Hysterically more so

Hazel Woodward

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For Rachel, Sarah, Catherine, Elsa, Jeremy, Michael and Emma
and with grateful thanks to Imraan, Ron and my beloved husband
Geoff

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... "and what is the use of a book", thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"
LEWIS CARROLL

"We're a lot alike, you and me, I'm just hysterically more so."
SHEILA MAY

A NOTE ABOUT THE PAINTINGS THAT ILLUSTRATE THIS BOOK

Most of these artworks started out as sketches which I then photographed or scanned into my computer and coloured and modified. I know some are much more detailed than others, but in all of them I try to impose some sort of form on things that inherently have no form; that is, emotions and the emotional impact of certain events. At the back of the book I have referenced the illustrations in the order in which they appear with a title and a note as to what size each is, the medium in which it was created and how it came about. (*See from page 196 onwards*)


Staan
VAS
teen
die liste
van

1 never trust anyone over thirty (1969)

"The sword of the Word!"

A woman, shouting in the street. At first my eyes are riveted to the orange Brillo pad of her pubic hair glowing obscenely in all that blueish speckled flesh, but gradually her shape grows familiar and I recognise her as my sister. It's Theresa, the eldest. She jumps on and over the little wall in front of our house and stops on the verandah.

"Put on the whole armour of God!"

Never mind God's armour, I wish she'd put *anything* on. I'm shivering. Why is my sister naked and bellowing in front of our house at six in the morning on an ordinary school day?

Her hair's a halo of prickles – stiff, glorious, uneven – but not peaceful. Crackling and buzzing with static and madness, her words seem to pop on each excited hair and fizz down behind. My teeth start to jump, partly from cold, but mainly from fright. I'm standing behind the swinging sieve section of the front door and I pull on it with my nails to try and keep it closed.

Theresa changes her grip and holds the sword with both hands as though practising smash serves. It whines through the air. Ungainly circles, rustily patchy, imprint their lethal shape on my eyelids in duplicate.

Lina-Wena walks in through the gate, early for work. Even from where I'm standing I see her eyes widen as she lets out a deep booming shout.

"Theresa!"

Theresa turns, letting her wrists fall. Lina-Wena drops her packets in the driveway, lumbers towards her and wraps both arms around her, flattening her breasts in an unloving bear hug. Theresa wriggles but can't get away and the sword clatters to the ground. Lina-Wena lets go, bends with difficulty and picks it up.

"Next, I need the breastplate of righteousness," says Theresa conversationally. Lina-Wena puts her arm round her shoulders and leads her to where my brother and I are huddled in the doorway.

Theresa looks up at us from under her eyebrows, making them jump up and down. A second or two later my other sister, Jackie, comes walking up the drive, carrying Theresa's dress, a bra, two suitcases and one shoe. I'm too upset to ask her why she's back from Cape Town.

We all stand around, feeling odd. The atmosphere is overwhelmingly odd. Turning his face to the side, my father hangs his dressing gown around Theresa. My mother goes through to the kitchen and switches on the kettle. Both parents look old and worried. I go through to my bedroom and get dressed as fast as I can.

I have to get away.

"Oh well, bye everyone!" I shout. On the way to school I notice my tongue keeps sliding backwards in my mouth. There's a fleshy lump in my throat. I wait awhile, collect saliva in my mouth, but then eventually I have to swallow, narrowly taking my tongue in along with the spit. To prevent that, I start to hold it. Every time a car goes past, I leave it and grab my handle-bars with both hands. But when the road's empty my hand's back

at my mouth, hanging on to the tip of my tongue and not caring that drops of spit are running down my fingers. At first break I have to go home.

"Mom, I feel sick." She hardly looks up.

"Good," she says, "You can watch your sister. She's having a bath."

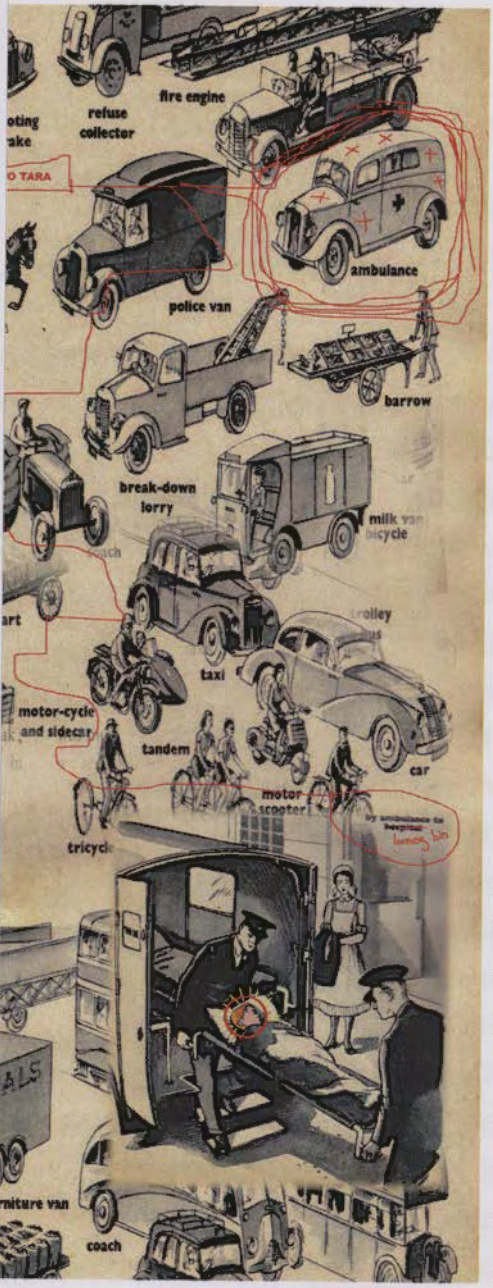
I don't like the sound of that. At thirteen, I've got to go look after my twenty-two-year-old sister? I wander slowly to the bathroom. There's Theresa, wavering on the edge of the tub. I don't mean next to it, I mean balancing on the edge of the actual bath, her toe-knuckles white with the effort of holding on.

"These taps won't switch off you know," she says when she sees me. She's holding herself oddly, as if her neck's bothering her. "The room's just going to fill up with water — it'll start running out of the windows soon."

"Why don't you sit down?" I ask, sitting on the floor on the bathmat after turning off the thundering taps. Slowly she lowers herself into the water, looking at me with wolf-shaped eyes and smiling a little. She looks weird, not like her normal self. She shaves herself with our dad's razor. Meanwhile I let my arm dangle in the water and wet my school-uniform sleeve up to the elbow.

By accident, she cuts her side, well below the armpit. The blood runs out quickly, a thin red line dissolving to orange fuzz as it hits the water. She sticks her finger into the blood near her waist and touches her cheek. In this way she paints half her face orange-red as though she were sunburnt. (Years later, I saw a piebald newborn baby. It's bipolar mother had left it out in the sun for six hours and it reminded me of Theresa's face that day). The razor drops and she's rocking, forwards and backwards, calling our mother, who comes hurrying in.

Our mom wipes Theresa's face on her apron. She holds Theresa's elbows as she sits rocking and helps her out of the bath. With difficulty we dress her in a kaftan. She laughs and dances, rips it off again. Then she races towards the front door. My mother grabs her and holds her as she laughs and wriggles.



"Harriet, go and phone your father. Ask him if he'd please come home early – oh, and if you don't get hold of him, go see if he perhaps caught the one o' clock bus," says my mother, looking about eighty-five, "and – er – tell him to hurry."

Theresa stands to one side, half-smiling. Her eyes, usually blue, are surprisingly green. Slanted and algae green.

Luckily my father *has* caught the one o' clock bus and as soon as he sees me he runs home. By the time I get home, red-faced and panting, he's on the phone. My mom's slips the kaftan over Theresa's shoulders again and soon after that an ambulance arrives. They come to take her away (ha ha).

Later, when the sun goes down we all wander outside – all except my mother, who's cooking supper, and Theresa, who's God-knows-where in an ambulance. My father takes the dog for a walk. I wait for Jackie and we go and sit at the bottom of the highest tree in the garden.

I'm vaguely aware that our little brother Craig is crash-climbing up the pine-tree, high up, probably level with the roof. Far below him, Jackie and I slide down on our haunches and sit leaning against the tree facing the garden

wall. I'm fiddling with a piece of pine gum while Jackie talks. I can hear small twigs breaking as Craig starts climbing down, moving lower and lower. I'm smelling pine gum on my hands because I'm rolling it between finger and thumb. Pine gum is one of those things in nature that annoys you while it's busy soothing you. We discuss Theresa.

"I wrote and told her I'd become a Christian," says Jackie. She looks down at my hands, irritated. "How can you stand all that dirty stickiness between your fingers? Anyway, so I got this long chatty letter back saying how glad she was, etcetera, etcetera and, by the way, she was coming to the Cape to see me. When I told Jakes – Jakes owns my block in Seapoint – he said it was out of the question. She was not allowed to come and stay. But, by the time I'd written to tell her this, she'd already pitched."

"Keep cavey for us, Craig," I say to him, more to let him know I've noticed that he's eavesdropping than because he needs to keep a lookout. I'm still busy squeezing pine gum. I have to keep spreading my fingers apart so that they won't glue together. Meanwhile, with my left hand, I'm gripping my tongue every now and then, and a hot stream of saliva is inching its way down my chin. There's this lump in my throat that makes me believe I'm about to burst into tears any minute.

"Craig?"

"Nobody's listening to you," says Craig. "Do you really think anyone wants to hear what you two've got to say?"

With a crunch of pine needles he jumps out the tree and runs inside.

I see him silhouetted against the front door and for a moment I want to run with him: I'd rather not know what happened in Cape Town. Instead, I discover a blob of gum under my left foot. I'm trying to ignore the rising panic in my throat. The evening's starting to smell like the chemist's, what with the pine all around us and bits of eucalyptus wafting over from the bluegum on the pavement other side of the wall.

"Anyway, she *arrived*. I almost didn't recognise her. She looked, I don't know how else to describe her, but, well, *glam*. She's never nicely groomed, you know, but this time...

earrings and this slinky blue dress. *Well.* She had a chap with her. Someone she's met on the train, she says. Anyway.

"I got rid of *him* pretty fast – one of those hangers-on, you know. Then we talked, about Jesus and that—"

I hiss through my nostrils. I have no idea what she means about "hangers-on". To try and cover up I say, quickly, "Yes, but how was she talking? Was she making any sense, what did you think?"

I fidget, restless. I wriggle my back against the tree, let my head drop forward, my knees bend out sideways. I wish Craig would come back. I'm getting more information than I can comfortably deal with. Jackie goes on.

"Look, I did find it a bit off-putting the way she kept confusing Jesus and this new boyfriend of hers: Kis, is it? Did you ever meet him by the way? Did you like him?"

I'd met him. I'd looked at the framed Bible verses he'd given Theresa, the bad poems he'd written that she'd read me, all flushed and happy as though T S Eliot himself were channelling through this guy. I'd tried hard to appreciate his poems because Kis was her first boyfriend and it was important to her that I accept and love him and love his stuff. I really tried, but to be frank, I'd hated them, especially because she couldn't even *see* how terrible they were. Moreover, he'd muttered something to me, something like 'Rooikop wat nie naai, se hare is gedaai'.* Redheads that don't sew, dye their hair?

What a weirdo. I couldn't work out why he was grinning while he told me this. I know I have red hair, we all have red hair, I'm ugly: fat besides, a particularly unlucky combination, I've always felt. But sewing? It's not in the picture. When I repeated what he'd said to Jackie she smacked me, shocked, but when she realised I had absolutely no idea what he meant, she explained, looking embarrassed, that the word 'naai' could also mean 'having sex'.

"Must say that's a bit off, telling his girlfriend's little sister a dirty little rhyme like that. You sure you got it right?" I had to admit I didn't. I hardly ever understood jokes.

* Redheads that don't screw aren't true redheads

For once Jackie didn't tease me.

Jackie was the one who'd told me about sex when I was about ten. My friend Cheryl from next door and I were exploring the veld near our house when a man came walking towards us from the dam. He had dirty brown hair and was walking too quickly and unsteadily to seem a safe kind of person.

Without any preliminaries, he'd shouted questions at us. He spoke really fast.

"Do you have any hairs growing yet? Hairs between your legs, hairs growing down there?"

I was brought up to be polite to adults and was about to walk towards him but luckily old Cheryl had more common sense and pulled me away and we ran.

The scary man used the words 'down there'. Why was there no word? That night my knees kept shaking and I couldn't sleep. Eventually I knocked on Jackie's door. She was doing her homework, sprawled out on her bed. She frowned as I came into her room.

"Away, away, you ugly witch!" she said. I turned to go.

She jumped off her bed and grabbed my shoulders. "Hey! Don't be silly, you've interrupted me now, now you've gotta stay!"

It took me a while to spit it out but she got the whole story.

"I don't know what to say to you." She walked up and down her room, giving me baleful looks. "Obviously you know you shouldn't be playing near the dam by yourselves. You've got to be careful of the types loitering around there. They can hurt you." She looked at me again, pursed her lips and blew air through them. "I suppose you really ought to go speak to Mom."

"Are you crazy? Forget it Jax!"

"Alright, I admit you can't. Absolutely no way. Don't tell her. But don't play at the dam alone by yourselves again, okay?"

"Why did he ask about hairs though?" I couldn't let the subject go. She seemed to get

muddled. First she said that Craig was a surprise because our mother was forty already. You have to be a developed woman to have sex and babies but not too old either. Then she said that people do what dogs do and that was exactly how babies are made.

I couldn't make much sense of it. I didn't know what dogs do. We only had one dog and she didn't do anything much. But I was sick of always having to pretend I understood the jokes about sex I heard on the playground.

"What do you mean what dogs do, Jackie?" I wailed. She blushed.

"Haven't you ever seen one dog wrapping its arms around another dog?" she asked. "And then, if you look closely, this pink thing between its legs comes out and sort of goes into the other dog."

I felt absolutely nonplussed.

"Another thing is, Jackie," I twisted my hands in my pyjama top, feeling embarrassed, "What's the word for down there? The front part. What do you call it?"

She turned back to her homework.

"Front bottom, I think," she muttered.

Even more recently an older girl had grabbed me in the cloakroom at school. She'd held my arm and whispered into my ear. I kept trying to pull away while she whispered because her breath was hot and she was wetting my ear. She told me that men have a sticky-out kind of thingie in their pants and we've got holes. When a man's alone with you, they push it into you and then you have babies.

This older girl told me what the word for down there was as well. She said it's called a fanny. I couldn't be absolutely sure she was right about that – I'd been reading Salinger and he definitely called a *bottom* a fanny. I didn't tell Jackie I'd learnt any more about sex, though, in case she laughed. I just tried to describe Kis without being too unfair.

"He's a total creep, I think," I say. " Yes, pretty grim. Mommy just about had a fit when I overheard Theresa telling her about him. I can't remember much of what she said. Maybe something about a Xhosa grandmother? Rumours in the town?"

"Thought so. Anyway, I had to tell her she couldn't stay with me. My Seapoint flat's tiny. She seemed to accept it. We started looking around for a place for her to stay, but then I had to go back to work. I'm painting away – we're busy making elves for the Christmas display already – next thing, two cops arrive. A woman had been taken out of the sea and the address on her luggage was mine. Jakes had obviously told them where I work and next thing, here we have the police looking for me at Stuttafords'.

"I got such a fright. I thought she'd... I thought maybe she was dead. But no, we got to the hospital and there she was, full of the joys. She said she'd felt like a swim, that's all."

"Why did it take two policemen to come and call you?" I try and jolly Jackie along, trying to make her laugh with me. I'm not exactly jolly myself, at this juncture.

"Man, I don't know. I thought for while, while they were taking me to the hospital, that perhaps she was in fact dead and they wanted to break it to me gently. But she was fine. Swimming, I ask you, with tears in my eyes!

"I thought I'd better bring her home. Home, here. And I'm glad I did. While I was getting tickets, she bought that sword. Eyes blinking in that mad way, carrying on about God's armour – anyway, I said the shops were closing and we needed to sleep. We went back to my flat, but she wouldn't sleep. Couldn't actually: she was too wound up.

"So around midnight I thought this is junk (anyway I was worried about Jakes: you never know with him, he's such a psycho landlord) so we hitched all night and eventually caught the Transkaroo in Kimberley.

"I must say, by the time we got to Jo'burg station I was absolutely finished! She kept digging the sword in people's stomachs – in a playful sort of way, mind you – and quoting the Bible at them. When a guy in uniform started coming after us, I grabbed her hand and we ran. Lucky for us, a taxi was standing around even though it was way past three.

"That's when she went totally wild. Waving out the window, me holding her waist, the taxi-driver looking at us in his rear-view. She started undressing. His eyes popped out on

stalks. At first, he wanted to stop. But I begged him to take us home, said she was ill. Meanwhile she's cackling away, very strange.

"When we got near here, she started going really crazy. She tried climbing out the window to stand on the roof of the car, me clinging onto her legs. She chucked her clothes out on Third Street corner and that's where we jumped out."

I was glad Jackie was home, even if it was just for a short visit. The way she'd left home had been awkward in the extreme, and she'd been gone for nearly a year..

It started with us helping her make props for her college festival.

It was hot, the middle of summer and our backyard bristled with wire-mesh, spray-guns and paper. Streaks of paint coloured the lawn and the bricks next to it. Buckets of glue stood around and sheets of paper blew about. We all had to help make props and scenery for a play, including a large papiër maché pantomime cow. Jackie's new boyfriend was organising us. My little brother Craig mixed flour and water to make the glue. I tore newspaper into strips. The boyfriend (whose name's Giovanni) was sitting on the grass, bending wire and chicken-mesh into a back and head with eyes downcast below a precariously-placed set of horns. Theresa was painting finishing touches on bits that were ready and dry, sprayed either white, or brown and black, while my mother sewed metres of green background and a pink felt udder.

"You've got to finish this weekend," said my father, looking irritated. "It would be a bonus to be able to get into my own garage."

"Ah come on, dad!" said Jackie, "This is such fun! I think Giovanni's really brilliant, organising all this for me."

My father shook his head, looking annoyed. I shook my head, too, and followed him inside. In any case the sun was going down and I was exhausted.

We sat at the kitchen table.

"Jackie worships that boyfriend of hers," said my father, teasing a wire out of his

transistor radio, lying in pieces in front of him. "I don't like it at all."

"What's the matter with your radio?" I asked, filling the kettle.

"Nothing, I'm just having a look at it." He started trying to close it all up again, but little bits fell out and it was basically ruined.

"I'd better get Craig to have a look at it," he said and stuck it in the drawer.

"Craig! Craig is a little boy! Why don't you ask Giovanni rather, Dad?" I've made six cups of coffee and one cup of tea.

"Pah!" was my father's only response.

Later that night, I'm lying in bed and listening to the slight rustles of my peaceful, sleeping family. Then I hear a whisper. And another one. I sit up, straining my ears to hear. Jackie's laugh, first. Then Giovanni's deep growly voice, lowered as he murmurs softly. They're giggling. I hear the soft whuff of something landing on the carpet, lots of silence. (Pants, grunts?) They're in the lounge, I know because I hear the couch creak. I wonder drowsily to myself if they're having sex (how could she bear it?) and lie back with my hands behind my head. The next thing I hear is the inevitability of my father's slippers shuffling down the passage towards the lounge. The passage light plunges on, I can see it streaming under the crack on my bedroom door. I know I don't want him to surprise my sister and her boyfriend, but I can't think of a way to stop him.

I hear the lounge door protest. Screams, loud male shouts. The words: "Out! Get out of my house!" and footsteps run out over the verandah. Why did I have to be within earshot? Why couldn't I think of some ruse, why didn't I devise some scheme to stop the slap of my father's slippers moving relentlessly towards Jackie and the heaving, steaming lounge? Couldn't I have lain in front of Giovanni's shoes, to stop him from hurrying away? I didn't know. But I felt as though I'd betrayed my sister, somehow, by knowing that something terrible was going to happen.

In the end, it wasn't all that terrible. My father actually apologised to Jackie the next day. He seemed highly embarrassed about it but then so was she. Giovanni didn't come

to our house again for ages. Jackie said she was going to go and live in the Cape, she hated Johannesburg in any case. I sat with her while she packed.

A very few nights after that, Jackie gathered up her belongings and her wide bat's wings and flew off to Cape Town, where, according to a letter she wrote me soon after, God entered her life in a purple/orange/turquoise Aurora Borealis on top of Table Mountain. I was slightly envious of this experience she'd had, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it. Swirling lurid colours in the sky? Hm.

I missed my wild sister. Jackie was a dark wolf, often violent, and sure, sometimes a wrecker and a fury, but life wasn't as interesting without her around. If Theresa were sitting quietly reading, Jackie would hurricane through her, grabbing her book and flinging it into the bushes. Sometimes she'd tease me by holding down my arms and legs and then letting a drop of spit slide out of her mouth, hanging there by a thread while I squirmed and tried to turn my face away until I'd pop in tear-exploding rage, then she'd usually let go and say of course she wouldn't've *actually* spat on me.

Except of course when she did it by accident.

Occasionally, though, she'd be kind. For many years I believed she was a witch, a fact she proved by showing me how her toes had crinkled black hair on them from flying over fires at night on her broomstick. She'd call us – herself, my best friend Cheryl and me – the three witches from Lundy Cave and whizz us down the road on her bike's carrier at breakneck speed. Her brakes would screech outside the local corner café and she'd give me a cent to run in and get us three Chappies.

Soon after Jackie left, Theresa finished her degree, then her teacher's diploma, and left home as well.

The ambulance that took Theresa away ended up at Tara, a Johannesburg institution for the mentally ill. I wear her madness like a yellow star, holding my tongue, fighting my thoughts. She is constantly in my thoughts. I'm a frightened fat adolescent of thirteen,

then fourteen, walking around holding my tongue with saliva dripping down my arm when I think no-one can see me.

The first time we were to visit her I hide under my bed. I don't want to go near that dreaded rabbit-hole. I lie among the dust bunnies, trying not to sneeze. My father walks into my room.

"Are you hiding?" he laughs as he grabs my foot.

"No, I'm just looking for my shoes," I mutter and crawl out very, very slowly.

Tara is an enormous place, full of huge bluegums and wide stretches of grass. I take off my sandals and skate my feet on the grass a bit. It's pleasantly cool. Out of the corner of my eye I see a group of people around Theresa. I edge towards them. An old friend of my mother's, a Mrs Carlisle, is talking to her.

"Oh, here are your dear parents," she cries desperately, her pink crimplene-covered breasts rising up and down noticeably. Her eyes question my mother's brightly: isn't Theresa looking *well*?

"Now, what kind of flower could this be, I wonder?" she addresses Theresa in a special kind of voice that irritates me so much I have to move away. "Theresa dear, won't you please ask Matron what this is called?"

With one hand leaning heavily on her knee, she lowers her bulk to the ground and picks a small blue flower. She gives it to Theresa.

"Fine, I will," says Theresa. Her voice seems lower than usual. She takes the flower carefully between finger and thumb. I sidle over to her.

"Hi!" I say. I kick my toe into the grass a few times.

"Oh, Harrie," says Theresa as if a thought had just struck her. "Look, here's a pretty flower for you," and she hands me the flower she'd just that moment promised to identify. Mrs Carlisle looks expressively at my mother shaking her head with hateful lugubriousness. I pull my tongue at her behind my hand.

Later my father says: "She will get better you know, Harriet." He doesn't sound convinced.

That evening my brother Craig and I start getting into an argument. All through supper we give each other dirty looks and as soon as my father finishes the after-supper prayers we run away outside to continue wrangling.

I don't remember what we fought about, but when we were in bed Craig (all of eleven at the time) fires the final salvo over the partition between our beds:

"You're just like Theresa! You're going to go mad just like her! Everyone says so!"

And I cry and cry until I fall asleep.

2 clamming up (1970)

I'm expecting my dad to come home from work early to take me to the doctor. Neither he nor my mother had noticed me holding my tongue, but my English teacher wrote them a letter to ask if they could explain why I was so nervous all the time.

No use asking me. I have no idea. I sit in the garden, beneath Theresa and Jackie's bedroom window, waiting for his car. Before she'd gone and gotten crazy I'd have said Theresa was my favourite sibling.

I sit there digging my fingers through the reddish sand, thinking about my doll. I know he's buried somewhere under me. I'm not sure exactly where. It was Theresa who gave him to me, when I was much younger. It happened this way.

It's Christmas, and my father's taking us girls to town for a treat. All three of us sit scuffling in a row, sniffing the sticky seats of his dark green Opel Prefect, giggling then shushing each other before he could turn round and go home as he threatened to do. I was squashed between Jackie and Theresa, wearing white socks, patent leather shoes and a pretty green flower print dress that my mother had made me. We park outside John Orr's in Eloff Street in Johannesburg.

Once inside the tall building crammed with mainly women, wearing hats and carrying shopping bags, we crowd into the lift. I jump as a hollow voice goes "Going up!" There's a man in a natty maroon outfit sitting on a stool behind me, holding a big shiny brass handle with which he points to various floors. He pulls a face at me when I stare at him.

"It's one of Santa's gnomes," Theresa whispers in my ear. Sure enough, he's got a beard and slightly pointy shoes.

My father asks him where to find the toy department. The liftman replies all in one breath: "Knitwear, beachwear, sportswear, sports equipment, toys and books, *fourth* floor."

"Oh, look," says my father, "They're having a colouring-in competition. Why don't you girls go colour in while I wait with Harriet to see Father Christmas?"

"Aw, no, Dad, we're too old for colouring in!"

"Not really. Look, there's an eleven-to-fourteen category. And what an interesting prize! If you win you can choose anything you want in this department!"

"We're a bit old for that –" begins Jackie, then she notices some alluring costume jewellery. Theresa wanders over to the colouring table and picks up first a royal blue, then another, darker blue and finally a turquoise blue crayon.

My father and I stand in the queue for a long time, my feet aching in their unaccustomed narrow shoes. At last it's my turn. Father Christmas's cave yawns white and green, oddly-placed lights encouraging you to explore further. A golliwog looms over

him, high above his head. A row of sugar candy walking sticks stride behind a frumpy teddy bear wearing a jersey and no trousers. Father Christmas looks tired, his hands ingrained with thin black lines. I perch on the edge of his lap and whisper in his ear what I want from him for Christmas. I tell absolutely nobody else.

Unsurprisingly on Christmas Day I do *not* get a boy doll exactly like the doll Cheryl-next-door told me she was getting. Cheryl came over to show me her present early: we were hardly awake. He was wearing red dungarees, a flat cap and had an adorable pointy nose.

I climb out of bed and nose around all the presents lying wrapped under the Christmas tree and know that not one of those flat boxes with my name on it could hold anything remotely like a doll with corduroy dungarees and a plaid shirt, not even a small one.

After we open our presents I sit on a chair in the lounge, holding my compendium of games. I'm so sorry for myself that I've given myself stomach-ache.

"Would you like to play a game, draughts or something?" says my father, sitting on the floor next to me.

"I don't really feel like it," I say.

"Come on, don't be a spoilsport," he opens the box and slowly I start setting out Snakes and Ladders, trying to look eager to play. The snakes look particularly vicious, the ladders short and sparse. Just then the phone rings.

"Sorry to disturb you on Christmas day," says the woman from the PR section of John Orr's department store, "But someone called Theresa has won our colouring-in competition. We'll send a car around tomorrow to fetch her, so that she can choose her prize."

"Whoop!" says my father, picking her up and swinging her around. "What a talented girl you are!"

I slide off the chair and go to my room.

Though Theresa was the one that won, Jackie can hardly contain herself. She's allowed to accompany Theresa to the shop, even though it's closed, it being Boxing Day,

and may help choose from the exciting shelves of toys: big bicycles, toy wigwams and remote control cars.

Two hours later they're dropped back home.

"I can't believe Theresa's so stupid!" shouts Jackie as she pushes into the house, letting the sieve door slam. "I'd already decided we'd get one of those Kenner's Give-a-Show projectors with 112 colour slides – they even include the batteries – and just guess what she goes and chooses instead?"

Theresa climbs out the car as well, and is hiding something behind her back. She's chosen a boy doll, just like Cheryl's, but with green corduroy trousers.

And he's for me.

A few days after that I'm going outside to introduce the new boy to my dolls' schoolroom class when Jackie comes in and puts me on the kitchen counter.

"Leave me," I say, struggling down, "I'm organising school," and I rush to the henhoks which run in an unsteady row behind our parent's house.

There's five of them altogether. Each has a metal gate dividing it from the next down. The gate's top half is diamond wire fencing firmly attached to moulded piping and the bottom half's a sheet of metal you could pound and it would make a satisfyingly loud noise. The gates have moulded metal latches that go straight into the walls.

These low grey buildings with corrugated iron roofs become ships, or castles, dungeons, prisons, playhouses or schools. They fester with poultry lice and mites, which means they are undesired by our older sisters, so Craig and I have them to ourselves. Craig has the small bottom one, which has shelves and I keep the top end all to myself both as schoolroom and storage place for my dolls.

My schoolroom henhok faces the house, faded by the sun. It has an escape route at the back, a hole about as high as a rooster and as wide, and the 'window' above that is a large fenced area. I'd peg a black sheet of pastel paper onto the fence and though it

shakes and bends badly as I point at it with a dowel stick, it makes a good enough blackboard. The dolls would sit on bricks, each with a wooden tomato box acting as his or her desk. Usually I'd have to remove a side plank or two, so that their legs could fit underneath. I put the new boy's desk right in front and push his legs under to sit at it.

"I'm not coming in there," says Jackie, wrinkling her nose through the wire-mesh at me. "Come on, let's go make some mudpies or something." I roll my eyes. I haven't made mudpies for at least two years, but I humour her and walk with her to the sandpit.

My old sandpit is in the corner next to the laundry room. We hit at the clothes held firmly by their shoulders while the wringer, stolid and predictable, squeezes dripping masses of fabric into hard manageable chunks. Jackie pushes through the washing I walk under and sits on the sandpit's brick wall.

"Let's use that as the kitchen counter," I say, and she moves slightly. She's twisting her plaits with her fingers and looking bored. I get a watering-can of water and make a bucket of mud.

"You can help if you want," I offer, and soon she is making tiny fairy cakes with delicate roses on top out of sand and water. She's thoroughly absorbed in squashing small balls between her finger and thumb to form a petal at a time. She works extremely neatly. Tentatively, I start planning an after-school party for the dolls. Everyone will get a beautiful Jackie cake when they arrive. But then: a whistle from the side of the house. Jackie jumps up, shedding sand everywhere.

"Oops, there's Craig!" she says, and touches her hair. "Gotta go." She's off around the corner, plaits flying out behind her. I don't look up. There's no point in trying to get Jackie back once her boyfriend Craig has come to visit: suddenly she'll never have played a game in her life.

I hear a laugh. It's Lina-Wena.

"Yo, Jackie! Always some boy sniffing around her!"

Lina-Wena's our char, she comes to our house every Monday. Today she's busy

pushing washing through the wringer. She lifts a sheet over the edge of the big wash-basin which is full of bright blue water and it drops in with a splash. Freckles of blue, Reckitt's Blue for whitening laundry, land on my arms. She laughs at me as she wipes me down.

"You're sitting in the line of fire," she says. I'm about to go back to the henhoks when Theresa arrives with her sketchbook.

"Oh good," she says. "Just hold still for a bit, would you?"

I put my hands on my lap and sit on the edge of the sandpit. I sit still for so long that a fly comes and walks on my face. I can't help it, I have to reach up and wipe it.

Theresa tsk-tsks.

"Okay, that's fine, don't worry," she says, "I'm just going to finish drawing the mermaid then I'll help you with one or two more of those cakes."

"What mermaid?" I say, looking around. Her head's down and she doesn't hear me asking. After a few minutes she climbs down off the wall. She shows me her drawing. I can see the flat roof of the laundry behind me, the washing hanging out in two long lines, the sandpit, (but not me) and there, high on the top of the garage roof, leaning back with her hair blowing in the breeze, sits a mermaid.

"There's no mermaid," I say, but Theresa goes, "Of course there is. You poor thing! Can you honestly not see her?"

I stare and stare at the garage roof, hoping, but of course there's no mermaid and meanwhile Theresa's put her sketching materials away and is busy making mudcakes. Hers aren't quite right, but I don't mention it so as not to hurt her feelings. She doesn't stick to roses, one of the cakes has a curled-up kitten on it, the other a spiky dragon. They don't match the rest of the set.

My mother's calling her. She doesn't seem to hear. I nudge her with my elbow.

"Theresa, mommy's calling you." She sighs, washes her hands under the tap, and I finally get to go on with my dolls' busy school schedule.

My schoolroom's escape hole is uncovered and four dolls are missing. I run into the house, looking for Craig.

"Craig, have you seen my dolls?"

"Why would I want your little girl toys?" says he, sounding scornful, but his voice lacks a certain necessary note of conviction. I grab him.

I shake him, trying to imitate my mother's strict voice, but he only laughs and pulls away. I search the bushes fruitlessly, mistaking red berries for a glimpse of my doll's dress, the gingham one my mother made, or calico-coloured lilies for my Tiny Dot's blonde topknot. It's only when Cheryl from next door arrives that Craig realises we're about to gang up on him and he'd better give in. He's a bit scared of Cheryl.

"Okay, okay. It was the bomb, you see, kinda like, the mushroom cloud?"

He leads me to the sandy area outside Theresa and Jackie's bedroom window. Four neat crosses, made of sticks and string, stand in a row.

"No-one survived, except GI Joe," he says, looking on as Cheryl and I get onto our knees and dig my babies up. Afterwards, though, we spend a most productive afternoon bathing the dolls and washing all their clothes. And a few months later Craig stuck up for me and one of those exhumed dolls at school. So did Theresa.

It was the boy doll, Terence. For the longest time he was my favourite. Terence had long straight legs and a satisfyingly rubbery feel. I wrapped him in a blue blanket and carried him tenderly in my arms, leaving my suitcase for Craig to carry. The reason we were allowed to take one toy ("Only one!" Mrs Davies had made it very clear) with us to school that day, was that we were celebrating another year of South Africa being a Republic rather than a Union. There were endless speeches and I was glad to sit on the concrete quadrangle and fan my doll's face with the South African flag we'd each been given. The flag was orange, white and blue. Later I swopped it for a chocolate sprinkle sandwich that a boy in my class offered me for it.

At second break a frightening thing happened. I showed the children in my class my doll and they all crowded around me and started giggling. One of them began to shout.

"Kaffir doll! Kaffir doll! Harrie's got a kaffir doll!" I hugged my doll to my chest. Eyes and fingers, eyes and fingers, focusing on me, pointing at me and laughing. And that word.

We weren't allowed that word in our house. My dad worked for the Non-European Affairs Department and recently he'd sat us all in a row and told us we were not allowed to use the word 'native' or any other words except one to describe black people. We were only allowed to use the word 'bantu'. Then he'd walked up and down for a while, pulling his hair in the way he did when he felt unsettled, and said: "The thing is, why do we need one word to describe this group? It's made up of different personalities and types. I mean, we don't go round calling ourselves the redhaired group, just because all of us have red hair, and we don't cut Mommy out of our lives because hers is blonde, now do we? I don't know what we're supposed to do, really." He'd then stopped talking and told us to go play, which I did – gladly.

But by now I was crying so hard I didn't notice at first that Cheryl-next-door had charged over from her playground and was at my side. The chant started faltering. Fists flew around me and soon I wasn't the only child crying. Cheryl pulled their hair and kicked their shins. Her face was bright red and her ringletty curls stood out like springs from her head. Then Craig arrived, head-butted a boy and his nose started bleeding. A lot of other children in the school started crowding around to watch the fight.

The high school was next door to the primary school. The ground it was built on was raised quite a bit higher than our school's and the high-school pupils could look down on us. Of course it was strictly out of bounds for them to come to the smaller children's playground, and vice versa, but before I realised what was happening Theresa was there.

Children parted in front of her like the Red Sea, leaving a clear path between them.

Everyone went quiet as she walked towards me, her grey school uniform standing out tall against the small blue and brown ones either side. She picked me up in both arms and started walking right back to the high school with me, not saying one word. Everyone was looking at us. I wriggled and kicked, bit her arm.

She dropped me and Terence onto the ground and I shouted at her – "Leave me alone!" – and ran back to my classroom, where I hid the doll in my suitcase.

That afternoon, when nobody else was around, I played funerals all by myself. I wrapped Terence in his blue blanket, dug the deepest possible hole under Theresa and Jackie's window: and buried him there.

Keys rattle in my ear. My father's arrived. Doctor time.

"I really don't know what's the matter with her, doctor," my mother says. We're at the doctor's and I'm standing because I feel too wound up to sit.

"Fine." He nods at her to tell her to go. She leaves, sharing a final meaningful glance with the doctor before she discreetly closes the consulting-room door. He turns to me. I hold my tongue (literally) and stare back at him.

"Now, young lady," he says. "Perhaps you can explain why you're so nervous?"

"I think I've got cancer," I say and show him a black spot on my leg. He smiles at me and hardly glances at the leg. His face is bright red and his teeth are very yellow. I wonder what sort of medical condition he has that causes the mottled crimson effect. I'm very aware of his skull beneath his skin. He waits with his hand on my shoulder. It's heavy and damp.

"It's because of my sister," I say reluctantly, not looking at the intensely red skull. The words are oozing out from some place I don't really know about. Honestly, at that exact moment I have no clue why I keep holding my tongue. The words simply jump out of my mouth. "I'm just like she is and I am going to go mad exactly like she did."

He takes his hand off my shoulder and sighs.

"Look at me, girlie," he says, holding my hands in his knuckly red ones. "You are one person. Your sister is quite another. No two people are ever the same, but mainly, and now listen to me carefully. The word is not 'mad'. She has had a nervous breakdown and will soon be fine."

My tongue starts to feel as though it belongs in my mouth again.

"Will she really be fine again?" I whisper. It is quite strange. This man, for whom I feel mainly contempt (I hate his grotesque teeth and the way he calls me 'sweetie' or 'girlie' as though he's forgotten my actual name) has managed, in just a few words, to make me feel calmer than I have for months. I swallow, just to make sure. My tongue doesn't feel as though it's about to slip down my throat and get stuck there forever for a change. I run out to my mother and father.

"I feel fine," I say, grinning. I'm talking much too loudly for a doctor's waiting-room and heads swivel.

"Okay," my father gets up, half-exasperated, half-relieved, "Let's go."

first interlude

The three girls were crammed in, knees touching, squashed together uncomfortably on the badly-made bench of the dark pine-scented sauna. Every now and then a plank moved, pinching a pink-and-white bottom. The owner of the bottom would shout out, jump up, twist to examine the damage and rub the spot until it flushed inflamed like the cheek of a sleeping child.

Drops of condensation gathered and fled down the inadequate window, echoing the streaks of sweat on their rose-red faces.

How luminous in their glory! Possibly, Klimt might have done them justice, these three naked girls glowing gorgeous with youth. The western sun did its best. It fired their soft, touchable skin with a faintly opalescent sheen, pinked the tips of their nipples, emphasised rounded areas, shaded angular ones and stuck broken bits of brightness into cascades of healthy shiny hair.

"Interesting how she always sucks it into herself, huh? Betrayal, responsibility..."

"It's that angle-poise light of betrayal that interests me. She's always blinding herself with it, turning it to face into her face. How did that particular piece of equipment get inside her head? And she *always* compares herself to her sisters."

"Never mind, I'm happy she's packing a full arsenal. She's planning to use the lot I'd say. Parentheses, single and double quotation marks, plenty of apostrophes, both a 'hey' and a 'eh', 'fanny', – both meanings – and she's not neglecting colons, n-dashes, ellipses and semi-colons."

"Yes, though I notice she's overplaying the italics a bit. Have to watch that tendency. Too gushy."

"Oh, well, she *is* gushy, you know. Tears always on high alert, waiting to burst from the tear-ducts at a moment's anguish. Besides the masses of trigger-happy snot and spit, which urge forward from her nose and throat.

"As for drops of urine! They're kept from running out by only the tiniest of weak muscles."

"There's just one thing that really bothers me. Where was the teacher on playground duty, I ask you?"

"You don't want to know. She only had one thing to say. Her comment was: 'What were her parents thinking of, buying her a kaffir doll?'"

3 love and sex and the whole damn thing (1971)

The prevailing calm the doctor's words gave me doesn't last long. I can't stop shivering. Most days I can't control my shakiness. Every night I wake around three in the morning, with fear washing over me. I drown in it. I'm forced to get up, I'm simply too overwrought to keep lying down. Constantly overstrained and irritable. I keep telling myself it's only because I'm worrying about Theresa.

I never lose any sleep over my little brother. Craig is always in trouble, usually making me promise not to tell the ole man and ole lady, as he calls them, but always charming his way out of any real punishment. Meanwhile I'm doing badly at imitating being an ordinary teenager. Craig helps the most, in a backhanded sort of way.

Jackie tries to sort me out. She's decided not to return to Cape Town and moves back in with us for the few weeks before she gets married. She's sitting on the front verandah as I jump off my bike in front of her.

"Dear God, Harriet," she says. "You've gotta do something about your uniform,

kiddo. Just try it. A few simple rules. Never wear your gym too long. You know? Look at yourself. It's hanging down to your knees. The rule is, always too short than too long. Have your belt too tight rather than missing, or twisted. Starch it if it starts twisting like that! Or ask Mom nicely to put some stiffening in it. As for that shirt you're wearing! It's Craig's, isn't it? Easy to tell because the cuffs are all frayed. And of course you do know boys button up the opposite way to us? Don't tell me you never noticed? People see these things, Bunny! Nails. Nails can be too long, but never dirty. I don't mind if you get into trouble because your hair's hanging in your eyes, but not if it's greasy. And I'm leaving my razor here for you. Pulleeze shave your legs!"

While she's back living with us, I get to look almost presentable when I go to school. But once she marries Giovanni (surprise, surprise) and leaves home, I slide back. My school gym doesn't enter my consciousness until just before I have to put it on for school: then I find it crumpled under my bed where I left it the previous night. I set my alarm once or twice to wake up earlier so that I can iron both it and my shirt but when the alarm actually goes off there's always some book luring me in seductive tones. Just one or two pages, then before I know it it's time for school.

Craig starts high school after I've been there for three years. His friends have names like Puhn, Chick and Connection. His own changes from Craig to Red in high school. His gang hangs out on the lower rugby field during break.

Actually, most of the school could be found on the lower fields behind the cricket pavilion. Piles of long legs in grey school trousers. From way off I could always tell where Craig's lot were by the haze of smoke hanging low over their hair.

One day I'm hurrying over to an extra domestic science class, which is going to be held at second break because some of us were acting up during the lesson. Not me, of course. I'm always sucking up to the teacher, Miss Goody Two-Shoes, teacher's pet. I know it's a mistake being that sort of person but I can't work out how to change

myself. All I know is I'm trying to pass for normal, and failing.

I'm walking past the various groups of fifteen or twenty guys lounging around on their elbows with their legs stretched out over the ground. Someone laughs and I nearly turn back, but realise the person probably isn't laughing at me because he's looking over towards the pavilion.

However, every time I pass a group there's definitely a bit of a snigger. It seems to happen a few times. I brace myself and keep going, the way you pass a house with big dogs barking at you. Footsteps run after me. I walk a bit faster.

"For Christ's sake Harriet, stop!" It's Craig. He takes off his school blazer and gives it to me.

"What's this for?" I ask.

"Put it on!" I put it on.

"I don't get this," I say. "You're going to get into trouble for not wearing it."

"It's okay," he says. "What's one more detention in a week? I've lost count already. But do me a favour? Keep it on."

It's only when I go to the cloakroom to put on my apron that I see the blood on the back of the pale grey skirt of my school gym.

"Howzzeet Harriet," says Craig. He's waiting for me at the bicycle sheds. I notice he stubs out a cigarette on the side of the prefab as I arrive.

"Aah jees, Craig, don't you care about your lungs?" I see his mouth thin out to a line and wish I'd kept mine closed.

"Thanks so much for your blazer, by the way." I take it out my suitcase, shake it out and give to him.

"So. Did you manage to sort yourself out?" he asks, not looking at me.

I nod, fiddling with the carrier. I have to brace it open with my elbow so as to push my suitcase in. Craig holds the bike upright for me, gets impatient, shoves it over at me

to hold while he deals with the suitcase. Ties it round the back with the rope I keep tied on to the carrier for the purpose, to stop my case crashing to the ground as I ride.

"No, wait," he says, not looking at me directly. "I feel a bit of a doos saying this, sorry eh. But, listen, there's something I want you to do."

"What?" I say, impatient to be off, my foot on the pedal.

"Would you mind not coming over to me during break? I don't mean like today," he adds hurriedly, "But you know? Just generally. I don't mind if I've forgotten something like my lunch, just don't worry about it, okay?"

"Ever?" I ask, but I feel my face going red.

"No, I mean, it's fine, but. It's just if you've got something for me won't you rather just bring it to me at my class or something, not while we're all mooching around at break. The okes are always try'na give me a hard time. Okay?"

I hardly hear his last few words as I hurry off on my bike, my face burning, mortified. But I take the hint and this time I make a concerted effort to look less out of place at school. That evening, though, I find a letter-opener that he's made me in woodwork class, carved out with my name on it, lying on my pillow.

When Craig is fourteen and I'm sixteen, we're on a trip with our parents for the weekend along the Vaal somewhere near Parys. It's to do with my father's work.

I manage to persuade Craig to come to the company disco with me in the evening. It's fun dancing with my brother: he's taller than me. We drink far too much punch, something neither of us has tasted before. Later that night we lie on the cool floor under the wrought iron bed in the cabin we've been allocated. It's too hot to lie in the two single beds. I have Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* with me, which I've read but Craig hasn't.

"Read me some of your book, Harriet," he says, stretching out next to me with his head on his arm. I remember I was wearing a fairly transparent nightie made of pink nylon and he was wearing short pyjama bottoms.

Okay, but move away a bit, you're hot," I say and lie on my stomach and start reading. I was just getting to "*Mrs Rose Cottage's eldest, Mae, seventeen and never been kissed ho ho*," when he interrupts.

"Have *you* ever been kissed?"

"Mm, once," I told him. "Very recently, actually. It was the day before my sixteenth. When I was visiting the farm with Aunt Sophie. One of her friends came over and brought her son. Black leather jacket, white teeth, wouldn't talk. He and I took the radio to the top of the old barn to listen to the LM hit parade and then, as the sun went down, he kissed me. So how lucky was that! I missed being sweet sixteen and never been kissed by the skin of my teeth. Saved in the knickers of time!"

I carry on reading. The descriptions are maddeningly sensuous. Just reading the words makes me feel warm all over. It's a sweet fumbling pleasure to articulate Dylan Thomas' amazing sentences. When I get to, "*She feels his goatbeard tickle her in the middle of the world like a tuft of wiry fire*," a roaring sound like waves or thunder starts buzzing in my ears and I can't stop it, a shiver spirals up and down me, through my whole body and, my body's flounders through waves of involuntary shudders. It's scary as well as delicious. Alarmed, I peep over at Craig to see if he's noticed me move.

He's lying on his side, mouth open, fast asleep.

The year I finish matric, what with Jackie married and Theresa living in a flat, my parents take in a lodger. Hamish is the son of a friend of theirs, a smalltown boy who's come to the city to study law. He is good-looking, energetic and full of fun. He sleeps in the bedroom next to mine, in Jackie and Theresa's old bedroom. Craig meanwhile, has moved right out of the house and into the backyard, into the henhoks that he's fumigated and fixed up for himself.

With Craig living outside, I have our big old bedroom that used to be divided into two to myself. The wooden partition's been taken away and I've been given a creaky

old double bed that used to belong to a neighbour. The parents sleep far away, way past the dining-room, right on the other side of the house.

I don't mind the lodger, I don't even mind that Craig is allowed to sleep in the henhoks and I'm not, but what I do mind tremendously is that the folks refuse to let me go to university. I've just finished my final year of school and I'm incandescent with rage because my parents have decided I'm not going to study, even though I've done okay in matric. Not as well as my older sisters, naturally.

Let me admit at once that, from my father's side, I can sort of understand why he decided university was a bad idea for me. I can just see him contemplating the three of us, sizing up what we are doing compared to what we ought to do, and in his eyes the one who doesn't have a degree has made a success of her life: Jackie. Jackie's married and pregnant. This to my father is the pinnacle of success. I know he truly believes this, it's just that I don't happen to agree.

Then he turns to consider Theresa. Just look at her! My father's brow creases every time he thinks of her. Surely she'd have been better off doing something useful like nursing or typing. Anything other than disappearing off to a one-horse town to teach and having a nervous breakdown. And now, here she is, trying to live off art, of all things. Painting for a living! Or trying to. I know my father's sure that quite soon the scales will fall from the eyes of those few people who are buying her canvases and he'll have to support her. Meanwhile, he thinks he's being so sensitive, avoiding the subject of her work in front of her so as not to hurt her feelings, but of course she's hurt because he doesn't like them and thinks they're only a temporary fad. You can see quite well he thinks her paintings are rubbish. Knowing this doesn't help dissipate my anger towards him.

As for my mother! In a way she's worse, because I know she doesn't totally agree with him, but she refuses to take sides against him and won't say what she believes. The part that niggles at me most is that I'm sure my parents think I'm just like Theresa and

that too much education may make me go mad. Of course I don't say this.

I pay them back in other ways. I retaliate by hardly ever attending the secretarial course my father enrolled me into willy-nilly. I bunk nearly all the lessons, smoke and wear very short miniskirts and lots of eye make-up.

And, well, Hamish is sympathetic. He loves going to Wits – feels nearly as sorry for me as I do for myself. It doesn't take long before Hamish and I get up to no good. He's unattached.

I'm not in love with him. I like him, though. (And from early on, I recognise that I'm a sucker for beauty.)

The person he's in love with is Jackie. Poor Hamish. Unrequited love, because she's married. He sits on my bed at night and tells me how wonderful my sister is, and though we're both part of the fan club, he's blind with lust and I have to prevent myself from pointing out her obvious flaws. I shut up and agree with him that she's too good for him.

My relationship with my parents goes from bad to worse. When he's angry, my father's lexicon flies out the window. Before he stopped me from going to university, I'd have protected him from Craig's teasing of him, but not now. Now I'm siding against him.

In front of Hamish he shouts at Craig and me to drop our blazer fair attitudes. When we snort behind our hands, he says he'll wallop us at the drop of a pin. He glares up at Craig and adds that we in this family must stop fighting hammers and tongue. Finally, and most embarrassingly, he uses the wrong word while he and Hamish are chatting about the tenants of combat, generally reminiscing about the war. Well, my father's doing the chatting, Hamish is listening and I'm pulling faces at Hamish from behind the lounge window.

He describes an incident that happened to some pilot and ends with the words "...and then he ejaculated onto the deck."

Hamish nearly explodes with trying not to laugh and I laugh as well, ignoring the small pinpricks of betrayal.

"Are you still a virgin, Hamish?" I ask him one evening. It's late and everyone else in the house is asleep. He blushes.

"Yes, I must admit I am. Why do you ask?"

I don't reply immediately. Suddenly he focuses his blue eyes on me. He doesn't ask the question I'm ready for. I'm waiting for him to ask: "Are you?"

I'm trying to begin a grown-up dicussion here, in my view. But I didn't imagine how his mind would work. He simply assumes because I ask if *he*'s a virgin that I'm not. He bounces on my bed and says, "Let's have sex."

I decide to fob him off with a sophisticated-sounding response.

"I'm not on the Pill! It's not that I don't want to, but I'm really scared of falling pregnant." Really, really scared, I added in my own head.

"That doesn't matter," he was adamant. And joyful. "I can pull out."

I don't understand what he means but I don't say anything more. He strips off his pyjamas and sinks down on top of me. I feel a painful thrust down there (I haven't acquired any reliable vocabulary yet; while this is happening I think I really must ask him what to call it), then three or four more.

Painful and quick. He ejaculates on my deck, as it were. In spite of the pain, I'm interested in the sticky mess. So this is exactly how to make babies, I think. The next minute I'm overwhelmed with tears. Meanwhile he's appalled that there's such a lot of blood and that I can't stop crying.

"Why didn't you tell me you were also a virgin?" he asks, sitting on the edge of my bed. "You had such a big-deal, knowing attitude that I thought of course you weren't! We'd better not do that again!"

"Okay," I say, a bit doubtfully, through my sobs. I'm not crying because of the pain, not even from this queer sense of loss I have, but I don't tell him that. I'm crying because I'm thinking: is this all there is to sex? I know it's a bit late, but also going through my head is a perhaps-I-should-have-waited-until-someone-I-loved-came-along thought. And

finally, I'm thinking what is the big bloody deal about it all? I can't understand it.

But first I pull myself towards myself and plan a trip to a doctor. Just in case. Although I'm seventeen, I actually have no idea how people can tell whether they're pregnant or not. Hamish assures me I can't be, but I'm taking no chances. I take a bus into town and pick a doctor at random, a Dr Jones, GP, in Jeppe Street.

I tell the doctor I think I'm pregnant.

"And what makes you think that?" he asks me, tapping his teeth with his pen and peering at me over his glasses, old-man style. Well, I sincerely hope that when you were a teenager you knew, at very least, that one had to miss a period to begin to suspect one was pregnant, but I simply didn't.

"Well," I say, "I had sex last night."

I don't describe the coitus interruptus part. I wasn't at all sure that none of that sticky mess had strayed inside me and I have a vague idea that a baby would probably start growing immediately.

To be fair to the doctor, he didn't laugh.

"Why?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you have sex? Do you love the – ah – your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend." But I add quickly: "But I might – well, we may do it again so I'd like the Pill." As an afterthought I say, "Please, if I may."

"First things first, young lady," he says. "I'm going to give you something that will bring on a period. If you don't have a bleed, say three days from now, come back and see me."

"And the Pill?" I ask, because I'm tenacious in my way. Though I don't know what menstruation has to do with being pregnant, I do know that swallowing the Pill stops one from becoming pregnant. A poor assortment of knowledge, not so?

The doctor becomes angry.

"No," he says. "No Pill. You have no idea what you are doing, little girl! Do me a favour? Don't do it again, all right?" I nod, fast, but I already know for sure I am going to do it again.

I can't leave it at this low ebb! First, though, I take the pills he prescribes. Some kind of morning-after cocktail. They do their job, inasmuch as I'm bleeding by next morning.

But Hamish and I take four more chances after that, weeks apart each time.

Hamish is ashamed of the fact that he can't control his urges.

"If you fall pregnant I don't think we can get married, Harriet," he says, looking over at me in an irritated way.

"I know we can't, Hamish," I say. "I don't want to marry you either."

This isn't absolutely true. Even though I'm well aware he doesn't love me, it seems such an effortless option for me to become his wife and be the mother of his child. I wouldn't ever have to worry about how to support myself, for one, someone else would do it for me. And I know my father'd be pleased, even though I'll only be eighteen at the end of the year.

I snap out of my daydream and listen to what he has to say next.

"And don't you go telling anyone that we've had sex."

I keep quiet.

He looks over at me, the truth dawning on him. "You have already!" he says, looking as though keeping from slapping me is difficult. He's all pink with fury.

"Actually, I haven't told my sisters. Spoke to Cheryl about it though. I tell her just about everything that happens to me," I say. "But okay, fine, I haven't told Jackie or Theresa, yet. I won't tell them, if you like."

"As if that'll help!" he burst out. "Cheryl must think I'm a total pig!"

She did actually, but I didn't tell him that. I didn't agree with her, as it happens. I knew it was actually my fault we'd done it.

"Don't worry about it," I say, "Cheryl never tells anyone anything. And no-one's going to tell the folks. Don't worry."

This was certainly true. We all protected my parents from knowing anything about us. They'd have gone through the roof if they knew what we did. Craig was the most secretive of all of us: they had no idea what he was up to most of the time.

Cheryl did think, though, that I should move out of home so that I was no longer

around Hamish. During our endless conversations about it she said that having sex every now and then with someone who doesn't love you, whom you don't love and upon whom you can't rely, can't be good for your self-esteem.

I retorted that what had happened to her certainly wasn't good for her self-esteem either. She'd just looked down at her coffee mug and said nothing, which made me very sorry I'd opened my big mouth. She'd only been fifteen at the time.

During the years I'd been at the local high school, Cheryl had attended a prestigious convent in the city. One of those really expensive ones. She'd hated it, pretty much. The music teacher was a creep. She found him revolting, but unfortunately, he hadn't felt the same way about her. He kept telling her she was 'a most attractive young lady' and a 'credit to your parents'. She used to brush his creepy arm off her shoulders and didn't think too much about it. Towards the end of the year he informed her that she had to fetch her end-of-term report after school. When she arrived at the music-room to pick it up, there was a note on the door.

"Cheryl, please see me in the infirmary." Irritated, Cheryl ran upstairs to the sick-room, and knocked on the door. It was locked, but, before she turned to go, the music teacher opened it. He looked annoyed, but, she said afterwards, when she thought about it a little, she realised he was only *acting* annoyed.

"Come inside," he said curtly. He closed and locked the door behind her.

"What?" she said, standing looking at him with her hands on her hips. Cheryl was not a person to be intimidated easily. He sat on the sickroom bed and stared at her.

"I've heard an unsavoury rumour about you, Cheryl," he said. "You don't have to admit anything, but I do know."

"Mr Oberholzer, I haven't the slightest idea what you mean and I really do need my report, so please give it to me."

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he stood up. Cheryl stared him levelly in the eyes,

stretched onto her toes a little so that she could look down on him.

"I've got a bus to catch," she added.

He moved too close to her. She took a step back, towards the door.

"I hear, I *believe*, you are very fond of Sandra Robinson," he said.

She snorted. "So what's that supposed to mean?" she asked, folding her arms.

He looked at her steadily, preparing to outstare her. "I don't know if you're aware of the fact that some girls are – I'm not sure how to put this delicately – *some* girls would rather, shall we say, *be* with another girl rather than with a man."

"No, no, I'm not. I don't!" Cheryl's face burned and she turned to the door. He grabbed her around the waist.

"Prove it," he said.

"What do you mean?" she said, kicking at his shins, but with nothing like her usual strength and conviction.

He spoke into her ear. "Sandra is my niece. She told me what happened in the cloakroom last week." He let her go and sat back on the bed again. Cheryl blushed just thinking about it. It was all so stupid. Sandra had dared her to tongue-kiss her. Of course she'd done it and – she'd felt really embarrassed when she told me about it – she'd kind of liked it.

"You do what you want," Mr Oberholzer continued. "I have my information. Personally, I think we should tell your parents."

"Please don't!"

Mr Oberholzer lay back on the bed, with his face to the wall. She stood there feeling awkward. He muttered, half into the pillow. "Take off your panties."

"I beg your pardon?" Cheryl couldn't believe she'd heard correctly.

"Take them off and I'll deal with it," he said, sitting up. After hesitating a moment, Cheryl slipped her pants off over her shoes and socks and stood with them in her hand.

Mr Oberholzer took something that looked like a red rubber dog's bone, but without the bony end bits, from under the sickroom pillow.

Afterwards he tried to justify what he'd done by telling her now that she wasn't a virgin any longer, nobody could mistake her for a lesbian. As for her parents, they complained that Cheryl could never stick to anything for long and they'd bought a piano for no good reason.

So yes, Cheryl was keenly aware of how low self-esteem could fall.

I inform my parents that I'm leaving home, and that I am going to share a flat with Theresa in Hillbrow.

"I thought you wanted to go to university!" says my mother.

"Of course I want to go to university! "

"Well, if you pass this secretarial course, you'll be eighteen at the end of the year and *then* you can go to university!"

"This is a fine time to tell me!" I scream. "I'm gonna fail this year and I wouldn't have if you'd said you were going to let me go to university at the end of it after all!"

"You were too young, didn't you understand? Theresa said you might take drugs—"

I go cold, as though someone's opened the fridge door.

"What do you mean?" I ask. "What's Theresa got to do with it?"

"Well, when we were discussing whether you should read for this degree or not, she pointed out that you had written matric while you were still sixteen. You were too young to go and mix with that arty crowd, who all take drugs and do all sorts of unspeakable things..." She stops as she sees my face. I feel utterly betrayed. Theresa said *that*?

"I can't believe you listened to Theresa. What does she know about my choices? What does she know about me?" But even as I say it, I start to feel uncertain. If Theresa had said she didn't think I should go to university, then possibly she had a point. But sudden-

ly I feel as though I am standing on the edge of an abyss, a black and wide abyss that yawns between my sister and myself. In my eyes, she is usually right. But how could she have been so wrong about my character? Didn't she know me well enough to see that I was far too scared to ever take drugs? Or, perhaps... ?

Perhaps it was because she knew I was exactly like her.

"Well, Mom, now I am going to go out and work, so you don't have to EVER worry about me again! Good-bye!" I say and flounce out of the house.

My father picks up my suitcases and sleeping bag and drives me to Theresa's flat. He finds me a job as well, as a receptionist for a friend of his who owns a consulting engineering company. He doesn't say much after he drops me off, just squeezes my shoulders and says I must let him know when I need a lift and that mom said she'll do my washing.

4 the phoenix of splashy expressionism (1974)

Living with Theresa is great fun. How phoenix-like of her to have got over her traumas. God's armour, electro-convulsive therapy, all kinds of brain-cell loss. So brave of her to fight her way back to some semblance of normality.

The locusts ate two years of her life. I'm not too sure what had happened to her during and in fact before those two years. Theresa never talks much and besides, our nine-year age-gap yawns. Obviously I know she spent nearly two years in Tara. But before that, I know vaguely she graduated *cum laude* from Wits University, mainly because my mother mentions it to friends of hers while they're having tea. To pay back her govern-

ment loan she had to teach. She taught art in a small school in what is now called Mapumalanga, in Watervalboven.

What happened then, though? Theresa leaves Watervalboven, comes back to us via Cape Town brandishing a sword and letting terrible screams loose inside her. She tries to flush herself down the toilet bowl. She fights. She loses. She gets dragged off, imprisoned in a hell-hole, drugged and shocked. Gets large doses of electricity administered, which charge through her veins instead of blood. She doesn't want to talk about it much so I don't ask her any questions. Gradually I stop trying to make sense of it all. Though I feel relieved that she seems relatively normal, I can't help worrying about what exactly made her go off the rails in the first place. Was it because she fell in love, I wonder?

Thing is, Theresa'd never been in love with anyone but her English mistress before. So when a railway guy calling himself Kis started swanning around her, she fell for him. A hook, a pick-up line and then she sank.

Why did it end so badly? To me it seemed this way. There was this Kis, courting Theresa, laying flowery framed verses and sleazy reproductions of kitsch paintings at her feet. She loved him in spite of these. Worse, she actually seemed to love the stuff he gave her. In her head a Tretchikoff print became transformed into an object of beauty *because* he gave it to her, or so it seemed to me. So what made the love affair descend so swiftly into mayhem? And a running about naked? Why did Theresa need to collect God's armour – who was she protecting herself from? From him, or from her family, us, in fact? Apparently while in Tara she flushed away the lucky-packet ring Kis had pushed onto the third finger of her left hand.

As for that young man, Kis. Though she doesn't want to discuss her breakdown with me, she loves talking about him. Every night at the flat she tells me little bits about Kis. Soon I feel like I know him really well.

He used to hang about outside the schoolyard in Watervalboven with his mates. When the new schoolteacher arrived, he liked what he saw. He saw a pretty young

woman, a little bit plump, with red hair, which he didn't like much, but it was neatly styled. Sweet and neat altogether. He thought he'd try his luck and check if she'd go out with him.

After a few weeks they decided they would like to get married. During the April holidays they took the train to Johannesburg so that he could meet her parents. Theresa was disappointed in our mom and dad's reaction.

"They were quite horrible to him, Harriet. They just couldn't see how lovely he is."

I keep quiet. I didn't like him either, but I don't hurt her feelings by telling her that.

"And then I don't know what went wrong. He didn't say anything to me before he left. He just suddenly stopped loving me."

Whatever the reason, he went away and left Theresa alone with only his letters and gifts to remember him by.

And after the pain of being dumped and going insane, Theresa seems to have survived, more or less intact. She's fine. Laughs, paints and sings, all as normal. The question still niggles at me though: how come she went mad in the first place? Because she was dumped? I swear to myself I will never be the lover rather than the beloved, if I can possibly help it.

She realises she can't teach. Can't *begin* to control a classful of children. Instead she works as a fulltime artist, painting window displays for John Orr's as potboilers and, in her spare time, she makes splashy abstract expressionist paintings, good ones. Their honesty packs a punch, tends to knock you flat. And, luckily for her, a small group of select buyers begin to notice her work.

Her flat's on the tenth floor. It's a bachelor flat, just one room with a tiny kitchen and bathroom. Her easel stands in the middle, her bed squashes up against the shortest wall. I sleep on the floor next to a big sheet window which reaches from floor to ceiling. I love the feeling of flying it gives me when I look down onto the heads of the people on the streets below.

At night, it's even better. The glass wall becomes black, studded with every kind of light – sparkling, splashing, neon, or simply blank and bright – hundreds of windows in close-up and headlights far away, and, on special occasions, the moon.

Theresa paints frenziedly. She gives me one of the paintings from her a series called *Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.*

It's a smallish painting, oils on a square of masonite, with a vivid blue background. Just a simple work, of someone's hand pegging up washing. The peg is recognisable as one of those old-fashioned wooden ones, then there's a little piece of sheet or shirt or whatever it is being hung up, and the washing line disappears off into the distance. The hand's outlined in prussian blue with her signature yellows and reds in patches all round and on it.

What makes this painting particularly evocative is the half circle of small white dots equally spaced around the hand. The halo celebrates the hanging out of washing. Very nice. As soon as I said it was my favourite, she gave it to me at once and I've treasured it since.

Sometimes she'd work all through the night and then go to the café in the morning and buy me an Eskimo pie and herself a packet of cigarettes for breakfast. It was heavenly lying in my warm sleeping bag, licking my ice-cream and watching her paint. She'd dab a few strokes, then narrow her eyes and step back. Smoke would drift around her hand as she gazed at the canvas.

"I need a date for my office party, Theresa," I tell her.

I'm enjoying working at the consulting engineering company. Every morning I walk from Hillbrow to Braamfontein and answer the phone all day. Sounds drab, but the bonus is I'm working alongside ten or twelve young men. They're the draughtsmen, the magicians of the office.

Old engineers draw quick designs on dirty scraps of paper and the young draughtsmen spin the mingy straw of their scribbles into gold, as it were. In my eyes, the

draughtsmen are the ones producing the actual work: the drawings, huge and clear. These are then brushed with ammonia – so heady you nearly pass out from the fumes – and reproduced in shades of sepia.

The green counterweighted drawing boards stand in rows and you could always tell a draughtsman at lunchtime in Braamfontein. He'd be the one walking around oblivious of the yellow duster on his shoulder. The guys produce a constant stream of eraser debris which has to be flicked off with a duster.

And here's the thing of it: the first event on the social agenda at my new office is a Christmas party. I don't only need a date for my own sake or for the sake of the party, I need a date to show the draughtsmen I don't need their pity. I tell Theresa I think I've got a scheme.

"What's your scheme?" she asks, smiling. I love the way she smiles at me, as though she finds me the most entertaining person in the world.

"Well, what about if we visit the different churches around here, and I find someone and ask them to do their Christian duty and help a damsel in distress?"

She laughs. and agrees we could try, she supposes.

That Friday night we land up at a born-again barn in Kotze Street. Blue murals all over the outside and lots of long-haired hippie types inside. The interior walls, though peeling, are mostly the turquoise blue of swimming pools. Dense overlays of grafitti scratch and bite their feisty slogans at sharp angles across mustard and blue surfaces.

'Alex you french-fucker.'

'My mother made me a pederast.'

'If I buy her the wool will she make me one too?'

'Tebogo where are you my lovely?'

'I love grils'. The word *'grils'* is crossed out and replaced with *'girls'*. Someone else has written *'what about us grils?'* above that. A crooked *'poes/cunt'* is mostly hidden by

'*Boitemelo WAD HERE*' and '*tsuck tsepo tsuck*'. These contrast violently with golden messages in capital letters evenly spaced between the small barred windows: '*Jesus saves*', '*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*', and '*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*'. (Personally I prefer the *verily verilies*, *haths* and *lests* of the King James' Version).

A badly-proportioned wooden table with red legs balances primly on the edge of the stage, insinuating itself into our line of vision. The side facing us is decorated with short bursts of spray-paint in ill-considered tones: silver, adjacent to pale lime, jostles uneasily against a few rounds of metallic orange and contrasts abruptly with five long messy streaks of ochre. The underside is flooded with a nasty scarlet, green patches emerging at intervals. One of its legs curves inwards slightly, insecurely bracing itself on the filthy floor.

The place is called The Fellowship of Jesus Freaks. People blob against the walls and ooze towards the stage. Soon a young man, thin, ecstatic, with long blonde hair and rising-moon eyes, swirls his dark cloak and begins to sing. He stands with head bowed, arms stretched out in a wide V-version of the benediction pose and soon the whole room swoons and sways.

A gril, sorry, a girl, throws herself onto the stage and speaks in tongues and next thing everyone's babbling, even Theresa. I take the opportunity of looking around while everyone has their eyes closed in prayer and notice a quiet man who thank goodness is *not* speaking in tongues. He's wearing a neat brown suit and has *Heart of Darkness* in his hand. I'm not crazy about Conrad but at least he knows how to read.

His friend, meanwhile, is throwing himself onto the ground in wild abandon and shouting out phrases in what sounds like gibberish. Sounds I'm sure he's making up on the spur of the moment.

After the service I manage to attract the neat young man's attention.

"Excuse me," I say. "But my sister and I are a bit nervous to walk home at this time of night." I'm such a liar, we've been walking Hillbrow flat every evening since I moved in.

He smiles at us shyly. "Oh, but of course you are. This neighbourhood isn't very safe," he says. His voice has an Irish lilt. "I'll give you a lift. It would be my pleasure."

As he drives us home, I wind down the window and let my hair blow in the breeze, looking up at the green lit-up Hillbrow Tower and planning the next little piece of my scheme. I begin by asking him in. I tell him how kind he was to bring us home and that at the very least I should make them each a cup of coffee or something. He (his name is Fred) and his pious friend agree. While I'm making coffee in our tiny kitchen Theresa comes in.

"Please don't ask Fred to your party, Harriet," she says.

"Why ever not?" I forget to keep my voice down. After all the trouble I'd gone to!

"Shh. No, please don't. I really like him. Ask his friend."

"Okay," I say doubtfully. So I end up going to my office party with Gibbering Gideon and Theresa begins a relationship with Irish Fred.

Gideon is very much in love with me. The office party was obviously the highlight of his entire year's social calendar. He tells me his parents live in Swakopmund and begs me to invite him to our house for Christmas. I don't mind, much. I have no feelings for him either way, really. We catch the last bus to my house on Tuesday, Christmas Eve. I lug my suitcase of dirty clothes and he's got a grubby old rucksack.

My mother's greeting is extraordinarily cool. Her arms quiver as she makes up a bed for Gideon in Hamish's room. I make a face at the irony of it: my mom's obviously afraid that Gideon and I might indulge in some hanky-panky but of course she never dreams that Hamish and I did. Hamish isn't going home for Christmas, so we'll have a full house: Craig of course, me, Gideon, Jackie, Giovanni and their kids Matt and Jo. Theresa and Irish Fred will arrive in time for lunch.

I've had bad Christmas presents but Gideon's present sets a new standard of low. (Mine for him is dull I must admit.) I got him a pen and pencil set. But it's not nearly as bad as the gift he gives me. It's a notebook. It has a picture of two kittens on the cover,

sitting on some lacy cushion with a bow around everything. A bow around each kitten's neck, a bow around the cushion and yet another bow around the picture. The cuteness of it all sets my teeth on edge. But that's nothing compared to what's inside. It's not blank. It's full of badly-written poems, each bylined to Gideon van Tonder. The worst is, the book falls open to a page with a poem addressed "To Harriet" on it. It is very clear that the scribble of flowers above the poem is an amateurish attempt at hiding another name. I can make out an M and a G, I think. Magda? Magdalena? I thank him insincerely.

Theresa gives me a painting: it's one shade of clear blue with lots of tiny specks of impossibly bright colours clustered just off-centre. It's brilliant, I love it.

Giovanni's parents have sent the children a box of gifts from Italy. It's packed with exotic sweets, foreign-looking teddies and sugar mice. Jo gets a tiny maroon silk dress – not a bright sort of colour but a rich, dark plum – with masses of flounces and ruffles. Matt's gift from his Italian grandparents is a toy dagger with a sharp point that makes Giovanni hold up his hands in horror and swear to hide it away until the child is at least five.

After we've opened the presents I wander through to the kitchen. My mother's busy cutting up pumpkin for lunch.

"Can I help with anything?" I ask, sitting at the table.

"Who's this man?" she begins, without any preamble. Before I can say I've only just met him and we've been out exactly twice, once to the office party and once for a milkshake, Gideon comes strolling in.

"I'm so glad you're here together," he says (in Afrikaans) "I've got something I want to ask you, Mrs Bradshaw." We look over at him.

With a slight wobble, he gets down onto one knee. "Please, Tannie, I would like to ask you for the hand of your daughter in marriage," he goes. I'm mortified. I jump up, rush over to him and try and pull him up. But my mother loses her temper completely.

"Get out!" she shouts. "Get out of my house right now! I am NOT going to have a rep-

etition of what happened to Theresa. Harriet! Are you completely off your head? What do you think you're playing at?"

I drop Gideon's arm. "What do you mean?" I ask her.

"That stoker boyfriend of hers! And what did you say you are, Gideon? A shunter! How do you expect to support my daughter in the manner in which she is accustomed? What are you both thinking!"

I'm furious at my mother for being such a snob, and I'm furious with Gideon for asking my mother if he could marry me. I grab my handbag and run out of the house.

It's Christmas day and of course there are no buses. I sit at the bus stop and seethe. Though the bus shelter is luxurious enough to have a seat, it's as though you're sitting in a tin can it's so hot. Across the road some Christmas roses droop over a wall and no birds sing. After a while I hear a car coming.

It's my father. He stops at the bus shelter and winds down his window. "It's okay, Harriet," he says. "Gideon told us that you've only known each other a week. I told him if you still want to marry each other when you're twenty-one, then of course you can go ahead."

I'm amazed at him. He honestly doesn't have the faintest idea about me. But hot on the heels of that thought comes the realisation that I've spent most of my life not sharing myself with him. How can he help it? I suppose I can't really blame him when I do my best to keep my parents at arm's length.

"Dad," I say gently. "I don't want to marry Gideon. I don't know him and to be honest I don't want to know him. It was all a mistake me asking him out in the first place."

He beams at me. "That's my girl! But come, jump in the car. Your mother could use some help making lunch."

After Theresa and Irish Fred get together, they need the space in our bachelor flat in Hillbrow and so I have to move back home.

Luckily I'm used to the taste of humble pie.

My mother hugs me and asks me where I would prefer to sleep. There's a turnup for the books! I'm almost tempted to claim the henhoks, but I know Craig would go stir-crazy in the house now that he's been sleeping outside for so long, so I move back into my old bedroom.

I catch the bus to work every day. Hamish is still sleeping in the bedroom next to mine, now totally taken up with his new girlfriend. He seems to have formed quite a close friendship with my mom and I often hear him telling her how wonderful this Katie, or whatever her name is, is.

I'm not too bothered, though. I certainly never loved him. Initially I still like him, but feel absolutely no stirrings of lust towards him. Unfortunately he still does. To my amazement and disgust he's still keen on sex with me.

One evening his girlfriend is out of town, gone to stay with her aunt for the weekend and he comes through to sit on my bed, ostensibly studying.

As though a thought's just struck him, he looks up from his work and says, "You know, you look just like your sister Theresa. And you act like her. You'd better watch out, or you're gonna go crazy just like her."

"What do you mean?" I say, getting goose-pimples up and down my arms. I know I'm a lot like Theresa. I don't need him to remind me.

"Well," he says. "You're like her in the way people come along and have sex with you and don't really care if you fall pregnant or not. Of course you know I won't get trapped by you, do you? I'll jump in my little car and be out of here so fast if anything happens!

"So, anyway," he continues, while I'm busy being dumbstruck, "I went and got a french letter today. Should we go for it?"

Now I'm speechless.

For a breath or two, anyhow. I don't know what to say to hurt his feelings the most. People, indeed. I'd only been with one person and that was him.

Blinking, I stutter that I know he just wants to have sex because he's got no chance with his girlfriend.

"I know," he says, eagerly, "I know that!" And he goes on to explain that *she*'s planning to stay a virgin until they get married. I'm quiet for a moment. Incandescent.

Then I say (far too loudly) that I hope she's planning to keep on being a virgin for ever afterwards, as well. For the rest of both their natural lives, as far as he's concerned anyway.

"Hang on!" He's totally gobsmacked by my reaction. "I thought you wanted to! I thought you didn't mind! How can you say that?"

"That's not the point. *I* can't believe you're so thick! How do you think Katie would feel if she knew what you were suggesting? How would you like me to tell her?"

When I ask him to get off my bed, he actually listens. I hate the way he makes me feel like the hindquarters of the pantomime cow.

One thing bothers me, though. It keeps coming back to irritate, like a piece of carrot stuck in your tooth. How come he said that about not caring if a person falls pregnant or not? I dismiss it, thinking he must be generalising about all females, not just about Theresa or me. Cheek.

I'm relieved when Hamish leaves our house to move in to the university residence.

second interlude

Their arms around each other, Thalia and Terpsichore peered from their dizzy heights through the kitchen curtains as Harriet hummed and measured. "Look at this, baking *again*."

"Mm, it's a lovely recipe though. One of Lina-Wena's, she got it off Springbok Radio – *So Maak Mens*."

"Smells good. How do you make it?"

"Easy enough. The pudding takes relatively little flour – six tablespoons – then you add the same amount of sugar and sift together with a pinch of salt. Then you measure six tablespoons of butter and warm them until they're runny.

"Finally you dissolve half-a-teaspoon of bicarb in half-a-cup of milk. Add everything to the dry ingredients, and, just before you pop it in the oven, you stir three tablespoons of apricot jam into the mix.

"As you can see, you bake it in a medium oven until that freshly baked aroma makes opening the oven door irresistible –" They both burst out laughing as Harriet carefully lifted the lopsided pudding out with ovengloved hands. "And, of course, what you *shouldn't* do, in a misguided attempt to make it more slimming, is to halve the amount of sugar and butter used!"

Unfortunately at just that moment her brother walked into the kitchen.

Harriet's father was nothing if not on her side. He shook his head at Craig's hair and shoulders decorated with chunks of pudding and asked him mildly what was his head doing in the way of Harriet's cake?

If only he had used the word 'pudding' instead of 'cake', Harriet would have been entirely mollified by his properly paternal and partisan attitude.

5 emperor of home and garden (1975)

It's strange living back home. Craig is in high school, I'm working. Giovanni's planning to move Jackie and their two children to Italy. While they save for this move, they travel all over South Africa making boerewors rolls and selling them at sports events. In spite of the fact that Giovanni can't mention wonderful Firenza enough, how its streets flow with milk and money etc, when he starts discussing the nitty-gritty of actually moving, he seems strangely reluctant. As for Theresa, she and Fred have already left for Ireland.

"What on earth are you gonna do in Ireland, Theresa?" I ask her when she informs me of this move. I'm heartbroken because I don't want her living so far away from me.

"Paint." She pushes my fringe out of my face. "I'll write, don't worry."

I'm not easily consoled.

"How will you manage about the light?" I ask her in desperation. "You know it's going to look completely different to African light. You're going to miss the sun, too, I bet."

She just smiles. She smiles too much, in my opinion. "Harriet, come on. You know quite well I work mainly with colour, not light. And my subject matter's all in my head. It's not essential to where I find myself. It's fine, it's going to be just fine."

Irish Fred chimes in. "Yes and besides, her work's so bloody exciting. My family've got these three galleries in Dublin and my dad'll jump over the moon when he sees her stuff. You'll see. Your sister's going to be so famous you'll have to make an appointment to see her next time. She'll be like the pope. She'll be the queen!"

Without any siblings in the home, my life starts acquiring this dreamy quality of being a cossetted and spoilt only child. Craig gets away with murder as usual, not helping around the house or doing any chores because he lives out in the back, just coming inside to eat and to have his washing done. He's fixed up the henhoks as a sort of five-in-a-row series of rooms: a low-ceilinged terraced house with the zig-zag corrugated iron roof. It looks good: big wide windows, a bathroom and a kitchen. Not that he needs the latter, he's still at school.

My mother dotes on him and some of her doting rubs off on me. One thing leaves me gaping. She cleans and empties his ashtrays without a single complaint. I know he's been smoking since he was twelve years old, but I can't believe she accepts this. She still has hissy fits when she discovers any of us girls smoking the odd cigarette. The only conclusion I come to is that I imagine she's sort of given up parenting him. My mother guards her interior life with rows and rows of defences but somehow, Craig has managed to worm his way behind her lines. I think he actually knows who she is, a feat I certainly never achieved. Which means he calls her bluff when she acts all menacing, and she never stays angry with him.

My father's never particularly strict in any case.

At high school Craig constantly has a cigarette hanging out of his mouth unless a teacher's in the vicinity, and then he hides it behind his hand for a while. Usually

Gauloises, usually unfiltered. Until he's sixteen he rides a racing bike to school but after that he buys himself a Zundapp motorbike. He has one or two bad accidents on that as it happens. My parents never know about those, of course, because Craig insists I shut up. During a particularly hot October holiday he spent most of the two weeks wearing his school blazer because his arms were more scab than skin. Full of blood and tar-burns.

He never seems to study. All during his final year of high school Craig lies flat on his back listening to music with his earphones on. You'd hear *With a word she can get what she came for. Ooh, ooh, and she's buying the stairway to heaven* from quite far away. Goodness knows what it's doing to his ears. It's an act of divine intervention that he passes matric.

Theresa writes to say she is expecting a baby and my mother immediately books a flight to Ireland. She's going to be away for three whole months. To me this sounds exactly right. It doesn't seem good for Theresa to have none of us to take care of her when she has this baby.

It turns out that three months is not nearly enough. Our mom ends up spending nearly a year in Ireland because Theresa falls apart. I'm impressed by my mother's maternal instinct. How did *she* know that just having a baby would cause Theresa to have a second nervous breakdown?

Theresa recovers: takes eleven months to get back to normal. Even though she's in Ireland, surely a more enlightened place than South Africa, she still has to endure electric shock treatment. I must say I thought it was just here in Africa that we were so backward as to treat a sick person in that barbaric fashion. Just shows you.

All the fears that I'd managed to tamp down start clawing at my throat again. The unswallowable lump reappears but I don't touch my tongue. I make contingency plans. I'm determined I'll never live anywhere but in Johannesburg because I know I'm likely to drift off into the high blue sky without the ballast of my mother and father and Craig around me.

After Craig finishes his last exam, he and his gang go out to have a bit of a jorl, and coincidentally I find myself in the same Wimpy Bar. (Well, maybe not completely coincidentally). At nineteen, I am startled to see what they get up to. From behind my own menu, I watch them ordering drinks. No drinking was allowed on Sundays in South Africa, no bars were open and certainly no under-age drinking at any time.

"Ah, two Babychams, two Lions and a Castle, please," Craig smiles at the waitress. I didn't realise you could order drinks at a Wimpy Bar if you ate a meal. The waitress looks uncertain. "And, please, we'd like a little time before we order, so no rush."

Is she going to ask him if he's over eighteen or not, I wonder. His hair is curling over his collar and he's wearing an open-neck shirt, not too casually dressed. He smiles steadily at her, his wonderful Heartbreaker Special. She smiles back.

I groan. Another one bites the dust: waitress nil, Craig one. Two high school girls gravitate towards their table. So that's why Babychams, I see. A Babycham is a nauseatingly sweet concoction with a turquoise blue label of a young deer, batting its eyelashes like Bambi, lecherously wrapped around the bottle. The bottle itself has widespread covert notoriety for being a dildo, a fact I am sure most women never dream of, at least women without brothers to enlighten them of this information.

Craig's friends, Puhn and Chick, drink far too many beers. Chick stands on a chair and they get thrown out of the Wimpy Bar. Craig has to borrow money from me to help pay the bill.

The girls get totally motherless and camp at the bottom of our garden where they all decide to sleep for the night. Craig climbs the enormous pine tree that bends protectively over our verandah and garden wall. Previously he and my dad had lopped the very top of this tree off, so that all that remains is a towering mutilated stump.

So now he decides to balance on top of the stump. From where we are, far below, he looks like a scarecrow, or the fairy on top of the Christmas tree, standing with his arms outstretched. He's in that lovely space between sobriety and drunkenness.

"I want a woman!" he yells. (He's a one-man scenario in a Fellini movie). He stretches his arms out on either side, then overbalances, arms starting to whir like a dragonfly about to take off. All I can see is glimpses of red hair and his orange windbreaker crashing from branch to branch. Crash, hesitating silence, then crash crash. I scream but he shouts at me to shut up. When he comes to rest, a branch or two above the ground, he gives that fake laugh that guys give out when they don't want to let on that they're hurting rather badly. We're both grateful for that little leprechaun – baby Benjamin – who's holding my mother's heart hostage in Ireland.

Later someone gets sick over all the clothes lying around. Soberly Craig cleans it up. And together we all (my father included) praise the holy Saint Patrick that my mother is six thousand miles away.

Every day I catch the bus and work all day, ostensibly typing and answering the switchboard, but in reality the drawing office is a young receptionist's wet dream. A lot of my time is spent chatting, organising dates for the guys, doing their shopping and making sure the office is well-stocked with shortbread and cake.

Somehow, though, they never seem to notice me as a potential girlfriend, which makes me feel mournful but safe. In between I type the odd letter and deal with calls. A restful sort of job.

My friend Cheryl organises a party and I need a date (as usual). I think the time has come to approach one of the young men I work with. I choose the handsomest. (Still a sucker for beauty, I'm afraid.)

"Hi, could I speak to Peter, please?" An angry-sounding woman answers the phone and says she'll see. Is he involved with some babe and I didn't realise it?

When he takes the phone I hope my voice doesn't sound as quavery as I feel.

"What's wrong?" I should have realised he'd think it was only a problem at the office. After all, I don't really know him. I twist the phone cord around my fingers and then can't

extricate them. I drop the receiver on the ground and a piece of plastic falls off.

"Oh, it's nothing," I say, at last, after I've retrieved the mouthpiece. "Actually, I'll see you tomorrow – at work."

"No, wait," he says. "I've been meaning to ask you..." and then he asks if I want to go to movies with him. I nearly drop the phone again, with joy this time. I explain about the party and he says he'd love to go. He sounds apologetic as he tells me his mom always sounds that angry, which is a relief.

We drive to a small block of flats on the dreary side of Braamfontein, near the station. The block is close enough to hear trains all through the night. Wits University is just a little further down the road attracting street gangs of students. You can sometimes hear their shouts late at night. We park two blocks away – there's never any parking in Braamfontein, night or day – taking care to leave the car under a streetlight. Pete says the car is called Bootles.

Being only three floors high, the apartment block hunkers down at the feet of the skyscrapers surrounding it, a midget among its tall neighbours. Cheryl lives on the second floor with her boyfriend Klaas. She and a girlfriend of hers share a tiny flat on the floor below, but neither of them actually live in it. They rent it in case either of their sets of parents visit.

This small flat represents a neat two-dimensional facsimile of student life. Not a piece of paper on the floor, twenty unread books on the bookshelf and only a can of deodorant and a toothbrush in the bathroom. I'm sure Cheryl's parents simply go along with the charade, particularly knowing how chaotic Cheryl's room at home was.

We feel the party before we see it. The entire building throbs with music. Pete and I are walking up the stairs when we hear footsteps behind us and Cheryl's boyfriend Klaas picks me up and runs all the way to the roof with me shrieking, slung over his shoulder like a carcass.

Stars, the moon and various neon signs all seem to hang in the sky at roughly the same height as the disco lights Klaas has rigged up. Big speakers shake with noise and we dance and scream. People who arrive to complain stay to dance.

At half-past eleven we hear a police siren.

"Look," says Pete. At the end of the street, skulking under the shadow of the station's warehouses, crouch two cop cars and a van. We're not sure if they have anything to do with us. We lean over the railing, looking at them, and after a while Pete reaches for my hand. I drift up to seventh heaven, bobbing high among the stars and the neon lights.

At quarter to twelve the police van bounds forward, siren going. It screeches to a halt below us.

"Gooi die taal," Klaas tells me as he dives into their flat with three or four bottles of beer. This immediately makes me go mute. I'm not about to slide into Afrikaans, my beloved mother's tongue. My English-speaking friends don't understand anything about me, really. They assume because at base I'm half Afrikaans I'll be able to fake some sort of complicity with the policemen. I can't tell you how far off the mark this is. Trying to wave me like a friendly flag. Damn their eyes.

"Why are you dancing with blacks?" One of the cops asks. Somebody laughs and I shrink inside. That person, probably a friend of mine, is laughing not only because we happen *not* to be dancing with black people. (The caretaker and his wife are dancing among us but with each other.) It's because the man pronounced it 'blecks'. My mother also has trouble with her a's in English.

I walk down the stairs to get away.

Pete's down in the street already, laughing out loud. He's got a paper cup in his hand. A policemen thrusts his face close to his and says he can get arrested for drinking in public. He laughs some more and then the cop asks him if his teeth are feeling hot. Does he need to have them cooled off, perhaps?

Pete isn't in the least intimidated. He waves his Coke under the cop's nose and says get a whiff of this. No alcohol.

Guests on the roof are not so lucky. It counts as a public space, we learn, and anyone found with a drink in his or her hand is hauled down the stairs and into the van.

The police say we are causing a disturbance. Klaas invited everyone within hearing distance to the party and after all it was the only party we had had all year. Even though most of us are students, we don't feel brave enough to argue. The cops seem so sure of themselves and so full of unfocused anger. It's now twelve o' clock and the beginning of Sunday. Everyone knows we can't make a noise after midnight.

"Disperse or else come spend the night in the cells," says the leader cop. Grumbling, we go ahead and disperse. Even Pete's slightly nervous of the police. Cheryl's not, of course. The first I knew she'd been slammed into a van was the glimpse I got of her black ringletty hair, throwing herself backwards as she's being pushed in.

"Do you mind giving me a lift to try and get everyone out?" asks Klaas, as the rest of us stand on the pavement. Pete's the only one with a car.

We try following the police van, but are soon left behind. We know where it's headed though. At Hillbrow Police Station they let everyone out of the van except Cheryl. We wait, leaning against the walls until someone deals with us. We wait for two whole hours. I'm so grateful my mom's overseas with Theresa. She'd've been frantic with worry and then she'd have killed me when I finally walked in.

Eventually, around three am, we manage to see her. Cheryl's blazing mad, but hasn't assaulted anyone, hasn't been assaulted. There's no charge, but they've taken down all her details. They release her into our custody.

And Peter and I go out more often. I'm relieved that Jackie and Theresa are both married. Had either of them been around, I know for certain my boyfriend would have fallen in love with them instead of me. I've always felt that they're more successful versions of me. I can't even say, "that is, except for Theresa's instability", because, surely, I'm just like her?

I don't know yet if I'm going to become manic depressive like her, but I'm hoping like hell I won't. I don't know what to do to protect myself against it, other than not moving too far away from my family.

But I find myself falling more and more in love with Peter. One of the things I like about him is that he's a body donor. I ask him about it and he says he "just decided to donate my body to science. Medical students can use it to dissect and learn. So you see, if someone asks me to lend them a hand, I'm the type that goes: aah, go on, here; have an arm and a leg as well," and with that he waggles his arm with his other hand.

"An eye and an eye, whatever body parts you wanna play with, students!"

I'm impressed by his jokey ways and get the feeling he's a man of substance. He's practical and funny.

Another trait he has that I find appealing is his courage. I'm such a fraidy cat myself, that it is enormously satisfying to be with someone who doesn't back down on a challenge or a confrontation.

Pete claims it's impossible to have a rational conversation with a religious person and though I don't agree entirely, I like his solid opinions. He doesn't steer clear of religious arguments like I do and I sometimes find myself playing pig-in-the-middle between him and my sister Jackie who is becoming alarmingly creationist in her beliefs.

When he first takes me out, he complains tongue-in-cheek about us Irish Catholics, who breed so prolificly. I have to tell him that only a limited mind jumps to conclusions. My mother used to be Dutch Reformed. Her father was an Irish orphan brought up by Afrikaners. She became Presbyterian when she married my father. I'm agnostic, my sisters are born-again and my brother's nothing in particular.

We get married when I'm nineteen and Pete's twenty-five.

6 belonging to the government (1976-1978)

Like all the other guys I know, Craig has to go to the army after matric. He's called up to report for duty at the beginning of 1976. His friends seem, among them, to make one of each of the few choices they could make directly after school. (His male friends that is, girls weren't called up).

There's Douglas, nicknamed Puhn. Douglas gets accepted into Wits Medical Schul as some people call it – trying to be funny – and so he's a lucky one who doesn't have to enlist until after he's finished qualifying as a doctor.

Then there's Alex Walsh who leaves the country to live in England with his father. Alex is too afraid to ever come back to South Africa in case he gets conscripted. He leaves illegally, then realises he can't return because that will mean he has to go to the army for two years and so in effect he becomes an exile.

Another member of Craig's school gang, Stephen Engelbrecht, (Brains), chose police service instead of army time. Stephen has the worst of it, it what with it being 1976 and rioting going on in Soweto next door. He's always been shy. Now here he is, a seventeen-year-old schoolboy forced by his government to shoot at people. He never recovers. Stephen drives trucks for his father as a job and smokes pot as a religion.

It's a new emotion for me, worrying about Craig once he's in the army. But I can't help it. In my view these two army years plant landmines inside him. Stress bulges inside them so that they stretch like ticks.They latch onto his heart and his lungs, bursting with their lethal contents, parasitically near his lifelines.

Thing is, I was used to having him around. His was a constant presence, always behind me when we were little, then in front of me when we grew up. When he was small, Cheryl-next-door and I used to force him away, telling him my mother wanted him whenever he followed us.

We'd say: "Mommy's calling you!" or "Ma roep!", (using Afrikaans to make ourselves sound more strict). Not that he'd listen.

Once on a snowy day in Johannesburg, I climbed through our fence to wake Cheryl. By this time we'd unwound part of the diamond-mesh fence dividing our two properties, making a hole that reached to the top, easy to slip through and Craig followed me as usual.

I've got this clear early memory of a pale redhaired two-year-old, greenish white skin against greyish white snow, wearing nothing but a vest, running along the neighbours' front verandah wall, kicking snow with soft bare feet and giving out great belly laughs.

Craig gets conscripted into the SADF in January. After his six weeks' basic training we're allowed to go and visit him.

I can't find him. Four or five hundred identical-looking soldiers are massed on this field and my brother is nowhere to be seen. Pete and I walk straight past him. Naturally Craig doesn't call to us, he allows us to pass him as though he were a perfect stranger, just to tease us, of course.

He knows he looks like someone else. He's unrecognisable. My squidgy soft curly-haired brother has lost a quarter of his body mass at least and his hair is shaved short. He looks neat and thin, like a thing that belongs to the government and not like anybody we know.

He's in the army for two years. In 1976 conscripts could sign up for two years, and get rewarded by not having to attend camps afterwards. The situation on the border's so hectic that some boys go totally off the wall.

Craig tells a story about waking in the morning and finding a cow lying on her side, riddled with bullet-holes. Someone heard a noise in the night. The boys jumped up, took fright at her big shape against the sky, and kept on and on firing.

Packed with bullets, the poor cow was fit for a scrapdealer rather than a braai.

To me, these are the gaps Death takes to hitch-hike a ride in my brother's heart. Worry and two years of unrelieved lies and tension bide their time in his aorta.

Craig was not heartless, but certainly he seemed robust. He managed not to become swamped by the sheer hellishness of border life, and extracted jokes, albeit black ones, from the mud of it. He told stories of pouring whole bottles of meths or paraffin into the toilets (which were joined together) so that when unsuspecting smokers dropped their cigarette butts into the toilets they would explode in a violent ball of flame, making them jump up smartly with their trousers around their ankles.

His feet became marked with a curious pattern of small holes on the soles which never went away. He said the army donated those but wouldn't elaborate.

Anyway, after two years, he comes back, still a corporal. I knew he'd been on an officer's course but he never got to be an officer. He laughs when I ask him why not, pooh-poohs my theory about our family genes and the madness whizzing like tracer bullets through our aunts and uncles (and our sister of course).

"Huh! Mental instability, as you call it, would have been a plus! You actually HAVE to be a bit bossies to cope in the army. Hell, no, it's much simpler than that! *You're* my problem!" He explains with a grin that they called him into the office and questioned him closely about the activities of his sister Harriet.

Apparently her best friend Cheryl was under constant surveillance, was arrested more than once during June 1976 during the riots at Wits and so on. I had no idea that my friendship with Cheryl had affected my brother's promotion. Meanwhile, the truth of the matter is that I'm so ignorant that when Cheryl and her friends discuss the ANC, I lose track early in the conversation because I think they're talking about ante-nuptial contracts.

7 botswana wedding

It's 1979 and I'm just about to have my first baby around the time I get an invitation to Cheryl's wedding. Cheryl lives in Mochudi in Botswana. In her letter she tells me that she and Klaas have decided to get married so that eventually he can get a British passport. Klaas refused to enlist in the army after finally finishing all his degrees. There was no way he was going to join the SADF and fight his friends in Swapo. Because of this he chose to cross the border into Botswana illegally. Cheryl joined him there and they are teaching in a village. I can't wait for the wedding.

When Cheryl's father comes to pick me up he is not a little irritated to see that I have a baby with me. I'd neglected to tell him that I was now two people. Truthfully it didn't

dawn on me, until the day of her birth, that I would be giving birth to an actual other person, someone I would be wholly responsible for and that I would not be able to go wherever I wanted without her. I was lucky I managed to add her to my passport in time. I apologise for not telling him about her. Perhaps he feels a baby would not be welcome at the wedding.

In my view, though, Emma is eminently and obviously the most appropriate luggage to take to show my friend.

Grumblingly he packs the carrycot and me into the backseat. His car is clean and big and I feel too grubby for it, with my new baby and her piles of brandnew travelling disposable nappies.

It's a four-hour trip to Gaborone near where we cross the border into Botswana. I'm enjoying the cool air inside the car. What luxury! Cheryl's brother is in the front seat, and though I feel a little self-conscious breastfeeding, there's no help for it, Emma's hungry. I scrabble around to undo my bra at the back. I'm already dripping milk into it, the usual reaction when my child cries. To distract the men in the front of the car I start talking about the army.

"Did you have to come here to defend the border, Graham, when you were in the army?" I ask him. He's distracted alright. Gets thoroughly worked up.

"I'm British," he says. "I didn't get called up. What are you talking about, defending the border? Don't you know the border war is in Angola?"

I get worked up myself. "Graham, didn't you watch Pik Botha the other night? Someone asked him about that, and he said its absolutely categorical. We are *not* in Angola. It's just a stupid rumour South Africa's enemies are spreading about. Everybody knows we're only protecting our own country's borders. My brother was on the border and he'd have said."

"Oh God, you make me sick, you know. You're all being made to swallow every lie those cold calculating bastards tell. Wake up, man! Every single one of you bloody

Nats is a liar and a racist besides! How can you vote for them?"

"Hey! Hold your horses! I don't vote Nat!"

"You're Afrikaans aren't you? All you Afrikaners are Nats. Don't deny it."

I'm cross. I'm not Afrikaans but at the same time I am because my mother is. I don't vote Nat but I've always had a soft spot for Pik because he looks a lot like my cousin Gert. And even though he is only a Nat I believe he has *some* integrity, at least. Besides, nobody would tell such blatant lies which could catch you out so easily.

"Listen here, Graham. My folks are UP. They've always been UP. As for my husband and I, we're Prog." Hurriedly I try and change the subject.

"Oh, which reminds me. I must tell you about Pete canvasing for the Progressive Party. It was so funny! He's walking up these people's garden path and this little yappy dog, sharkbait you know, comes and nips him on the ankle. He kicks out at it – he didn't actually touch it with his foot – and this woman comes out and starts shouting at him for kicking her dog. He says he didn't and she says she saw him. He gets all mad and says 'Are you calling me a liar?' And then her husband comes out and *he* starts yelling at him too and grabs his arm. Pete shakes his arm loose, hits the man hard on the nose and jumps over their flowerbeds and out of their garden. I'm sitting in the car. As he stands on their wall he shouts 'And don't forget to vote UP!' Back in the car he tells me Helen Suzman wouldn't want people like that voting for her."

Graham doesn't crack a smile.

"And... and for goodness' sake you must know Cheryl wouldn't associate with us if we didn't like Afs."

Graham snorts. "The trouble with you Progs is you think the answer is to slowly bake a bigger cake. No, sir! The cake has to be cut up now! And by the way, what do you think the word 'Af' is but a racist slur?"

That pulls me up short. I'd never thought about it. How mortifying. It *never* struck me before. There I was, making a group out of disparate people just as my dad had

always told me not to. I do feel sorry and ashamed, but I'm not going to admit it to this annoying person. And I am positive he's wrong about the border.

Mochudi at dusk glows softly with dust reddening the sky. Not a sound, except the faint clatter of cow bells and frogs croaking sporadically. Cheryl's dad slows down to a crawl, trying to find his daughter's hut among so many other similar-looking ones.

At last we see one with three or four fires around it, and a blue Cadac gaslight hanging outside. A lot of women are rolled up in blankets on the ground around the hut, fast asleep. When I ask Cheryl why, she whispers that it's a tradition. They're there to offer her protection during the night before her wedding. They've also been making clay pots of home-brewed beer and the mud-ovens they've built in a rough semi-circle around her front door are being used to cook the wedding feast.

My baby, who up to now has been a niggly, colicky sort of person, lies up close against me, staring quietly into the fire and doesn't utter a sound. I didn't even notice I'd forgotten her carrycot in the car. I't's amazing how cozy and protected you feel with many quiet sleeping bodies around you. Something loosens in my chest and I find I can lie on the hard ground in a borrowed sleeping bag with my baby in my arms and not wake up until the sun's fullsquare in my face.

Early next morning I'm breaking eggs into a bowl. I break nineteen eggs, and as I crack the twentieth I smell something basically sulphurous, suffused with a pinch of dead rat. I've broken a rotten egg into the mix. I try and scoop it out, but it's unsaveable. Cheryl throws all the eggs out one shot. I stutter through an apology but she brushes it off. No sweat. She says in town you don't have to watch for mistakes like that, but here, constant vigilance! To me it feels the other way round. I can't begin to describe how free I feel in this quiet place. She just shakes her head. It's not as easy as that.

I'm horrified at the price she is being made to pay because of what she believes in. She may not return home, ever. She's now officially exiled. Not to see her mother who had a heart attack a few weeks ago and is still too ill to travel, nor to attend her brother's wedding. Her post is disrupted, opened, censored, returned to her unread. She may never put a toe back across the border into South Africa, to smell the sea, to see the Drakensberg, or to visit my baby at my home. To me it is a shockingly high price, too high a price. On top of that, she's beginning, just faintly beginning, to have uncontrollable mood swings. I wouldn't have noticed except that she had this rip-roaring fight with her father a bit later on.

It starts with him pulling his face when he tastes the home-made beer.

"Um, Cheryl," he begins. "It's not terribly far to Gaborone. Should I go and buy a few dozen cases of Castle?"

She turns on him. "How far do you think a few dozen cases of Castle would go, Dad?" He stares at her, but doesn't appear to know enough to shut up. Any fool would have backed down if he'd glanced at her face just once.

"Why," he says. "I could get quite a few more if you think I should, my girl."

"Enough for the whole village?" she says with her hands on her waist. Of course he has to go on and wade right into it.

"Er, what about if I just get enough for us?"

Had this moodiness, these few strands that later gather into the stormcloud called bipolar already infiltrated its grotesque roots into the raw place where her own were summarily wrenched out? Or was it actually infectious? Theresa had it, now Cheryl seemed to be getting it. Was I just waiting in the wings for my turn to go crazy?

Meanwhile, I help put the shreds of her father together again. He's in one piece just in time to go through the charade of giving someone away that he never knew to begin with.

The wedding is wonderful, glorious, like diving into apricot pudding. I'm her brides-

maid, heading up a row of maidens, with a bucket of beer in my hand instead of on my head. We walk through the red dust barefoot. My baby's safe, taken care of by five or six little girls with chapped hands who pass her around like a pass-the-parcel game. Cheryl's the queen of the day in an indigo and white shwe-shwe print dress. Klaas looks your average son of a boer wearing a white shirt with veldskoens, his beard trimmed and his white wide smile just apparent under the wide-brimmed hat he's wearing. Though I miss a lot of the ceremony because her tiny babysitters make Emma anxious, the day is picture-perfect, truly a keeper. We sing and dance and drink far too much home-made beer, which certainly does taste foul (not that I'd dare mention it) but makes you feel wafty.

That night we sleep under the stars again and in the morning to my remorse my baby's tiny face is polka-dotted, mosquito bites imitating measles. Before I leave, Cheryl and I plan a ten-day trip to the Okavango Swamps with our husbands when Emma's bigger.

A few months later Cheryl phones me from Botswana. It's sooner than we planned but we need to take that holiday now. She implies but doesn't specify it's for political reasons. Pete and I coerce a friend with a bright yellow Kombi and no girlfriend to drive us and we pack everything around Emma's campcot, balanced in the middle of the floor of the car.

Once in Lobatsi, Cheryl's friend Lourens wants to explain to us why we have to leave right away and why two of his friends, Thabo and Johan, have to come along, but Cheryl won't let him, to my relief. I'm afraid to hear the hows and whys. I don't want to hear that Thabo, say, blew up a restaurant in Pretoria and unfortunately a ten-year-old was killed or that Johan perhaps set off a car bomb down at the station. I keep my ears covered and I don't want to know.

There's nine of us, six of them claiming to be communists. Before the holiday is over I'm happy to become one as well. Not that I know anything at all about communism, but

I'm delighted by the communal way they care for something as fragile as a child. It's quite unlike anything I've experienced. I find all I have to do is ask Klaas, Thabo, whoever, to take care of Emma and they do, for hours at a time, with gentle hands and story-telling voices. Emma's little feet get dipped into lily-shadowed shallows, she's shown how antlions catch ants, cries out at the dart of a lilytrotter's shadow, and is kept safe from hyenas and eating too much Kalahari sand.

Emma, and Lourens' child, Marietjie, are the only babies on the trip and it seems to go without saying that everyone shares fully in the responsibility of looking after them.

"The children in our community belong to all of us, " says Lourens. I admire that concept but can't totally accept it for myself. Odd too, to see a child as pampered as Marietjie being smacked for something as unexceptional as turning on a plastic water container's tap. When I protest her mother Jenny explains that she can't be allowed to waste water, even though she is only two-and-a-half. Even now she must learn how precious drinking water is in Botswana.

We're talking books and I mention the Sestigers, and that Breyten Breytenbach is my favourite South African poet. I like him even more than Ingrid Jonker. Lourens says he no longer reads. He says you'd be surprised, when you hit forty you no longer want to read, you just want to say what you want to say. You leave reading behind you for good.

I'm twenty-three and can't imagine ever wanting to stop. Why deny yourself the pure pleasure of reading books simply so that you can write them?

"Do you attribute this to your aging or your activism?" I ask him. It's just another thing that bothers me about activism in general, and having to deal with South African politics in particular. It seems so propagandist, almost. As if any of your emotions are suspect if they are not politically motivated. As though the whole political scene in South Africa skews your point of view. Lourens quotes a poem by Niemöller to shock me out of my political apathy:

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists,

And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist;

And then they came for the trade unionists,

And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist;

And then they came for the Jews,

And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew;

And then... they came for me... And by that time there was no one left to speak up."

I get it, I get it. But I can't help pointing out that it seems a helluva high price to pay, to never *ever* be allowed to return to your native land because you're branded a Communist and a terrorist. I mean, all Cheryl had done really was join a banned organisation (the African National Congress in this instance), support Klaas' decision to flee to Botswana and had got herself arrested a couple of times.

For those few deeds, she is never allowed back home? That's a bit heavy, isn't it? Besides that, I really wasn't prepared to kill anybody ever, or to have them get killed by accident. I have to admit though, because I am white and South African, I imagine any thinking person outside of South Africa is interested only in my declaring what my political choices are, not how I manage my older sisters, say, or how I got a boyfriend.

For myself, this makes me feel as though two hands smother my face. I can't free myself. Apartheid exists, privileging me. Everything I feel the urge to think about or write about ignores this pedestal of privilege. A privilege I'm oblivious to, can't see or smell or touch, but vaguely I'm aware it's there. It holds me hostage.

We argue about Afrikaans. Lourens claims his children, and his grandchildren too, will definitely speak Afrikaans. I say no way, José. My grandmother was imprisoned in a British concentration camp when she was thirteen years old. Partly as a result she refuses to ever speak English.

My mother married an English-speaking South African Scot and though all of us spoke Afrikaans to her, we children grew up speaking English to each other. Now, I tell him, my thoughts and my dreams are all rooted in English and I wouldn't dream of

trying out my pathetic Afrikaans on Emma. English is her mother tongue. I think he's especially annoyed because he so misses the homey sounds of Afrikaans.

Johan's sitting next to me. It's early one evening and for some reason, he's pinned a hectic official smile on his face and seems to be gearing himself up to speak to Peter and me.

"So you don't want to even think about joining the ANC?" he asks. "And you both agree, it is a completely mutual decision?"

Pete tells him about the bigger cake, that capitalism and only capitalism is the solution, that we have to educate everyone, and voices his concerns about all this being perhaps not the right choice but what other choices do we have. I'm quiet. Eventually Johan asks me if I've got something to contribute because I seem awfully angry. I say no, I'm fine.

When Pete comes to bed (well, to sleeping bag: we're in a tent next to the Okavango River) he asks what's with me.

I say what do you mean what's with me, didn't his questions irritate the hell out of you as well? I'm choked up with anger. To me it is as though Johan's poking a stick through my own private murky waters, stuff I'm not ready to share with anyone yet. Things I'm not clearcut about. Why did I become furious when people in England buzzed around me asking me to sign a release-Mandela-now petition, when I'd handed one around at lunchtime in Braamfontein myself?

Political choices in South Africa are not black-and-white, strangely enough. All kinds of emotional prices are extorted, not all of them expected. You have to stump up bigtime, and people who ignore that fact, or worse, don't even know it, irritate the hell out of me. Belonging to a banned organisation costs you your freedom and your family. The way I'm feeling, all I want is for Nelson Mandela to come out of prison right now so that we can get on with our ordinary lives. I have to admit I'm really not sure of anything.

It's late and I hear voices shouting around the campfire. Cheryl is standing up and yelling at Lourens, who is not shy about shouting back. They're going at it hammers and

tongue, and I lie low in the tent, covering Emma's small ears. I can't make out what the fight is about.

When I ask Cheryl about it next morning she avoids the question and says it's all to do with differing ideologies. She adds that Thabo wants Pete and I to take some stuff to someone in Johannesburg, Soweto actually.

Lourens and Jeanette collect Marietjie and the guys, and leave us. Klaas seems angry with Cheryl, but doesn't get it off his chest. All these differences of opinion with her comrades blossom into a tipping point, the place where Cheryl went from being fine in exile to being lost in exile. The black depression she falls into takes months to lift.

And quite soon after that, when she and Klaas flee to Tanzania to an ANC school, she starts hallucinating, seeing the human dogs in camouflage that still haunt her on bad days.

As for Lourens, the last time we hear from him is a flier he sends us through the post, with Jenny and Marietjie's faces on it, saying don't mourn, fight..

8 defensiveness and mediocrity (1979-1992)

I'm beginning to feel I've led a particularly uncourageous life up to now. Furtively I look about me to see if there is anything at all I can do to help others in South Africa, but at the same time taking great care not to let myself fall down the treacherous rabbit-holes dotted about the entry signs to my home.

In 1988 my daughter's school opens voting as to whether we will be allowing domestic workers' children into our school. It seems a tiny change, but one I'm sure all our neighbours will go for because it's only fair. It shocks and disallusions me to see how many of my neighbours want to keep the children out. Their arguments are that the children will swamp or take over the school, that being from a different culture to our

culture, ours will be debased, and that in any case the domestic workers affected won't be able to afford the school fees.

At the meeting, Peter suggests that each of us with a child at school pays the school fees of one more child. His suggestion goes down like a lead balloon. In the end, though, a whole lot of us manage to persuade the board that domestic workers, who after all live in the suburb, be allowed to educate their children with ours. It's a small victory, but an eminently satisfying one. It lifts my heart to see children of all colours wearing the neighbourhood's school uniforms. I particularly enjoy seeing that the unpleasant pleats of my own old school's pale grey uniform make *all* South African girls' bums look big.

And in February 1990 Mandela is released. Whew. It feels as though the whole country can take a deep and healing breath. After having stayed at home taking care of my children for eleven years I start looking around for a job. Only one place will have me, an Afrikaans-language weekly newspaper called *Vrye Weekblad*.

I haven't been there a week when I realise I'm in sanctuary: I love these men and women. It's as though I've reached home after losing myself in the wilderness my whole life long. From editor Max to office assistant Vernon I'm enraptured with them all, taken prisoner by their particular selves. I'm disarmed and impressed by their bravery, their audacity and their off-the-wall lifestyles.

The first moment I walk through the huge oak door of their offices in Newtown I feel wonderfully at home. Everything about *Vrye Weekblad* is dangerous and charming. The newspaper is put together in an ancient old bank building in Newtown, across the way from the electric workshop, all broken windows and neglect, with Nelson Mandela's bridge undreamt of as yet. Someone tells someone else to fuck off, but how can I put it, without malice? Caressingly, almost. A dark woman in Doc's (the ankle-boot kind: cherry red), her serene face halfhidden under unmanageable frizz, sleeps on an orange threadbare couch dwarfed in the dusty room, sun pouring down on her through tall windows, dust mites floating upwards. The couch beams a Bollywood welcome mainly

because of its coat of many colours. Pink, turquoise and yellow shawls sprawl over it with green stuffing dribbling at one corner. Desks stand around haphazardly with messy computers on top. The light smells of freshly gound coffee.

Max the editor comes over, shakes hands, gives me a T-shirt to welcome me, keeps his voice down so that we don't wake the sleeping journalist. She wakes anyhow and he says to her that if anyone wants him later that afternoon to tell them he can't help them, he is with God. Audrey yawns and says Christ, Max, I thought you *were* God. Someone trips over the mass of extension cords plugged into the computers. The plugs rip out. There's ominous silence, then barrages of verbal grafitti, groans. Max is all no compromise, next time they'll remember to save their work every ten seconds.

Should I have taken my legacy of Afrikanerdom more seriously? Is that it? I adore them all, prodigally and voluptuously, can't wait to get to work in the mornings.

A young man Ryno is speaking of love. I'm supposed to be answering the phone but can't drag myself away to do so. Ryno says that to be in love with a writer, you have to love his work. I so disagree, I can't shut up. I say that's just suffocating, having people you love decorate you with their expectations. If you don't write well enough, I say exasperated, do you honestly believe they will stop loving you? Yes, he says, yes. Oh, yes.

But what sort of love is that? I start raising my voice. I can't stop fidgeting. If you can't expect unconditional love from your partner, where will you get it?

He looks at me so compassionately. Nowhere, he says. I'm sorry. Nowhere. You ought to know that by now. Only your mother and your father, if you are very lucky indeed, will love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair.

I'm getting really worked up when Max shouts from the other side of the office.

"Harriet, answer the fucking phone!"

Another time, journalist Klippies Msindwana and I go and cover a boring press conference. We're returning to the office in my ancient Beetle, when we see two men dressed in khaki pounding on the office door. The men look a lot like each other. They're both

wearing long beige trousers, short beige shirts with epaulets and have (I peer closely) yes, a bible under each left arm. An old-fashioned kind, big with black covers. It dawns on me that the hand each is knocking with has a gun in the fist, pointing upwards. Their moustaches bristle with aggression and self-righteousness.

Sensibly, no-one opens the door. We're still sitting in the car, looking at the men and debating whether to park. Klippies decides for me.

"I don't think Max needs us back in the office this afternoon. Do me a favour, Squeeza, get out of here. You can drop me at the station!"

Next morning Max says the police took their beauty sweet time to arrive. They'd had to call the cops because these men banged and kicked for over an hour. Luckily the door of the old bank building is tough.

Finally, a few weeks later a bomb goes off during the night at our office, destroying part of that same heavy front door. It seems strange, but Max seems elated rather than upset, and I wonder if it's part of his job, that he has to be a bit screwed-up to be able to cope with the constant stress of nearly being killed. I imagine he's smiling because of the happiness of relief. The rightwing did its worst, and it wasn't too bad.

To my sorrow, I have to leave *Vrye Weekblad*. Pete's got a job drawing the Katse Dam in Lesotho and we move out of South Africa for a few years.

Just before we leave, I get to go to the Olympic Games as a volunteer, accompanying two young girls with life-threatening illnesses for the SABC and for the first time in my life, get into trouble with security.

I'm only in Barcelona with these kids for one week. It's 1992, the first time South Africa has competed in the Olympic Games for thirty-two years.

In other words, this is a great big bloody deal.

The children are in good spirits and never allow the fact that they're horrendously ill get in the way of their having fun. We're part of a larger group from all over Africa.

You have to understand us South Africans' point of view. We're definitely over-excited. Nelson Mandela is out of prison, we have a government in transition, and we're simply overflowing with pride and joy. A small thorn in our sides is that we don't have a new flag yet. And, worse, our old orange, white and blue one is banned from the Olympics. The Olympic Committee hammers a new flag together for us.

It's shit.

A country's symbol isn't something you can quickly conjure up just like that. It upsets all of us that South Africa's been lumped with a small grey blanket of a flag with some arbitrary circles on it. No-one knows (or cares) whose flag that is. So there we sit, flagless wonders. All very well banning our old flag, but at present the old oranje, blanje, blues is the only one we have, the flag we all grew up with and hate – mostly.

It's the athletics meet and we hope we'll get a gold medal in the women's ten thousand metres. The stadium's pretty empty, but it's obvious there's quite a lot of South Africans supporting Elana Meyer by the odd shouts here and there.

I've brought Max's T-shirt along, the one he gave me when I joined *Vrye Weekblad*. It's basically orange white and blue, but in front, shoving the colours to one side is the brave shield and spear of the ANC shot through with gold, black and green. It's also got a forlorn Voortrekker monument stuck on somewhere. Not your standard rightwing supporter's flag. I start waving it around above my head.

Unfortunately, though, the subtlety of ANC colours is lost on the officials and I'm busted. I'm told to leave the stadium. To my dismay, I start getting pushed out. One little push, and all my resistance crumbles! These security guards are not nearly as menacing as any officials in South Africa. No weapons for a start, just little radios that at a pinch they could sklonk me over the head with and I'm already panicking, giving up. It strikes me again how very many levels there are of courage. I give over embarrassingly quickly, take the T-shirt and bundle it up into my bag. And then I'm allowed back to my seat.

But by that time more South Africans have dragged out their secreted flags. To my glee we start to gather together. The flags lure us into a clump. Barcelona's security officials get really jumpy. Small Catalans in black uniforms talk earnestly into their radios, start pushing paths through us, shouting something like "Sente, Siéntese".

Strangely, as soon as we South Africans as a group are threatened, we start speaking Afrikaans. Some of us are black, some white, some English-speaking South Africans and some Afrikaans, but Afrikaans becomes our lingua franca. (Cheryl once wrote to tell me this happened in Tanzania as well, in a different way. When people arrived at Solomon Mahlangu School, claiming to be South African, someone would question them in Afrikaans. Afrikaans is the secret language of South Africans!) Poor old Elana's looking a bit embarrassed by all the fuss we're creating. Remember, to run ten thousand metres she has to pass our group twenty-five times, poor thing. She's looking shy but also sort of pleased. She gets a silver, honourably beaten by Ethiopia's Derarte Tulu.

To the badly upset officials, we must have seemed a Boer equivalent of English soccer hooligans and they seem suprised when there's no Mass Action of the Rightwing kind. When the race is over, we pick up our litter, fold away our little banned flags, and leave the stadium in an orderly fashion.

South African we may be, but we could have given their English commentator a lesson in good manners. He has the racist cheek to say, about a contestant in a different race: "There he goes, in typical African style, shooting away much too fast."

Enough to make your hair stand on end.

At the same time as these Olympics are going on, my sister Theresa's work is part of a small exhibition near the Sagrada Familias. I drag the two girls with me to go and have a look at it. Previously I'd seen one of her exhibitions in London. Even though I love her stuff very much, I can't get over the prices her agent is asking for her paintings. To my amazement he obviously knew what he was doing, because every single one was sold.

This particular exhibition has gathered together the work of various outsider artists throughout the world. Theresa's got four pieces on the show. The one called *Communion* seems comfortingly familiar. She's used her usual smallish square format again, but this time she's packed nine of them into a square to make up the single painting. Somewhere in the write-up below it has that quote from the Bible about whenever you do this, think of me.

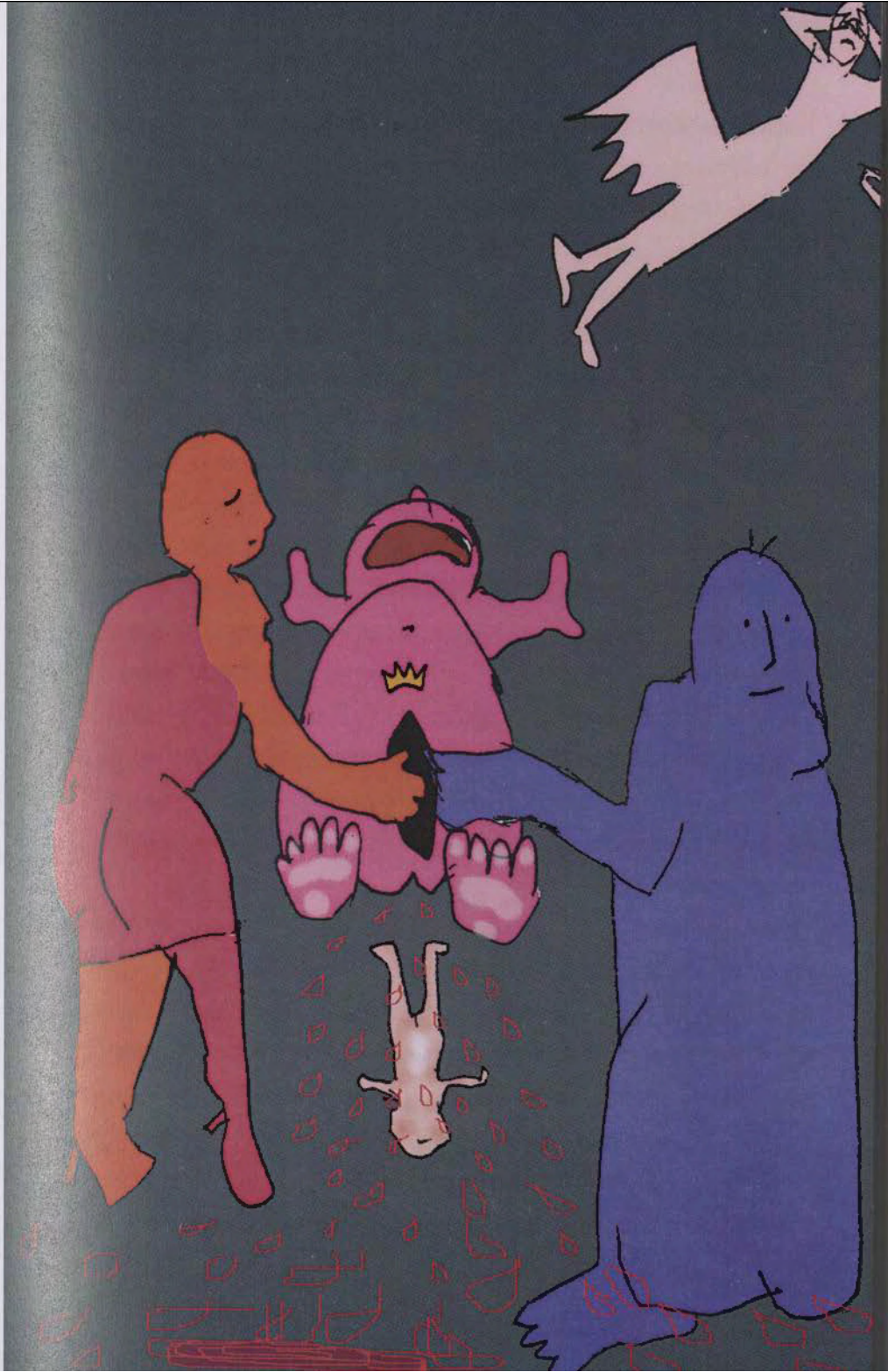
The first square's a small coke bottle, half-full, and half-a-loaf of white bread. Next a cup of tea and two Baker's assorted biscuits. The third, a glass of red wine and a Pyott's cream cracker. A glass of milk with a tower of cookies. And so on. All nine squares have an air of violence about them: every drink, even the milk, seems to barely withhold the spilling of blood. Just looking at them, I wonder how my sister is really. Her works seems so angry. But I'm shocked as I move onto the next piece.

In fact, her other paintings paralyse me. My legs can't hold me up, I have to sit on the floor. It suddenly becomes crystal clear, as though Theresa were standing in front of me and articulating (as she never did), that she was expecting a baby when she arrived home swinging her sword in nineteen sixty-nine.

How betrayed she must have felt. Betrayed by all of us. And alone. Did she plan to ask Jackie for help? Did she even know for sure she was pregnant when she went to Cape Town? Perhaps she thought Jackie, her more worldly sister, would know what to do, how to tell. And then the awfulness of how terribly alone she was hit her. Jackie didn't even have a place for her to stay, let alone the ability to hear about an illegitimate child. The word bipolar had not yet been coined. Theresa was locked up, diagnosed as manic depressive and the baby taken away without any further ado.

Looking at the paintings and scanning the copious notes beneath them, bound in gold and black, I read – nearly fainting – and see.

Oh, dear, Theresa. Your sword didn't protect you at all, did it? It didn't protect you at all. They took it away from you, the baby as well. On your left, God meaning well, a little



hesitant, concerned, and on your right, the devil, flattering and oh so charming. Together they laid you on a high white table.

As that first electrical current surged through you, your thoughts stood still.

Later you remembered only the angels gazing at you, touching you lightly with their feathery wings. You focus on two figures in particular, in each painting.

Is that your mother on your left side, your father on the right, each with their arms up inside you? Helping to hurry up and get that girl-child out of there, the one you were too mad to bring up? The one you wanted to call Xolile? And what would the neighbours say, indeed?

Everyone – her doctors, psychiatrist and parents – everyone would have agreed she was incapable of taking care of a child. Not her sisters though.

We wouldn't have agreed, would we? Jackie would have fought for her, if she'd known. Wolf-like she'd have been red in tooth and claw for that baby's life. And I would have thrown cloths of patchwork and power over them both. I was thirteen, and didn't know much. However, I did know one thing.

Even at that tender age, I knew enough never ever to trust anyone over thirty.

In a daze I gather the children under my wings and we walk back to the hotel.

We're on the bus off to the airport and someone raises the question of which five-minute periods of your life would you like to re-live? The women, without exception, say the few minutes they held their babies in their arms for the first time. The thought sears, what with Theresa's work still burning in my brain, but still: I can't help thinking they're nuts. I have to banish this most unthinking form of self-deception. For me, no. But only then does it occur to me how lucky I was that I did not have a post-partum psychosis.

Obviously *that* was why my mother had hovered over me like a mother hen over one chick just after I'd had Emma. And why she and my father had beamed and beamed as

though Emma was their favourite grandchild when I'd brought her back safely from Cheryl's wedding, three weeks old and covered in mosquito bites.

It was relief that I hadn't gone crazy shining out of their faces, not grandparently fondness!

I think, as I sit on the bus next to these two girls that I've spent the past week with, that okay fine, happiest moments and my children are inextricably linked. Just picturing their faces sends a wave of gladness surging through me. And even as I'm having that thought it occurs to me how common it is, and commonplace as well, but it clatters down the centuries into my head and the long resonance of it shakes me.

An almighty tap root. I'm in the company of the blessed and my happiest moments swarm thick and fast like flying ants in a summer street.

All five of us lying on the grass in Formosa forest looking up at the stars and waiting for new year. Millions of kilometres between us and Orion striding upside-down across the sky, flashing his belt at us.

Emma's primary school graduation. Christmas last year, when we'd spent the day at Silver Mine, diving in water the colour of Coke and seeing no further than the tip of your elbow in it. And here's Johannesburg below us, and no more re-living of any moments for the time being.

9 reprehensible (1994)

We're all at a braai in Lesotho. I'm mixing with my least favourite group of people, the expats. They're having fun disparaging South Africa. There's a man from Australia drinking Castle. Possibly he can't help being so offensive. He's waving his beer around, all the while going on about how disgusting white South Africans are. I catch a bit of his conversation.

"Have to say: never go there. South Africa's a real dump. I catch a plane from Sydney to London, from London to Nairobi, and then fly to Maseru so I don't have to put my foot on the sodding place."

I reach my hand towards his face and knock his beer out of his grip onto the ground.

"Oh, sorry," I say, "Whoops! Wait a minute. No. Hang on, I take my apology back!

"I've actually done you a favour, seeing it was only a South African brew," and I stalk off, with him staring after me not sure what to do. I don't bump into this man again until during the war.

One starry Lesotho night in 1994 (before South Africa's first-ever democratic elections, that is) while sleeping peacefully, I dream there's a war on. The dream becomes very loud and very intrusive. Bombs go off, guns sound like fire crackers (or vice versa?), and people shout at random moments. In fact the dream quickly begins to morph into a nightmare so I wake myself up. The noise doesn't stop. Blow me down if it isn't *actually* a war. I'm in a war-zone.

Worse. Much worse. Pete and the kids are out of town in our only car. They've gone away for two weeks. I'm on my own in Maseru without wheels. I walk out of our company home towards the Lesotho Sun. It's a triangular house, Swiss-looking, with five storeys, basically one room per storey. The advantages are that one small anthracite heater heats the entire house (hot air rises) and that you get plenty of exercise running up and down the stairs.

The Lesotho Sun's entrance is blocked with a tank and barbed wire. I see my tall blonde friend from England striding towards the hotel and I run to catch up with her. She's laughing.

"This is a hoot, eh, Harriet?" she says, slinging her hair back over her shoulders. I'm not quite so amused. I must say I find the stiff upper-lippishness and general cheeriness when things go badly wrong that you find among certain British people quite daunting. "Come on, we have to go see what's happening!"

We run to the hotel, well, to be accurate, I run to keep up with Longlegs who's walking quite calmly. Bullets zing over our heads sounding like bees. It's strange hearing these fake insects, knowing that quite possibly one of them could hit you before you hear it. We find a crew of BBC news people at the hotel and they're trying to make their way to the roof. We know exactly how to find the roof owing to many drunken evenings and we lead them upstairs. Mortar shells fly over our heads. I can't believe how calm I start becoming. I'm pleased as I stand on the roof next to my tall friend that I finally seem to have found some kind of fatalistic serenity inside myself.

From on top of the hotel we have a 360 degree view over hilly Maseru and can see both factions: the junior officers at Maseru's Makoanyane Barracks, who are the ones apparently causing all the trouble, and the smaller and nominally more loyal army members at Ratjomose Base at the other end of town.

The Makoanyane guys ran along the lowish mountains snaking behind their barracks one side of Maseru and began lobbing shells in the direction of Ratjomose, over the hotel and our heads. These shells were causing a lot of damage to residential areas lying immediately below the line of fire (as far as we could tell from the top of the hotel). Apparently the troops from Ratjomose got enraged by this insolence, stormed and then occupied the same mountains, beating the others back because by then there were more of them. Luckily in the end not too many people are hurt.

Someone from the BBC asks me to volunteer to take care of a few children with cancer and I jump at the offer. Her charity has offered to pay for three young people and a minder to visit Semonkong (a holiday destination, the name meaning smoke, which refers to a huge waterfall) while the war limps on in Maseru.

It's easy enough to identify three disadvantaged kids with cancer in need of a holiday, but apparently just about impossible to find a responsible volunteer. I'm not doing anything, have no ties at present and after all I'd brought two girls in my care back alive and well from Barcelona.

This time my travelling companions are three boys, all about seventeen and all of them have cancer. We're on our way to Semonkong in a taxi when something really reprehensible happens inside me: I fall in love with a child.

This is beyond the pale. Besides anything else, I'm in my mid-thirties, am happily married and have three children of my own. I can't believe this is happening! I try to ignore my feelings and push them away.

Much later, when I confide in my friend Ryno about this unfortunate series of events and show him a photograph of the boy, he laughs and says oh, no, Harriet, it was simply

your maternal instinct kicking in! I thought you meant he was a man of the world!

One thing Tebogo is definitely not, is a man of the world. But, what is it that happens to me? I know it should have been maternal affection. After all, my daughter's only two years younger than this boy!

Well, then, the facts. We're on our way to Semonkong. Man-of-the-world Lebogang is the liveliest and easiest to talk to of the three. He's always cadging sweets and looking at girls. Tsepo is small and thin with worried eyes and Tebogo, the youngest, is quiet, gentle and huge, nearly seven foot tall and nearly as broad as he is tall. I'm going along in my capacity as a freelance PR person and writer. I expect the BBC wants some publicity out of it. I'll have to write an article or two. No such thing as a free lunch. (Bitter laugh – how's this for an eye-catching headline: *Charity worker molests cancer child?*).

Arriving in Semonkong is a bit like walking towards a blowdryer full face. It is unseasonably hot, thirty-one degrees at eight in the morning. We have cold showers as soon as we get to our accommodation, which consists of two free-standing chalets with bathrooms en suite. We then go for a swim in the river.

In their bathing suits, the boys stand out from the rest of the young people. You can see then, why they are said to be "suffering" from cancer. They have odd scars and misshapen hollows, bruises that won't go away. But they're not focusing on themselves and their wounds. Tsepo and Lebogang are checking out the girls, the foreign young girls from America and Canada who have been sent away from Maseru because there's a war on.

Tebogo, though, seems oblivious to them and jumps into the river like a large bouncy hippopotamus. The water is warm, light-blue and dirty. The light around the waterfall is like that of the film *Death in Venice* with something of that film's pale menace lurking behind it, a menace that's such an integral part of Africa. Tebogo gets dragged in near the waterfall by a sucking-in current but after a concerted effort, manages to swim away from the danger.

I'm relieved he manages to free himself from the whirlpool-like current because I have no idea what I would have done if he hadn't. No paramedics, no nine-one-one. By the time he gets out, panting heavily, the other two have gone back to the chalets. To tease him a little and to lighten my own frantic fears about his near-death experience, I ask him what he thinks of the young girls, some of whom are sitting around without their bikini tops on.

"I think they should cover themselves," he says moodily. Oh dear, why should I worry that a young man has an odd reaction to the perfectly beautiful bodies around us? Why must I feel I have to rush into a Ms Fixit outfit? Why must I always feel that if there is healing to be done I must be the one that goes ahead and carries it out? I say nothing.

Later that evening there's dancing. We have wine and lots of champagne, courtesy of the BBC (unwittingly: I don't somehow think they'd be best pleased if they knew I was pouring liquor down under-age throats like there was no tomorrow. The thing is, though, there might well be no tomorrow for these guys. They are scarily sick.) And we get to bed after one.

Next morning the wake-up call at five am makes me groan. Tsepo and Lebogang simply carry on sleeping, but Tebogo and I make an effort. We get into the Land Rover for a day trip to Thaba Ntso and Senqunyane.

It's a long drive and sitting next to Tebogo is like a balm in itself. He is so big and so quiet, it is like sitting in the shade of a big tree. The driver follows the route to Thaba Ntso and carries on to Liphamoleng village which is balanced on the edge of the Senqunyane gorge, looking giddily down into its dark depths. I experimentally lean my calf muscle quite close to Tebogo's – within a hair's breadth – and yes, this burning feeling I have licking all over my skin is in fact emanating from him. Is it affecting him as well? I look up into his face in terror, but he's as serene as ever, gazing out of the window. I am heartily ashamed of myself.

Another perfect evening during the short war in Lesotho and I'm talking to Tebogo about his illness. He says he'd just got back from a holiday with his parents when he decided to go for a run. He couldn't get past their front gate, he was so tired. That exhaustion went on for quite a while and eventually he landed up in hospital. It was a thing this big (he indicates a size) growing between his heart and lungs. They hit it with chemo, he says, and now it's only about the size of my fist.

I'm horrified.

"But why don't they just remove it altogether?" I ask.

"Thing is," he says, "If just one cell gets away then it could start to grow again in a different place. No, it's better like this. It's fine. I'm fine."

But it's just too ineffably romantic. I'm remembering Kay in Hans Christian Anderson's story, the one called *The Snow Queen*. Kay gets this piece of ice in his eye that makes him incapable of recognising love, almost causing him to self-destruct. To me this cancer in Tebogo is like a piece of ice lodged between his most vital organs, poised to destroy this big beautiful person at any moment.

Another day goes by. It's evening and I'm walking next to Tebogo at a market. Mangoes, avocado pears, apples, bananas, oranges. God, I'm hyper-ventilating I think. I need a paper-bag.

I'm finding these waves of desire extremely difficult to overcome.

"What's wrong," Tebogo asks. I can't bear to look at him. What's the point of saying I'm swooning here, little boy, run away! I feel like hugging him around the knees, curling up at his feet. I tell him nothing's wrong, but add I think I'll go back to the bus, keeping my voice neutral. I avoid looking at him. I say my mantra. You are thirty-seven, you have a loving husband and three children.

I don't know what you're talking about, says my brassy seventeen-year-old self, her hand on her hip. I hadn't noticed she was there.

I look for the other two kids I'm supposed to be looking after. I can feel Tebogo look-

ing over at me every now and then, concerned. I think how ridiculous of me. All that's the matter with me is I am dying to take you in my arms! I'm fainting for love! I keep my arms sternly at my sides.

It isn't long before we find the other boys, involved in elephant hair rings and wooden sculptures. It's getting dark.

"Oh here you are! I'm off! Do you want me to take your stuff?"

"Please," they say gratefully, handing me their bags of nartjies and gifts.

"Yours?" I ask Tebogo.

"No ways," he says. "Are you sure you're alright?" I nod. I don't want to speak in case my voice sounds tearful. I'm finding his concern extremely touching. I wander off back to the bus. The shouts and cries of the market are soon behind me. We're parked near a dark brown river, dotted with beige boulders. I stand in the cool water, which laps over my feet. No-one's about. I strip off, balancing the boys' items carefully on my clothes so that they don't get dusty. As I walk into the water I think of Tebogo saying, it's funny, even though this is Africa it feels safe here, not like usual when you feel you're lucky to get away with your life.

It does feel safe. Warm, mild and secure, the river's like a wrinkled grandmother. I lie about in the water, looking up at the small sliver of moon I can see past the windows of the bus. Strange bits bump into my legs under the water – I'm glad I can't see what they are. (Fish or bits of filth?) After just the right length of time I hear people in the distance and I have enough time to pull on my clothes without any unseemly haste.

It takes me hours to get to sleep. I'm longing for Tebogo. For his huge presence, looming at my side. I get such a kick out of his size. I love that towering feeling he brings with him wherever he goes. Eventually I fall asleep but I'm awoken almost at once from a dream in which a dead bird is stifling my mouth. Somebody's knocking. I wrap myself in a sheet and open the door. Tebogo.

"Sorry to bother you," he says. "But I can't wake Tsepo. He's inside, asleep, with

the key of course, and I can't wake him up. You have got a spare key to our room, haven't you?"

I blink at him, trying to rouse myself, make sense of what he is saying. But it does seem as though he is really and truly saying all he needs is the key. He takes it and soon I hear a cheerful shout reassuring me he's inside thanks, and goodnight.

To me, it was just another indication of the wide chasm between our ages and attitudes. And yet, how totally impossible it would have been had he come to my room in the same spirit as I might have dreamt of going to his. I toss and turn the rest of the night away, eventually get up with the merciless sun flagellating its way through the flimsy curtains.

It's Sunday and wiry Lebogang wants to go to mass. He tells me I don't have to come, but I insist on accompanying him. I need to repent! He buys a candle, and bends his head for a long time after he lights it. I wonder if he is praying for his leukaemia to be healed. It must be frightening, looking at the statistics – a fifty-percent cure rate – and looking at yourself, male, pubescent, the wrong sex and the wrong age for luck to be on your side, and wondering if you'll make it. I say a quick prayer to the God for whom I have no time:

"Let this boy live, come on, I dare you, you can do it if you try!" Not that I have any hope. God's busy doing His damnedest to show He doesn't care one way or the other.

We wander quietly up and down the aisle of the church. It is cool and peaceful inside. Eventually we notice a little knot of people gathering, and we join them. The doors close and the mass begins. For a ceremony of which I understand not one word, it is remarkably absorbing. I wonder whether its power lies in the fact that you are forced to sit quietly with nothing to distract you so that you can think.

And it's blessedly cool.

We only get back to the others in the evening. It's our last evening. I feel my face light up as soon as I see Tebogo.

"I missed you today!" I say. "Both of you!" I add, lamely.

"Let's go eat!" says Tsepo eagerly, "Im starving!" For such a frail-looking boy, he eats like a hyena.

"Your mother must quake every time you walk into the kitchen," I begin, but we head off to the dining-room and order steak and chips. The boys each have beer and I have two glasses of red wine. The next thing I notice is that the place seems darkish, Tsepo and Lebogang have gone and Tebogo is pulling me to my feet.

"Where did the others go?" I ask.

"We're going to swim," says Tebogo. "They've gone on ahead."

"Oh great, I love swimming. But: was I asleep just then?"

"No. Why?"

"It's just that I didn't see them go."

"Too much wine, eh," he says, but as though he is thinking of other things. I let it go, thinking I'm sure I hadn't had too much, but in an odd way time had collapsed for a few moments. I shrug it off.

Tebogo and I walk down to the river. The waterfall heaves itself over the edge with a desperate energy as though it's a last-ditch stand: one that carries on and on perpetually. I strongly resist an urge to slip my hand through his arm. Lucky, in a way, that he is so tall, because it would make holding onto him an awkward manoeuvre. I can't wait to get into the water. I feel as though I'm on fire. Not only is my face burning, but it's as though I have uncomfortable little flames licking at my arms and legs and at all the more private crannies of my old body.

Old? That word never crops up in my head. I'm out of age. I'm trying to remain conscious of the Harriet who's in society, but my mind and my body want to skip the fact. I'm out-of-age Harriet.

No swimsuit, I think as we reach the water's edge.

"Do you think anyone'll mind if we swim in our underwear?" I ask, meaning him. Tebogo says it's fine. We walk into the water. I'm wearing a nice-ish lacy bra and a

rather raggedy pair of pants. I slip off a rock, fall into the water and sit up spluttering, looking very uncool as my teenage daughter would put it. We go in deeper, me giggling and wiping sand out of my eyes and Tebogo rather quiet. I yell that I can't walk any more, it's too deep.

Tebogo turns round, and picks me up. He holds me up with his hands under my arms, either side of my breasts. At his touch, I am lost. I cling to his shoulder and rest my face on his chest. I've been wanting to hold him for such a long time. He bends and kisses me. It's a wonderful kiss, so gentle, so warm, I could have gone on kissing him forever. I push away from him and mutter into his shoulder that I am so sorry. I don't want to spoil anything for him in his future. I am really sorry. It's just that he is so like a man it is hard for me to believe he is only a boy. He is a perfect imitation of a man.

If time had seemed to contract earlier, now it was expanding. We float in the river, out of time, particularly letting go of each other in the warm evening river. Eventually I tell him that I have to do something wrenchingly difficult, and get out the water and go away. I tell him he is beautiful. I tell him I don't want to spoil it for him and someone else, someone his age, someone in his future.

I don't allow the thought, but he mightn't have one.

He asks me if I am going to be okay and I get out before I have to reply. I don't say it of course, but obviously I am not going to be okay. I just hope I can make it and don't die of over-emotion before I reach the chalet. I stumble out of the river, grab my stuff and have another cold shower, before I lie down under the sheet not bothering to dry off properly.

And the next day he's ashamed of the kiss, young, guilty and disapproving. On the other hand I don't even wonder why I feel no guilt. I feel none of that. Fundamentally if not intellectually that kiss has nothing to do with my children or my husband. It has something to do with an echo of a passionate piece of my life that trumpeted once more.

When I finally see Pete again I limpet onto him as though I'll never let him go and drag him to bed even though he's supposed to be at work that morning.

Oh, as for the man from Australia who was drinking Castle. We're driving to Maseru and when we pass the border traffic, who do I see?

Is it possible? There he is, queueing up at the border, trying to get to safety in South Africa, away from all the shooting and desperation in Maseru.

Of course I can't resist, "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry to see you *have* to put your foot in the sodding place! You poor little thing!"

He pulls a zap sign at me as we drive past him. But I smile at him forgivingly.

third interlude

It was nearly eleven by the time the six women had showered, washed their hair, applied an assortment of creams and depilatories to parts of their bodies, and found themselves together in the sauna. The heat of the coals caught in the throat.

"What do you make of it so far, Callie?" asked Thalia, pushing herself back onto the hot slats with pleasure.

"It's all about borders, anyway," said Callie authoritatively. "Having been born in South Africa – that loose cannon of a fishbowl – to Harriet the rest of the world appears upside down. Look at the scene where she masturbates next to her brother–"

"Hang on," said Lerato, "Experiencing an orgasm involuntarily next to someone isn't exactly masturbating."

"Possibly, but it wasn't the first time she'd read *Under Milk Wood*. But I'm more interested in the physical borders of the country. When she crosses into Botswana, for example, her surroundings begin to pressgang her towards some sense of normalcy. She finds she can breathe in Botswana. And then again, when she hears of the abortion in Spain, and after that paedophiliac episode in Lesotho, she gains what I can best describe as a lack of waveriness. She seems not to teeter quite as much."

Lerato, one hand holding the ends of her towel as though not to grant banks of imaginary voyeurs peeping through the sauna's close-fitting planks the slightest glimpse of her body, got up to ladle water on the rocks. Through the burst of steam, she took care not to glance at the other five as she asked whether any of them had any idea what had happened to that young boy.

Thalia sat up, her breasts loping ahead as if intent on asserting their fierce independence from her body and its static stance. "Yes, I heard something. He's dead."

An alert look came over Cleo's face, unusual in that she normally gave off such an air of languor it was as though she moved perpetually on the border between sleep and wakefulness. "His story's over. But *her* part–"

"He's definitely dead. Don't look at me like that, Lerato! And it *was* inappropriate –"

"I'm sorry, excuse me, I have to ask, why do you think so?" Lerato replaced the water container precisely on its watermark, still faintly visible on the plank floor, and straightened up, with her back to the sauna door, possibly to prevent anyone leaving, or in fact, entering, until the question had been replied to to her entire satisfaction.

"Everybody – Why are you getting so uptight?" asked Cleo. Her usually bored eyebrows arched maliciously.

"I just... I simply want to know why you're kind of accusing Harriet of being a

paedophile or something, for heaven's sake. We're not talking *little children* here –"

"A child's a child, Lerato! She was old enough to be his *mother* –"

All five women beamed their formidable visages at Lerato.

She clenched her fists at her sides and began: "Tebogo died two months after that incident. If indeed Harriet had kindled something inappropriate in him, why did he manage to fall in love and have a relationship during that brief period between life and death? Remember his distaste at the bare-breasted girls at Semonkong?

"That reaction wouldn't have shifted to one side so quickly if Harriet hadn't paraded her middle-aged charms in front of him. He had so little time.

"Almost directly, once he was back in Maseru, he hooked up with a girl a year ahead of him in school, and they spent three weeks clutching at each other in broom cupboards. Making the beast with two backs with abandon behind the janitor's hut.

"And," she spread her arms at shoulder level and smiled. "I'm glad about that."

Callie lifted her legs up onto the warm wooden bench in front of her so that she could hug them against her body. She braced herself into the corner so that her back flattened against the pale wood of the wall, vertebra by vertebra.

"I would have thought," she said, pulling her mouth into a straight line, "If it were me, I'd have thought to weigh the thing up properly. Did you consider the future of that poor girl in any way? What will become of the bastard he quickened inside her?"

"As for that," Lerato gazed at Callie's notebook, the pages of which were wilting rather, in the heat of the moment and the sauna. "As for that, of course I did. Tebogo's parents had only the one son, and the child may make some small recompense. Every baby drags his own small burden of love along behind him."

10 the house under the brixton tower (1997)

Theresa's husband Irish Fred died in a car accident, though not before fathering her son, Benjamin. Theresa coped well with the tragedy. She moved back to South Africa and managed to support her little boy not only by selling paintings, which she shipped out regularly to Fred's parents, but by teaching art at a girl's school.

Two years or so after Fred's death, she fell in love with the home economics teacher at the school. Simone moved in with Theresa in 1990. Ben grew up in a stable and happy home with two adoring parents and all went well.

Theresa's Irish parents-in-law had established her position as a respected artist and Simone liaised with them regularly, marketing her work both locally and overseas, and making sure she produced enough pieces for an exhibition in London once a year.

Her most famous work (but most ruinous one) was the interior of her house, or to be perfectly accurate, the interior of Simone's house that she basically pirated.

Simone bought a modest house in Johannesburg under the Brixton tower and, after their son Ben left home to live in London, Theresa started modifying it. Quite drastically. She ruined it for living in, though it was beautiful to look at.

The exhibition opening was held in the street at two o' clock on a Saturday afternoon in the late nineties. I arrived early to help with the wine and eats, and also to have a sneak preview, as Theresa and Simone hadn't allowed anyone near for weeks.

I gasped as I walked through the front door. With the door closed behind me, the sun shone through triangles of cellophane paper glued all over its glass panels and windows. Stately, like stained-glass, but with a hint of the carnival because the triangles repeated themselves. Harlequinlike. It took my breath away, and I could see why the exhibition had been organised for a Saturday afternoon in winter. The Highveld sun played its part splendidly. Light streamed in from above my head. Then I noticed the big holes gouged out of the pressed ceiling.

Guiltily I thought well Simone must surely think art is its own reward, but I was glad it wasn't my house that had been basically vandalised in the name of beauty.

Guests were starting to arrive and I thought I had better go back outside and start serving glasses of wine. I recognised the arts journalists from two national news-

papers and then a tv crew drew up outside. As they were unpacking their equipment there was a hullabaloo at the gate. Oh dear. Craig.

After leaving the army Craig found he'd saved enough money to buy his dream car, secondhand. It was a bright red Alfa Romeo, a bit old and wrecked by now.

There he was, trying not to rev it too much at the front gate. The car looked a curiously hazy orange rather than its usual red. He screeched to a stop, almost driving into the back of the SABC truck. Both doors of the car sprung open and four men leapt out as though they'd been shot out of catapults.

"The hose!" roared Craig. He grabbed Theresa's hose from Peter, who'd been peacefully watering the garden, and turned it full blast, twisting in his hands. One of his friends opened the bonnet and the car's engine erupted with flames: apparently it had been on fire all the way down the road to the exhibition.

Luckily nothing fazed Craig for long. He looked yearningly down the road for a minute, while his burnt-out shell got towed away and then turned to walk through the exhibition. He wandered into the garage and said: "Hey! I bet Theresa put this here for me!"

"What?" I went over. I hadn't realised the garage was an installation in itself.

"Yup," he said, "I once told her what sort of personality was needed for my job. You have to find the kind of guy, I told her, who'll look at a button on the wall that says 'Do not press'."

"Oh," said I, "You mean the kind of guy who has to go ahead and press the button, even though it clearly states – "

"No!" he said, "No. Not the kind who'll simply press it. You need the kind of guy that will buzz around this button obsessively until he finds a way to discover what it's going to do without pressing it and THEN he presses it."

He pointed into the garage. He was right, it had exactly that feeling, even though there wasn't a red button or instruction in sight. The entire garage wall was swathed in the inevitable curls of wire and electrical bits that men seem to attract to themselves

like flies to Pigpen. Tools hung from the rafters, spattered in drips of paint, and smeared with fingerprints. Scuffmarks and staples embedded in bricks. The entire garage gave off an unmistakeable and comical whiff of Craig.

As for the kitchen, in it wild arcs of blue paint smothered one entire wall, including the cupboards and the geyser. Streaked, smudged and dripped over these hung gouts of blood, – well, alizarin crimson actually– and written underneath was "Whose blood runs down the firmament?"

The other side of the kitchen had the clock outlined in heavy-handed black and that wall was covered in rich cobalt with gold leaf, interspersed with pieces of weaving and quilting. I saw (with a twinge of regret) a piece of a patchwork cushion I had made Theresa many years ago. It was barely covering a wavery pink kind of figure that seemed to need propping up.

Wait a minute! I started looking more closely. It struck me. The whole house was a series of portraits. In this kitchen were... okay, there was Lina-Wena's apron, her Reckitt's Blue splashed around all over, the movements she'd made with the polisher, and the kwaito music she used to listen to: all quite clearly part of the work.

As for that patchwork-cushioned drip of a person: that was me! The frizzy hair, the shoulders all uneven and insecure, the cringing stance. And that was surely Jackie next to me, spiky and unquestioning. Women's work all over, not only sewing, pottery, beadwork, but the repetitiveness of housework, cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing.

The kitchen was stuffed with the women in Theresa's life. Her sisters were compressed into a tiny nook in one corner, but we were there alright.

In some ways it reminded you of Helen Martins' Owl House in Nieuw Bethesda, and certainly at least one of the works reflected Martins' influence directly. This was in one of the bedrooms. On the floor was a small hessian sack, reminiscent of the buck skin sack discarded in a corner somewhere in the Owl House. (Two feet stick out of that sack, a cloven hoof and a foot). Theresa's sack looked lumpy and as though it concealed some-

thing fleshy, with disgusting ooze leaking out of it. She'd painted the entire interior of this bedroom with shiny black enamel paint – including the pressed ceiling! – and covered most of it with smelly, runny bitumen. She'd covered the windows, the wall and the inside of the door. Above the lintel on the outside she'd gouged the words "*X marks the spot*" and filled them with her favourite alizarin crimson.

I have to admit I am slow to catch on. It was only after I looked at Ben's bedroom, the baby clothes wafting in mid-air, secured with fishing-line and looking like strung beads or bubbles against magnificent layers of blue – blue Rothko walls – that I realised the other bedroom was of course the aborted baby's, Xolile's.

Later on I learnt that particular bedroom caused an insurmountable altercation between Simone and Theresa.

In the main bedroom, the bed itself was covered with a densely textured Turkish kelim in shades of blue with the odd thread of shocking pink. All very well, sounds beautiful, but it had been burnt. A huge crater in the middle of the bed, going deep down,

reached the wooden floor. You could see mattress springs and layers of textures, from duck-down extorted from the duvet, to the remains of a lovely red Basotho blanket I'd given them, to linen sheets, like an archeological dig. And the bed was chained to the floor with bathroom plug links and bicycle locks. The dressing-table was covered with female frippery and the mirror was practically scrubbed away so that all you could see in it were speckles and tiny samples of your skin.

Finally, the bathroom was arrayed in Indian cloths stuck onto the walls and taps, fabrics of all kinds, sparkles, hologram paper and gold edging, with wavy lines all around the pipes and plugs. The bath was painted as though it were full of water, right up to the brim.

Amusingly, one of the papers reported on Craig's car burning out as though it were an integral part of the exhibition, commenting that "the happening" did not seem out of place considering Theresa's attitude to prized material objects.

All in all it was a magnificent work but unfortunately, could not be sold. The wrecked and ruinous aspect of the house, though, wasn't what had upset Simone. It was the black bedroom.

Simone explained she hadn't minded at all when the small red sack sculpture was completed. That was fine. Even painting a patch of the wooden floor black with bitumen for it to lie on was fine. What she didn't like or appreciate, she said, was the amount of space, (equalling psychological space in Theresa's head, according to her), that Theresa allocated the dead baby.

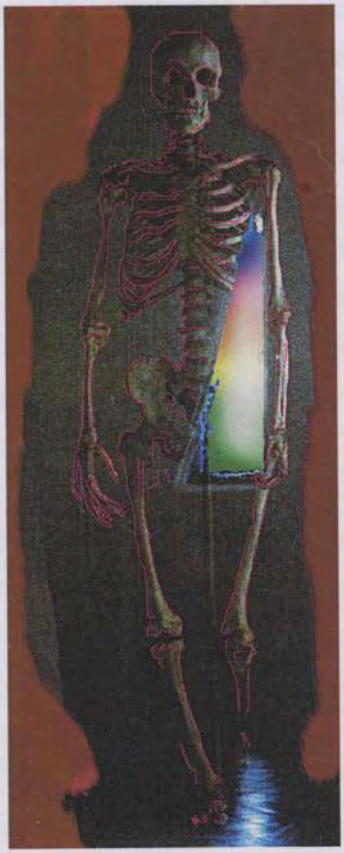
What about Ben? Theresa rode roughshod over Ben's feelings equating his whole twenty-odd years to her dead baby's four or five months in the womb. Over-stated and mawkish, said Simone.

Theresa had become mulish and, then, after not speaking for three days, she'd finally come out with the unforgiveable words that Simone wouldn't understand because she'd never had a baby herself.

Ouch. I couldn't believe Theresa could say such a deliberately hurtful thing to Simone. To Simone, who loved Ben as though he were her own!

Simone and Theresa split up. Simone went to live in Canada where she met a truck-driver and they moved in together. She gave Ben all her South African assets and made sure he retained power of attorney over her and Theresa's joint bank account, helping ensure that Theresa would be taken care of financially but would not have any access to money.

Simone knew Theresa very well.



11 he was my brother (1998)

As for Craig. I idolise Craig. Can't help it. He's such fun, so lighthearted. My desperate attempt at making sense of what happens next feels like a life-line I'm hanging onto. All I can manage to do during a day is to sit here in front of this typewriter and try to explain it to myself. Otherwise I don't feel solidly in one piece.

So. My brother. My brother rarely loses his temper but he gets his own way. He describes for instance, how his telephone broke one day. He's at work and the phone on his desk was giving trouble, so he calls the technician.

Eventually this man saunters in, takes one look at his phone, then sits on Craig's desk and makes a (longish) telephone call to his mate. He stands up and says: "There's nothing wrong with this phone."

Craig says nothing. He simply stands up and walks to the technician's side of the desk. He picks up the phone and places it carefully on the floor. Then he climbs on top of his desk and jumps on it.

"'Yes, there is', I tell him."

His wife refuses to live in town, saying she's been a farm girl all her life and can't bear the city. They buy a place out near Magaliesberg. Pete and I go see it and it's absolutely stark: just one small building, a pump and lots of grass. Craig works in an office during the week and on weekends he and Margie build their home.

It's an amusing experience watching him sort out problems at work from their tiny farm in the Magaliesberg.

The phone goes. It's a shared line, which means at least five or six households could listen to the conversation if they want to. One short, one long, one short. Each person on the party line had a particular pattern of ring so that they know if the call is for them.

Craig picks up the phone and it's a friend at the company branch in Italy, needing help with a tricky problem. No electricity. (Not the man in Italy, Craig). He lights a paraffin lamp and opens a manual, meanwhile speaking a strange mixture of Italian and English. To him Italian wasn't a language but an attitude.

"Si, try sposti l'interruttore verso il processor, prova che scambia i legare intorno. Internal. Are you sure siete sicuri la cartolina base non siete schiacciati?" Usually he could help sort out any problem without needing to fly to Milan, but every now and then he'd be forced to travel, which he hates. Leaving his wife and kids makes him asthmatic. Giovanni's always pleading with him to send him in his place, not that that would be a possibility in any way.

Margie was sick for nine months throughout each of her pregnancies. Before Craig turns twenty-nine she falls pregnant with their fourth baby. Over a beer and a cigarette he mentions to a doctor friend of his that he'd like a vasectomy. The doctor says nobody in his right mind would choose to have a vasectomy at the age of twenty-eight. Craig laughs and says he thinks four children are enough for anyone. The doctor books him in without delay.

And now it's 1998 and he's turning forty. Around twelve on the morning of his birthday, on the fourth of January to be exact, Craig visits me.

I see his bakkie draw up outside. It's dirty as usual. Its basic blue is streaked and dusted with red mud from the state of the roads he has to fight through from Magaliesberg to Sandton every day. He often stops off at my place for a cup of coffee and I look forward to a chat. I flick on the kettle and dig out my best coffee mugs.

"Hey, howzzeet Harriet!" he says, throwing himself into the armchair in my kitchen and lighting up a Gauloises. He's the only person in the whole world allowed to smoke in my house. "I came in to ask if you want to go for lunch."

I'm tempted to say I can't. I'm in the middle of painting our bedroom. Besides that, I'm wearing an old purple tracksuit and have paint-splattered hands and feet. I want to finish before Peter gets home and throws his toys about the mess.

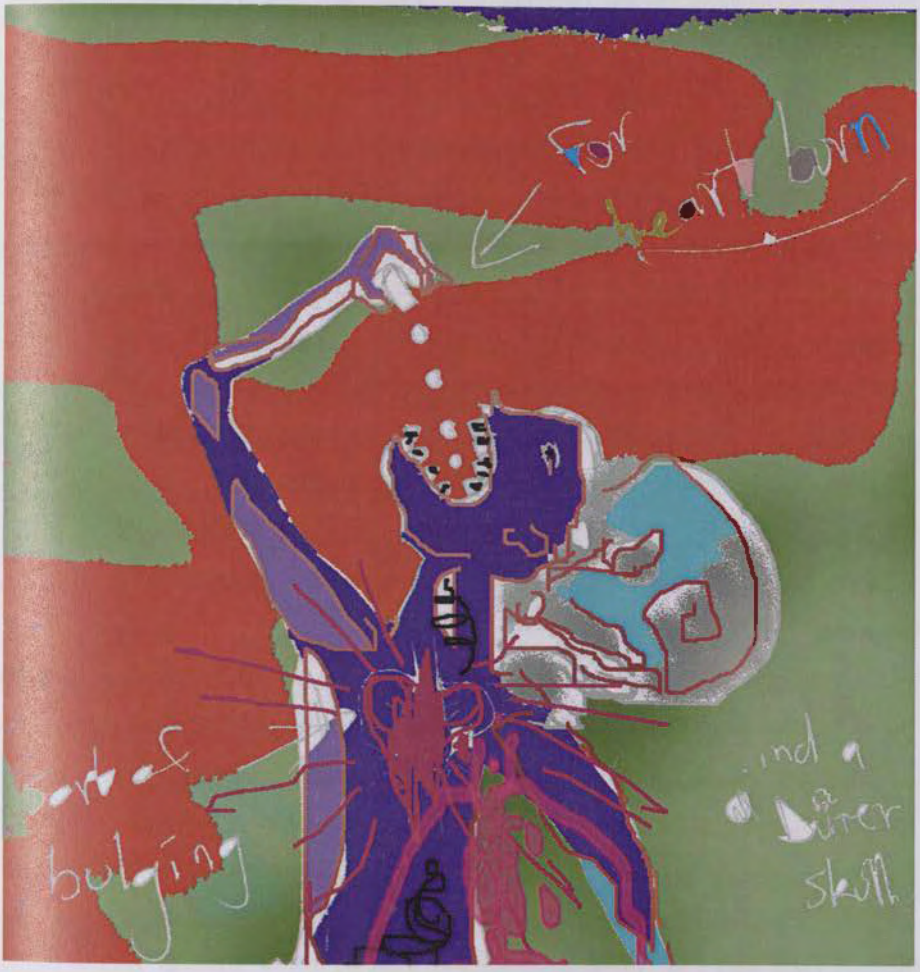
"Must we?" I say. "Look at me!"

"Hey, of course! It's a come-just-as-you-are party! It's my birthday! You've got to come, there's this lekker new pub out on the Honeydew Road, I've been meaning to try it for ages. But we have to leave now. I'm starving!"

I don't change out of the tracksuit, I figure I'll have just enough time when I get back to quickly finish the fourth wall. What I don't know, of course, is that this is the last date I will have with my brother. I grab my umbrella and shoes and hop into the front cab.

"So guess what happens to me on the way here?" he says, lighting up. I look at his profile. His eyes are red-rimmed and there are deep creases around his mouth and eyes from laughing.

For an instant I imagine I see a badly-outlined skull, ghastly pieces of hair sticking to its bald pate, its jaw bound with a bloody cloth, leering at me from his shoulder, the one closest to the car door. I shake my head, and it's only his reflection in the window.



"What?" I ask. He's talking but I'm not listening. I'm thinking how old he looks. His car is strewn with boxes of antacid tablets and papers and smells strongly of unfiltered cigarettes.

Craig drives well, using only one arm to steer. The other hangs outside with his cigarette at the end of it. I tune into the story he is telling me.

"..so this car's stuck on the side of the road, further up, and this woman's got the bonnet up – she looks like she's waiting for someone. As I slow down I see a Toyota pull up, and I figure, okay, her husband's arrived, I can maar drive on. I relax.

"I'm just about to go, when out the corner of my eye I see four okes – not one, but four – jump out the Corolla and the way they're running towards her, I reckon they're not planning to be of assistance. I just get this odd feeling about them. They look like wild dogs, you know? When they're after a bokkie.

"I jam on my brakes, and wonder what the hell I'm going to do. What the fuck, I think, I gotta do something! So I throw the gears into reverse. Skid down the road backwards. Slalom between her and the guys, without making eye-contact with them. I run towards her as though I don't even *see* these okes. I fling my arms around her and shout, 'Hey, Karen, what you doing here? Haven't seen you for years!'

"I hug her, make a racket, half-pull her into the road. These guys stop, check us out – I'm talking and gaaning aan loudly – and they sort of turn around and slink back into their car.

"Shame, she gives me such a hug back, because she says she'd just about jumped out of her skin when they'd stopped. They'd scared the living daylights out of her.

"Any case, so she insists I take her Zippo, swears she's become religious from this moment on. She's giving up smoking to give thanks, she says! Lekker, eh?"

He holds out a nice old Zippo lighter to show me. I relax suddenly. Stuff painting the bedroom. It's not going to go anywhere, like housework it will wait patiently for me to get home, I know that. I can finish tomorrow. I sit with my feet on his dash, making him a

button with "It's not my birthday, Kiss me anyway" on it. I can't think of anything funny but I want him to know that I'm making an effort here.

Craig pulls up his piebald bakkie up next to a contrastingly clean Mercedes. We've arrived at Owen's Pub. It's quite an upmarket place and I feel a little self-conscious in my paint-spattered state, but not that self-conscious, because deep-down I don't really much care what anyone thinks. I'm with my brother and I'm perfectly happy.

The maitre d brings us each a small dish of home-made mayonnaise to taste. His wife makes it, apparently, and it is divine, especially with the asparagus spears we eat with it. Craig orders snails in garlic sauce, which he is mad for, and I have penne with pesto, my favourite. I drink masses of red wine and Craig has two pink gins.

"That was good, thanks," he says, sinking back. He looks exhausted and I suppress the desire to ask him why he's smoking again.

"I've got this strange pain in my right arm," he says.

"Just be glad it isn't your left arm!" I say, "Remember when that doctor asked you when you had your first heart attack? As if! I nearly died when you told me that. What did he mean? Surely you're not the heart-attack type, all stressed out? Do you think you could actually have had a heart attack and didn't know it?"

"No way! He's also the one who told me I'm in great shape. For a man of sixty, that is." He laughs. My last laugh.

That evening, when I get home, there are three messages on my phone. (This is unusual for me, I never have many calls).

The first one is from my sister Jackie: "Hi, Bunny! Craig is in hospital, but he's doing fine!"

The next one is from my sister-in-law, Margie: "Hi Harriet! Don't worry about Craig, he is going to be fine."

And then the last is from my mother, who doesn't sound as chirpy as the other two.

"Hallo Harriet my dear, Craig was admitted to the Joburg Gen this afternoon. I've just heard from Margaret and she says he is doing well."

After the third message I ask my long-suffering husband to please take me to Johannesburg General Hospital. Generally I believe you can feel reassured if one person tells you someone else is fine. If three tell you so, it's just too reassuring to be true.

And it was.

We arrive at the Joburg Gen at about eight and I'm marginally happier after I see Craig. He's asleep. His colour is good. Pete and I wait in the waiting-room with Margie. Eventually a surgeon arrives.

He speaks to Margie, tells her not to worry, her husband is going to be fine. They just have to wait for the other surgeon. The second surgeon runs in, and is not nearly so comforting. They'll do what they can, he says, but you never know in these cases. After they go out, I ask Margie what happened.

"He was sitting under a tree with one of the orphans who'd fainted at the New Year get together. They'd had a three-kilometre race in the afternoon," she says, "It was very hot, and he said he was also feeling a bit faint. Next thing, when I walked over to him, I saw he'd passed out. We couldn't seem to wake him. I called the ambulance but soon after that I panicked and called the paramedics. They sent a helicopter. While we were flying I so wished he would wake up so that he could enjoy the ride. He'd have thought it was great. We landed on the roof and they brought him directly here. Anyway, they said he seemed to have had a seizure of some kind and that they were sure he would be fine. But now... I think they're saying he had an aneurysm. An aortic aneurysm."

We all look at one another. None of us have heard of an aortic aneurysm. I don't know what it is as a single unit, but I know what an aneurysm is and I know what the aorta is. Surely it means his aorta got blocked and burst. I start feeling panicky. How do you sew up an aorta, with raggedy bits of flesh-pipe lying about? Isn't it a very important blood vessel? Isn't it a vital part of the heart?

I look across at Pete and he stares over at the computer terminal on the nurses' station desk. Margie asks if we wouldn't mind giving her sister a lift. This we do. After we've seen her to her door, we drive home in silence. Once home I fall asleep almost at once. It was a pretty exhausting day altogether and as I drop off I realise my hands are still full of tiny paint spots and that I've forgotten my umbrella at Owen's Pub.

Next thing I know the phone is ringing in my ear. The receiver's playing hide and seek as I climb out of my dream. I fumble it to my ear. I don't recognise the voice, but the words I hear make me sit upright and become more thoroughly awake than I have ever been in my entire life. Each separate hair on my head seems to stand upright as well, slowly and agonisingly.

"Harriet. Craig didn't make it."

I shout, quite loudly, "What?"

"Harriet, Craig never woke up from the operation. He died on the operating table."

It's Margie's mother talking. She's asking me to do something but I can't work out what the words are. Eventually it becomes clear. She's asking me to please let various members of my family know that Craig is dead. My heart is thumping so loudly I can't hear very well. My fingers dial my sister Jackie's number automatically. Luckily Giovanni is still awake. I ask him to sit down. I tell him. I ask him and Jackie to please go and wake my mother and tell her – kindly? softly? compassionately? How do you make the facts sound less deadly? How do you break news as cruel as this? How do you tell her that her only son is dead?

I'm wide awake now. I ask Pete to wait up for our teenagers to get home and to tell them gently what's happened to their favourite uncle (they're at a rock concert) while I sputter to my mother's in my falling-apart old car, driving badly down the empty, balefully illuminated streets.

My mother's standing in the doorway of her flat wearing her dressing-gown. Every

bit of her soft old-lady face seems to droop downward. Suddenly she looks very short. Recently she'd told me again, laughing, how much she'd wept when she was forty and found she was pregnant with her fourth. She'd been so angry at herself and at my father. Really, they hadn't wanted another baby. Then he'd turned out to be the boy, the wonder son who'd dug a highway straight to her heart.

My sister Jackie's waiting with her. I say I'll stay with her for the rest of the night and not to worry.

We can't sleep, but lie in her big old double bed and hold each other, my mother and me, telling each other stories of my brother, what he was like and how he would have reacted were he to see us now, sobbing because we've lost him. My mother says she can almost hear him saying, "I'm glad you're both feeling so sorry for yourselves because it saves me the effort of having to feel sorry for you."

For the whole of the following week I can't drag myself to work. I feel uncomfortable. I can't easily stand, nor sit, nor get on with washing the dishes or wiping down the bathroom. Nothing seems to be in its rightful place and my heart is physically aching. This new emotion is suddenly in my face, lodged in my heart and counting as part of my repertoire, one of whose existence I hadn't dreamed before.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of dying – denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance – don't seem to me to cover all the bases. The actual emotion called grief is sharper and more in-your-face than the sum of all these. It has a thick beige base of depression, which makes your head and hands feel equally thick. Like a dirty sink it seems to smell of old tired food and yesterday's drains. Certainly, it's sometimes spiced up with splinters of anger, but there really isn't much time for denial and bargaining if someone dies without warning. Coffee seems dull. No scent of Gauloises anywhere.

It wears off, of course, eventually. I still never see anyone I mistake for him because I can never forget for one second that he is dead. If I hear a good joke, it's like a thump in my chest because I so wish I could tell it to him.

If I see his daughter with a boy I think to myself how much he would have teased that child. I know he would have given the boyfriend a hard time but the boyfriend would have grown to love him anyway.

Suspending my disbelief for just a moment, I can easily imagine Craig sitting on a cloud, looking down, beer in hand and pointing her out to his mates, the other angels. So proud of his pretty girl and reminding his sons: "Okay guys, remember, your sole reason for being alive is to make sure your sister is always alright."

He had these dating rules which he said all boys (every eligible boy in the world I suppose he meant) had to read. Rule number four was to make it clear to any guy who wanted to date his daughter, that they may have been told that in today's world, sex without utilising a barrier method of some kind can kill them.

"Let me elaborate," he'd say, "When it comes to sex, I am the barrier, and I will kill you." But not any more of course. He's dead.

fourth interlude

The sauna's three wide rows of benches staircased to the ground from the back wall so that everyone faced the same direction. The walls, floor and ceiling were clad with pale sanded and rounded boards, except for the front wall, which was entirely glass. Only the door and frame set in the glass impinged into the view of the rest of the gym.

The nine women had plonked themselves heavily down on the planks, sinking in. Pine became buttock, parts of the body creaked woodenly. Sweat ran off their chins, evaporating into steam. They sprawled in various attitudes of relaxation.

Their skin colours ranged from blotchy pink through cumin and ground coriander to cloves.

What a privilege to glimpse the voluptuous curves of their naked bodies! Lightning stretchmarks delineated the physical faint record of life-changing occasions. Wrinkles traced tangible echoes of laughter and distress. Their bodies hammered out their history and honed it. Da Vinci, only after he'd sculpted the slaves though, might have managed to capture their careless mature magnificence.

Mel stood up, swinging her arms to and fro across her front. Drops ran down her cheeks, and it was not clear whether these were tears or perspiration.

"The thing is," she said, "the thing is, once Death gets his foot in the door, it's almost as though he can't help himself, he has to lop off one or two more blooms before he leaves again. Almost as though he's broken a seal of some kind."

"You don't think he lays it on too thick, perhaps?" asked Thalia, inspecting her nails.

"Oh, of course he does. Absolutely. But death's not known for either his sensitivity or his sense of timing."

Eutwerpe fidgeted and pulled at the gag tied firmly over her mouth, but none of the others took the slightest notice of her. Callie leaned her elbows on her thighs, her polished eyes sparkling in their wrinkled settings as she spoke.

"It suits the turn of events that he die. She leant on him too heavily and it was about time she realised she could do without his sheltering presence."

Polyhymnia, who'd had nothing to say for over forty years, suddenly began to speak. The others all turned to her, surprised for once into silence.

"So many parts of the body have a butterfly, folded look. The nasal fossae, for example, have a delicate tracery that echoes the microstructure of the scales on butterfly wings. The perineum is a classical butterfly (according to Judy Chicago, for instance). It's closed wings spread to reveal a wondrous pattern.

"The spinal cord's a butterfly in section: a fibrous arrangement of various densities which become the information super-highway of the body: revealing byways to the most fragile tips. A fat butterfly of the stiff-necked stance exists in the top cervical vertebra. This reveals the decision not to yield, but also points to there being very little backbone in her spine as she says yes meaning most definitely no no no.

"And... we all know about the gobbets of food shoved into that meaty receptacle, headed up by her mouth? And the wine swilled down after! The butterfly kidneys will patiently untangle the toxins. How exposed the heart is behind that flimsy armour! Listen to the sound of the sea ruminating in her butterfly-pattern ears! Listen to all those primordial truths! It's her history spiralling down into our unravelling guts."

12 euthanasia?

1998 started out badly and gets worse. Not only does my brother die, but my sister Theresa seems to be becoming a little unstuck. My mother needs a lot of help, more than we her children can easily manage. Jackie and Giovanni have moved into our old house and my mother moves into the henhoks, which have been transformed over the years into a warm, north-facing flat.

And then in March 2001 she goes and dies as well.

Well, dies is a general term. More specifically, it was probable that my mother was murdered. Highly unlikely? No, to be strictly accurate, I'd have to stick with probable rather

than possible. Not that I'm planning to mention it. After all, how important is the placing of a pillow? The expression on a dead woman's face?

My sister Jackie phones me as soon as she can speak. She'd walked through the backyard to the garden flat as she did every morning and been shocked to find our eighty-one-year-old mother lying in bed, dead. As soon as I replace the receiver, I jump into my car and get there within ten minutes.

The sun's just beginning to rise, igniting the frost on the grass in front of the flat. Masses of early morning light shoot through the branches of the ancient pine tree near the verandah.

To one side of the tree, kneeling on the pine-needles in her pyjamas, I see our eldest sister in prayer. The sun flares on her once-bright red hair, sending out mild grey beams with undertones of orange and pink. I don't disturb her.

These days she's always praying – when she isn't fighting, that is.

I'm surprised by the unexpected aching of my heart. I didn't think I would feel so sick and sad when my mother died. It wasn't as though it were a shock. She'd had a weak heart for years. She was tired of life, and had often voiced the wish to die. And, more specifically, after our brother's death all of us were aware that our mother did not especially want to live any more.

Often, to my exasperation, while I was with her, having a coffee or just pottering around, cleaning up, my mother would sigh and say she wished God would hurry up and take her. I used to get annoyed and used to tell her so, loudly. I feel bad about that now. I know she didn't mean to imply that she was sick of my company. In my heart I knew she wasn't saying it for effect or to elicit gushing contradictions. A favourite statement of hers was life's okay, but why in heaven's name must it go on for so long?

Perhaps I should have told her how much she would be missed. In truth, though, I didn't think she *would* be missed that much. I should have told her more often how much I loved her. I managed it once, though it did not slide trippingly off the tongue. I've

always found it difficult to tell someone I love them. It puts you in such a vulnerable position. The lover rather than the beloved. My children seem to manage the words "I love you" with ease, so it's gradually becoming one of those things I learn from them. Besides, to say I love you is twice as difficult in Afrikaans (the language in which I speak – I mean, spoke, of course – to my mom): the tenses get complicated, not to mention having to use the third person as a token of respect.

Make no mistake, I loved my mother. Frankly, my brother and I adored her. For us she was just about an ideal parent. She gave us plenty of freedom, support when we needed it, she never lost her temper with us and, probably because she was older and steadier when she had us two, (there were seven years between Jackie and me) always seemed wise and patient. Our older sisters, perhaps, were not quite as enthusiastic. In fact, she used to joke that one makes so many mistakes with one's firstborn that it would be a Good Thing if the first child were disposable.

I wonder if Theresa thought it such a joke.

I arrive a minute or two before the doctor. My mother's body seems to take up so much less space than when she was alive: so small under the bedclothes. She looks like an old, precious porcelain doll, with crackle veneer on her face. Though I feel a little squeamish doing so, I just can't bear the look in her eyes, so I do as I've seen done in the movies. I reach over and with my forefinger and pinkie, pull down on the creased eyelids. They move quite easily, but the eyelashes curl in a little. I swallow my revulsion and distress, pull gently on the eyelashes themselves with both hands, then the eyes close quite naturally. When Dr Ishvarlal walks in, she has no hesitation in stating that the cause of death was coronary heart disease and issues a certificate to that effect soon after she sees her.

As for me, I keep to myself the two disquieting details I notice. The pillow, for one. The pillow was rumpled up and next to my mother's head, not beneath it. And the other was the look my mother had on her face. I knew that particular expression. It teased at

me during that whole day when I wasn't thinking of other things. When did my mother look at us like that?

It was late evening, nearly bedtime, before I remember. Of course. Once, not so long ago, when my mother had launched into her if-only-I-could-die routine I'd been thoroughly fed up.

"Fine," I snapped, "My doctor's Dutch. I'll ask him for some tablets if you want. I know he supports euthanasia and I'm sure he'll help you."

As it happens, quite recently I had made a deal with that same doctor. He'd wanted me to design him a brochure and had asked how much I charge. I'd said only the cost of a way out. Say if I get ill, I said, or maybe one day when I'm very old, I'll decide today's the day I die. That day I'll need some of your magic medicine.

He'd laughed. "Don't you believe it," he said. "You'd be amazed at how rarely people get to the crunch. You're still relatively young and healthy and you think you'll not be able to bear it when you're old and sick, but I tell you what, you will. I know. I've seen this in so many terminal patients of mine. In Holland I had a patient, dying of cancer, in terrible pain. I left the appropriate tablets next to his bed. Take them, I told him. I'll help you, just let me know.

"I know you will, he said, and I really appreciate it, it's just that I want to wait for my granddaughter's wedding. As soon as that's over, I'll take them. Well, when the wedding was over and he was suffering really badly I went back to visit him. I looked at him and I looked at the tablets. He said no wait, not just yet, I just want to see who wins the football this Saturday.

"And so on. So there's a big difference in saying you want the means to die, and actually using the means to die. I'd be surprised if you really mean it, you know."

"Okay, okay, Piet," I said. "I believe you, but I'd still like a prescription for those tablets. Just in case."

He didn't give it to me, just laughed again. But I was fairly sure I'd be able to wheedle

some appropriate medication out of him if my mother indicated that she would like to end it. But she didn't. Instead she went on a bit about God being the only one who may decide when a person dies. And she looked at me with that expression: a resigned sort of look, a sorry-that-I-could-come-up-with-such-a-foolish-idea-but-forgiving-me-anyway kind of look. And *that* was the expression on her face when she died.

Theresa had been living with my mother for the past three months. The circumstances leading up to this are complicated but in the final analysis, Theresa decided my mother needed taking care of and that she was ideally placed to do so. There's no denying that the rest of us were quite relieved, even though I wondered at how easy either of them would find living with the other. We'd all been thinking my mother needed more help and none of us was really sure how to provide it.

My mother was adamant that she would not move into a retirement village of any kind, and that of course she could take care of herself. But she hadn't been driving for a while. Slowly we'd had to take over many little chores, like taking her shopping, getting her to the doctor or dentist, sorting out her accounts. Now, though Theresa herself doesn't drive, at least she would be there to handle our mother's washing and cooking, and ensure that her groceries didn't run out before Jackie and I shopped for more.

When she moved in with my mother, just about all Theresa had in the world was a bedding roll and one crinkled Pick 'n Pay packet. Well might you ask, why didn't the rest of us think to ourselves this was a little unusual?

You see, the trouble with Theresa is that throughout her life she's always been unnaturally devout. She always gives all she can to the poor.

Now, you might know of people who are charitable, you might be one yourself, but Theresa's charity goes completely over the top. She *lives* passages from the Bible, along the lines of: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor'. Creeds like that.

She'd carry out more specific instructions from the Lord that she would insist He had given her, instructions she would interpret as 'If you have a pair of trousers and someone hath need of it, give him your trousers and your anorak also'.

In fact, she gives all she has to anyone who asks for it. Say for example, Theresa walks all the way to the shops and buys a bag of bananas. On the way home construction workers at the side of the road happen to call out to her:

"Hey! Give us a banana, man!" She'll go over to them, dish out all her bananas, and carry home an empty plastic bag.

After Simone left her, we fretted and fumed a bit, but mainly watched, as we saw her living as she felt she ought. Francis of Assisi appeared to be her main role model, with bits of Jesus on the side.

Jackie and I really had no way of arguing with her, because she'd always claim that God had told her to do whatever the latest outrageous escapade was. Not only did she have God on her side, He seemed to be constantly online inside her ear, commenting on and guiding her through every little detail of her life.

Luckily for our peace of mind, her erstwhile lover kept selling enough of Theresa's paintings to yield respectable lump sums for her and these Ben took care of, banked and doled out any money she needed when she asked for it. Privately, I thought her very lucky indeed to have such a darling, long-suffering son who manages her finances for her, instead of forcing her to live with the consequences of her lifestyle.

The trouble began almost to the day my mother invited Theresa to live with her. Soon I found myself practically tripping over the animosity, all emanating from one side. Theresa was bursting with resentment against my mother. She could hardly contain herself. And it certainly didn't improve matters that Theresa slept on the floor next to my mother's bed, instead of in the spare bedroom. They never gave each other room to breathe.

One day I arrived to hear yet another argument. My mother was voicing an opinion about one of the woman in her church.

"I have to say, Rachel never took proper care of her husband. Once the nurse came in to find him lying in his own vomit! Nearly ninety, I think he was at the time. An absolute disgrace, I must say. Of course the nurse decided that his care was inadequate and had him moved to a hospital of some kind."

Theresa's face flushed red as she responded. "I'm sure it wasn't because she *could* not take care of him. It must have been because she *would* not. As far as I can remember, Rachel's husband used to get drunk every night, hence the vomit. And he was horrible to her! We used to hear him swearing at her when we were children."

"Oh, no," said my mother, sounding very sure of herself. "On the contrary, he was a lovely, warm, caring man, reduced, through no fault of his own, to dependence on that egocentric wife of his. He was mercifully released from his marriage by death and then she went and squandered all his money by investing in her niece's hairdressing business. She—"

"But! She kindly visits you regularly and kindly brings you flowers and – you – say – nothing! You hypocrite!" Theresa had got up, was bending over my mother and was shouting as loudly as she could into her ear. My mother looked astonished, then appalled.

"Theresa!" I said.

Her hands were shaking. I led her outside the flat.

"Theresa, don't take what Mom says so to heart. You know what a soft spot she had for old Mr Stein. And she's old herself, she gets carried away by the eloquence of her own words. She doesn't really think Rachel's that bad, she's just gone and got her knickers in a knot and can't untangle them with dignity."

"I know, Harriet, I know. But I just can't bear the way she's polite to Rachel – I admit she's never really friendly towards her – but she'll act so polite, and then behind her back she goes and gossips about her."

"But, Theresa, that's what we all do, you know. We have to. It's how society functions. If we all had to go round telling everyone else exactly what we think of one another, all the parts would freeze up. Manners are the vaseline of social intercourse."

She cracked a small smile. "Okay, okay, Bunny," she said. She walked away down towards her favourite spot under the tree, presumably to pray for patience. I went back into the flat.

"Theresa doesn't mean it, you know, Harriet," my mother said quickly, before I could speak. She held onto my arm with both her hands. "She's very good to me: she's just developed a bit of a short fuse, lately. She was never like this as a child."

I wondered how often she'd shouted at my mother in that way. To me it was unacceptable, but I didn't know what to do about it.

To add to the general atmosphere of unpleasantness, she always seemed to be wrangling with visitors of my mother's. Apparently she would sit silently in the corner, a death's head at the feast, saying absolutely not one word, and then some poor old soul would make a casual comment Theresa deemed offensive and she'd enter the conversation, become overwrought and upset everyone.

She'd had hectic arguments with practically all my mother's friends: my poor mom was beginning to feel really embarrassed. There was nothing you could put your finger on, you just felt she was being nasty and vicious. Aggressively argumentative.

And, my mom was right, this was not like Theresa. Before Simone had left her, she was quiet, pleasant: passionate only when she painted. Certainly not volatile. Unsurprisingly, the stream of visitors my mother usually had dwindled down to a trickle.

The crux of the matter started as usual with my mom's same old litany. Once more she wished God would see fit to allow her to shuffle off this mortal coil. Knowing firsthand how exasperating this was, I could just imagine, and in fact sympathise, with the way Theresa snapped.

Apparently what she'd done was, she'd taken a knife out of my mother's kitchen

drawer and asked, screamed, rather, should she be the Angel of Death?

My mother'd said, "Ah, Theresa, don't be silly."

Stumbling across the lawn to Jackie's, Theresa muttered incoherently that she needed a look at Jackie's face to remind herself how my mother had looked when she was still relatively young and lovely. Then she'd gone back to the flat and turned our mother's dining-table upside-down, flinging plates to the floor with a crash. Jackie had run to the flat behind her and was furious.

"Right!" she'd said, "Let's go get some help for that temper of yours."

Theresa had been treated by the same psychiatrist for years. Unfortunately, in a way, he did not ask to speak to Jackie as well as to Theresa. Theresa spent ten minutes with him, he wrote out a prescription and they returned home.

Theresa walked straight back into the flat where I'd been picking up pieces of cup and plate and righting the dining-table. All was orderly again. My mother was much calmer than I was. She really was the most patient being on the planet. Theresa's hands were shaking and she had tear streaks down her face. In a voice that sounded thick with barely controlled hysteria, she asked: "How could you? How do you justify having forced me to have an abortion?"

My mother looked puzzled, as though she were trying to remember what the word meant. Theresa was barely managing to holding herself together, her whole body taut as a clenched fist.

"We're talking about thirty years ago," my mother said, questioningly, sounding as though she were trying to work out exactly *which* abortion. I saw Theresa begin to tremble with a wave of irritation and almost involuntarily I stepped in between the two of them. Theresa's trembling was quite unnerving.

"Thirty-two years and five months ago, actually," said Theresa. "I've asked God so many times to forgive me for my part in killing my baby, but have you ever considered asking Him to forgive you? Have you thought about it ever? Has it EVER crossed your

mind that my child would be a woman with children of her own by now if you hadn't taken it upon yourself to get rid of her?"

"Hang on," I say. "It wasn't Mommy's decision you know. There were doctors, it was legal, it was advised–"

"Shut up, Harriet! This is between Mom and me. She knows what I mean."

My mother sat a little straighter in her chair.

"My relationship with my God has got nothing to do with you, Theresa. Precisely what did you expect me to do? You arrived home, in a state, in fact totally unable to make any rational decision at all. What was I supposed to do about it? Are you honestly telling me you expected me to bring a fifth child into my home rather than have you take responsibility for it, and take care of you as well? At that time you were unable to care for anyone, not for yourself and not for an unwanted child. No, I'm sorry, Theresa, I absolutely do not see any reason at all for me to explain my actions to you."

"Unwanted! How can you sit there and say she was unwanted? How dare you! Can't you at least say you're sorry?" shouted Theresa. "Hasn't it once crossed your mind to apologise for what you've put me through for the last few decades? I can't believe you can sit there calmly and say none of it was your fault!

"You can't even accept one tiny little piece of the blame! I agree, *mostly* I was to blame. Though was I, really? What was so wrong about what we did? Kis and I were going to get married! We were all set! And we were so good and careful about not having anything intimate happen between us before our marriage and then, and then, there was just that one single time on the train, and then, your reaction..."

Theresa was heaving and sobbing, nearly falling over. I put my arm around her, partly to comfort her but also to stop her physically throwing herself at my mother. I felt totally out of my depth. Anything I could think of to say wouldn't help much. In my mother's shoes, I thought I *would* probably apologise to my daughter. Not to take the blame for the abortion. Theresa had been treated in a state hospital in South Africa in the sixties and

the choice to have an abortion or not would have been Theresa's psychiatrists' and her-doctors', not her parents', surely?

Perhaps though, in her shoes I would say how sorry I was that I hadn't shown any mercy, any pity, for the situation my distraught twenty-two-year old had been in.

For not showing any mercy for the situation Theresa was in now, in fact.

And, just at this moment, Jackie came walking in, laughing hysterically. Much too busy laughing to notice the tense atmosphere in the room. "Serves me right for trying to impress my mother-in-law!"

Without glancing at Jackie, Theresa walks out down to the bottom room of the flat – the flat is a curious shape, five rooms in a row, all facing north – without another word.

My mother turns to Jackie with a slightly strained social smile and asks:

"Why, what happened?"

"Oh, my goodness! She's just left. She must have come about ten minutes ago. I see her car at the gate and the kitchen's an absolute tip. I know there's no way I'd manage keep her out, the nosy old bag!"

"Jackie– " murmured my mother.

"Ah, come on, Mom, you know what she's like, always snooping after me, and commenting about how Valencia's house is so different from mine. And those nasty double-edged compliments that are such insults – how she understands *artists* have higher things on their minds. Anyway, I'd just made a whole lot of milktarts and stuff. Naturally all my mixing bowls, tupperware, pots and so on are all standing around unwashed, the dishwasher's chock-a-block, so I quickly hide everything in the oven, all the plastic and dirty utensils piled in higgledy piggledy.

"Anyway, I buzz her in. I try and keep her in the lounge by giving her a few photos of Jo's babies to go through, but no. Of course I have to offer her coffee and of course she has to follow me into the kitchen.

"Blow me down if she doesn't walk directly to the oven and switch it on. She has these little miniature quiches in her bag and she takes them out. Scratches in my kitchen cupboards, looking for, you've guessed it, an ovenproof dish. Worse. Much worse. I'm busy. I'm so busy I don't *notice* her switch on the oven!

"I'm making coffee. In a minute or two, of course we smell burning plastic. I open the oven (she's right behind me of course practically leaning her nasty pointed chin on my shoulder) and I have to haul out all the melting unwashed mixing bowls etc in front of her. For once, though, she couldn't think of any cutting remark. Her English probably flew out the window and she could only think in Italian! She just looked, I don't know, *flabbergasted*! I just scooped it all up and shoved it into a rubbish bag as if that's what I was planning to do all along: bake my mixing bowls and then chuck them away after I've used them!"

And, so, yes, I knew of the events of the past few weeks. Actually, not only of the past few weeks. Of Theresa and my mother's life-long relationship. And in the same way as you can't hope to diet away in a month or so the fat you've accumulated over a life-time (you may keep it at bay for a while, but it'll come back, with interest), so you can't deflate swelling resentment with a few placatory sentences here and there. You set yourself up for failure.

My lot in life seems to be to dive back and hunt through the superfluity of clues I have at my disposal to sort through my own inexorable build-up of guilt, pain and death. On the one hand I'd rather remain silent about this, this stuff I'm finding so difficult to articulate, but on the other I seem doomed to continually carry on and on about it.

13 well out of it

"Cheryl, I just phoned to let you know my mom died this morning." She lets out a wail as though someone's just stood on her foot.

"I don't believe it, Harriet!" she cries.

"Believe it," I say, a little unkindly, not entirely believing in my strong friend's strong over-reaction. I wait for nearly half a minute while she sobs. Eventually I tell her I'll ring her back later.

I'm really puzzled. It's not as though Cheryl knows my mother that well, even. We

never spent that much time around her when we were young and later Cheryl was mostly out of the country. Sure, my mom was good to us when we were little in that she allowed us enormous amounts of freedom, but she never paid that much attention to us. Cheryl and I were allowed to play together where we wanted for as long as we wanted as long as I was home when the streetlights came on. If we were unkind to Craig she'd be firm with us, otherwise there were few limits to her patience. Cheryl's reaction bothers me so much that I call her back almost immediately and ask if she would please come over.

Meanwhile I start clearing out the fridge. The freezer has four or five home-made prepacked meals in them, with my mother's delicate handwriting on pieces of paper slipped in between the layers of plastic.

I realise I can't do this. It's only been about six hours since the undertaker was here. He'd reversed his hearse right up to the edge of the flat's patio, opened the back and taken out a little stretcher on wheels. He'd deftly wrapped a see-through plastic bag around my mother's body, like a take-away sandwich, rolled it onto the stretcher, covered it with a sheet and wheeled it back into the hearse in one well-oiled manoeuvre.

I close the fridge again and switch on the kettle.

Cheryl arrives sooner than I expect, seeing she'd driven all the way from Magaliesberg. She and her daughter live on a smallholding, quite near my sister-in-law's place, actually. She looks a wreck. Her eyes are red-rimmed and her wild ringlets are sticking out all over her head in shades of black and grey.

"What's going on with you?" I ask her.

"Harriet, I'm seeing those human dogs again."

"What," I say, but I know exactly what dogs she's talking about. Cheryl began seeing these – hallucinations I suppose for want of a better word – ghosts, during the late seventies and early eighties. Wherever she and Klaas had run, they had felt doors slamming behind them. It must have been when Botswana, a place Cheryl had held very dear, became closed to her.

Batswana friends of theirs died protecting them. Then Lourens' wife and daughter were killed by a parcel bomb. Meanwhile Klaas and Cheryl had had to keep moving, from safe house to safe house. They moved on and up, eventually finding themselves in Tanzania.

Once in the school near Dar, Cheryl was trapped in a very different African country to the one she grew up in. At the time, she'd had no notion she would ever be allowed back to South Africa. Once she wrote me a heartbreaking letter, saying she didn't think it possible that her children, but maybe one day her grandchildren might be able to return to the home where her heart lay. Her yearning for the country of her birth was palpable in every letter she wrote. And then her letters began to be returned to her. From my side, all I saw was that I stopped getting letters from her, and after a while I stopped writing to her, accepting that Cheryl had probably decided to move on.

Later on, to my remorse, I discovered that her post had been intercepted, opened, and returned to her, without me, or any of our mutual friends, being aware of it. The savaging of that tenuous life-line, her correspondence with her friends in South Africa, was probably what caused Cheryl to snap. Klaas took her to England to see an analyst, but in the end a local Tanzanian psychiatrist was the one whose treatment was most effective, probably because he could understand and treat the ramifications of exile.

The UK analyst could not but help letting her private opinion shine through. She couldn't help letting Cheryl know that she thought everyone who'd left was well out of that mess called Africa.

"Yep, the dogs wearing camouflage and stalking me. It's one thing to know intellectually that they're not there and they're not real, it's quite another to feel them emotionally. They try to take control of my movements. I hate it and I can't seem to stop it."

"Have you been taking your medication?" We're travelling down a well-worn path here, not so much one I've trodden, but many friends of Cheryl's have had to ask her this partic-

ular question. How many times in the friends of bipolar bears' lives must they ask, tentatively, bravely, or angrily, if that particular bear in that particular den has remembered his or her medication?

"The thing is, Harriet, I've been doing so well without it. I've been fine without it for the last nine months, ever since my medical aid kind of caved in."

These last few sentences resonate with deja vu. Everyone's heard similar exchanges over the years. Cheryl's always been a fighter, confronting her illness in the same way as any other challenge in her life. She finds out all about it, takes appropriate steps and manages it. The problem arises when she feels she is perfectly well. She rapidly reaches a stage when she feels really and truly she doesn't need to carry on taking tablets, those tiny capsules of evil that suck in all her energy. I give her a hug.

She knows and I know that she simply has to go back onto it. I know how she's feeling, though, she's told me often enough. She feels like she's standing at the mouth of a cave. She has to turn her back on the bright sunlight and step by step sink back down into a cold, dim half-world. It's dreadful.

14 private irritability

We've just returned from my mother's funeral. Very traditional, very simple. Jackie, Theresa and I walked home from the church together. Though I don't want to broach the subject so soon after my mother's death, I'm wondering what to do about Theresa. Say, just say, she *had* placed a pillow over my mother's face and kept it there for so long that my poor fragile old mom had no longer been able to breathe? Could I just hold my tongue about this forever? Could Theresa, sweet, inoffensive Theresa, have become so vicious? Of course she could have, I knew that already. But did she? I would have to ask her.

Before I can begin to say anything, though, she's getting me to help her plan her next move. She's resigned to the fact that she can never paint again.

"It's the lithium," she says. "It makes me shake so badly that I can't paint exactly what I want to, and I'm not prepared to settle for second-best."

I think about the past few months, with Theresa moving here and there. She always seemed to be moving into a new home, taking very little with her. Wherever she went she seemed to give stuff away. By the time she moved in with my mother, as I said all she had in

the world was her bedding roll and the few items that she carried with her in a Pick 'n Pay bag. And, yes, if this seems very baglady-ish, it is. We have to face the fact. It sort of crept up on us. Jackie and I have to accept that our sister is a baglady.

Now Theresa's latest plan is to volunteer to work in an Aids village. Apparently she'd been planning this for a while, just waiting until our mother died. I'm supportive. It's only while I'm helping her type up her cv that I feel twinges of uneasiness.

"Theresa, you've written here that you can sing and dance," I say.

"Yes. Well?"

"I think they might be needing more practical skills," I say carefully. I'm skirting around Theresa's irritability. As soon as she's aware that I'm trying to avoid an argument, she gets irritated anyway.

"It's ridiculous, you know, Harriet," she says. "I went to see them and in the interview they asked if I can help to raise funds! Fundraising, I ask you! I've never handled money in my life!"

"Well, did you ask if you could perhaps wash patients or something like that? Clean or cook? Something useful?"

"The woman, Figaleppe, said they have enough volunteers and enough nurses. They need someone to manage the office. There's no way I can do that!"

"Alright," I say, giving up. "I'll send in your application exactly as you want it."

It's patently obvious that the Aids village need her like a hole in the head, I think, and the quicker she's refused the quicker she can move on to something else. This sister of mine is like an impossible Heath Robinson piece of machinery, all pulleys and containers strung together.

She's busy praying under the pine-tree and I'm cleaning my mother's flat. I'm looking through my mother's diary of the past few months and wondering what she made of Theresa's moods. She's written a little about it.

Monday. *Theresa wants me to apologise for my part in her abortion. I find this absolutely unacceptable. What did she expect me to do? For one thing, it all happened over thirty years ago. Thirty years have gone by! Life was different then. I had four children myself. What did she think I would do, take in her child as well? She just doesn't seem able to think anything through. And the man had a Xhosa grandmother! What did she think we would be able to do with that sort of child, in those days? Where would I have educated him? I should say 'her', rather. Theresa claims she saw the foetus and it was a girl. I don't want to swear to it, but I would be most surprised indeed if, under the circumstances, any nurse or doctor at Tara had let Theresa see the foetus. She was being treated for a serious mental illness and surely it would have added to her distress to see it. Anyway, seeing she was having electro-convulsive therapy, her memory loss was, is still, great and her capacity for making up stories even greater.*

"But getting back to keeping the child. It would have been cruel to everyone concerned, not least to the child itself. Would it have been accepted into society? Would it have been healthy, normal? But mostly and basically, she was certified insane. She just doesn't seem to be able to accept that.

"Yesterday Jackie brought me so many oranges I simply won't be able to eat them all, must make a note to remember to give Matt-

I put the book down. I'd forgotten about the Xhosa grandmother, dimly remembered telling Jackie a long time ago. No wonder Theresa felt so alone and isolate. (STET: an adjective, *is/il/it*)*. Why hadn't she said? Well, what could she have said differently? But my mother was right: why bring it up after thirty years? Is this what happens to any seething wound of resentment? That it simply has to bubble out even if it takes a lifetime to do so? It reminds me of old sports injuries. You injure yourself during a rugby game, say, in your twenties. You don't think of it again, dismiss the whole incident, but

* I'm leaving this in as a figurative floral tribute at the feet of Giles Coren.

in your fifties the knee or the shoulder starts letting you know it's hurting, and that you have to do something about the pain.

Where does Theresa's personality end and her instability begin? Is someone who spends years on end depressed and doesn't manage to do anything about it but paint, insane? Her paintings are generally acknowledged to be brilliant. They've always sold, in spite of her diffident attitude towards them and her buyers. And my mother wrote that Theresa made up stories, lied.

I so strongly disagree. My sister always tells the truth as far as I can judge.

And is someone who does things impulsively, gives away large amounts of money, walks around with a stupid grin on her face because she's happy for days on end because she claims God is chatting to her – can you in all fairness stick a label on her? I can't work out what exactly is wrong with Theresa. Could she possibly be a saint of some kind? Or are the things she does simply symptoms of a dreadful illness?

There is one thing though. Something that's always bothered me about Theresa. She so often slides out of accepting responsibility for her actions.

She will give all her stuff away, but she doesn't go hungry, or suffer much hardship as a result, because one or other member of her family takes care of her money or her meals for her. This is partly her fault, but of course mainly ours, her family's. We *will* always jump in and save her from herself. Bright and sensitive as she is, she always manages to seem so vulnerable that one rushes in to protect her.

So I make a concerted effort not to do so, and a week or so later have all my Ms Fixit buttons pressed at once and for once I refrain from acting on their pressure.

I was listening to her talk and feeling quite outraged at what she was saying.

"You know, Harriet," says Theresa in a conversational tone, "Just recently it feels as though the intervening years since my baby died just didn't happen. It's as though I lost Xolile, and then suddenly whoops, I'm face-to-face with her murderer."

We're sitting in the front garden of a baby home. Theresa has been volunteering here

three times a week to play with the children. After she left my mother's flat after the funeral, she found a place to live in Yeoville. The couple who own the flat are the Mphales. They are letting her sleep in their youngest child's bedroom while he's up north, finishing a degree in languages.

I look down at the ground, trying to make sense of this conversation. "Whoa there, Theresa, what are you talking about?"

Theresa's pushing one of the children in a swing. "What do you mean, about my abortion?"

I'm gasping, trying to breathe properly. "Just tell me how you understand the situation. What do you think happened?"

She laughs. "No, Harriet. I don't think that at all. I know it was my choice, my fault."

I'm feeling extremely out of my depth. She's not coherent. She's not making any sense. I have no idea to what she is referring. "Could we start again, please?"

She suddenly gives the swing such a hard push that the child falls out of it. He topples forward and splits his lip on the ground. There is blood all over his mouth and his top. Theresa picks him up and hugs him, nearly hysterical.

"I didn't mean it! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she keeps saying. The thing is, I know she'd pushed the swing far too hard. I decide for once I am not going to say a word. I'm not going to run to the superintendent and say there's been an accident, or explain my sister's history. I stand and wait.

The superintendent hurries over. "What happened?"

"I pushed the swing too hard. I'm really sorry, I think I lost my temper."

Much umming and aahing later, she's asked to please not volunteer at the baby centre again.

I'm beginning to realise we're running out of options here. She's not taking her medication regularly, she keeps losing her lithium. At the same time, she's losing threads of conversation and not making sense.

Lastly, she's losing her equanamity and taking it out on helpless little kids!

In despair, I think to myself this is too big a burden. I can't manage her. Jackie and I find her a pleasant clinic not too far from where we all live. She agrees to stay there as a temporary measure only.

What I find enormously upsetting is that the details of her life with Simone and Ben, her life with Irish Fred even, all seem to have paled into insignificance. She appears to hardly remember them. All she focuses on, all the time, is her dead baby.

Undeniably, at the time, Theresa must have built little castles in the air. Without looking at the facts, she must have thought to herself, *I'll marry Kis*. She didn't think well, why hasn't he asked me again? What does he think about it now? How are we going to live? Where are we going to live? Or even, where is he right now?

She hoped that someone else would take care of all the detail and practicalities. And I believe she became as angry, as vulnerable and as dangerous as a mother bear in a trap when she realised no-one was going to help her keep her little baby: not her doctors, not her mother and not her father.

Theresa's resentment stewed and brewed for years, seething under all her day-to-day activities, until, at last, when Ben left home and Simone went away, she was left with the dead baby Xolile sucking up every bit of her emotional energy. Had she still been living in that house under the Brixton Tower I bet she'd have painted every wall, every door and every ceiling, enamel-paint black by now.

15 somewhere between forty and death

It's slowly beginning to dawn on me that I've simply never noticed that Theresa is incapable of looking after herself. The clinic staff look at me as though I'm crazy to even ask whether she can leave within a month or two.

I have to question her about our mother.

The opportunity comes before I'm ready for it but I know I have to say something.

"Theresa," I say, cautiously, not wanting to make her angry. "You didn't perhaps – ah, – help Mom die, did you?"

Theresa looks down at the floor. She stares down at it for so long that I feel, with a sinking sick feeling dropping into my stomach, that she must have done it. Theresa may be bipolar, she may have had the odd manic episode in her life, but she is not and has never been a liar.

She looks up. "No," she says.

She doesn't say anything more for a long time.

Something about Theresa's denial bothers me. But in all the years I've known her she's never lied. I remember my mother's doctor saying to her once, when someone had kicked her and then denied it.

"Don't worry, Theresa. Everyone here knows you're a bit loopy. But we all know you never lie. Of course he did it."

Eventually she stops staring out the window and speaks again. "You know, remember when I went to see Jackie in the Cape? Before I was married, while I was teaching at the high school in Watervalboven?"

I stare at her. Of course I know what she's talking about.

"I had a swim at Mouille Point, you know that?" I nod.

"I just felt like swimming," she says. She comes up to me, and gives me a hug. Then she picks up the packet of liquorice I'd given her and the bunch of flowers, and she walks away from me. At the door to her room she turns around, waves and smiles.

Ben pops back from London to visit his mother in the clinic and he comes by later to see me. I decide to drive back with him to Jackie's where he's staying for the moment. We get into his mini, (Simone's old mini, actually) and take a detour to have a cup of coffee at Seattle.

"Well, Mom's not doing too well, is she?" he says. "Wonder where she'll end up?"

"I was there this morning. She mentioned her first manic episode, you know– "

"When she had the abortion?" he asks.

"You know she had an abortion?" I'm surprised.

"God, Harriet, everyone knows. The postman, the people who run the café down the road, everyone. The congregation at whatever church she's at, whatever. She never shuts up about it. It's as if all those years of silence, when she simply read and paint-

ed, never existed. Sometimes I think no ways this is some bizzarro Theresa, and my mom's, you know, been absorbed by an alien or something.

"After Simone left and I moved back to Jozi and lived with her for a bit, all she did was talk and shout. And pray of course. As for the love that dare not speak its name! That never shut up either! She was forever going on about being lesbian and kind of daring any church to chuck her out because of it. It's partly why I escaped to the UK in the first place!"

I didn't know she'd been busy changing churches as often as she'd been changing homes.

"But Ben, you do know she's calmed down a lot again, eh? Her anger seems to be fizzling out. Since your gran died, she's been weirder, certainly, but definitely not aggressive any more."

"I'm glad to hear it, Harriet, because, no ways can I cope with her moodiness. You really never know what she's gonna come up with next. I actually have to protect myself from her. I can't take it, I must be honest."

When Ben drops me off home eventually, I switch on the percolator to make myself a strong cup of coffee.

"Why did it take two policemen to come and call you?" I remember asking Jackie.

16 dead or alive

Spring Sunday and I go to Phela Care Centre to ask Theresa if she would like to come out with us. She's delighted. Her whole face lights up when I walk in to see her. I only wish I could feel as happy to see her.

It takes some time to walk her to the car. She cooperates as much as she can, she just can't coordinate her feet very well. She hasn't enough strength in her arms to pull the car door shut. I ask her how her week was and she gives a sideways grin. None of the questions I ask elicit any response from her so quite soon I give up and talk exclusively to Pete. She sits in the back, not looking out the window.

We drive to Mountain Sanctuary Park and meet up with some friends. When we set out to walk the easy distance to the mountain hut, we wave them on, stay with Theresa. We have all morning to get to the hut and I don't want her to feel hurried in any way. We cross a stream splashing through rocks: it's steep but not too steep to manage. A snake makes a dash for it on one side. Overhead a bird of prey I can't identify. I hate the way my eyes are deteriorating with age, so that I can't make out the diagnostic characteristics of birds any more. It must be a black eagle, surely. Meanwhile, Theresa's coping well and it's not long before we reach the cool of the mountain hut's verandah.

I drag out a mattress for her and she stretches full-length, toes curling contentedly. She looks happy and relaxed. God knows what she's feeling.

Where we sit we can see only mountains, wild and quiet, washed in sun, and one distant sandy track. There's a faint smell of burnt grass. Must have been a veld fire recently but we can't see evidence of it this side of the slope. All you can hear is the murmuring of everyone's voices, a short snore every now and then from Theresa and the far-off cry of a group of hadedas heading north-west. Our friend Karl pours us each a glass of wine, his wife Charlene starts cutting up tomatoes for lunch. Karl holds a glass out towards Theresa and looks at me questioningly. I don't know. I have to say I can't decide for her. Of course she's not supposed to drink when medicated. But how can you take away every small choice from another person? What right do I have to set myself up as arbiter? I wake her and point to the wine. She nods enthusiastically.

Taking Theresa out makes me clench up inside, but gradually I start to uncurl. Charlene, Rosemary and Anton shake out the big old turquoise table-cloth I brought along in my backpack. It's one I bought from a beggar many years ago. I begged her to sell me her skirt. It's a singular shade of blue with great piles of fruit on it in red, yellow and green and the border is detailed in magenta and dark blue with spots of white. It lifts my heart every time I see it. I dig out the dozen hard-boiled eggs and the quiche I brought along. Theresa sits up and slowly starts peeling an egg. She eats five eggs in a row. That alone makes me realise just how far she's gone: how far grown from the person she normally is, the kind who would politely check how many people there are and how many eggs there are. She notices me looking at her.

"Harriet, read my poems," she says, shoving her notebook into my hand.

You did not bring me offerings, instead you wearied me with your sins
I forgive you because of who I am, I will not hold your sins against you.
I am the FIRST the LAST the ONLY GOD.

August 16 Wednesday

TODAY

Feel dreadful, wavery, wavery. Disembodied, stiff.

August 20 Sunday

MY SON

MY SON

Jesus said to her: Mary

She said: Rabbini

She heard him in the garden: She was glad.

She loved him. He was her God and her beloved.

August 28 Monday

MY SON

August 29 Tuesday

MY SON

Time seems much shorter than ever before.

Teeth were on the menu for a nurse who insisted a bit and I have just done those.

Free activities were very restricted. Fell over feet of a nurse.

Found my place in this book and presumably went to bed.

Washed hair, with help.

With my vest over the other clothes feeling very confused but not not as bad as these last few days.

September 1 Friday

TODAY IS TODAY

The reality is coming right a bit I think.

It is not OK yet, but it is getting right.

There's bound to be a slow turn-over over of soil. A churning, a churning, turning, process of decay. Can I complain? No - but I thought AFTER death.

Not having missed death altogether.

Can I ask a question?

Why did Death feel like nothing.

I stop reading.

I can't bear to carry on. I give Theresa's book back to her, saying something trivial, I don't know what. It's getting cool and time to pack up and go home.

For the first time Theresa becomes uncooperative. She mutters that she can't walk. She lies on the rocks in the path. Eventually Karl and Pete have to stagger along giving her a fireman's lift back to the cars.

17 memorial service for someone with a name similar to theresa's

"Pinch me, pinch me, Harriet! I must be dreaming!" I hear this cheery voice which sounds like it is coming from a long way above me, way above in some sunny place, worlds away from the blackness engulfing me in waves. I manage to yank my neck in the general direction of the voice. The casual acquaintance's wave disappears around the corner with her minibus.

She couldn't've heard about it, otherwise she wouldn't have sounded quite so amused at seeing me outside her church.

I climb out of my car, feet slowly finding purchase on the kerb. I notice I've forgotten my handbag at home, but my skirt is clean, my buttons are all present and done up in order and I seem to have remembered to do something with my hair as it's not hanging over my face.

The parking spaces are filling rapidly. I can't tell if the voices around me have much to do with me and my tongue doesn't articulate responses in time.

"Hallo Harriet! Gosh, I'm sorry about your sister. Dreadful, eh?"

"How old was she again? So soon after your mom!"

"We shouldn't be sad, you know she's with the Lord!"

"Hallelujah, safe in the arms of Jesus."

"Hmm, well, you know, maybe she thought she wouldn't have much of a life after your mother died."

"I remember saying – last time – 'Better luck next time, old girl!' I feel bad about that now."

I look around and spot Cheryl. I edge towards her.

Everyone crowds into the church, which is packed. There is an upbeat feel, a celebratory undercurrent. You get the feeling these people have finally come into their own. Death appears to be their strong suit. The congregation keep their arms in the air for minutes on end. They're swaying, and singing.

Awesome saviour, cool deliverer of men, Jesus, Jesus. Oh oh oh.

One thing's for sure, I can recommend a charismatic church's music as an antidote against grief. No matter how sad you feel, you can't suppress spurts of irritation seeping through at the tuneless ardour of it all. And each hymn appears to have at least thirteen verses.

Eventually some youngster gets up in front of us. I swear his whole head glows

with joy as he sees us as-yet-unsaved souls like so many small islands trapped in the ocean of the redeemed.

"Our sister Tertia is in heaven today as we speak. She kneels at the right hand of the throne of the Lord your Guard. Guard the Father has forgiven her. Repent! Repent! Though your sins be as red as blood, they will be as white as snow. Who knows when your time is up? Accept Guard into your life!

"Get down on your face! Just say: 'Jesus, I can't take it anymore. Make my life OK.' And boy, will you know the grace of Guard! Don't weep for your dead. They are with us! Do not grieve. Rather, rejoice! "

I duck out the back. You'd think he'd trouble to get Theresa's name right. I haven't indulged for thirty years or more, but when a young man whose face is vaguely familiar offers me a smoke, I grab it with thanks. I lean against the unedifying brick wall of the Jesus Alive church. There's hardly any space between all the windows.

I hear a crunch on the gravel and Cheryl's leaning between the next two windows.

"Hi," she says.

I nod at her. "Thanks for coming, Cheryl, who let you know?"

Cheryl's fiddling with a corkscrew of her hair that's come out from her bun. She can never let her hair alone.

"Why do you think she finally did it, Haydoor? I mean, obviously because she's bipolar, I suppose, but then again, aren't we all? What does that actor, what's-his-name, Stephen Fry, say? 'You don't have to be gay or Jewish to create, though it helps. But it's downright imperative to be bipolar!'"

"She wasn't creating very much towards the end. Maybe that was it? She couldn't paint. She was shaking. I don't know."

I'm shaking as I stub my cigarette out carefully on a bare bit of concrete beneath the window. The double-doors swing open and the congregation streams out, some of them still singing. My sister Jackie hurries over to me.

"Sorry about him getting her name wrong," she says. "I wrote it on a piece of paper for him. It's my fault, really, my bad handwriting."

"Don't worry, Jax," I say. "There's really nothing he could have said to improve matters in any case."

"No, it was a pretty uplifting service otherwise, don't you think? I mean, he seems so cute! Young, earnest, full of good intentions. You can see the Lord moving in his life!"

"Well, I don't know. It's probably just me, but I was hoping we could dwell a little more on Theresa's life."

Two young men sidle over. "Mind giving us a lift, Harrie?" It's Jackie's son Matt and

Theresa's son Benjamin.

"Matthew! Ben!" I hug them both. Cheryl's known them since they were born even though she was in exile then.

"Well, that was a crap service I must say. I think Theresa deserved better than that," says the taller of the two, Matt. He's wearing a neat suit and tie. Benjamin's eyes are red-rimmed.

"If you wanted it better, why didn't you organise it yourselves?" snaps Cheryl, moving slightly in front of Jackie.

Matt looks hurt. "Shit, Cheryl, we only arrived from England yesterday. And as for Benny here, well, you probably heard about Kath's miscarriage. What do you expect from us? By the way, some TV station got hold of me this morning, Harriet, and I told them you were the one who found her. They also wanted to look at the house. It's all been painted over, hasn't it?"

I stare at him. I didn't know the work had been destroyed.

"Her house!" says Matt impatiently. "It had to get sold of course!"

I shake my head, trying to focus. Oh, of course, no doubt. I photographed the exhibition at the time, kept all the photos, but I have no intention of giving them to the press. Mind you, what business is it of mine? I sigh.

Jackie sighs too. "Harriet, stop it now. There's no point in blaming yourself, or me, or anyone else, in fact. Basically: she was mad. I mean, it's just – inevitable. If someone's insane, they're insane. Nothing we can do about it. Schluss. No point."

Cheryl says: "If everyone who's insane had to end up topping themselves, AABC for one would have absolutely no-one rattling around inside." Cheryl works in broadcasting, the African Alternative Broadcasting Company actually. She's always on air, haranguing some politician, making some poor sucker wish he had never been born.

She stiffens. "Look who's coming towards us. It's that pratface from the *Daily Wail*. He's here to suck up any bits of story about the late woman artist. Looks like he sat

through the whole service for nothing anyway. Good. Let's get out of here before I slap him. I'll drive with you." Cheryl links her arm through mine and we sweep past a man in an ill-fitting suit, struggling with his briefcase. He drops a few sheets of paper and Cheryl deliberately steps on them.

"Oops, so sorry," she says insincerely, baring her teeth at him. His apologetic smile hardens as he recognises her. "And, Corné, I'm afraid you've just missed the family. Bye for now!"

"Mind giving us a lift, Harrie?" Matt's got his cousin by the arm and they are just behind us. We all squeeze into my Corsa Lite to drive to Jackie's house for the memorial service breakfast.

Ben speaks for the first time, his voice sounding unnaturally high. "Of course, you are absolutely sure she didn't leave a note – I mean, you definitely checked all over, didn't you?" I look over at him. I'm not endangering our lives, Cheryl's driving. She can't bear to be a passenger when I drive.

"Oh, Benny," I say.

18 strange fruit

"...strange fruit
Blood on the leaves, blood at the roots
Black bodies swingin, in the southern breeze..."
Abel Meeropol (pen name Lewis Allan)

I can't think of any event that comes close to engendering the kind of heart-pumping distress and guilt I feel at my sister reaching the end of her tether in this way. A conversation I once had with a long-dead friend buzzes through my head. I asked him something like "What can I do without a memory?"

"You make one out of paper," he'd said promptly, and added, paraphrasing Guillermo Cabrera Infante for my benefit: "I shall remain faithful to my memory even though she fucks around something chronic."

My husband and I were just about to have lunch, when my phone rang. I excused myself and walked outside. It was the matron in charge of the institution where we'd taken my sister after my mother died.

"I'm sorry, Harriet, but you'd better come and see Theresa. She's been really down. Dr van den Bergh can only get to see her on Monday at the earliest. Please try and get here today if you can, there's a prescription you need to sort out for her as well."

Guilt. I hadn't been to see her in ten days. We finish lunch and Pete settles down to watch the rugby while I drive the short distance to the home.

The grounds of the institution Theresa lives in are huge. The whole place is bedraggled, reminds me of what I imagine Cuba to be, like a prostitute who's gradually admitting she can't get away with pretending she's twenty-nine any more. Urine pong and ruins, hadedas clustering and spreading out in the over-long kikuyu grass. And was that a rat I saw disappearing down a culvert? It's exactly a kilometre from the boom to the front door of her ward.

I know my way to her room so don't look for a nurse or the matron. I open her door. Then. It's a little like those cartoon re-takes. The glimpse I get of inside her room shakes me so much, I close the door immediately and I open it again, hoping to get normality back. In vain.

The smell. Usually fresh, right now her room smells disgustingly of dirty nappies. But she's not in bed. And that, that that I am trying so hard not to see, sways gently in my peripheral vision. I sit down on the floor in the doorway, and look sideways and up. Billie Holiday's voice singing "Strange fruit" starts wailing in my ear, so loudly that I can't think. Her new dressing gown cord, the one I gave her for Mother's Day. The table, the matron was doubtful about the table, but I'd insisted, saying she needed it. Where, I'd asked, was she supposed to put her clock radio?

She's hanging from the burglar bars. The room is an old-fashioned one, and the top of the window is as high as a ceiling in a modern home. She must have climbed the stur-

dily-made burglar bars to get to the top, tied one end of the dressing-gown cord there, and then stood on the occasional table I'd insisted she needed, with the other end tied around her neck. Her face. It's the same shade as the dressing-gown that's lying in a heap on the floor.

My legs are giving me trouble, I find a way forward of sorts. I crawl to her feet. They are soft and still a little bit warm. From a long way away, I hear a series of short screams. I note that it's me screaming. A nurse comes hurrying in. She jumps past me and onto the little table.

"Get Matron," she says to me and I find I can move. They cut her down and lie her on her bed. They seem furious. In a fury of activity, they're rubbing her, breathing into her, bringing things with tubes and long extension cords hanging off in and out. As for me, I'm not functioning.

All sorts of emotions are zipping through my head. I'm not angry, yet. I'm panicking. Mostly pity. How long had she planned this? Obviously she'd waited until the nurses were busy placing people for lunch so that no-one would notice she was not in the dining-hall. Unfortunately the cord had had some stretch in it, which meant her neck had not snapped immediately as she must have hoped it would. Instead she would have dangled there, with the knot slipping tighter and tighter around her neck.

She'd have died slowly. Guilt. Why hadn't I dropped everything and come immediately Matron phoned? What was so important about finishing my lunch? At the same time I'm fending off some personal red-eyed dogs of anger.

Every time I stayed away for even a little while, I was considerate enough to let her know for how long, and now look! She decided to move on forever without saying anything at all. And beneath everything else, a tsunami of guilt: why hadn't I taken her into my home? Why hadn't I been to see her this week? Together with so many other smaller whys, that proliferate like the snails you find all over sweet basil. (The harder you stare, the more pop into view).

I was selfishly upset, in the least literal sense of the word, that my hardwon serenity had been sent flying once more. And *of course* she'd written a note, of sorts.

I'd lent her my *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* sometime ago. And she's left *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* open on her bed, with a tiny pencil mark next to the chorus.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword.

fifth interlude

Terpsichore tiptoed into the sauna. For once it was empty. The gym reverberated with Bob Dylan's *She belongs to me* :

"She's got everything she needs

She's an artist, she don't look back..." but inside the hot wooden box the sound was muffled.The coals beckoned red and welcoming. She leaned against the glass wall and breathed in the smell of woody pine. Then she advanced forward into the clear space between the benches and the door, dropped her towel and did a short,

experimental twirl. The boards shifted slightly.

She curtseyed to the gang of imaginary admirers standing on her right, some holding jewels in open boxes on their palms, others dangling pieces of frankincense or phospheresence which reflected in the glass wall next to them and glittered in the coils of precious necklaces roped around their arms. She shimmied and simpered at the imaginary women sitting in the rows, who wafted exotic perfumes and fragrances towards her with languid movements of their hands. Then she began to dance.

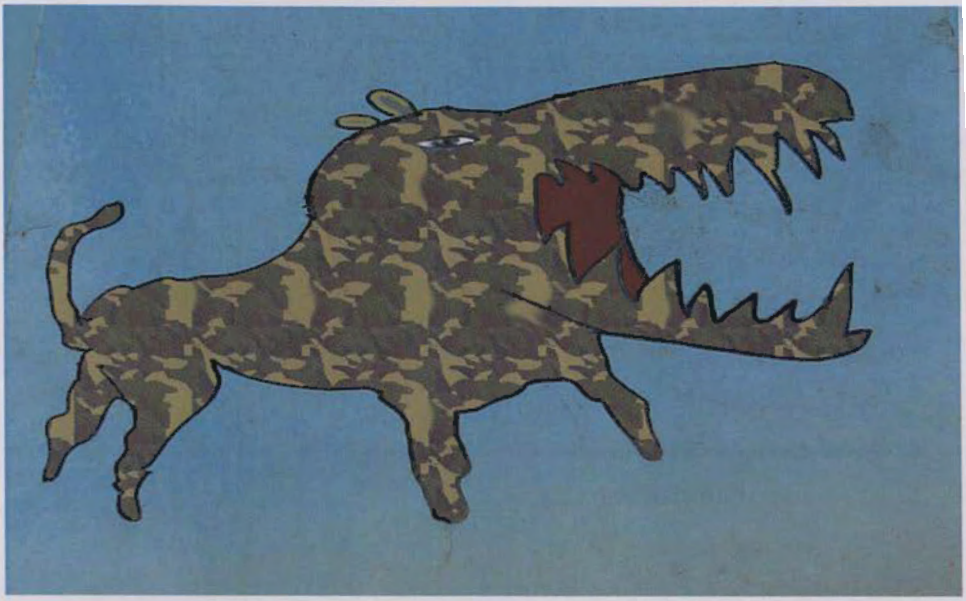
She kicked her left leg forward, and balanced it on the tip of her big toe while she leaned back and rolled her waist, hips and belly in a soft undulating sequence. Then she did the same with her right leg, repeating the movements over and over in hypnotic swirls.

The sauna seemed darkly illuminated with the tips of the men's cigarettes and the muted flames of the coal burner. The dark seemed to drop lightly over her shoulders like a chiffon veil.

She raised her hands above her head and unfurled her magnificent tail. As it swung sideways and up into the air the sauna door creaked open. Immediately her audience dwindled away between the cracks between the planks of the wooden floors and benches.

"Oh, it's you," Callie wound her towel around her head, and spread another neatly on the bench, so that all its edges were straight. She sat down heavily and began to do something complicated to each of her toenails in turn.

Terpsichore tucked her tail between her legs and teetered out towards the brighter lights of the gym.



19 grinning dogs

I'm sitting in my mother's flat reading her diaries again instead of sorting out her things when I get a call. I'm not up to answering my phone. I'm caught in a pearl-like smoothness, all I want to do is flatten out on a horizontal surface. To be a mussel, clinging to a messy rock. Hanging down behind me, bobbing at the back of my knees, the apron strings of duty tap out a gentle reminder of household tasks that I absolutely cannot neglect any longer.

Another seven rings insist. I take the call.

It's Cheryl. She needs me to come over straight away, she knows it sounds funny, but those dogs who've been following her, the ones with human bodies and dog's heads in camouflage uniform aren't letting her out of the house. Yes, she knows they're not really real. But she can't cope. Can I come?

My tongue starts making its presence felt. I don't believe this. Cheryl hasn't had a proper manic episode since the mid-eighties, when the SADF was busy setting off bombs getting rid of activists in our neighbouring countries.

I jump in the car and head off for the Magaliesberg. She's looking pale but resolved. "If you don't mind, would you take me to Phela Care Centre. I think I'm going to have to check in."

I try and stay upbeat but the lump in my throat is swelling and my tongue wants to slide backwards behind it. My sister dropped in there like a stone, never to re-surface. I hate to abandon Cheryl in that place, but she's adamant.

The clinic staff greet me like an old friend, and I help Cheryl to settle in. Her new room is only two doors' away from Theresa's.

She's fine, until suddenly she sits up, says she can control lightning.

"You'd better duck, otherwise I'll zap you with it," she says. She's talking a little too quickly and getting all jumpy, moving up and down on the bed.

I don't argue. I just back down so that she doesn't get over-excited. My shoulders drag over the threshold as I walk out of the building. I can't believe I've lost my mother, my sister and now I'm losing my friend.

I'm bogged down with a huge baggy cloud of sadness muffling my face and all my movements. I've just left Cheryl in a very dark lonely maze and, quite honestly, I don't think she'll ever find her way out.

20 it's the bipolar hip-hop boppity bop

Resentfully I fetch my keys off the hook. Time to go see Cheryl. Again. At least when you visit your friend in hospital with a physical illness, like a hysterectomy or something, you're met with gratitude. But you never know with Cheryl. You're greeted with an unpredictable menu featuring gratitude occasionally, sure, but today's special could be stony silence, with dirty looks as your hors d'oeuvre, your main course her turned-away back with barbed comments on the side, maybe a shoe thrown at you for dessert.

My legs move slowly, stuck in quicksands of reluctance.

"I've got to go to the hardware shop, do you want me to drop you?" says Pete, who's walking to his car. I hang my keys back up and jump in.

Pete drops me at a different entrance to the one I'm used to. I find I'm way past the bluegums and have nearly a kilometre to walk. The small buildings dotted about are different wards, formerly all belonging to the State, but now owned or part-owned by various institutions, some of which are government, some are NGOs and some are simply small private enterprises. Phela Care Centre belongs to the latter group.

I pass a battered sign: LIBRARY. Cheryl loves to have a whole pile of books to dip into, so I turn in to see what's available and if she might join.

There's no-one in sight, so I browse among the stacks. Not much to choose from. There's a whole bunch of romantic fiction, which I pass hurriedly. The older books seem the best bet. I find Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, a George Eliot or two, some relaxing volumes on fly-fishing and an *In search of South Africa* by HV Morton. I make a pile of roughly ten or twelve, thinking to myself I'll whittle down the choices depending on how many books she's allowed to take out at a time. I'm paging through a nice old collection of Goya's paintings when someone comes up behind me.

"Where're you from?" I nearly jump out of my skin, I'm so engrossed. I turn around. A chunky matron with iron bands of hair welded to her head has her hands on her hips and me in her sights. She's a caricature of Nurse Ratched and I stutter and blink that I'm just visiting a friend.

"Where do you belong?" she asks, enunciating each word carefully. I say again that I'm visiting a friend, a friend at Phela Care Centre. She looks me up and down. You can almost see the list she's ticking off in her head. No make-up. No handbag. No car keys.

"My husband is coming to collect me in about an hour," I say. I'm trying to remember the Care Centre's ward number.

"Of course he is," says Nurse Ratched, "Meanwhile, I think you should wait in here," she adds and puts her hand on the small of my back.

"Don't!" I move away from her hand. She jumps away from me in turn, nearly falling over the table piled high with the books I was browsing through.

"Listen to me," she says. "I want you to wait in there. Your husband won't be long, I promise." She waves her hand towards a door behind the counter, the stockroom. I brace my legs in case she tries to push me again.

"No, I'm sorry, I can't stay. I'm on my way to the Care Centre." I would have liked to ask her how to go about taking books out for Cheryl, but I'm unnerved by her manner, and the fact that she 'promised' my husband was on his way.

"Of course," she says. "Of course you are." She moves further away from me. "But, before you go, I expect you want to do something with all these books, don't you?"

I turn to the books, thankfully. "Oh yes," I say. "My friend's name is Cheryl St John. I was wondering how many a person's allowed."

"As many as you like," she says, opening the top one. The last date someone took the Morton out is 12th August 1988. She opens all the books and piles them neatly. "Oh, look under the counter, will you, you'll find the date stamp. Pass it to me, will you?"

I move behind the counter. Nothing there. There's only the dried-out body of a fly lying in a foetal position.

"Oh goodness, how did that cat get in there?" I turn to see what she's talking about and she's on top of me. She shoves her knee between my legs and both hands on my shoulders and she pushes me right through the stockroom door. I stumble backwards and she steps back from me and out the room. I hear two bolts being shot. I close my eyes. Open them again. Nothing's changed. I'm trapped in a dusty old library building by a madwoman. I bang on the door.

"Let me out!" I try not to sound as panicked as I feel. Silence. I look around to see if there's a window, or a phone.

There's nothing. Not even a pencil and paper. The shelves are dusty and empty. I hammer on the door again. Nothing.

A few minutes pass, each taking its time. (Its beauty sweet time, I think, thinking of Max). Eventually I hear a crunch on the gravel, then footsteps and murmurs and the bolts get drawn. Two men in white look in. Behind them is the woman who pushed me in here, and behind her is another tall woman holding a file.

I move towards the door but I'm prevented. The two men walk through and position themselves on either side of me. One of them touches my shoulder. I duck away.

"Please don't touch me!"

"Don't be afraid," says the tall woman, "We just need to get you back where you belong. Come with us."

I burst into tears. A stupid thing to do but I can't stop it.

"Why are you so agitated?" asks the tall woman, who still hasn't said who she is. I stand on my own toe, hard, to shock myself into drying up so that I can speak. It doesn't work.

"Wasn't agitated *before*!" is all I manage. The two men hold onto my elbows and we follow the two women. We walk out of the library and in the opposite direction to Phela Care Centre. When I try and turn towards it, the two men lift me by the elbows and we go the way they want to go.

Once in her office the tall woman finally introduces herself as Doctor Ameer and asks me my name. The room is unnaturally clean. Every surface seems to sparkle as though Mr Min himself skated across them in his over-zealous way: desk gleaming, window calling attention to itself. It occurs to me that the strange effect of brightness and attention to detail is owing to my perception and not to a dramatically high standard of hygiene. Certainly I feel odd, with tight balling and quite painful effects in my stomach and these two men becoming appendages of mine, almost: over-close and breathing in my breathing space. I tell her Harriet Macguire.

"Oh ja, sure, and just now her name was Cheryl Rin Tin Tin," says Nurse Ratched, who's leaning in the doorway.

"I said my *friend*'s name is Cheryl," I give her a look over my shoulder.

"Temper, temper," she says. "You were emptying the shelves in the library and then you got all aggressive with me when I asked where you belonged."

"I didn't," I say, getting indignant, " You pushed me! I *told* you I'm a visitor!"

"Harriet," says Dr Ameer, "Look at me. Please count backwards from a hundred."

I do it (she stops me at seventy-five) and next she asks who the president is. By this time my shoulders are up to my ears and stinging needles are pricking the back of my eyes.

"Please, I really must go and see my friend," I say. She sighs and sits back.

"I can't allow you to go anywhere just yet. Just keep calm and as soon as we gather all the facts we can sort out what is going on here."

Just then I see a small group of patients walking by with a nurse and lo and behold! Cheryl's among them! I bellow her name as loudly as I can.

She turns around. Strides into the office. Takes no notice of the nurse she's with gesticulating behind her or of Nurse Ratched, trying to block the doorway. No knight in shining armour has ever looked more winning. She walks over to me, hugs me and, looking over at Dr Ameer, asks: "What on earth's going on here? What are you doing to my visitor?"

Dr Ameer pushes her file away and sighs. "We really don't have time for this sort of nonsense. I've got a lot of work to do."

She looks at me. "Why didn't you simply explain?"

"I've been a psychiatric nurse for twenty years and she's a schizophrene alright," mutters Nurse Ratched. I pretend I don't hear her and brush past her, arm-in-arm with Cheryl.

As we pass the window I hear Dr Ameer say, "The only exercise a limited mind gets is jumping –"

And Nurse Ratched: "Oh come off it, Shireen, you know as well as I do she's a schizophrene! Think I don't know one when I see one?"

Cheryl tells me she's improving all the time. She says the shrink there is great and from her side, she forces herself to sleep when she needs to and disciplines herself to get up when she must.

She confesses it's frighteningly easy for her to turn into a real bitch when she's either manic or depressed. I don't go "Whoa, you don't say, eh", like I would have normally. Just at present I can't imagine her being anything but an angel straight from heaven.

Apparently her daughter sat her down and told her, "I need you to pay attention to what's going on here. I'm nervous and pretty much afraid that this is the end of the line, that you're never going to snap out of this."

"It was a real wake-up call," she goes. "It hurt at first to know how much I was hurting her, and not being able to help it. It's not my fault I'm bipolar! I get so mad! I didn't ask for this bloody illness."

She starts getting to grips with it by using her periods of wellness to prepare for episodes that may lie ahead. She knows that when she slides into the grip of mania, she easily wipes out her savings just like that. Without a second thought she could leave herself with no money for groceries, let alone for accounts and monthly debits. She has to learn, by rote as it were, painstakingly, the spiky shape her symptoms make when she's balancing on the cusp of a manic or depressive episode.

By discussing this with me, we try and agree at what point she needs to get help and that I can give it if she asks me, or even before she asks me, if necessary. She holds me out at arm's length and says "And so? What about you? You reckon I can have you committed when I judge it necessary as well?"

I laugh but I feel like crying. I thought by now, after so many years, I was safe from ever going mad. She looks at my expression and gives me a hug.

"Silly Billy! Haven't you got it yet? That every single person in this crazy country's crazy in their own inimitable fashion? You're getting by: that's the best you can hope for!"

Another thing she's done that's extremely useful, is design a road map for what to do next when something happens. It's something practical that will help us diffuse any anger or guilt that might come up when the difficult decision about hospitalisation has to be made in the future.

Looking at this road map, I reassure myself. Okay so I never see human dogs hanging about the perimeters of my line of vision. I never feel like shopping and spending tons of money on things I can't afford, and I don't lose my temper with people. Other than that, bottom line, aren't I exactly like her?

Where's the boundary line? Thing is, no boundary line ever keeps still. Nothing much stays fixed and permanent. You draw a chalk line, it gets blown about by the unpredictable gale forces of – what? Mental illness? Uncontrollable events? Chalk in the the air, scattered about. So all you can do is keep redrawing your boundaries.

Cheryl is in the hospital for nearly two months. Rescuing me did her a lot of good! Now that she's stabilised on medication and I see her tough old personality re-establishing itself, I've begun to hope again and it's actually cheering visiting her now.

Every now and then I bump into some or other friend of hers, just coming in or leaving, and then it becomes a whole social gathering, all of us taking care of Cheryl or vice versa. As she steadily improves, when I go in, she'll be lying on her bed, shoes hanging off the end, joking with the nurses. She spends a lot of time helping/hindering in the kitchen, or taking patients for involuntary walks around the grounds.

It's such a joy, to see, that like a precious puzzle, she's all back together again.

21 wedding daze

2007 and it's my daughter Emma's wedding day. Three am. I wake up.

"Focus on the moment." My yoga teacher's talking in my head, but I keep thinking of my brother and sisters and their weddings, dusty old layers muffling this day. Losing my siblings was like surviving two major accidents. The trauma caused by my protective framework crashing down on my head and arms still hurts like hell. On my own wedding day I didn't feel nearly as shaky as I am on my daughter's. So this is what old age is like, and me barely fifty.

My heart's thumping in panic as usual. I curl around Peter, trying to draw comfort from his evenly breathing body, but my eyes pop open and persist in staring into the

blackness of a winter morning. I get up. Three forty seven. Too early to get up, I know. My dressing gown's on the floor. I find it by standing on it, and my shoes are next to the door. Once outside, I can see, because of the merest hint of moonlight, that each piece of kikuyu grass is outlined with an edge of frost.

The garden's as familiar and dear to me as my own. I grew up balancing on its high walls, climbing the fruit trees, swinging on the washing-line poles. The ghost of the dirty old henhoks is smartened up into a ghost-filled granny flat, a filled-with-granny's-ghost flat. The sandpit's a flower-bed and the laundry room's flattened.

The swing's still there, between the compost heap and the trees. I tick off lists in my head: the caterer, the cake, Pete's father-of-the-bride speech. I picture my teacher saying inhale-three-four, exhale... but I breathe too quickly.

I swing more slowly. I'm absolutely resolved not to think of my siblings or my mother – the Missing Person's list – but they keep intruding, jumping into my consciousness like hijackers.

The other brides, those sisters of mine! Jackie's wedding. There's a safe one. The sunflower wedding. Huge sunflower prints on Jackie's sleeves and hem, real ones in her bouquet and in everyone's hair and button-holes. Huge Van Gogh suns set off with brilliant blue delphiniums. Jackie and Giovanni hauling everyone out into the suburban streets to dance with candles. Someone wearing a candle hat.

Three years later, Theresa's wedding. At the time, we'd considered her much too old to ever get married. She was an old maid and on the shelf at twenty-eight. As I'm thinking this I realise Emma's also twenty-eight. Far too young to get married! At the time, though, we'd kind of given up on Theresa ever getting married.

Theresa sits on the verandah steps in her wedding dress, crying her heart out because she'd suddenly started feeling guilty, feeling she was taking advantage of her bridegroom. They'd only known each other two months and Fred was two years younger than she was.

I remember muttering that she must stop smudging her mascara. I felt so honoured that Theresa had chosen me to be her bridesmaid. I'm smiling remembering how Theresa blinked and grimaced as I brushed mascara (my mascara, actually) all over her lashes. I'd stared into her eyes, not forgetting to put loads on the bottom lashes as well, dabbing blue colour all around them. How fashions change! Today of course the hired professional make-up person will arrive at around eleven and charge an arm and a leg to put on a face. At that time, though, all Theresa had was me and my plastic make-up set from Woolworth's. I remember checking her teeth to make sure I hadn't got any pale lipstick on them, and then, on with the dress.

Together we carefully lowered her dress – the colour of peaches – that my mother had made for her, over her Mrs Thatcher-style hairdo. Of course Mrs Thatcher might well have had that hairstyle at the age of twenty-eight. Only difference, she'd kept it the same way ever after!

I remember my cousin trying to grope Cheryl behind the henhoks. She'd kicked him pretty hard and he'd been annoyed. Served him right.

My own wedding had been the most fraught, but still, I'd enjoyed it. It was fun when it was all over. Cheryl was my bridesmaid (that was before she'd been banished) and we'd giggled and talked about sex the entire previous night and how before you got married men were interested in your fine body and afterwards in your fine housekeeping. All through my actual wedding day I was so ill I wanted to curl up in a corner somewhere and sleep. I smudged my own mascara crying while I promised to love and cherish but not necessarily obey Pete forever and ever. It was a perfect autumn day on the Highveld, a full moon and clear, and everyone danced on the verandah under the stars until midnight.

And finally Craig's. By that time Emma and Greg were born and I was pregnant again and in no mood for a celebration. In the end it was the mother of all celebrations. Craig looked an angel in his warm grey three-piece suit, his frizzy red hair all over the place,

glowing and radiant as they say the bride should be: as his Margaret *was*, make no mistake! They'd looked so care-free as they drove off in his wildly decorated Alpha Romeo, tin cans dragging at the back, streamers of toilet paper flapping in the wind and shaving cream all over the windows, courtesy of Puhn, Connection and Chick.

A tiny breeze lifts my hair and I wrap the dressing gown closer around me with one hand, the other holding onto the swing chain. What's that clutching at my heart? Only the usual tragic trinity that make it hard to say yes to life: guilt, pain and death. Gimme some tragic optimism so that I can churn all this straw into gold, spin this flax into thread!

Flax into thread. The thought reminds me of the story of the lazy bride and her three old aunts. It's a Grimm's fairy tale, as far as I can remember.

Oh yes.

Once upon a time there's a pretty young girl who is poor and rather lazy. Her mother yells at her to get spinning. They both need to get weaving so they can earn money. And the girl won't spin. In fact, she's never bothered to learn how. All the shouting her mother's doing attracts the attention of a fine lady travelling by in her coach. Not only is she a fine lady, she's the queen of the country. She stops outside their modest cottage, and asks the girl's mother why she's carrying on like a demented banshee.

The girl's mother is much too ashamed to admit that her daughter can't spin, so she spins the queen a yarn instead. She says she was telling her daughter to stop spinning so much. She complains to the queen that her daughter is just way too industrious, that she's got to stop: to eat and rest sometimes.

To both of their's dismay the queen says, "Ooh good, just the kind of wife I am looking for for my son. I will take your daughter to the palace!" The lazy girl has no choice but to go to the palace with the queen.

Once at the palace, the queen locks her into a large room stuffed with flax. She says to her that once she has spun all the flax, she can marry the prince. The girl sits on a a stool and cries.

Three ugly old ladies walk past the window. They stare into it, and call to the girl.

"Why are you crying?" they ask her. Through her sniffs and sobs, she tells them her problem.

"No problem!" say the three old ladies, and without any fuss, they climb through the window and get busy on the flax.

"Oh, how can I thank you?" says the girl, clasping her hands and laughing with joy, when they finish the last bit of it and get ready to leave.

"Very easily," they say, smiling at her. "Invite us to your wedding. Tell your bridegroom that we are your three dear old aunts and we must eat at the main table with you."

The girl must have felt a little daunted at the prospect, but she swallowed hard and agreed.

It's the girl's wedding day. Her bridegroom, the prince, can't keep his eyes off her. She's looking absolutely stunning in a tight-fitting corset with wide silk ribbons and a softly draped French lace skirt. The three old ladies shuffle in along with the other guests. The bride drifts over to them and introduces them to the prince as her three old aunts.

He can't help staring at them in horror, they are so ugly. The first one has a huge tongue, reaching down to almost past her chin, with disgusting veins lying blue against swollen tastebuds. The second one has two grotesque hands, full of dark brown calluses, and clenched into permanent-looking fists. Finally, the third old lady has an absolutely huge bottom, each cheek wobbling at a different speed as she walks over to them. They sit at the table and the bride allows them to eat the best of the delectable treats available.

Eventually the bridegroom can't bear it for a moment longer, and he asks his lovely wife to excuse them. She moves off and he turns to the old ladies.

"I'm sorry to mention it," he says, "But how come your niece is so fair and beautiful, and you three are so ugly I can hardly stand to look at you?"

"Aah me!" they say in chorus. "From spinning, from spinning!"

The first old lady says: "My tongue got this way from licking the flax, licking the flax. From spinning, from spinning."

The second old lady goes: "My hands got this way from pulling the thread, pulling the thread. From spinning, from spinning."

The third old lady says: "My bum got this way from sitting at the wheel, sitting at the wheel. From spinning, from spinning."

The bridegroom jumps up and in a passion, declares: "My wife has already proved herself to be the best spinner in the country! From this day forth I declare that she will spin no more!"

His bride dimples up and squeezes the shoulders of the three old ladies as she hurries back to take her place next to her bridegroom. Like a cat, she stretches, licks her lips, and thinks: "I never have to lift a finger for the rest of my life."

How do you behave as the mother of the bride, shivering on a June morning, skittish on the morning of your daughter's wedding day? I'm as nervous as a bubble on a cactus farm. And on top of it, I'm both hemmed in and shut out simultaneously.

For instance, yesterday we go to the Plaza to buy some ornamental bits and pieces. We get three basic kinds. Some made of plastic and really over the top, totally camp, some made of glass and some made of icing.

"Do you actually like *any* of these cake decorations?" I ask at last, exasperated.

"They're awful," she says, "I hate them."

What about the orchids? They're terrible, mom. Could she possibly want the bride and groom? Fine, she'll have those.

Fine? Fine's a capitulation and a giving up. Could she have been intimidated by me? Possibly. She wanted the plastic camp couple, we got that. (I find it hard to believe she really wanted it). Did she read my face and see how I felt about any kind of bride and groom figurines at all? She must have done...

22 the three old spinners at the wedding

It's not the sort of conversation I'd have chosen to overhear. My daughter has her hand on my husband's shoulder and is fiddling with his tie. "Don't you see, much as I love her, I can't cope with the extra stress of having her around. Please Dad, can't you think of something? I need her out, gone!"

That's my girl. Of course she's organised everything down to the last detail. She's planned melon, honey and yoghurt for breakfast, a long bubbly bath and then her bridesmaids'll fetch her to have her hair done. Pedicure. Manicure. But presumably the first item on her list is the hardest: to get her mother to leave the house willingly.

I'm standing outside on the frosty grass, talking to my sister, Emma's dear old Auntie Jackie, both of us with cups of coffee steaming in our hands, when we both stop chatting for a moment and hear Emma's rather carrying voice talking to Pete. Pete's reply is inaudible, but by the tone of it he doesn't sound optimistic.

The sun's making the lawn look covered in complicated beadwork. Unlike the fractious Cape where Emma's been living for the past three years, once a winter Highveld sky begins a morning in blue, it remains blue until evening. At least the weather will be perfect.

Jackie's looking at me compassionately.

"What?" I say.

"Come on, Bun, you'd better put her out of her misery, and go away for the morning. You know you'd better."

I look away. "Alright alright, I will! Don't go *on* about it, Jackie!"

At breakfast, Emma opens the conversation tactlessly. I know she doesn't mean to, but her first words rub me up the wrong way. "Why don't you take Lina-Wena to Tiffany's for a cup of coffee, Ma?"

I tell her she can't expect the old lady to go out this morning. She's nearly ninety and the wedding is going to be quite enough excitement for one day. Fatally, I add that luckily we're having the ceremony here as well as the reception.

Too late. I see my casual use of the word "we're" annoys Emma. Too late I realise I adopted a proprietoral air. And though she stops short of saying it, I can see she thinks I'm hijacking her wedding, Jimmy-come-lately-style. Just barely, she manages to swallow her retort: "It's *our* wedding, mine and Toffels', not *our* wedding, mine and yours!"

She makes an effort to hold onto her temper and asks: "But didn't you say you needed to draw money at Cresta?"

It's obvious to her that the more unwanted she's making me feel, the more obstructive I'm becoming.

"I can do that at the ATM," I say, "I don't need to go into a shopping mall on a Saturday morning, Emma!" Emma's transparent ploys to get rid of me are naking me anxious. I will go, I will definitely go, I just need a way to do it gracefully. It's as though

she's chased a scratchy old cat up a tree and now I'm trying to claw my way down and save face at the same time.

At last I manage to say oh yes, of course I'd better go and choose a few books to read on holiday because after all we won't have time later. Emma's whole being beams with relief as she offers me her car, and asks me to deliver Toffels' buttonhole corsage to him at the clothing store where he'd be working all morning. I accept her offer graciously and promise to see Toffels first.

As soon as I've reversed out the driveway my phone rings but by the time I stop at the side of the road it's a missed call. It was Emma. Should I call her back? Perhaps she was calling to say no, look it's fine, stay and watch me get ready. But we both know that no matter what chance remark I make, it's sure to cause damage. I drive on.

Last night for example. All I said was her cat seems hungry. It sparked off an almighty row, less than seventeen minutes after we'd arrived at her house.

I remember with awful clarity some of the nasty fights we had when she was an adolescent. One memorable occasion I took her shopping for clothes. I honestly don't understand the importance of clothes and I hate shopping. She'd badly wanted a pair of green shorts, and I said fine, I'd get them for her when she lost a little weight. I wanted her to have a small incentive of some kind, but how she'd hated me.

She'd snapped: "Don't you realise I have a figure uncannily like yours, Mother? Maybe it's in my genes and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it!"

And looming ahead on Emma's horizon, on her wedding day, is one very important bit of information that she really and truly didn't know how to communicate. Later she said she was petrified about it. She couldn't see any easy way to tell me about it. She just wished she could stop shaking and stammering over the fact. She was absolutely convinced that as soon as she mentioned it I'd give her that look, that *look* in my eye, the one she claims she dreads to see: that sorry-that-you-did-such-a-foolish-thing-but-I-forgive-you-anyway kind of expression. So she didn't say a word.

It's afterwards. The ceremony went off without too many hitches. Toffels dropped her ring and Emma forgot to call him by his proper name – called him Toffels instead of Christopher – but otherwise to all of our relief everything seems to have gone smoothly. Almost all over.

I love the ceremony but I can't help worrying about our relationship and how to change it. Surely there must be a way. I've got this white cloud of a think-bubble above my head. I'd like to know why I come across as so certain, someone with such very definite ideas about things. How did I change from being a reputedly tongue-tied teenager into such a self-assured old woman? My sharp tongue darts out like a weapon or a wound. And the faint image of a fat young girl physically holding her tongue flashes in front of me.

It's not a ghost. It's Cheryl. She's also wearing crocs and her skirt is bright purple. Her hair's a fur ball on her head. We giggle together, Cheryl and me, and if we weren't both so old and wrinkly you'd swear we were still teenagers considering our puerile jokes. Of course we don't have the slightest idea how terrible we look or we wouldn't be so cheerful, would we now?

Cheryl's fought so much her whole life long. She fought on the side of freedom fighters in South Africa, she's fought her personal demons, depression and psychosis, and has come through the other side strong and smiling. She notices Emma looking over at us and raises her fists in the air:

"Beautiful woman, beautiful day!" she mouths.

At that moment, it strikes me that we are Emma's very own personal three old aunties, the ancient walking wounded, wearing our faults and our love like medals for all to see.

Jackie's passing the champagne around. She's always calm, always smiling, so consistent, never frightening anyone with judgments or hurtful comments, her wide lap always available for any of her numerous little nieces and nephews to sit in and be com-

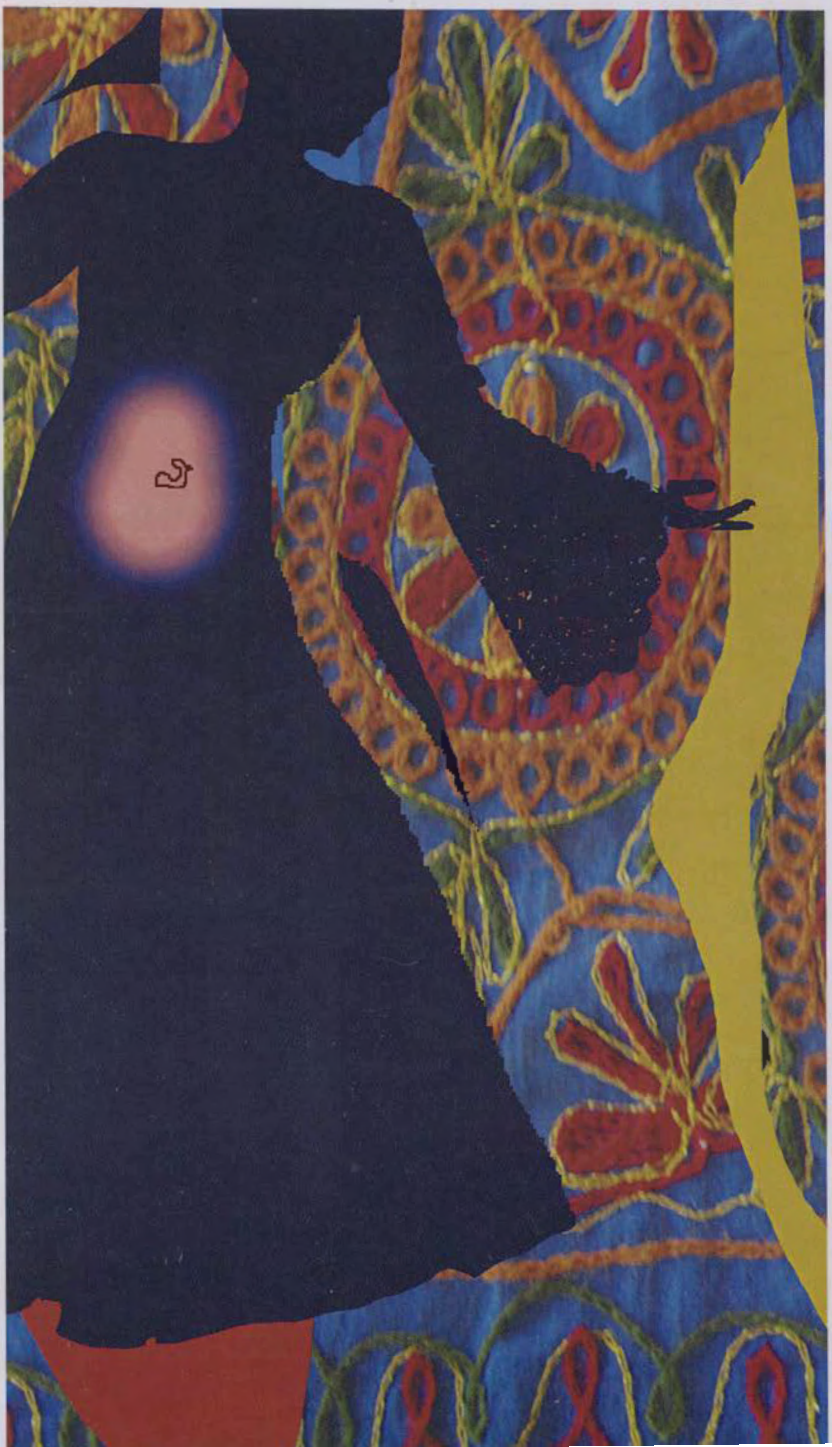
forted with milktart or raisins. Cheryl's ready to swig down my glass as well as her own. I'm about to toast my daughter with red wine rather than the champagne.

Emma walks over to us. Pete is nearly ready to begin his speech. I look over at him, hoping he'll be able to put into words what my tripping tongue can't because it's always too busy trying not to say nasty things. She puts her arms around her beloved Aunt Cheryl, with her hands always ready to defend the weak, and looks over at me.

"I've got something I've been meaning to tell you, mom," she says, "And, uh, no thanks, Jax, I can't– yes, I'm afraid so, I'm pregnant."

"You're pregnant?" Everyone looks over at the sound of my whoop of joy. "Oh wow! I'm so pleased, Emma, I can't wait to be a gran! Yahoo!" And I grab Cheryl's hands and we do a wild witch's dance around her, whirling and shouting on the pine needles under the drooping old tree in front of the verandah.

My love becomes a shelter: safe, indestructible.



PAINTINGS: NOTES

Resist the devil

(300 dpi 350x 500mm charcoal sketch/collage scanned into Photoshop and modified)

The words "Sword of the Word" have been resounding in my head for many years and I wanted to give a cartoon-like spin to the grotesqueness of a haunting situation. The skin colour had to be changed to pink (not blue as in the book) because of the dark blue in the background and it matched the very necessary ginger pubic hair.

Ambulance

(190x430mm collage)

I scanned lots of transport images from an old encyclopaedia and pasted them together in Photoshop, and coloured the background pink. I'm disappointed in the reproduction, it's too brown.

Sandals under the bed

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and modified)

Tried to show both the impossibility of hiding in your bedroom and the anxiety you feel while hiding.

Tongue holding

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and modified)

The drippiness of spit is what comes to mind. I tried to magnify various aspects, like the holding of a slippery tongue and the awareness of wet saliva.

Pointing fingers

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch/collage scanned into Photoshop and modified)

I found a reproduction of the Reckitt's Blue girl, advertising laundry whitener, and photographed it, adding a doll in her arms and lots of brown and blue uniforms mocking her.

Torso

(pastel on pastel paper 200mm x 300mm, colours heightened in Photoshop)

I've used this particular drawing to illustrate the first appearance of the Muses because they reflect the plain prose sense of the protagonist at this stage, in the tools she uses, the concerns she has and her youthfulness.

Letter opener

(red and black cokey pen on A4 watercolour paper with black ink)

At first I planned to scan an actual letter opener, but opted to draw one instead as it needed to look clumsy.

Orgasmabyss

(300 dpi 350 x 500mm pencil sketch and old drawing of fleshy-looking rocks photographed, blown up and modified in Photoshop)

This needed a queer feeling of balance and fleshy tones.

At knee level DETAIL

(90mm x 190mm: Collage modified in Photoshop)

My sister painted this bathroom (in both senses!) and I photographed the painting and added details in Photoshop.

Ski-jump cake

(300 dpi 250 x 250mm. Pencil sketch coloured in Photoshop)

Needed to illustrate the anecdote of exasperation, teasing and amusement, bearing in mind the smiling Muses in the top lefthand corner.

World Emperor

(pencil sketch modified in Photoshop at 300dpi)

I wanted the penis to look tail-like so I left out the scrotum and any other extraneous detail. The flat colours and fairly limited palette are meant to reflect someone young, but not cute.

Giant of a Man

(mixed-media painting 300mm x 450mm)

I was intrigued by my subject's toenails: they looked just like claws.

Mochudi – place of safety

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and modified)

I was revelling in the deep reds of Africa, and all that red dust in Botswana and to give a glimpse of a late night fire reflecting on things.

Ryk's computer

((300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and modified)

A plain illustration of someone opening very tall windows with one of those long poles.

Good intentions and needs must

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

This painting is a mixture of a muddled, mixed-up dream of two figures holding a person down while they administered electro-convulsive therapy, and of two figures making her go through a very premature labour.

Skin thing

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

I copied a drawing from a biology textbook thinking about scar tissue and how it doesn't feel, and how hair follicles grow through, but some don't. I coloured each part of the drawing individually in Photoshop to give the cells more texture.

He emanated shelter

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch/collage scanned into Photoshop and modified)

Another quick illustration just to evoke the feeling of protection a big person carries with him as part of him.

Dousing the flames

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

It has to become clear that some of the Muses are very much on Harriet's side while others are simply not. I thought I'd mark the most partisan with wings.

Trapped

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch collages scanned into Photoshop and drawn on)

Perhaps a (badly-drawn) bird caught by its wings, bits of things stuck in glue, or other things that cause a struggle to pull away.

Blackroombaby

(300 dpi 350x 500mm bitumen painting scanned into Photoshop and modified)

The vague suggestion of feet sticking out of a sack is meant to refer the viewer back to Helen Martins' sculpture called 'The Little Devil'.

Harlequin stain in glass

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

An illustration showing how a person glories in the light shining through coloured glass.

Rainbow glass and icing

(300 dpi 350x 500mm A scan of a photograph of a selection of skeletons and modified in photoshop)

Thoughts of the Mexican day of the dead when you eat skeleton-shaped cookies decorated with icing. One desperately scrabbles around for something light to ease the burden of grief.

Heartburn

(300 dpi 350x 400mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

Swallowing heaps of squares of Rennies... surely cannot be good!

Ripping the ties that bind *or* Phone call

(Charcoal and wood varnish on A3 plywood)

Tried, by drawing the fingers holding the phone in a peculiar stretched-out fashion, to epitomise some kind of agony. (Hands contorted or stretched seem expressive somehow).

Sometimes an hourglass

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

To express grief as a shape: a weary, towards-the-earth-diving type of position. Caught in your own Little Ease, in which you can neither comfortably sit nor stand nor lie down, and all the while household chores nag at you to get going.(As you probably know, the Little Ease is in the Tower of London in which one could only crouch.)

Fruitful ladies

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

Just a very sketchy illustration showing Euterpe, gagged to stop her pleasing anyone, Calliope, the tallest and wisest of the Muses, Erato, smiling and relaxed, Thalia unwise, green and grinning, Clio sardonic, Melpomene lying around tragically, Terpsichore's feet tapping, and Polyhymnia and Urania out from under the limelight.

Praying under the pine

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

A plain illustration of a certain facet of spirituality.

Furious pink and yell DETAIL (your face becomes a mask: you already are a monster)

(original in ink on paper originally, scanned and modified in Photoshop)

I struggled with this concept a lot. I tried making this emotion clear over and over again. I wanted that hollow feeling of victory after you've had a fight, and also a flicker of role reversal, when the other person becomes passive or, as in this instance, dies. I wanted it to be a side-glance, not a focused, but a sidelong look.

Battle ready with batwinged helper and cudgel tail

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and modified)

This a painting about unresponsiveness. I wanted the person to be entrenched in their position, not able to move out of it really, and then a friend had to be darting about, making comments. Her face is contorted in misery. Carried out almost entirely in Photoshop on the computer.

Battle ready in pink with Job's comforters

(300 dpi 350x 500mm drawn in Photoshop and coloured)

This is a painting about someone who is stuck, figuratively. Judgments from friends are really unhelpful, making everything worse not better and the weapons at hand are mostly scratches in ink and a floppy dagger.

Smells funny

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

There's a sculpture by Tinguely that has these feathers on top of a triptych, that whizz around busily but entirely ineffectually. I wanted some of that trussed-up feeling of energy that can't go anywhere and rickety wheels that can't carry the load.

Shadow-puppet bogey men

(Prints of actual clay model stuck in resin with acetate and tracing paper)

Not only do the actualities become menacing but you find yourself getting menaced by the shadows they cast also.

Death hacks about

(300 dpi 350x 500mm collage/pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

The 'Dans Macabre' is a concept I don't know much about, but just the words evoke a particular horror, that of dancing on stuff that used to be alive, and having a body that is not quite your own but some semblance of it. I left bits and pieces in the painting, to give an indication of wanton destruction.

Nightmare in cheery colours

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

This painting is trying to express a private attempt at recovery and healing.

Beware of camo

(300 dpi 350x 500mm cokey pen on enamel photographed and coloured)

I drew this beware of the dog sign back in the day when I still owned a dog and filled it with camo pattern to illustrate the chapter.

Divebomber friendship

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

I've never forgotten the rigid feel of that fairground ride called the Divebomber: the way the two little carts are stuck on at right angles on each end of a stiff pole and how rigidly you hold your arms while you ride in it.

Sinking sand

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

Just to show your loss of firm purchase when relationships you thought were forever, suddenly aren't.

Flax into thread

(300 dpi 350x 500mm pencil sketch scanned into Photoshop and coloured)

Can't help feeling that the concept of flax into thread is a bit like 'weaving a story' or 'spinning a yarn' from the raw material of your own experiences. And eventually it's how you manage your flax that counts.

'That's all folks' ends on an expectant note

(300 dpi 350x 500mm photograph cut out and stuck on embroidered cloth)

Trying to indicate that rarely is an emotion evenly distributed. Here joy itself is shot through with mournfulness, fragility and various other bits and pieces.

Harriet teeters on the edge of a bipolar abyss, never entirely sure of herself or her sanity. Her whole life long she tries and mainly fails to pass for normal. The book is about the ripples that the illness makes, and the echoes of the illness in a strangely skewed country. In the end you might believe that you too are a lot like Harriet except that she's hysterically more so.