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Undertow

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

Signature:

Signed by candidate

Date: 14 February 2003

Synopsis

Miranda Friend, a therapist at a Cape Town psychiatric hospital, wants to reverse herself from the cul-de-sac of her life. At thirty, she is in a dead-end relationship and is working in a hospital which is struggling under new management.

Miranda is the co-ordinator of the Eating Disorders Unit at Greenside Psychiatric Hospital, and apart from running the unit, is involved in patient care and group therapy.

Stephanie, Ella, Linda and Gary are patients suffering from bulimia and anorexia, and associated addictions and Miranda helps them gain insight into their problems. Miranda herself battles to come to terms with her past as she tries to help others.

It becomes clear that there is no commitment from the new management of Greenside, specifically the Managing Director, Ian De Kock, to upgrade facilities. Staff are disgruntled and dissatisfied, largely due to poor remuneration. Calvin Goliath and Natasha Sweetie are nurses attached to the eating disorders unit. Calvin is resentful towards management, and Natasha is involved in unscrupulous antics.

Miranda battles, in particular, with Gerald Edwards, her supervisor. He is a workaholic, but does not appear to have the best interests of the patients at heart.

Miranda breaks up with Daniel Fisher, only to be swept off her feet by Detective Teacher Lentshi, who attempts to recruit her as a whistle-blower. He discloses that the hospital has been under surveillance for a while. As a member of a Scorpions Task team, Teacher is investigating the possibility of drug dealing in the hospital. He suspects that Gerald Edwards may be involved.

Miranda begins to ask awkward questions, and takes it upon herself to do some amateur snooping. She soon realises all is not as it should be, and that ethics are secondary with certain staff members at Greenside. The relationship that exists between Victor King, the father of a patient (Ella) and Gerald Edwards concerns Miranda. There have also been several suicide attempts at Greenside and Miranda is curious to understand why.

In the opening scene Miranda finds herself the victim of a bomb blast. Most of the unfolding action takes place during the two weeks before the blast.

Undertow

undertow. n. another term for UNDERCURRENT.

undercurrent. n. 1 a current of water below the surface and moving in a different direction from any surface current. 2 an underlying feeling or influence.

South African Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2002

1

Friday

December 23

12:35 PM

Miranda Friend was wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, tasting blood, rolling her eyes, staring up at the sky, thinking the clouds looked like a herd of buck, moving, like on a wildlife video.

She turned her head.

“My God, are you all right?” Janet August said.

“I’m okay,” Miranda said, then asked, “I am, aren’t I?” wondering if Janet would lie to her, being as she was, flat on her back in the parking lot outside Greenside Psychiatric Hospital, bleeding, her shoes gone, flown off her feet.

“Well, Janet, *will* I be okay?” she asked, hearing her voice come out soft and uncertain, hearing Janet say, “Yes, yes, you’ll be fine.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m a nurse, remember?”

“You’re the manager. You order sheets and make sure the kitchen is stocked.”

“Even with the jeans on I can tell a damaged artery and yours isn’t. There’s blood, maybe a broken leg, but you’ll pull through, Miranda.”

“My God. That was a helluva blast. Smacked me clear across the drive,” Miranda said, surprised about it all, remembering the resignation letter she’d been about to deliver personally to Iggles De Kock, Managing Director of Greenside Psychiatric. She’d planned to look at him straight, tell him it wasn’t over, that she’d see him in court, the bastard, that he wouldn’t get away with what he’d done.

She asked, “What’s happened to De Kock?”

Janet didn’t answer.

Across the lot, Miranda saw the roof of De Kock’s M3 was blown away. A quick conversion to a cabriolet, she thought. Just call Cape Town Car Bomb City. And this in the middle of the afternoon, two days before Christmas, and a Friday too,

when most people just wanted to get home and be with their families, maybe finish a little last minute Christmas shopping.

“Jesus, will you look at that? I don’t feel good,” she said, propping herself up on her elbows, looking at the mess, at the burning cars, then at her Levis, feeling them cold and wet against her skin.

She wondered what it would be like to lose a leg, strapping on a prosthesis every morning? What about phantom limb problems? What would that be like, feeling pain in a leg that wasn’t there? She was thinking too, that she could bleed to death in the parking lot, end up zipped in a body bag and carted off as autopsy material to some forensic laboratory.

She squeezed Janet’s hand.

“I’ll stay with you. Hang in there. You’re going to be fine,” Janet reassured.

It was a pretty standard thing to say, Miranda thought, whatever the prognosis. On a sudden impulse she reached for the strap of her satchel, yanked the bag closer, wanting her life to be near her, moaning as pain shot down her leg.

“Don’t move,” Janet said. “Don’t worry about your bag.”

Miranda watched a lipstick roll away. Tampons and a Bar-One spilled from the side pocket. And her Mont Blanc fountain pen. About the only thing she’d ever got from her father, apart from *A Good Education*.

“I’ll pick up your things. Stay still,” Janet said, finding the letter addressed to De Kock and stuffing it back in too.

“Isn’t this is supposed to happen to other people?” Miranda said, just before she passed out.

She heard sirens and shouting, thinking it was all a bad dream, thinking she’d wake any minute. She twisted her head on the tarmac, scraping her ear, feeling pain, opening her eyes. She saw shattered glass and charred debris on the drive and papers fluttering, glowing and showering sparks, shrivelling to ash.

There was an ambulance she hadn’t noticed before and a jaws of life emergency vehicle. Air shimmered around the wrecks, almost mesmeric. Firemen doused smouldering metal.

Miranda focussed on a single Hush Puppy a few metres from what was left of De Kock's car, wondering why it was shoes mainly, that were videotaped on the peripheries of accidents, on the news or a cop show? Surely other items personalised a scene as well? At any rate, she thought, wriggling her toes, at least she could feel her feet.

She switched her concentration to a chip packet and a Coke can close to her head, thinking no matter how many bins lined the streets, rubbish still lay around. People were pigs.

University of Cape Town

2

Thursday

October 23

8:30 AM

Miranda Friend worked in the Eating Disorders Unit, a small outfit devoted to the care of patients who starved, binged, purged, drugged and drank themselves close to breakdown. The first thing she did every morning at Greenside, was stop at the nurses' station, get out the files and read the records of the night before.

This day, from the notes dashed off quickly by the night staff, she could see that from seven AM to seven PM it had been quiet.

A night duty nurse changing to go home said, "Cindy Fernandez' flu isn't improving."

"She's missed breakfast for the third time. I'm not happy about that," Miranda said.

"I can't argue with the mercury showing thirty-nine point four. And she's flushed and coughing. I couldn't send her down," the nurse said.

Miranda's gut warned check it out, that it was always before meals that Cindy was ill, and she wondered, on her way to room twenty-nine, what was the kid up to?

Cindy wasn't in the room.

Miranda heard whimpering.

The window was open.

She looked at the burglar bars, thinking they weren't much use spaced so widely apart, looking out the window then, feeling her heart lurch in her throat when she recognized Cindy on the roof outside the dormitory window, where thank God for small mercies, she'd broken her fall. But she was sitting dangerously close to the edge, rocking, rocking, keening, Miranda thinking she had to get out there. Now. That any minute Cindy could be spreadeagled on the concrete a floor below. She had to get out and try talk sense into Cindy, or restrain her, wrap her arms around her, prevent her from real injury.

That's when she discovered the burglar bars, not designed with the confinement of anorexic teenagers in mind, wouldn't hold back a full-bodied woman either. Getting through was do-able, like squeezing into a dress that hadn't been tried for a while, that was tight on account of too much junk food.

"Don't touch me," Cindy Fernandez shrieked, inching herself closer to the edge of the roof as Miranda crept towards her.

"I won't, I won't."

"I'll throw myself off. Don't you dare touch me!"

"I'm here to help, Cindy," Miranda said, feeling an urge to push Cindy off herself actually, teach Cindy a lesson for trying this stupid stunt, but Cindy could break her neck falling the extra distance. Miranda thought at least she could lose weight in prison but she wasn't about to give up croissants and cappuccinos at the Empire Deli, or caffè lattes, cinnamon sticks, custard Danishes and hot chocolate sprinkled with chilli pepper, in favour of weak tea and pap.

She moved slowly, not wanting to startle Cindy.

"You're coming to get me," Cindy screamed.

"I want to help you," Miranda said, wanting to shout out, before you break your neck you silly girl, but staying calm, trying again to reassure her. "Cindy, I'm here for you. Let me help you."

"I'll jump if you come any closer."

"Cindy, I'll look after you."

"You can't. He's going to get me whatever you do."

"No one's going to hurt you."

"You can't protect me from him, you can't. He's grinning at me, there, through the wall, he can get through the wall," she was whimpering, covering her face with her arms, sinking right into herself.

"Who is he, Cindy? Who are you talking about?"

"Him. He's going to hurt me. I know it. He'll hurt me and throw me away."

"Cindy, I will not let anybody hurt you. I promise." Miranda meant it, thinking Cindy was a pain-in-the-arse addict, but there was hope for her yet, wasn't there?

It was about then that a good-looking man in a suit hauled himself up the drainpipe. He stayed at the edge of the roof, blocking Cindy from flinging herself off. Within minutes two ambulance personnel climbed a ladder they'd leaned against the

roof, with Calvin Goliath, nurse aide, and Doctor David Love, psychiatrist, bringing up the rear.

Miranda kept up her exchange with Cindy, holding her attention.

Cindy was so freaked out that before she noticed it was getting crowded on the roof, Calvin Goliath and the paramedics pinned down her flailing limbs and David Love jabbed a fast acting sedative into her bum.

Overkill, Miranda thought, as the fire engine arrived thirty seconds later, sirens blaring, firefighters in fireproof suits jumping off the truck to see what they could do. She wondered who'd called them? Really, the paramedics could handle it. The firemen made themselves useful though, strapping Cindy to a stretcher, lowering her to the ambulance.

"Does this happen often? Patients trying to kill themselves?" the good-looking man asked, watching the medical personnel move on, Miranda thinking that on first impression he was strong and helpful and looked great in his Armani.

"Second time this week," she said. "A few days ago some lunatic from the General ward, suffering from schizophrenia, walked over to the station, lay down on the tracks and waited for a train. No one noticed he was gone."

"My God. Must have been a mess."

"He didn't get it right either. He was shouting obscenities because the train was late, drawing attention to himself, screaming that he'd checked the schedule and where was the bloody train. The security guards managed to subdue him, probably with a klap I'm afraid, but they brought him back."

"You're a therapist, right? And you like the job?"

"I do. I like people's lives. I like people's stories. That's what it's like, being a therapist. You give people a chance to air their stories. And you? What are you doing here that you happened to be walking by?"

"Daniel," he said, holding out his hand.

Nice firm grip, she thought, watching as he leaned against the wall, loosened his tie and pushed back a Hugh Grant hair-lick hanging over one eye.

From her smile he knew he'd made an impression. Just like that. She was hooked. Full lips, straight teeth. She could lose a couple of kilos though, but he liked good dental work. Wouldn't stick his tongue in a mouth with rotten teeth.

"Daniel Fisher, architect. Working on the plans for the renovations."

"Glad to hear that's still happening," she said.

"Oh yes, it's happening. De Kock's got plans for this place."

"Wish he'd get on with it, it's been long enough don't you think?"

"He won't give the go ahead for anything. It's frustrating," Daniel shrugged, thinking maybe sharing his feelings would work in his favour, but that he'd better not say too much if he wanted a good fuck. Didn't want her thinking he was a wimp, didn't want to scare her off that way. He asked, "How about a drink later?"

"I could use one now," Miranda sighed, glad it was over. "She got through the burglar bars, can you believe it?"

"She's pretty skinny."

"She could seriously have hurt herself. Can you believe I got through too, through the bars?"

"Just a matter of manoeuvring," he said, appraising her body. Nice curves. Good skin.

She didn't mind that he looked closer, thinking it had been long enough since any decent man had shown interest. She was tired of De Kock's passes, sick of wolf whistles from council workers and builders when she walked up the road to the Deli to buy lunch.

"So how about that drink then?"

"Good idea," she agreed, sealing the deal and Daniel Fisher arranged to meet her after work.

4:30 PM

Visitors were drinking tea and coffee, lounging on plush sofas in semicircles around low tables in the reception area of Constantiaberg Hospital. The tiger lilies and roses in a vase on a central table looked fresh. Miranda pinched through one of the petals to make sure the flowers were real. The aroma of fresh-ground filter from the coffee shop was hard to ignore, but she did. She walked past the gift shop overflowing with

flower arrangements, around the corner, past palms in terracotta pots, towards the lifts. She got in a lift with an old man in a wheelchair. The nurse accompanying him checked his drip, nodded at Miranda. Miranda tried smiling, nearly gagging at the smell of antiseptic and stale flesh so overpowering in the small space.

“Do you have a vase for these?” Miranda asked the nurse behind the counter. She put down her *You* magazine to look for one, but the only suitable container she could find was a Nescafe jar.

“That’ll do,” Miranda said and rinsed out the sediment.

Cindy Fernandez was alone in the four-bed ward. A frame elevated a sheet over her fractured hip. Miranda put the flowers on the trolley at the foot of her bed. The poppies looked cheerful. Orange and red brightened the room, dispelling the sense of gloom hanging about the place.

Miranda sat on the chair facing her, asked, “Why did you do it?”

“I thought I could fly,” Cindy said.

“Did you?”

“I thought I could, like in a dream. Fly through those bars and the hell away from that place.”

“What’s it like, in your dreams? What’s it like, flying?” Miranda asked, never having had the flying dream, wanting to know.

“I spread my arms. I feel weightless and I go. I feel the air pass my face. I’m in control. When I look down I see tar-beaches, the highway, cars speeding under street lamps. I fly anywhere I want. I fly away.”

“I wouldn’t mind doing that myself sometimes.”

“In your dreams you can fly anywhere.”

“There’s one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“This morning wasn’t a dream. Cindy, you free fell three metres and crushed your hip on the cement roof.”

“I really thought I could fly.”

“The doctor says you overdosed on LSD. Suffered a delusion.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe it was a daydream. I don’t do drugs.”

Good example of denial, Miranda thought, saying, “It’s here, Cindy, written in black and red. The details are filled in on the chart. You did drugs this time. At Greenside.”

Cindy turned her head away.

“Cindy, look at me. I’m worried about you. You don’t do the hard stuff. You came in to sort out your eating disorder for heaven’s sake.”

“Did you know my folks are transferring me to Serenity Village?”

“Oh, yes? Very exclusive. They’ve got an excellent rehab facility.”

“They’ll help me there. I know it.”

“And we couldn’t? Want to tell me what’s happening? Where you got the drugs?”

“No,” she said, slamming her eyes shut, like a door, in Miranda’s face.

Miranda looked at her - pale, washed out – hating the realization that she’d recognised Cindy’s drug use earlier: icy, taught skin, dilated pupils, unpredictable behaviour. She’d denied the signs, had kidded herself it couldn’t possibly be true. In a secure facility, a residential psychiatric hospital, how could a patient possibly be doing drugs?

6:40 PM

“Watch it,” Daniel Fisher said as some guy elbowed him at the bar.

McGinty’s was packed.

“Must be tough, working with mental disorder,” Daniel said, turning back to Miranda, handing her a glass, pouring the beer for her, thinking why the charade, why couldn’t they just go back to his place and fuck?

“There’s never a dull day at the hospital,” she said loudly, above the din. “I’d like a few. Dull days. And architecture? What does it do for you?”

“You can hold your hand against a cement wall on a thirty degree day and it’ll cool you down. Dried out window frames can be brought back to life with a sanding and varnish. Understanding how we use materials in nature. Buildings that survive hundreds of years. All leaves me with a sense of awe. That’s what it does for me.”

Miranda warmed to him, thinking she liked this New Age man, sensitive, attentive, even sitting there in the pub, and that his ice blue eyes and dark curls were very attractive.

A few Windhoek Lagers later they ended up at his place.

The bed wasn't made, but so what, she thought, nor was hers.

The lovemaking was awkward. Miranda wanted to tell him she liked it slower.

Daniel was thinking, fucking condoms, how he hated them, he couldn't feel anything, pumping harder, harder, finally doing it, oh God, coming.

Miranda thinking jeez, that was quick, she wasn't *close* to ready, thinking it was the first time. First time could be disappointing.

He rolled off her, the condom slipping off as he softened.

She drove home, parked in the street outside her block in Royal Road, Muizenberg, thinking she really needed a Gorilla, or some type of gear lock. She unlocked the door of her flat, with Oregon pine floors and high ceilings and space to spread out and a view of the sea, even if it was from the kitchen, thinking sure, she and Daniel had to get to know each other, take more time with each other. It would improve, she thought. She could train him, right? Daniel Fisher, a good-looking professional like him, had potential.

3

Monday

December 13

Miranda was realizing the truth, that building materials slowed down Dan-the-Man more than her body did, and coupled with his idea of foreplay being the M-Net sports channel, she gave up on the quest for intimacy (whatever intimacy meant precisely).

The irreconcilable differences between them showed themselves early, one at a time. She'd known from the start that he wasn't going to work out, stupidly ignoring her first date gut that the guy was a waste of time.

When he stayed over he flopped on the bed at night and watched sports on the portable job he'd moved from the lounge to the bedroom without so much as a by your leave. Even bowling would do. She resented getting up at three in the morning to switch off the goddamned golf because *he'd* fallen asleep on the remote control. She didn't like the way he preened in front of the mirror. Or the protracted time he spent in the bathroom or the way he left the floor wet and the basin ringed with shaved beard. She didn't like the way he stuffed his bok-baardie into his mouth and chewed it. She didn't like his complaints about Volk en Vaderland. He never brought her flowers, chocolates or lingerie. That would have been nice.

She liked his elegant hands and feet, his voice like Velvet Cream liqueur. She'd responded to his passion for design, but the passion wasn't transferred to her form.

She'd kicked him recently when he'd snored. He'd woken up, grunted, "What the hell?" and went back to sleep.

She knew it was over, that it had actually never got off the ground.

The nasty affair was coming to a head.

7:15 AM

Miranda found it hard to believe that a woman putting her clothes *on* was more titillating than one taking her clothes *off*, but that's the way it seemed, that her reverse strip turned Daniel on.

She eased her hips into the seat of her jeans, noticed Daniel watching the lower half of her disappear. She looked at herself too, objectively, in the full-length mirror, thinking she'd gained weight the last few months, soothing away stress with food, Daniel always on at her about losing those extra kilos, as if they weren't part of her. He was reflected too, naked flesh moist from the shower.

Better be quick, she thought, zipping her Levi's, thinking it was probably the designer label that got him hard, adjusting her breasts in a new T-shirt bra from Woolworths, praying he'd leave her alone.

Daniel was thinking her pants cutting into her crotch like that was an invitation. He preferred skinny, but even on the curvy side she looked good. He was thinking he could do with some of her for breakfast.

"Mmm..." he murmured, coming up from behind, easing his hands between lace and skin, cupping her breasts, feeling the weight of them, squeezing.

She pushed him away.

"Not now Dan, please, I've got a meeting first thing. And group."

"Your crazies can wait."

"Daniel, I've told you, it pisses me off when you come on to me in the morning when I'm trying to get dressed. And I don't like it when you call my patients crazy."

"Hey, I'm joking. Come here."

She said, "Look."

"I am," he said.

As if she should be grateful.

"I'm not in the mood for this."

She bent down, pulled on her boots and straightened.

He grabbed her hair.

"I don't care what you're in the mood for," he said, tugging her backwards to the

bed. He wasn't hurting her, not much at any rate, just letting her know what he wanted.

Miranda was thinking she could stop him if she wanted. Kick him in the balls, scream Help, Zoleka! Call her friend in 2B.

Daniel yanked the straps from her shoulders, broke the fastening and threw the bra on the floor. He unzipped her jeans and pushed his fingers between her bum and the denim, squeezing her arse, then stroking.

"Feels good doesn't it?" he breathed into her neck, "You are so desirable."

"Don't say another word," Miranda warned, thinking Daniel's tedious love clichés would dry her up in no time and the way it was turning out, she wanted that ounce of flesh. And deluding herself that she'd get satisfaction, thinking too, that if a man was going to whisper in her ear then it had better be something worth listening to. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, teeth clicked with contact, just so he'd shut up.

They grabbed off the remaining clothes and groped and rubbed and sank into each other and a few minutes later he exploded inside and it was over. For him. She lay there wondering why she'd expected any different? He rolled away, grunted something inaudible. Lucid as usual, Miranda thought, wanting to laugh in his face, but part of her thinking what about me? The rest of her knowing it was always about him. He didn't care less.

Daniel planted a compensatory kiss on her forehead, stood up, wiped himself off with her pyjama top and threw it on the floor next to his socks from yesterday and her broken bra. She lay there, watching him dress, then heard him in the bathroom, pulling the chain, lay there astounded that she'd let the affair carry on as long as it had, a couple of months now, thinking she'd be cleaning house any minute, sweeping Daniel out the door. She griped under her breath, admonished herself for giving way in a moment of weakness, for not saying No, the way she practiced with the patients at the hospital, to say No to drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse, a big emphatic No, preaching all day to them about taking responsibility for their actions.

He was in the kitchen now, then at the front door, calling "Cheers. I'm out tonight, by the way."

She got up, thinking she had to get him out of her life, permanently. She stepped over his sodden towel. She dipped into the bath she'd drawn earlier, rinsed the sticky evidence of his good time off her thighs and pulled the plug.

The final diluted fantasy washed down the drain.

As she toweled dry, she looked at her reflection in the mirror and consoled herself that the crescent indents framing her mouth were laugh lines. After a cup of strong coffee, she checked again. Short auburn mussed up hair framed an intelligent face. Chocolate eyes stared back at her. She looked a lot like Christine. No wonder Mom and Dad had left the country. Couldn't stand to be reminded of their youngest child. The sister with the blue eyes.

9:10 AM

The 1990 Mazda 323 had dents on two doors and the rust on all four had eaten holes in the bodywork. Basic air conditioning. There were two hundred and seventy plus kilometres on the clock. Miranda Friend couldn't afford more than an engine overhaul on her salary, and even that would have to wait. She'd do a lot of things when she won the Lotto, she thought. Magical thinking, that's what it was, imagining that something fantastic was going to happen to reverse her out of the cul-de-sac of her life.

She parked the car in her usual spot under the oak in front of the Victorian mansion that had been converted to Greenside Psychiatric Hospital, named on account of the patch of grass and giant tree which was a hundred years old and considered a national landmark.

The exterior walls had been candyfloss pink once. Now they were smutty with grime and exhaust fumes and the broekie lace was rusty. The building was like old tart in dirty panties and no man was interested in commitment.

Miranda walked past the billboard at the entrance:

“Renewal of Greenside Psychiatric Hospital and Drug Addiction Centre by Gates and Kerchoff.” It was a big, bold sign, attached to wooden struts. Some delinquent had spray painted a gang tag across part of it, obscuring the names of architects and engineers

involved in the project. Daniel Fisher's name was blacked out and Miranda was encouraged, taking that as a sign that it was truly time to get him out of her life.

She stepped onto the stoep, pushed through double doors, still with the original stained glass panels, walked past a mangy Christmas tree decorated with lights flickering red and green, past a mural in progress on the passage wall. She liked the mural. She'd watched it evolve in stages, patients having added to it continuously over the last month or so. Her nose twitched as she passed the visitors' toilet, the faint whiff of vomit proof that someone had puked up their troubles and flushed them away.

At reception she tapped Delicia Martens on the shoulder, mouthed the word "messages", thinking maybe this was it, that she'd won the Community Chest lottery and the prize of airline tickets to a destination of choice, maybe the taxman wanted to confirm her address and send back PAYE. How about a new car? That was possible. She'd supported the disabled, bought a five rand raffle ticket and was in line to win a Corsa. She sighed then, thinking she was fooling herself again that she and the perfect life were separated by nothing more than a message on a spike.

Delicia told her private call to hang on.

She said, "Nothing for you this morning, Miranda."

"What happened to your leg, Delicia?" Miranda asked, noticing the bandage wound tightly around her ankle.

"I fell off my sandals and went through a glass door on the weekend."

"How about giving up the ten centimetre heels?"

"It's tough going out with a millionaire. You have to look good."

"He should rescue you from reception."

"That's what I'm hoping."

Miranda shrugged, thinking the guy probably drove a sports car, had a boep and was balding, thinking the compromises women made for men just weren't worth it.

9:18 AM

“You’re late,” Gerald Edwards said, glaring as Miranda opened the door, thinking *he* was going to be late and he’d squashed in two extra sessions. He had to stick to his schedule if he wanted to be out of Greenside by seven. He looked at the staff, thinking what a downtrodden bunch they were and why couldn’t De Kock be on time to run his own bloody management meeting?

Gerald Edwards, prim and proper in his Pringle, was a WASP as conservative as the beige of his sweater. He turned back to the agenda. Miranda noticed a tiny hole in the elbow of the V-neck, and his hair standing to attention on the top of his head. Stress pattern balding. Some parts had to rebel.

She considered him a competent therapist though, and if patient numbers proved anything, he could well have been exceptional. He worked seven to seven, surviving, it seemed, on twelve teas a day and an occasional Red Bull she’d seen him swig in the passage between sessions.

His job, or the way he’d worked it for himself, being adept at the corporate game, was to provide patients with individual therapy while she managed the unit. He holed up in his office making a packet billing two hundred and fifty rand an hour while Miranda, as coordinator, did the admin and filing, fielded calls and enquiries, sent faxes and e-mails. She supervised meals and facilitated groups, taught the patients art and knitting even though the only item she’d ever knitted herself was a hot-water bottle cover in grade four.

As she sank into a ball and claw sofa, the upholstery released the smell of stale smoke. Someone had ignored the no smoking regulation. She poked her finger into a “fuck-you” cigarette burn, straight through the cloth and padding to the plywood structure. She stretched her arms over the armrests thinking the couch should be dry-cleaned, hearing Gerald’s voice on the edges of her mind, not listening much. The floral fabric was faded and dirty. Belonged on the compost heap.

There was a lull as Gerald ticked an item off his list.

Miranda asked at once, “How many patients in today?” mustering some energy, thinking she should show more interest.

“We’ve been through that already,” Gerald said, narrowing his eyes, disapproving.

She noticed an obscenely long fringe of lashes curving perfectly as if pressed into shape with a curling tong, wondered if there wasn't a hint of eyeliner on the inner edge of his lower lids. Mama's boy, she thought. He sat upright, his straight back angled forward, holding his legs together like a woman, with his clipboard balancing on his knees.

"Linda's back. Linda Payne," Calvin Goliath said. "And Stephanie Hill signed in on Friday. You know about her. So it's only the four of them: Ella, Gary, Linda and Stephanie. No one wants to be in this place for the holidays."

Miranda was relieved the hospital was quiet.

"You missed the part about no pay increases," Calvin hissed. "Fat cats'll reassess in six months," saying to Miranda, under his breath, "And Gerald does nothing. Tells us we should talk to De Kock if we've got a problem. Tells us we have to be patient," and he wasn't any more, he'd been patient long enough. He was sick of waiting, sick of empty promises, sick of being treated like he didn't matter.

Typical, Miranda thought. Gerald was supposed to look after his "team" but as long as his own buns were buttered, that was all he cared about.

"What about the Christmas party?" Miranda asked.

"We're going ahead with the New Year's dance at Blouberg," Gerald said. "Fifty bucks a head, payable by staff members."

Calvin stood up. He couldn't contain himself.

"No body can afford that and how do you get there if you haven't got transport? Every time it's promises, promises, and we don't even get a Christmas party!" he erupted, Miranda thinking Calvin was Muslim, what was he going on about?

"Keep your cool," Gerald said, looking at Calvin, watching him scowl, Gerald feeling angry that De Kock wasn't doing his own dirty work.

"Why should I? I can't stand this place," Calvin said, a bitter tone to his voice and his face turning a shade darker than honey. "Management doesn't care about us. So much for private hospitals. Even if I was working at a *state* facility I'd be earning double this little bit you people pay me. And you tell us the management idiots want us to wear uniforms. Where do I get the money for uniforms? Why should I wear one anyway?"

"It looks good. It's professional. Now sit down, Calvin," Gerald ordered the bad-tempered dog back down, noticing that the cuffs of Calvin's cotton shirt were frayed and stubborn ring-around-the-collar was creeping from behind to his open neck.

"How's the Saudi Arabian job application going, Calvin?" Miranda asked, the general bitching about uniforms masking their private conversation.

"*Dubai*, Miranda, I want to go to *Dubai*."

"D'you still have those application forms?" she asked, thinking earning a whole lot of moola in foreign currency wasn't a bad idea.

"You can fill in the forms, but you still have to pay your own fare. How can I afford a ticket? How can I do anything I want to do? How can I save for the Pilgrimage? The old company gave a birthday bonus. Medicorps doesn't even give an increase."

"Dubai sounds like a good bet, Calvin. You can make a lot of money."

"Then again why should I leave?" Calvin went on. "Why should I leave the country of my birth to earn a decent salary? I don't want to leave. All I want is the increase. I don't care if they've just bought the place. I'm supposed to be saving for my ticket to Mecca and Medina. I didn't get an increase last year. I want one now."

Ian De Kock barged in.

He was tall, big-built, his hair cropped, as if he'd just joined the army.

De Kock, loosely translated as Dick Brain from the Afrikaans, also known as Iggles and Ugly behind his back, had bought Greenside under the umbrella of Medicorps Holdings. Along with his sleeping partner David Love, psychiatrist, he'd proposed to re-establish the ailing hospital as a leading treatment centre specializing in addiction. He'd made his money dubiously, according to the rumour mongers, but no one was interested in where the money came from as long as he pumped some of it into fixing the place up. But the hope that Medicorps Holdings would see to the revival of the hospital was fading.

Rumour also had it, that De Kock had played practical jokes as a teenager and that once he'd gone too far. He'd stolen methylated spirits from his school science lab and doused a teacher whilst two friends held the man down. De Kock set him alight. Another teacher managed to extinguish the flames before his colleague was seriously burned and De Kock and his friends subsequently spent eighteen months in a juvenile detention centre. Now, he was supposedly rehabilitated.

He was the boss.

He looked at Miranda in the low couch, squinting his piggy eyes.

She was thinking that he more than likely got a kick out of having her head in line with his fly. Silly braces for show stretched over his paunch. A cell-phone and a pager were clipped to his pants. She looked down in the interests of self-preservation, thinking, beware the man who wears grey shoes.

De Kock picked up where Gerald left off.

“We’ve had to severely prune staff benefits. Staff who don’t pull their weight will be retrenched. *You people* can’t expect Greenside to be running at a profit yet. Qualmed left the hospital in a real mess.” He licked his lips. Looked around. His mouth glistened. His spittle was illuminated for a split second by light angling through the bay window. Miranda was thankful he wasn’t lecturing in her direction, disgusted at the spray settling on her colleagues.

De Kock explained why Greenside was running at a loss, something about his five earlier acquisitions being the priority, something about the nature of takeovers and the stock exchange but Miranda wasn’t listening. Same old, same old, she thought, looking out the bay window. He’d parked his electric blue M3 in a spot clearly marked with yellow road paint: “Doctors only”. Guy’s got a chip, she thought, taking a chance, saying, “I didn’t expect things to be going this badly, Ian,” thinking she had a right to ask, and what was everyone doing in this room, heads bowed, taking whatever shit he dished out.

“Don’t interrupt Miranda.” He stared at her, his eyes glinting, as small and black as raisins, thinking about licking her cunt.

She said, “We’ve had regular re-admissions. How can we not be turning a profit?”

“We’re still claiming debt from Qualmed patients. And as for *your* unit, what, four patients in this week? In a ten-bed unit?”

“We’re small, Ian. And Christmas is usually quiet. It’s tough this time of year, for patients and staff.”

“Concentrate on filling your six empty beds.”

“No one wants to be in at Christmas. People want to be with their families, having a good time,” she said, thinking that general patients would flock back afterwards, depressed as all hell after splurging their bonuses, anxious and moaning that they didn’t

have money for school fees and house repayments. And the eating disorders unit would be full then too, with kids who'd overdone it, the ones caught vomiting, the ones who'd starved themselves, denied themselves Christmas lunch.

Miranda said, "We'll pick up. There are plenty of sick people to go around."

"And we only want patients with medical aid. Or cash up front. We've had too many moochers who don't pay," De Kock said. "Do your job, Miranda. Pump the programme."

"Ian, I can't do that actively before we're more organized. I can't run groups in the garage for much longer. We need to provide proper facilities. You allocated the garage as a temporary measure. Six weeks later I'm still there."

"You know how it works, Miranda. No money, no renovations."

"It's hardly a therapeutic space. We can't charge patients five hundred a day and expect them to have groups in a garage. And being in that garage feels as if we're locked inside a meat truck. Suffocating in there too, on really hot days."

"We're hopeful we'll turn a profit soon. Anyway, people are so desperate they'll pay no matter what the place looks like. In the meantime, do what you can for the comfort of the inmates," she was startled by his term, "until the renovations are under way."

"When at least are they planned for?" She would not give up. Keep your mouth shut, the voice of reason warned she'd said enough, that the guy didn't like to be challenged.

He didn't answer her question. Instead he said, "By the way, you look vital this morning, Miranda," acknowledging her with a dirty stare, wondering if she had any idea he was imagining her naked with her legs spread, wet lips, begging for him. He asked, "Got a new lover, Miranda?"

Trust Dick-Brain to be so blatantly crass, she thought, tempted to say, "As a matter of fact I have. An eighteen-year-old with an eight-inch cock and we do it on my desk during office hours," but she played it safe and smiled. Tightly, but she smiled.

On his way out he tossed around buzz words like downscaling and restructuring, Miranda thinking with all the assurances, the status quo remained the same as the first

day of his takeover: the hospital, according to De Kock, remained broke and renovation, renovations, and remuneration were low on his list of priorities.

She left too, waiting for Gerald in the passage, bumping her index finger along the ripple paint, wondering if the bile yellow was part of a plot by the previous owners to keep patients sick? Qualmed had given the hospital a shitty inside paint job, a poor attempt at a facelift to con anyone interested in buying the place. 'Interior design' some idiot had called it, leaving a legacy of the bile-toned walls clashing with turquoise carpet squares and pink furniture.

Gerald scurried out, clutching his briefcase.

Miranda pulled him aside, saying she wanted to discuss Ella King.

"What *about* her?" he said, sighing, impatient, wondering why couldn't she leave her insight till ward round?

"She's withdrawn, dejected. Doesn't say much about herself. How's it going with your sessions? Anything I should know?"

"Miranda, we can't force anyone to talk," he said, thinking, really, he didn't have time for this. He wasn't going to say more than that, turning away from her then.

As he brushed past her, she caught a faint whiff of gism and wondered where he'd been earlier. Good for you Ger, she thought. So he had some fun in his life after all. But thinking too, that talking to Gerald was as dissatisfying as stroking fake fur.

She sighed, thinking maybe he was right, that she should back off. Ella was the one who needed to do the work. She'd been warned before about getting too close to the patients. It was too bad Ella reminded Miranda of Christine, her flesh and blood.

She didn't want the same thing happening to Ella.

10:00 AM

Group

Stephanie Hill was too fat to sit in a chair. She'd slumped to the floor and spilled onto a continental pillow, her back to the wall.

"I'm a Comfort Eater," was how she'd introduced herself. "I overdose with food. It's an emotional anaesthetic. Cake and ice cream. I get my hugs and kisses from cake and ice cream."

Linda Payne sighed, wringing her hands. Stephanie looked out the window. So did Miranda. The sky was flat blue and at mid-morning the day was already a scorcher. A Waste-Tech truck passed under the window, the stench of garbage hanging in the air long after the beep-beep warning signal had faded. There wasn't other traffic and nature was still. Not even a rustle of wind through the leaves disturbed the quiet.

Stephanie was thinking at that minute that she wanted to get better, thinking she could do it, that it would be easy, that she would have the support she needed in a psychiatric hospital. Even if no one else in the room was going to talk, she was.

"So, Gary, how long have you had problems?" Stephanie asked.

"From the age of about thirteen," Gary Smith said, thinking he didn't mind talking about it. At least Miranda would be off his back then. "Who needs food? Dad was busy being a plastic surgeon and mom just thought it was the genius in me insisting on meals alone in my room. I scraped the food into bags and stored it under my bed till I could throw it away. She used to say, 'Gee Gary, you're getting tall. You're so lanky'."

"That's too bad," Stephanie said. She waited for someone to ask *her* something, maybe for Gary to ask *her* about *her* life.

No one said anything.

So Stephanie said: "My mother called me fat-arse, dumb-brain. She said You'll never amount to much, Stephanie. Well, I showed her didn't I? One hundred and sixty-four kilos of nothing."

There was sighing and shuffling and Gary kicked the leg of his chair.

"What else about *your* life, Gary?" Stephanie asked.

"If you really want to know, I graduated from school with six distinctions and high expectations. I had a really good memory. That saw me through matric and got me a scholarship to varsity but I flunked out after one semester at UCT though, studying chemistry. My mother wasn't pleased. I had a breakdown. That's when she found out I was starving myself," he said, thinking that he couldn't believe his mother hadn't noticed before then, not that he cared anyway, thinking that now he'd really said enough.

Miranda listened. His life was a mess. What a waste. He'd probably end up working at a video shop, selling Lotto tickets.

She waited for more. Better that there wasn't too much prompting from her.

Gary sat on his hands. Stephanie squirmed on the pillow.

Sometimes it was hard not to motivate them. Sometimes Miranda wanted to speed things up a bit.

Ella sniffed. Linda yawned.

Miranda inspected her nails and reminded herself to make an appointment at Dream Nails for a manicure. Too many rush jobs with blunt clippers and her nails were ragged. Her hair was a mess too. And a massage would do her good, she thought, get rid of the knots in her shoulders.

Still no one added a word.

Miranda noticed Ella King's mouth twitch, but Ella couldn't get the words out. She was sixteen and hip in black bells and a cut off T and a belly ring with a shiny blue bead attracting attention. Blonde strips of hair framed her oval face.

Finally Miranda said, "So, who else would like to share?" weighing up in her head if facilitating a group of eating disordered patients was more like being a priest in a confessional or an SS officer torturing information from prisoners of war. Sooner or later, the truth would out. "You're only as sick as your secrets," she said.

"Since when?"

"Since always, Gary," she said, looking at him, then at the others. "You'll feel better if you talk about whatever's bothering you," wondering if that wasn't just an empty promise, saying "C'mon let's get this show on the road. We haven't got all day."

"There's forty-five minutes," Gary said.

"And fifteen minutes ago there was an hour. You can keep staring at your takkies or you can talk. You started off fine. I can't do it for you."

"Linda hasn't said anything," he said, wondering if Miranda hadn't *noticed*, or *what*. He'd answered the fat chick's questions. He'd fucking *shared* enough.

Miranda said, "So what's up, Linda? This is your third admission this year."

"It's not as bad as you think," she whispered, her voice as thin as thread. Then she sat straight and put conviction in her tone: "I'm not that thin and I've hardly been on the booze. Really, I'm doing better."

"So why are you back?"

"I really want to give it up. This time I really want to. The booze, puking, starving, you know, the prescription drugs, everything."

"I want to believe it but I'm not sure I do," Miranda said,

"But it's *true*," Linda said, dipping her head, breaking eye contact, Miranda knowing then for sure that nothing had changed, and concerned that the career addict would influence the others.

She said, "How's it really going, Linda?"

"I'm struggling," Linda said, putting up her hand, covering thin lips, embarrassed. "And I've lost some teeth. Don't look."

"We talked about it last time, remember? Digestive acids from habitual vomiting eating away the enamel, exposing the nerves. Then gum disease sets in. Dentists say it's an epidemic, the rotten teeth they see."

"Don't rub it in," Linda said, the fire in her eyes dimming again, saying, "The problem is I don't think anyone can really help me," sounding weary, as if telling the truth tired her out. Addiction was the only friend she'd ever had and she wasn't about to ruin the association in middle age. She suddenly felt the weight of being thirty-something. "I don't know why I came back. I guess I didn't have a choice. I had to do something."

"Right, we have to do something." Stephanie sounded assured.

"Truth is I've been downing a hundred laxatives a day with a bottle of vodka. It's like I can't help myself. I'm sorry."

Miranda was thinking that Linda wasn't sorry at all, thinking if Linda didn't stop her intestines would rot and she'd be cleaning out her shit from a colostomy bag attached to her side.

Linda said again: "I'm sorry, sorry. Maybe what happened to me *was* my fault. Maybe I could have stopped it. My mother knew. *She* didn't stop it. Maybe it's just *me* making a big deal out of it."

“Making a big deal of what, Linda?” Stephanie asked, thinking she couldn’t take six weeks of Linda feeling sorry for herself.

“My Uncle Leonard liked sticking his fingers up my vagina when I was five and my mother didn’t believe me. Once she asked ‘What’s bothering you?’ and I told her. She walked away. After that if I ever spoke to her about Uncle Leonard she’d slap my face.”

“And you keep on punishing yourself for what happened,” Miranda said. “Isn’t it time to stop?”

“I want to, I really want to,” Linda said.

“My mother dumped me,” Ella chipped in. “My mother left me with *him*.”

“Who’s *he*?” Stephanie asked.

“My father. Dad. I’ve got no respect for him.”

Gary said, “My mother was disappointed the day I was *born*. Friday the thirteenth. She thought I was bad luck.” He went on, “At Home Affairs she changed the date on my birth certificate to Friday the twelfth, so my whole life is a lie. As for my dad, he left my mom for one of his patients. He died of lung cancer when I was in high school. He smoked in the days cigarettes weren’t bad for you.”

Stephanie and Gary and Ella and Linda looked at each other then, smiled, connected, realizing there was common ground.

Gerald Edwards pushed the door open. He didn’t knock first. He just pushed open the door and walked in.

His habit of joining group half way through pissed Miranda off. She considered his regular late-show in poor taste, disrespectful to her and especially to the patients. No doubt he’d had ‘phone calls to make, appointments to set up. Why waste valuable time on group when he could get a summary in the last ten minutes, then rush off to his next patient? She seethed, thinking what the hell was it with him, as he made his entitled self comfortable, thinking, how could he do this, he was too late to do any good. Where was he at the start of group? Thinking, not good enough Gerald, giving him a piece of her mind. Pity he couldn’t hear a word.

“Ella, we’re concerned about you,” he launched.

Ella tucked her heels under her bum, curling her toes over the edge of the chair. She focussed on the wooden floorboards, saw how the pine had been weakened by the criss-cross hollows of foraging beetles.

Miranda noticed the teenager's jaw trembling, and that she was hugging her knees to her chest as if she'd fall apart if she let go. The next thing Ella was crying, her cheeks turning red and blotchy.

Gerald was impatient.

"Ella, what's going on?" He tried the matter-of-fact approach, thinking if his patient had pitched he wouldn't be here at all, wasting his time.

She looked up, glaring, angry upset, not sad upset, blurted, "Nothing. Nothing's going on. Leave me alone."

"Don't give me that. You're so consumed with pain it makes you blind to the part of you that needs looking after." He had her attention now. "You'll never be able to look at yourself and know who you are if you don't see what's right in front of you."

"I know what's in front of me. You. Forcing me to talk about stuff I don't want to talk about. Stuff that's got fuck all to do with anyone but me. I hate my father. I told you that. I'll never forgive him for leaving me in this dump."

"You put yourself in here. No one forced you to starve. You've turned yourself into an infant and now we have to look after you. Drop the tough girl act."

"I told you, I'm not talking to you."

"You'll be talking to me later, at three," he said, "At your individual session. Miranda, make sure she's on time. We've got a whole *lot* to discuss, don't you think, Ella?"

Ella retreated between her knees.

Gerald left, closing the door behind him.

Natasha Sweetie arrived almost immediately. She was a Julia Roberts look alike, exploiting long legs in a very short skirt completely inappropriate for a nurse, Miranda thought, working on a petty jealousy of Natasha's movie star looks, thinking even if she lost weight a skirt like that wouldn't work on her. Natasha's red hair glowed with a henna tint and she had the kind of full lips men stared at, moist and pouting.

"Tea's waiting," she said.

“Is it that time already?” Stephanie perked up, looking at her watch, heaving herself closer to a chair so she could pull herself up.

“In the dining room. Chocolate digestives, jelly babies and strawberry drinking yoghurt,” Natasha said, watching Stephanie rock herself to her feet, thinking how amazing that the promise of food could get that great big bulk moving. She turned the screws: “You’ve got black Rooibos and a rice cake, Stephanie.”

“Is that all I get? One rice cake?”

“You want to lose weight, don’t you?”

“I can’t eat rice cakes. It’s like eating cardboard.”

“You can and you will.”

“I can’t eat biscuits, or sweets,” Linda said.

“Your snacks have been weighed and measured. The food is already on the plates,” Natasha said, thinking she couldn’t wait to see Linda’s face when she looked at those jelly babies, all in a row, waiting for her.

“How do you eat your jelly babies, Linda?” she said. “I bite their heads off first.”

11:30 AM

Miranda went back to her office. She nursed a mug of coffee, stared at the dry walls of the four metre by four metre room, prefab and entirely windowless. The fluorescent tube set smack in the centre of the ceiling cast an unnatural light. She’d brought in a couple of pot plants to make the space more appealing, but hadn’t watered them for days, or switched on the daylight lamp either, and they drooped half dead on a shelf in the corner. Carpet squares were curling away from the cement floor. Plaster that had fallen in chunks from the ceiling was stuck to the gummy undersides. The walls were dirty. She’d requested a paint job but wasn’t hopeful.

Management had issued her with a portable ‘phone which she’d forgotten to recharge and her cell was in the Mazda. She slumped, feeling completely incommunicado, ‘disappeared’ in the bellyache of the hospital, only to be regurgitated later to facilitate some group, or manage some crisis or other.

At least the extractor fan was working, she thought, turning it on, wanting to get rid of the smell of over-used oil. There wasn't any other way of circulating air, unless she kept the door open.

Janet August's voice wafted down the vent from the manager's office: something about how many sheets hadn't come back from the laundry, and whoever she was talking to shouldn't forget the new mattress for room twelve and someone should remember to replace the carpet tiles on the west side steps. She placed an order for Lays Chips and a selection of chocies for the tuck shop.

Good, Miranda thought.

Then Janet skelled out some bug company: "You were supposed to fumigate yesterday. We can't have fleas in a hospital. You gave me your promise. Can you give me a time?"

While this continued, Miranda did admin, filing, made a few calls, the usual catching up, her mind going over group, thinking she'd speak to Gerald about barging in like that.

2:00 PM

Room Twenty-nine

"That lunch was disgusting," Linda said.

"Don't talk about it," Stephanie said.

"Do they really watch us from out there?" Ella asked. "I bet we could sneak out of this room and no one would notice."

"Quite possibly," Linda said. "They're so dof in that nurses' station, we can do what we want." She paged through a *Vogue*, thinking she was thinner than any of the models she saw. She at least had *that* and no one was going to take it away from her. Just let them try. She smiled, thinking about the little something she had for later, to ease the pain, hidden in a plastic bag taped right under the window sill. She lay back on her bed, looked around, thinking the bedroom was laid out exactly the same as when she was in the last time. She even had the same bed. She liked this one in the corner, next to the window. The only thing was, it looked like someone had died with all the arrangements

about the room, that it was a bit depressing and someone should throw out the old flowers.

From her side of the room, Ella asked, "So why *did* you come in, Linda? Does this place really help?"

"I had to come in. There wasn't any binge food in the cupboard. I went to Shoprite. Picked out a selection of sweets and some packets of biscuits. I got muesli and milk and at the till I added some chocolate bars. I couldn't believe I was going to put all that junk in my body but all I could think of was packing it in. I wanted it to be over. And then I was so stuffed I thought I was going to die. Whether it helps or not, I had to come in, I thought I was going to have a heart attack," Linda said. She was telling it like it was. No therapist interrupting her, pointing out that it wasn't about the food. Of course it was about the food. They'd never understand.

"What about your weight?" Ella said, thinking that was a lot of calories, thinking she would have a nervous breakdown just *looking* at food in the supermarket, thinking Wow, Linda had done it all.

"I knew I'd just throw it up. No need to worry. The worst part was when I'd eaten all that food I felt swollen. I felt like I was going to burst. And I was terrified this time I had put on weight so I ran to the bathroom, drank a glass of water, tied my hair back and vomited. I was having trouble so I used my toothbrush and tickled the back of my throat. I sprayed the bathroom afterwards, with air freshener, to cover the smell. And that was just yesterday. Ever feel completely out of control? I had to come in," she said. "I don't want to die."

"Your family knows though, right?" Ella asked.

"Everybody knows," Linda snapped, irritated with Ella and her naïve questions. "My flatmate left because I wouldn't stop. The in-laws have custody of Beatrice. My kid. She's four. I got knocked up in recovery. Can you believe it, I had my period *once* and got pregnant? And each time I *swear* I'll never do it again. I'll starve for a week. I'll fast. I'll stay in bed. I say I'll start tomorrow. I can't afford to binge anymore."

"Ja, it'll kill you," Gary said, from his chair at the table in the middle of their room, sitting with the girls for the obligatory one hour digestion period, thinking he'd rather be in his own room, doing what he wanted.

“It’s the bucks, Gary. Each binge costs me minimum eighty rand. And I had to get an advance from my Trust Fund. I hate what I’m doing but I can’t stop. I’m disgusted with myself. And the laxatives, too. Everyday I ask myself can I be normal or will I blow it again. All I can think about is food and pills and booze and where I’ll get them.”

There was silence after that, Gary thinking he should keep his mouth shut, keep the attention off himself. He couldn’t afford it with what he was up to.

Ella thinking too, that she was happy the focus was on Linda, then she’d never have to blow about her family.

Then Stephanie said, in her girlish voice, and not very loud, “At least you’re thin,” getting them to notice her, thinking she had problems too, y’know. The lot of them asking Linda questions, not realizing there were other people in the room. Hardly giving her the time of day. *She* was in the room. “I know you all think I’m disgusting. You all look at me like I should be dead.”

“Hey, Stephanie, that’s not true,” Ella said, thinking, actually it *was* pretty disgusting to be *obese*, remembering last night and Stephanie showing them the rash on her inner thighs from the blubber rubbing together, chafing, when she walked. And her arms stuck out. She couldn’t get them close to her body.

“Anyone this fat should be dead, that’s what the lot of you think,” Stephanie said, looking at each of them, her chin back, challenging them to say No it’s not so, when she knew it was.

“But you’re losing weight aren’t you?” asked Ella.

“With the amount of food they give me here I better be. I’m craving food. I wish I was home ordering groceries off the Internet.”

“How did you get to be so big, d’you mind me asking?”

“It’s like this. Everywhere I go, everything I do reminds me of food. I’ll be on the bus to work and we’ll pass Checkers and I’ll see the specials and I’ll get off the bus and go and buy whatever they are before I go to work. And if I watch TV the adverts make me so hungry. I want everything. I can’t stop. I sit down in the evening to write a letter and before I know it a loaf of bread is gone and a tin of jam is empty. Peanuts, chips, biscuits. I’ll eat anything. I’ve tried everything. I’ve tried every diet in the book. I’ve

tried starving. I've got scars from liposuction. I cheated at Weight Watchers. This is the last stop."

"They tell us here that weight's not everything, Stephanie," Ella said, in a small voice, thinking actually it was, that weight was *everything*.

"Don't give me that crap, Ella. You only say that because you're skin and bone. You've got rid of your unwanted flesh. God, you're sixteen and you don't have boobs. You're as flat as a table. You don't menstruate," she spewed, sick of these anorexics, sick of their skinny bodies, thinking how righteous they were.

"Jeez, Stephanie, what's got into you?"

"Admit it, Ella, you've made yourself clean and pure."

"We were talking about you, Stephanie."

"And now we're talking about *you*. You're protesting against being a woman."

"I've hardly had good examples."

"Just don't give me that bullshit. You feel sorry for me, but mostly you find me disgusting."

"Okay, I do. Is that what you want? Yes, you're disgusting. All that wobbly fat, like a jellyfish."

"Is that supposed to be insulting?" and it was and Stephanie started crying, hearing her mother's voice, wishing it could be different, wishing her mom could love her even if she was fat, saying, "You know, when I order my groceries off Home Shopping, QuickStop delivers to the front door. I don't even have to go out. No one sees me. All day long I don't stop. I never throw up. I stuff my face. I can't stand it but I don't stop. My husband won't talk to me. He doesn't make love to me. He doesn't even look at me. My life is a mess. You know nothing about life, Ella. What can you know at sixteen? All you want is to be thin."

"You said so yourself it's what you want, Stephanie. At least I've got that right."

"God Ella, you look like a bloody stick insect and you're unhappy as hell. You'll never be thin enough. You said so yourself, it's not about being thin."

Not that any of them believed that.

3:55 PM

Gary waited for his four o'clock session with Gerald, seeing Ella come out of Gerald's office, thinking she looked sick, wondering what they talked about that she came out looking worse than when she went in.

He got comfortable on Gerald Edward's couch, looking at his degrees on the wall, thinking Gerald certainly had a lot of them, wondering how long he'd studied for? Must have been years. They were nicely framed too, in gold.

He didn't know what to say. He looked around the room, thinking how tastefully it was done, it was smart, like a lounge.

"You're a good-looking boy, Gary," Gerald said, saying it in a way that suddenly had Gary feeling uncomfortable, knowing that look from the guys at boarding school. His father had said that whatever happened at boarding school was the norm. 'Don't take it too seriously, Gary,' his father had said. 'Don't dwell on it. Don't be a dweller.' But he couldn't get it out of his mind, what they did to him. 'Initiation' the prefects said. Made him stand in line, keeping it in when he had to go shit, how could they do that to him, to anyone? And later, the things they did to him later, in the dark, in the cubicle at night, the older boys, now seeing the same look in Gerald's eyes, and hearing Gerald say, "How are you fitting in with the women?"

"Fine," Gary shrugged, thinking it wasn't a problem, being with girls. He liked listening to them talk, skinning with and about each other. They made a big deal over everything.

He folded his arms as he thought about Natasha. Natasha was treating him right. She knew what he needed.

"What can you tell me?" Gerald asked then.

"About?"

"Anything, Gary, you know how this works." Gerald leaned over, put his hand on Gary's knee, saying, "I can help. It's my job to help," taking his hand off Gary's knee when he saw Gary getting nervous, antsy.

Gary said the first thing that came into his head: "Is it true you were married?"

Gerald wondered where he'd heard that from, said, "Yes. For a short while. It didn't work out." He looked at Gary, wondering what else he knew. "Sometimes things just don't work out."

Gary decided he's better talk, keep Gerald's mind on his *problems*.

"Ja, UCT didn't work out. I let my mother down, flunking out of engineering school. It was Goddamned boring though. Drugs helped me. Then the starving."

Gerald sat back, listening, patient, said, "Go on."

Gary brushed off his apprehension, thinking it was probably his imagination, him thinking that Gerald liked him in that way. He whispered then, saying, "You know, no one knows what a high it is, starving. You get to a point where you don't need the drugs. Your body just does it by itself. It was like I was floating through classes, like I felt I could do anything."

"Until you collapsed. You've got more meat on your bones now."

Gerald looked at his watch, said time was over, said "Come here," and hugged

Gary, saying, "I'm here for you, you know that," looking at him again in that way.

Gary couldn't get out of there quickly enough, hoping he'd find Natasha, fast.

Miranda thought, good, she could go home, close the door on the files brimming with the burdens patients had ruined their lives over.

She said cheers, see you tomorrow, to the four of them and Calvin who'd come on duty for the night shift.

She got in the car, put on Ella Mental's "Pressure's getting harder everyday", turned up the volume, hearing it belt from the CD, thinking what a great voice the woman had and she'd like to see her live.

Twenty minutes later, she stopped at the Atlantic Street robot. Three cars ahead, a dwarf in satin pants and a green and purple jacket covered with sequins did a little jig and cupped his hand for a donation. A yellow-eyed man, very down and out, held up the cover of the latest *Big Issue*, where pOVERty, was printed in big letters below the masthead.

She was glad to get back to Muizenberg. It was cooler than Claremont, and beautiful too, a triangular shaped suburb bordered by beach and vleis and mountain.

She'd read about Muizenberg's heyday as a premiere resort, mainly frequented by wealthy Jewish families, but the glory days had long since faded. The reality of the twenty-first century was Africa creeping in, characterized by disrepair, disrepute and exploitation. Gangs had extended their territories from Mitchell's Plain and slum-landlords stuffed buildings with refugees, charging eight hundred rand for the space of a mattress. The beachfront looked like a movie set. Washing hung over crumbling balconies and walls were defaced with crude graffiti. Abandoned buildings disintegrated brick by brick, waiting for demolition orders to be filled but no one would foot the bill. Teenagers, glassy-eyed, anaesthetized by chemicals, waited on Frankfort Road for number thirty-five The Mews to open for business so they could slip in and spend dad's generous pocket money on pills and joints and escape the boring world.

7:00 PM

Miranda headed for the Muizenberg Community Centre, on the sea front, around the corner from her flat. She walked past kids playing cricket in the streets and surfers with their wetsuits hanging around their hips, surfboards on their shoulders, heading for the beach.

The centre was neglected. The walls were mottled apricot and brown, like skin with age spots and at least a third of the overhead lights needed bulbs. The rest cast a mediocre light into the hall. It was like dancing under street-lamps. True to Tango.

The word Tango originated in Africa and means "the meeting place", the "special place."

Tango in Cape Town was a big deal.

In the last ten years every township, every dorp with a town hall or community centre, had started classes in Latin Dance, open to anyone with a bit of rhythm and satin pants or a frilly dress. In Muizenberg, Congolese from Brazzaville and

The Democratic Republic, ex-soldiers and students who'd studied political science, did Tango there before slipping out to car-guard and security jobs. And neighborhood klonkies did basic steps in beginner's classes. The sessions were popular, young and old alike being addicted to dance.

Miranda sat on a plastic chair, held her head back and stared at a dead bulb, thinking of Daniel and their burnt-out relationship. He'd tried Tango once but was too uptight. "I don't do this," he'd said. The subtleties of the dance hadn't suited him. She zipped off her boots and strapped on high-heeled sandals with leather soles, good for twists and turns and slow slides but wearing thin. A hole was starting under the left big toe.

"Looks like you'll have to resole," Zoleka Mdadi said, her neighbour and Maths teacher at Muizenberg Junior, taking the chair next to Miranda.

"It's time for new shoes. Zoleka, how was your weekend, by the way?"

"Tiring. I spent most of the time sorting out my mother."

Beauty was a live-in domestic worker at a big house in Constantia. She and Zoleka had shared a back room on the property until Zoleka left for the University of the Western Cape.

"Must be a helluva change for her," Miranda said, "From working full-time to retiring."

"She doesn't want to give up the position. But she's really not well. She can't keep it up. The family will provide for her. Shit, she still calls the old guy 'Master'. Freaks me out. And I can't go there without her saying how grateful I should be they paid for my education. Saying to me "Remember to say thank you". How many times do I have to say it?"

"Where's she going to go?"

"Butterworth, where she spent her childhood. She wants to be buried there, on sacred ground. Be with the ancestors. I don't know. I'm out of touch with a lot of the traditions. And the cost of a funeral, you won't believe it. Seems like she's been saving her whole life to die, sending bucks to the *Lasting Dignity Plan*."

"As long as it's not a rip-off."

"Who knows these days? Pizza, later?" Zoleka suggested.

“Hawaiian, and you’re on,” Miranda said, thinking she’d burn off the calories beforehand.

Tyrone Davids called from across the floor: “Miranda, d’you mind taking the lead tonight?” He was the dance teacher, energetic and exuberant.

“Glad to,” she said, waving to Zoleka.

“This is Marie-Claire. She’s been in Muizenberg only a few weeks. She’s a novice. You speak French don’t you?”

“A few words,” Miranda said.

“That’s enough.” He handed her over. “Thank goodness for your height darling. You’d have made a fine man.”

“Thanks,” Miranda said, thinking camp as he was he found her attractive and that was a compliment.

“So, you’re from the DRC?” she asked Marie-Claire.

“Brazzaville. I walked down. For eleven months I was travelling. To come to Muizenberg. People say this is where I must come. There’s a better life here, n’est ce pas? Life is worth something here. Not like up there, where they cut off my mother’s hands for nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Miranda said. “You’ve been through a lot. Do you have papers yet?”

“I have six months for the application. I have been to the Home Affairs one time before but the queue was too long. I waited more than one day. You lead,” she said, tapping her foot, eager to get going.

“I intend to,” Miranda said.

A lot of nonsense is talked about the lead in the Tango. It’s not about forcing your partner around the dance floor. A good lead is a dancer moving clearly and confidently, indicating speed and direction, inspiring her partner to follow.

Miranda liked to lead and it worked out often that she did. She liked the practice and the power and she liked her versatility.

But Marie-Claire was slow and hesitant.

Miranda noticed the stranger, and he noticed her too

Maybe it was his looks or the way he was dressed but the man leaning against the wall had presence - a straight back and muscular legs - she could tell by the way the black denim hugged his thighs. He was bright and shiny and very fast and when she looked again he was at her side, asking, "Can I cut in?"

"Why not?" Maybe it was a case of star-crossed chemistry, but whatever it was, Miranda apologized to Marie-Claire.

The stranger took the lead.

"You dance beautifully," he said.

"I dance for pleasure," Miranda said, connecting with his good smile and electric moves. She was comfortable. No doubt about it, the man had caught her imagination. She arched and he stepped towards her, supported the small of her back, fitting her pelvis to his hip like a puzzle piece.

The first instruments to accompany the Tango were the guitar, flute and violin but eventually the bandoneon, a sort of squeeze box concertina with keys at both ends and astonishingly difficult to play, replaced the earlier instruments. It's described by some as the instrument of the Devil.

Miranda was excited by the insistence of the beat, excited by the relentless swing and contact with her partner.

The lyrics were Spanish, of fire and love. She breathed against his cheek, pressed her body against his, communicating in a very unsubtle way that he was well worth dancing with.

The music slowed and stopped and Tango-Man raised her hand, bent his head to meet the back of it, then turned it up and kissed her palm.

"The man should always remember he is dancing with a lady," he said as he straightened and turned and walked off the dance floor.

Miranda was thrown for a split second. She breathed deeply, counting in then out, gathering composure. She realized she hadn't even asked his name. He turned back and smiled and she wondered why it appears black men have such white teeth.

4

Tuesday

December 14

6:45AM

Miranda woke with the pressure of Daniel's body against her back, lying still, not wanting to rouse him, relieved that at least his previous night's over indulgence, wherever he'd been, had anaesthetized him. She had to get her spare key back. He belched in his sleep, booze-breath escaping from his mouth, along with a trail of spit sinking into the pillow. Each minute lying next to him felt interminable.

She finally raised herself, swung her legs away from his inert body and placed her feet firmly on the ground, thinking this was how she got out of bed, put both feet down, stood up, took a step. If she didn't fall over, she took another step. That probably summed up her philosophy on life.

She dragged on her uniform of jeans and a T-shirt, went to the kitchen and discovered some good sense at the bottom of a coffee mug. The moan coming from the bedroom may have translated as Bring me coffee! But it was the last thing she intended to do. She grabbed a banana from the fruit dish and a soggy apple Danish from the back of the fridge, sneaking out of her own flat, thinking, that was it, he had to go. As she stuffed her face in the car, on the move, Miranda wondered if eating breakfast whilst driving was illegal.

8:30 AM

As if Daniel wasn't enough, she had De Kock sliding up to her too, in reception as she checked her spike, caught her sorting out her life out loud.

“Talking to ourselves, are we Miranda?” He stepped closer, squeezed her bum, pulling his hand away before she got nasty. He saw she was pissed off but it didn’t matter to him. He liked her feisty.

Miranda was thinking she didn’t have to put up with his shit.

A woman of about sixty walked past in pink bunny-eared slippers.

“She’s so pathetic,” De Kock whispered. “No better than an animal. Shuffling like that, in that dirty gown. Should be put down.” He looked at Miranda. “She’s a loony. Should be taken out of her misery. Roll on gene manipulation.”

Miranda held her tongue, thinking, he was a big time personality disordered dick, should be put down himself, stupid git, dishing out judgement and ridicule like that, thinking De Kock had out-done himself. Thinking she better get out of the reception cubicle before she told him exactly what she thought of him. She wasn’t ready to be fired.

He blocked the door.

“I’m taking your suggestions into account, Miranda. I value your opinions,” he said.

“So will I be moving my groups out of the garage anytime soon?” she asked, thinking the only thing he valued was himself.

Delicia interrupted: “Mr De Kock there’s a call on hold in your office. Urgent.”

De Kock backed off, calling, “We’ll discuss this later.”

Miranda shook her head in disbelief.

“Hey, you’re not looking too happy Miranda,” Delicia said.

“You noticed.”

“I noticed De Kock likes you. Slimeball pinched your behind.”

“He’ll go for anything in a skirt.”

“You wear pants. I’ve never seen you in a dress.”

“You know what I mean.”

“But you let him.”

“He didn’t *ask*. What was I supposed to do? Scream? He pays my salary.” Was that what it boiled down to? she thought. A woman thinks she’s got things worked out: interesting job, gets her bikini wax once a month, exercises at the local gym, dances the

night away, remembers to send yearly contributions to the foot and mouth painters charity. A woman thinks that'll guard her against bad luck, against the jerks of this world.

"Miranda, have you heard the latest, by the way?"

"What?" It came out short tempered.

"It's going around that De Kock killed his neighbour's cat when he was a kid, poisoned it and skinned it and left it on their doorstep."

"You're making this up, right, Delicia? And it's in poor taste."

"No, I'm not."

Miranda shook her head, feeling suddenly desperate for all the poor cats killed by dysfunctional little boys. Little shits.

"Oh by the way, a Mr King is here to see you," Delicia said. "Did you forget? He's waiting in your office."

No one had scheduled an early meeting. Fuck the world, Miranda thought. She hadn't had a second coffee yet. She wasn't fortified to deal with a difficult parent. She walked to her office thinking the day would improve, right? It wasn't too much to hope for.

"What, you're my urgent 'phone call?" De Kock asked Natasha Sweetie.

"That's right. I've got time. Ten minutes."

"That's not long enough," De Kock said, thinking it was also on the early side for him. But what the hell.

"I can do it in that," Natasha said.

"You didn't finish me the last time," he said. "Left me ready to explode. This time you'll finish me."

"That bloody Miranda was knocking at the door, and Gerald. For a meeting *you* scheduled. You weren't ready, anyway," she said, thinking the man had no right to blame her, letting her start on him like that when *he* was the one organized the bloody meeting.

He was thinking if she went on like this it would put him off, the silly bitch. He said, "Just get on your knees and do it."

“You’re paying this time. It can’t always be on the house.”

“Hurry up will you,” De Kock said. If she didn’t get right to it, it wouldn’t happen. He was wondering what else the little bitch did on her tea breaks, thinking he liked her mouth on him, and when she brought her tea with her like this and sipped and sucked him and her mouth was hot on his cock, he really liked that.

Miranda would do it for him too. He wouldn’t have to force her. She’d do it because she wanted to, and as Natasha sucked he thought about burying his head in those big breasts of Miranda’s, holding them, closing his eyes, nuzzling, breathing in that honey and almond scent about her, like sweets, keeping his head there a long time.

He was coming, Natasha sucking him off, swallowing.

He’d have to give her extra, little bitch, charging him in his own hospital, little slut, thinking at least he wouldn’t have to clean himself with tissues. He hated doing that, hated the smell of himself afterwards.

“How’d you get in, Gerald?” Miranda said, before the Good Morning bit. Gerald was pissing her off again.

“With my spare key.”

She wondered why Gerald was gracing her office, considering she usually had the problem parents all to herself. She could handle Victor King on her own.

“Would either of you gentlemen like coffee?” she asked.

“I’d rather get straight to it,” Victor King said. He was tall with a pockmarked skin, probably scars from adolescent acne, Miranda guessed, curious about the problems he’d had as an ugly teenager. The muscles around his mouth were tight. His long legs stretched under the coffee table and Miranda couldn’t help noticing the exposed length of ankle between the turn-ups of the chinos and the tennis socks, thinking how smooth the skin was, that he was probably preparing for the Argus Cycle Tour.

She leaned forward, rearranging magazines on the coffee table, waiting for him to begin, and stared through the glass at a neat rose tattooed on the outside of his right ankle.

Even without her glasses (where were her bloody glasses anyway? she thought) she could tell the design was so crisp it had to be new, not one of those faded with age, fuzzy-edged numbers where the colours had seeped into skin capillaries, the image resembling a healing bruise.

Victor, noticing the scrutiny, stooped and dragged up his socks as far as they would go. He crossed his legs, thinking, can't she keep out of anyone's business?

"How can I help?" Miranda asked, clear, confident, keeping her personal shit packed away.

"I want to know what's going on with my daughter."

"She's struggling, but that's entirely as it should be. Kicking an eating disorder is tough."

"I'm not happy with Ella's slow progress."

"It's complicated. It takes time, Victor. We've been through this before. She's only been in ten days or so."

"I want her out of here. I'm sick and tired of this therapy con."

His vehemence didn't surprise her. He was a parent, he didn't want his kid to have problems, and he didn't want anyone to blame them on him.

"You've been prying into our family affairs and I won't have it. No more, leave her alone. And leave her mother out of it. My ex-wife tells me you're asking questions. You're poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Victor, this kind of problem often has a root in family dynamics." That's right, she thought, the families are usually *fucked up*. She still hadn't had her coffee and Gerald sat there expecting her to put up with this nonsense.

Victor went on: "My wife and I have nothing to do with her eating problems. D'you think it's easy watching your child starve to death? Do you think I want it this way?"

"No one says it's your fault. We don't attach blame. It's a combination of peer pressure, societal pressure, difficulties of plain old growing up. Family issues come into it. We can't pretend they don't."

There was quiet as Victor King digested the words. He was annoyed. She was an upstart of a therapist, telling him what to do with his own kid. He'd talk to Gerald again, insist she lay off, insist Gerald *do* something about it otherwise he would.

Miranda said, "Victor, you want to know though, don't you, what's happening with her?"

"Back off," he said, challenging her to defy him.

Miranda sighed, thinking parents were a strange breed, that they'd promise to do whatever it took, they'd say 'All we want is the truth, we want our child back. We're willing to face anything'.

"Truth hurts, Victor. It also sets you free." Or so they say, she thought. "We have limited time. If Ella wants to turn her life around she's going to have to work hard, examine her life, talk about relationships."

"But you're making it worse," he said, playing roughly with the loose end of his belt, Miranda wishing he'd stick it in the loop where it belonged, or wrap it tight around his neck. One fewer problem parent. She breathed, centering herself, said, "Sometimes a patient has to get worse before they can get better. They come to understand their deep-seated issues. They can't run to food or drugs or whatever the preferred addiction. They need to get clean. And when they are it's damn difficult because it's then they have to face the fears, the sad feelings, lurking memories they've built their lives around. We help our patients cope with the reality of their lives. And when the addiction is food, then sometimes it's more difficult. The patient has to learn to have a relationship with food. Drugs and booze you can cut out, but food has to stay."

"The reality is you want my money, it's all about money, that's what you people are after," he exploded. He stood up then, thinking he didn't want his kid mouthing off about things that didn't concern her and he'd better watch his temper.

"She's right you know Victor, give it some time," Gerald said, Miranda thinking at last he was supporting her.

"I still have questions and I need to ask them," Miranda said, watching Victor's face drain from beetroot to ash, the pock marks shining white against his flushed skin, and his mouth, an angry gash, twisting in on itself. He clenched his fists and pulled his calves against the sofa.

“Stop pushing my kid. Leave her alone,” he said, sounding more as if he was dishing out a threat than offering paternal protection.

Victor stormed out, beyond hearing sense.

Gerald sighed, shaking his head, thinking he'd talk to Victor later, calm him down, concerned Victor would blow what they had together with that temper of his.

Miranda said, “If he wanted Ella at the Holiday Inn he should have booked her in there,” shaking her head too, thinking they were on the same wavelength for once.

“Don't push, Miranda,” Gerald countered. “You're asking for trouble. She'll clam up then we'll never get through to her. Or Victor will remove her. Leave her be for a while.”

“She's a good kid. He's going to ruin her chances if he goes on like this.”

He closed the door when he left.

Miranda sat a while, rehashing Victor and his vitriol, the whole lot taking up too much space so she screwed him and his insecurities in a glass jar, let him pull as many faces as he wanted in there, and put it on a shelf in her head. There were a lot of jars there, packing the place out.

She felt slightly nauseous. Switched on the daylight lamp. The stale Danish sat like a brick in her stomach.

10:00 AM

Group

“Mothers, fathers, who do you have problems with? Draw them out. There's no right way to do it. Let's see how honest we can be,” Miranda encouraged. Art materials and paper were set out in front of them. The day was stinking hot. For once she was pleased to be in the garage, cooler here, hoping they'd just get on with it. She wasn't in the mood for a fuss.

“You're not doing it,” Gary said.

Wise arse, Miranda thought, used to this reaction when it came to expressive therapy.

“What’s drawing pictures going to help anyway,” he said. “Waste of time if you ask me.”

Miranda looked at him, knowing the power of picture making, knowing that demons were easier to deal with on paper than in the head. She’d seen nightmares screeching out from the middle of the page. She’d seen representations of supposedly respectable aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers, abusing their children, speech bubbles drawn from their mouths, telling the children they were no good.

“C’mon Gary, I’m going to help you. I’m in this process too,” she said. “My honesty with you counts for something. Doing a picture sometimes feels safer than explaining in words. See what you can do.”

“I wish she was dead. I hate her. How’s that for honesty,” Gary said, thinking he’d give it to her straight, cut the picture crap.

“That’s intense.”

“I do sometimes. Wish she was dead.”

“I bet you do. Mother’s bring up strong feelings.”

“Maybe it’s not my mother I’m talking about,” Gary said, knowing it *was* his mother he was talking about, hating her for signing him in, hating her for never being there, always looking the other way, letting his father get away with what he did to his own son.

Miranda said, “Who is it then? Put it on the page.”

“All I know is, it was easier before I came here.”

“You were high most of the time. Real life is tough. Draw the feeling. What colour is frustration? Or anger? Does it have a shape? Draw *her*. Whoever she is. You can do what you want on paper. Kill her on the page if you want. Scribble her into oblivion. Feels good. I’ve done it myself. You can do anything on the page.”

“You want to know about mothers?” Stephanie cut in, thinking this lot had nothing on her. “My mother tried to kill herself when I was twelve. She slit her throat with the bread knife.”

“Shit, Stephanie,” Gary said, taken aback.

“That’s right,” she said. “I found her. Blood dripping into her slippers. She did it with a stainless steel bread knife. That’s what got me the most, that the knife wasn’t even

sharp. You know, it was one of those ordinary serrated bread knives.” That’s right, she thought, glad Gary and Ella and Linda were looking at her, hanging onto every word. People should know she’d had a hard life. “I visited her in hospital. I remember the bandage around her neck was brown and yellow on the edges from dried blood and antiseptic. And then afterwards, I remember my father saying the knife was too good to give away. It’s still slotted into the knife block in our kitchen. We still use it, you know, and when we cut bread I think of my mother and that her neck was never the same after that. And she couldn’t talk. She damaged her larynx.”

“Well, who can top that?” Linda said, a sarcastic edge to her voice. Linda, who liked to be the centre of attention, Linda who thrived on being the most abused.

“On the bright side, my daughter can’t do worse with *me* as a parent,” Stephanie said. “She’s six. Does french lessons. She’s going to have every opportunity. I’m a good mother.”

“That’s right, lie to yourself,” Linda said. “You’re about as good at mothering as I am. It’s a blessing to our kids that we’re in a psychiatric clinic.”

“Fuck off, Linda,” Stephanie said.

Ella asked: “Does your kid have to do French, Stephanie? Can’t she do something fun?”

“All you know is starving Ella. Don’t give me advice on bringing up children. What *is* it with you people?”

Gary said, “I know what it’s like when people are pushing you, saying do better, we expect more, why aren’t you living up to your potential, all that crap, when you’re doing the best you can. French lessons sound boring. She’s six years old. She should be playing with her friends on the jungle gym.”

Then Stephanie said, “Hey watch it, you’re talking about my child,” and Linda said, “Oh shut up, it’s always got to be about you you you,” the two of them drowning each other out.

Ella said, “We’re supposed to be drawing, aren’t we?” trying to refocus the group.

“I can’t do it. It reminds me of pre-school,” Linda said.

“Then maybe you can draw pre-school,” Miranda intervened, fascinated with the disclosure, hoping they’d follow through on paper.

“How old were you, Linda? Five, six? Draw your experience at that age.”

Like what? Linda thought. Like Uncle Leonard probing her vagina with his fingers? Twisting in his fist, cupping his hand over her mouth when she cried out? Tearing her. Warning her not to tell what he did during his baby-sitting afternoons, helping out her mother.

She said, “But I’m not good enough to do this. I’ve got no talent.”

“It’s not maths, Linda. I can’t come along and tick it right or wrong with a red pen. It’s subjective. Just try it,” Miranda encouraged, looking at each of them, noticing the lethargy, thinking either they were dreading lunch or maybe it was the heat getting to them. “I’m not judging your ability and it’s not a competition. Just do it!” She finally relied on the Nike slogan, thinking, forget the Masters programme, the lectures and countless textbooks she’d read. The best advice she could give just then came from an advert.

Linda splattered paint haphazardly across the A1 cartridge paper, spilling black on the floor.

“There. Now what?” She confronted Miranda, sending her a silent message: you made me do it, now what?

“What’s in you?” Miranda asked.

Linda crumpled the paper. She threw it across the room against the wall, watched as black paint leaked from the creases, streaking the walls, thinking, there, she’d asked for it, stupid therapist with her it’ll-all-work-out attitude. It would never fucking work out.

In Miranda’s opinion the splatters improved the décor. The wall looked like modern art. She handed Linda a clean sheet.

“You’re getting the hang of it,” she said. “You have a choice. Your secrets will hurt you in the long run. It’s up to you. I can’t do the work for you. Also, you have to clean the wall when you’re done.”

The four settled around the trestle table.

For a while it was quiet. Miranda watched them work, the only sounds pencil crayons on paper, the scrape of a chair against the cement floor as Stephanie struggled to get comfortable.

Gary coughed.

He was drawing something that resembled a giant zol. Either that or his sexuality was rearing its head, Miranda thought.

Linda painted a skeleton belching fire, but the work¹ was executed without passion, like graphic design churned out for a client. She added a bottle of vodka, on its side, empty, at the bottom of the page, and a haphazard design of pills and lozenges.

Stephanie drew a fat torso spilling over the edges of the page, with drooping breasts, a distended stomach. She looked up, self-conscious under Miranda's scrutiny, thinking why didn't she hover over someone else's work?

"This is me," she joked. "I'm ugly. I'll need more paper if you want to see the rest of me!"

No one laughed.

Miranda said, "There are good things about you."

"What are they?" Stephanie said.

"You tell me."

"I hate myself. I'm a blob. There's nothing good about me."

"You're carrying on your mother's work you know, when she insulted you, said you were worthless. She's long dead, but you're doing the same thing to yourself."

"I can't change that."

"You can. I believe you can. You have to do it for yourself. I can sit here till I'm blue in the face saying there are good things in your life, even good things about your body, but you have to absorb that, do it for yourself. You know, change the tape in your head. Throw the old one away. Destroy it. Put in a new one and listen to the positive voice."

"What do you think of this?" Ella asked. Miranda appreciated the drawing of a woman in eveningwear, bronze shoulder length curls contrasting with an emerald gown draping elegantly to the floor.

"Beautiful dress," Miranda said, watching Ella sketch leaves into the pastel with a sharpened lead pencil, painstakingly capturing a pattern of vines and grapes. Miranda remembered being a child, scratching at black wax-crayon, exposing the rainbow colours

underneath. In the corner Ella drew a small figure, with a neck angled back awkwardly, the face distorted, as if forced to witness this woman's glamour.

"Who's the little person? You?" Miranda asked, thinking, mind her own business? Never.

Ella didn't respond. She kept etching into the pastel.

Miranda asked, "When did your folks split up?"

"A year ago."

"And that's difficult for you?"

Ella nodded.

Miranda noticed her bottom lip trembling. A strand of blonde fell across one eye.

"C'mon, you can do this," Miranda said, hoping for a break in defenses.

Gerald opened the door, closed it, bang.

The intrusion was as startling as a backfire in traffic. He walked in, pulled out a chair, sat down.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked. It didn't sound like a question. He was there whether any one wanted him to be or not.

Ella grabbed a black pastel from the box, scribbled over her mother, obliterating the image with such force she tore the paper, marking the table.

"Hey Ella, calm down. We'll do this another time," Miranda said.

"I can see you're upset, Ella," Gerald said.

No kidding, Miranda thought. Bloody Gerald, what use was the doctorate if there weren't simple manners? Barging in like that, destroying the momentum, destroying the trust.

Ella stared at the floor, thinking after what she'd found out, she'd never talk to him again.

"Miranda, you can fill me in," Gerald said, thinking he wasn't going to get anywhere with this lot, especially not with this girl. God, he'd tried. He wondered why he bothered sometimes. The marks would wash off at least, he thought. The table was the only new item in the room. A decent squirt of Handy Andy and some elbow grease would do the trick. And what were those black streaks running down the walls? Really, he didn't understand what went on in this room.

11:05 AM

Gerald was in his office, checking his palmtop, waiting for his next client to show. He'd been in the business twelve years. It was enough. He was thinking he'd like to quit. Thinking he didn't like people much, that he'd rather work with animals, start a charity for abused pets, something like that. Good, there she was now, knocking.

"Come in," he said, looking up, seeing Miranda. Thinking what did she want now?

"Gerald, how could you interrupt like that? At a critical point."

"It's my right to joint the group when I want," he said. It was his programme. What was she on about? Always on about something, taking the job too seriously, thinking she could change these people.

"Is it? It's too much of a habit. It disturbs the patients, destroys momentum when you fling open the door."

"Made such a grand entrance, did I?" he said, thinking she'd do well to be less dramatic, less demanding. "Cool down, Miranda. You're too worked up."

"Gerald, it really bothers me," she said, breathing, trying to get her point across, being reasonable. She was months behind on the rates and taxes. She regularly let the electricity meter run down. She had a thirty-two rand library fine. Her car licence had expired, and her hooter had stopped working: the Mazda wasn't road worthy. But as far as the patients were concerned, there she followed the rules. They deserved respect and care. Even if she didn't like some of them. "Please, join us from the start. We build up to disclosure. If anyone intrudes at a crucial moment the group shuts down. It's unprofessional. It's bad enough that we're stuck in the bloody garage."

"Are you on about working in the garage again?"

He didn't get it, he just didn't get it, she thought.

"Gerald, it's about the patients. I want consideration for the time and space my patients need to get to grips with their struggles," she said slowly, Gerald thinking *her* patients? Where did she get off thinking they were *her* patients?

Gerald's lady was at the open door. He wasn't going to have a scene.

"I take your point," he said, thinking this would blow over, thinking she had new therapist syndrome: young, enthusiastic, give her time she'd be jaded too. She'd see them for an hour too, then forget about the stories till the next session. Assuming the patient didn't chicken out of course, and showed up.

11:20 AM

Miranda was concerned about the number of coffees she could knock back, but she deserved her break, would take it today, would put her feet up. She climbed the stairs, thirty-two of them, to the staff recreation room at the back of the hospital. The room was as crummy as the rest of Greenside, the redeeming feature being a superb view over the hospital parking lot (Ha!). There was a slight breeze and the hairs on her arms stood to attention like soldiers on guard.

Calvin Goliath was there already, reminding her of a dog from the SPCA, pitiful and angry and distrustful. His eyebrows sloping from the bridge of his nose towards his ear lobes added to the look of victim, the role he settled into so well.

She asked, "Calvin, have you seen my jersey? I may have left it here last week."

"What do you need a jersey for? It's thirty degrees out."

"I just want to find it, that's all."

"And don't look at me like that," Calvin said.

"What do you mean?"

"Natasha's with the group."

"I know. Snack time. They're in the dining room. I've just passed them there. Everything's hunky-dory. All I want is my jersey." Not some persecutory trip he wanted to lay on her, she thought, keeping her mouth shut, not wanting to antagonize him.

"I need to take a break sometime you know," he said. Touchy. Defensive. Thinking he was never allowed any peace. Thinking he was the workhorse while other people had dreams. What about him? He'd show them. He got up and kicked the side of

the fridge. Opened it. Said, "Someone ate my samoosas. How could they do that? My samoosas. Look, there's the empty carton in the bin."

Miranda didn't say a word, deliberately not interacting, avoiding communication, staying out of his chaos.

"There's no respect. I can't even leave my food in the fridge and it's gone," he whined. Someone would pay, he thought, stealing a man's lunch like that. Calvin looked out the window then, thinking all he wanted was to get out of this dump. "Do you have any idea what School and Leisure charges for my kids' school clothes? How the hell am I supposed to get by? Look at that fat cat in his fancy BMW and the rest of us don't earn enough to buy groceries at Shoprite. See him squeeze into that car? Why doesn't a big man like that drive something decent? Picking up women, that's what he does with that car."

Miranda lifted the two-day old *Times* from the table. She tried hiding behind the sports section. The coffee burnt her tongue. She'd hardly waited for it to cool, drinking it too fast so she could get out of there.

"How can you read that nonsense, Miranda?"

"The sports page? You're right. SA's lost the edge."

"There's a lot of rubbish in that paper."

"Keeping up, that's all."

"Do you see the headline? PAGAD seven escape from Wynberg Magistrate's Court."

"I saw that on the news last night."

"A policeman caught one guy. Did you see that? They caught the guy hiding behind a dump truck. Because his shoe fell off. The sole was still warm. The cop knew he had to be around."

Good story, she thought, scanning the article, saying, "It says inside job suspected."

"That Fagmied Abrahams, the leader of the seven, I know him."

"Oh, ja? The guy in the picture? What did he do?"

"Protecting people that's what. And they throw him in prison. Lock him up like a criminal."

“Didn’t he blow up a man’s shop? Killed the greengrocer? That’s what they said on the News.”

“Greengrocer was the front, selling drugs, Miranda. And *Fagmied* lands up in prison.”

“Maybe there’s another way to stop drug dealers.”

“What way is that?” he asked, looking at her, suddenly calm, and she thought better not piss this guy off.

“I’m just saying maybe bombs and shooting aren’t the way to go.”

“Talk to them nicely, is that what you’re saying? Just ask the drug lords please stop selling drugs to our children on street corners and they’ll go away? PAGAD, they do a job. They stick up for decent people. Let the gangs know they can’t get away with it,” he said, knowing that in his neighbourhood People Against Gangsterism and Drugs did the kind of job the police should be doing. This new government, this new South Africa was going down the drain.

Miranda said, “What about this magistrate shot outside his house, getting into his car? Writer says he was working on the case.”

“Maybe that fancy lawyer was having an affair. Maybe his wife paid a hit man. His head so stuck in files he didn’t know what it’s like on the Flats. Who knows who killed him?”

Miranda thought she’d better watch it, that she’d be in the tea room another twenty minutes if Calvin continued defending PAGAD as a bona fide Neighbourhood Watch. From what she’d read, they were a law unto themselves, who murdered drug lords and gang leaders, established their own territories and ended up selling drugs too. The PAGAD G-Force was a group of fanatics who wouldn’t stop at throwing pipe bombs through lounge windows, killing children watching Kideo in the afternoon. They murdered execution style and showed a preference for terror by car bomb, making rudimentary pipe bombs from instructions off the Internet.

She turned back to the paper.

“Look at the girl on the back page,” Calvin Goliath said. “She’s got hardly any clothes on. It’s disgusting. Crazy Americans. Capitalist Pigs making money that’s all. What do you say, Miranda? The world would be a better place without McDonalds and

Hollywood. This life young girls see in movies, it's lies. Brainwashing. We're losing our culture."

"Fast food and faded jeans and Barbie are here to stay," Miranda said, turning a page.

"Ja, Miranda, that's the problem," he said, adding, in a conspiratorial tone, "And the Twin Towers? You think it was the Arabs? It was Mossad and the CIA. They did it. They plotted against Islam. They want to blame Osama Bin Laden when they did it themselves."

Miranda raised her eyebrows, looked over the paper. She remembered reading somewhere that the words thug, zealot and assassin all came from ancient terror cults – Hindu, Jewish and Muslim – each believing they were doing the work of God. This was enough. She couldn't listen to his shit any longer.

"See you later, Calvin," she said, and on the way out scanned the handwritten notice taped to the back of the door:

'Some members of staff are dishonest. Until we find out who is behind a series of petty thefts, please keep your valuables locked away and ensure you do not leave your belongings lying around.'

Calvin glowered. He had a lot to say and he wasn't finished yet. He checked the fridge. He was hungry. He fingered a cheese and tomato sandwich wrapped in plastic. Looked fresh. It wasn't his, but he took it anyway, thinking somebody had to learn a lesson.

12:00 Noon

Miranda finished some admin, made a few calls. She knew from the overbearing smell in her office that there was meat for lunch: mince and cabbage. She reckoned Ella King would be having a fit right about now, would be anticipating the food, getting anxious, following Linda's lead, claiming injustice to animals. She switched on the extractor fan, hoping it would clear the air.

She heard two distinct voices coming from the vent. She walked over to the slatted grate set just above the skirting and sat on the carpet tiles. She tuned in her good ear and kept as still as the clay sculptures on her shelf.

“What am I supposed to do, you tell me.” Victor’s high-pitched whine bordered on the verge of hysteria.

“I’ve told you, leave it alone,” Gerald said, in an angry tone.

“You’ll be sorry.”

“Calm down...”

“I can’t go on like this. I’ve had enough, Gerald.”

“I told you before...”

“But it’s not working. I don’t want her meddling in my business.”

“Just calm down will you? I told you I’d handle it,” Gerald insisted.

“What’s going to happen if people find out?”

“They will if you keep this up. You’re interfering, making it difficult.”

“Can you understand that this is impossible for me?”

“I’ve told you, leave it to me, Victor. She’s going to be fine. She’s talking to me about it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Right about what? Miranda thought, hearing the click of a door closing, getting up, stretching, hearing the rumble of the motor kicking into overdrive. The extension buzzed. She switched off the fan.

“This is Tichala Lentshi.”

The name didn’t mean a thing.

“Yes?”

“We met at the dance class.” The voice was rich, smooth, transporting her to tango. “We partnered for a while but we didn’t talk. I got your number from Tyrone,” he said. “Hello, are you there?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, surprised. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to meet for a drink, maybe something to eat. How does that sound?”

It sounded fine. She’d see him once she’d settled her business with Daniel.

“I’d like that,” she said and Tango-man set a time for later that evening.

2:00 PM

Body Awareness

“Hey, what’s this all about?” Stephanie said, as Miranda tied the strip of fabric around her head, blocking her eyes.

Miranda said, “Trust me. We’re going for a walk,” doing the same with the others, Ella squealing, having fun, like a little kid in play-school, liking the game so far.

Linda said she couldn’t do it, but let Miranda blindfold her anyway.

Gary was okay about it too, thinking at least it was something different.

“I’m leading you around the grounds. This is what it’s like to be blind. You can’t see. And it’s about trust. Trusting that I’ll look after you, that I won’t get you run over in the drive. That I’ll lead you safely back to room twenty-nine.”

Later, with the blindfolds off, Stephanie said, “Well, I guess we made it.”

“And now, what is this bullshit, looking at ourselves in the mirror? I don’t need to do this,” Linda said.

“Find something beautiful to focus on. Like your eyes, Linda. Those beautiful, green elongated eyes you have, clear as glass, look at them.”

“It’s about being grateful, right?” Ella said, “That we have eyes, that we can see.”

“I can’t do it,” Stephanie said. “There’s nothing beautiful about me.”

Miranda asked, “What is beauty?”

“There, in the magazines, that’s beauty,” Ella said.

Miranda said, “If it’s only the external you’re holding onto, then that will fade, everybody ages. And there are only about eight super-models. You have to find beauty within. I want you to understand what makes you beautiful. It’s not clothes. It’s not being thin. It’s a certain energy, a confidence. And gratitude for your bodies and what they can do. Yes, that you can see. That you have the gift of life.”

6:35 PM

Rita's, a glitzy bar around the corner from the hospital, was crowded, as usual, with singles on the prowl, men with loosened ties and women in tight skirts with slits.

Daniel swiveled automatically towards whatever the berg wind blew in. His focus settled briefly on Miranda's face, thinking she was pretty with those dark eyes of hers, then fluttered from her to each new entry heralded by gusts of stifling air.

She couldn't believe the way he looked at other women. Did he think she didn't notice?

"Daniel, are you expecting someone?"

"Just looking around."

"You're restless."

"It's this place."

"Why did you *choose* this bar then? Let's go somewhere we can talk."

"Miranda, for fuck's sake, it's Cape Town. I'm pissed off with Cape Town. I'm not challenged here."

"You've said that before. Why don't you go back?"

"To England?" he said, perking up at the idea.

"Why not? To Zaha Hadid, to Rem Koolhaas, to New-Age architecture, steel and glass. If this place is such a dead end, why don't you just go back?"

"Miranda, the point is I'm working with Philistines. The tyranny of the right angle and the cube rule around here. There's no understanding of the curve, that it's the best way to get between two points. Curved like the mountains, like Einstein's universe, like a beautiful woman," he said, glancing at the new offering from the street.

To listen to him you'd expect good news in bed, Miranda thought, wondering what did he know about the curve?

"There's a total disregard for innovation, Miranda. There's no space for anything new."

“Must be tough having your superior talent ignored.” The hint of sarcasm was lost on him.

“Face brick is a turn on to some of the idiots I work with. I’m wasted here.”

“In all quarters, it seems,” she said, thinking how wasted she was with him, the slobbering git, his eyes almost permanently on the door.

“In Europe architects are heroes.”

“Daniel, I’ve sat through this before. That’s where you should be working.” Save me the trouble of kicking you out of my life, she thought.

“I’d still be in London if I hadn’t been deported. All that bloody fuss over a visa.”

“Things are different now. You could probably get back on some ancestry claim. Be a hero if you want.”

“Don’t say it like that. *You’ve* moaned about your job as much as I have, how stuck you are, why don’t *you* do something about *your* job?”

“Christ Daniel, do you have to twist everything back to me? I just don’t want to go through the same shit again.”

“There’s a total disregard for what I can bring to the company. And the renovations? What’s the stall there? I’m sick and tired of waiting. You’d think De Kock would want to spruce that dump up.”

Miranda didn’t want to talk about the hospital. She excused herself.

Part of Rita’s sales pitch was that a visit to the loo was ‘no longer a private affair for male patrons’ on account of the one way mirror in the ladies toilet, with a view on the men’s room. There was already a crowd. Miranda shook her head, thinking women had no idea how vain men were. She watched a guy smooth stray hairs from his forehead with spit. The guy next to him checked out his biceps. Then he pulled a string of steak from between his teeth. It was enough to make her question her sexual orientation. Thank God the urinals were out of sight. She decided a whiskey would help straighten her out, ordered a double at the bar and faced Daniel back in the booth.

She cut straight to the point: “Daniel, it’s not working.”

“What do you mean it’s not working?”

“That’s what I mean. You and me. It’s over.”

“What do you mean it’s over?”

“We’ve done our time.”

“You make it sound like a prison term.”

“Close.”

“C’mon Miranda, we’re good for each other.”

“Dan, I could get into bullshit break-up talk but the truth is I haven’t had a proper orgasm for two months. You’re not committed. You want to play the field.”

“Maybe you should see someone, you know, like a sex therapist, help you loosen up. Go for a massage. You’re too tense.”

“Daniel, I won’t hesitate if I need help. You have to know though, the sports channel can’t be considered foreplay. And when your team loses it’s like a death in the family. I can’t handle the mood swings.”

“Coming from you, that rich, Miranda. What do I get from you? You don’t cook, you don’t clean, what do I get?”

“My God, what is it you want? A maid? *You* could cook sometimes.”

“I’m an architect.”

“You’re a chauvinist.”

“*You’re* an uptight lazy bitch,” he said, people on either side looking at them, “And I’m sick of Chinese.”

“Which you get free of charge, usually at *my flat*,” she said, on a roll now, letting him have it. “You don’t contribute a cent. I’d eat Kentucky Fried chicken, a Steer’s burger, anything if you paid for it and brought it home. You’re always broke, borrowing fifty bucks here and there. You’re a sophisticated cheapskate. You don’t pull your weight.”

“Have you noticed, by the way, what all those noodles’re doing to your legs, Miranda? They’re looking like fucking spring rolls.”

The couple next to them were shaking their heads, Miranda thinking this was it, the insults, the abuse, that’s what it was, was over.

“What do you want, Miranda?” he said, looking around him, shrugging, as if people should know how hard it was to please her. “What is it a woman wants?”

“Why don’t you ask sometime, Daniel?”

“Because I end up with this shit.”

She drained the whiskey, thinking the drink would be more useful in her system than in Daniel's face, and left him and his Ego (and the bill) at the bar, thinking she was a therapist for God's sake. She knew she didn't have to put up with this bull. And this wasn't the person she wanted to be, insulting him, sinking to his level.

She stopped at the ladies. Brushed her teeth with her portable toothbrush. She made a cold-blooded check of her look: A Balenciaga bomber-jacket with applique on the lapels upgraded the jeans and T-shirt. Sometimes it was worth having a credit card. She applied fresh lipstick. Yes, she looked fine. She checked her bum in the mirror, straining to see the back view. That looked fine too. She wasn't so easily shaken.

9:10 PM

Twenty minutes later, in the heart of town, she reverse-parked, directed by an informal attendant, exasperated that she could do it herself but tipping him upfront because she was vulnerable and she didn't want the windscreen smashed out of spite. Miranda crossed Loop Street to Marco's African Place, pushed through glass doors and headed for the bar.

Six gyrating, pelvis pushing musicians, vests stuck with sweat to damp abs and chests, and one curvy lead singer, a woman extremely comfortable in her own body, belted out Kwaito from an elevated platform.

Tango-man was leaning forward on the counter on his forearms, conversing with the barman. His skin was smooth, unflawed, laugh creases at the sides of his mouth. He had beautiful lips. Smooth. Miranda sat in the empty bar stool next to his and held out her hand.

He smiled, pleased to see her, thinking she looked good, casual, confident.

He said, "My friends call me Teacher. I'm glad you came."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You've got a boyfriend."

"No, I don't."

"You had one a few days ago."

"Well, I don't have one anymore."

“Not your type?”

“That’s it exactly. So how did you find me? How d’you know about the boyfriend?”

“Tyrone gave me your number. And the information. Said if I wanted to ask you out, I should know. Said your man threw a scene once at Tango.”

She shrugged, not wanting to share details of the ex’s low impulse control getting him into shit. And in this case she didn’t mind Tyrone dishing out personal details. She said, “Tyrone’s a good teacher. Tango’s exhilarating, expressive, and he understands the complexities. Nice guy, too.”

“That’s what I respond to, he knows his stuff, understands the gamut of emotion tango takes you through,” he said. “He taught for a while at the old Alhambra. That’s where I usually dance.”

“So why come through to the Muizenberg Community Centre? It’s like the other side of the world from Sea Point.”

“You said it, Tyrone teaches well.”

The kwaito band was back from their break, starting to get loud and nasty.

Teacher said, “You know kwaito originated in the townships?”

“Sure. SA urban rap. About beating oppression,” Miranda replied.

“Let’s dance,” he said.

“Why not,” she said. They couldn’t talk anyway, with the band hotting up, doing their in-your-face-furious stuff. They joined in the stamping, posturing and hip thrusting. Getting closer. Teacher’s breath was on her neck. She ran her tongue over smooth teeth, pleased she’d brushed them, thinking it was only a matter of time before, you know, they fucked.

“Give me the shoot position!” belted the lead singer, florescent strips on the sides of his takkies flashing with his fancy footwork. “Give me the shoot position!”

They locked elbows and clasped hands and took aim, fired to the rhythm.

Teacher pointed his imaginary weapon and shot Miranda through the heart, thinking I’ve got her. She’ll do what I want. Thinking this was supposed to be business, but she was a good dancer. She could move. And he liked her too. She had spunk. He’d

have to watch it, wondering then when he'd spring it on her? Wondering how she'd react when he told her?

She liked his exuberance and enthusiasm and his straight teeth, gleaming in the light of the dance floor. And he didn't take his eyes off her. *

They jived and laughed and finally sat down at a small table. A waitress walked over. Miranda admired her braided hair hanging from her beaded turban.

"Nceda, Di funa Windhoek Light," Miranda said.

"Je ne parle pas Xhosa."

"Strong music," she tried.

"I prefer Congolese," the waitress shrugged, walked off with her notebook, hips and hair swinging.

Teacher said, "I like you, Miranda." No small talk. She wasn't the type. Better keep it straight and plain. "And I'd like to get to know you better."

Miranda remembered her father's warning: you attract complexities, you're a magnet to trouble. Watch out.

But Mom and Dad were out of her life. Had emigrated to England. They'd stopped trying to protect her from herself, or them, whichever they were more afraid of, after Christine's death. Miranda was pretty sure Teacher was Trouble, thinking, at that moment, it didn't bother her, that Fate was finally helping her out here, helping her out of the cul-de-sac of her life.

They danced some more, talked, but not much, the kwaito drowning out any sensible conversation. Miranda thought though, that they were communicating very well in a sweaty, primal kind of way.

Teacher left a generous tip. He wrapped his arm around Miranda's waist and escorted her across the road to the Mazda.

"When will I see you again?" he wanted to know.

"Call me," she said.

They kissed. Deep, hot, breathless. Miranda summoned her resolve and refrained from inviting his hands on tour of the rest of her body, thinking it could wait, it would be better if there was some anticipation. At least a couple of days. She could wait at least

twenty-four hours, right? What did she know about him anyway? That he was one helluva dancer. That his mouth was hot and soft.

11:50 PM

Back at the flat, Miranda headed straight for the kitchen. She'd stashed a Wedgwood honey and macadamia nougat bar in a drawer somewhere. She found it hidden under a dishtowel. She peeled away the cellophane and stuck it straight in her mouth, savouring the smoothness of the nougat, the sweetness of it. Instant gratification. A delectable substitute for Teacher's tongue.

Daniel stepped out of the shadows. He'd been waiting in the lounge for her, wondering where the hell was she?

Miranda, startled, nearly screamed, said, "Jeez Daniel, don't do that. You scared me. Be lucky I'm not holding a steak knife."

"Where've you been till this time of night?"

"Movies," she lied.

"I've been waiting."

"Daniel, go home," she said.

He yawned without covering his mouth, said, "I've been waiting a fucking long time."

"Daniel, I meant what I said. It's over."

"You don't mean it," he said.

"I really do," she said, keeping it quiet, not wanting another scene, but aware that every fibre of her body supported the knowledge that he was out of her life.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are. Back to your own place," she said, standing her ground, keeping clear, keeping calm.

"I won't come back."

"Daniel, that's the idea."

He was getting angry, his foot tapping, eyes narrowing, not believing she wanted him to leave, getting his own back, saying, "Actually, I can't believe I've hung around as long as I have. You're so critical, you're so psychologised, you're such a fucking Prima Donna."

"And there can't be two of us in this relationship. I'll call you when I've packed your stuff lying around. And I want my spare."

"Fuck you, then," Daniel said, digging into his pocket, throwing the key onto the linoleum, watching it bounce and slide under the fridge. He slammed the front door. Miranda watched him from the lounge window, a shadow moving along the pavement towards his car.

University of Cape Town

5

Wednesday

December 15

7:15 AM

Miranda lay there, her feet hanging over the edge of her bed, wondering why there wasn't daylight saving in this country. The sun was already high. She could hardly breathe through her nose thanks to the second hand smoke hangover and her eyelids felt heavy and swollen. Sunrays slanting through the gap where the curtains were supposed to meet formed an elongated rectangle of light on the carpet. She watched it lengthen, knowing she'd be late if she didn't haul herself out of bed.

The 'phone rang on the bedside table next to her, two, three, four rings, Miranda wondering whether to pick up, thinking what if the caller didn't leave a message. She grabbed the receiver before the answering service clicked on.

"It's Ella. She's hurt herself," Natasha said.

Miranda braced herself then, remembering a similar call a month ago when a patient had swallowed the fragments of a drinking glass she'd shattered on the bathroom tiles. The woman had cut her feet on the splinters, trekked bloody footprints to her bedroom.

Miranda said, "What's she done?"

"Opened a vein with one of those giant paper clips from the art supply cupboard. I did a check at five thirty, tried to wake her for her bath. Found her lying in a sodden bed. Blood all over those Winnie the Pooh pyjamas of hers."

"How bad is the cut?"

"Not serious."

"Thank God."

"More of a hole. Gouged out of her thigh. Next to the others. Jesus, I hadn't seen the scars before."

“Pretty rough, isn’t it?” Miranda said, her mind’s eye seeing the red welts and criss-cross patterns of scarred flesh.

“She’s been bandaged. And she wants to talk to you. Only you.”

“Put her on.”

“She’s back in room twenty-nine, with Calvin. Can you come in early? I don’t want her wailing in the nurses’ station. She’s pretty upset we stopped her but we couldn’t have her making a mess like that. The mattress is stained, though. Trudy will be pissed off. There wasn’t a plastic undersheet on the bed.”

“How about calling Gerald?”

“He said call you.”

Dishing out instructions, as usual, typical Gerald, Miranda thought, saying, “I’m on my way.” She put the ‘phone down, thinking why was she going in to mop up the blood? Gerald always rubbing it in they were his patients till the shit hit the fan. And Natasha, under what rock did they find her?

She sighed, weary that Ella hadn’t found the words to talk about her pain. Sometimes she wondered what good any of this was, the talking, the probing? It was that self-destruct streak. People could kill themselves with just about anything: a knife, a pair of scissors, a sharpened pencil, a hairpin if they wanted. She sniffed under her arms, decided she couldn’t get away without a bath, so made it shallow and quick, flapping like a duck afterwards, getting the Lady Mitchum dry. She dragged on second day jeans and the last clean T-shirt, swearing ‘cause she hadn’t collected the fresh load of washing from the laundry in Main Road. She zigzagged through traffic, took a short cut down Strubens Road, the man on her tail looking as if he’d like to beat her up for driving an old car.

8:20 AM

Miranda parked badly in the usual spot, not bothering to reverse and straighten, thinking what the hell! She sprinted up the stairs, the exercise getting at her lungs after the night before. Even with the tango, she needed to do more. She’d ‘phone the gym and ask for the current rates. She’d go this time.

At the nurses' station, she knocked on the glass, asked, "How's Ella?"

"Out for the count. She's been sedated," Natasha said.

"Hey, I skipped my coffee to get here."

"She was out of control, Miranda. Thrashing about. Swearing. For the sake of the other patients Doctor Love did it. And thank God he was around, what with Ella driving everybody crazy with her wails and handover trying to happen in the nurses station," thinking Miranda should get off her case. She had things to do. Couldn't hang around Ella, waiting. She had to get on with the behind the scenes stuff, getting them up, getting them dressed, getting them fed, looking after them.

"I made an effort to get here as quickly as I could."

"Feel as irritated as you like, Miranda. At least the kid stopped howling. Gave the rest of us a chance to talk in peace. It's minor stuff. I told you. Looked worse than it was. A lot of blood but just a little hole. Attention seeking."

Miranda managed asking nicely: "Let me know, please, when she's ready for visitors, okay Natasha?"

"My shift's over. Ask Calvin. He's watching her."

Miranda's take on Natasha was she wouldn't go out of her way for anyone but herself. Why did she do nursing? she wondered, heading down the stairs, pissed off with the way things worked by default around Greenside. She checked her spike at reception, hoping for divine intervention, thinking the only thing she'd ever won was twenty rand on the Lotto and a purple radio when she was ten. Her luck might yet change.

No messages.

But take these, Delicia said, handing over two official looking letters and a padded brown envelope from her pigeonhole. The large envelope was stamped in the left corner with the Medicorps logo, addressed to the Greenside Eating Disorders Unit.

She popped her head around the dining room door, not wanting to disturb breakfast, but at least Calvin should know she was around if he needed her. He saw her, called her to come in.

"Linda won't eat," he said, rolling his eyes, thinking Miranda could try with this woman. He didn't know why they bothered. Parents and medical aids throwing good

money after bad in his opinion, except that no body asked. He could tell them a thing or two, but why should he? Bunch of hypocrites.

"I hate eggs. I told him it's an exclusion." Linda raised her chin, said, "Just you go ahead, try get me eating these disgusting things. We'll sit here all day. I'm up to it."

"I checked on the list, Miranda," Calvin said, looking at Linda. "It's in your own hand writing, Linda. Your exclusions are avocado, liver and custard. You only get three and that's what they are, in your writing, signed by Natasha."

"I told you I don't eat eggs."

"Linda, please, eggs aren't the end of the world," Miranda said, wanting to stuff the egg down Linda's throat. It wasn't about food. When would Linda get the message? When would any of them get the message? She wanted a long soak in the bath, wanted her coffee.

"You're torturing me," Linda said.

"Better eat the eggs before they coagulate. That's real torture, Linda. You can do this. We'll talk in group. I have to say it again and again. This isn't about the eggs. You know that. C'mon, they're already cooling." Miranda encouraged her, thinking she wouldn't mind the eggs herself, and a rasher of bacon on the side and toast and jam.

"I'm not going to do it. You don't understand. None of you people understand. I don't eat like other people," Linda whined.

"Bed rest if you don't," Miranda said, calmly. "You know the rules. And a glass and a half of Build-Up. There's more kilojoules in that than in the eggs."

The toughest place was the dining table. Telling a food addict they didn't have to eat was like telling a druggie to go ahead and take a toke of crack. She had to be firm, inflexible when it came to food. Linda had to eat and she knew it.

Then Gary started.

"Can't you lay off? She's depressed," he said. "We got weighed this morning. Linda's picked up forty grams."

"And I've picked up half a kilo," Stephanie butted in. "I'm supposed to be losing weight, not piling it on," she said, sullen, glaring at Miranda, Miranda thinking Jesus, no one was taking responsibility for their own choices.

“If you think I’m going to eat the egg, you’re wrong,” Linda said, looking at Miranda, challenging her, thinking if Miranda forced her she’d spit it in her face.

Miranda kept cool. Breakfast was Calvin’s duty. What was she doing there anyway? She’d have her own problems with the lot of them later. She said, “You have a choice, Linda. Eat the egg or drink the Build-up. You think about it. Whatever you want, Calvin will organize it,” leaving then, saying she’d see them all in the garage. It still surprised her that patients kicked so hard against getting better, against release from obsessions about food. Their existence revolved around how to avoid eating it or how to get rid of it. How miserable living that way, she thought, and how extraordinary that cake and chocolate, bread and eggs, could bring a grown woman to her knees.

Back in her cubbyhole, Miranda did some admin, some odd filing, ‘phoned the parent of a prospective patient.

“Eight weeks is it? The In-patient programme?” A Mr Sugarman asked.

“That’s the one.”

“But does it work? That’s what I want to know.”

“There’s no quick fix, I’m afraid. It’s really the first step to recovery.”

“At sixteen thousand rand it better be a big first step.”

“Like most addictions we need to look at what the underlying issues are. Why don’t we make a time, you can bring your daughter in and we’ll assess her, discuss treatment and then you can decide. Next Friday twelve noon, will that do?”

The post turned out to be one cheque for an outstanding sum for services rendered. Miranda had battled to get money from a rich Joburg client who’d cheated from day one, hiding food and vomiting into jars stored under her bed. As if they didn’t know that trick. She’d split in all directions, blamed everyone but herself for what she was doing. She’d been on a drip for a while. Managed to pull that out too. Anything to avoid eating. A death notice was attached to the cheque, and a note of thanks for all the staff had tried to do. The payment was from the woman’s deceased estate.

There was a card from another patient. She wrote, 'I have a steady job now and I spend more time behind my desk than in the toilets.'

Miranda opened the brown A-four envelope, confirming the contents as the *Medicorps News* mag. Tedious stuff. She stashed it in the in-tray.

10:00 AM

Group

"Don't you think," Miranda asked, "that you're giving the scale a whole lot of power?" as she fiddled with the video machine, trying to get it to work. "You allow the numbers on the scale to change your mood."

"I just have to look at the scale to feel down," Linda said.

"But how can the numbers on a scale bring on a major depression? One minute you're fine, then you see the number. If it's fluctuated by a few grams you've had it for the day."

"Only if the numbers go in the wrong direction, up, then it's bad news. I look at the numbers and if I'm heavier, everything feels out of control. I feel like my head is spinning. I can't breathe."

"You understand that in the course of a day your weight will fluctuate, don't you? That your weight would be different each time if you weighed yourself three times in a day. Your weight will fluctuate before and after a pee, for heaven's sake."

Linda was thinking Miranda just didn't get it. She said, "It doesn't help knowing that. All that stuff about hormones and my body weighing differently at certain times of the month, it doesn't matter. I get on the verge of a panic attack if I see higher numbers. I know I have to put on weight, but I don't want to."

There was silence for a while, some shuffling. Gary blew his nose, Miranda thinking he wasn't looking good today. Maybe he was catching a cold.

"I got a card from the executors of a deceased estate today," she tried something different. "An ex patient who finally died of starvation. She buggered up her body and it gave in."

“That’s not going to happen to me,” Linda said. Bloody Miranda, always trying to scare the lot of them, as if they could be put off so easily. The power, the euphoria of the number getting smaller on the scale, she just didn’t understand it.

“With every binge, every puke, you damage your vital organs. Every day priding yourself on doing without food, is another day you hurt your body. A slow suicide. You’re depriving your body of the nutrients it needs for health.”

“I’m going to stop. When I’m a kilo lighter I’ll stop,” Linda said, adding, “Women grow out of this sort of thing, don’t they?” knowing as the words came from her mouth that she was talking rubbish. She changed the subject, asked, “Is Ella coming down?”

“She’s on bed rest. There’s a reason she cut herself. She has to think about what it is, what feelings got her to do it. Maybe she’ll talk about it later.”

“Do we have to watch this video?” Linda said, avoiding her own issues, as Miranda inserted “The Amazing Body” into the machine.

“What’s wrong with this?”

“I watched this the last time I was here. Boring crap on healthy eating and proper exercise. I don’t feel like sitting through it again.”

“Linda, pay attention this time. Get a grip on how lucky you are. You’ve got two arms and two legs, and they work. You’ve got a lot to be grateful for. Try staying awake this time, okay? Calvin, don’t let our lot sleep in front of the TV,” she said as he came in to the lounge, knowing that was exactly what he would do. If De Kock ever approved her budget, she’d spend money on a decent library, video and books. There were enough of them out there, about the side effects of food abuse. Big business. She said, “Did you know that in the course of an average lifetime, we cry ninety-seven buckets of tears?”

“It’s in the video,” Linda sighed.

“Connect with your own sadness, Linda, your own bucket of tears, the ones you won’t cry.”

But Linda was already bored out her skull, thinking a vodka would do very well right about then.

11:05 AM

A Kit-Kat and a Bar-One was an excellent choice, in lieu of the eggs and bacon she'd been hankering after since breakfast. Miranda added the price of the chocolates to her tuck shop tab.

In the tea room she switched on the kettle, leaned out the window, scanned the parking lot for want of a different view. The handyman was cleaning the interior of De Kock's M3 with a nifty hand-held vacuum cleaner. He shook dirt from the rubber mats. He poured wax on the bonnet, rubbing the metal with a shammy. Gerald's Jetta, gleaming alongside De Kock's penis extension, had also had special treatment.

Miranda thought her car needed a wash too, but it wasn't about to get one.

The kettle whistled.

Calvin stuck his head around the door.

Miranda moaned inwardly at the thought of enduring his company, wishing he'd leave and bother someone else, leave her in peace with her snack.

"Ella's gone," he said.

"Christ," she said, feeling a burning sensation down her gullet as she gulped her coffee.

"Her bed is empty. She's not in the toilets. She's not in the lounge. I don't know where she is."

"Maybe she's sneaking a cigarette in the courtyard? Jesus, the coffee's hot."

"She's not anywhere. She's gone. I tell you she's gone."

"But she was sedated!"

"Must have worn off."

"She was supervised, wasn't she?" Their brown eyes locked then, his, muddy and defiant, a match for hers.

"She's gone, Miranda. Took that little black rucksack of hers and ran away, right out the front door!"

"Did you check with Delicia?"

"Delicia saw nothing. Too busy talking to that bloody boyfriend of hers. And listen Miranda, this isn't bloody Pollsmoor. I can't be supervising the video and watching

the room at the same time. I can't leave them for one minute before somebody tries something funny."

"Calvin, they *have* to be watched, you know that. There's no bingeing, no vomiting, no drugs, no booze. They're going to try something, you *know* that."

"Don't blame me for this. Natasha's supposed to be on duty upstairs. She's in De Kock's office again. What's she doing in there all the time? Do I have to do everything on this unit? I can't even go to the toilet."

"Calvin," Miranda sighed, then breathed deeply, said, "Ella's gone, and we're wasting time. Go walk around the block, go to the station, see if she bought a ticket. And take the 'photo from the file in the nurses' station. Show it around. I'll 'phone her father. Let's just pray she doesn't get into trouble," thinking that could mean getting raped on the train, or thrown off or having her throat slit for the gold locket around her neck.

Victor wasn't pleased.

"We'll do what we can, Victor," Miranda promised.

"How does something like this happen? How can you guarantee anyone's safety in that place?"

"Victor, Ella is streetwise. More than likely she'll come back herself. She knows the area. She knows the hot clubs and restaurants. She's probably hanging out some place."

He said he'd check some of her haunts, 'phone her friends. Actually, he handled it better than she thought he would. No threats, no blame.

The closest station was Claremont Police. She called them next.

"Listen lady, we'll do our best. I'll radio the van and if they see her they'll pick her up. But you know about yesterday's bomb blast? The station is in a shambles." She'd seen it on the news. Charge office of the police station blown up. Hundreds of thousands of rands worth of damage. A reservist dead and another injured. That inspired confidence, she thought. She'd passed by the station often enough and had noticed the sign screwed into the face brick: "These premises protected by Chubb Security." It was absurd, she thought, that a police station needed protection from a private security firm, and even that didn't work, and that she couldn't possibly rely on them to find Ella.

"The streets are quiet. She's nowhere," Calvin reported.

"Let me think," Miranda said, muttering shit, what now.

The 'phone rang. Her day just had to get better. This was it, the Society for the Disabled letting her know she'd won the car with the lucky raffle ticket.

"This is Security at Cavendish Square."

"Thank God, you've found her," Miranda said, relieved, thinking of course Ella would end up at the local shopping complex, a hang-out for teenage movie-watching mall-rats, chatting and drinking in any number of café-bars. She'd probably planned to sneak into a club later. Most young girls these days didn't even lie about their ages, fourteen year olds looking eighteen, getting plastered on Archers and Baccardi Breezers, was hardly unusual.

"Excuse me?" the voice from Security said.

"I'm sorry, I'm presuming you're calling about a run away patient. That's what you're calling about, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry to break the news..." the man said, hesitating, Miranda thinking my God, she's dead, raped, please, she can't be hurt.

"Don't tell me bad news."

"We found your bag here at Cavendish Square."

"My bag?"

"The cleaners handed it in. A black suede bag under row F, seat 12 by the Cinema Nouveau with your wallet in it and that's how we knew how to get hold of you. When is convenient for you to come in? To the Consumer Security desk on the ground floor. We'll keep your things here."

"Look, there must be some mistake. Can you hold for a moment." Miranda put the 'phone on her desk, bounded to the filing cabinet and yanked out the bottom drawer. The only items there were a pencil, a packet of mini-tissues and a TV-Bar wrapper. She checked the other drawers before admitting there were some skelms at the hospital and why shouldn't someone sneak into her office and steal her stuff? Spare keys were floating around and anyway she didn't lock up half the time, trusting no one would rip her off, or tempting fate, she thought.

“Thanks, I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” she said, thinking maybe some resident junkie had needed to finance his drug habit. He’d return stoned, full of remorse. He’d own up: sorry, I couldn’t help myself. He’d promise to pay back the two hundred bucks he’d nicked from her purse.

But what about the telephone book, bankcard, Visa card, her chequebook, tampons, her lunch, Miranda thought, realizing just how much of her life was in the satchel.

There was another call.

“Can you drop what you’re doing and meet me, right now, as soon as you can?” If she didn’t like this man as much she’d say piss off, I’ve got work to do. He was coming across entitled. But she agreed to meet Teacher at Cavendish.

She grabbed her jacket, left a message with Delicia that she was continuing the search for Ella, ran to the parking lot, hopped into the Mazda and roared off, literally. Toxic fumes had slowly eaten away the exhaust pipe and there wasn’t much left. She slotted in a CD, mixed quiet, that she’d recorded herself, off the Internet, with the voices of the Indigo Girls and Sade, Roberta Flack and Norah Jones. She turned up the volume, drowning out the rumble from the exhaust.

12:00 Noon

Cavendish Square was swank and shiny, with chrome and glass everywhere. Miranda moved through the gauntlet of shop fronts and in one gleaming window she noticed her bum trailing behind her moving body by a second, her reflection a sure sign to diet.

She clutched the handrail of the escalator running from the glass dome to the basement and focussed straight ahead. Vertigo set in anyway. She felt as if the earth was pulling her down, appealing to her to end it all, what was the point anyway, but she screwed the Devil back in the glass jar, watched him thrash about in her mind’s eye. It was just a matter of time, she thought, before someone tried suicide here. She imagined an article tucked between the Shoprite and Pick n’ Pay specials: “A young medical student pressurized by his family to achieve straight A’s took his life at Cavendish Square

this weekend. He plunged through the glass dome, decapitating himself...” coming out of her warped split second reverie near the ground floor, seeing the back of Ella's head, her sleek hair tied in a ponytail.

Ella was wearing the same sleeveless T-shirt, the stripey one she'd had on that morning according to Natasha. She darted around a corner. Hey wait, Miranda wanted to yell, but she didn't want to scare her off. She pushed past a pair of adolescent lovebirds smooching near the bottom of the escalator, wondering why they had to be so sloppy about it. She ran along the marble walkway, looked fleetingly through the windows of Crazy Daisy and Callahan's and DKNY, making sure Ella hadn't ducked into one of the shops.

There was no sign of her.

Miranda stood breathless and disappointed, thinking she must be crazy running after Ella like this. She'd come back.

Then she thought about her Gap satchel. It had cost an arm and a leg in London a year ago, bought on a visit to Mom and Dad.

At Consumer Security, Miranda filled in forms. A security officer presented her with the bag and a parking voucher and profuse apologies that such a thing could happen at an exclusive shopping centre. Forty minutes later her accounts were cancelled and she was swearing under her breath about the personal inconvenience, all the while keeping an eye open for Ella, wondering where would she go if it was her? Home? Never. School? Highly unlikely, unless she wanted to enlist the help of friends. Ella seemed so solitary at the hospital Miranda didn't think she'd run to anyone in particular.

If she was Ella, she'd go see a movie, she thought, a double feature. She'd binge on popcorn, low on calories, then reappear at dinner with her tail between her legs.

Miranda asked permission to inspect the seating areas. Projectors were rolling. As she stood in the aisle, her vision compensated for the dim light. She stared at the few matinee moviegoers, but it was too dark. The patrons were unrecognizable as specific individuals, even when the contours of a face were illuminated by intensified lighting on the big screen. She gave up. What the hell was she doing anyway? Ella was probably clear across town by now.

Miranda walked past the fast food gauntlet. She considered a cheap meal. Then she spotted Ella for the second time. At a table at McDonald's. Miranda, fed up, thinking the junk food was most likely paid for with her money, went up to her, tapped her on the shoulder, said, "What the hell kind of game are you playing at?"

"Excuse me?" The teenager turned to face her.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else," Miranda said, actually not at all sorry. Teenagers all looked the same: hair pulled back from a scrubbed face, pony tails, tight tit-hugging T-shirts, three-quarter cookie-cutter pants. Lolitas, the lot of them, thinking they were all grown-up, scoring dagga from some two-bit dealer at the local petrol station so they could get stoned at school and give blow-jobs to boys at break behind the tool shed.

The Owl and the Pussycat was diagonally across the way. Miranda was early.

So there she was, sitting in a booth in a pub during working hours, spending her emergency ten rand note, nursing a G&T, thinking that at sixteen she hadn't been too different from these teenage boppers, remembering her rebel days when she bunked class. When she smoked herself sick at the Sunnyside Steakhouse, a dive around the corner from boarding school. Then she'd thought her life was worth more than being bored to death in Geography. And now? This job wasn't all it was cut out to be. Therapy was supposed to work, right? People were supposed to get better, *do* something with the insight, move on with their lives.

Teacher slipped into the booth beside her.

She was suddenly anxious, raising her hand to her neck, feeling the sweat, thinking she was dressed in mismatched clothes, with not even a dab of Chapstick on to soften her lips.

This wasn't the way she wanted it.

He cut straight to the point, didn't even order a beer.

"Miranda, I have a problem."

"And it couldn't wait till after hours? You're married? Gay? You don't date white women? Don't tell me you're an addict? An alcoholic? Dope-head?"

"None of the above."

"So what's up? I've covered all bases."

"I'm with the police."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm a police. A detective." He handed her a business card, with a glossy pic of a leopard lounging on a branch in a thorn tree in the veld on one side. His police details were on the other, including a private cell number scribbled at the bottom.

She said, "The Scorpions? That's a specialist unit, right? Deals with fraud, corruption, that kind of thing? Scorpions, Justice in Action. They have a logo."

"I'm part of a special task team."

"That's a relief."

"Is it?"

"Would have been worse if you'd told me you were eating disordered."

"What do you think?"

What she thought was she wasn't a fan of the South African Police Service. What good did they do? She blinked a couple of times, flashing to a regular TV news scene, a police wife sitting in a Cape Flats council flat, being interviewed by an SABC newsman with a bad accent. Her policeman husband shot or stabbed to death in a dark backstreet by the usual Mr X.

"I think you should be on a CD cover, playing drums or the lead singer of a band the way you move, not toting a police issue pistol. It's a tough job."

"Sometimes."

"And you wear blue crimplene on parade."

He smiled.

"The uniforms are cotton. Good quality."

"Why the meeting? I've heard worse."

"It's complicated."

"Why didn't you tell me last night?"

"It didn't come up. We didn't talk much. I don't know much about you either. We were busy." Deep throating, gyrating to kwaito, he'd been comfortable with her. She was easy to be with, and today, easy to talk to, funny.

“How *can* you be a policeman, especially in this country? You can get killed being a policeman.”

“Miranda, these days you can get killed just for living.”

“You know, it doesn’t matter to me, you being a policeman. It doesn’t make a difference to me.”

“There’s more.”

“What more could there be? I don’t see it as a problem.”

“I need your help, Miranda.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“You heard. I’m asking you to help me. With an investigation.”

“What could you possibly need me for?” Apart from to make love to, she thought.

What the hell did he want?

“Have you heard of asset forfeiture?” he said.

Miranda wasn’t certain if she really wanted an explanation. She was starting to get a bad taste in her mouth.

Teacher said, “This is how it works,” thinking he’d play it straight, he’d lose her if he didn’t. He wanted to bring his man down. “If we gather evidence that a property is being used in crime, we can seize the property, shut down any illegal business happening there.”

She looked at him, blinked her eyes, thinking what did she have to do with any of this?

“There’s a new act. The Prevention of Organized Crime. We can confiscate property if it can be shown that ‘said property’ is being used as an instrument of crime. Most of the time owners put forward a defense of ignorance, called the ‘innocent owner defense’. Parents swear their boys, good boys, brought up right, aren’t involved. That kind of thing. But we collect evidence, statements and videos, eye witness accounts. We can subpoena tax records from the Receiver of Revenue, even set traps, to see if the owner is benefiting financially.”

“So what is it you want me to help you with?” she asked, thinking the meeting was turning a bit surreal.

He decided telling her what he wanted was his best bet, went right into it saying, "We're not asking you to risk your neck, just notice what's happening at Greenside. We want to know if the building is being used for drug dealing."

"What the hell are you talking about, Teacher?"

"I know. It's a shocker. We want to know if drugs are being distributed from Greenside. Or if the premises are being used as a drop off point. A drug laundering facility. The ringleader's a Cuban who goes by the name Nelson Garrides. He could be orchestrating it."

She was stunned into silence, digesting what he'd said, then she asked, "Shouldn't people come forward on their own if they suspect anything?"

"They should. Doesn't mean they do. People are afraid they'll end up with a bullet to the head, execution style, for ratting out the drug dealers selling ice, speed, crack, dennies, you name it, to their children. Or that their kids will get killed. There's a lot of fear. Intimidation."

"This Garrides sounds like bad news. I'm not into getting killed keeping a lookout for you."

"No one will know."

"I'd be a spy, a snitch."

"An honourable member of society."

"If assets are seized, what happens to them?"

"Houses, boats, cars are sold, and the money goes to the Criminal Assets Recovery Account. Or the money is donated to the community for upliftment. Sometimes property is donated to the community. A while ago, a drug house in Kensington was converted into a halfway house for recovering addicts. Greenside would possibly be auctioned."

The bad taste in her mouth was getting worse.

"Has this all been a set-up?" she said, incredulous. Falling for flesh didn't pay. Her unexpected reward from Fate was turning out complicated, with conditions.

"Your evidence will be treated discreetly," he said. "We need reports from witnesses who are impartial, trustworthy."

He saw the look on her face, said, "This is the way it's done these days," sounding apologetic that he was recruiting her. "It shouldn't be this way, but it is."

She was sipping her drink, asked, "So why me?"

"We want to speed things up. By all accounts you're a good citizen. You wanted to join the Police Reservists. We've got your application."

"That was a previous life, a moment of madness."

Teacher was thinking she was perfect. She was committed. Worked after hours. Had a social conscience. She was cute, too, with those brown eyes, healthy skin, not burned like most of the white girls he knew, who wanted to be tan, lying in the sun like they did, but not seeing it the way he did, that they were damaging their skin.

He was also thinking after this was over maybe he'd sleep with her.

What the hell, he'd sleep with her anyway.

"You don't like this," he said, noticing a stiffness to her shoulders. "Please," he went on, "What's happening between us has nothing to do with my job. I want to know you better whether you help me or not."

"You *lied* to me. How could you *do* that?"

"So I followed you, watched you..."

"Why did you choose *me*? Couldn't you pick someone else? What about procedure? Aren't you supposed to identify yourself as Police before involving innocent people? Recruiting me is ridiculous. I don't even work with the drug unit at Greenside."

"That's what we need. Someone who's not too close. And not involved."

"How do you know I'm not?"

"I believe I can trust you. Why not consider your help as Community Service?"

"Whistle-blowing?"

"Call it that if you want. Police can't do the job without support."

She looked at his mouth. It was wide and warm. There was something else about him: a hardness, a coolness that she'd recognized before and it drew her closer.

He said, "We're in the same business, really. Addiction, right? Most of the parents calling in at the station are choked their kids are into drugs, let alone selling the stuff at school. Supplying kids free, getting kids hooked on the stuff then demanding money, kids stealing from their parents, pawning jewelry and household goods, selling

stuff at Cash Crusaders. I'm talking about fourteen-year-olds. You know how it works. Nelson Garrides is a big time supplier. But we go for anyone involved. Zero tolerance. It takes a coordinated team effort to send these guys down. We're worried he'll flee, to Mexico or Argentina, then we've had it. If he's laundering drugs through the hospital then we have to know."

After he left, Miranda sat awhile, astounded she was so easy, that she'd agreed to keep a look out, thinking this was not the way she wanted to start a relationship. She contemplated cashing in her savings, digging out her passport from behind the bookshelf at her flat and disappearing into the blue. She downed the last centimetre of the kick-start drink. Nearly ordered another one, thinking about Tango-man's revelation, thinking about what could possibly be happening at Greenside, that people all over the place were being screwed and why was she surprised?

"Hey, leave my arse alone," Miranda said, the waiter groping her on the way out.

"But it's such a cute arse," he said.

There was a bit too much of it as far as she was concerned. She was over endowed in several places and attracting too much attention. And she was thinking too, as she walked out, that she'd like to be in Teacher's arms again, thinking that life really was happening while she was busy making other plans.

Miranda saw Natasha chatting up a couple of teenage boppers in Accessorize, checking out earrings and headbands and bangles. She walked over, glad the upside of gin was no smell.

Natasha Sweetie was wasted at the clinic. She had no aptitude, no inclination and no desire to look after problem people. She looked good in the shop though, as if she'd do well selling accessories. Miranda watched as she draped a scarf around her neck,

laughed at some teenage joke. Miranda appreciated her loveliness: generous mouth and curly auburn hair spilling over her shoulders.

She changed her mind about stepping in to say Hi. Wasn't in the mood.

Just then Natasha looked up. Her eyes widened, her head twitched sideways. She was startled to see Miranda, wondering what the hell the workaholic was doing at Cavendish during office hours. It wasn't Christmas lunch.

Miranda headed back up to the glass dome, in the lift, which turned out less nerve wracking than the escalator. She looked at the decorations this time, thinking they were depressing, ostentatious and gaudy, thinking that the good times should just be cancelled.

2:00 PM

"Father Brown 'phoned," Delicia said, telling her as soon as she stepped in at the door.

"Ja? Give me a chance to catch my breath, won't you?" Miranda said.

"From All Saints Catholic around the corner."

"And?"

"A kid sneaked into the church a while ago."

"Ella?"

"He found her kneeling on a sampler in the back pew, crying her eyes out."

"Thank God."

"Calvin fetched her. She wasn't happy being brought back. I heard her screaming all the way down the block," adding in a conspiratorial tone, "Calvin tells me she dug her nails into her thumb, bled on a bible and a couple of hymnals. The Father's not too pleased about that."

Ella lay face down on her pillow, on a starry night duvet cover, on her corner bed, her hands tucked between her legs, knees to her chin. Miranda sat on the edge of the bed, stroking her hair.

“Hey Ella, I’m glad you’re safe. I was worried.”

Ella whimpered into the pillow. When she finished crying, she faced Miranda, tears still wet on her cheeks, running into her mouth. Miranda handed her a tissue.

“Tell me,” she said.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Of course there is, Ella. You’ve sent out strong messages that something’s on your mind.”

“I can’t tell.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too complicated.”

“Try me.”

“He doesn’t want me to.”

“Who? Your Dad?” she guessed.

Ella nodded.

“I’m not going to leave before you give me something to go on,” Miranda said, serious about that, settling herself with the latest *Nineteen*, supporting her back against the wall, legs stretching comfortably across Ella’s bed. A skinny computer enhanced model posed provocatively on the cover, flawless. All of fourteen years old, Miranda reckoned, looking out with perfect skin and perfect teeth at the envious reader. Miranda had an urge to black out her teeth with kokie pen, and give her a moustache, just as she’d done years ago at the convent, and bulk out her body too while she was at it.

No wonder so many fucked-up teenagers popped Ecstasy, she thought, escaping drab lives of homework and pimples and troubles with parents. They wanted some of this, wanted to shed plump, pubescent bodies and be super models. And the implied promises of adverts on every second page disturbed her. You too can have a cleavage if you wear this bra, and these hold-up-your-arse pantyhose will ensure men glue their eyes to your juvenile bum and if you use this cream you’ll stay young. Please, Miranda thought, the only way to look young is to be young, like you know, Britney Spears on the centrefold.

“You know Ella, he’s got to face the truth some time,” Miranda said, throwing the magazine on the table. Ella started sniveling again. “Look, I’m the one your dad’s got

issues with. He says I'm pushing you too hard. I want to know if there's anything in that."

"What do you mean, like it's your fault I cut myself and ran away?"

"Something like that," Miranda said.

"It's got nothing to do with you. How can he say that?"

"Well, I want to get the story straight. Maybe he thinks I'm pressurizing you, but you'll tell the truth in your own time."

"He won't like that."

"For you to tell the truth? I respect your dad as a parent. Parents have a tough job. He loves you. I'm not going to back down, though. I'm going to stick up for you. I'm patient and I'll hang in there. But I need to know if it's a problem for you."

"I told you it's not. But if you think I'm going to help you out with what's going on in my family, you're wrong."

"We're here for you, you know that."

"Maybe you are," Ella said, not actually believing that anyone could help her. "But people are so serious and uptight around here. Like someone in the next room is dying or having a baby. I keep on thinking what am I doing here? I can sort out my own problems."

Miranda bit her tongue, hoping she'd go on, but she didn't. "You know you can kill yourself that way, slicing up your leg so close to the artery," she prompted.

"It's beautiful," Ella said. "The red. When I see the red run down my leg it's like I'm not in my body. The pain goes. It flows away."

"There's going to be a scar."

"What do I care. My family's fucked-up. I may as well admit it and me too. Bring on the scar. Cool."

"Scar tissue is a permanent reminder of the pain. You haven't kicked it out of your system."

"My life is shit. My parents are delinquents. Deviants. I hate them. I hate myself. What good is all this talk?" she said, angry with Miranda, wanting her to fuck off. But wanting her to stay too. Hoping she wouldn't leave.

“Whatever shit goes down in your family, you can be independent, make choices right for you. Tough takkie if your family doesn’t approve. But look what you’re doing to yourself. No wonder they’re uptight! You don’t expect otherwise, do you?”

She was listening.

“It’s about your Mom, isn’t it?” Miranda said, taking a chance.

“You don’t understand,” Ella spat and pulled her hand away. “I saw her, when I came out of my room. I wanted a snack. It was late, probably midnight. She was in our kitchen, helping herself from our fridge. A Tart. Red curls on her shoulders. Red like not real, completely plastic, straight from a bottle. She had on a green dress with sequins sewn like leaves. Glitzy. She looked like a prostitute and the seam behind her knees was skew. She couldn’t even pull up her stockings properly. I thought what kind of a slut is this?” Ella slowed down, and said deliberately: “Dad brings women to the house sometimes. I guess he’s allowed. He’s an adult,” thinking she’d said enough, he’d be pissed if he knew, thinking she’d better watch it but she felt okay, felt better talking about it.

“It must be difficult not having your mother around,” Miranda said.

“My *mother* is not the problem!” Ella buried her face in the pillow, contracting her hands into fists near her head, letting out a muffled wail. No, she didn’t feel better after all. She felt worse. She couldn’t take it any more. Dry sobs wracked her body.

Better than bottling it up, Miranda thought, sitting on Ella’s bed a while longer, waiting for Ella to calm down.

Miranda squeezed her shoulder.

“Takes me a while sometimes. I’m trying to understand,” she said.

“At least you don’t talk about me as if I was in another room,” Ella said.

“Who does that?”

“Gerald and my dad. They talk about me as if I wasn’t there.”

Miranda sat a while longer, and covered Ella with a blanket once she’d fallen asleep.

5:50 PM

The dramatic monologue on the other side of Gerald's door was winding down. Another fifty minute session nearly over. Miranda waited, smiled politely as his patient walked out, passing her in the passage, dabbing at mascara smudges under her eyes with a pink tissue.

Gerald congratulated himself on once again having manipulated the sluices. He'd listened, or pretended to listen, survived the day emotionally intact, detached. You had to be that way in this game, couldn't get involved. Most of the time while his women spilled their guts, rambled on, he'd think about what he needed to buy from the 7/11 on his way home. Or he'd calculate roughly how much money he owed on the bond, or think about registering for the next race, running off the extra weight. He was clever that way. He could follow the gist of what they were saying without paying much attention.

She was at his door before he could close it.

"Gerald, I've got news on Ella," Miranda started.

"Yes, I know. She's back."

"We've had a talk. She's really opening up."

"What's she saying? She's wasted enough staff time. Well, what is it?" He wondered what had the little bitch said?

"She started to talk about the women Victor brings home. Stray cats. I didn't want to push too hard and she was upset."

"I wouldn't take it seriously," Gerald said, glancing at his watch.

Miranda wasn't going to be put off so easily. No matter how disinterested he appeared.

"It's progress. We have to pursue this," she insisted.

"Miranda, time's not on my side. We'll talk tomorrow," he said, considering how to deal with Ella, composing himself as he ushered in his next patient, the last one before he could go home, thank God, directing her to the one-seater sofa. He downed a Red Bull in the passage, warm from his desk drawer, before he followed her in. The downside of overtime was exhaustion.

6:10 PM

Dinner started at five. By six the last plates were loaded in the dishwasher and the kitchen staff were off duty. The allure of freshly baked apple cake was too much for Miranda, walking past, taking her chances, finding the door unlocked and the kitchen empty, sneaking in. She remembered breaking into the kitchen at Res, jimmying the lock on the industrial fridge, stealing ice cream and malva tert and trays of bread and butter pudding.

She propped her elbows on the stainless steel counter and smelled the cake, still warm, covered in netting and cooling fast in front of her. The kitchen was out of bounds to patients for good reason. Linda would squash the pudding into her mouth, leaving the trays empty, smothering her panic in crumble, only to void herself as soon as she could.

Stephanie would scoff it so fast if her tongue had a voice it would ask, what was that that just went past? What a waste. She switched on the cylindrical kettle, then scrouged in the cupboard, looking for a knife, maybe a cake lift.

She recognized Calvin's voice: "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

"It's me, Calvin. What do you think? That I'm scoffing the pudding? I'm about to. Want some?"

He leaned against the counter, said, "You shouldn't be doing this."

He'd probably report her, pious git, Miranda thought, but the taste was worth it.

"I can't resist."

"I thought you were a patient."

"Calvin, I just love apple cake. Don't worry, I'll settle with the kitchen tomorrow. A couple of rand for a helping. There's plenty here."

Calvin didn't leave.

"Are you going to Gerald's party?" she said, giving him a chance at light-hearted conversation.

"You're joking," he said. "I don't go to parties. So many lives ruined by alcohol."

"You don't have to drink."

"Other people will drink. There's something wrong with Western society, don't you think?"

How miserable it was to be devout, Miranda thought, feeling sorry for him. No such thing as fun on the agenda, the whole point of Islam being it was a serious religion. She wouldn't say so to Calvin, but she bet the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him, really did laugh, remembering she'd read somewhere that in the Qur'an it says he used to make jokes with his friends.

His fanaticism did, however, provide a reasonable excuse to boycott Gerald's party and she gave him credit for that.

The metal lid of the kettle clattered, steam pushing it above boiling water. The thermostat nipped her fingers when she turned it down. She felt her eye twitching, thinking all she wanted was tea and a snack. What was the big deal?

"Well, give me your opinion," Calvin said.

Miranda groaned inside.

"You're right, Calvin, it's a plastic-fantastic society, and most of us have fallen into the consumer trap. We're stuck."

"Not me. I'm going to do something about it. Look at this place Miranda, look at the kids here, on drugs, they've got eating disorders, where does that come from? United States of America I tell you. That's what these kids believe in. They should be grateful they've got food on their plates. And management, De Kock telling us there aren't increases for six months and then he drives off in his sportscar. He has a massage, twice a week Delicia told me. She's heard him talking dirty to his masseuse on the 'phone."

"Maybe he needs to de-stress."

"He gets more than a massage at Quality Escorts. And have you heard the latest? Adult World wants to open a sex shop on the doorstep of our Mosque. It was built in 1854. They want to sell sex toys and whatever else they sell, right opposite the Mosque. De Kock is a customer. I've seen the bags in his office. I've seen them with my own eyes."

"De Kock? Shops at Adult World?"

"He needs all the help he can get. You've heard the things they say about him."

"Don't you think he's doing any good?" she ventured, changing the subject, thinking Iggle's sexual dysfunction wasn't where she wanted to go.

"What d'you mean?"

Funding a psychiatric hospital. Helping addicts. That's a contribution, isn't it? With the mess that state hospitals are in."

"He doesn't care. He's in it for himself that's all."

"You think?"

"I know what he's doing."

"So the guys a jerk, so he doesn't care. We're the ones that do good. We make a difference, right?"

"While he drives around in that fancy M3 of his, I must sit in this dump and not even get my bonus on my birthday? Think again Miranda."

She carried her snack to her office, closing the door, savouring the tart apple, the sweet crumble melting in her mouth.

There wasn't much hope of reaching Ella's mother at her workplace, but it was the only number Miranda had. She dialled it anyway, was subjected to a dose of muzak before an answering service kicked in:

"Mrs King is currently in Johannesburg. She'll be back at the end of the week so please call then or leave a message."

No cell 'phone number.

She'd try again in a few days. In the meantime, Ella was the one who had to do the work.

Miranda swung her satchel over her shoulder, switched off the daylight lamp, locked the door. From the stoep she saw Victor drive in for visiting hour. She hung back, pretending to be preoccupied, looking for something in her satchel, waiting for Ella to join him. She watched them for a moment, hoping to pick up on body language. There was a stiffness in the way Victor held his frame that she'd noticed the day before. His shoulders crept up to his ears as he guided Ella by the elbow towards the bench at the edge of the parking lot.

He did most of the talking.

Her head was bowed, lank hair shielding her face, neutral to whatever he was carrying on about.

8:30 PM

Miranda collected the stray Daniel-stuff strewn around the flat. She threw his things into a box: some odd socks, a book on golf technique, jeans which had lain crumpled in the corner of the room for days. She placed a stack of *Design & Architecture* magazines in the box. She'd miss the CDs. Mellow music like James Taylor. She collected Bright Blue and Yossi N'Dour and Jamiroqai, the discs lying around without covers, gathering dust. He didn't look after anything.

She found every item that was his. The scream of industrial tape tearing away from the dispenser pleased her. She sealed the box, experiencing a sense of finality, realizing how little he meant in her life, frightening herself that she'd been with him without really being connected to him at all. She pasted his toothbrush and toothpaste on top of the box. Then she called him.

"Miranda, you're overreacting. We just need a break."

"Daniel, I won't go through this again. It's over. Pick up your box, please," she said, very polite.

"We've got a good thing going, Miranda."

"Daniel, with all due respect, you are not getting the message. We are over."

"You don't mean that. You're overwrought, working too hard."

"I want my life back. I have to work some things out," she said, on the verge of using the old break-up clichés, anything to get him off her back. "So you'll pick up your stuff then? How about Saturday?"

"You're making a mistake."

Miranda put the 'phone down.

One thing about living alone, she thought, a person could eat what they wanted. She removed a couple of slices of white bread from the emergency loaf in the freezer, toasted

them, stuck several hunks of cheddar between the bread, microwaved herself a soggy toastie. It tasted fine.

Another thing about living alone, a person could do what they wanted.

She 'phoned Zoleka.

"Go for a drink now? It's ten o'clock. Miranda, I'm in my pyjamas already."

"C'mon Zoleka. One drink. I'm buying."

"Give me ten minutes."

That was easy.

They walked up the road to the Wipeout - a surfing term for getting dumped by a wave: you get up on your feet, feel exhilaration, then a wave knocks you down. You get up again.

Zoleka ordered an Amstel. Miranda said, "Make that two. And a plate of chips. And tomato sauce." They sat in a booth away from the bar, ate the chips. Miranda licked her fingers clean, thinking it was great tomato sauce had recently been classified as a vegetable. At least she'd eaten something decent.

"So, what did you drag me out the flat for?" Zoleka asked.

"What else. My life."

Miranda complained about Daniel:

"I've kicked him out," she said.

"It's about bloody time," Zoleka said.

"Last night. It's been building up. A few nights back he arrived at the flat and said, 'I'm so stressed'. His code for I want sex and I want it now. 'Can't you at least ask nicely?' I said. Then he said, 'Please, come over here, get down on your knees and suck my dick'."

"The guy's *abusive*. You're a *therapist*. Why do you put up with it?"

"Not any more. I don't know. He was appealing at first. Nice eyes. Nice hands. He was interested in my work. Women think they can change men, right?"

Next she complained about Teacher:

"He's a policeman."

"I don't believe it. You're keen on a policeman?"

"Yup. And he didn't tell me."

"I'm not sure about that."

"Nor am I, frankly."

"Go slow this time. Take a chance to get to know him."

"You're right."

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Home day. Going to tackle the steel wool at my bikini line. And wax the hair on my legs. From the knees down they're looking like the calves of an adolescent boy."

University of Cape Town

6

Thursday

December 16

Day of Reconciliation

10:45 PM

“Stephanie, stop tossing, you’re keeping me awake,” Ella said.

“I can’t sleep.”

“I can’t sleep either,” she said, “What are you thinking?”

“About food, that I love food. Food has always been my friend.”

“How can food be your friend?” Ella whispered,

“It’s there for me, never lets me down. Being with food is comfortable.”

“A friend calls you on your birthday, goes out with you to watch a movie. You can talk to a friend. Food is *not* a friend.”

“What I like about chocolate is it’s instant. I put in my mouth, it melts, it’s instant relief.”

Linda chipped in, “Listen to you, Stephanie. You’re in denial for God’s sake,” mimicking Miranda, saying, “It’s not about food, it’s about feelings.”

“Shut up, Linda.”

“Shut up yourself, Stephanie. You’re the one wrote on the mural today ‘When food is food I will be free’.”

“It’s cool isn’t it? Painting on a wall?” Ella said. She didn’t want Linda spoiling the mood.

“The mural looks good, too,” Stephanie said, sensing the camaraderie between them, thinking Fuck Linda. “And you’re talented, Ella. I really like the figures you painted.”

“Hey, thanks, Stephanie. I could definitely get into this art thing. Maybe do graphic design when I leave school.”

“All in all, the public holiday hasn’t been too bad. I’m glad we’ve had a break from therapy.”

Ella appreciated that Stephanie was making an effort.

“You know, Stephanie, sometimes you’re okay,” Ella said, thinking Stephanie was nice to talk to, friendly, open, not so different from her, just in mass, that was all.

And Stephanie was thinking, she *was* okay, wasn’t she? Even her kid said so, that she was a good person. That counted for something. She didn’t need to be pissed off all the time. She went on: “I’ve always felt invisible, you know. I’m so big, but it’s like people don’t see me. As if I’m not human. People don’t give me the time of day.”

“Did you see that programme on Oprah? About losing weight? One woman lost two hundred pounds in a year. If there’s hope for them, then there’s hope for you,” Ella said, trying to be helpful.

“Two hundred pounds. What’s that, a hundred kilos? That would suit me. I’d get back to about seventy or so.”

“So why don’t you?”

“I can’t even think it’s possible. I’ve got to give up food, though. Food is turning against me. Food is making me sick. I can’t breathe properly because of the fat around my throat. You’ve heard me snore.”

Ella said, “You should try Go-Snore. I also saw that on TV. You spray it in your throat and it weighs down your tonsils so they don’t vibrate.”

“That’s it, exactly,” Linda said, “If you’re fat you can’t even breathe. I will *never* put on weight. If you put on weight Ella, you might end up like Stephanie.”

Ella moved on her bed, uncomfortable, squirming at the thought of being fat. She agreed with Linda, but she wasn’t about to say so and hurt Stephanie’s feelings, just when they were getting along.

Stephanie wouldn’t let Linda get her down. She said, “Ella, don’t take any notice of Linda. You’re young. You could die, wasting away like this.”

“What about you? You could get a heart attack, or kidney failure. Early onset diabetes. Imagine injecting yourself every day.”

“You’re right. Food as food, not friend or foe. Everything in moderation, right? ”

Ella was thinking it didn't sound so bad when Stephanie said it, but even in moderation, eating wasn't something she didn't want to do.

Then Stephanie surprised her, saying, "You shouldn't hide your pills, Ella. You need them. I know you're stashing them under the mattress."

"How did you know?"

"It's a small room."

"I hate the medication."

"I understand. My mother was always on pills. To get to sleep, to go to the toilet, for depression, to be alert, to wake up, keep her calm. She still had the energy to say I was no good. I believed her too. Even after she died. Miranda made sense. The only way I could be connected to my mother was to say to myself the same things she said to me all the time. But you need your meds."

"Maybe you're right Stephanie, maybe I'll stick with the medication," she said, even though she knew she wouldn't.

There was a sense of calm in the room. The window was open. It was cooler.

Linda was sleeping.

Ella was thinking her father was a rat. How could she ever trust him? Yet wanting and wishing she could jump into his arms like she did when she was small when he came home from work, wondering how the change happened, thinking about when she first started noticing. Little things. The way he did his hair, the way he touched it all the time, seeing if it was in place, the way he looked at guys. Even if they were like *married*, and sitting with their kids in the Spur, he'd look at the men, not the women.

The door opened. It was the night duty nurse shining a torch in their faces, checking they were asleep in their own beds.

Linda was snoring gently.

Stephanie lay with only a sheet over her legs, feeling comfortable, not too hot, thinking that later, later, when Ella was asleep, she'd get the cake out from under the bed.

It was cut in slices already. In a box. Sure, she'd handed over her gold brooch to get it, but it was worth it.

Stephanie's mouth watered. She swallowed saliva, imagining the softness of the sponge cake already and the caramel cream melting in her mouth. She'd do it slowly, no one distracting her from the taste, eating it while the others slept so they wouldn't catch on. Filling that empty space. So what? She'd never be thin. May as well not even try.

University of Cape Town

7

Friday

December 17

9:20 AM

Miranda parked badly under the oak, thinking so what, there was plenty of space, she wasn't going to start the car again and straighten out. She raced along the stoep. Be on time was a possible New Year's resolution, and oh yes, rejoin the Health and Racquet. Slight exertion on a hot morning and already her breathing was shallow. Could she handle Gym Culture? Being a sweaty body in lycra, a slave to the circuit and treadmill?

She nodded at Delicia, letting her know she was there. She passed the mural, noticed the group had been busy.

10:00 AM

Group

Natasha Sweetie was waiting, tapping her foot, riding the chair worse than Gary, impatient, wanting to get out of there and fill the orders as soon as possible.

"My car, you know, wouldn't start," Miranda said, thinking what was she on about making excuses to Natasha!

The plastic back of the chair bent with the strain of Gary's weight. Linda slouched, keeping her eyes on a paint stain on the carpet. Stephanie, breathless just from being fat, was sprawled across two cushions, with another one between herself and the wall. She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a tissue, said, "Did you see the mural? We worked on it yesterday."

"'When food is food I will be free'," Miranda said. "I saw," thinking, when feelings are feelings I will be free, keeping it to herself for the moment. "And who did the little figure in the corner, with the monster towering over it, with the red mouth, yellow teeth like security spikes on a fence?"

"That's mine," Linda said, "Uncle Leonard and me."

"Tiny. Helpless."

"That's how I felt."

"I just fooled around," Gary said. "I really enjoyed it. I did the patterns. Barbed wire, Chinese writing, the koi. I don't know why, just for fun."

"It's okay to enjoy yourself, Gary. And the puppet? There's a figure that looks like a marionette, a hand manipulating the strings. Ella's, right?" then Miranda asked, "Where is she? Late getting meds this morning? I don't want to get into anything without her."

They looked from one to another, Miranda noticing the hesitance, saying, "So tell me please, where is she?"

"Well, she's not coming," Gary said, shrugging, thinking Miranda should know, shouldn't she? Where her patients were? What was she asking them for?

"Will someone fill me in?" Miranda said, a sense of foreboding warning that she was about to hear bad news, wondering if Victor had discharged his daughter. He'd better have signed a red paper. Discharge without consent of presiding physician or psychologist. Gerald wouldn't let her go though, would he? Ella needed to be on the programme. She was fragile, volatile. This was bullshit, waiting for the patients to tell her what was going on.

"So, where is she?"

"She's having ECT this morning," Linda threw up like vomit.

"You're joking, right?"

"I'm not joking. That's what's happening to her."

Miranda rushed out, got out of the spinning room, keeping her eye on the group room door, wondering who the hell had decided on ECT? And without consulting her? Thinking they were supposed to be a team, right? She punched in the nurses' station extension on her portable.

"Natasha, what the hell is going on? I had to hear from Linda about Ella's ECT."

"I thought you knew, Miranda." There was genuine surprise in her voice.

"I didn't know. And I don't agree."

"It's too late to stop it," Natasha said, thinking what's the big deal anyway? Ella suffering shock therapy didn't bother her much. It worked, didn't it?

Miranda asked, "Has she been prepped yet?"

“It’s as good as done. Dr Love was positioning the electrodes before I brought the others over.”

“Is Gerald there?”

“He’s in the treatment room with her. *He* should have told you.”

“You’re right.”

Miranda switched off the ‘phone, stood for a while outside the door, taking time, doing deep breathing, steadying herself.

Inside the room, Stephanie was saying, “What is ECT exactly? What do they do?”

“Electro Convulsive Therapy. They fry your brain. Zap you with one hundred and fifty volts, from one electrode to the other, on each side of your head. The shock jolts everything out of your brain. Kills short term memory. Gets rid of the nasties. Then you start again. If you’re lucky you don’t crack your vertebra while you’re convulsing.”

“You know a lot about it, Linda,” Gary said.

“Well, they did it to me, didn’t they? They strapped me to a bed, gave me a light anaesthetic. Then the shock. You lose consciousness. You pee your pants. You shit. You lose control.”

“Jesus. They better not ever try spring that on me,” Gary said, remembering he’d kicked his father so hard once he’d broken his ribs, and that was the last time his father touched him.

“Don’t they need her permission?” Stephanie asked.

“She’s sixteen,” Linda said. “They can do whatever they want. She’s a minor.”

“What’s the treatment room like?”

“Looks like a medical ward. Not much different.”

“It sounds like a medieval torture.”

“They don’t even know how it works. They just go ahead and do it to you.”

Miranda came back into the room then.

Gary said, "Are you upset? You look upset."

"Yes I am," she said, thinking she'd better be honest, asking then, "What about you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe she needs it."

"Maybe," Miranda said, but she didn't believe it

Gary asked, "What exactly happens in ECT after you lose consciousness?"

"Extensor seizures first, followed by a series of contractile seizures."

"Is it true you can break your back?"

"In the old days. And fractured ribs were common. And broken teeth or a dislocated jaw too. Nowadays the side effects are disorientation, amnesia and short-term memory loss. That's the point. The idea is that verbal therapy works better after ECT. And usually it's done in conjunction with medication. Thought patterns are reconstructed and therapists can work with those self-defeating habits patients have and try to change them."

"So you think it really helps?" Stephanie asked.

"I've seen people turn around after ECT. Yes, it can make a difference. Depression *can* set back in though, sometimes within a couple of months."

Linda added, "After my treatment, the upside was my depression was wiped away but the downside was I got depressed again because I couldn't remember anything."

Gary looked agitated, picking at the gold hairs on the back of his hand, saying, "How does something like this happen? That there's no control over what she wants. That's what I'm scared of."

"There must be good reason for Ella's ECT," Miranda said. Pity she didn't know what it was though. She was furious inside, wanting to talk about it, but her anger didn't belong in group. She'd have to go back to therapy, get some of her shit sorted out, thinking Gerald, fuck him, why hadn't he consulted her?

She brought her attention back to group.

"Gary, isn't it the fear of losing control that keeps you so rigid about your eating?" she said.

"That's the point. I'm in control when I'm watching what I eat."

"Isn't that a lie? A misconception? That you're in charge? Essentially, if you're mucking about with your food, you are *out of control* big time. Your food is controlling you."

"I don't see that," Gary said.

"You're dependent, force fed and supervised twenty-four seven."

"But I honestly feel better when I'm restricting myself."

"Maybe. But it's an illusion. You know logically you're starving yourself."

"It's not my fault," he blurted. "If my mother wasn't so hard on me then I wouldn't be here. Study, study, study, was all I ever heard. Don't let me down, don't waste your potential. Her favourite line was 'I didn't waste my life doing secretarial for nothing, I've given up everything for you'. She ruined my life. Wouldn't let up, kept on at me," Gary said, hoping that would satisfy Miranda, that she'd focus on Linda or Stephanie. No one needed to know about his father.

"Your mother, with all her failings, is afraid to let you out of her sight. You've pushed the envelope, Gary. We didn't know which programme to put you on at first, here or the drug programme. You know that."

"Christ, I take a few Myprodol and everybody's calling me a drug addict. What is it with you people?"

"You blacked out while you were driving your car, Gary. That's pretty serious. You could have hurt someone. You could have killed yourself. Sounds like you were spiralling out of control, starving and bingeing and losing weight and popping painkillers. What was happening in your head that you were trying to block out?"

"You expect me to tell you every detail of my life! Maybe I can have ECT, let you people *control* me completely."

Miranda shrugged, feeling the heat in her throat again, keeping it down, thinking she'd sort it out, thinking she wasn't handling group, thinking all she wanted to do was get out of there.

Stephanie took up the slack then, using the time for her story, saying, "My husband loves thin women you know. And look what he ends up married to." She looked at Linda, thinking her husband would probably perve at Linda in those hipsters sitting seductively on her snake hips. All of a sudden she was thinking about the eclairs in her suitcase, thinking she wanted to stuff her face, saying "You look like a kid in those jeans, for heaven's sake, Linda. When the fuck are you going to grow up, dress your age?"

"You're just jealous Stephanie, that I'm thin, that my body's attractive, that men look at me."

“They look at you because you’re ugly. Skin and bone, you’re a walking skeleton.”

“Hey, stop it now you two,” Miranda said, taking control. “The challenge is, how do you turn your life around irrespective of the role other people have played in it up to now. It’s about taking responsibility for yourself, not blaming other people for what’s happened to you. In whatever way you’re doing it, you’re using food to cope with the nasties: the fear, the rejection, the sadness. It’s not going to help to insult each other.”

“Hooray,” Linda said.

Miranda had the last word: “Insight is the easy part.”

10:55 AM

“Don’t punch in the numbers just yet. We have to talk.”

Gerald Edwards looked up from checking an SMS, thinking no one would bloody leave him alone, let him get on with his job, Victor hassling him, Victor becoming a problem. And Miranda at his door, starting now with her shit.

“I don’t agree with ECT for Ella,” she said.

Gerald thought here it comes.

“She’d started to share some of her experience. We didn’t need the shock treatment route. I’m concerned that I wasn’t consulted,” she said, sounding self-assured, as though she had things together even though her heart was in her throat and she wanted to scream at him.

She was right about the whole thing, of course, Gerald thought, looking at her, thinking about Victor, that he was a liability, that he couldn’t afford to lose his practice over Victor and what *Victor* wanted him to do.

“Did I need to consult you, Miranda?”

“Gerald, surely I could have influenced a decision either way with my contribution.”

“It wasn’t your decision to make.”

“Wasn’t it a team decision? Something like this should be discussed, at least.”

“Miranda, you have enough on your plate.”

“I do not appreciate important treatment decisions happening without input from or knowledge of all members of the team.”

“Have you forgotten she’s my patient?”

“She’s not property, mine, yours, she’s the responsibility of the collective staff who work here and we can each add valuable contributions about her progress.”

“You’ve said enough.”

“I don’t think so, Gerald. I care about her. It was only a matter of time before the Zoloft lessened her anxiety. I wanted Ella’s story undiluted. Wiping her memory clean isn’t the answer.”

He looked at her a moment before saying, “Miranda, you have a specific job description. Keep the unit running smoothly. Stick to what you’re employed to do. You’re doing a great job,” he added, hoping to placate her. “Just don’t take it so seriously.”

“Gerald, that’s precisely the commitment we make, to take the patients seriously. They depend on us. We’re supposed to make informed decisions in their best interests.”

“And in this case ECT is appropriate,” he emphasised. “I wouldn’t have recommended it if there wasn’t a major benefit. Victor agreed. We waited long enough for the meds to kick in. She’s stuck. I discussed it with David. Twelve sessions, two a week spread over six weeks. You asked me what we’re doing with her. I thought it through and you were right. She’s severely depressed. It was time to be pro-active.”

“I never said she’s depressed. Withdrawn, dejected, but not depressed. In this business you don’t fling that word around lightly.”

“About the Zoloft. This morning Calvin found a stash hidden under her mattress. It wasn’t ever going to work because she wasn’t taking it. If she didn’t want us to know she should have flushed the pills down the toilet.” Gerald turned away, thinking that would do it. Miranda was young, enthusiastic, he’d give her another ten years and she wouldn’t be as keen.

He closed his door, leaving her standing alone in the passage, her mouth open, catching flies.

11:15 AM

There they were, Natasha and Gary, sitting on the concrete bench, close and cosy, fraternising, blurring the boundaries, her hand brushing his thigh, Natasha playing with fire when she put her hand in her pocket, took out a pack of smokes and gave it to Gary. He looked around furtively, hiding the cigarettes in his pants.

Miranda was thinking well, well, what's happening here, as she looked at the two of them from the tea room window, thinking she should go out there right this minute and put a stop to it, whatever was going on? Thinking this time Natasha had gone too far. This day was turning out damn difficult, but whatever she needed to do, she could do it after tea, better calm down before confronting Natasha, better take her time and think about how she'd go about it. Touching was a no no. Cigarettes where a no no,

Gary said, "Have you got the other order?"

"Of course. I told you I deliver. I haven't let you down yet."

"I'm talking about Stephanie's stuff."

"The biscuits are in the back of my car. I'll bring them in later. And I've got Linda's vodka. You guys are going to have a great weekend."

"I couldn't make it through this without you, Natasha."

"You know it's wrong though, don't you? You know I'm putting myself on the line?"

"I know, I know, but I can't make it without the stuff. I'm going off my head in this place."

"And you owe me Gary. Better get some bucks in here."

"Is it just about money to you? Is that all it is?" he said, irritated, thinking she better get him what he needed fast, before he blew it all, went into withdrawal, got himself noticed.

"Hey, Gary, I like you. I do it 'cause I like you."

"How did you get me past the urine test yesterday?"

"I swapped samples," she said. "They only test for certain properties. There's no way to know whose pee it is and if the label says it's yours, then no one's going to

ask if it is." She ran her fingers along the inside of his thigh, a little bit harder this time, so he could feel it through the denim, registering that he shivered at the touch. She wondered if he could even get it up with the stuff he was on.

Miranda sat back in a wicker armchair, put her feet on the coffee table. The top was chipped. A large chunk of glass had been glued back on one side. The blood flowed from her feet to her legs. She could feel it. She leaned back, determined not to let the day get to her, thought of Gerald, Ella, Natasha, Gary, and Teacher too, the lot of them scurrying like hamsters in her head.

She stared at the row of pink lockers. Natasha Sweetie's name was printed on a sticker pasted on the locker directly in front of her. A lock dangled open from the steel door. She got up, checked Natasha and Gary still touching thighs on the bench. She slid the Viro off the bolt. Natasha's locker door squeaked open. It was packed, a mess of stuff.

She rummaged, saw a tape recorder, a pocket knife, a half-empty packet of condoms. She opened a small box, found a brooch shaped in the letter S and a gold cross, wrapped in tissue paper. There was a Longines watch. That was worth something. There was a container filled with ten and twenty rand notes and assorted change. Then Bingo! She pulled out her jersey bundled near the bottom, covering still more loot.

She picked up a baggie, one of about twenty, thinking Natasha was audacious considering dope was illegal and she was storing the stash at an addiction centre.

She heard footsteps bounding up the steps. Quickly, she closed the locker, flinched when it squeaked. She angled the lock the way she'd found it. She stuffed the jersey behind the upholstered cushion of the chair, reclining comfortably with a yesterday's newspaper. All before Natasha opened the door, standing there, guessing Miranda had been up to something, noticing Miranda looking relaxed, hearing her say, "Hey Natasha, it's hardly surprising there are so many anorexic kids, just listen to this, this is interesting."

She quoted the Lifestyle headline: "Africa's face is fine, but the body is out: Fashion Houses are looking for hips of maximum thirty-six inches, perfect teeth, flawless skin, minimum height of 1.72 metres, age between fifteen and twenty-two,

and a charming personality. In most African countries women do not aspire to emaciated vital statistics.” “Can you believe it?” she said.

Natasha looked at her locker.

Miranda went on: “This model boss says he’s measured so many hips in his search for African models that he probably qualifies for the Guinness Book of World Records.”

Natasha Sweetie didn’t say a word, just turned her head, stared, wondering what was Miranda up to?

Miranda watched her from the periphery of her vision, feigning interest in the newspaper.

Natasha walked to her locker, bolted it shut and sat down. She’d do an inventory later. She snatched a cigarette from the box in her top left pocket and lit up. Miranda forced herself to read the article slowly, and another. On page six, there was a thirty point headline: “Men now prefer ‘em skinny, new study shows.” That didn’t help, she thought, reading on about how men’s tastes, according to this study anyway, were shifting away from girls with curves and big breasts towards rivals who were androgynous and skinny.

The smoke clogged her sinuses and had her sneaking shallow breaths, but she couldn’t leave, concealing the bulge of her jersey as she was. She read on: ‘The body of evidence is a slap to evolutionary biologists who contend that men have always preferred women with big curves because of the association of breasts and hips with health and fertility.’ Miranda sighed, wanting to get out of there. She folded the newspaper, tried another tack: “This place isn’t doing too well,” she said.

“We know that,” Natasha said.

Miranda leaned forward, Teacher’s image in her mind, risking her health to passive smoking.

“Doesn’t it worry you, the unprofessionalism that abounds?”

“This place is a dump, that’s all.”

“I spoke to Gerald about the ECT. He knows I’m not happy. You could have told me about the pills though.”

“I thought you knew about that too. It’s in the file. Don’t you read the reports?”

Touché.

“What about Gerald consulting the rest of us?”

“None of my business.”

Miranda folded her arms, leaned back, yawned: “How’s Calvin! He’s so morose these days.”

“Calvin’s a creep.”

“What about his fundamentalism. Doesn’t that scare you?”

Natasha shrugged.

Miranda picked at the nurses’ rations: egg mayonnaise on stale white bread. Looked soggy. Avoidable.

“And the rumours about De Kock? Delicia saying he learned to make candles at Boy’s Town? You’ve worked closely with him, right?”

“That’s right. He transferred me from the Paarl clinic.”

“What’s he really like?”

“All these questions. What are you getting at?”

“Just making conversation, that’s all.”

“A good old skinner, hey? Well, I’m not into it. Sounds like splitting.”

Natasha picked up a back-issue of *Cosmopolitan* and paged through it, disinterested, thinking modelling wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, the best part about it was the drugs, thinking when was this bitch going to leave? Thinking how could she have left her locker open? Big mistake. She finally snuffed her Camel Light. She’d come back later.

Miranda got up, stretched her legs. She left too, taking her jersey with her, and the bag of Natasha’s dagga she’d put in her pocket.

12:30 Noon

Calvin walked past the dining room, his head was down, eyes glued to carpet tiles stained with soup and gravy, the distant wail of the imam stirring his heart to prayer. As he passed, he was imagining Heaven, lined with seventy-four virgins welcoming him, getting excited thinking about it.

Miranda heard the call too, found the sound strangely comforting, a reminder that some people still had faith, albeit somewhat rigorous.

She tried to get a grip on the mood she was in, which was pissed off: residual anger at Gerald and uneasiness with Natasha's petty theft, influencing her in equal doses.

The food was wheeled from the kitchen in a bain-marie, each plate covered in cling wrap, with a name clearly marked on a sticker. Linda was already bitching about her lunch.

"You haven't even seen what it is yet," Miranda said.

"I don't have to. I can smell it."

"It's food, Linda. From the major food groups. You have to eat. For health. It's not going to jump off the plate and bite you," Miranda said, feeling irritable, knowing the kitchen staff had just spent an hour weighing each helping of fat, carbohydrates, protein, and doing it precisely so that none of them had grounds to complain. Doing it exactly the way the dietician specified.

"I hate the way the other patients look at us, as if we've got Aids or something."

"Linda, it's just that you kick up such a fuss with each meal. You draw attention to yourself." Accidentally on purpose, Miranda thought. The alcoholics and drug addicts complained that the antics and laments of the eating disordered patients put them off their food. They had a point, Miranda thought, looking at Linda about to throw a tantrum, thinking no wonder the EDU patients were isolated from the rest, sitting at a separate table.

Linda stared at the food with disgust, as if someone had scraped what was on her plate off the sole of their shoe.

Stephanie looked guilty that she was eating it. Taking tiny mouthfuls, but eating quickly, finishing her meal before anyone else, folding her arms, wishing for more, sighing.

Gary, quieter than usual, looked pale, ill maybe with some flu bug that was going around. Or guilty, Miranda thought. Little bugger, breaking the rules, smoking cigarettes or pot, whatever Natasha was giving him.

Miranda didn't bother with conversation. She needed time to consider what she knew and what she was going to do about it. She listened to the sounds of knives and forks clinking against plates, the buzz of patients talking.

"Linda, what's that bulge in your sleeve?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just a tissue," Linda said.

“Linda, take it out.”

“It’s a tissue, I told you. Don’t you trust me?”

“I want to, but you’re damn right, I don’t,” Miranda said. “Take it out of your sleeve.”

Miranda unwrapped the serviette, discovering a chicken breast folded in a lettuce leaf, reminding herself that the patients would cut out the middleman every time. Straight from the table to the toilet.

Linda yelled, “I can’t eat meat, I told you. I’m not going to eat it.”

“It’s chicken, Linda. You will eat it. I’ll get you a fresh piece. It’s difficult, but you know the rules.”

“What about Gary?” Linda said.

“What about Gary?” Miranda asked.

“Do you think I’m the only cheat?”

“Shut up, Linda,” he said, glaring at her, going red.

“Where is it, Gary?”

“It’s under his plate,” Linda said.

There they were, bite sized morsels of chicken, potato wedges and peas, hidden under the rim.

“Gary, how on earth did you think you were going to get away with this?” Miranda said, incredulous, thinking a bright boy like Gary at least could have been clever about it.

“You too, Stephanie,” Gary said.

“Why bring me into this?”

“Isn’t that your second bowl of jelly and custard?”

“Gary didn’t want his,” she said, looking sheepish. Miranda swallowed. What the hell she was busting a gut for? Sitting at this table with Stephanie and Gary glowering at each other, Linda crying, making a scene, saying under her breath, “You forced me, you forced me.”

“Bed rest for both of you, and Gary too,” Miranda said, handing them over to the nurse on duty. “Watch them. They’re impossible. Lunch was a disaster.”

“Don’t worry. No one is allowed to leave the room. I know the ropes. They can’t get by me. For at least an hour. For digestion.”

“Maybe a spot check is an idea. Do it this afternoon. Check that no one’s brought up their lunch in the flower jars. I’m going for a walk. I need the fresh air.”

Dirt and dog-do and broken glass littered the pavement. Toilet paper caught in barbed wire coils on top of a vibracrete wall trailed in a gentle breeze. Plastic bags and chip packets blocked the gutter at the side of the road. An old woman begged for handouts at the robot, holding a cardboard sign, claiming unemployment and two hungry children, in bad spelling. The walk was worse than work. Miranda turned back.

Her photo-chromatic specs were sitting purposelessly on the shelf in her office. She squinted hard against the sun and at the men she passed in the parking lot, too close for just friends. The embrace was personal, to her mind intimate, but thinking, hey, it was none of her business, until the short man disengaged. It was Gerald. The big man was Victor.

“You’re going to do what?”

“Go to a tango class. It’s a turn on, I tell you. Dressing up, looking right at people I know.”

“Taking a risk, aren’t you, Gerald?”

“Stop fussing, Victor.”

“But I don’t understand you. Why do you want to take a chance like that? What if someone recognizes you? Why don’t you come over and I’ll cook you dinner.”

Gerald looked at him, thinking, that was exactly the problem, Victor was like a maltese poodle licking at his heels. It wouldn’t work. He felt trapped by Victor, by his demands, his petty jealousies. He didn’t want to be exclusive. He was having fun, meeting new people. He was careful. He carried condoms. He wasn’t going to give it up.

“And Ella, what’s happening with Ella?”

“You can’t pretend any longer that she doesn’t know, Victor. But I’m working on it. Don’t worry. The ECT will make a difference.”

Victor felt relief in that moment. He put his arms around Gerald right there in the parking lot.

“Get the fuck off me, Victor,” Gerald said, pushing him away, thinking he’d been right about the man all along. He was unstable, he was too emotional. “Half the dining room can see what’s happening out here.”

“You’re full of bullshit, Gerald, like that marriage of yours, didn’t last long did it? You couldn’t keep up the pretence. What was it, a couple of months?”

Gerald walked away, turning his back on Victor.

2:00 PM

Miranda pulled out *Medicorp News* from the brown envelope stashed in the in-tray in her office.

She paged through the usual adverts and medicine updates, introductions to new staff and interviews. There was a full-page review of *Mainline Lady*, a new magazine aimed at female addicts: the ultimate in heroin chic.

“The magazine wants to show users as women with specific needs, that they’re a part of society.”

The model on the cover was a recovering addict, tattoos of barbed wire running down her arms. *Medicorps News* had printed equally horrendous before and after pics of the makeover of the thirty-eight-year-old cocaine and heroine addict. In the Sex section, the review said, a junkie prostitute described her harrowing experiences. There was a Dear Doctor column where addicts were cautioned on HIV hazards for syringe users. There were beauty pages apparently, advising on countering drug-induced dry skin. Getting people to kick the habit was not the mag’s priority.

Towards the back of *Medicorps News* was a life story of a former patient illustrated with a photograph taken in another lifetime, of an adolescent girl, smiling, before drug addiction. She wrote about herself at age nine: “If only I could live my life over from that moment, I would, when I didn’t have any scars and I looked great.”

There wasn’t much more of interest until the interview at the back, with Ian De Kock, and his full-page colour photograph.

Medicorps News: Congratulations on the purchase of Greenside Psychiatric Centre, your sixth acquisition.

De Kock: We have high hopes for Greenside. Thank you.

MN: Your background is business. How did you become interested in medical properties, particularly psychiatric hospitals?

DK: I saw a reasonable opportunity, and a friend, now my partner, Dr David Love, was interested in joining forces. We bought our first private hospital, situated in Paarl. We renovated, and employed first rate staff.

MN: And that hospital is doing well?

DK: That's right. As a residential treatment centre for recovering alcoholics it's very popular. Clients are willing to pay high rates for excellent treatment.

MN: We hear there are problems with Greenside, the Cape Town drug rehabilitation centre. Could you elaborate on those?

DK: Look, Greenside Hospital is struggling. It's no secret. It was bankrupt due to poor management by previous owners so it'll take time to recuperate. But we're certain we'll make it. We'll have clients queuing.

MN: We're told renovations have been delayed. Considering the success of the other hospitals, what stops you ploughing profits into sprucing up Greenside?

DK: In good business that would be a mistake. Although the treatment centres are linked by ownership, we run them separately. Each has to turn a profit independently without crippling other assets. If it eventually doesn't work, which I assure you will not be the case, then the remaining centres won't be compromised.

MN: You sound certain of success.

DK: I am. There are a lot of sick people out there, drug addicts and alcoholics. We can do something for them and their desperate families. We'll be sending our prospectus out soon.

The extension rang:

“Miranda, the Big Boss wants you in his office, NOW,” Delicia said.

2:55 PM

Pushing his pot belly around, as usual. Miranda thought. All she needed was an interminable management meeting with De Kock.

Gerald, Natasha and Calvin were sitting already, like naughty school kids on the wrong side of De Kock's desk, his home-made candles in a row in front of him,

cylinders of garish orange and turquoise and lots of stripes. Delicia had told her he'd learned candle making in Boys Town. It was either candles or pressing number plates.

De Kock pulled up his cuffs, flashing a Rolex. He answered the cell 'phone:

"I told you not this weekend," he said. "It'll have to wait. I'm not ready for delivery," he said, punching details into his palmtop, getting back to the meeting, saying, "Miranda, we're discussing the hospital advertising brochure. Is your Eating Disorders contribution ready?"

"How about postponing publication until we have proper facilities to advertise," she said.

"Does that mean no, Miranda. You haven't written your piece?"

She didn't answer.

"So, what was I saying? Do we go with *patient* or *client*?" he said, expectant, waiting for someone to back him up.

Gerald tapped his left fingertips rhythmically against the right, thinking he was hungry, that he'd go to Kwikspar on the way home. It was more expensive but it was closer than the 7/11.

Calvin Goliath looked at his watch, wanting to get out of there too, scowling, thinking why did he agree to come to this meeting? He wouldn't be seeing any overtime for it.

Natasha Sweetie looked out the window, thinking this was too much to ask on a Friday afternoon, with the weekend starting and good weather outside and nobody giving a damn about the advertising brochure anyway.

"Patients, they should be called patients," Miranda said, wanting to get the discussion over with.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to refer to people using the services as clients? They're paying, we're providing," De Kock said.

"A patient is someone who requires care. According to the Latin derivative, patient means to suffer or endure," Miranda explained. "There's a Jungian analyst, Virginia Bean Rutter, who stresses suffering and caring as fundamental aspects of therapy," she added, impressing herself with her memory of the textbook. "And anyway Ian, personally I prefer that concept. Client smacks of a business deal. I don't like that. Patient seems more gentle. A client is someone you're trying to sell a house to or a lounge suite and you offer the purchaser a money back guarantee." And she

thought, maybe if the patients were treated less like clients and more like patients they'd have a better success rate. Not so many re-admissions.

"It's all about business, Miranda," De Kock said. "I go for client." He'd already made up his mind, that's how it sounded, Miranda thinking patient or client, what did it matter as long as the people in need were looked after. It was Tango night. Her head was already out the door. But De Kock insisted on persuading her.

"It's not about what *you* like or don't like, it's being tuned to the times, Miranda. And yes, we are selling something. We're selling well being. A chance to turn life around. Well being as a product. It's about marketing," he said, thinking she always knew better, treating him as if he didn't know what he was talking about, wanting to upstage him. Damned if he was going to let the teef show him up.

She said, "A few weeks on a specialised programme and you can't walk out rejuvenated, Ian."

"You're so insistent."

"It's something I believe in. Therapy is a process. It would be wrong to offer a magic fix. It doesn't work that way. That concept only gives therapy a bad name. It's what people *do* with therapy that makes the difference."

"Miranda, I have to wonder if there's something else going on here?"

"What else could be going on?"

"You're so stuck on your point."

What the hell was De Kock mouthing off about? she thought.

"You're so concerned about converting me to your point of view, there's an authority complex revealing itself. Maybe even penis envy," he said, thinking he could quote the jargon too, thinking he was no fool, he knew a thing or two. He'd show her who was in control.

Gerald cut in then, Miranda thinking well hello, she'd hardly noticed him in the room up to that point.

He said, "Ian, I agree with Miranda. The term patient is commonly used for residential patients. We can use client for out-patients if you want but let's not make a meal of it." he said. "And as far as penis envy is concerned, many therapists vigorously reject the demeaning view of female psychology propounded by Freud that women experience penis envy. And there isn't place for this discussion in this room. Please, the matter is settled, isn't it? I'm going home." Gerald redeemed himself. Miranda felt her faith in him was somewhat renewed. De Kock didn't like being put

in his place. Miranda could see it, and the blush creeping up his neck to his jowls. She got her own back too, imagining De Kock naked in his chair, his shrivelled winkle hanging forlorn as a newborn bird fallen from the nest.

“Miranda, stay,” De Kock instructed as Gerald and the others were leaving. She wondered what the jerk wanted now, trying to second-guess him, wondered what he wanted alone with her?

“So, Miranda,” he connected with her cleavage, smiling lasciviously. “You don’t seem happy with the way things are running here. I’ve had reports that you’re intimidating certain staff. They feel insecure under your guidance. And apart from that you’re pushing the patients too hard.”

She looked at him, staying calm.

“I’m doing my job, Ian,” she said. “If staff feel insecure working with psych patients, they should quit. If you work in a psychiatric hospital your ego should be intact.”

“Miranda, the point is you’re treading on people’s toes and they don’t like it.” He wished she’d shut up. He wasn’t interested in her opinions and especially not in challenges to his authority. He wanted her meek and mild and obedient. A woman should know her place.

“Point well taken,” she said, thinking she’d say anything to get her out of the idiot’s office. “I’ll be more gentle with both staff and patients.”

“Stick to your job description. Teach the clients art, make sure they eat. I like having you around,” he directed at her breasts.

Back in her office, Miranda pulled Teacher’s card from her purse. She dialled the number of the Claremont Station, too snoop to call the cell ‘phone first. Engaged. She dialled a second time, tapping her fingers through three and a half minutes of ringing before an answering service took the call: “South African Police Services, please hold. Thank you for being patient. your call will be answered. You are number twenty-two in the queue, thank you for your patience. Your call will be answered in approximately two minutes and thirty-three seconds.”

By now she reckoned, she’d be raped or dead, and so would the other twenty-or-so people on hold. She listened to taped assurances for a minute more then hung

up. What was the point of an answering service at a Police Station? She snapped the card back into her purse, independence surging through her veins. What would she tell Teacher anyway? That she'd been scolded by De Kock? That Gerald Edwards had gone behind her back and organised ECT for his own patient? That Natasha Sweetie was a petty thief and a dope head? Big deal.

5:00 PM

It wasn't under the oak. It wasn't in any of the parking spots. Miranda scanned the lot, looking around, but her car definitely wasn't there. Her gut feeling was that some bored kid under the misguided illusion that life was a video game was riding around in the Mazda. He'd stolen it and would probably use it for crime on the weekend and then he'd douse it with petrol and terminate the adventure with a big bang.

She headed for reception and didn't waste time calling Teacher's landline.

"Teacher, my car's been stolen," she said.

"What?" he was surprised. "I can't believe someone stole your car."

"Hey, Teacher, watch what you say. I'm fond of my car."

"Didn't anyone hear the car take off? You hardly have an exhaust system."

He was right. Who would want her beat up Mazda?

"There were new tires on the car. Or maybe the Mickey Mouse towel on the back seat covering the torn upholstery appealed to someone. I don't know. But some moron nicked it. I've seen ads for a gear lock often enough. I could kick myself."

"Miranda, criminals spray those steering locks with dry ice and crack the brittle metal with a rubber hammer. They dump the lock, hot-wire the car. If they want it, they're going to take it. I'm grateful you weren't in it."

"The only thing I hear when people are crime victims is thank God you're not hurt. No one gets angry any more. The response to crime is relief that we're alive. It sucks, Teacher."

"I'll send someone to take a statement," he said. "Can we meet at Jake's afterwards, in about an hour?"

“Can you believe it?” Miranda said. “And my cell and my portable CD player were in the car. I’m not insured for those.”

“This city,” Delicia said, shaking her head as Miranda retreated to the non-smoker’s lounge where the Inspector was waiting.

“It’s an old Mazda. I parked under the tree this morning,” Miranda said, recalling the registration number from some deep memory recess.

The cop said, “You’ll have to fill in forms for the insurance.”

Miranda listened him promise he’d do his best, knowing that he wouldn’t do anything. If the car turned up it would be luck. And the insurance pay-out would hardly cover the cost of a second-hand bicycle.

She sighed, picking up the remote control, collapsing into the grubby sofa she’d sat in at the Monday staff meeting, with it’s back to the door, noticing someone had singed extra holes into the armrests. She slumped, pulling her legs onto the chair, hugging them like the patients did, for comfort and containment. She pointed the remote, about to click on and tune in to *Days of Our Lives*.

“Here is fine. Let’s sort this out,” Gerald said, crossing the threshold into the lounge. Miranda stopped with the remote, watched reflections of the men on the television screen: short and tall in miniature.

“You have to talk to her, frighten sense into her,” Gerald said.

“You’re wrong. I know it. You think I don’t know my own staff? Why should I rock the boat?” De Kock said.

“She’s doing it and if you don’t do anything about it I will.”

“Do you know more? What else can I confront her with? I need details. What can I say to her?”

“You’ll think of a way to do it.” Gerald pushed the point. “You’ll regret it if you don’t stop her before it gets out of hand.”

“Don’t worry. I will.” De Kock didn’t sound convinced that he should do anything.

“I won’t tolerate what’s going on. What she does in her private capacity is her business but she’s overstepped the line.”

“Gerald, you’re overreacting.”

“I am definitely not, Ian. If she carries on someone will report it. This could ruin the hospital. I want your support on this one.”

“First thing Monday I’ll call her in. Leave it to me. We’ll clear this up.”

“It’s serious, Ian. Don’t sweep it under the carpet. This is a legitimate business. We have a reputation. *I* have a reputation and I’ll protect it.”

“I don’t want to spoil your party. Let’s do it after the weekend.”

“Natasha is trouble, Ian.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll sort it out.”

They didn’t notice Miranda sitting there with her legs tucked under her bum. She was relieved that Gerald knew about Natasha, thinking that at least she wouldn’t have to tackle the problem. She’d see how De Kock handled it.

6:00 PM

At Jakes, Miranda made herself comfortable at a table for two.

Teacher arrived a couple of minutes after she did, ordered an Amstel. Miranda nearly asked for a Windhoek light so that she’d think clearly if she had to, but stuff that. She went with her craving for scotch on the rocks.

“A part-time solution is either Avis Rent-a car or travel by train, but at sixty rand a day renting doesn’t appeal to my pocket and the trains are a bloody mess these days. Gangs do what the hell they want. You should know, Teacher. I look at those ripped seats sewn together with plastic stitches and I imagine the damage a gangsta knife could do to flesh.”

“It’s a damn shame.”

“Sometimes I wonder what I’d do if some adolescent arsehole with pimples and a gun threatened me just because he felt like it. Could happen anywhere, anytime.”

“Look, I’m happy to lend you my car,” Teacher offered, surprising Miranda. They hadn’t even had sex yet, she thought.

“I can get by with the allocated police vehicle for a couple of days.”

“That’s generous.”

“It also gives me a legitimate excuse to get my Kawasaki out of storage, a 750cc.”

“Hey, you’re right. What good is it there?”

Then he got down to business.

“How are things at the hospital?” he asked.

Miranda sighed. She really didn't have much to say.

"A nurse with the EDU is storing dagga in her locker. She's hiding a collection of pilfered goods in there, too," she said, telling Teacher about what she'd found. "But the stuff was thrown in, totally disorganised. I can't see her being involved in any organised drugs syndicate."

He didn't respond.

She said, "Does that help?"

"Everybody does dope," he said.

"Do you?"

"I don't go out of my way. I did do once but not anymore. Fuzzed me out too much at the edges. I like to be clear. I like to know exactly what I'm doing."

"I haven't noticed special deliveries of sealed cardboard boxes, there's no store-room, just a bunch of personality disordered staff and the patients, paying a fortune for therapy."

Teacher was quiet, sipping his beer, looking at her, waiting, thinking she was smart, she'd be useful if he played his cards right.

"What's the nurse like?" he asked.

"Natasha Sweetie. She's a crowd pleaser. She gets on a little too well with the patients. I prefer people to do their jobs. We're not paid to be friends with the patients. She's not short of cash, either. And she spends a lot of time in De Kock's office."

"He's bad news."

"Are the rumours true then, that he was a guest at Boy's Town? You'd know about that wouldn't you?"

"From the file. He's your regular psychopath. Comes from a broken home. Has low intelligence, sexual maladjustment. He had enuresis as a child. His mother made him wash his own sheets in the mornings before school. Seems he was extremely aggressive, had poor social skills. Turned into a fire setter. He set his home alight."

"Wasn't it his teacher he set alight?"

"You know about that?"

"I've heard things."

"That happened later. In the earlier incident, he'd blamed his brother for a premature explosion he called it, in the back seat of the car, with a girl named Cecilia-

Anne. Pretty name. I got that from the trial transcripts. He beat her up. Then he set the house on fire. His brother died in the blaze. The house fire was ruled accidental. About a year later he burned the teacher.”

“Sounds like you should be keeping an eye on him.”

“The hospital’s been under surveillance for some time now,” he said.

“It’s hard to believe.”

“I’m afraid so. Scorpions have had their eye on Nelson Garrides’ operation for months.”

She said, “You know, I haven’t heard of him. Garrides. Has there been anything about him in the paper? I tend to stick to headlines. I’m a simmer.”

“He was indicted on charges of racketeering and conspiracy in 1991 in Miami, but he got away, you know, used his contacts to get out of the country. He didn’t want to be prosecuted, didn’t like the possibility of jail.”

“So what does he have to do with Greenside?”

“This guy uses submarines, ships, helicopters. Brings drugs in by ‘plane, fixed-wing aircraft, anything that moves to get them in. He smuggles large quantities of narcotics all over the world. Including to South Africa. He originally got to the US from Cuba as part of the Marcelito boat lift, did you hear of that? When thousands of criminals released from prison joined refugees in a series of flotillas. And now he’s in Cape Town or maybe Jo'burg. We’re not sure.” He was honest with her. Hoping it would pay off. He was working hard enough entertaining her, thinking he’d better keep the slips, show his boss it was work, all these meetings in bars and restaurants. “As if we don’t have enough of our own. Now we’ve got this creep and Jurgen Harksen,” he said, joking with her.

She smiled. Why did things have to get so complicated, she thought, watching him nurse his beer, thinking he really did have nice hands. She was a sucker for elegant fingers and his nails were nicely manicured.

She said, “You know, I’m not keen to be involved in all this.”

“You’ve seen what drugs do to kids, you see it all the time. How they get hooked. Just keep your eyes open, that’s all. You’re doing that already. You won’t be involved in anything. Keep your eyes on Gerald Edwards. We may be interested in him.”

She wanted to laugh out loud.

“Gerald? You’ve got him all wrong,” she said. Gerald? What was he thinking? De Kock maybe, but Gerald was as conservative as the colour beige.

“Miranda, what do you know about Gerald?”

Just like that. Deliver the goods.

“Teacher, if I knew anything worth knowing about Gerald Edwards I’d tell you. That’s the whole point. He’s predictable. He sticks to routine. The little I know I’ve told you.”

“Tell you what, let’s forget about Greenside. It’s Friday night. What do you say? Let’s go tango,” he suggested and Miranda said why not, even though she was tired and testy, the part of her wanting to stroke him fighting with the part of her wanting to scratch his eyes out.

Tango was good for her. Cleared the mind. Healed the soul.

9:00 PM

In Sea Point the sun was setting. The Atlantic sparkled with fragmented reflections. Miranda thought of the contrast to Muizenberg where the mountain cast shadow over the suburb by tea time.

They walked along Main Road, from Teacher’s second floor flat with a balcony facing the sea, to the old Sea Point Alhambra. They pushed through swing doors. The carpets at the entrance were green and gold, a design of geometric shapes in a gold grid, from the days when patrons dressed up for a double feature, sitting in the back row with bottles of Coke and popcorn. And in the romantic scenes the boy would slide his arm over his date’s shoulders and they’d snog.

The high ceiling slanted towards the screen. Ceramic palm trees and waves decorated the walls. There were rows of seats towards the back on a gentle slope, but the seats on the level floor had been removed to accommodate the dance area. A shattered skylight added after the movie house had closed down, housed countless pigeons and a section of floor was littered with droppings.

Teacher went to rent shoes.

Miranda sat down in the first row of seats, closed her eyes and listened to the music, to shuffling and stamping and dance instructions.

She watched the dancers, lithe and clumsy and fancy and plodding.

She noticed a familiar dancer expose a shapely thigh, stretching her short neck, looking at her, but she couldn't put her finger on it, where'd she seen the woman before. Stocky, but nice. The dancer turned away and her partner led her to the other end of the floor.

Miranda ignored the decay and transcended the scratchiness of a poorly taped *Delusion* by the Orchestra Tango Café. Life is not what it seems, said the lyrics. The beat was steady, perfect for a dance class, good for beginners and experienced dancers alike.

"They're not in bad nick. Here," Teacher said, handing her second-hand sandals. She put them on, thinking they were in better shape than her own. He was ready, too.

Miranda stood with her back straight, stamped her right foot and looked directly into Teacher's eyes. She started with confrontation. There was room for conflict in tango. She called the shots, set the rhythm. She offered resistance to his foot as he slid his against hers. He indicated a change of direction and she conceded and followed. She liked the power of leading but she also liked being held firmly in the frame of a man's arms.

After forty-five minutes of teasing he moved very close, whispered, "Let's leave."

They walked hand in hand in the cool air, sticky palms plastered together.

Back at the flat, they hardly made it up the stairs. Teacher pulled Miranda to him, held her against the wall, kissed her, unnerved her with his gentle tongue. He fumbled with the key and for a moment she thought they'd be doing it against the front door, thinking c'mon, get the door open, thinking she didn't want to make love there on the welcome mat. They made it to the bed and what they did was so good they did it again, Teacher oblivious to her extra padding, revelling in her body, wanting to climb into it, not shy to put on a condom, wanting to get as deep as he could.

8

Saturday

December 18

8:20 AM

The next morning she awoke, not wanting to disturb him, but thinking she had to move her arm, she couldn't feel it, being numb from the weight of his torso. She couldn't lie still any longer. She shifted her arm from under his body, pins and needles stabbing her fingers as she flexed them. He didn't wake. She watched him for a while, wondering at the difference in their skins, his smooth dark velvet, hers as pale as foolscap paper.

9:00 AM

She liked Teacher's straight back, his confidence. She liked the smell of him on her body, thinking she could lie in bed all day, lounge about, take things easy. When he woke, she said, "That's quite a cut," tracing her finger along a scar on his right side. "Knife wound?"

"Appendicitis."

"Looks too vicious for surgery."

"Emergency operation by a hack doctor. Up in Port St Johns when I was visiting my father. After a couple of days in my father's hut, I woke up with a stomach ache. I thought it was my guts getting used to pap but by the afternoon I was in surgery at the local hospital. Emergency services flew me out as soon as they could, to Groote Schuur."

"Your father lives in a hut?"

"I'll tell you over breakfast."

"I've got everything, appendix, tonsils, wisdom teeth."

"I like your butterfly," he said, his fingers fluttering over the wings on her shoulder blade.

“A Silver Dragon special,” she said. “Bloody painful and the colour didn’t take so I had to go back to get it redone. You know the tattoo artist draws blood? A droplet rises with every pinprick. The tattoo was part of my Saturn experience.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Early mid-life crisis, which apparently women hit at thirty. But I’m over that now.” She liked the tattoo, especially considering it drew his attention, his tongue flicking across her shoulder blade, now the kiss turning intense, his mouth on her, sucking, tasting, travelling.

His cell rang. He leaned across her, picked it up, listened, grabbed his shorts, put them on, went into the other room.

Miranda got up too, lifted up his sweatshirt hanging over the back of a chair and held it to her face. Smelled his scent.

She looked around. There was an uncomplicated bareness to the bedroom. There was the bed, a small table and a chair. Blinds on the windows.

She had a quick shower, dressed, and went through to the lounge. He was still on the ‘phone in the spare bedroom.

There was a quality CD player and when she turned it on, Sade’s mellow voice reassured “You think I’d leave your side Baby, You know me better than that...” . His CD collection was good stuff: the Christians, Erykah Badu, Mango Groove, the African Jazz Pioneers. Macy Gray’s *Your role model is in therapy* caught her eye, as did a CD by the melancholy Eva Cassidy. Posthumously acclaimed. Died of cancer at thirty-four. Couldn’t fill a club while she sang live. Sade finished. Miranda put on tango music. “El Amanecer”, *The Dawn*, by Carlos di Sarli, reading on the CD sleeve, “Legend has it, that Roberto Firpo, the composer, was inspired to write this magical tango whilst walking home after performing at an all night party.” She listened to the voices as they recreated the dawn chorus.

The flat was open plan. There wasn’t much furniture: a table and four dining chairs, a comfortable couch facing double glass doors and the view. There was a TV in

built-in shelving and an assortment of penguin novels with orange spines. Looked like old stuff he'd picked up in second hand bookshops. A Nicolaas Maritz painting of a rock pool hung on the wall and a black and white etching, titled "My father" by an artist she didn't recognize.

She went to the kitchen, thinking coffee would do right about now. There was a self-defrosting fridge and a new stove that looked as if it had never been used. And in a cupboard were boxes of Fatti's and Moni's spaghetti, tins of tomato and tuna fish. There was a rack of decent wine in the corner cabinet. She couldn't find coffee.

Miranda heard Teacher's voice raised, then nothing. He'd done with the 'phone. She closed the cupboard, quietly, thinking she wouldn't mind sharing the merlot at some stage. Soon. He said give him a few minutes. He showered and changed and they walked down the road to Melissa's.

They talked over croissants plastered with strawberry jam and emmenthaler. Miranda read a couple of clichés on Hulett's sugar packets, tore open one saying "What you harvest in your mind you will manifest in your life." Good counsel. She sweetened the Earl Grey.

They got talking.

"There are some beautiful girls at the hospital," Teacher said.

"Patients?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I've seen them come to the out-patient groups."

"The tragedy is they believe they're fat and ugly. Useless."

"Fascinating field, psychology. How'd you get into it?"

"My parents are psychologists. Always analyzing, discussing theories of behaviour. It's what they do. Now it's what I do. Like a family business."

"And?"

"Hey, it's a long story."

"We've got time. Part of getting to know each other," he said, taking her hand, thinking he really wanted to. That he knew some of her story already but he wouldn't tell her that.

She enjoyed his touch.

She hesitated, wondering if she wanted to go into it, then deciding what the hell.

“Christine, my sister, was eighteen months younger than me. We shared digs as students. She had a heart attack at twenty-one.”

“That’s rough.”

“I thought it was my fault. I should have done something sooner. She was bulimic. She didn’t want to stop, though. My parents scattered her ashes at Scarborough, her favourite beach. It’s so peaceful out there. Sometimes I drive out and sit on the beach and remember what a great sister she was before things got so out of hand.”

He’d read it in the synopsis in the file but she was giving it a new slant, a human angle.

“What about your parents?” he asked.

“Soon after she died they emigrated to England. There was nothing they could do. We were a family of therapists and it didn’t stop Christine from killing herself. That’s what she did, really. It’s what they all do.” Miranda was thinking it was a relief to talk about it.

“I remember one night she prepared a platter of hamburgers and she walked past me in the passage and I asked who was coming for dinner. She locked her bedroom door behind her and I swear she guzzled every one of those fourteen odd hamburgers. Didn’t even offer me one. The next morning after she’d left for varsity I sneaked into her room. I looked around, you know, for pills or drugs, there had to be something. I didn’t find anything but when I went into her bathroom I smelled that faint acrid smell that you can pick up after someone’s vomited. I wanted to fix her. I became fascinated by eating disorders. There you go, I’m still at it.”

“I didn’t know you could die from bingeing.”

“She wasn’t even thin. Looked like a typical varsity rebel with greasy hair. She gutsed so much I thought at least some of that food had to stay down. Some of it had to feed her. But it was the strain on her system. She couldn’t bounce back. She did it too often. Died in her sleep. The post mortem showed she’d damaged her heart. Her boyfriend found her with a pool of curdled vomit on the pillow next to her.”

He asked for a new coffee. Miranda said, “And you, how did you get to be a policeman? I figured music industry, television, something like that.”

“That would be nice.”

“Pity the force has a reputation for employing morons and thugs who beat up whatever they pick up.”

“That’s not true. Generally the police are just pretty hopeless. Low morale. Too much crime. Not enough manpower. No vehicles.”

“So why are you part of it?”

“I wanted to do good, make a difference.”

“Your accent is beautiful.”

“My parents were in exile. Uganda, Tanzania, United States, you name the country, they probably passed through it. They settled in England. My father taught Law at various universities, was a specialist lecturer in Family Law. I transferred from one fancy school to another. All my father talked about was coming home, he was obsessed, always harping on about Home. He hankered after the Transkei. Even Johannesburg held some kind of allure for him. So I never really felt I fitted in myself. I did law too, at Oxford, got a degree specialising in criminal procedure, but I didn’t want to wear a suit and tie and work nine to five in pea soup, so I came back with my parents, after twenty-five years, after the elections. I wanted to discover an identity. I joined the force. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“D’you miss London?”

“What about it? The cold? The arrogance? No. I belong here.”

“And your parents. Are you close?”

“We’re close enough. For a while it was exciting to be back. My father was never around. My mother knew he was having an affair, another one, but she looked the other way. She was in denial, pretending it was a series of late meetings, maybe a conference, that father, an important man back in South Africa, had to re-establish himself.”

“Did he? Is he a Minister or an MP or something?”

“This is where the hut comes in. He’s the head of a new family. He left my mother, my long-suffering mother, dumped her for a common-law wife. A traditional Xhosa woman and her daughter. They live in a rondavel in Port St John’s, on the hill overlooking the bay. They collect water from a nearby tap. There’s no electricity and the sewerage is dumped in an open pit right next door to the Tourist Bureau. My mother’s

still waiting for him to come back from the conference.” He shrugged. “She gave up her life up for her husband and he doesn’t even pay alimony.”

Miranda noticed him drifting somewhere, tapped him on the knuckles, asked, “Did you settle?”

“I’ve been in the job ten years. I’m an institution.”

“Young for that aren’t you?”

“In Crime Intelligence it’s the experience that matters. I’ve got qualifications. I know how to build a background. Figure out how the pieces fit. Make sure that once we’re ready to move we’ve got what we need to pull off a legitimate arrest. Then it’s over to the justice system. Sometimes a lot of hard work comes to nothing.”

They were quiet for a while, savouring the fresh espresso, each of them thinking what now?

Teacher said he had to leave, suddenly uncomfortable that he’d told so much of his life, that it fitted into half an hour, that she’d drawn it from him without him realizing it.

Back at the flat Teacher handed Miranda his car keys, thinking he had insurance if anything went wrong, if she reversed into a pole or something.

Miranda enjoyed his kiss, thinking it tasted as sweet as the cappuccino and the upside was there weren’t any calories.

12:00 Noon

Teacher’s Opal was automatic, as were Miranda’s thoughts, on breakfast and what they’d done before. Then she was thinking about the party tonight, thinking about Gerald, with his tight arse and his pens all in a row peeping from his breast pocket and about De Kock acting as if he owned Greenside, which he did, but that didn’t give him the right to intrude any way he wanted. She was thinking about Calvin’s resentment and Natasha’s stash, wondering if she smoked the stuff or dished it out only to pretty boys like Gary? Staff were supposed to be exemplary. Parents were supposed to be role models. No wonder kids ended so screwed up. If she was half her age maybe she’d spray paint “Go

Fuck Yourselfs” too, on a grey and yellow Metro train, a moving testament to the adult world.

At Grace Avenue she turned right, then right again into the hospital gates, drove around the back to the parking lot, slowed down, snapped to consciousness, thinking hey, what was she doing there? As if she didn't get enough of Greenside during the week, and the hassles that went with it. She drove out, went to an early movie. She fed her face popcorn, salty and buttered and washed it down with Fanta.

After the movie, her eyes grown accustomed to the midday glare, she headed for Muizenberg. She drove under the Railway Bridge. The village was waiting for some big developer to do a rescue. Like the misguided notion of romance, Muizenberg was waiting for Prince Charming.

Miranda stopped for groceries at the local Shoprite where the clientele were mainly refugees, the homeless, poor whites in pyjamas and hair curlers. Ordinary people. People in constant financial turmoil. The supermarket was crowded with people dreaming of a better life. People like herself, Miranda thought, putting the regular milk and bread and veg in a carrier basket. She stood in line to pay, determined to ignore the stacks of Peppermint Crisps, Tempo's, Crunchies and Smarties tempting her from the display at the till. She chose an Inside Story. Nothing a chocolate wouldn't cure. Or two, she thought, adding a Chocolate Log to the basket.

A local Bergie stood behind her at the checkout counter, looking half-decent in her spaghetti-strap sundress, someone's second hand cast off, a floral-print in pretty good nick. Miranda noticed her breasts hanging loose under the cotton.

“Wat die fock gaan nou aan!” the Bergie screeched.

“These bloody homeless people, where do they come from, hey?” a man shouted from the next queue.

“Moenie so lelik praat nie,” Miranda said. “You look like a lady today.” The homeless woman smiled. Miranda paid for her goods, brushing off her guilt about the chocolates. Wasn't she supposed to be losing weight? A balanced diet and everything in

moderation. That was part of her philosophy. She didn't deprive herself. The packer crammed the stuff into plastic bags. She hated the flimsy supermarket packets, a lot of them ending up floating in the sea or caught in trees. Next time, she thought, she'd remember the basket.

The Bergie vlooked again. Miranda looked back at her and beyond her, she saw Daniel in the condiments aisle, reading the label on a jar of beetroot. Nothing else could be so purple. He looked up, caught her eye. She turned to the cashier and counted out nearly two hundred bucks for a bag and a half. Damn inflation.

Daniel caught up with her in the parking lot.

"Where the hell have you been? Wasting my time. I've been waiting since twelve. You said you'd be here," he said.

"Life is hectic."

"Replaced me already, have you?"

"Daniel, I don't need this. Your stuff is in the storeroom. Ask the caretaker for the key. You can get it when you want."

"Didn't I mean anything to you?"

"What surprises me is that we lasted all of two months."

6:20 PM

She napped a while, dreaming of herself in police uniform. She was Teacher's partner, chasing bad guys resembling Daniel, around every dark corner. Then they were shooting rounds at the firing range, bam bam bam. She woke with a start. It was probably a backfire in the street outside. There wasn't much time to prepare for Gerald's party.

She gelled her unruly hair into soft curls around her face and stroked subtle shades of green and amber eyeshadow across her lids. She smoothed a dab of base over freckles dotting her nose and cheeks. She matted the foundation with a tissue and finally brought attention to her mouth, wiping away half of the lipstick, thinking the natural look suited her better. There was a hint of storminess around her mouth, but no one would

notice the stress. She slipped into a simple, black, evening dress, low-cut but not trashy, and then she was ready.

8:00 PM

Most of the time Miranda wanted to wring the neck of the person who created image, thinking of Ella whose life was ruled by it, how she looked and what she wore, as if the right label meant she was acceptable. There was a place for it, though, she thought, admiring the Marianne Fassler extravagance of a few months back. She draped last season's pashmina over her bare shoulders, thinking it should probably line a dog's basket. It was twenty-eight degrees and windless and she didn't need covering. Pity she didn't have a dog.

Gerald lived in a suburban security complex, of pseudo-Victorian units which all looked the same, with their cream walls perpendicular to neat pavements and their finials, ridiculously vulnerable and ostentatious.

At the entrance, a Chubb guard checked Miranda's name against the guest list. He activated the boom and waved her through Live-Wire fencing. She recognised De Kock's M3 parked at an angle, hogging space for two cars, in front of Gerald's home. She nearly dented his car, thinking it would serve him right. The world was not there for the sole purpose of servicing his needs.

Miranda announced herself at the intercom, heard the click of the lock opening on the security gate and walked in, noticing guests mingling, enjoying wine and snacks, on a manicured lawn bordered by pansy-studded flowerbeds. Miranda recognized dolled-up nurses and administration and management staff and practitioners, doctors and psychiatrists and psychologists she'd met at some meeting or slide show or ward round or other and there were people she didn't recognise at all.

Fairy lights were strung between two trees, over a kidney shaped swimming pool near double doors opening from the lounge. Gerald stood near the pool. His open-necked cotton shirt, the palest shade of pink, was tucked into pleated beige chinos. Every hair

looked gelled in place. Miranda imagined him skinny-dipping: pale gooseflesh, toes gingerly testing the temperature.

“Happy Birthday,” she said, pecking his cheeks, handing over the Titleist golf balls, suitably expensive and conservative. He took them inside and a few minutes later came back out, pointing a Polaroid camera in her direction.

“Miranda, smile,” he said.

“Party trick, Gerald?”

“And why not?”

She heard the shutter click, the flash blinding her for a couple of seconds.

“Here, have a look. It’s yours. A memento of this auspicious occasion,” Gerald said, handing her the picture. She watched the emulsion slowly transform, ghost shapes gaining clarity and turning all the colours of the rainbow. She’d hardly had a moment to appreciate the magic before he plucked the pic from her fingers.

“I’ll peg it to the fig tree. The photo-tree,” he said.

Miranda looked behind her. She watched as Gerald attached the Polaroid to a branch with a clothes peg. There were a dozen or so other pictures there already.

He was having fun, providing guests with instant gratification, pictures sliding from the camera, people transfixed as their images developed in front of their eyes. He blinded a waiter carrying a tray of full crystal flutes, but the guests rushed for the champagne. The waiter didn’t spill a drop.

Gerald laughed, thinking this was his party, he could do what he wanted.

He finished the film, ran inside and exited shortly with what looked like a fancy Nikon slung around his neck.

“Miranda,” De Kock beckoned from the lounge.

He’d obviously recovered from their spat, Miranda thought, and that he seemed too pleased to see her and really, she didn’t feel like talking to him. She walked over, though, considering her move in the corporate game, not ready to be blatantly rude.

“Beautiful evening isn’t it, Ian?”

“Very beautiful,” he said, his eyes wandering from her neckline to her chest, thinking it was only a matter of time before he had her eating him, only a matter of time.

Miranda was thinking if there was one thing she really hated, it was fat wet lips planting themselves on her mouth. She nearly gagged at De Kock’s spittle, thinking the man had no idea of personal space, leaning in like this, trying to graunch her with the intimacy of a lover, holding her arm as if there was something between them.

“I promised to help Gerald with the canapés,” she said, backing away, smiling, thinking the man had serious problems.

“We’ll talk later,” he said.

“Sure,” she said, turning her back, wanting to get out of there, have a bath. Being in his company left her feeling dirty.

But the food looked excellent, she thought, appreciating the spread as she got closer to the buffet.

She slung her evening bag across her body, freeing her hands, thinking handbags were a liability at parties, as she piled samoosas, mini-quiches, cocktail sausages and spicy chicken wings on her plate, wondering how she’d negotiate snacks and wine and be elegant about it.

She headed back to the garden. Daniel and De Kock were chatting up Natasha Sweetie. She looked a knockout in a red look-at-me dress cut low at the cleavage and short in the hem. Miranda was relieved that Daniel had redirected his efforts. She noticed De Kock didn’t look too pleased about sharing Natasha’s company. Miranda was pleased she’d escaped attention from both those losers.

She made another trip to the buffet, came away with a helping of the coup de grace, a fruit and meringue tart smothered in custard, and more champagne from the bar to go with it, deciding she’d join the gym for sure.

“It’s not today or tomorrow I worry about, it’s fifteen years down the line,” Doctor David Love said, “So that’s why we’re leaving, you can understand. Africa is finished.”

"But Canada's so cold," someone said, "Why d'you want to go there?"

"Canada *runs* on South African doctors. We're going to Fort St James, a rural town where there's already an established community of South Africans. An old friend even runs a shop where we can get all our goodies: Marie biscuits, Marmite, biltong. I couldn't do without!" Laager mentality, Miranda thought, keeping her mouth shut.

He asked, looking at her: "And you, Miranda, thinking of leaving?"

"I like it here. And I don't have a sense of urgency about securing a pension and medical aid just yet."

"This city's going nowhere. It's the crime and grime."

"Have you read the latest *Newsweek*, though, David? Cape Town was voted one of the top ten creative cities in the world. New York, Paris and London didn't even feature."

"Who wants to be creative? I want to be safe, Miranda, and I want my children to be safe."

"David, you don't have children."

"I don't want to wake up one midnight with my hands and legs tied with telephone wire while some criminal rapes my wife next to me in the bed," he said, thinking hadn't she read a newspaper lately, didn't she know what was going on in this country? And he *was* planning a family.

She changed the subject.

"While I've got your attention, David, can we talk about Ella?"

He sipped his champagne, slow to respond.

"Let's not talk about work," he said.

"I'd like to see you on Monday then, for a chat."

"Fine."

"We've sold everything," his wife chipped in, "Our house, our furniture. Conditions are really fabulous over there. Canada has the best quality of life, that's according to the United Nations."

Miranda thinking, sure, maybe. It was their choice, no judgement. Thinking though, that she was bored with the typical let's trash SA party conversation.

“The move will be a wonderful adventure,” she managed, an attempt at graciousness.

I've got a firm offer,” David carried on, “they're flying me over, and the wife, considering me as an individual, providing spectacular perks”

Miranda excused herself. Joined the group on the lawn.

“It's only a matter of time. The Zolof lessens the anxiety and then he'll be able to talk about the abuse,” some intern lectured the small circle gathered around him. It wasn't a case she knew.

David was right. She wasn't going to talk shop. She slipped away, passed a conversation about fashionable shoes, heard someone saying, “Heels are as high as you dare go. Models swaying down catwalks were falling off their heels at the Gucci and Prada shows in the spring.”

She walked down a passage, away from the clatter, voices and laughter and glasses clinking, merging as white noise. She locked herself in the bathroom, had a wee and washed her face. She opened the cabinet above the sink. There was shaving balm, traditional Tabac, a Twin-Lady ladies shaver. Calyspo bath beads and Body Butter from the Body Shop, which she'd tried once, but the cream would have worked better on toast.

On the second shelf, a small bottle of Aphrodisia apothecary bath oil stood alongside a pack of Rough Riders. There was an assortment of medicines: the usual Panado, Revital tonic, medications for hay fever. There was a tube of Anugesic anaesthetic anal cream.

Some desperado waiting for the loo banged on the door. Miranda grunted Occupied but that didn't put him off. So she waited a bit longer before she flushed. A minute later she opened the door, smiling, holding her breath against the Pine Breeze toilet freshener.

She was alone again, soft-shoeing farther along the carpet, farther away from the party. She stopped at the guest room, checked again that no one was around, went in and closed the door.

Miranda rifled through the pockets of a couple of jackets flung carelessly across the bed, and suede bombers which must have been flying off the racks there were so many of them. She plucked out a few peppermints coated in lint, a lipstick, a card for Satisfaction Escort Service, a piece of string and a mini-torch.

She progressed to the varied bag collection of dainty micro-purses and satchels, unzipping compartments, foraging. Apart from the usual make up, small change purses, car keys, rape sprays and vibrators, ordinary trash and trinkets, there wasn't much of interest.

The gold zip of an expensive-looking box-bag opened easily. Natasha Sweetie's name was stamped in gold on her chequebook. Miranda thought it a pity the balance wasn't written in. The bag was full of girl-stuff: eye shadow and a compact, a cherry lipstick same make as Miranda's, the usual smeared tissues, a couple of one hundred rand notes folded in her purse; a leaking pen stained Miranda's fingers blue. She wiped the ink off with one of Natasha's tissues. She pulled out another chequebook, sticking out at an angle from the side compartment, wondering why Natasha carried two of them, curiosity turning into surprise when the second chequebook turned out to be Miranda's very own. She wanted to storm out, confront the thieving bitch on the spot, but that would publicise her own unscrupulous behaviour. She decided to hang on, see what else she could lay her hands on, and rummaged for her credit cards but they weren't there.

With her face flushed and her heart beating in her throat, she left the room, inspired by her success, thinking why not check out Gerald's room while she was at it, see what she could find?

She turned the handle, looked over her shoulder one more time, then crossed the threshold into darkness and closed the door. The curtains were drawn and the carpet blocked light from the passage. She turned on the bedside lamp, rehearsing excuses in her head in case she was caught: that she didn't feel well, needed to lie down, or she was fixing her make-up, that sort of thing.

She looked through the pockets of Gerald's towelling gown hanging behind the door, but they were empty. There was no family crest embroidered on the breast pocket either, which she'd half expected.

The room was a variation on the white and beige theme. The corners of the bed were squared with military precision. She peeled back the bedcover, thinking white was fine, and there was nothing better than cotton against the skin.

She rearranged the cover, lay down, tested the mattress. Too soft. On springs. It was a nice bed though, wrought iron and brass. She sprawled out, welcoming her weightlessness, thinking she could switch off completely, take refuge till home time in Gerald's bland bedroom.

She scrunched her eyes, scanned the gleaming spines in his bookshelf. Some new titles, on drugs and eating disorders and addiction, that looked as if they'd never been opened from the smoothness of the spines, were alongside the usual psych academic standards. On the bedside table was an arrangement of lavender in a vase. Nothing else. No book, no clutter. She pictured the chocolate wrappers, tango manual and library books (desperately overdue and gathering dust) cluttering her own bedside table. She thought about the crumpled mess at the flat, thinking she had to get stuck in and do a little overdue house work.

She got up and smoothed out Gerald's bed. She picked up a teddy bear off the single seater beige couch and smiled at his red bow tie, thinking that Gerald had probably been a cute little boy.

The hinges of the built-in cupboard were well oiled and the white melamine doors opened silently, dim light brushing the edges of shirts and jerseys, folded and stacked, all in white, cream, beige and brown. Even his jockey shorts looked ironed and were sorted into piles. Gerald was organised, perfectionist, immaculate, right down to his underwear. There wasn't a thing out of place. She closed the cupboard, turned to the chest of drawers facing the bed. Beige, grey and brown socks were folded in the top drawer. She gave him a gold star for colour co-ordination. In the second drawer was a standard collection of toys for boys: a state of the art Sony video camera, visual and audio tapes, an old Pentax, an extension lead and several rolls of Kodak film.

She pulled out the bottom drawer, lifted a T-shirt off a mess of sweet papers and chocolate wrappers, thinking what was this all about? looking at a stash of chocolate bars, some half-eaten, sticky, a couple showing taste test-bites: Crunchies, Bar-Ones, Peppermint Crisps, an assortment of Cadbury's slabs. Twinkies and Millionaires

shortbread and a six-pack of Woolworth's cup cakes were still sealed. Miranda's mouth watered at the binge food, stored in a hurry, maybe before the guests arrived. Liquorice Allsorts, sparklers, cereal and mini bread rolls. Maybe Gerald had an eating disorder. How about that? The blind leading the blind, Miranda thought.

There were no neatly stacked bags of cocaine, no Ecstasy or Mandrax or heroin, no black-book list of druggie clients.

She heard the groan of the turning door handle and dropped to her hands and knees, thinking the snoop in her didn't want to be caught, managing to sidle under the bed just in time. She looked sideways in the direction of a man's shoes as he came closer to the bed, sat on it, sandwiching her between the springs and the carpet.

She spotted dust bundles of hair and dirt and skin flakes. Gerald needed a more meticulous house cleaner. A couple of chocolate wrappers and half an Aero lay next to a pair of ladies panties hooked on the rough skirting board near her face. They were maroon satin with black lace trim, looked like an adventurous, sexy woman's undergarment.

She noticed a rectangular shape, guessing it was a postcard, curled against the foot of the bed near her ear, or a photograph that had slipped between the bed and the wall, lost now in shadow. She could just reach it but in the dim light couldn't make out the image. She managed to slip the card into her bag, thinking she'd better not move around or she'd give herself away and lay wondering what the hell possessed her to be so deceitful? It was damn uncomfortable under the bed and it reminded her of being trapped by Daniel when he lay on top of her. Thank God at least that was over, she thought.

The heavy man got up, went over to Gerald's drawers and did his own search. When he was done he sat down again. Miranda turned her head to his shoes, at thirty-degree angles to the bed. She recognised the tattoo. The light illuminated the rose for an instant before Victor crossed his ankles, hiding it again.

Victor started sobbing, wondering how was he going to make it through this charade with dignity, wishing Gerald would appreciate him.

Miranda worried he wasn't about to leave anytime soon thinking please no! Go back to the party! Have a drink! Cheer yourself up! Go and talk to one of the therapists out there! Thinking what now when Gerald himself opened the door and walked in.

"I thought you might be here," he said.

"Just needed time out," Victor sniffed.

"Oh God Victor, don't tell me you're crying."

"I could lie and say I'm not."

"Here, clean yourself up. Come back to the party for God's sake. Don't make a scene. Stop snivelling for God's sake," he said, more harshly than he intended, but his plea didn't seem to make an impression on Victor. He didn't want true love. Why couldn't the man get it into his head? He wasn't ready for a serious relationship.

"Look, Victor," he sighed, "You have to stop this. I want to keep our relationship strictly professional. You shouldn't have come in the first place."

"Don't you think it's a little late for that, keeping our relationship professional? People know. I deserve to be here."

"It's over, Victor, you know that. A couple of dates, that's all it was. A therapist comforting his client."

"I need you, I can't do without you," Victor whined, his voice escalating to hysteria. "You've hardly given me a chance, I need you. So what that I'm older. I can offer stability. I'm tired of fucking boys in men's rooms at gay clubs. I want to settle down, commit to someone."

Then Gerald slapped him. Very therapeutic, Miranda thought, lying there, not breathing, wishing they'd get the squabble done so she could get out from under the bed.

"Get yourself under control, man. I'm not interested," Gerald said.

"You used to be."

"Not for long and I'm not any more."

"My nose is bleeding."

"Well, clean it up. Here, Victor, don't do it like that, roll up some Kleenex and stick it in like this. Lie down. Please, try to understand. I don't want a scene out there." He sat on the bed next to Victor.

She hung in there, thinking beige blends, beige is accommodating. One should never underestimate beige

After a while Gerald asked, "Feeling better?"

"My nose has stopped bleeding," Victor said.

"I'll tell you what you'll do now," Gerald said. "You'll clean yourself up, wash your face and leave."

"They'll find out you know Gerald. What you're doing, you know," Victor said, thinking it was typical of Gerald, telling him what to do all the time, always knowing best.

"Are you going to tell, Victor? You're not thinking of telling are you Victor?"

"No, I'm just saying, that's all."

Gerald thought he had to get the man out of there before he caused trouble.

"Victor, you're having a hard time. I'll call you."

"Will you?"

"Yes, I will," Gerald said insincerely, closing the door behind him.

Victor was thinking he'd be sorry if he didn't, he'd be waiting and if he didn't call he'd get his own back, tell people Gerald liked young boys, see how successful his practice was then, thinking Gerald had picked the wrong man to mess with. He blew his nose, aimed the crumpled tissue at the dirt bin, but missed. It dropped to the floor.

As soon as he left Miranda rolled from under the bed, stood up and brushed her dress off. She could smell dried sweat on herself, evidence of adrenaline turned sour, and realized just how nervous she'd been, having considered the possibility of being trapped for the duration while the two of them shagged on the bed.

She switched off the light, stood quiet in the dark for a moment, then opened the door to the passage, returning to the party via the bathroom, making sure she didn't look as if she'd been fucking in the spare room. Someone was. She heard the escalation of lovemaking moaning as someone reached orgasm, wondering if Gerald and Victor were settling their differences.

Back in the hub of the party, she noticed Daniel and Natasha sitting near the pool, hitting it off rather well, Daniel enthralled by her tight dress, his hand on her arm, and Natasha not shaking him off. Miranda noticed De Kock staring from the other side of the table, his eyes on Natasha, looking like a thundercloud as Daniel's hand slipped to Natasha's bum.

De Kock noticed Miranda too, and caught up with her at the gate as she was leaving.

“Miranda, I wanted to tell you, you're looking exceptionally lovely this evening.”
He eyed her breasts again, under the stretchy lycra.

“Why thank you, Ian,” she said, evasively.

“How about dinner some time?” he asked. She didn't put him down with Listen you pathetic drunk, I wouldn't be seen dead in public with you! She figured he wouldn't remember the conversation the next day so she said “Fine” thinking she'd say anything to get away without a fuss.

University of Cape Town

9

Sunday

December 19

6:00 AM

A light plane flew over the village, too low, sounding as if it was coming through the bedroom. Then it was gone.

Miranda lay in bed, listening to the sugarbirds and a robin chirping a morning chorus from the Jacaranda in the garden directly below her window. She checked the time on the digital clock-radio, it was early, then rolled over back to sleep.

Victor's whimpering was in her head. Victor and Gerald, arguing, then Victor's tissue staining Gerald's cream carpet, blood seeping under the door, guests in the queue waiting for the toilet screaming as a crimson tide lapped at their fancy shoes and trailing pashminas.

Miranda woke from the bad dream, got vertical and exorcised the jumble with strong Ciro. From the sliver of view out the kitchen window, she confirmed a wind-free and sun-kissed day, watching even sets of waves breaking on the sand thinking the surfers would be out in droves later on. She checked the kitchen drawers for something she could use to fix her glasses. She found the mini screwdriver which had rocketed from the previous year's Christmas cracker and managed to manipulate the imprecise tool, tightened a screw, securing the right lens of her sunglasses in the frame.

She pulled out the vegetable rack, looking for the avocado from Shoprite. The skin was smooth and firm but when she cut it, the flesh was mostly bruised and rotten. She smeared the healthy part on buttered toast, sprinkled on salt and black pepper, thinking it was possible to make something worthwhile from very little.

Then she got ready for a swim, jiggling into a lycra bathing costume with a crossover back. A tight fit. She wrapped a sarong around her hips, threw a towel over her shoulder and walked the couple of blocks to the beach, thinking she liked Muizenberg on

a Sunday morning, when it was quiet, when most people were sleeping late or sitting in church.

She played in the waves. The sea was her friend. The cold water knocked all the worries from her head. This was the best medicine. She considered getting the patients down here, getting them to use their bodies, getting them grateful for arms and legs. After half an hour or so, she walked out, invigorated, her skin as pink as a cooked lobster. She rubbed herself dry and walked home.

After a hot, leisurely bath, she checked the answering machine. Someone had called and had hung up. Maybe Daniel. That was his style. Miranda thought she wasn't surprised he'd redirected his attentions, wondering how it went with Natasha after she'd left, then thinking she actually didn't care. She and Daniel were so over that they'd have to find a new word for over.

The second message was from Teacher. She called him back.

"You're up early," he said, "any plans for today?"

"Come around," she said, thinking she'd better hurry up and clean the flat, wash the ring from the bath. She dumped the collection of clothes on the couch into the walk-in, hid the dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

She put clean sheets on the bed.

10:00 AM

Teacher said, "C'mon, get on the back," and she did and they went for a ride on the Kawasaki, sloping around the curves of Chapman's Peak Drive. When he straightened and slowed down, Miranda opened her eyes, appreciated the views across the Atlantic Ocean, not worrying too much about giant boulders which could fall from the mountain and crush them. They went on.

At Kalk Bay harbour, they walked along the harbour wall to the lighthouse, past the fishing boats. They had lunch at Ek en Jy and he said, "This smoked snoek is great," licking his fingers, sitting out in the sun, nursing a beer. "I love this place."

They went back to the flat and made love in the afternoon, and slept in each other's arms.

He woke, watched her, thinking this was good, he could get used to this. He smiled at her when she woke, said how he'd enjoyed making love to her.

After a while she said, "Don't you ever think about quitting the police?"

"I like the police. Bad pay, long hours, shitty justice system. I still choose to do the work. Do what I can. Uphold the law. That's what I was taught. I protect myself. I'm careful. And you? Doesn't doing therapy wear you down?"

She shrugged.

"C'mon, talk to me," he said.

"I know eating disorders. It's my way of giving back too, I suppose. My parents lived in New Orleans for a while when Christine and I were girls. They taught Post Grad psychology at Tulane. We ended up at boarding school and Christine hated it. She discovered diet pills and that's how she coped. Once at breakfast she ate ten sausages and I don't know how many slices of French toast. That was her meal of the day. She'd binge, probably threw most of it up, and then she'd starve the rest of the day. Every morning, at five she'd sneak out of the dormitory, and weigh herself on the matron's scale in the passage. I played a joke on her once, set the scale five kilograms heavier than the day before. She believed she'd gained that weight over night. Freaked her out. I set the scale right that night. I didn't understand the power of a number on a scale then."

"How does a child get that way? Your parents loved her, right?"

"It's not about love. My mother's favourite phrase was "Go read a book".

Christine was lonely. She couldn't amuse herself. My parent's were married to their research. They didn't have a whole lot of extra time. I liked *doing* things. Dancing. Hip-hop, modern, tap, whatever was offered. I was easier. I had friends. There was a lot of pressure on Christine. My mother had expectations. That Christine should do well at school, be pretty."

He lit a cigarette. She got up, flung on his T-shirt and scratched in the kitchen cupboard for an ashtray.

"How about quitting those," she said, walking back into the bedroom.

"I've been thinking of quitting."

"I don't like the idea of passive smoking. Or of smoking in the bedroom," she said, plucking the cigarette from his fingers and pulling him from the bed.

She put on music.

They danced the Tango around the kitchen table.

"Did you know," Miranda said, "In 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm the second forbade soldiers to dance the Tango in uniform. He branded the dance lascivious and an affront to common decency."

"Is that right?" Teacher whispered, nuzzling into the warmth of her neck.

"It is. I remember stuff like that. Trivia. Irrelevant details."

Teacher thought if Kaiser Wilhelm could see what was going through his mind, he'd have a convulsion. He said, "How was the party by the way?"

"Why d'you want to know?" she said, feeling used suddenly, irritated that he was asking, thinking that's what it came down to, Teacher wanting to know if she'd seen anything, that what was she *thinking*, hoping the Garrides thing would just disappear.

He said, "People let their guard down at parties."

"Nothing much there. I came home early."

"I really need to get moving on this."

"I've told you all I've seen," she said, asking, "Why do you think Gerald is involved?"

"Rumours. That he's connected in some way to Nelson Garrides' outfit. One of the young runners we picked up mentioned his name, then he hanged himself in his cell before we could question him."

"Jesus. And De Kock? What about him?"

"At this point I couldn't say," Teacher said, non-comittal. "I can tell you some good news, by the way."

"What?"

"We're close to arresting Nelson Garrides."

"And you're only telling me now? So that's it then?"

"No. If Garrides was using Greenside as a drop-off service, then we want to know."

10

Monday

December 20

6 AM

Miranda slept badly, tossing in the heat, her thoughts restless, about what she knew, wondering how Gerald and Victor and Natasha were connected to Garrides, if they were connected at all.

She wanted to get closer to Teacher, but at the same time, what the hell was she thinking? She was convenient to him. It was supposed to be different this time around.

Curiosity and suspicion and plain anger got her out of bed early. She dressed, weighed herself. Sixty kilo's. How did she expect to lose weight living on rolls and chocolates? She sighed at the mess, promising her flat a more than superficial cleaning when she got home, like squirting the Handy Andy and the Harpic and applying elbow grease.

On her way to Greenside, she saw the headlines:

“Nine bombs blow in Soweto”

“Eight month old baby gang raped”

“Miss World pageant threatened by riots in Nigeria, 200 dead”

She hadn't read a paper for two days. Things could go seriously wrong in two days.

There was an ambulance parked in the emergency bay at Greenside.

8:20 AM

“They need help upstairs,” Delicia yelled, waving, hurrying Miranda.

"I'm there," she said, taking the stairs two at a time, nearly spraining an ankle as her sandal caught on a loose rubber strip on the edge of a step, thinking, Jesus, someone could break a neck on the stairs.

Two bathrooms were situated off the landing. The night duty staff and Calvin stood facing a closed door. One of the nurses was rapping her knuckles against it, like machinegun fire.

"Who's in there? Come out. What are you doing in there?" one of the nurses said, pressing her palm flat against the door, her knuckles red from all the banging.

"We can't find the key," the other one said, looking at Miranda sheepishly.

"What about the spare in the nurses station?" Miranda asked

"Not there," the nurse said.

A rush of cynicism flowed through Miranda's veins. The place was the pits.

Calvin was thinking this was time for action. He was fed up with pleasantries, pleading, asking nicely who's in there and what are you doing. This was a loony bin for Heaven's sake, what did they think was going on in there? This was his shift. He was taking control. He yelled, "Stand back!"

Miranda wasn't sure if he meant the nurses hanging around or the person, it had to be a patient, in the bathroom. Either way, he hardly waited for anyone to move before playing Pulp Fiction, attacking the door with a natural violence, pounding his boot against the wood, splintering the frame. The door flew open, the doorknob thwacked against the bathroom wall, rebounded. Calvin, in the lead, swung the door open. Miranda moved closer, bit her lip. Saw a pale arm, a plaster of paris fragility about it, extending straight up against the side of the bath. The red transfixed her. Jackson Pollock splatters on the walls. Blood, pumped out by the rhythm of a strong heart, dripped wet and shining down the tiles.

Gary lay barely conscious in thirty centimetres of bath water, like a macabre Madame Tussaud's waxwork. Miranda couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe Gary had done this. A glint of metal caught her eye, probably the razor blade, leaning against the Lux in the soap dish. She stepped aside as paramedics arrived, hauling cases of life-

saving equipment up the stairs. Their florescent armbands reflected the sun as they moved.

One of the night nurses, still there, rattled behind, pushing the disordered hospital trolley. A stethoscope hung precariously over the edge. Miranda hoped the paramedics were more organized. She watched Calvin, his shirt and pants already bloodied, help a paramedic heave Gary from the bath. They strapped Gary to the stretcher, covered him with a sheet, checked his vitals, immediately put him on a drip.

Linda and Stephanie and Ella were hanging out of their door, straining to see from their room, catching a glimpse of Gary on the stretcher.

“Linda, Stephanie, please, go back to your room. Take Ella with you. This is tragic. We’ll talk later. As soon as we’re settled here.”

Gary was shivering. Miranda was hoping he’d make it.

A nurse said, “At least he’s alive.”

“*Just* alive,” the other one said, wiping her forehead with a hanky embroidered with a sprig of flowers, pushing her glasses back up her nose, her face shiny with sweat, watching as they carried him down the stairs.

Gary was thinking, what were they going on about? He had to get away, that’s all, get away from them, clinging to his skin, holding onto him, even in the water they wouldn’t wash off, digging into his skin.

“Things are supposed to be quiet on night duty. I can’t take this,” one nurse said. The other one saying, “Go home. We can’t do anything here,” all of them hearing the wail of the ambulance as it started up, getting softer in the distance.

Miranda fielded calls from reception in the nurses’ station. She dialled Gerald’s extension but he didn’t pick up. Calvin came in and sprawled into a chair along side her at the switchboard.

“We’re understaffed and now this happens,” he said.

“So what else is new,” Miranda said

“My God. It’s a mess in there.”

“What happened, Calvin?” she said, genuinely surprised. This was why she didn’t like Mondays. Leave the place for the weekend, she thought, and things got totally out of

control. "I'm shocked he did this. I thought we were moving with this boy. How could he do this?"

"With a fork."

"What do you mean, with a fork?"

"That's what I mean. He gouged out his veins with a plastic fork."

"What about the blade in the soap dish?"

"What blade? The fork was floating in the water. The paramedics say that's what he used."

"Jesus, Calvin He wasn't even considered a risk."

"I hope he survives."

"He didn't look good."

"The water was cold. He was in there a long time. No one noticed. Even his friends didn't say he was gone. I'm telling you Miranda, kids today, what values do they have?" Kids today didn't work for anything, he was thinking, there was no commitment to anything, no morals, no discipline. They could just kill themselves if things weren't going their way.

"I'm just upset Gary did this," Miranda said.

"He's an adolescent. They do what they want. He stole the key from the nurse's station."

"That wouldn't have been difficult," she said. "Patients are in and out of there like flies on rubbish." They could probably help themselves to whatever they wanted and where the hell was Gerald, she wondered?

Day staff was in. She didn't have to hang around.

The cleaner in blue overalls with the Medicorps logo printed on the back, said, "You expect me to go in there. I'm not going in there. I'll be sick, man."

"You're paid to do the bloody cleaning," Calvin said.

“But I haven’t never had to clean so much blood before. I’m not going in that mess. I’ll get Aids,” he complained, leaning on his mop, not looking as if he had any intention of using it.

“Why did he have to make such a mess?” Calvin muttered.

“I tell you I’m going to be sick,” the cleaner said.

“Hey Miranda, it’s not a razor in the soap dish, it’s the key,” Calvin called as she passed the bathroom.

The shock of seeing Gary half dead in the bath was starting to work on her. Miranda punched in the numbers of Gerald’s extension. She did it again, pushed redial about ten times, her obsessive streak surfacing, thinking where was Wonder Boy, but he didn’t pick up.

She buzzed Delicia.

“Where’s Gerald consulting? I need him for damage control. I can’t get him on 724.”

“He hasn’t come in yet,” Delicia said like it was no big deal.

Miranda tried his home number. Got the answering machine. Tried his cell. Got the voice mail. She walked to his office. There were patients waiting. A very skinny woman sat with her arms and legs crossed and her foot tapping. Another woman scanned the latest Cosmo. Miranda introduced herself.

“Gerald isn’t in yet this morning. There’s been some sort of mix-up and I can’t reach him on his cell,” she explained. “I suggest he calls you when he gets in, to reschedule.”

“I’ve taken leave to be assessed and he doesn’t have the decency to let me know he can’t make it. I’ve wasted an hour here already,” the angry skinny woman said.

“It’s unusual,” Miranda said. On her way out, the woman handed over her business card.

“I should bill him for my time,” she said.

The reader seemed relieved Gerald hadn't pitched. The magazine slipped to the floor and she didn't bother to pick it up she was in such a hurry to get out of there.

Miranda picked up the *Cosmopolitan*, read the teasers on the cover:

"Botox Parties: Plump up your lips"

"The blood type diet"

"Interview with an anorexic"

She turned to page thirty-four.

"I see no reason to eat," wrote Lila K, "only to keep me alive. But even that's a chore. More than anything I want my hipbones to stick out. I would give up my life in a heart beat to be thin."

10:00 AM

Ella was curled up under her duvet, asleep. Stephanie had earphones in her ears, closing the world out with them. She was staring at the pressed ceiling. Linda was propped against the headboard of her bed, writing in her journal in small spindly handwriting with a tiny lead pencil.

"We'll talk around the table, here," Miranda said, moving a jar of dead chrysanthemums to the window ledge, and the stack of magazines to the floor. The cover copy of a *Company* caught her eye: "Why do you keep falling for the Bad Boys?"

"Too bad about Gary," Linda said.

"Shocking, wasn't it? Seeing him like that."

"When they brought him out, it was like watching a television programme."

"It was real."

"I know, but it didn't *look* real. It looked like TV."

"That's right, like TV," Ella said, her head drooping to the left, her eyes dull and hooded, a side effect of the ECT, looking as if she hadn't woken up properly.

"It looked like red paint spilt on the walls. It didn't look *real*." Linda kept on.

"Is he dead, Miranda?" Stephanie asked.

“No, but he’s in bad shape. He’s in intensive care. We’re waiting to hear how he’s doing.”

Ella asked, “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“I hope so.”

“We’re supposed to be safe in this place, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean, Ella?”

“If you come here you’re supposed to get better. People here are supposed to help you, right?”

“That’s right,” Miranda said, taking Ella’s hand, squeezing it, seeing a smile flicker across her face then disappear.

“If any of you feel suicidal, if you are even entertaining thoughts about it, please, speak to someone, a staff member, someone who can help you. That’s exactly it, Ella. We’re here to help you.”

“We can’t talk to just anyone,” Linda said, stuffing four fingers in to her mouth, chewing on the nails.

Miranda asked,

“Is there something I should know? Why did he do it? What was getting him down? Any ideas? Please, Linda, did he share anything with you?” using her best tone, gentle and seductive, wishing Linda would take the plug from her mouth and say what she wanted to.

“There’s nothing,” Linda said, pulling her hands from her mouth, the words tumbling out a little too fast. “I don’t know. How should I know? Why are you asking me? Ask the others.” She sat on her hands, aware of a dull thudding in her thumbs from having bitten her nails to the quick, angry she’d been singled out, as usual, people thinking it was her fault, that she should know what happened to Gary.

“I know you talk at night,” Miranda said. “I know a lot goes on in this room that I don’t have a clue about. After hours therapy that you do. Swapping stories. What about you, Stephanie? Anything? Or Ella? Did Gary tell you what was bothering him?”

“I’m scared, that’s all,” Ella said, her voice subdued.

“About what?” Miranda asked, gentle, coaxing, leaning closer. But Ella shook her head, looked at the table, scratched off some wax crayon with her nail.

“All I know is I thought *I* had problems,” Stephanie said, leaning back in her chair. “To be or not to be. I’d rather be fat than dead.”

“I don’t think he wanted to *die*. I think he knew they’d break the door down.” Linda said, pulling the blanket tight around herself.

“Aren’t you hot, Linda?” Miranda asked. On a thirty degree day Linda was wearing a baggy sweatshirt, wrapping herself in polar fleece, covering herself, making sure no one saw how wasted away she was.

“Seeing Gary like that gave me the shivers,” she said.

Ella went back to bed and curled up under her stars.

“Don’t look at *me*,” Stephanie said, twisting the earphones back in her ears.

“We should say something,” Ella said, after Miranda closed the door.

“What Ella? You think something’s happening? How would you know? You’re so out of it you wouldn’t know.”

“Where did you get the Swiss roll, Stephanie? I saw that. And the cream cake.”

“I saw it too, Stephanie. Under the bed. You think we’re stupid or what? I saw you eating the whole thing with your fingers, licking the icing off the cardboard.”

“Mind your own business, Linda. Anyway, what’s a bit of icing between friends?” she said, looking pointedly at Linda.

“Stephanie, leave me out of this.”

“You don’t think I know what you’re doing?”

“Cake, booze, what’s the difference? Go ahead, tell, call her and tell her you’ve been scoffing at midnight, tell her I’m boozing, go ahead.”

“It’s Christmas, for God’s sake. What does she expect, that we sit here over the jolly season and eat the kak they put on our plates? Please, the food here is disgusting.”

“And you, Ella, what are you looking at?” Linda said.

“Stop it, just stop fighting,” Ella said. “I can’t stand it, going for each other every chance you get.” Ella covered her head with her duvet, thinking the treatment made her really sleepy. They thought she didn’t know what they were doing, Stephanie and Linda and their treats and Gary doing whatever he wanted too, and who was it visiting him in his room the other night, late? Not even the staff saw the person sneaking in. They should give her some credit. She’d had ECT, not a fucking lobotomy.

11:30 AM

Miranda drove out of there, entertaining the fantasy Gerald had run off. There he was, in her mind’s eye, false passport in his leather bag, snacking and drinking a Shirley Temple on SAA, voted the best African airline by *Sky Tracks*, bound for England, getting his money out the country while it was worth more than the peanuts he was munching.

“Oh yes! I know you!” The security guard remembered Miranda from the party and let her through the booms. She parked a hundred metres down the road from Gerald’s house, taking notice of instinct, thinking when she listened to that voice, she was generally better off.

The gate was open. The garden was pretty in the morning light. The place was quiet. She stood a moment, looking across the lawn to the ‘photo tree with numerous pegs still attached to the branches. The fairy lights were still strung across the pool and a plastic chair floated upside down in the deep end. She cupped her hands on either side of her eyes and looked through the garage window facing the lawn. Gerald’s bike and an aluminium ladder were propped against a worktable. A golf bag and clubs were balanced in the far corner. Several cardboard boxes were filled to varying levels with newspapers, tin cans and bottles for recycling. There was a large oil stain on the right side of the concrete floor, an indication that his Jetta needed a service.

The Jetta was not in the garage.

Miranda walked to the house. She peeped through the lounge window. The room was tidy but not immaculate. Whiskey tumblers and some wineglasses were rim down in

rows on the bar counter. A crystal desert bowl sparkled, catching the sun. She guessed the bulk of the glasses had gone back with Jaque's Caterers. A damask cloth had been folded neatly and was hanging over the back of a chair. Cotton serviettes were heaped on the coffee table. Pillows on the couches needed a good shake.

Miranda passed the lounge and looked in at the bedroom. Sheets lay twisted and strangled on Gerald's bed. She could see his cameras, along with other paraphernalia, on top of the chest of drawers: his Nikon, the Polaroid, loose change, a lipstick, some instant pics from the fig tree. Where was hers, she wondered? She wouldn't mind having it.

She was surprised to see Victor in the kitchen, shocked at the way he looked, black around one eye, his cheek swollen, thinking that even in profile he looked badly beaten. She hung back, wondering whether to announce herself, watching him through the open door, weighing up what to do.

He poured whiskey sloppily into a glass, didn't bother with water.

She watched him down the drink, heard him whimper, saw him pick up the bottle again and pour another, thinking what the hell was he trying to drown out, on his way to getting blotto on a Monday morning? What the hell had happened since Saturday night?

She watched him break off a couple of hunks of French loaf, smear on margarine and slap on salami rounds. He kneeled in front of the open fridge, scrounging for what turned out to be a bottle of Stoney's Peppadews, chopped up a few and sprinkled them on top of the meat. He slathered on too much mayonnaise.

He looked at the sandwich, pushed the plate away, couldn't bear eating. What he needed was another drink. He picked up the bottle and poured the booze straight down his throat, feeling it burn the back of his throat, starting to cry then, thinking he should be at the police station, thinking what kind of a man was he that he hadn't been to the police yet? What good would it do anyway? It wouldn't help Gerald. Thinking then about Gerald and what had happened and crying and taking another swig and feeling numb, thinking he'd go to the police later. Maybe.

Miranda decided not to confront him.

The telephone rang just then. He left the kitchen. Miranda waited for him to answer but all she heard was the answering service. She slipped in quickly, through the open Trelidor, took the film canister she'd spotted on the counter and put it in her pocket. She hurried back to the car, her heart beating in her throat, wondering still, where the hell was Gerald, really worried now, and wondering what had happened to Victor, that he looked so bad.

She dropped off the film at Noye's Pharmacy, ordered glossy Jumbo prints, then crossed to Sunningdale Farmstall where she picked out a roast beef and mustard foot-long and scoffed it in the car. Comfort eating. Quelling her anxiety. She wiped her fingers clean with serviettes, saving Teacher's immaculate upholstery. She'd call him first thing, wishing she'd replaced her cell so she could call him now. She drove back to Greenside.

12:45 PM

Gerald's mother had visited her boy once at the hospital. Miranda remembered she'd brought him chocolate chip cookies which they shared in his office with tea. She'd made an impression with her blond bob, dyed and sprayed stiffly in place. Pert breasts matched a face that was too young for her neck. Miranda was sure if she'd looked, there would have been plastic surgery scars behind her ears. Close to seventy and still trying to be Barbie.

Miranda 'phoned her.

"I have no idea where he is," Mrs Edwards said in a plummy drawl. The voice was affected, artificial, superior. "He does what he wants. He's always been difficult. Ran away often as a child."

"Is there anything you know that might help locate him? Any close friends? Could I contact them?"

"I can tell you he liked to play this sort of game as a child. Hid in a trunk once. Fell asleep. We found him three hours later. As a child he worried me constantly. I can't

say I enjoyed those years. He was an only child you know, and such a worry to his mother.”

“I’ll ask him to call you when he gets in, shall I?” Miranda said.

“If you want. He’s a grown man. He’s always done what he wanted. There’s nothing more I can add. I can’t be responsible for him all my life.”

Miranda picked up on a steely quality to her voice, warning her off.

“I expect he’ll turn up,” his loving mother said.

Miranda knocked on Janet August’s door, thinking the hospital manager might know where Gerald Edwards was.

“I’ve tried his home, I’ve tried his cell. I’ve called his mother. Where the hell is he, Janet?”

“How about golf? Couldn’t he be playing golf? He’s a member of Royal Cape, isn’t he?”

“If you want to delude yourself that he’s playing golf, go ahead,” she said, “Without canceling his patients? He wouldn’t do that.”

“Miranda, hang on, he might waltz in any minute with some excuse. His car broke down or he had a flat tire. Some emergency.”

“When do we call the police?”

“Do we? God, Miranda, you really think something has happened to him?”

Miranda *wanted* him to be golfing. She didn’t want to entertain the ugly thoughts crowding into her head, but she’d seen the Pings in his garage.

“Miranda, tell you what, I’ll phone his family. I’ll speak to Ian. Let’s not jump the gun here, okay?”

“I hope you’re right, Janet. Where is De Kock anyway? He should handle this.”

“Who knows where he buggers off to during the day. I heard the tyres screeching out the drive earlier. I don’t even think he knows about Gary Smith.”

2:00 PM

“I love this clay,” Ella said, molding and rolling and playing with the clay and not making anything in particular, just enjoying the freedom of squashing and feeling and having fun.

Miranda said, “Here, dip your fingers in the water. You need to soften that lump a bit.”

Stephanie said, “Me too, I love this clay. You know, when I get out of here I might even take up ceramics.”

“The figures you make are beautiful. Earth mothers.” Miranda complimented her style.

“I was thinking of making bowls. I like the hand made look of the pinch technique. My figures are all fat. What’s beautiful about that?”

“They’re round. They’re fertile. That’s the way I see them. The arms are open, like Jesus on the cross, or a mother ready to embrace her child. There’s something vulnerable and lovely about your figures.”

Linda said, “I hate this clay. I can’t touch it,” pushing the chunk away, wiping her hands on her apron. “Take it. I can’t do it.”

“You *can* do this, Linda.”

“If you make me do it, Miranda, I’m going to scream. Don’t force me to do it,” she said, her voice quivering. “How can we sit here and do clay anyway, with Gary in the hospital, as if it never happened.”

“Okay, Linda, it’s okay,” Miranda said, thinking the tears would turn to hysteria and she didn’t need extra hassles, her mind on Gerald, worrying about him, feeling anxious about Victor.

“Gary’s going to be fine. It was a shock, what he did to himself, for all of us. We have to go on though, learn from his experience how important it is to share problems before they spiral out of control.”

“I can’t do this, don’t make me do it.”

“Linda, what’s happening? Is this about Gary, or is it something else?” Miranda said. “What’s in your mind?”

"Don't make me touch it, that's all."

"You do not have to touch the clay," Miranda said.

"When I put water on the clay, when I squash it, it's slippery, wet, warm, like him squirting. I can't do it. Get it away from me."

"What age Linda, what age are you?"

"Four. Five. When he started. Thirty-five. In his office. The clay feels like his penis."

"This is clay. This is not his penis. In whose office, Linda?"

"He said touch it, c'mon Linda, it feels nice, and then he got hard and he made me rub him and then he squirted into my hand and later he made me take it in my mouth and I choked and he held my head down. He said it tastes nice, c'mon Linda swallow, it's good for your skin. Protein, he said. I spat it out and he pinched me, hard, in my vagina, and I bled and the next time I remembered and I swallowed." Her eyes were closed, sweat and tears mingling, her face shining with the effort. "Uncle Leonard did it once, and that night I couldn't stop retching and I told my Mom and she took my hairbrush and she beat me with it."

"Linda, open your eyes, you're with us. You're safe. It's in the past. It's over. Uncle Leonard can't hurt you. Linda, give me your hand." She was that five-year-old, Miranda thought, terribly sad, damaged, alone. "What would you like to say to Uncle Leonard?"

"You've killed me!"

"He's dead, isn't he? He can't hurt you any more."

"Yes, he's dead," Linda said. "But he's not really dead. When I think of what he did, it's like he's right here in the room pushing me down and I can't stop him. And there's the other one. He's hurting me." She wouldn't say more.

Miranda handed her tissues. Watched her calm down, wondering whose office she'd been abused in, what part of Linda's life did that come from?

Calvin opened the door, saying they were late for tea.

Miranda was relieved group was over. Where the hell was Gerald? she thought, missing all this, the drama, the breakthroughs.

Later on she put Stephanie and Linda and Ella in front of the TV where they yawned through an educational video on healthy eating. Today Miranda didn't mind. At least they were safe there, passed out in the non-smokers lounge.

4:20 PM

Teacher wasn't at the station. She 'phoned his cell but he didn't answer. She left a message on his voice mail. She tried Victor at his home. No answer. She called Gerald's house. No answer there either.

She went straight home. Skipped the tango.

She tried Teacher again. Got him this time.

"Can you come round tonight?" she asked.

"I'm in Jo'burg," he said. "The Garrides thing is coming to a head. We're arresting some of his connections up here. Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

"It's been a hell of a day. A patient slit his wrists in the bath. He didn't manage to kill himself. No one wanted to clean up the mess."

"That's rough."

"A young kid, nineteen, Gary Smith. He gouged out his artery with a plastic fork. What I wanted to tell you is Gerald Edwards didn't arrive for work this morning and no one knows where he is. It's only been a day, but even that's too much for Gerald."

"That's worrying. If he's one of Garrides' people, if he's caught wind of what's going down, he may well have flown the coop. A lot of people up here will be going to prison."

"After ten years at this hospital? Do you really think he's involved? The idea seems ridiculous to me, Teacher."

"It's good cover. Being a therapist."

"But Gerald? I can't see it."

Then he was breaking up, saying something about seeing her the next evening, could she meet him at Marco's? She agreed, saying there was more, she needed to talk to

him urgently, could he 'phone her back, wondering if he could hear through all the crackling, and then she lost the signal.

Miranda soaked in a bath, in blue Radox, trying to relax. She poured herself a G&T and ordered pizza, watched a sitcom till the canned laughter irritated her more than the inane jokes. She tried reading, but she couldn't get her mind off Gerald. The thought that he might be involved in drug dealing just didn't gel. She saw Victor's bruised face in her mind's eye and that worried her too. She dropped into bed early, and was so exhausted that she slept well and couldn't remember her dreams when the alarm woke her the next morning.

University of Cape Town

11

Tuesday

December 21

9:00 AM

Miranda picked up several enquiries about the programme. There was a request from the principal of Holy Cross Convent for a talk on Eating Disorders. She sorted messages on Gerald's spike. Patients and practitioners wanting to know where he was. Miranda was thinking she'd like to know too. In her office she didn't bother to switch on the extractor fan or the daylight lamp.

She returned a call from Dr Levy.

"Gary's out of the coma," he said.

"That's a relief."

"There's a complication."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather talk about it in person."

"This afternoon?"

He said two would be fine.

She tried Gerald again, but no luck.

She phoned Victor at work, but his secretary said he'd called in sick. She called his home number but he didn't pick up.

She dialed Janet's extension.

Janet said, "Gerald's mother says to go ahead and file a missing persons report."

"Doesn't she want to do it?" Miranda asked.

"She's helpless. Want's us to do it."

"What about De Kock. What does he say?"

"He was out yesterday afternoon. Hasn't come in yet. I've left messages."

"Something is *wrong*, Janet. You know Gerald's obsessed with work. His patients are pissed off. He hasn't called *anyone*."

"My God. I don't want to do this."

"What, call the police?"

"Where could he be?"

"Janet, what if he's in his office? Had a heart attack or a stroke?"

"Then where's his car?" she said.

"Right," Miranda said, paranoia making her foolish.

"Let's look anyway. I'll get the master key."

They fiddled with the key. Once they were inside, checked the room was empty, Janet put through a call to the police.

"They're on their way. Can I leave this to you? D'you mind canceling his patients for the day?"

"Sure," Miranda said, watching Janet, thinking she looked slumped, the day bringing too many complications along with it.

She closed the door. She was legitimate. She could take her time. She opened drawers as organized as the ones in his bedroom chest. She paged through files and folders and scanned some non-committal reports, outlining the sketchy treatment details of various patients. His filo-fax was on the table, but it turned out a straightforward record of appointments written in blue ink in precise, slanted lettering. It was interesting really, Miranda thought, to see how up his arse he actually was. He recorded everything from patient times to fetching laundry and neatly ticked off each item on completion. Cancelled entries were tippexed out. Miranda counted. He was fully booked with an average of ten patients a day. She wondered how he remembered each name? let alone provided personal attention to so many patients. Maybe he *had* run off, the thought of

more than fifty women a week mouthing off about starving, bingeing and vomiting too much even for him?

There were no personal notes. Nothing cryptic. Nothing to indicate his whereabouts. Nothing to link him to drugs, or Nelson Garrides, nothing shady as far as she could make out.

She sat at his desk, cancelled his appointments for the following day, and the one after that. He even had Christmas morning booked. She looked under the desk, but there was no drug stash pasted to the underside. There were no secret drawers. No hollow compartments. She lifted the fruit from the fruit bowl. One rotten apple ready for the dustbin fell apart in her fingers. She lay on the couch. It was comfortable.

Gerald's extension rang, startling her upright.

"Gerald?" she said.

"Delicia."

"Sorry, I'm a bit freaked out."

"Miranda, there's a policeman waiting to take a statement. In the non-smoker's lounge."

"I'm on my way," she said, about to leave Gerald's office, thinking that it wouldn't hurt to borrow Ella's file.

The notes in it looked meagre. A couple of sheets of foolscap, scant remarks in the same blue, spidery handwriting. She tucked the file under her arm, stopped at her den and buried it in her satchel.

Miranda described Gerald Edwards: "Close to forty. Medium build, medium height, brown eyes, straight brown hair, slightly balding, pale complexion."

The inspector printed the details slowly, in block letters. He asked for a description of the car. She gave him one. He asked for the registration number, but neither Miranda nor Janet knew what it was. They said, "Call his mother."

"You're a therapist here?" he asked.

"Yes," Miranda said. "I run the Eating Disorders Unit." More or less.

"How long have you worked here?"

"Six months." Give or take a week or two.

"Any ideas what happened to your boss?"

"No." Murder. Hijack. Could have been killed by a jealous lover.

"What kind of man was he?" The past tense disconcerted her.

"Immaculate and a perfectionist. Predictable. Works seven to seven. You can set your watch against his arrival and departure."

"And his personal life?"

"I don't know much about his personal life," she lied. "He's an only child. He spends time with his mother in Newlands. He jogs. I don't know if he's involved with somebody special or not."

"Thanks for your time," the inspector said. "And if Mr Edwards walks in the door, please contact me immediately."

"Of course," she said, feeling guilty then that she hadn't said anything about Gerald's relationship with Victor. She wanted to talk to Teacher first, not some arbitrary cop from the local police station, especially if there was some link in all this to Garrides.

"Was that a police van I saw parked outside the building?" De Kock wanted to know.

"Ian, did you check your voice mail?" Janet said, explaining the presence of the inspector.

"Why the hell didn't you inform me?" yelled De Kock, spittle settling on Miranda's cheek. She unsubtly wiped it off with the back of her hand.

"You didn't say it was urgent," he said. And while all this palaver was going on he was having such a nice time too, with the two blondes massaging him, in all the right places, with their breasts hanging over him. He'd felt rested, renewed. And now he had to come back to this mess. Taking time off wasn't worth it. Couldn't they just get on with their jobs, he thought.

“You’re supposed to let me know what’s happening in this place. And you Miranda, I’ve warned you about doing things your way. I leave the place for an afternoon and the place is in bloody chaos.”

“Alerting the police really was the sensible thing,” Janet said.

“What the hell did you do that for? The man goes missing for a day and you bring in police?”

“An inspector interviewed staff, asked about Gerald’s habits, that kind of thing.”

“My God Janet, why didn’t you consult me?”

“Under the circumstances we decided in Gerald’s best interests to act immediately,” Miranda chipped in.

“His family should deal with it. This is bad for business, Miranda. I don’t want police involved.”

“Ian, the man is missing for Christ’s sake. And what about Gary, is Gary bad for business too? He nearly bled to death in the bath.”

“I’m supposed to get upset over an attempted suicide? The only thing that concerns me is the possible lawsuit. These people here are all crazy. They’re bound to want to off themselves. Just keep the police out of whatever happens here. My God, you’re a bunch of bloody women,” De Kock finally exploded, like a grenade with the pin out, thinking he couldn’t leave the place for a minute, thinking he was entitled to a good time. He couldn’t hang around the frigging hospital all day. Just like a bloody woman to jump the gun, not thinking things through, calling the police at the slightest hiccup.

He didn’t want the stinking cops sniffing around his hospital. That was right, *his* hospital, he could do what he wanted here.

10:00 AM

Group

“What’s happening in this place?” Stephanie asked.

"I was supposed to have my session with Gerald at eight this morning. Calvin said he's still not here," Linda said.

"When's he coming in?" Ella asked, out of it after another bout of ECT.

"No one knows where he is," Miranda said. "I'm not going to lie. You probably know already that he's been reported missing."

1:30 PM

Miranda parked in a loading zone outside Noye's Pharmacy, thinking it would only take a minute to collect the photographs and buy a snack to tide her over. She looked at the prostheses and body aides and crutches lining the window, thinking that she'd never actually seen anyone buy any of them, but that was how the shop made most of its money.

She ate the chocolate and the packet of cashew nuts in the Constantiaberg parking lot. She handled the glossy prints carefully. They were mostly of guests toasting and eating, in suits and dolled-up, smiling and red-eyed as the flash surprised them. In the background of some of the pics was the photo tree.

Laid out in an album, these prints would have been self-explanatory. Gerald Edward's birthday bash. Gerald blowing out his candles. Gerald the centre of attention. A manic Gerald, grinning in a way he never did at Greenside. The host with the most.

The photographs that had been taken after Miranda had left were more interesting. There was a close-up of Gerald, his gap-toothed smile stretching across his face, his shirt unbuttoned, his tie hanging over one shoulder. And a profile shot of Gerald looking at the pool. And a pic of the pool where three pink-arsed men, whom Miranda recognized as the catering trio, were captured in the split second they jumped into the water. There was a photograph of Gerald and a young man holding hands. The young man was the waiter who'd served the champagne. In another photo, the waiters splashed in the pool, Victor looking on disapprovingly, sitting on a bench, his arms crossed, not much liking what was happening. Miranda guessing that was the way it was.

She stuffed the green envelope in her satchel.

At intensive care, she signed the visitor's book at the counter, filled in the required details and a nurse pointed out Gary's bed. He was sedated but at least he was off the critical list, the nurse said, and the chances were good that he'd be walking out of the hospital, faculties intact. Miranda stood next to his bed, stroking his hand. It was limp on the crisp sheet. His wrists were wrapped in crepe bandages. She noticed how close in colour cloth and flesh were, both pale, lifeless. She heard the click-click of leather soles on linoleum, looked towards the purposeful footsteps coming her way.

Doctor Levy walked over.

"I'm glad to see someone from your team. I expected Gerald. I've left messages for him. I know he's busy." His shoulder-shrug suggested he didn't believe that was an excuse, Miranda thinking that under the circumstances, Doctor Levy wouldn't be seeing Gerald anytime soon.

"I hate to break the news," she said, "but if you haven't heard, Gerald didn't arrive for work yesterday."

"Oh? Recovering from his party?"

"You were there?"

"Good snacks," he said.

"He was last seen on Saturday night. The police have been called in. Seems he might be missing."

"Gerald? Missing? I don't believe it!"

"His car is gone. He didn't arrive for his seven o'clock yesterday. He hasn't cancelled his patients. Had ten patients lined up and he didn't pitch."

"My God," Doctor Levy said.

Miranda hoped he'd fill the silence that followed, but he just looked right at her. After an awkward moment she said, "There isn't much to say, really. So what's happening with our boy here?" Life goes on. He knew it and she knew it. "I still can't believe he cut himself."

"I've got news on the blood test. I was hoping to speak to Gerald about it," Doctor Levy said, sounding distracted, upset, realizing he couldn't do that. "This is bad news."

“Let’s hope for the best,” Miranda said. “That Gerald will have some plausible excuse. We can wring his neck for worrying the lot of us.”

“I’m talking about Gary’s tests. Apart from the slit wrists, he was high as a kite. Blood tests came back positive for LSD.”

“No. Don’t tell me.”

“I’m afraid so. Not enough to kill, but he overdosed. Was more than likely hallucinating when he cut his wrists. He was definitely out of control. Gouging out his veins like that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Read the report yourself.”

“Three weeks on the addiction programme and he was off dope. He’d never been on the hard stuff. Urine tests proved it.”

“Well, yesterday he was stoned out of his fucking mind. Could be a problem if he was doing drugs on the programme. He’ll make it but he’s in bad shape. He’ll be here a while.”

“I don’t believe this is happening.”

“So soon after Cindy Fernandez. What was that, a month ago?”

“Two. D’you need to tell the mother yet?” Miranda asked.

“Not yet, but soon. I wanted to discuss it with Gerald. I can’t believe something might have happened to him.”

“Please. I need some time to digest this.”

“Look, this is just another day at the office. Rape, stabbings, shootings, a drug overdose, par for the course. I’ll wait a day. Say I’m waiting on tests. But that’s all I can do. His family deserve to know.”

“Thanks,” Miranda said, feeling scrambled inside, confused and disconnected, wondering who she could talk to about this, thinking it was De Kock’s problem but she didn’t trust the creep. There was Janet, but what could she do? Back at the car she fiddled with the tuner, looking for a decent radio station, one broadcasting music, not talk radio rubbish and the inane opinions people wanted to express. Reception was poor. She switched it off.

5:30 PM

The rest of the day blurred past, with most of her energy dissipating on worries about Gerald and Gary and waiting for Teacher so she could talk to him. *He* was the one she needed to talk to.

Miranda 'phoned Victor's firm. He'd called in sick.

She tried his home 'phone: "Victor, if you're there, pick up the 'Phone." She tried again. "Victor, I need to talk to you. Please call me."

8:40 PM

Teacher parked his bike on the pavement outside Marco's.

"I'm late," he said.

"You are," Miranda said.

"Bloody paperwork. I missed you." He leaned over, kissed her. Didn't say much.

She said, "I went around there yesterday lunch time, to Gerald's house."

"What for?"

"I would have told you last night but we kept breaking up. Victor King was there, standing at the kitchen counter, his face beaten up, standing in his underwear. I didn't know what to do. There was a film canister on the table. When he left the kitchen I nicked it and had the photos developed. Here."

Teacher looked through the prints. Raised his eyebrow at a couple of them. commented that Gerald looked as if he was having a good time. He said he'd check it out, but from what he could see it was just a bunch of men enjoying each other's company.

“D’you mind if I hang on to this one?” he asked.

“Go ahead, take it,” she said, looking at the pic of Gerald and Victor. “From what I can make out they had an affair and Victor was pretty cut up that Gerald lost interest.”

“Isn’t it unethical, to have a relationship with the father of a patient?”

“Absolutely. But anything is possible.”

“Would be worse if he was involved with one of his *patients*.”

“It happened once, apparently. He married a young woman under his care. He terminated therapy when he realized he was in love with her. The marriage didn’t last.”

“Maybe this is why,” he said, looking at the photograph of the two men kissing. “He’s showing his true colours.”

“And I can’t talk to De Kock about it. I can’t trust him to do what’s right. He’s borderline. He’s irrational. And I still can’t believe Gerald could be involved with drugs.”

“With Garrides? You said it Miranda, anything is possible. Look, I’m asking you, keep a low profile. Don’t do anything more on your own.”

“Teacher, you pulled me in, gave me the community whistleblower bullshit. The patient I was telling you about, the one that slit his wrists, Gary Smith. Well, it seems that he did it as a result of being spaced out on LSD. It’s my right to ask questions. I want to know what the hell is going on just as much as you do,” she said, her irritation surfacing. He couldn’t just come into her life and call the shots, as if she’d do whatever he said because he was a man, because he was the police.

He didn’t touch the chops.

The goulash she ordered was miserable. She chewed through a chunk of meat, like biltong. She’d eat anything as long as she didn’t have to cook, but this was too tough, tasteless. She pushed it aside.

Teacher pulled out a cigarette.

Miranda watched smoke curl around his elegant fingers, thinking he’d have to kick the habit if he wanted to be with her. Nicorette gum or patches. Some people stopped cold turkey, maybe he would do it that way. She ordered the brandy pudding and an Irish Coffee.

Finally he said, “Miranda, we found Gerald’s car.”

“What?”

“Yesterday. Confirmed the news last night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me first thing?”

“I wanted to hear what you had to say. Didn’t want to spoil the meal. I’m telling you now.”

“The food was the pits. And Gerald, what about Gerald?”

“Not with the car. It’s a burnt shell. Was stripped to the bones, a bare chassis on blocks. The parts are probably already packed on shelves in a chop shop. A two-bit gangster’s most likely trying to sell the tyres in a parking lot somewhere.”

“This is bad.”

“And some man on the street will buy them, knowing they’re stolen but what does he care as long as they come cheap.”

She hated asking, “Could it have been a hijack, d’you think?”

“That’s the way it looks.”

“Not sure?”

“I don’t know. Could be. I’m wondering how Victor fits in.”

“He’s dead though isn’t he? Gerald is dead.”

“Who knows for sure. Probably.”

They settled into uneasy silence.

The brandy pudding was sticking in Miranda’s throat.

Later, at home, Miranda switched on the TV. Some Big Brother idiot was lying on top of a blonde bimbo housemate, graunching live on national TV. She switched the TV off.

She did some tidying. It had to happen some time. Threw jeans and a crumpled T-shirt into the washing basket, hung up her jacket. Sorted the clothes she’d stuffed into the bottom of the cupboard. Her party dress was creased, smelled slightly of sweat. She’d take it to the dry cleaners.

She emptied her evening bag. Threw away used tissues. She carefully inspected her cancelled chequebook, making sure none of the slips had been torn out. She pulled

out the photograph she'd found under Gerald's bed. The Polaroid showed Victor standing outside some club. The street name, Verloren Straat, was painted in black on the curbstone. She could just make out the name of the club from the sign above the door, out of focus but legible: Angel's. Victor was pouting, ready to give the camera a blowjob. He'd inscribed the back, "To Gerald with love".

Miranda considered the probability of herself and the bathtub ring, spending the evening alone together, but she was hyped up.

She 'phoned Zoleka.

"Who goes to clubs on a Tuesday night?" Zoleka said. "And besides, I'm tired."

"You're always tired after you've been with your mom."

"Sitting in that back room. Things don't change. I can support her. She can live with me. But she says that's her place and she'll stay there, working for board, till she retires. It's not long now."

"It'll do you good. In town Tuesday's the same as any night."

"What about a good movie?"

"This is research. I have to go. Please, Zo, I'm asking nicely."

10:15 PM

A parking attendant gestured Miranda into a spot at the top of Long Street. As if she hadn't been reverse parking for fifteen years. They walked down towards the strip of clubs and restaurants that were crowded with late night revellers, tourists and local jollers. The entrance to Angel's, in Verloren Straat, was sandwiched between Myra's Second Hand Clothing and Denny's Café. The side street was dimly lit. Miranda turned her head to make sure a mugger wasn't stealing up behind them.

"What is this place?" Zoleka said.

"Looks pretty seedy."

"Why are we here, Miranda?"

“You’re helping me with a project, right? Zoleka, don’t worry. And look, that’s promising,” she said, pointing to an advertising banner swung across the doorway:

At Angel’s: “Cape Town Jewels - The City’s Most Beautiful Men”

“Could possibly be a Ladies Night,” she used an optimistic tone. “Maybe we’ll see taut triceps and six pack midriffs.”

“Why are they performing in a dive like this then?” Zoleka said. Miranda didn’t answer.

“Miranda, let’s give it a skip, this place is a dump. Let’s at least find a bar that looks safe. Go back to Long Street, try one of the fancy places there.”

“Hey Zoleka, where’s that sense of adventure?” Miranda kidded.

“I don’t have one remember?”

“You spend weekends in Guguletu. You can handle this night club.”

“I’m your sensible friend, right? Trying to do better with her life. I don’t like badly lit streets with no people around.”

“We’ll have a couple of drinks, scream, maybe tuck a ten rand note into a leopard skin jock strap.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Zoleka’s voice trailed behind Miranda as she headed through the door, past a bouncer, leading the way before Zoleka objected more strongly.

Miranda’s bravado faltered slightly as they tripped down a narrow flight of steps into the club, small and dingy. A neon Angel cast a pink glow across the bar. Dim light from standing lamps threw discoloured shadows, like bruises, across the features of the few male patrons.

The club was kitted out with a bar, a ramp, small round tables and steel chairs at various angles. Poles were set in the bar counter, set into the low ceiling. Miranda rapped on the counter for the attention of the barman, taking his time, looking bored. She ordered a couple of Savanna’s.

“Weird, that just a street away it’s like another town. Hip and happening,” Zoleka said.

“Most clubs look pretty miserable when the patrons are sober. A client jols in this place. I want to know what kind of joint it is.”

“One drink and then home.”

“I see your point,” Miranda said, her lower back already aching with the effort of sitting straight on the stool.

The club filled slowly, mainly with single men, eyeing each other out, flirting and flaunting, trying their luck at picking up dubious one night stands, but not with the few single women in the place.

Close to eleven a spot landed a circle of light on the ramp and a tall bottle-blonde parted the curtain, walking onto the narrow stage, getting everyone’s attention with her false eyelashes and lots of lipstick. All gold and glitter, brown legs balancing on stiletto heels, she belted out a James Bond movie theme song, the Tina Turner number ‘Gold Finger’. She unravelled from gold lame cling wrap, letting the length of fabric fall to the floor. Miranda watched her tight arse, firm thighs, well-defined calves. She strutted on twelve centimetre heels, gyrated around the pole, keeping her knees close, bending forward with her back to the audience, wiggling her arse.

She was camp and sexy, tassels dangling from two neat handfuls of tit. Miranda sitting there, keeping her back straight, thinking real woman couldn’t compete with cellulite free thighs. The real thing had dimpled legs and a wobbly bum. Dangly bits tucked away in gold panties, tight and smooth across her crotch. Miranda thinking the cabaret was worth the covert charge.

There was Gold, Ruby, Sapphire, Tiger’s Eye and Diamond, the most beautiful men in Cape Town turning out gorgeous.

Emerald moved along the ramp, her shapely figure in a sheath, low-cut and figure hugging, sequins glittering, the pattern of leaves and vines snaking around unnatural curves.

Ella's Mother's evening gown showing off silicone assets, or socks, the truth hitting Miranda after the opening bars, that it was Victor in the dress.

His body looked damn good. He'd tried with his face. Foundation lightened his olive complexion, covering his acne scars and the bruises. He must have used a lot of make-up to get his skin flawless. Bold eyeliner and green and silver eyeshadow emphasised the jade of his eyes. His lips, glossy and scarlet, mimed the Weather Girls, "It's Raining Men".

Miranda liked the song. She watched, transfixed at the change, thinking it must be a relief not to have to learn the words.

Victor looked at the audience.

Miranda raised her glass, toasting Cheers.

He nearly tumbled off his heels, thinking what the hell was she doing here, suddenly frantic that she'd recognize him, realizing she *did*, wondering what else she knew, his lips unsynchronised with the words belting from the music system. He minced backwards and disappeared through the curtain.

Miranda said, "Zoleka, I'm going back stage. D'you want to come?"

Zoleka shook her head.

"Entertaining as the show is, I'm tired. I'll stay here. Watch the last bit."

Miranda pushed through the stage door to the left of the ramp, walking towards the dressing room. In the bright light she saw a couple of queens past their heyday, Old Gold, Faded Ruby, slouching half-naked in stockings, their wigs on stands next to them, their own hair slicked back.

"Not a bad show tonight." Gold took a drag on a Gitane.

Ruby said, "I want to sing my own stuff. Why is it we have to mime the words? I'm sick of it."

"It's the way it is. It's fun remember?"

"I want it to be more meaningful. Not just about drag."

Gold noticed Miranda.

"Did you enjoy the show?" she asked, wondering what this chick was hanging about for.

“Very professional,” Miranda said, watching Gold peel away false lashes, wiping away rouge and eye-shadow, looking at the hands and the hair on the back of them, thinking how masculine they were.

“Who are you looking for, sweetheart?”

“The performer in green. Emerald is it? Stunning dress, like a Sparkle sweet.”

“Vicky?”

“That’s her. I loved her dress.”

“Gone, like a bat out of hell.” Gold turned back to the mirror and wiped off her eyebrows. She cleansed her face with coldcream, watched Miranda leave the dressing room, thinking what the hell, there was no security in this place anyway, people coming and going as they pleased, not even asking for autographs, thinking it was time they took the show to a better quality place. So what that the girls were older, they still had damn gorgeous bodies. They could make it, she knew it, if only they had the chance.

2:00 AM

Miranda couldn’t sleep. She made coffee. She straightened the duvet, propped herself against pillows. She opened the file she’d borrowed from Gerald’s cabinet. She scanned the notes carefully, sketchy notes that didn’t tell much that she didn’t already know. No family history. No indication that Victor was a cross-dresser. He knew didn’t he? How was she supposed to do her job when she didn’t have a decent background?

She hauled out her Diagnostic Manual, Volume 4, read the few lines it delivered so clinically. She looked for Advanced Psychology of Modern Man in the bookshelf. It wasn’t there. She remembered it was role-playing a doorstep. She wiped off the dust and hauled the manual back to bed, found what she was looking for on page two hundred and forty nine.

Cross-dressing was considered a victimless sexual variant characterized by a person’s choice to dress in clothes of the opposite sex and deriving sexual pleasure from doing so. Cross dressers were described as almost exclusively heterosexual with generally

no desire on the part of the patient to change anatomically. If there was a dilemma about gender, that's when it became Transvestism.

It was close to three in the morning. Miranda's head buzzed. She couldn't switch off. She watched CNN until Business Report bored her to sleep.

A few hours later she woke with the remote control still in her hand and the We Are One channel theme song in her ears. In the space between dreaming and waking, she watched a Crime Stop advert for missing persons. A presenter, glamorous in a leopard skin top and hair extensions, described a missing father who'd left his home in Phillipi to go to his furniture removal job. Two weeks later he still hadn't arrived at work. And a little girl, seven years old, had been snatched from her bedroom in an Ocean View flat, three nights ago, while her parents slept. Her photo was out of focus.

12

Wednesday

December 22

7:30 AM

Miranda borrowed the early edition *Cape Argus* from Zoleka's welcome mat. She scanned the headlines over a mug of black coffee and a bowl of High Fibre Bran, determined to give her bod a break from saturated fat and carbohydrates, thinking at the same time though, about the Whispers in her bag, for later.

There it was, a page seven report, between Pick 'n Pay and Shoprite specials:
 "Missing man's vehicle Found at Strandfontein"

Relatives of missing Claremont man Gerald Edwards confirmed that his vehicle has been recovered from Strandfontein beach parking lot. His mother, Priscilla Edwards, confirmed that the white Jetta, registration no CA EDU, was found burnt out. Residents apparently reported a flaming car to the Mitchell's Plain Fire Department who doused the blaze before midnight on Monday. Police have been unable to find clues to Edwards' whereabouts or to what might have happened to him. Police conducted an unsuccessful search of the beach area from Strandfontein to Swartklip. Anyone with information is requested to call Detective Donaldson on 082 335 8756."

Twelve lines of copy. No picture. Gerald Edwards was a case number in a missing persons' file. One of hundreds. Miranda knew no one took your car in this city and let you live, thinking that in all likelihood, if you got hijacked, you'd end up shot execution-style. It was easier for criminals to pop the victim so they didn't worry about identity parades in the unlikely event of ever getting caught. Better to drive a beat up car like hers, but even that hadn't prevented its reduction to a statistic. There hadn't been a word on the Mazda and she doubted there would be. Old Mutual would pay out in about six weeks but she'd still need a loan for another second hand job. She dreaded the prospect of dealing with bureaucracy.

She scanned other articles in the paper:

“Ten year old in custody for rape”

“Durban Bollywood Concert Bomb scare”

“Violent deaths in South Africa top the charts”

She sighed, wondering how Gerald Edwards fitted into the mess.

Enough. She chucked the paper in recycling. She left for work, late again.

10:00 AM

Group

Miranda noticed that Ella was wearing the same dirty pyjamas she'd had on for days, that she looked tired and vulnerable.

Stephanie looked bigger than ever in the kaftan, and bloated.

Linda worked her thumbnail.

Stephanie said, “This place is a mess. Miranda, where have you been? We've been waiting for you.”

“How do you feel when you have to wait, Stephanie? When someone's late?”

“Like I'm not important. Like whatever that person is doing is more important than being on time for me.”

“Did anyone keep you waiting as a child?”

“My mother used to forget me at school. She wouldn't collect me from aftercare. Sometimes the teacher would have to call and remind her. It was like she didn't want to be with me. Actually she said so, that she couldn't stand my fat, that I was a slug, that I wasn't the daughter she deserved.”

“You know today it's not that I didn't want to be on time, you are important, it's been a helluva couple of days, you know that. Gerald is still missing. I've been on the 'phone again, canceling patients. It all takes time.”

“But what happens to us? None of us have had our sessions. There's no one to talk to.”

“Natasha's on duty today,” Miranda said, noticing the looks that shot from one to the other. “And Calvin's taking meals today.”

“Calvin's so pissed off it's hard to talk to him,” Stephanie said.

“Have you spoken to the dietician?” Stephanie asked.

“About your weight?”

"That's right. I'm fed up. I look worse than when I came in."

"Stephanie, your body's getting used to a new regime, you may well be retaining water. She said that could account for the weight gain. She says once your body stops holding on to whatever you put in it, the weight will come off."

Miranda said, "Linda, please, take your fingers out of your mouth. That thumb of yours was bleeding the other day. Give it a break."

"So what, who cares," Linda said, thinking this was the biggest farce there was.

"Isn't it painful?"

"Are you joking? After what I've done to myself, you're worrying about my cuticles?"

"Linda, it's another habit, an addiction. Biting your nails instead of talking about the feelings. How about doing that?"

"Stephanie is right," Linda said, looking at her, defiance in the lift of her chin. "These last few days have been dismal. We're not getting the help we need. Without Gerald, without Natasha."

"It's about the work you do yourselves. There's no magic fix, no magic person that can put it all right. How about right now, take the opportunity to look at some of your own issues."

"At least Natasha understands," Linda said under her breath. "Whatever else she is, she understands."

11:15 AM

Victor was pacing outside Miranda's door, keeping a lid on his agitation, thinking where was she? He wanted to get this over with, thinking he hadn't seen Ella for days, hoping she was okay.

Miranda thought his face looked sore. The bruise under his left eye was healing. The skin on his cheek though, was blotchy, shiny, it looked tight, as if the skin would burst if she touched it.

"I need to talk," he said.

"Come in," Miranda said, unlocking the office, going into the darkness, pleased that he'd come to see her, after all the messages she'd left him.

She switched on the light.

Victor looked both ways down the empty passage before following her in, clutching his briefcase, holding it like a shield against his breast. He pulled at his tie as if it was choking him.

“It’s not what you think,” he managed in a rush of breath before he sat down.

Miranda was thinking of course it was – he’d been in a fight, and he liked doing cabaret in a wig and women’s evening wear. She wondered how far he’d crossed the line. Maybe he liked looking good. Maybe it was for kicks. Maybe he wanted a neat vagina sewn into himself in a conversion operation.

“You have to listen.” He sounded desperate.

“Take a seat.”

“Through all this, I want to do what’s best for Ella.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“I couldn’t believe you were at the club. I shouldn’t have run off like that but I couldn’t believe you were there,” he said, fidgeting with his belt, rolling the leather in and out. She wanted to put it through the loops for him and tell him leave the darned thing alone.

Victor said, “I have to talk to someone.”

She waited. Not wanting to push him.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said, waiting, hoping he’d talk about Gerald if he knew something. Hoping she wouldn’t have to ask, watching him chew on his lower lip, wondering if he’d draw blood he was biting so hard.

She said, “I can get you a cup of tea, if you’d like.”

He didn’t respond to the offer.

Finally he said, “It goes back a long way. I’ve always loved the softness of hair around my face, ever since I can remember, and the softness of certain fabrics on my skin. Elizabeth, my wife, was fine about it for years until I developed a sense of style. I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be noticed, for people to admire me. Elizabeth started to hate me. She couldn’t handle when I went out. When she left I took more risks, even dressing up when Ella stayed at weekends.” His lips quivered.

Miranda handed him the box of tissues.

“You know Victor, it’s not unusual that men enjoy wearing women’s clothing. It’s actually common,” she said, in a reassuring tone.

“What do you mean, common? I’m a freak!”

“Okay, okay, Victor. Let me hear your story. I’m listening.”

“I dress up with my balls tucked between my cheeks. I’m a freak and I can’t stop. Every evening I come home, hang my suit on the valet and dress up. In satin and lace for God’s sake, the softer, the more feminine the better. I started to wear her lingerie, then her suits. I tried her lipstick. I experimented with makeup at her dressing room table. I run a law firm for God’s sake. And there I sit in my corner office touching ladies panties through my open fly.”

After a quiet moment, Miranda said, “Gerald knew, didn’t he?” using the past tense automatically, thinking, it was a bad sign.

“Yes. But I didn’t have anything to do with his disappearance. Everybody knows he’s gone. I know what people will think if this comes out.” He was lying. He could tell she knew it. He couldn’t help it. He couldn’t tell her what really happened. The look in her eyes, that intense look stopped him talking.

She asked, “What was going on between you?”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing,” he said, as deadpan as he could. “I’ll tell you I was attracted, I wanted something to happen.”

“Was he interested?”

“He was worth pursuing, let’s put it that way,” he snivelled.

“What do you mean?”

“Gerald and I go way back. He was a fat boy at Prep. Children teased him so his mom put him on a diet. She bought him a scale for his birthday. He was like a girl, soft, fleshy. His mother wanted a proper son. Pushed him to do sports. Said he looked like a pastry.” He leaned closer. “I have to explain, do you understand that?”

She leaned back in her chair.

“Go on,” she said.

“I have pictures of myself as a child, dressed up like a little girl,” Victor said. “My mother thought it was cute. She was right. I was a lovely little girl. She bought me pretty things and helped me with my hair. When I was twelve she called me into her bedroom and there, laid out on the spread was a girdle, we used them back then, and a pair of stockings and a bra size 32AA. I bought my first lipstick when I was thirteen and my mother helped me put it on straight. I was so excited I couldn’t do it properly.” He placed the briefcase next to him on the floor and held his hands up to his face. He pulled a tissue from the box, wiped his eyes, blew his nose.

"So what happened?" Miranda asked, thinking life was hell for this man, his double life, his secrets, that he sounded confused, sad.

"I was suffocating under my mother's pressure. I couldn't keep up. So I left, got married. I wanted to be a real man. I couldn't do it. The first time Elizabeth found me I was wearing one of her Chanel suits, in heels and lipstick. It was in the afternoon. I didn't go to work. She came home early. She was upset."

"Finding you like that must have been a shock."

"She could hardly breathe. She threw things around the house. When I took off the shoes she threw them in my face. I used to do it only once in a while, then on weekends but now..."

"You seemed anxious last night, Victor."

"I didn't want you to see me like that." He hesitated, sucked in his lips and sighed before he said, "Ella saw me, you know, dressed up. She didn't know it was me at first. And then she recognised me and she still didn't believe it."

"Must have been difficult for both of you."

"It was late, after a show. I thought she was asleep. I didn't change. Came straight home and made a snack. I don't always want to change back immediately. She couldn't believe it. She looked as if I'd kicked her in the stomach. Ran back to her room, locked the door. She'll never forgive me," he moaned.

"She can understand why you kept it from her. You can share your shame and uncertainty with her. Maybe it'll bring you closer."

"I insisted Gerald didn't talk about it with her. It was a mistake. And it was me begging Gerald to do shock treatment. She hated me for so long."

He sounded calmer, added, "This is confidential, right? I don't want people to know. I'm talking to you as a therapist."

"I won't discuss your personal life. I only wish you could talk to Ella about it."

He sucked in his lips again, not much liking that idea.

"D'you know anything about Gerald, what's happened to him, where he is?" Miranda asked then, an adrenalin rush warning her to shut up.

"I told you, I don't *know* what happened to Gerald," he snapped.

She took a chance.

"Listen to me Victor, why d'you think I've been calling you? I saw you on Monday morning at Gerald's place. Beaten up. Drinking. I was concerned."

“So I got beaten up. It’s happened before,” he said. “Cape Town’s a dangerous city.” He stood up then, sniffed, said, “I really don’t know *anything* about Gerald.”

She knew he was lying.

At the door, his hand on the handle ready to open it, he asked, “And I want to know, how did you find me? At the club?”

“I saw a photograph of you posing in a suit outside Angels.”

“No one decent goes to that club,” he said, hesitating, then he opened his mouth as if there was something more. He shook his head, took a breath, steeled himself against the real world, left the room a business man, a suit and tie kind of man, the gainfully employed professional most mothers wanted their daughters to bring home.

2:30 PM

Group

Ella said, “She was screaming at my dad, going all red in the face, saying terrible things, accusing him of going through her things again. She called him awful names. But it was me. I found it. I took it. I hid it in the Wendy house.”

“What did you take, Ella?” Miranda asked gently.

“It was floating in methylated spirits in a peanut butter jar.”

“So, what was it?” Linda said.

“Don’t push her, Linda, she’ll tell us in her own time,” Stephanie said.

“No, it’s okay. I want to tell,” Ella said. “Thanks Stephanie.” She waited a moment, chewing her lip, thinking how hard it was.

Stephanie was grinding her teeth, thinking Linda better not mess with this kid. She could lie on top of Linda one night and smother the sick bitch, lie on top of her and no one would even hear her scream. Lie on top of her and kill that whinge coming from her rotten mouth, that’s what she could do.

Slowly Ella started up again, saying, “I remember thinking it looked like something from the X-files, thinking that a foetus looks so alien. It was tiny. It’s eyes like a young bird’s eyes, too big for the face, if you could call it that. She didn’t want more children. I felt like it was my fault.”

“Ella, how could it be your fault?” Miranda asked.

“She didn’t like me. I’ve been a disappointment.”

“Is that why you think she had a miscarriage?”

“For all I know she aborted the baby herself. So she wouldn’t have more hassles.”

“So you’ve been punishing yourself? Starving yourself on account of your mother’s baby?”

“She didn’t want more children. Like me. I remind her of my father. When I hurt myself it feels better. Then I don’t see that poor little baby floating in the jar.”

Miranda cut in, said, “No, Ella, No. That’s not it. Whatever her reasons were, it wasn’t about you.” She was tired, feeling life was too complicated, thinking how twisted and warped things could be.

“You know I’m a mother,” Linda said. “Nothing I do is because I don’t love my kid. It’s about what happened to *me*.”

“Me too, Ella. Your mom’s got her own shit. Don’t make it about you,” Stephanie said, reaching up from the pillow, patting Ella’s hand.

Ella knew Stephanie was trying to help, but her hands felt disgusting, hot and sweaty. She was thinking she’d *never* get fat. She was *never* going to put on weight, thinking she’d hide her tea in her pants if she had to, that everyone was so pre-occupied they wouldn’t even notice.

6:20PM

The first thing Miranda saw when she got home was a Chubb Alarms vehicle parked in front of the flats. She ran up the stairs. The security guard standing at her open door assured her no one was in the flat.

“Burglary,” he said. “They’re long gone. Made a mess, though.”

Miranda flashed to an episode of Special Assignment where security guards, captured by hidden cameras, were rifling through a trashed home, stealing stuff left behind by the original burglars.

A Mountain Man was talking on his cell, his bike leaning against the post boxes.

“Chubb called us,” he said. “We’ve been watching from on top of Cinnabar flats. Didn’t see a thing. We get a lot of idiots carting off stuff in broad daylight,

packing it in a rucksack or hiding it in bins to collect later. This guy slipped in. Make a list of what's missing. Maybe we can track it down."

"Thanks," Miranda said.

"We'll check out False Bay station, Muizenberg station, see if there's anyone there looks suspicious, waiting to hop on to the next train."

"By the way, we found a baggie. Try hiding your dope better. If the police were here they'd lock you up, never mind the perp."

From the entrance hall she saw the state of the lounge, her life strewn on the carpet: books and magazines, picture frames and collectables, Christmas cards scattered about. In the bedroom were piles of personal stuff emptied out of drawers onto the pine floor: socks and panties, shirts and jeans, make-up, wrapping paper and photographs. The TV and CD player were still there. Her silver brush and comb set could bring in a few hundred but it was on the dressing table in the spare room. She righted an upside down dresser drawer and kicked a pile of lingerie aside, got down on her knees and rummaged around, looking for the pictures.

She called Teacher.

"My place has been broken into."

He said he was on his way.

When he got there he said, "Looks like whoever broke in was looking for something. Do you have any idea who did this?"

"Do you?" she asked.

"How about that ex-boyfriend of yours?"

"Why would he do this?"

"We should call the police," Teacher said.

"You are the police."

"I don't do burglaries."

"D'you mind staying a while so I can sort this stuff out?"

"Miranda, I'm getting a burglary unit over."

"I don't want you to. What can they do? You said they were useless."

"You know something, don't you?"

"I don't know anything."

"This is connected to Gerald's disappearance, isn't it?"

"How should I know? Really, I've told you all I know," she lied.

“C’mon, Miranda, help me here. Looks like someone wanted something. Or wants to scare you. D’you notice anything gone?”

“Not that I can tell,” she lied again.

“Jesus, Miranda, what have you got yourself into,” he said, thinking he should have known she’d get herself in shit, thinking if it was connected to the drug dealing at the hospital she could be in real danger.

“Excuse me? I don’t believe what I’m hearing. You’re the one that wanted me *involved*. Anyway, this kind of thing happens all the time around here.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it? Why am I trusting you anyway? From the start it’s been about getting what you want. How could I have been so stupid?” She heard her Father’s lecture coming out her mouth and she didn’t like it one bit, about her bad judgement, falling for the wrong men, not using her brain. “Shut up, just shut up,” she yelled, at the voice in her head.

Teacher backed off, thinking it was the burglary that had got her upset, thinking he’d make it up to her later, that she was distraught, who wouldn’t be, their place turned over, violated by some asshole who didn’t give a damn. At least she hadn’t been in the flat. Could be dead, otherwise.

He helped her stack books back on shelves. He folded clothes and gathered papers and swept spilled make-up from the floor. He poured her a glass of wine. He made a simple pasta with cheese sauce. The conversation was strained. She did though, apologise for losing her cool earlier. He said he’d stay the night, said he wanted to protect her. She said she didn’t need protection. She told him the photographs were gone, that it had to be Victor. He insisted on staying anyway.

“Can I join you?” he said when she went to bed.

“Teacher, I need to be on my own.” She was petulant and childish. For the moment she was ignoring him quite successfully. She tossed him a blanket and a pillow and indicated the couch. She heard him turn on the radio.

She lay awake a while, thinking he wasn’t much good in the other room.

She walked to the lounge, tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned, looked at her.

“Come,” she whispered.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said. He switched off the News.

In her bed his warm breath caressed her skin, convincing her to reciprocate.

13

Thursday

December 23

8:25 AM

Miranda slowed to five kilometres an hour as traffic inched forward at the Blue Route robot. She registered the headlines screeching for attention from posters tied to electricity poles, black and white and red all over.

“Man shoots brother in fight over pie”

“Police officer steals dying boy’s cell-phone”

“Couple kill daughter feed body parts to lions”

A *Big Issue* vendor ran alongside the car, holding up his magazines. A boy of about twelve knocked on the window, selling a tray of nectarines. The light turned green. Miranda turned onto the highway. Twenty minutes later she was at Constantiaberg Hospital, riding the lift to Ward D.

Gary was propped against fresh pillows with breakfast untouched on the trolley in front of him. He didn’t look at it. He didn’t look at her either, but he knew she was there. He reached for the water glass on the bedside cabinet, struggling as the tubes, stuck in his forearms with translucent tape, got in the way. The crisp sheet slipped from his side exposing the catheter bag attached to the leg of the bed, urine seeping slowly down a plastic tube into it.

Miranda got the glass for him, handed it to him, their fingertips touching. Gary looked younger, she thought, washed out, like he’d lost five kilos.

“How about eating your yoghurt?”

“Is it always about food with you? I don’t want it.”

“Then d’you mind if I have it?”

“Go ahead,” he said, surprised. She was here to see him, right, not scoff his breakfast.

She said, “How are you?”

"My mouth is dry," he said. "I can't talk."

"Drink more water, then. And what about your juice, do you want that?"

"Jeez Miranda, have you noticed I'm in Intensive Care? I'll have my juice, thanks."

"Have you spoken to your mother yet?"

"She's flying from Jo'burg tomorrow."

"I've told her, you know."

"That I slashed myself?"

"Gary, she knows about the overdose. She's very concerned."

"That's right, that I'm never going to be a doctor, or whatever was her plan for me."

"What happened Gary? Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"It's not my fault," he said, wondering why she had to bring it up. He couldn't even be in hospital without someone nagging him about something or other, first his breakfast, now this. "I wish I was dead," Gary said.

"Thank God you're not." Miranda swallowed, the lecture rising in her throat.

Gary was thinking he'd better tell her something otherwise she'd stay, thinking about the mess he was in, thinking he couldn't rely on anyone.

He said, "I tried out for Pop Idols. Didn't even make the second round. I chose the wrong song. I dreamed I could fly, you know, I dreamed I could touch the sky. My life is fucking miserable."

"We'll work it out, Gary."

"Nothing I do works out. I can't even be a success at suicide."

"Slitting your wrists is pretty drastic, Gary. And so you don't do karioki. Be grateful."

"Maybe if I'd chosen a better song, or maybe tried out for Pop Stars, then maybe I'd have got somewhere."

"Gary, what's happening? Forget about being a star. Where did you get the drugs?"

"I want to tell you but I can't," he said, sinking back into the pillows, wondering when Natasha'd get him more stuff, wondering if she could sneak it in here?

"You can do it Gary. We'll get through this. LSD. It says on the report. Did you bring it in?"

He sighed, thinking she wasn't going to go away, saying, "It's in blotting paper," giving her something. "It's soaked into cute pictures of the Simpsons. Pretty standard. Kids sell it at school Grade seven drug dealers sell right under the teacher's noses." He sighed, looking away. "You can get drugs anywhere, Miranda," thinking it was supposed to be more than the drugs, that she said she *liked* him.

"Was it Natasha? Did Natasha get you the stuff?"

Gary looked at his taped wrists, flexed his fingers, suddenly feeling that he'd said too much and he knew what happened to people who didn't keep their mouths shut. She'd warned him, and here he was blabbing like a kid.

"I don't remember where I got the stuff," he lied "I guess I thought the stuff would help."

"For what? Taking drugs helped you with that?"

"I couldn't take it any more. What mom wants. Wanting me to make up for her husband and the disappointment he turned out to be. Expecting me to be a genius. They were coming at me, all of them. Mom and dad, teachers, yelling at me what to do with my life. I couldn't take it. I guess I was sick and tired of people telling me I've fucked up."

"Gary, you just tried to kill yourself. Why don't you come clean? Somebody gave you the drugs."

"I want myself dead so what's the big deal?"

"You opened your veins with a *plastic fork* for Christ's sake. Tell me who's involved before anyone else gets hurt, that's all I'm saying. Before you hurt yourself again. You're worth looking after. Let me help you, is all I'm saying. "

It wasn't any of her business anyway, he thought, wondering when he'd get out of there so he could ask Natasha what he meant to her *exactly*. And Gerald, coming in to his room at night at Greenside, waking him up the way he did, telling him it was part of the treatment.

All he could say was, "Things aren't right there, that's all. At Greenside," looking around then, making sure no one heard what he said, afraid then that they'd find him, punish him, suddenly saying, in a panic, "Ask Linda if you don't believe me."

"Linda too? She knows something?"

"Why d'you think she comes back all the time? To Greenside? Did you think it was the therapy bringing her back?"

“That’s the point, isn’t it?”

“I thought we had something, you know, she *liked* me. She promised I was *special* and that she’d take care of me.”

“What about Gerald? Does Gerald have anything to do with the drugs?”

But he turned on his side and closed his eyes.

Miranda sat on the bed for a while, stroking his hand and he let her.

He was feeling small, thinking he didn’t mind a woman touching him. If he could bring himself to talk about what happened he would but he just couldn’t. He felt dirty just thinking about Gerald. He was glad the son of a bitch had disappeared.

10:00 AM

Group

“What do you have to lose, Linda?” Miranda asked. “You can stop. You can face the truth.”

“I can’t stop. I can’t face any of it.”

“What about your daughter?”

“Leave my child out of this.”

“She’s the one person you take seriously in your life.”

“Sometimes I just want to run and hide away from myself. But I only catch up to me. Sometimes I see inside myself but I don’t *want* to look. I don’t want Beatrice ending up like this.”

“She won’t. She knows you love her. She needs you, though.”

“But why should I stop? She doesn’t live with me. At least my in-laws come in useful. She gets good care. ”

“You should face the truth because inside you’re tired as hell. Aren’t you sick of the deceit? Haven’t you had enough? You’re afraid of putting yourself on the line. Maybe it’s time to do that.”

Linda chewed harder on her nail, lips screwed and tight, her thumb like a plug in her mouth. She pulled it out, blurted: “When I go to Virgin Active I’m on that treadmill so I can wipe it away and then I stuff my face with muffins and I buy ginger bread men for Beatrice and I eat them myself and puke it all up in the showers. Nothing works. I can’t get rid of the voices telling me I’m nothing.”

Miranda was thinking she didn't want to know about the gym. She wanted to know about Greenside. She looked at the faces in the group. Deadpan or just plain dead. Emotionally dead. Nothing flickering behind the eyes, lighting them up. Ella was staring at the floor, exhausted from the ECT of the day before.

"Stephanie, how about you? How did Gary get his drugs. D'you know?"

"I'm the outcast remember? I'm the Fat Chick. No one tells me anything. And I'm out of here tomorrow. I've gained half a kilo, can you believe it and I'm supposed to be losing. That's not what I call progress. I don't care what's going on in this cesspool."

There was nothing she could do with any of them. They hated being there, in that room. Miranda could see it. She hated it too, thinking she wanted to get out of there, that she wasn't going to get anywhere with any of them.

11:10 AM

De Kock started with his nonsense at reception, checking Miranda out in her tight jeans, thinking she was asking for it, wearing those pants cutting into her crotch like that. He wanted her naked, thinking about what he could do to her, how he'd touch her, how she'd lie there on his bed. He'd spread her, punish her, the silly bitch.

She wanted to get out of that cramped space, feeling trapped against the cubbyholes, wishing that he'd move so she could leave.

"I've got an appointment. I have to go," Miranda said.

"About the other night," De Kock said, "I want to take you out."

"You're not serious, right?" she said, trying to keep things light.

"Why wouldn't I be serious?"

"I'm not available," she said, thinking she couldn't put it more clearly without using rude words.

De Kock was thinking why did women insist on the hard to get routine, why did they have to do this, why couldn't they say yes graciously.

"Tonight," he said.

"I don't think so."

"I'll pick you up at eight."

"Ian, thanks, but I'm having a quiet night."

"No strings attached," he added, smiling, showing her he was easy, he could be friends. Wasn't that what they wanted? If she didn't say yes he'd show her, one night when she got home to that seedy rent controlled flat of hers. Could be anyone in that dump, illegals and coloureds, plenty of scapegoats for what he'd do to her. He'd use tape on her, keep her quiet, keep the screams in her mouth.

He wasn't budging from reception. He blocked her way.

She watched him for a moment.

"You're not going to give up, are you?" she said, thinking, well maybe it could be an opportunity to find out what was going on, surprising him, saying, "One date."

Miranda walked up the stairs, to room twenty-nine.

"You were very quiet in group, Ella. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that. After what you said yesterday? I think there's a lot on your mind. Even with ECT you know what I'm talking about."

"Like what?"

"Like your dad and what he does and why your mother left him. It wasn't your fault. I know about it too."

"Oh great, the whole world knows."

"Some men are simply turned on wearing women's clothes, Ella. They usually do it in the privacy of their own homes."

"But not my dad. It's bad enough he's gay."

"He's also your father."

"I've seen the magazines he looks at, men tied up, in leather with dog collars around their necks. They're all fat and old. It's disgusting."

"Some men get sexual pleasure from dressing up. It's not uncommon."

"It's normal, is that what you're saying? So now I'm supposed to tell my friends?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm explaining how it is. A man in women's clothes can connect with his feminine side, the softer, sensual, more giving and forgiving side usually subordinated to the tough business guy image. It's a way of

exploring different aspects of identity. That's not hard to understand, is it? Doesn't sound so disgusting if I put it that way."

"Sometimes he wears a gown and fluffy slippers. He likes frilly things. He's ridiculous."

"Women wear pantsuits and ties, in public, on the news, in meetings, and no one complains."

"I wish he wouldn't use so much make-up," Ella said, thinking she'd never get used to it. Even if he did love her.

1:15 PM

"Got something in your mouth?" Teacher asked, waiting for her to answer him.

"Banana fritters. From up the road. Lunch. Oops." She caught the 'phone in the crook of her elbow as it slipped from under her shoulder.

"How about I cook you dinner tonight, something decent? All the food groups. Something healthy."

"Tonight? Not going to work for me, Teacher."

"I miss you. How about later on then?"

"No, not tonight."

"I want to see you. We need to talk."

"Tonight's not good, Teacher," she said, thinking, did she have to spell it out? Irritated that he expected her to drop her plans. "I'm meeting a client. And then I'm having an early night. Watch some TV. I'm whacked." She surprised herself that lies were so easy, that she could deliver them so smoothly and added, "I miss you too," in a more gentle tone. She knew her anger didn't have much to do with him and it wasn't fair taking it out on him. It was true, she did miss him.

She sighed, trying again, "I saw Gary this morning. And I've been working with Stephanie and Linda and Ella. I've got to drag every bit of information from them. Sometimes it feels like I'm pulling teeth."

"Is that what's got you uptight?"

"I wanted to shake the secrets out of them this morning. That's not good. I'm tired. I'll call you tomorrow."

He didn't push the point. She wanted a night in. He respected her privacy. She wanted to watch TV, go to bed early, he could live with that. He'd call her later, talk when she was more amenable.

3:30 PM

Calvin knocked. He walked into her office.

"I'm sick of the lot of them," he said. "Using food. That Stephanie. She's disgusting. She's got self-control. At tea she put all her sandwich in her mouth at one time."

Miranda was thinking here we go, a lecture.

"The fasting in Islam is about self-discipline," he said. "This build-up to Christmas is a commercial racket. Stephanie swore at me. She said she wants mince pies. The Western way. I tell you, it's disgusting."

She remembered the month of Ramadan, how Calvin had fasted from sunrise to sunset, how he'd moaned to her enough about feeling faint and weak. For the love of Islam, he said, he'd do anything.

"Calvin, it's nearly Christmas," she said. "Give them a break. It's a tough time of year to be institutionalised."

"So, what should I do with them?"

"Calvin, give them some down time. Give yourself a break too. Just put them in front of the video, okay? Let them watch a movie on M-net. I'll talk to them later."

And she did, letting them know she was going early, that she'd see them for group the next day. She said she cared, that Calvin did too, that they should talk to him if they needed to. That Natasha was on duty that night, wondering as she said it, what the hell was she going to do about Natasha?

4:30 PM

A date with Iggles De Kock wasn't worth a new dress, Miranda thought. She considered a detour to Truworths, knowing that the shopping urge was a bad sign. She

was compelled to stick to her decision to see him for supper. On some level she was fascinated with what made him tick.

At the flat, she rolled open the sliding door, inspected the limp garments on hangers. She chose the navy blue Rosenwerth: elegant but sexy, clingy but not too provocative. She dressed carefully, a push-up bra boosting her cleavage, certain it was in her interests to distract De Kock. She did her make-up and put the lipstick and tissues in an evening bag.

She waited in the street, made sure she was out the flat well before eight so De Kock wouldn't come looking for her, contaminating her flat with his presence.

8:00 PM

He was on time. He walked around to the passenger side, doing the gentlemanly thing. He was doing this right, opening the door for her, telling her she looked good, which she did.

She was thinking he looked ridiculous in his braces and bright tie. Even the fashionable jacket couldn't do anything for him.

"Warm tonight," he said, taking in the mounds of breast and the shadow between them, thinking he'd like to pinch her nipples, hard. If it was colder he'd see them, like marbles, under the dress.

She sidled into the passenger seat, saying thanks with a tight little smile and he wondered if she was tight down there.

"We're going for dinner at a favourite place of mine in Sea Point," he said.

"Why so far? There are plenty of good places closer to home."

"We'll go for a drive, and I've made reservations."

"Fine, I like Sea Point," she said, thinking not to argue this early on, not to antagonise him before they'd even started.

"D'you like this?" he asked, turning up Julio Iglesias.

"It's okay," she lied. When he went on to Barry Manilow she considered suggesting he change the CD, but decided even that she wouldn't do.

At Sea point there were bright lights and open windows and people enjoying the streets, queuing outside Chariots, Giovanni's, Mario's, News Café, Daniellas.

De Kock stopped at a Main road robot. Miranda noticed a prostitute in a micro-mini and a leopard-print tank top. She was young and prettier than the others, waiting, leaning against a lamppost, talking to a black guy on the corner, either a Nigerian drug dealer or her pimp.

“Look at that,” Miranda said.

“Cute,” De Kock said.

“She’s so young.”

“Nobody cares,” he said, turning his music louder, attracting attention to the M3 like some stud trying to impress his date. “Me, I like them riper than that.”

“Ian, the robot’s green.”

“So?”

“You should drive.”

“When I’m done,” he said, paying a vendor for a bunch of roses in silver paper, passing them to her.

“For you. You like flowers, right?”

She put them on the back seat.

He accelerated, nearly knocked down a homeless man and his trolley piled with cardboard and scrap metal.

“Cool it Ian, I don’t want to end up a statistic.”

“Chill, Miranda,” he said, thinking who was she to talk to him like this?

Miranda was thinking this was a bad idea, keeping calm, thinking in a couple of hours she’d be home.

De Kock turned into a circular drive. He parked in front of the glass doors of the Regent Hotel. Miranda got out of the car while De Kock warned the valet about denting the M3. They walked through reception towards the lift, De Kock putting his arm around her waist, Miranda cringing from the uninvited pressure, letting his arm stay there, wondering how far she’d go before telling the creep to back off.

“I’ve been coming here for years. Had my matric farewell here,” he said. His date was a virgin, etched on his memory, and that she bled on the sheets had turned him on.

Miranda noticed his smug expression and it crossed her mind that he’d more than likely fucked his date in a back seat of the car, imagining a repeat of Cecilia-Anne, in the parking lot without her consent.

The lift doors opened on the twenty-third floor, at Windows. The restaurant was quiet. What with the gravitation towards the Waterfront, Miranda wasn't surprised. It looked old fashioned too. She noticed the slightly yellowed linen and dull cutlery. The waiter removed a reserved sign from a table overlooking the Atlantic seaboard. Lights, below and in the distance, like glittering sequins on an evening gown, stopped at the sea and it was hard to tell where black water ended and the night began.

"West Coast mussels to start, alright by you? And Simonsig Sparkling," De Kock ordered, thinking not so much of the other times, but aware right now how tempting Miranda looked.

He poured the wine.

"Here's to us," he toasted.

She raised her glass.

"So tell me about yourself," he said.

"I want to hear about *you*," she said sweetly, leaning forward, opening her eyes wide.

The waiter asked if they'd decided on a main dish.

"I'll have Wok Fried Fresh Line Fish, Prawns and Squid," Miranda ordered, at a whopping one hundred and twenty-five rand, "With the oriental salad and punzu broth on the side." She skipped to the desert page and her eye settled on the white chocolate tiramisu.

Go ahead bitch, De Kock sat thinking, have what you want. *You'll* pay later. In the Honeymoon suite. He wondered if she'd be impressed by the gold taps in the bathroom. He liked those, and the canopy over the bed. A mirror would be good, but it wasn't that sort of place. He'd do that another time.

"Steak for me, rump. And a bottle of Chateau Libertas," he ordered.

"I'll stick to champagne," Miranda said, smiling at the waiter, covering her glass with her hand as he came across to pour for her.

De Kock sucked the mussels from the shells, scraping out the bits of fish that stuck, with his fingers.

"My brother and I collected mussels at Fishhoek when we were laatzies, off the rocks there below the catwalk. These are good," he said.

"They are."

“Unfortunately my brother died in a tragic accident. Our house burned down,” he said, lowering his voice, playing the sympathy card, hoping maybe she’d feel sorry for him.

“That’s too bad,” she said, knowing he’d murdered his brother, reminding herself the man was sick.

He licked his fingers. He licked his lips. And he could see that she was enjoying the mussels too. And the wine. Her eyes had a softer look about them. He felt himself going hard. Glad the tablecloth was covering him.

“Where were we?” he said.

“I read the article in the *Medicorps News*. You own six hospitals.”

“I’ve come a long way.”

“You’ve made your mark,” she said, buttering him up.

“I’m pleased with my achievement.”

“I’m sure!”

“Especially since I left school at fifteen.”

“Oh, yes? Why so early?”

“Long story.”

“I want to hear.”

What did she think, that he was stupid? That he was about to fill in the details of his childhood, feeding cleaning fluid to the neighbours’ cat, and burning teachers for a joke? And his father saying you’ll never be a man when he peed the bed, beat him again and again for doing it.

“I don’t advertise it, that I only have a standard eight,” he blurted.

“It’s incredible that you’ve come this far,” Miranda encouraged, waiting for him to go on.

He was comfortable after half a bottle of wine on top of the champagne, thinking that she sounded interested and maybe he wouldn’t have to do her the way it happened with the others. He watched her sipping champagne, watched her mouth go greasy from the fish, tender and succulent. She chewed the squid and cracked open prawns and washed her fingers in a bowl of warm lemon water. It was slow motion to him, everything had slowed down.

He looked to her like an ugly schoolboy who thought he was on to a sure thing. She got the conversation back on track, saying, “It really is fantastic, what you’ve achieved.”

“For seven years I slogged at Cape Town Station. I sold tickets from eight to five, perched on a stool in a booth, handing over tickets to commuters travelling the Strandfontein, Kayelitsha, Mitchell’s Plain line. I hated it. I always had the feeling I was made for bigger things.”

“Oh, yes?”

“The smell of that train station at rush hour made me sick. Mostly blacks not washing themselves. So I went to night school.”

“That’s commendable, Ian,” she nodded, condescending, thinking that she’d choose body odour anytime over the heavy aftershave she got a whiff of as he leaned closer.

“I studied bookkeeping. I allowed myself two rand a day for lunch and for that I could buy a bag of fruit. Sometimes I ate biltong. The only fancy thing I owned was a leather jacket. Finally I left the Railways. Can you believe I did an MBA part-time? Night school’s a bitch, I tell you, a person has to be motivated. I was. I was going to do something with my life.”

Miranda looked at him, thinking he had, hadn’t he, messing with health care, screwing with people’s lives, probably providing drugs to half the hospital population. Maybe even getting Natasha to do some of his dirty work for him. Fucking prick!

“Look where I am today,” he said, glancing sideways at his reflection in the window, adjusting his tie, pleased he’d taken the time to co-ordinate his clothing. He especially liked the blue shirt with the white collar.

Miranda thought the shirt was passé and the tie should have been hanging in a gallery, with all those eye-catching geometric shapes, not attracting attention around his neck.

“Pity, don’t you think, that there are so many sick people,” she said.

“Good for business, Miranda. That’s what it’s all about. Showing profit. Greenside will too.”

He leaned closer. His breath smelled sour from too much red wine.

“To a healthy relationship, Miranda,” he toasted, reaching for her, stroking the back of her hand.

Now, she thought.

“You won’t mind if I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“What d’you think happened to Gerald?”

“Gerald?” He looked genuinely surprised. “Your guess is as good as mine. I dread to think.”

“Do you think he knew something?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she said, vaguely, looking at him, waiting for him to dig a hole for himself.

Well, well, well, he thought, what was she up to now?

She took a chance, said, “*Something’s* not right at the hospital, Ian, and I wonder what it is, that’s all.”

“What *exactly* is bothering you, Miranda?”

“Cindy Fernandez on drugs right under our noses, and Gary, psychotic and slitting his wrists. On drugs too. They were both Gerald’s patients.”

“Don’t concern yourself tonight with minor tensions. Enjoy yourself. You’re with me,” he smiled.

She pulled her hand away.

“Now what did you do that for?”

“What? Ask questions?”

“I was holding your hand, Miranda.”

“Two overdoses in a month. That’s serious, Ian.”

De Kock didn’t flinch. He leaned across the table, whispered: “Give me back your hand and I’ll tell you a secret.” That’s right, he thought, I’ll whisper the room number in your ear, something for you to look forward to. He was thinking they could even do it on the carpet in there, it was so plush. She should shut up while she was ahead. Thinking he wanted her in that room, soon, silly bitch, too clever for her own good. Couldn’t she just sit there, soft focus, and listen to his life? Why did she have to complicate things.

He moved her glass to the side, slipping in the Rohypnol without her noticing, congratulating himself on how good he was at this and thinking how good he’d be later, getting it right this time. Getting it up, getting it in, keeping it in with all the Viagra he’d been taking. He held out his palm. He watched her take a healthy swig. He didn’t care about her reluctance. He was horny. He was in control, doing things his way.

“So tell me,” she said, feeling a little motion sick, like at the start of a roller coaster ride.

“Not yet,” he said, flicking his tongue across his lips.

She was concerned that the nausea at the base of her throat was a reaction to the fish, but she wasn't allergic. The dizziness reminded her of being sixteen, of the night she had too much Durban Poison; and when the same waiter come over to the table again and again, she knew something was wrong. It was like when she'd downed too many Baccardi Coolers at seventeen and suddenly the walls melted away and she was surprised she was still standing because she been leaning against one of them.

She got up, said, “I'll be back.” She supported herself on the edge of the table, worried she was about to collapse and pull the cloth from the table and the clutter of the meal along with her. She lifted the dead weight of her bag from the back of the chair.

He said, “Do you need help? Perhaps it's time to leave.”

“No, I'm fine, Ian. I don't want to miss desert,” she managed, hearing a voice come out of her mouth, knowing it was hers but thinking it didn't sound right, guiding herself along the buffet counter, walking straight, upright, feeling very disoriented.

Whatever was coursing through her system, he'd orchestrated it and it was acting fast. The walls of the ladies room were dusky pink velour. She thought this is what it must be like in a womb and she wanted to curl up on the floor and sleep.

Instead, she did what any right-minded woman would do: stumbled into a toilet booth, bolted the door, stuck four fingers down her throat tickling her epiglottis till she gagged. She threw up again and again, purging alcohol and mussels and squid and whatever he'd dropped in her drink, until bile trickled down her chin and she wanted to be sick just from the bitter taste. She stood up, flushed the chain, left the stinking cubicle, stumbled to the mirror and looked at herself through bleary eyes. A strand of hair was plastered against her cheek. She tucked it behind her ear, thinking she was feeling slightly better to bother, thinking that she was through with the undercover stuff.

She ran the tap. Splashed cold water on her face, her body on the verge of letting her down.

She stumbled past the front desk, smiled at the maitre d' and took a lift to the parking lot. She asked the valet to call for a taxi and the words came out fine but her tongue was swelling.

At the taxi rank Iggles De Kock grabbed her arm, startling her, then fear took her heart in both it's hands and squeezed.

"You had me worried," he said. What did she think, the teef, that he'd forfeit the deposit for the room?

She said, "I feel sick," and vomited again, the stream of bile splattering as it hit the cement.

"Hey, that was nearly my shoes."

"I need fresh air. Maybe the fish didn't agree with me."

He pulled her towards the car.

She tried saying, "You drugged me, didn't you?" but her tongue lolled useless in her mouth like a piece of driftwood on the tide.

Nearing midnight

The parking lot was surprisingly quiet and if there were people about Miranda couldn't see them and De Kock was pushing her against the car door forcing his lips on hers and she wanted to vomit.

"Ian, take me home. I want to go home."

"What d'you mean? You've been giving me the eye all evening and at Greenside. I can't ignore the look." She couldn't come with this crap now, that she didn't want him. She was going to get him whether she liked him or not. "I know you want it, Miranda. C'mon take a look, feel it, it's for you. You can't wait can you?"

Pulling her hands to his dick hanging out his fly and he touches himself and strokes the purple shaft as obscene as his stained mouth and she thinks he drugged her he must have she feels awful like she's going to collapse and her tongue is choking her but she will not give him the satisfaction of choking on his cock and she won't do it and he's nailing her to the car door his penis hard the fuck he'll fuck her but she won't let him she won't do it

No No No No No.

“This is what you wanted. C’mon Baby, this is what you’ve wanted all along and I’m going to give it to you.”

“No!” She swallows vomit, tries to scream. His thing is going soft and he slaps her and rips her dress and she wants desperately to run but she hasn’t the strength and he grabs her arm and pulls it behind her back and her tongue won’t work and there’s a scream waiting in her throat and it’s trapped and it comes out a moan and the doorman leans over the desk talking to someone she can’t see and she wills him look this way but he doesn’t and she thinks he can’t hear her screaming and De Kock’s hand is over her mouth.

“You stupid bitch, think you could pull one over on me did you? You want to know what’s going on at the hospital? No one minds their bloody business. You’re a bunch of shrinks and quacks. I’ve had enough of you lot. My whole life d’you hear? I’m a grown man. You can’t stop me. I’m done listening to reports. Why I did the things I did. I’m done saying sorry. Now it’s your turn. You’ll listen to me.”

Christ, she thinks, her strength seeping away and her tongue bitter with bile and her flesh loose on her bones and she can’t fight him.

“Stand up you stupid slut. All you had to do was get on with your job, do what you were told, but that was too much for you. And tonight, why did you have to complicate things? I was paying the bill, all you needed to do was lie there, you wouldn’t even have remembered you stupid bitch.

She tries lifting her arm but there’s pain and her hand is limp and he’s grabbing her wrist pulling and she’s moaning.

“Get in there. And your fucking boyfriend. Couldn’t keep his hands off Natasha. Hands all over her, sucking face when he didn’t think I could see him do it. He’s sorry, begged me to let him go, believe me he’s sorry. And she agreed the little slut. Get in there cunt.”

He shoves her in the dark and she's crying and she's in the boot tossed in like luggage and squashed in a cramped space and next to her she feels plastic and there's something in it and she can't breathe the stench of vomit on her chest and the smell of Hugo reminding her of Daniel.

She doesn't know how long she's been out. She gags. Acid stings her throat and her tongue is still swollen. There's nothing to bring up, not even bile. She is empty. She twists her handbag from under her shoulder and feels for a tissue and wipes her face. She's crying again, tears washing her face and she curses that she doesn't have a cell or mace spray. She's lying on plastic. The road is even and the car slows down to a stop and she's afraid she breathes breathes.

"Get out, bitch. It didn't have to be this way. None of you can behave yourselves." He wants to fuck her like he tried with Cecilia-Anne in the backseat when his brother made fun of him. He's going to do it right. Could have done it in the hotel, maybe even have called for room service afterwards, but no, the bitch had to give him trouble. "Get out you bitch, I said get out!"

He's sticking car keys into her ribs she's moaning but she's not moving. Her eyes are closed. He drags her from the boot. She's a lump of flesh and bone and her hip scrapes against the lock and her body screams a silent scream.

She was heavier than he thought she'd be. Too many god damned sweets. Flowers and chocolates. Dinner. That's all they wanted. He was sick and tired of the charade. He'd get what he wanted.

She's over his shoulder and he dumps her on the gravel in the parking lot. She hears waves, sees a construction site on the edge of the lot in front of dunes and she recognises Strandfontein beach and she panics thinking she doesn't want death thinking he'll rape her and mutilate her and hide her behind the cement bags. She watches him in the dim light pulling out the rubber undersheet, the Medicorps logo black on white and she's thinking he's going to wrap her in the sheet and she

decides *now* ignoring a tearing cramp at her side dragging herself up loping towards grassy dunes towards the sign that says stay off the dunes.

He hears the crunching of gravel under foot, yells, "Come back you fucking cunt!" He goes after her.

Sand blows against her face sandpaper eyes screwed and scratchy and she thinks this is make believe but she can't call the game off it's no hallucination no overdose no nightmare and she sobs and trips over a brick and grazes her knees and palms and doesn't feel the pain and she's scrambling a dune and pushing herself and pulling herself up by handfuls of coarse grass till she's on the summit and then she's somersaulting over over over landing on the beach.

"You think you can get away? Where d'you think you're going to go? You think I'm not going to get you? You're the same as the others. You're a fucking slut, a white trash whore bitch."

He's right behind and she's looking back and sees black and she thinks she's getting away but then he lunges at her dress and grabs her breast and she shrieks and she's screaming Get off me Get off me. He's on top of her gripping a fist of hair and she is animal scratching clawing biting tasting blood sinking her teeth into flesh squeezing testicles tighter harder De Kock squealing and she's scrunching his balls and he's bursting wailing and she lets go and he doubles over and she sobs and runs tripping into breaking waves where the sand is firmer under her feet and the sea is her ally and the cold is at her knees and she's alive.

"Don't think you can get away from me flesh bitch cunt," he's screaming, in blinding pain not breathing it's so bad and he stumbles. "You're all the same, you won't get away with this," but knowing he can't get her in the water and he sinks to his knees screeching in frustration because this was going to be it.

She's in the water. Her lungs are burning and she sucks in breath and a white horse comes at her and breaks over her and knocks her back and she gets up and she's

pulling to chest deep sea and her dress is a burden weighing her down and it would be so easy to go down under drown.

But she's pulling off the clinging sheath and the black shape is a seal around her legs and disappears circling under water and she's swimming to the black night and every stroke is an effort as the water gnaws sharp-toothed shark babies at her bones and her head is up and she pulls past breakers to calmer water. She's lifted by swells rolling and breaking on the beach and she's swimming to the night beyond the breakers to the black night and into False Bay false hopes false dreams where drowning seems so easy but she gasps against death. She swallows salt water exploding in her sinuses and she's coughing and treading water and turns to Muizenberg to strings of sparkling bead-lights on the shore that look as if she can reach out and touch them they're so close and she doesn't know how much later but she swims ashore. She pulls her body over the rocks at Surfer's Corner, fighting kelp arms, kicking against slippery tentacles wrapping around her thighs and the backwash threatens to keep her in the sea and hold her against her will. She pulls herself onto the rocks, hunches between giant boulders, partly sheltered from the wind. She thinks she is cold she wants sleep but she pinches herself rubs her arms holds herself.

She sticks to the rock a barnacle stuck tight on the rock.

14

Friday

December 24

5:00 AM

Miranda was shivering uncontrollably, her arms wrapped around her, feeling like cold seaweed tentacles. But the awareness that she was whole was all that mattered.

The tide slipped out and the rising sun spread a glow across the horizon. She rocked in the warmth of breaking day. Her body had been clammed shut for so long she prised open her arms and legs and aching, slowly, stretched cramped limbs.

The beach was deserted. No sign even of an early morning dog walker. She crossed the sand and limped along the pavement. A bakkie stopped at the Atlantic Road robot and a worker perched on the back whistled, called out Sweet, I want some of that, looking at her in her bikini underwear, his tongue darting in and out like a snake.

She made it to the building. Pulled herself up the steps, using the guard rail, opened the door to the landing.

An oversized arrangement of red and pink roses and carnations looked out of place at her door. The bouquet wasn't her taste. Neither the colours, nor the size. She plucked the card from the plastic holder, read: "To My Girl. We'll try again."

How had he organised the freaking bouquet since last night?

She was shaking then crying and she heard a roar, her own voice, like the rush of the sea. Her arms locked around her body, a vice grip so tight, she felt the pain in her ribs cutting out the chill of her skin, thinking the psychopath wasn't going to give up.

She banged on Zoleka's door till Zoleka stumbled out, rubbing her allergic eyes awake, wondering who was disturbing the peace at this obscene hour, gasping when she saw Miranda. She helped her friend inside, eased her on to the couch and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, and her own arms, holding and comforting.

"Miranda, what happened?" Zoleka said, looking at her, seeing that there wasn't blood, but that her face was scraped and there were scratches on her arms and legs.

"Bad date"

"Can I call the police?" she asked, gently, stroking Miranda's hair.

"Not yet. I really want to warm up, have a bath."

"I hate asking," Zoleka said, "But should you be having a bath?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to upset you, but you know, did anything happen?"

"I wasn't raped Zo, if that's what you want to know. Nearly, but I wasn't," she said, feeling surprisingly calm. She was relieved she was alive, that was it. "He would have killed me afterward. I'm sure of it. I'm lucky to be here. I'm so cold. Make sure the bath is really hot, okay?"

She brought Miranda sugary tea and Rescue Remedy and an arctic fleece tracksuit.

Miranda lay in the bath a long time.

Afterwards, she looked in the mirror and touched the scratches on her face. She looked at the scrapes mostly on her legs and there was one nasty gash on her forearm and she thought at least the marks were proof she'd been knocked about, by him, or the sea, against the rocks, she didn't know for sure. Either way she hurt like hell.

Later, Zoleka and Miranda circled the bouquet to get to her door. They left it on the landing, ugly and ostentatious, a personality-disordered arrangement.

"My God, are you sure it's from him?" Zoleka asked.

"The date from Hell. Who else could it be?"

And in her flat Miranda leaned back in her sofa, warm in the tracksuit, a mug of coffee laced with brandy steaming between her palms.

"You should call the police now," Zoleka said.

"I suppose so."

8:20 AM

First thing Teacher did was pay a visit to Victor King at his office.

The secretary buzzed him in, and announced him once she knew who he was, checking his ID to make sure.

Teacher noticed the tenderness across Victor's cheek, the blackened eyes. He noticed Victor trying to appear all professional, in his suit and tie, as if nothing had happened.

"Victor King?" Teacher asked.

"What can I do for you?"

"Just a few questions."

"Don't know what I could possibly help you with."

"What happened to your face?"

"Mugged. Cape Town's a bitch. On Saturday night," Victor said, thinking he'd stick as close to the truth as he could.

"After Gerald Edwards' party?"

"That's it," he said, wondering what this cop knew about the party, what he knew about what happened afterwards.

Teacher said, "You may know Gerald Edwards is missing."

"Yes, yes, I know. What does it have to do with me?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"Do I need a lawyer," he asked, deciding to play it safe.

"I'm interested in Gerald Edwards' whereabouts, that's all. Thought you could help. Get a colleague if you want. I thought we could keep this private. If you want to go through legal channels, go ahead. We'll have to take a trip to Special Branch, down town. I'm sure your firm can get along without you for a couple of hours,"

Teacher said calmly, guessing that the last thing Victor wanted was to draw attention to himself. The secretary knew he was police. Everyone in his office probably knew by now. Victor would play along if he wanted the mugging story to stick.

"Are you going to tell me what happened, Victor?" he said, taking out the photograph of Victor and Gerald making out on the bench near the swimming pool, throwing it on the desk in front of Victor. Victor and Gerald making up, all over each other.

Victor touched his eye, thinking this was it, he owed it to Gerald. And if he didn't talk about it he'd end up down town, police asking questions, his partners wanting to know what were the implications for the firm.

"You'd better sit down," Victor said, sitting down himself then, noticing the look in the detective's eye, knowing he wasn't going to disappear, none of this mess was, sighing, shaking his head. "They were going to cut off my finger for my signet ring," he said, not wanting to remember, with those boys coming into the room anyway, as he thought about what they'd done. "I didn't do anything. I went along, that's all." He was even relieved that he was getting the thing off his chest. "You know, I've been going to bed worrying someone will hurt me or kill me. That they'll come back and do what they want with me."

"What happened, Victor?"

"I 'phoned the police, you know. They said they could only do something if there was a crime," he said, shaking his head. "You have to wait for someone to get bloody killed first, before they do anything"

"Was there?"

"What?"

"A crime."

"I didn't do it, if that's what you mean. I didn't do anything. I went along, that's all."

"Went along with what?"

"We met in a gay club. Simple as that. Gerald fucked me the first night, in the men's toilets and we weren't the only ones doing it. There were used condoms in the corner of the booth and even a needle, but I didn't care. I wanted him to do it." He stopped then, shaking his head again, breathing deeply, trying to control himself, when what he wanted to do was rip his clothes off, scream, scratch his skin off, getting on the 'phone then, asking his secretary for coffee.

"Not for me thanks," Teacher said, watching Victor gulp the coffee, then put the cup down carelessly and spill on the saucer and on papers on his desk. "Tell me what happened."

"That night of the party we had a tiff and he asked me to leave. I went home and watched half a ridiculous M-net movie and then I *had* to see him so I went back. The caterers were still there but he was pleased to see me and after they left we went to Angels. You know, the cabaret joint in Verloren Straat in the city. We dressed in

evening gowns. Gerald liked to do that. We looked good. And then later, a couple of hours later, must have been after four in the morning, we picked up three guys outside the club. They were young. Clean-cut. Smooth. Dressed in black. Gerald said let's party and they didn't hesitate. Like they wanted action, they were ready for it. One said why not drive to Rhodes Memorial, see the sun rise. So we did and hat's where one pulled out a gun. We just want a good time I said. He pistol-whipped me and I lay there, next to one of Rhodes' stone lions covered in paint and graffiti. They took turns. On me, just on me. They tied up Gerald with his pantyhose and threw him on the back seat."

Victor broke off then. He was breathing heavily, trying to get the words out, shaking his head, saying at last, "They sodomised me repeatedly. I passed out. They left me for dead. It was maybe six, seven in the morning, already light, and I limped down the mountain, sticking to the path where I could. I flagged a taxi. I didn't want to scare anyone the way I looked, beaten up, my dress torn and bloodied. People don't understand. But nobody asked a thing."

"What happened to Gerald?"

"Those boys drove off with him."

"Has he contacted you?"

"I haven't heard a thing."

"Mr King, you're going to have to make a statement."

"I can't. I've done enough damage to my family, especially my daughter. Believe me I want to, but I can't. Whatever happened to Gerald it wasn't me. It was his idea. I'm sorry it took a wrong turn, if that's what happened."

Teacher left him in the office, wondering how soon the guy would admit himself to Groote Schuur, or Falkenberg, looking like he did, on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

9:10 AM

He checked the SMS.

Emergency. Call Miranda.

When he opened the door of the flat, Teacher said, "Jesus, Miranda, what happened?"

"I'm okay."

"Are you?"

"You mean did I get *raped* or anything?" she said, wondering from his tone if it would make a difference to him. He could handle anything, right? "He damn near did rape me," she said and filled in the details, confused about some of them, telling Teacher the psychopath had put something in her drink.

"I should have known better. Going out with De Kock. I thought I could find out more about the overdoses," she said, noticing the disbelief in his eyes. "Playing detective is not my strong suit."

She felt his fingers brush across her bruised cheek, saw the disbelief become concern, and she knew that whatever happened it would be all right.

"I pulled myself out at Surfer's Corner. I didn't move before light in case he was waiting to finish with me. I'm still cold, in my bones."

He held her and stroked her and said he was so relieved she was okay, that she should go to hospital for a check-up. She said she felt surprisingly fine, almost on a high, ready to get the bastard.

"You're going nowhere, Miranda," he said, ordering Zoleka to stay with her.

10:45 AM

While he was gone, Miranda smoothed foundation over her bruised cheek. She rubbed antiseptic cream into the scratches on her arms and stuck on some plasters. She was whole. She didn't need a check-up. She dressed carefully. She *felt* like she'd come off a bad trip, but except for her face, she looked okay.

Barely an hour later Teacher was back.

He had to break the news to her. In person.

First he told her what he'd learned about Gerald from Victor.

"My God," she said.

Then he told her Natasha Sweetie had been arrested.

"What for?"

“Shoplifting at Stuttaford’s. A lipstick and a scarf. Natasha’s been doing favours for the patients. Supplying cigarettes and junk food, and drugs from Prozak to LSD. Whatever they wanted, she got it for them. At a price. But strictly small time. Got the drugs from the petrol station around the corner.”

“And De Kock, what about that bastard?”

He said at once, “He’s not involved with Garrides. Nor is Gerald. We’re certain about that. Seems we’ve arrested most of the key players.”

She wondered why he dropped his eyes, wondered what the hell was happening now?

“Look at me, Teacher.”

He’d have to tell her. He said, “He’s denying the attack. Says it was a tedious evening with you at a Sea Point restaurant. You invited him in afterwards, you made an advance but he didn’t reciprocate. You were angry, felt rejected, had a tantrum, behaved like a wild cat, scratched his face. Says he had to hold you at arms length. He admits slapping you. Says the staff have been concerned. That you’ve been agitating staff members with your attitude towards their work ethic.”

She couldn’t believe it.

“Teacher, he did this to me. No one else. It was him.”

“It’s his word against yours, and with his lawyer sitting right there next to him, telling him when to breathe, there’s nothing we could incriminate him on,” he sighed, knowing how this guy would slip through the system and that it wasn’t the first time and so much for rehabilitation.

Miranda looked at him, opened her mouth but nothing came out.

She tried again.

“The psychopath tried to kill me. I’m evidence for God’s sake.”

“It’s not enough.”

“Teacher, look at me! My arms and legs. He hurt me, the bastard. What am I supposed to do?”

“We can charge him with assault. You have to know how it is, though. It’ll be months before a trial if you want to go ahead.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“It’s how things work.”

“I’m not a happy customer,” she said.

“There’s no such thing in this business, Miranda.”

She got up. He watched her pull on denims, feeling sick that there was no safe place, that he couldn't tell her move to England because it was the same over there.

"I'm going back," she said.

"Don't do that."

"I have to show my face, and I want collect my things."

"I can't stop you."

"No, you can't."

12:35 PM

"Where have you been? Jeez, this place is falling apart. A Mr Sugarman and his daughter are waiting in the non-smokers lounge," Delicia said, raising an eyebrow at Miranda's heavy base, thinking she didn't usually use this much make-up, but not asking what happened. The woman was a walking disaster area what with her car stolen and now looking like she'd gone through the windscreen or something.

"There is no programme. Tell them that," Miranda said.

"What d'you mean?"

"Tell them to go home, tell them there's nothing we can do for their daughter," she said, leaving Delicia some morsel to spread around.

Miranda sat in the dark a while, thinking what was she doing at Greenside? It was crazy. She was crazy. She could walk away. She didn't have to be there. With Linda, Stephanie and Ella all going home for Christmas. They didn't need her.

She scribbled her resignation and addressed it to Ian De Kock.

She walked down the passage to his office, determined to deliver the letter personally, make sure he couldn't say he never received it. She wanted to spit in his face, tear him apart, kick him in the balls and keep on kicking, do real damage and have the police say to De Kock, sorry, you're not a priority. She shook the locked door with a rage that could break the door down if she carried on. Tears pricked behind her eyes. She breathed the sensation away.

She walked past the dining room, saw Ella and Linda and Stephanie, all of them looking sullen and waiting for the food to be dished from the bain-marie. Calvin was at the window, staring into the parking lot.

She thought to hell with this, waltzing past Delicia, Delicia calling, "Hey Miranda, where you going? The Sugarmans are still waiting."

Right then she had to look after herself. She had to get out of there. She just had to before she started screaming. She walked out, stopped at the grass, squinted against the glare, standing a moment, thinking, what now? She heard the stoep door slam, turned her head. There was Iggles De Kock walking towards his car.

Some valet service had buffed his M3 brand new shiny. She wondered if they'd scrubbed the lipstick off the inside of the bonnet. He'd pay, the bastard, Miranda thought, walking purposefully towards him then, the letter burning a hole in her bag. She considered running at him, screaming that she'd get him. So much for the promises, the great plans, she thought, walking past the renovators' sign, catching up to him, watching De Kock beep open his penis extension and throw his briefcase on the passenger seat.

In that same moment she recognized her trusty Mazda, parked next to his M3, registering surprise, as the blast hit, that her car was back.