

# Talion

*A tragedy*

Beyers de Vos

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# Murder

(October 2014)

# 1

The building that stood here was ripped out by its roots from the concrete skin of the city, leaving only a scar. And one other thing: a wall, grey and untarnished, a sole survivor of the carnage.

Painted onto the wall, spreading giant black wings, an angel stands in darkness.

The angel wears a black gown and her black hair is blowing in an imaginary wind. She is blindfolded. In her left hand, she holds the scales of justice. She is strained, constrained. Underneath the angel, at her feet, a crowd of small people have gathered. They are prostrating themselves in front of her, faces eager, faces full of adoration. But along the edges of the crowd, skirmishes have broken out; people are stabbing each other to death with tiny, badly drawn knives. Some of them are tying nooses. Other are flinging themselves off the edge of the world. Still others have begun to climb the angel, using the folds of her gown to pull their way up; a few of them are even urinating on the people below.

At least one of these tiny people has reached the summit of the angel, standing on her left shoulder. This man has reached up towards the edge of her blindfold and lifted the heavy fabric. From underneath, an angry eye is leering at the street. A fierce, red eye.

In the angel's other hand, the right one, she holds an erect penis, as if she is using this as her sword. The penis is engorged and ejaculating, and from the angel's hand great white globs are falling, killing the people at her feet who get caught in the mighty splashes. Drowning in her fertile fury.

When the wind blows through Pretoria, it is possible to imagine the angel's wings flapping furiously, her chest heaving. It is possible to imagine her breaking free, a great avenger, seeking out those that have done wrong. It is possible to imagine her white, sharp hands and her stark, bold mouth stunning the beholder with their power, with their ferocity.

Underneath the angel, in angular black letters, it reads: *I am coming for you.*

And from her angry red eye, the city watches. And it sees.



Friday

## 2

Ben hears the gunshot before he feels it.

The car is still running, the rumble of the engine unnaturally loud. His foot is slipping off the clutch. His blood is spilling out behind him, wetting the seat. His whole body is trying to panic, trying to cry out, trying to flee. But he can't move, his lungs are filling with blood.

The car coughs. Dies.

People are shouting.

He saw the shooter; he saw the man raise the gun – satisfaction like oil all over his face, black and molten – and squeeze the trigger. He knows who's shot him. He knows why.

The bullet came through his window (why had his window been open?).

“Ben! Jesus Christ!” She is at the window suddenly, wildly. Fear blooms in her eyes, bright and blue. He wants to tell her that it's all going to be okay. It's no big deal. Like the time they were playing Touchers and he fell through the glass table. Does she remember? There was blood all over the white living room carpet, the carpet that their mother loved so much; he'd gotten fifty stitches. This is just like that. This is just another scar.

But a black fog is rolling through his eyes. His heart is losing rhythm, is a song falling from its crescendo. He cannot move his tongue; he does not have any last words.

He is so tired.

His mind slows down. Every sensation is travelling from very far away, reaching him through a cloudy tunnel. Colours are fading, blending into each other, losing intensity.

There are more people around the car now, shouting and running. She is opening the door, undoing his seatbelt. “Don't move him!” someone yells. She takes her jersey, takes his hand (grasps it), and pushes it down over his wound. “Ben! Can you hear me? Don't close your eyes, okay? The police are coming. Don't die. Jesus Christ, don't die!”

He won't die, he won't. He's just going to close his eyes. Just for a second.

## 3

Sergeant Nolwazi Mngadi is having a bad night.

She's been on duty for little over two hours and she's already fed up. She tosses a chocolate wrapper out the window, rubbing her bruised nose. She's sulking, because a shoplifter managed to cuff her across the face while thrashing around, shouting about police brutality. Later (Nolwazi still trying to stem her nosebleed) the little criminal's father had

berated Nolwazi for almost an hour: why wasn't she doing *real* police work? Why wasn't she chasing *real* criminals? Why wasn't she out catching *rapists*? Never mind that his daughter had been caught red-handed.

After that she was called out to deal with a gang of streakers. When she arrived (five minutes before anyone else did) they scattered, and she was forced to chase a skinny, petulant man through the streets: a naked man who turned to look at her – leering, hands on his genitals – before jumping a fence and evading arrest. She gave up the chase after that. Nolwazi would be the first to tell you – she isn't built for running.

She should never have asked to be transferred to the Brooklyn station.

Brooklyn, she had thought. Sophisticated area, low crime rates. Nothing more than petty theft and drunken driving. Maybe the occasional hijacking. But no more bodies hacked to pieces, no more murder, no more gangs, no more child abuse, no more rape. No more babies in garbage bins. No more happy-just-to-be-alive at the end of the day. Brooklyn had a kind of heroic ring to it. Brooklyn PD – like in New York. Like in the TV shows she liked.

But no one told her that Brooklyn Police Station wasn't technically in Brooklyn at all, but in Hatfield: the station is only a block away from the university campus. Students. Students everywhere. Drunk, stupid students who spend their nights getting wasted and pissing her off. At least in Mamelodi she had been treated with respect. The badge had meant something. People had known her: the first thing she got when she walked out her door in the morning was a smile, a nod. But here? Here it's a scowl and a bad cup of coffee. Here she spends her days dealing with privileged, part-time racists who think they're above the law.

When she arrives, Frik and Hans have their arms crossed, staring down at a young man standing in the half-light of a streetlamp. Not a man, really; a boy no older than twenty. He has a cigarette hanging limply from his lips; he is shuffling from foot to foot. They're pulled him over on a quiet residential back street. Above the tree line the glow of Hatfield's bars is visible, and to her right – on the dark horizon – the loops of the highways that feed it. But she could almost pretend none of that existed between these normal houses, these tranquil streets that existed just outside the reach of the pestilence of Hatfield. Nolwazi often parked her car in one of these streets, moving away from the neon-loud bars, the clouds of music; she could switch her radio off and escape into another world – a world where justice isn't a broken, ridiculed victim; a world where heroes exist.

“Hey,” she hears Frik say to the male suspect as she gets out of her car, “do girls actually like those?” He is pointing to the black, too-tight skinny-jeans the guy is wearing. The young man stutters, but Frik bares his many teeth, and laughs, not looking for a response.

“Evening Nolly,” he nods.

“Evening Frik. Hans.” Hans ignores her, as usual. Because she’s black, because she’s a woman, because she outranks him; or some combination of the three. It doesn’t particularly bother her. She’s used to it. At least that’s what she tells herself.

“We caught them buying weed from Bra Joe outside there by Tings ‘n Times. They say they were just asking for directions. But I saw Bra Joe give them the stuff with my own eyes. Searched the car twice and the guy, but the chick was in the passenger side window, doing all the talking. We think she’s got it somewhere.”

The female suspect is standing slightly apart from her friend, smoking a cigarette and looking at the police expectantly, daringly, like she’s sharing a secret with them. She is dressed in a short, tight-fitting white dress, worn over bright blue tights. She’s taken off her shoes. Her painted toenails glimmer brightly every time the police lights flicker across them: blue and red, blue and red.

“Come over here, please,” Nolwazi tells the girl. ‘What’s your name?’”

“Sophie,” the girl says, putting out her cigarette on the curb, leaving the butt lying on the tar.

“Do you have any marijuana on your person, Sophie?”

“Not tonight, ma’am.”

“Stand over here with your hands on the car and spread your legs.” Sophie calmly does as she is told. There is a small smile on her lips. Her friend is watching anxiously.

Nolwazi hates body searches. She stands behind the girl and quickly manoeuvres her hands up her legs to just before the panty line. “Stand up straight please, arms out.” She checks from below the panty line, up the girl’s back. She checks down both her sides. “Turn around.”

Sophie is taller than she is.

“Are you sure you haven’t smoked any marijuana tonight?”

“No ma’am.”

“I can smell it on your breath.” Nolwazi is lying.

“Must be the cigarettes, ma’am.”

She runs her hands up Sophie’s stomach and under her breasts (almost lifting them out of the dress.) Clean. She doesn’t like this girl, tall and sexy and relaxed. She could ask her to undress, to squat, to lose a little of her dignity, but that would require taking all the suspects back to the station. Booking them. And Nolwazi can’t see where Sophie’s possibly hidden the marijuana, unless it’s inside her vagina. “She’s clean, guys.”

Hans, who had been watching her exam ardently, his big red lips slightly open in anticipation, slams his hands into the side of the vehicle. She sees him visibly resist the urge to toddler-stamp his foot. “Fuck’s sake,” he says instead. Frik merely runs his hands through non-existent hair and asks, “You sure, Nolly?”

“Yes. Sure.” Sophie and her friends look relieved.

“Okay, you okes can go. But don’t let us catch you buying weed again,” Hans says to them. Nolwazi can practically see the waves of disappointment peeling off him, his face crumbling in on itself – Frik and Hans spend their nights camped outside wherever Bra Joe is operating – it’s easy, it’s neat and usually no one notices if only some of the evidence makes it back to the station. Unless you’re Nolwazi, in which case it’s the first thing you notice. “We won’t,” Sophie says, mirth in her voice. She and her friend scramble back into their car. Nolwazi can hear their shouts of relief echo down the street – at least someone’s going to have a good night.

The harsh noise of electronic interference interrupts this silence. “Shooting on Burnett Street,” says the mechanical voice from the car. “White male shot in a blue Citi Golf. All available officers please respond.”

#### 4

A knot.

The city is a knot.

A big ugly knot that’s been fastened and refastened, tied and re-tied so many times that there is no undoing it. The only way to undo it is to burn it. A knot of many pieces: tendrils of stuff clumping together in dark, irreparable confusion. Mr October is following one of those tendrils now. A tendril that curves south into the black belly of the coil.

He lives right inside the knot, right inside the worst of it. Unprotected, unsaved. Living with the threat of being tangled in stray threads; in other, bigger knots. A city full of knots. Twisted, re-twisted, and twisted again. Unsolvable.

The tar stretches onward before him. The lights on the side of the road burn fiercely, like angry Cyclopes.

The night is dark, and strange.

#### 5

The police car leaves the dark driveway, and Slick emerges from the shadows. A quiet street between two busier ones. Office blocks. Student housing. The sounds of distant bars, the

flashes of distant headlights. The streetlamps are switched off, or broken. Across the road, in the shadows of a closed-down bar, something moves, someone signals to him.

He walks across the street.

The dead space that used to be a bar is fronted by a large balcony, where students sat on summer nights sipping cheap cocktails, listening to bad guitar music. It was a bar known for its lax attitude towards drug use, its Rastafarian rip-off feel. Which is why it had been one of his main areas of business – demand had been high. But now there is nothing left inside the bar save the impressionistic Bob Marley paintings on the walls. The student district, with the mighty campus at its centre, was crumbling, was losing its identity to a clean-up operation: no more bars, not more drinking. Instead there will arrive dentists' offices, optometrists, Chinese take-aways. Bad for business.

“Sharp, Bra Joe,” he says to the man taking shelter in the doorway, who is rolling a joint, sitting with a dirty sleeping bag around his knees. “Sharp,” Bra Joe says, inhaling. He puts his drugs back into a flimsy, stained bag and clutches it to his chest. “What are you doing here,” Bra Joe asks him, settling against the padlocked door.

“Just checking in,” Slick says.

“You never check in.” Bra Joe looks at him with drooping red eyes.

“Business not suffering?”

“People know I’m still here.”

“I suppose they do.” Slick hands Bra Joe a packet. “More stock,” he says. Bra Joe frowns and shakes his head like he is trying to dislodge something. The beads in his dreadlocks thud dully as they bump against each other. Slick can only imagine how dirty those dreadlocks must be. “Where’s the usual guy? The white one?” Bra Joe asks.

Slick sighs. “He’s busy.”

“Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like that.” Bra Joe points to him, a gesture seemingly encompassing his whole body.

“This is what I look like,” Slick says.

“No,” Bra Joe grunts, “No, you don’t usually look this nice.” The tip of his joint glowing brightly as he puffs. His skin is pockmarked, oily. He forages in his bag and finds a bundle. He hands it over. Slick pockets the money and nods at Bra Joe. Slick turns to leave, then: “The police were here,” Bra Joe says, “watching me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I told you, the police will leave you alone.”

“Okay,” says Bra Joe. “But send the other guy back next time. I like him. He brings

me a coke.” Bra Joe flings his joint aside and flops down, wrapping himself in his sleeping bag, wrapping himself against the night. His snores begin almost immediately.

“Goodnight then,” Slick says, walking away. Down the dark street, back into the shadows.

## 6

Freya Rust, twenty-one, art student.

Freya can hear herself talking too fast. She isn’t sure what exactly she is saying; the words tumble out of her mouth, clambering over each other, getting caught in a verbal stampede.

Because if she carries on talking, then she doesn’t have to feel or think. If she tells them the story over and over again, they can’t send her home. She won’t have to walk through the front door where Ben’s jacket will be hung on the hook it took him all day to put up; walk into the kitchen where his dried-up herbal tea bags will be stacked on the counter because he could never throw the damn things away.

Keep talking.

Ben had dropped her off outside the bar while he went looking for parking. That’s what always happened. Every Friday night she and Ben and Alex and Adam would go to Oxford’s – do you know Oxford’s? It’s right around the corner from the police station? – to have a drink. Ben always drove, always volunteered to be designated driver. He would drop them off and find parking. Always such a mission, parking.

She would buy the first round. Alex and Adam wouldn’t do much of anything except make jokes.

But Alex and Adam hadn’t been there this time, this night. They had gone home for the mid-term break. She and Ben had decided to go to Oxford’s alone. They had almost decided not to bother. She can remember that thought starting: *maybe we should just stay at home...* and she remembers dismissing it: *no, going out will be fun*. Ben had said there was something he wanted to tell her. Good news, he’d said. They hadn’t seen each other much that week – it had been filled with semester tests, assignments, irregular hours. And Ben had been spending more time away from home, with the stranger in the Atos who drops – used to drop – him off early in the mornings, when he thinks – thought – she is still asleep. But she had kept quiet about it; she had wanted him to tell her whatever it was when the time was right.

Campus has been quieter than usual, with all the students gone home for the holidays.

But she and Ben were Pretoria born and bred. They had nowhere else to go, no one but each other. Their parents are dead. Funny, she's never thought of herself as an orphan. Not really. Not until now.

He was her younger brother?

No. No, he is her *twin*. Was her twin. Her fucking twin.

How old?

She'll be twenty-one in a few weeks. They live together, in the flat their parents left them.

Where?

Not far from campus. Duncan Street. No, wait. The name of the street has changed. She can't remember to what. It's just around the corner. She walks past the police station every day (now that she's actually inside it, it's not what she pictured at all.) They could have walked to Oxford's too, but it's too dangerous to walk back late at night. They've been mugged before, so they're careful. Is that some kind of irony?

Did they report the mugging?

Yes. Yes, of course.

When did it happen?

A few months ago. May. Sometime in May. Ben was the one who came down to the station to make a statement. Freya didn't come with him.

Noted. Carry on, please.

Anyway, he had dropped her off. But she got a phone call just as she got out the car, so she didn't go inside right away. It was too noisy. She had watched as Ben drove down the street. As he found a parking space almost right next to the bar.

Was that unusual?

Yes, very. But like she said, it wasn't a very busy that night.

Who had she been on the phone with?

Her boyfriend. Eric. His name was Eric. Eric Evans.

Where had he been that night?

He was with friends. The relationship was new, a few weeks old.

So she had been on the phone and had watched as her brother – her twin brother – found parking?

Yes. Yes. But then another car, a red Mercedes, one of those old ones, you know, those 1980s ones, had tried to park in the same bay. And Ben had cut him off.

It was a him? The driver?

Yes, a man. Older. Maybe fifty? She couldn't tell. She isn't good with ages. Balding, grey hair. She remembers he had the lights on, inside the car. That's strange, isn't it? But she could only see his head, only his head was in the light. He is coloured. He wears glasses.

Distinctive marks?

What kind of distinctive marks?

Tattoos, scars, anything like that.

No, she doesn't think so. But she saw his gun.

Is she sure she saw the gun?

Yes, she saw the gun. She's sure.

So this man in his red Mercedes had tried to park, but Ben, Ben cut him off?

Yes.

Was there anyone else nearby?

There were people standing outside Oxford's, smoking. A girl getting out of her car. A car-guard, she thinks, on the other end of the street.

It's a cliché, isn't it, that things slow down? Like in films. The camera hovers above the scene of the street. In slow motion it watches as the red Mercedes drives carefully forward, the man inside it saying something (indistinct, unknown.) It sees Freya lower her phone and look up, dark curls swinging back gently, softly. The gun shots aren't seen, but heard in slow motion: deep, rough, plosive roars that overpower all other sounds, overpowers thought.

A pause.

Sound will stop.

Reality needs to reassert itself.

Now, the camera might move in. Might collide with – zoom into – the thick of the action, might become frenzied; the world will speed up.

Everything happens in flashes. A flash of the street, the Mercedes a red streak in the twilight as it flees; Freya running so fast she will look like a blur to all those who remember it later. She does not know how she reached Ben; she is there suddenly, holding him. The screech of the tyres left behind by the fleeing car only reaches her then; she hears it over the sound of her brother's struggled breathing: the sound catching up to the action, the world returning to a regular rhythm.

The trauma – so easy to describe here for you now, to relive from the outside, from above, as if it were a story – will rush back inside her, attach itself to her heart and pump itself into her blood. It will become hers. It will claim the centre of her, expanding and

retracting, exploding and exploding and exploding.

And everything becomes purple.

She cannot talk about that, about how she watched his eyes turn silver, felt his pulse stop. She cannot talk about what will happen now. She cannot think about going home.

But she can tell you what happened just before Ben was shot again and again and again. Maybe she's forgotten something, some detail?

Can she remember the Mercedes's number plate?

Maybe. Yes, maybe she can.

Then by all means, keep talking.

Saturday



## 7

After talking, there is silence.

Silence, dirty dishes and dust.

Coming home doesn't feel different than it does on any other day. The flat isn't emptier, or quieter; it is still filled with the overwhelming presence of Ben. His scent, his things, the expectation of noise from his room, the expectation that he is going to come around the corner to greet her or walk in behind her. The *potential* of Ben fills the flat, almost making a sound, almost calling her name. It's as if the house anticipates him, as if it's only inside Freya's head that he is dead, as if reality hasn't solidified yes, hasn't taken hold of the world.

The shift is yet to come.

And Freya, who is walking through the world without noticing it, who is retreating into her innermost self with every step, who is unconsciously building a wall of suspicion and anger that is sliding into place like a cell door, is waiting for it to hit her, to make contact.

Like waiting for a slow knife.

The force of violence is swifter and more brutal than memory, than the human mind.

But there *is* the silence, and through the silence, there comes an emptiness, cutting, raging. And then it's pulling her, dragging her down like so many hands. And she falls. She doesn't resist, and she drops to the floor like a plate from a shocked hand, and is broken.

## 8

What is left after the crowds have gone is not silence; it is the ghost of noise.

After all that energy – all those people with their cheers and their war-cries and hopes and expectations – has left, what rushes in to replace it is the haunting absence of what has just been. A phantom echo. It's like the whole world has deflated, as if the school does not know what to do with itself without any people in it. It is uncanny, and wonderful.

Mr October walks along the edge of the field, carefully keeping to the shadows.

He likes the silence; he likes the loneliness.

“What were you doing with him?”

“Nothing, leave it alone.”

“You need to stay away from him.”

“Leave me alone, Pa. Fuck off.”

The words are still settling on him, even though they were said last night. Most of what happened last night is still settling on him. Like a hammer on a skull, it pounded through him. His daughter. The Boy. His whole wounded life, flung into chaos again. Uncontrollable, desperate, leaking.

They had won the match, at least. But only by a single tri, so he wasn't completely happy. His team would need a talking to, on Monday. He picks up a chocolate wrapper grimly, folds it neatly and throws it into the nearest bin. Crowds are so messy, so uncontrolled, so distracting. If he could have his way they would play inside somewhere, behind soundproof glass. Just the players and the referee. And the coaches, of course. Just the sounds of the match being played. The whir-thump of the ball, the grunts and groans of the players: the sounds of speed and strength. The sound of teamwork and harmony. He cannot concentrate when the pavilion is packed with spectators – noisy, restless spectators, screaming, yelling, knowing better. Like a dozen mosquitos trying to wake you from the dream in which you finally, finally manage to win.

He always loses, in his dreams.

But they won today, so that is something. That feels right. He has a good team, too. Powerful, smart. You have to be smart to play rugby. Have to understand strategy. The stupid ones, the brute strength ones, they frustrate him: useful, but uninspiring, unmalleable.

He reaches the far corner of the field, the edge of the school. He checks behind him, where the fence that runs the length of the school meets the wall of the building next door, creating a small space where students loved to tuck their rubbish. But everything is clean. Satisfied, he begins walking along the edge of the field, heading towards the pavilion. The pavilion stretches along the length of the field, an ugly brick monster. There are gaps in the tiers of blue plastic, where the seats have been damaged or stolen: pock-marks across the monster's face. Underneath the pavilion, the change rooms and tuck shop. Behind that a parking lot and more sports fields, and behind that a forest of pine trees which hides the rest of the school, in all its sandstone grandeur, from view.

It is a hot day, strangely humid, and Mr October loosens his tie slightly. After all, everyone is gone. A loosened tie is permissible.

The last thing he checks before heading home is the changing room. A rectangular room, filled with lockers. Showers and toilet stalls line the back wall. It's yellow, unremarkable. But someone always forgets something. He uses the boot of his car as the lost and found; he charges ten Rand to return an item: there has to be some responsibility; nothing is free.

He hears a small, sharp noise as he checks the lockers. A human noise.

“Hello?”

A small gasp of air.

Mr October notices the closed bathroom stall, the bag left on the benches. “Hello? Is there someone still in here?” A young man unlocks the door and steps out. He is shirtless, and he has bandages all over his torso. His shirt hangs limply in his hand. “Mr Tshabalala? What are you still doing here?”

“Nothing, sir. Nothing. I’m on my way.”

“What are those bandages for, Tshabalala?”

“Nothing sir. Nothing. I fell.”

“You fell?”

“Sir.” He pulls his shirt on, and swings his bag over his shoulders.

Tshabalala does not make eye contact as he speaks; he looks at his shoes. And he is moving towards the door before Mr October can say anything else. “Afternoon, sir,” he says. He is practically running out the door now.

“Tshabalala!”

The boy turns to look over his shoulder, his face creasing, as if expecting a blow. “Sir?”

“How is my daughter?”

“Your daughter, sir?”

“Yes. My daughter.”

“Yes sir.” A cautious pause, before he continues, “She’s fine sir.”

“Good. And Tshabalala?”

“Sir?”

“You played well today.” The face opens wide, and the boy almost-smiles, “Thank you, sir.” Then he looks back towards the school gates, and says, “I better go”. And is gone.

They all suspected it, of course. That Tshabalala’s father beat him. It was a constant source of gossip – gossip, how he hates that word – in the teacher’s lounge. But they have never been sure. Never been sure enough to do anything about it. But now? Tshabalala is a quiet boy, a good player. Friendless, focussed. Mr October admires him.

He should report the abuse.

Mr October stands there for a while, not wanting to go home; not wanting to return to his dank, unlivable house.

He walks slowly towards his car. From under the passenger seat, he takes out his gun.

Then he goes home.

Sunday

“I brought breakfast,” Ash says when she appears at the door, waving a McDonald’s bag.

“I’m not hungry.” Ash puts the food down on the kitchen counter. “You really shouldn’t be smoking,” she says. Her flat red face, the tear marks running down her cheeks, her chipped teeth, all of these seem to be pulled up in disapproval. “Maybe we should clean a little before we go? Get your mind off everything for a while. Routine, everyday tasks. Might help.” Freya ignores her, and inhales deeply.

Ash. Stooped and old and broad. Cousin Ash, is what they used to call her when they were children, although Freya can never remember exactly how she fits into the family tree. Family branch, now – just Freya and Ash blowing in the black wind. Ash owns a plot of land outside the city where she tends chickens, indulges in some landscape painting and, as she puts it, “Listens to the trees.” After their parents died, it was Ash who came to look after them, who fetched them from the house and handed them a packet of store-bought cookies and muttered “terrible” under her breath too many times.

“Come and live with me,” Ash says now, in a voice like a big bell. Freya pulls her hoodie tighter, watching Ash as she begins clearing dishes.

“Don’t ask me that again,” Freya says.

“Is that Rusty’s hoody?”

“Ben. His name is Ben.”

Ash looks out beyond Freya. She says, “There’s a storm coming” and then in the face of Freya’s silence, tries again, “Must be nice to have that Jacaranda right outside your window.”

Freya looks behind her, out the large light blasted window, at the sprawling Jacaranda tree, now in full bloom; a purple explosion. She says, her voice bleeding lead: “Jacarandas come from South America originally. Not Australia. Everyone always says they come from Australia. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t know that, no,” Ash says, taking a seat opposite Freya, encouraging her to proceed.

“The word ‘jakara’nda’ was taken from an indigenous South American language by the Portuguese. It means ‘to have a hard core’.” Behind Ash, an oily corner of the McDonald’s bag is visible. Ash has her phone in her hand. It buzzes. “Who are you talking to? Is it about me?”

“It’s not about you.”

“I don’t want you talking about me. Or him.”

“Rusty was my family, too.”

“Ben. Ben. Ben. Ben. Ben. Was my brother. Is my brother.” Freya’s mind begins to expand, to fill with a buzzing, an unstoppable noise. She wants to lash out, to be violent. She says, the words shooting from her lips quickly, as if they are being chased by something inside her, “Jacarandas used to stand in the centre of Amazonian villages, and in the afternoons the tree would be a place of shade where the villagers could congregate, where the wise women of the village would gather and dispense justice and retribution.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I read it. On Google.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

“Probably not.”

“Have you heard the legend of the White Jacaranda?”

Freya shakes her head. “Hidden somewhere in Pretoria is a street full of white Jacaranda trees,” Ash says, “not purple, white. Only those who have found it know where it is, but if you can find it for yourself, you’ll have good luck for a year. You’ll pass all your exams.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Freya says, and she takes pleasure in the silence that follows these words; she enjoys the dumbstruck look on Ash’s face. Ash visibly pulls herself together and says, “It’s almost time to go, you should eat something.” But Freya’s brief spitefulness hasn’t achieved much; she’s already fallen back into darkness.

“Freya?”

“I wish I hadn’t seen it happen,” Freya says.

“You think that would have made a difference?”

“Maybe. If I hadn’t seen him do it, if I hadn’t seen his face, if I didn’t have that image playing over and over in my head, maybe. If my last memory of Ben was something else, maybe.”

“You would still have wanted to know who did it, to know why.”

“Why? I don’t want to know *why*.”

Ash doesn’t reply, instead she wipes the tears from her eyes, a piece of tissue sticking to her cheek. Freya looks out towards the Jacaranda tree, and beyond it towards the fragments of city hidden behind the foliage of the tree, cracked and mysterious. “Do you think it’s possible those old women from the Amazon are here now? That they came all this way with

their trees? Do you think that their spirits are still sitting under the Jacarandas making sure things are fair, that everyone pays for their sins?”

“I think it’s interesting that you’re asking that kind of a question,” Ash says.

“Well, I think they are,” Freya shouts, speeding again. “I think when people travel they take their stories with them. And I think underneath the streets of this city and on the walls of this city and in the trees of this city there are ghosts and gods and kings that were brought here by all the people that have lived here, and believed in something. Like a river flowing all around us. A river of stories.”

“That isn’t the real world, Freya.”

“Who are you to say that? Who says your world is real? Who says the world of McDonald’s and Coke and grocery shopping and iPhones is more real than my world?”

“Because it is,” Ash says, her voice annoyingly calm. “Because this world is the truth. It isn’t just happening in your head.”

“Well, maybe the world in my head is better.”

Ash is quiet. She lets Freya’s echo fade and die, and then, only when Freya isn’t entirely sure anything was said at all, does Ash speak. “This world you’re describing, Freya, it sounds like a dangerous place. A place to get lost in.”

“Good,” Freya says. “Good. I want to be lost.”

## 10

Mr October always makes sure he is the last person to sit down before the service starts. Which is the reason he volunteers to hand out the hymnbooks and Bibles to those too careless to bring their own. The books have to be handed out at the beginning of service and then collected again at the end, to avoid theft. Being stationed at the door gives him an opportunity to see who is coming to church and, more importantly, who isn’t. People in the community who are being neglectful of their spiritual well-being is of grave concern to Mr October. Especially those who have children. It is a sin to neglect your duty to raise your child in the house of God.

And he makes lists. He makes lists all the time. A list of people that aren’t in church this morning: Marina Freyhans and both her children, the Februarie twins, Mrs Kruiman, Mr Handel, Ms Hendricks-the-English-teacher.

His whole first team rugby squad arrived early and helped him set up the projector. The team is now sitting quietly in the front pew. All except young Mr Tshabalala, who is late. As usual. But stragglers are still rushing into the building, smiling nervously at him as they

hurry past.

It is a small church. One room. The pews are old and worn. The carpet is stained. There are few windows. A squeaky ceiling fan stirs the stale air. Flies buzz.

When reverend Booyesen walks in, his purple robe preceding him into the room, and takes his place at the lectern, he gives Mr October a nod. Mr October closes the doors. Then, sweeping his gaze across the assembled congregation, he walks slowly down the aisle. He watches for people who are slouching or who have their phones out, and he gives a small but forceful cough as a warning to anyone who is not paying enough attention. The cough is always obeyed.

His daughter is sitting in the second row, her white sundress immaculate. She is whispering softly to her best friend Frennie; they are giggling. When she sees him looking, she stops mid-sentence. And her face hardens. She doesn't look at him. Frennie gives him a nervous glance.

A list of lies his daughter has told him recently: that the marijuana cigarette beneath her window sill isn't hers, that she is a virgin, that she is going to school every day, that she hasn't been hanging around with The Boy, that she loves him; that she knows he loves her, too.

He takes his seat in the front row. Reverend Booyesen waits for his reciprocal nod, before starting. Reverend Booyesen clears his throat. The first hymn is projected onto the wall, signalling that the congregation should rise. With this one act, the atmosphere changes. It stiffens. The lazy casualness of moments before vanishes in the presence of worship.

When the final notes of the hymn fades, everyone remains standing. The first hymn is always followed by The Lord's Prayer: *our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name* ...

They are seated.

"Justice," Reverend Booyesen begins, "Justice. Today I want to talk about justice. And revenge." Reverend Booyesen is prone to pausing for dramatic effect, but Mr October is willing to forgive this one tick. When he is not giving a sermon, Reverend Booyesen is practical and grounded. "Today is a sad day for our congregation. We have lost one of our own." A pause. "We all know about Annette Niebenhamer's terrible tragedy. About her son who has died." A pause. "What can we say to Annette Niebenhamer, who is here with us today."

Annette Niebenhamer is sitting underneath a large black hat, and despite the fact that Mr October likes neither her, nor her dead son, he admires her for being here today, so soon

after losing a child. He knows what it means to experience that. That kind of loss is so visceral, so raw, that it envelops your whole being: you taste it, like blood on your tongue. You see it in the periphery, a spectre so tangible that it pulls you to your knees. And you hear the sound of it – the terrible, terrible sound of it. At night, he can still hear the echo of that loss, see the shadow of it standing over him, like a gaoler. To survive, you need strength and faith.

“What should we say to Auntie Niebenhamer about how she is supposed to feel? Should we tell her to want revenge?” Pause. “Should we tell her to ask for the death of those men who murdered her son? Should she be allowed to ask God for that, for vengeance? Doesn’t God say, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’? What can we say to her to stop the darkness in her heart, to make sure that she doesn’t become angry, like so many other people here who are angry?”

As Reverend Booyesen speaks, Mr October remembers – he has had his fair share of vengeance, in a past life. A life so distant from his current one that he hardly remembers it, and the little he does remember, he doesn’t recognise.

And more recent vengeance, blooming deep inside him: it’s come back, the violence. The violence he thought he’d conquered. It’s been unearthed by that boy – The Boy – and the threat he posed to his daughter. It was right there, inside his muscles, inside his heart only a few days ago, when he suddenly had his gun in his hand, when—

“Whosoever sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed’ Genesis nine, verse six!” The reverend’s voice crashes back over Mr October, a roar, a wave. “It is natural, perhaps, to want to see the person who hurt you be hurt in the exact same way. The modern justice system may not seem, at times, like justice at all. The punishment may not seem to fit the crime.

“Brothers and sisters! It is not us who must decide how we must punish these evil-doers. It is not us, it is not Annette Niebenhamer, and it is not even the judges of this country who sit on their hill so far away from us who must decide. Your pain cannot sit in judgement, nor your grief. Only God can sit in judgement. He is the only judge that matters, it is his wrath that will find the perpetrators and punish them, and it is from his heaven that they will be denied. Take solace in that. Vengeance, state sanctioned or personal, is never the answer. Revenge damages everyone involved. Only He can decide how to punish the sinners. God will punish the wicked. Your job is to forgive, brothers and sisters. Forgive those who have sinned against you. As Doctor Martin Luther King told us, ‘the old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind.

“Let us pray.”

Mr October dutifully closes his eyes, and he prays: please God, forgive me. Please God, haven't I been punished enough?

Monday

Slick watches the mighty city – sprawling, dull, indefinable – slip past his window. The sun rising, the city filling with light. The trains travel mainly through those areas that can't afford to be beautiful. Dank, industrial areas, large stretches of barren ground, the edges of slums.

All those people, all that pain.

He always travels by train: it is convenient and cheap. And he isn't legally able to buy a car; legally he barely exists. But more importantly, trains force you to be part of the crowd, the throng. Another face among many. The thought of always being on the move settles Slick. Even though he isn't running from anything, it's nice to know that if he were they couldn't catch him.

The plastic seats in the train carriage are hot from the sun, and wet from the sweat of whoever sat there before him. The whole interior of the carriage is covered in graffiti – gang tags, secret messages.

His first customer will appear shortly.

He glances around the carriage; it is always good to know where the security guards are. Although these days there hardly ever seemed to be any. Luckily. He shifts his blue cap up and down as the carriage fills with commuters – his blue cap is his advertisement, how his customers will recognise him.

It's been almost three years since Mama Africa vanished, on the eve of his seventeenth birthday, and so far he's managed to keep himself alive, to avoid prison. He is still living in the inner city, renting a small flat which from a big white woman with big red hair who doesn't ask questions. Armed with contacts Mama Africa left him and with a list of customers that needed their drug supply reinstated, he has begun a small but lucrative drug trade. And he has hit on a new and ingenious way of selling drugs to the good people of Pretoria – the trains. The trains, which wind through the city almost undetected by the people who live around it, but nevertheless service most of the city: from its very heart out to its furthest reaches like so many blood vessels – poisonous, diseased blood vessels.

He begins each day on the trains, taking a different route every day, being sure to stop at each station in the city at least once a week. He makes sure not to have a routine in this; he alters the routes over different days of the week, different times. There is no pattern to it, no way of tracking his movements. That is vital. He cannot be detectable.

It is simple: customers get on the train with money and leave with drugs. The

exchange happens in transit, quietly, underneath the seats. He is proud of the simplicity of the system. The – dare he say it? – genius of it. His is flourishing. At least he was, until about a month ago, when everything started going wrong. Caving in.

Outside, through dirty alcohol-stained windows, Hatfield stares him in the eyes, brown and broken.

The Hatfield train station is small, nothing more than a platform. It is hidden behind big concrete walls, and he has to descend a flight of stairs to get to street level. From this vantage point, Slick is in sight of the south-western corner of the university campus, ivory buildings encased behind blue, iron fences. Right across the street from the station, he can see the back end of a school; a school which he knows is about to be let out. One of the most moneyed schools in the city. Soon, these pavements will be overflowing with pupils, making their way south and east by car or bus or foot, into the comforts of leafy, golden suburbia.

He turns right at the station entrance, walking slowly. Few other commuters get off here. Why would they? This is the old suburban heartland of the city – privileged and protected. It is where Slick makes most of his money these days, where the children of the rich attend school and university. Hatfield, a wonderland, a place where special rules apply. It is a small sliver of territory that he has dug out for himself, targeting the campus and the richer neighbourhoods around it, finding and training runners in these areas: middle class boys who can move through that space without detection.

But today he is leaving Hatfield and the campus behind him. He is heading upwards instead, towards the large, quiet houses, the silver shopping centres, the parks.

One park, in particular.

Magnolia Dell, a green oasis in a knot of streets. Famous for its tranquillity, famous for its crime rates. Bordered by large, lush beddings of intricate hedges, which provide the perfect sleeping spot for the homeless and the desperate. These borders give way to rolling green lawns that unite in the centre of the park, where a narrow stream flows into a small lake. Next to the stream large willow trees bask in the sunlight, emitting a green glow. On the opposite edge of the park there is a small restaurant. Slick can hear the clinking of cutlery and the laughter of ice-cream fed children. On the lawns, jungle gyms are overrun by children, parents and young couples sit on picnic blankets. If you look closely – Slick always does – you notice how no one sits alone, no one strays too close to those edges underneath which poverty and desperation lurk. The restaurant is guarded by a red-faced manager and casual security guards, and any corner of the park out of view of these guardians are deserted.

Slick takes a seat on one of the park's many benches, looking down into the swift, icy water of the stream. A few frogs sit on the edge of the stream. A young boy wanders up to one of the frogs on the side opposite and begins poking a stick into the water. His mother comes to fetch him away, giving Slick a nervous glance, clutching her handbag to her side. Don't stray too far away from others, she warns her son. Slick gives a quick wave; it is not returned. Slick sits back and closes his eyes, drifting away from wakefulness, clearing his mind. It's been a difficult few months: a bad harvest, a few employee problems and the unwanted attention of the police have left him stressed.

Today is Mama Africa's birthday. It was on her birthdays that she would bring him here, a special treat for the two of them. She would buy them both an ice cream and they would sit on this exact bench; they would talk. Not about the things they usually spoke about: she wasn't teaching English or giving him an assignment. About other, more personal things. Does he miss his parents? What does he want to be when he grows up? What does he think of the other children in the house?

It was on one of Mamma Africa's birthdays that he was given his very first weapon. He was twelve, and had already spent four birthdays on this park bench with Mama Africa and her smile. But on that day she handed him a wrapped package. And he said "But it's your birthday, not mine," and she said, "Just open it" and inside their lay a beautiful knife with a sharp blade and a waxy wooden handle. And Mama Africa had looked around the late-afternoon park and tilted her head at him and asked "Do you like it?"

"Yes," he said. "Very much."

"Good," she said, and pointed towards the edge of the park where a lonely figure was walking, "Now go use it."

When he came back to the bench, handing Mama Africa a wallet and a watch, she shaded her eyes with her hand, hiding her eyes, and said "Good." She handed him some of the money in the wallet – a crisp twenty Rand note – and said, "Keep the knife, you'll be using it from now on." He had passed the test.

As they left the park, she said, "Ngiyakuthanda."

"I love you, too," he said, because she had forbidden him from speaking Zulu and he sensed that maybe this was another test. She merely looked down at him and smiled.

That was the first and only time he ever heard those words, or said them.

Slick opens his eyes when he is joined on the bench by a school pupil, with a bright smile and cocky shoulders. His uniform is ugly and brown, but he wears it with obvious pride. Slick looked across the park: pupils everywhere. School is out. "Haven't you been

warned not to walk through this park by yourself after school?” he asks the boy.

“I’m going to be late for rugby practice. Just give me the goods.” He has an accent, an accent that tells a story of money and privilege. “Money first,” Slick says. The boy sighs and digs for a big envelope through his backpack. Slick does the same. They exchange envelopes. “Do I need to count this?” he asks.

“Where’s the regular guy?” the boy asks, instead.

Slick slips a thin, short blade from beneath his clothes, quick and quiet, and nestles it against the boy’s abdomen. “Listen to me, Lucky. Umthondo. It’s not your job to ask questions. It’s your job to sell the drugs I give you, you understand?” The boy shoulders slump, his brow breaks into a small pattern of sweat. He nods. “If you cheat me, or tell anyone, or ask questions, I’ll cut your stomach open so that your intestines fall out of your body, and I will leave you here to die. And no one will know it was me, and no one will ever find me.”

Slick can feel the fear coming off the boy now, like a red fog.

He withdraws his knife. “Get out of here. Same time, same place next month.” The boy leaves quickly.

Slick takes one more look around the green, green park. He begins to make his way back to the train station slowly, taking his time, enjoying the smell of cold pond water that drifts across the park, mossy and crisp. Around him, people are covering themselves with raincoats and umbrellas, but Slick doesn’t feel the cold.

You never do, when you had to live on the streets for as long as he did.

## 12

Nolwazi has an uncleaned milk stain in her fridge that is exactly the same colour as the walls in this room. And the smell is worse; it’s a burning, metallic assault. The bodies lie exposed on the steel slabs. Three of them in a row. And Nolwazi takes a step back.

She recognises Benjamin Rust because his body is the least damaged. Just a gun shot. The body next to his no longer has flesh, instead the brown slime the body has become is slipping off the skeleton. Advanced decomposition. And the final body has been squashed, completely compressed. A train, Nolwazi guesses. A suicide.

None of the bodies have been autopsied yet. She is first in line this morning.

Benjamin’s hair has been shaved off. She can see a bag of his brown curls on a tray next to the body. The rest of the body has been shaved clean, too.

Her scrubs are itchy; the mask over her face does nothing to block the smell. Her eyes

sweep over him – over *it* – and she angles herself towards the top of the body, making sure his penis is out of her sight. Seeing someone this exposed always feels voyeuristic; the fact that they are naked makes it worse. His wound no longer looks like a wound. Just a perfect circle with a black edge, like a worm’s burrow, like a hole made by a machine.

He was quite beautiful.

The camera around Nolwazi’s neck is heavy.

The pathologist, Dr Natron, who is tapping an impatient refrain on her clipboard with her gloved fingers, is sharp and tall. A single lock of badly dyed blonde hair is escaping from underneath her surgical cap. She has the kind of pinched face – partially hidden by her mask – that models have, and her skin is the same colour as Benjamin’s body. Nolwazi is happy that she doesn’t have to go home with a pallor that resembles the dead. “Sorry, I’m late,” Nolwazi says.

The doctor clears her throat, “I’ve already completed the external examination, as you can see. His clothes,” she indicates a row of evidence bags on a low table to her left, “are over there. We did find a small bag of marijuana on him, hidden in his underwear. We’ve also X-rayed the body. The bullet is lodged behind his right lung. Shall I start?”

Nolwazi takes photos of the body, focussing on the entrance wound in his chest, then nods. Dr Natron begins at the neck. She makes a V-shaped incision that she carries down all way to his navel. A large, deep incision that opens him up: his organs have to come out, have to be weighed. When Dr Natron reveals them, they are fresh; red and real. Except for the heart; when Dr Natron takes out his heart, it has become purple, and it bursts like a berry under Dr Natron’s scalpel.

The floor of the mortuary examination room is wet. Blood mostly, and other liquids that Nolwazi can’t identify, which fall from the body as it opens up, is invaded. The most personal thing that could be done to a person: opened up and forced to reveal their inner-most selves. The room is cold and quiet as the pathologist works; the body now like a textbook diagram, the person that was there gone in the flash of steel.

“Found it,” Dr Natron whispers, with a little too much excitement. She holds a bullet in her bloody glove, between thumb and forefinger, and raises it to the light. Small. She drops it in a metal bowl. Nolwazi takes photos of the bullet, the camera flashing oddly against the light in the room.

“Single gunshot wound to the chest. The entry-wound is 9mm across,” Dr Natron says as she works. “No exit wound, obviously. So, a 9mm pistol. As you saw before we started, there is discolouration around the wound. The gun was fired from a distance of between thirty

and sixty centimetres. The bullet did considerable damage to both the heart and lungs. The victim would have been alive for, say, about five to ten minutes after he was shot. Probably conscious.”

“Thirty to sixty centimetres?”

“That what I said.” Nolwazi frowns, makes a mental note to follow up.

Dr Natron has given Nolwazi all the information she has for the moment, and the smell is starting to seep into Nolwazi’s skin – the touch of the dead. She clears her throat and asks, “Is the family here?”

“His sister is here, I believe. She is quite early. In the viewing room.”

“Thank you Doctor. Blood and DNA?”

“To the lab.”

“I’ll, eh, just leave you to it, then. I’ll come and fetch the evidence after the viewing.”

Nolwazi’s last image of Dr Natron is of her holding a saw, standing over the body like a scientist, like a gothic experimenter.

The victim’s sister is sitting with her knees pressed against her chest, gaunt and unresponsive on the single bench in the tiny viewing room. The only decorations are the blue, grimy curtains that shut off the window through which families identify the bodies. Her large, pale eyes are dark, her hair unwashed. Nolwazi notices again how thin she is, how insubstantial.

There is an older woman with her. Tall and broad with a great sweep of white hair spilling down her body. The older woman looks up when Nolwazi approaches, lifts an eyebrow.

“Excuse me,” Nolwazi begins, “Freya Rust?”

The older woman gets up and extends her hand, “Yes,” she answers, “that’s her. My name is Philomena Ash. I’m family. Who are you?”

“I’m Inspector Mngadi. I’ll be investigating your brother’s death,” Nolwazi says, speaking around Philomena.

The young woman doesn’t move, doesn’t say a thing. Her face is blank; her lips are white. “We met when you were interviewed on Friday, Ms Rust. And I know we’ve already taken your statement, but I was wondering if there is anything else you had thought of, anything else you would like to add? Any detail?”

Freya Rust is silent.

Philomena says quietly, “I don’t think she’s up to it.”

Nolwazi nods.

“Ms Rust, Ms Ash, I can officially confirm your brother died from a single gunshot wound to the chest. If there is anything else we can do, please let me know. There are trauma services I can refer you too.”

Philomena fills the silence with a rough boom: “Thank you, Inspector.”

Nolwazi has run out of things to say. She can see the abyss opening up around Freya Rust; in this little room, she can sense the gravity shift. She can sense it, because she knows it: it’s a cold ripple, as snug as a noose. She wants to say, “I know what it is like to lose everything. I know.” But she doesn’t. What could her pain do for this young woman? What good is piling pain on top of pain and expecting it to help?

So they sit and wait. Nolwazi, who should be getting a second statement from Freya Rust, who should be using this time to think of other questions, to work, is muted by the grief she senses coming off the young woman.

Dr Natron appears outside the door, keeping back. She beckons to Nolwazi. “The body is ready to be viewed. I haven’t found anything else of note, but I’ll send you the full report by the end of the day. Just pull the curtain back whenever you are ready.” Then she slips back into the depths of her lab.

Nolwazi walks over to the curtain. “Ms Rust, I’m going to need you to identify the body officially please. Your brother’s body is behind this curtain. If you need a few moments, I understand. Just let me know when you are ready.”

Philomena says, “I think it is best just to do it.”

Nolwazi nods. She pulls the curtain aside.

Freya stares at her brother’s body. She doesn’t react. Nolwazi does not see a single muscle shift. “Is that your brother, Ms Rust?”

Freya Rust stands up, looks Nolwazi straight in the eye, and says, “That’s him,” before walking out stiffly. Philomena follows her, a slightly apologetic expression flitting across her face.

### 13

Slick arrives home on the last train of the day, and it comes to a standstill with a rattling scrape across the tracks. The station is closing for the night.

At the entrance to the station, into a narrow street, he sees a familiar face. The woman is watching for him, waiting. He smiles at her, because you cannot help but smile at her. Her grin is wide and friendly, but also hungry.

He shakes her hand, “Sawubona, sisi” he says to her. Her greeting is smiled back at

him. “Unjani?” he asks, although he knows she won’t respond. She moves towards him, beckoning. But not for him, for what he has in his pocket. He slips a packet into her hand. “You’re the only person who gets anything from me for free, do you know that?”

She lets go of him, making desperate, urgent sounds in her throat. He waves goodbye as she rushes towards the staircase that leads under the train tracks, where she lives. “Sala Kahle,” he yells. She doesn’t greet him back.

He walks slowly down the narrow street. He is smiling; Mama Africa wouldn’t have liked his kindness one bit.

Of course, he doesn’t see it as kindness at all.

## 14

Freya is sitting on her small balcony; Ash has left.

She is wearing Ben’s favourite hoody, oversized and grey. It smells like wood, like skin, like smoke, like Ben. The ember of her cigarette blazes brightly as she drags, and with every pull it feels like the world is getting smaller. Dark storm clouds are stampeding over the city, writhing. Thunder. Almost-rain. The air is wet, purple. Freya looks up. A white balloon blows past. As she locks her sight on it, a fork of lightning scorches across the sky. The light fizzles.

The balloon bursts, and so do the clouds.

Before

It was a very hot day. It was noon, when the sun is at its fiercest and there are no shadows.

They were playing next to the pool, but not inside it. They weren't allowed to swim before their mother finished her work and agreed to supervise them. Big walls of sunlight rippled through the blue water. The world smelled like chlorine. Ben was sitting on the hot bricks that surrounded the swimming pool. He liked the feeling of the heat on his bare legs: almost painful. He had been rummaging around the fire-pit his father had dug next to the swimming pool the previous night. There had been a bonfire under the stars, fairy lights in all the trees and beautiful adults walking through their garden, saying words Ben hadn't understood and ruffling his hair. It had been wonderful.

Now the fire was dead. He had placed his hands carefully in the black ash, marvelled at how soft it was; the softest thing he had ever touched. He was making hand prints on the bricks, pressing his whole hand down firmly. Each print had to be complete, unbroken.

He painted war-marks on his face with the soot.

His sister was sitting a little way off, on the lawn. She had sought what little shade there was, under the mulberry tree. She had found an errant brick which she had placed carefully before her. She was using it like a cutting board. She had a knife with her. She had collected various things from throughout the garden. Yellow daisies and pink bougainvillea leaves and great strands of fern. Even a few cactus stems she had pulled from the wasteland that was the back garden. She also had figs, plums and a bucket full of ripe, ripe mulberries.

Ben walked over to her.

She was determinedly cutting up the mulberries one by one, even as they disintegrated under the knife. The brick was stained a deep red, and the knife was dripping with darkly purple juice.

"It looks like blood," he said to her.

She looked up at him, shading her eyes with one hand. She stared at him for a long moment. A dragonfly whizzed through the air between them. "It's more than just blood," she said finally. She looked back down at her work.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Cooking. Killing." Her face was dirty, and there were big beads of sweat on her brow. Grass smears stained her white dress.

"Do you want to swim?"

"Not now. I need to finish."

So he sat down next to her, careful not to disturb her work. He watched the front door for a parent that would no doubt appear any second. His shirt stuck to his back, and he suddenly felt dirty from the ash all over his body. The grass underneath him was nothing like the smooth brick; it itched and stung.

He waited for his sister to finish.

In the hot silence, there was nothing to disturb them. Just the occasional whirr of an insect and the grating, grating, grating Freya's knife made as she scraped it across the brick. Just the two of them, the girl with the purple knife and the boy with the blackened hands, trying to fend off the light.

Trying not to burn.

# The Spirit of the City

(June 2015)

Church Square.

This is the navel of the city, the guts.

Old sandstone buildings – once the epitome of grandeur, now symbols of a lost and degraded inner-city – surround the square. And at the heart of the square, there stands an old statue. The statue is surrounded by litter-strewn gardens and there are homeless people sleeping on the yellowed grass, not yet aware that the dawn of another homeless day is upon them. The roads at the edges of the square are quiet; it's too early for traffic.

Seen from above, the square isn't square at all; rather it has been built in the shape of a shield. A shield held on the arm of the city, buttressing attacks. In the centre of the shield, there lives a statue. Tall and grey and grand.

The dawn light is just about to strike the tip of statue's hat.

And the sun illuminates his eyes, he comes to life.

He looks up. He winks. Then, startled, he stares down at the great sandstone plinth he is standing on. He wants to get down. His copper bones are creaking.

The soldiers that guard the foot of his plinth are coming to life too, and as he touches each of them with his long, slender cane., they jump to attention. They salute. The statue indicates to his soldiers that they should help him down. The soldiers – there are four of them – gently lift the statue off his perch, and bring him down to ground level, where he surveys the square through a brittle eye. After a moment's thought – hand on his chin, eyebrow lifted – he seems to make a decision. He throws his arms open wide: come one, come all.

He's going to do a show.

He jumps. His great bronze feet boom across the square, and the concrete slabs beneath him ripple all the way to the edges of his garden, and splash drops of black-stuff into the road.

The people sleeping in the square stir. They stand up and stare at the two-foot monster come alive before their eyes, his metallic skin shining with excitement. He smiles. Come, come, he beckons. Come, come. The show is about to begin.

The soldiers, groggier and less assured than their master, are setting down their guns, and murmuring silently: what have they gotten themselves into? They look uncertain, and the newborn sunlight dapples cross their copper-wrought green coatings: they are like something from the sea, retrieved from some long forgotten shipwreck. The statue turns and signals to

them. He wears no green coating, bears no sign of aging. But across his body, splashes of red paint glisten like blood; the work of a protest. He seems not to mind this little inconvenience; in fact, the longer he is awake the more jubilant he becomes.

The homeless people are straggling through the square towards the wonderment before them, dragging dirty blankets and tiny children behind them. They form an audience, standing slightly apart from each other, as if they have forgotten how to be part of a crowd.

Once the audience has settled, the statue takes a bow. Then he and his men begin to dance.

They begin to drum a tattoo on the pavement with their heavy feet; they begin to clap their hands to an ancient beat.

In unison they beckon a song from beneath the city, luring it into the streets.

Their feet move faster and their hands clap louder and then, driven by the force of their own bodies, abandoning the formation, the four soldiers take each other by the hands and begin to waltz, dancing a circle around the lonely figure of the statue. They are surprisingly graceful, these giant metal men, holding each other and weaving through the dawn air. They move faster and faster and statue beats his feet faster and faster and faster until trails of dust are spinning into the air, whipped up by the frenzy of their movement.

And then there is a loud bang like a canon.

It is over.

The soldiers let each other go and stand to attention and the statue holds his mouth closed with both hands, as if ashamed. Tentatively, he looks at his vagabond audience. Slowly he takes his hat off and inches forward towards the men and women gathered here and holds out his hat to each, where it lingers for a cold minute before it moves on. There are no tips forthcoming; when he has asked each person twice, his shoulders sag and he retreats.

He stands reluctantly before his abandoned home, where the imprints of his feet are still written in the dust. The soldiers want to help him back up onto his pedestal, but he balks. He does not want to. But they insist, and he has no choice but to surrender. Once he has settled back, shaking his head as if to dislodge something, the soldiers take up their positions around him, and as the sun breaks, red and furious over the tall office blocks all around, the statue seems to be thinking.

He opens his mouth and throws his arms wide. His sculpted mouth is torn open and as sleek, dirty tears fall from his sleek dirty eyes, his voice breaks free of its terrible prison. And from the cool, dark recesses within, the city begins to whisper.



Thursday



His moustache is lit up by rays of sunlight spraying through the window. As he turns his head, she can see the individual strands of hair standing to attention above his lip, made blonde-red by the light. His upper lip twitches slightly, as if it knows it's being watched. His hand comes up automatically and strokes the misbehaving hairs down.

It's a nervous habit, and it has Nolwazi mesmerised.

Frik looks over at her, and she looks down at her desk before he can catch her staring. She waits a few minutes before she looks back up. He is engrossed in paperwork.

The police station is old and grimy (all police stations are old and grimy). It is a big, sprawling compound, built from blonde bricks and concrete slabs; the large banana trees in the courtyard out front does little to uplift the general dilapidation. It is a sleepy station with a small jurisdiction, and few people came in during the day, although there is always a small queue of them, usually here to report a lost driver's licence or get their fingerprints taken.

It is standard practice to take a nap at your desk.

Larger crimes are handled by the two bigger Pretoria stations: Sunnyside to the West, Garsfontein to the East. And the SAPS Detective Services deploys only two Inspectors to the Brooklyn police station. The only reason she is one of them – only months after being demoted and transferring here in the first place – is because Inspector Sergeant Paulson has been on administrative leave for months now, pending an internal investigation, and the colonel needed someone with experience to take over the Benjamin Rust case. "We need this solved cleanly," he told her, with uncharacteristic firmness. Murder was not such a frequent burden, here. So she came back from her self-imposed exile, back to a job she left behind in Mamelodi, a job she isn't sure she wants anymore; a job with few resources and with little in the way of a team to help her work.

She came back despite Dr Filippidis's strong urging to the contrary. "You aren't ready," he said. "But this isn't Mamelodi," she argued, despite her own reservations.

"Does that make a difference?"

Yes, it does. Because here, in the suburbs, crimes make more sense; crime has reason, crime has motive. It isn't inbred; it isn't the only way out or the only way forward. It isn't a way of life. She understands her own cowardice, fleeing the place that needed her more – the struggling, impoverished place that made her –for the comfort of a neighbourhood that barely notices her as she walks past. But Mamelodi wasn't good for her. She wouldn't have survived

there, not for much longer, surrounded by all that trivial violence. All that infectious anger, which still sticks to her, like a dark syrup coating her bones. Anger was the thing that almost destroyed her. Which made her do ... the thing she did. Which ended with a man dead. A man who deserved it. "Please, it's only one murder case and a few burglaries. They need me," she told Dr Filippidis confidently.

"But you transferred from Mamelodi to get away from violent crime."

"I know. But I'm ready."

He upped her dosage anyway.

She sighs.

She has to stifle a small yelp when his voice is suddenly beside her: "The Benjamin Rust ballistics report, boss," he says, "and the autopsy report on Maralene du Toit." Out of the corner of her eyes, she sees Angie smirking. "Oh, and here," he hands her something concealed in a bright blue wrapper she doesn't recognise. "You need to eat."

"Thanks," she says. She unwraps the package; inside there is a large chocolate covered biscuit, giving off a nutty caramel glow. She takes a bite, discovering a crunchy-goey centre. She closes her eyes and savours the rich chocolate, loving it because it is delicious, because it is the opposite of a crime scene.

She can't decide whether Frik is attractive or not. She never can, with white men. They are always so ... soft around the edges. Pink and squidgy. Collapsible, unsteady. Even the tall muscular ones looked a little insubstantial. But there is something – something about him that she can't quite identify – that she finds sexy. The way he moves maybe, the way he carries himself. She likes how tall he is, his broad shoulders, the way he keeps his head shaved. His dark, heady eyes. His soothing voice. And he's been so helpful lately, necessary even, on the two cases they worked together since she's been reinstated. If she overlooks the way he occasionally pockets the marijuana he confiscates when he's on duty, the slight misogyny with which he treats female suspects; if she adjusted her ethics just slightly – and why not, she's done it before? – then he is almost charming.

She hears a chuckle from her left. From Angie's desk. Angie is the station's liaison officer, slight and beautiful and full of mischief. Angie knows all about Nolwazi's crush on Frik, and she uses every opportunity she gets to mock Nolwazi. Angie winks salaciously and brings her thumb and forefinger together slowly, until they barely touch. Nolwazi rolls her eyes and looks away; she hasn't yet been able to let her imagination stray far enough to imagine Frik naked.

From behind Angie, Hans – short (not quite as short as Nolwazi herself) and podgy,

with a receding hairline he hides with a comb over and stringent denial – is staring at them, hostility engraved on his face. “Why doesn’t he like me?” she asks, flicking her eyes in Hans’s direction and putting the chocolate down, trying to hide her blush.

“Because you stole his gig,” Frik says. “He was next up for a promotion. He’s been trying to get on the murder squad for years and when that student died last year, you swooped in and took the job he wanted.”

“Can’t he just go work at another station?”

“They keep denying his transfer requests.”

“And I didn’t take *your* job?”

Frik shrugs, “I’m young, I like being in uniform. Detectiving sounds hectic. Anyway, you’ve already done this job. You’re just going back to it.”

Nolwazi almost doesn’t ask the question, but it slips out of her mouth, faster than her intentions, “And if I had been a white man who took his job instead of a black woman?”

“Then maybe,” Frik says hesitantly, “he wouldn’t be so hostile. Maybe.”

Nolwazi snorts.

“Cut him some slack,” Frik says. “You know he joined the force in ‘93; he thought he was joining to protect and serve a community that was dying. He’s a little lost in the new South Africa.”

“You’re kidding right? Cut *him* some slack? Because he hasn’t managed to find his footing in this big, scary new world? It’s been twenty years; he does know that right?”

Frik shrugs.

Nolwazi is standing, although she can’t remember getting up, and she is breathing deeply, and despite her effort to the contrary, she doesn’t think she’s managed to keep her voice down. Shaking her head, missing her fantasies, she says, “Just go back to your desk, sergeant.” In the corner of her eye, Angie’s face is flashing like a giant red question mark.

But Frik is smiling at her. “Would you like to go get some ice cream some time?” he says.

### 3

Slick can’t shake the nostalgia that’s welling up inside him. Everything he passes has the faded look of a photograph, on each street he walks down, memories latch onto him. It’s becoming one of those days; one of those days where he seems to woken up in the past; a wistful day, a day where the future resisted him. He knows people who live like that every day, who stew in their regret. His livelihood depends on such people. But he doesn’t like the

feeling. He can't handle the weight of it.

Central Pretoria is alive around him. The streets are bristling with people walking with purpose, others loitering slowly. Traffic is a mess: hooting, pushing, shouting. People in shop fronts are yelling out specials. The sky is grimy and smoke-filled.

He walks quietly onwards, until he comes to the house he is looking for. *The* house: the very house he grew up in; the house where Mama Africa brought him once she rescued him from oblivion.

It's been three years since he has dared come anywhere near it.

It's a two storey dump. Just as abandoned now as it was then, just as rotten. He is surprised it hasn't been condemned yet. It looks to him to be frozen in time: could that really be the same blue paint, still peeling? Could that be the same broken window frame? Surely not. Back then they had been squatting here illegally, of course. Slick imagines Mama Africa greased the palm of any authority figure who became too curious. (Another trick Slick picked up from her). Mama Africa had not lived in the house herself, although she had a kind of office on the second storey, which she called her parlour. Slick never found out where she went when she wasn't in. Although he did hear her say once, as she moved towards the door "Time to go back to the white picket fence". When she said this, her accent, which at the best of times rippled and changed like the surface of a lake, contained a twang, a saltiness he could only later identify as American, after he had watched television for the first time – he spent many years stealing them before he actually got the chance to watch one.

Access to the house was not guaranteed once Mama Africa recruited you. It depended entirely on your performance. If you were a good thief, a good runner – trustworthy, discreet, and loyal – you were allowed to stay. If you were not useful, then your access was cut off. Slick remembers clearly the number of times he fell asleep to the sound of a screaming desperate child who had been locked out when they tried to come home; he remembers the rope that tied itself around his heart every time he came back to the house and knocked on the door; the long moment before the large bodyguard stood aside to let him in. That pause between recognition and permission was the longest pause in the world.

Whenever he thinks of Mama Africa or this house, the two of them always seem to be alone: no other children, none of the many henchmen she had working for her, her security, her children wranglers. (Another woman did live in the house with them. A maid of sorts, who cooked and cleaned and kept a kind of domesticity going, but Slick hardly remembers her. When he thinks of being fed or bathed or given new clothes, of being nurtured in any way, he thinks of Mama Africa, even though he cannot entirely be sure she deserves this

place in his memories).

Of course, there were other children. There was Zelani, who had only one eye. There was Progress, who was deaf and was taught sign language by Mama Africa. There was Retief, the only white one amongst them, who Mama Africa said “Would prove useful”. And many, many others besides with whom he shared rooms and roamed the poverty-rich streets of the inner city. But all of them fade from his memory when he thinks about that time of his life.

His memory is like a large, echoing chamber at the centre of which there is only him and Mama Africa.

He is almost too scared to climb the stairs. If there *is* one thing that has changed, it is that the house no longer looks like home to him, not even today; it is alien. Like seeing a childhood friend after they have aged into themselves. Distorted, unkind.

He hesitates on the pavement outside. Across the road, a hawker has set up her portable shop. A wooden plank laid across to upturned paint bottles. Packets of crisps and bottles of Coke adorn the table. The hawker sits behind her goods, fanning her face with a newspaper, baring her broken teeth to the world. Slick would bet anything that what she was really selling was weed; in fact, she might even be selling some of his. He is quite well represented in this neighbourhood. Although she wouldn't know that.

Slick climbs the steps to the front door, which is standing open. The smell of decay is coming from the cool interior. According to his information, his target is on the first floor. The first room on the right. The room that had once belonged to the security guards, who had slept, like everyone else, on dirty mattresses on the floor. He's been told that the rooms are now individually occupied. Every man for himself. The house no longer united, no longer a community. Which is a shame. But makes his life much easier.

He doesn't knock on the door, he walks straight in. “Desré?” he says as he enters. “I want my money.” The room smells salty and sweet at the same time – a pot of putu is cooking slowly in the corner, forgotten by Desré, almost to burning point. Desré herself is sitting in the corner on a low chair – a box, really – holding her head against the surface of a mirror. Her breath fogs up the glass. Her eyes are half closed. She is wearing a purple tank top that doesn't fit over her pale, protruding stomach. She is the fattest heroin addict he has ever seen.

She has seen him, and is trying to say something. But the words are coming out as desperate nonsensical sounds. She is slobbering. He wonders if she's going to overdose. He begins to search the room. She must have something valuable somewhere.

“Hey,” she manages to say now. “Hey, stop stealing my stuff.” He ignores her.

His search doesn't take long. Except for the single hot plate, perched precariously on a chair, and a few items of food, she has nothing in her possession. He hesitates to search her body. She is so dirty it makes his fingers itch.

So he settles for hunching down beside her and tipping her face towards him with a finger. “Desré,” he says, giving her a little slap, “Can you hear me?” She makes a sound that could mean anything. He'll have to wait out her high, see if she's going to make it. He is sure, at least, that she hasn't got any more drugs with her. And eventually she'll want some, and then she'll have to listen.

She owes him two back payments. It's his own fault for letting her get into so much debt. It's a habit he's been getting into, giving things away for free, trusting people. He should have known better, but she's an old friend; she grew up in this house too. No mystery why she chose to come back here when she had nowhere left to go. Although when Slick's informant found her, he hadn't quite believed it could be true.

He sits down next to the stove top and helps himself to some putu. There's a carton of buttermilk next to the stove. He pours a thick layer of buttermilk over his spoils and looks down at the wounded woman. He takes a bite of the creamy-delicious porridge, keeping it in his mouth longer than is necessary, savouring it. “You're giving me my money today,” he says to her. “Or I'll kill you.”

#### 4

Justice is slow, and Nolwazi is used to that.

Labs are lethargic and underfunded, results delayed and delayed again. Backlogs, backlogs, backlogs. Often you can only really start work on a case six months after it is first opened, when evidence begins appearing in dribs and drabs. It's pointless to complain about the speed of the system, and unlike some of her colleagues, Nolwazi doesn't spend her time banging her head against that particular wall. The system is the system, and you have to work inside it as best you can. Frustration is useless. Anyway, eventually frustration becomes such a solid, real part of your everyday life that if you didn't let it go, you would lose your ability to be effective. Things happen slowly, and most days are boring.

She has ten open cases, and most of those are waiting for some lab to process some piece of evidence before she can get on with her job.

She puts Benjamin Rust's ballistics reports aside.

No, for swift justice, she relies on television. Crimes on television are intellectual and

pacey. And all about people, about tricking them and interrogating them. Television gives her heroes and villains, reasons and justifications. Morality.

On television crime is a game, a mystery that everyone participates in. And better yet, they *know* they are participating in. Everyone knows what the stakes are. The criminals are arch and cunning; they have clear, unquestionable motives. The detectives are athletic and philosophical. That is what is exciting about fictional crime. It's put into a narrative. It's arranged. It is *explained*. And you know there is a twist coming, because that's the rule. There is always a twist coming. But in real life, you can't arrange things into a taut, tense sequence. There are no trap doors or secret bookcases, no corners around which people can hide surprises

In real life crime isn't a puzzle, isn't something to solve. It just *is*. There are the facts you have, and the ones you don't. There is no aha moment. She's investigated hundreds of cases and she's never, not once, done anything but follow the evidence to a clear and obvious conclusion. No mystery. No whodunit. No running into abandoned warehouses by herself with only her gun and her wits to guide her. No tricking someone into giving a confession. She just collects the evidence, makes the arrest, and sends the suspect and the evidence off to court. It's easy, it's procedure; it isn't about outsmarting someone or playing games.

Most criminals are stupid. Stupid and desperate and lonely. Most of them don't understand themselves, let alone the complex pathology that led them to commit a crime. They aren't insightful. And even the smart ones are only smart enough to get away with it for a while. And in those cases "smart" usually translates to "rich."

"Hey daydreamer? Boss wants to see you, babe." Angie is looking down at her keenly, the word "babe" still resting on her tongue, as if she is savouring it. Her bright pink eyelids are lifted in mock curiosity, her full, too-red lips pursed. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"He wants you. Babe."

"Shut up, Ange." Nolwazi gets up reluctantly, plucking at her blouse. Angie always manages to so look voluptuous, even in her uniform, oozing sex appeal. Next to Angie, Nolwazi feels plain, and she hates that. She hates the feeling; she hates what it says about her. She hates jealousy: in her experience, the root of all things abusive.

The colonel's office is down a long, narrow hallway. The office itself smells like old cigarettes. He calls "come" when she knocks in his soft, high-pitched voice. He is a big man, tall and fat, and he fills up almost the entire space behind his too-large desk. He is wearing a brown suit that sits too tightly. He never wears his uniform; she doubts there is a uniform big

enough to fit him. He smiles when she comes in, and says, "Sit, sit".

His eyes are yellow and small.

The colonel reminds Nolwazi of her father. Something about the sharpness of his jaw and the way he tilts his head, examining you as you approach him. Something about the way he gives you bad news with a smile. Something about the way she catches him looking at her, like she isn't a person – an employee, a wife, a daughter – but something to overpower. She knows how to deal with that gaze: she meets it. Usually, that is enough. Usually, he is shamed. It's the ones without shame you have to look out for.

"Tell me about the Benjamin Rust shooting," he says.

"Well, sir. There's not much to report. You know how long these things take. I finally got the ballistics reports this morning. I'm still waiting for the forensic report on the victim's car. I received the DNA and blood tests report last week, but it only confirmed what we already knew. His blood tests showed marijuana in his system, but nothing else."

"The thing is, this relative of his –"

"His sister?"

"No, *she* stopped calling months ago, right. No, this aunt or whatever she is. Philomena Ash. She keeps calling here and now she's threatening to launch an official complaint. Says we aren't doing enough, right. Says she wants us to give back his car. And his phone. So you need to go and talk to her. Convince her we're working hard on this case. And it couldn't hurt to speak to the sister again. Right? And speak to more of his friends. He must have some."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel is quiet for a moment. "This case is the reason you got your second chance, right," he says. "The reason you don't have to run around wagging your finger at spoiled rich kids anymore."

"No," she says sullenly, "just find out who shot them." She regrets it as soon as she says it, and the colonel's expression is enough to cause a surge of shame to rise up her spine. She quickly tries to cover her mistake. "The thing is, sir. The ballistics report backs up the autopsy sir. The bullet angle of the shot and so forth, it looks like the gun was fired from less than sixty centimetres from the car."

"So?"

"Well, the shooter's car couldn't have been that close to the victim's car, sir. If the shooter shot from his driver's seat while the victim was in *his* driver's seat, as we previously assumed based on the eye-witness testimony, then the bullet would have travelled at least a

metre. Added to the fact that Benjamin Rust *must* have been facing his shooter head on. If the bullet was fired while he was turning his car, the angle would have been different. And the angle is all wrong anyway. It makes no sense that the bullet came from the street. How, if the shooter was facing him head on, did Benjamin Rust manage to park his car *after* he was shot?”

“The victim was conscious, wasn’t he? He was conscious for a few minutes after the shot was fired? So he was shot first, but instinctively carried on parking. A sort of reflex.”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?”

“The car was in neutral sir, and the handbrake was up. Surely,” she pauses as the Colonel impatiently motions for her to hand over the report, “surely the victim wouldn’t have done that after he was shot?”

“So what are you saying?” he says, scanning, “That there was another shooter? That the man in the car with the gun was there by accident. That Freya Rust is lying?”

“Not lying, sir. Just not sure of what she saw.”

“But we have confirmed that a car like the one she describes with a driver like the one she describes *was* in the area?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get ballistics to redo these tests. To make sure. We have a gun. We have a car. Surely all we need to do now is try and cross check all registered gun owners who own a 9mm and all registered car owners who own a ... what was it?”

“A red 1980 Mercedes-Benz 450SL.”

“There can’t be many of those in South Africa.”

“There are only two, sir. One belongs to a Saudi business man from Cape Town who is currently out of the country. The other belonged to a 90-year old man who died in 1992, and matches the partial number plate Freya Rust managed to remember.”

“So there’s a ghost from Cape Town driving around shooting people?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you think this ghost with a gun just happened to be at the scene on the night of the crime?”

“I don’t know sir, but there is something off about it.”

“Has there been no trace of the car since the crime?”

“We’ve caught it on the night of the shooting, sir. It passed a camera on Lynwood Road, heading in the direction of the city. It hasn’t reappeared on any traffic camera since

then.”

“And the driver?”

“Confirms the description Freya Rust gave us, but he doesn’t have a very distinct face at all.”

“What about the drugs the victim had on him?”

“Two milligrams of marijuana, sir. Only his own fingerprints. Sister had no idea where it came from. I am still waiting for his phone records and his social media records to be analysed.”

“Nolwazi, solve the case quickly. This cousin is getting on my nerves, right.”

“Right sir.”

“One more thing. How are you coping.”

“Sir?”

“The only reason I put you on the case, the reason I took you out of uniform, was because Dr Whatshisname said you were fit for duty, right. But if he was wrong...?”

The question dangles in the air like a dead fish on a hook. “I’m doing great. Sir.”

“Sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Because if you need more time in uniform, less pressure –”

“– I’ll let you know sir.”

“Good. And make another appointment with the good doctor, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

## 5

Eastwood Street runs north to south, down from the Union Buildings – great sandstone seat of power perched atop a steep hill, surrounded by embassies and government residences – through Arcadia and Hatfield and Sunnyside, to the deep, deep centre of the city, where it terminates in the midst of tin fires and street-sleepers. Other than being a busy tributary that could get you quickly from one side of the city to the other, it was known for one of the few streets not edged by the famous Jacaranda tree. This street, like a few others in the city, is dominated by a subtler, more beautiful kind of tree. At least in Mr October’s opinion. In spring it carries his wife’s favourite flower - the Magnolia – and to him, at least, it is a much more potent reminder of home and beauty than the Jacaranda is.

But it isn’t spring, and Mr October isn’t in that part of the street where these trees

front manicured lawns and Victorian dreams. No, he is at the point where Eastwood Street changes, where it narrows and becomes darker. Where the buildings on either side of it become rundown and abandoned. And flowers of a different kind adorn her edges.

Mr October is staring at one of these flowers now, his headlights turned low.

Mr October knows what people say about him behind his back. Tragedy, they say. That he's lived through a tragedy. But what does that word mean? What do people mean when they say that to each other? That they are sad for him? On his behalf? That the situation is *sad*?

Sad? Tragedy? What did they have to do with real life, with getting up every day and carrying on?

Meaningless, empty words.

Losing your only son because disease was eating him from the inside. Never stood a chance. Then, six months later, losing your wife too. A wife who couldn't live with the tragedy? She couldn't stay alive even for her husband, her daughter. Couldn't put them into her equation.

But he could. Because he had to. Had to carry on. Even as the grief and the pain ripped through his insides like a black frost, turned his core into barren, frozen veld. He had to get up. That's what you did. That's what God wants you to do. To stand back up again, to persevere. His son couldn't because the disease was stronger than he was. Mr October could forgive that. His wife couldn't because the pain was stronger than her, too. That, he couldn't forgive.

Get up. Do your duty.

His duty was to the family that stayed behind. To his daughter.

Still, you have to do something to get through the day. You have to have some distraction to stop you from toppling over, right there in the street, from the hollowness, from the heartbreak.

Thin and exotic, dressed in nothing but a thin circle of material that covers her breasts and a short-short denim skirt, she comes over to his window. "Howdy," she says, faux-American. "My name is Candy. Do you want to buy a girl a drink?" She is confident and brassy. Golden bracelets tinkle on her wrist. She smells like bubble-gum and vanilla. She smells familiar. "No," he says to her. "Not you." She seems offended. He wants to explain; he wants to explain that she looks too much like the people he knows. Like the girls in his classroom. Like his own daughter. She is too young, she is too young. But he doesn't dare say any of this out loud, doesn't dare let the thought do anything more than skim across his

mind.

Back from the street's edge, standing apart from the others, steadying herself against the wall with a heeled boot, is the one he wants. He points towards her. She has long white hair. A wig. "You want her?" Candy asks. "She's so old man. Come on, pick me mister. My pussy is much sweeter than hers."

Mr October's chest tightens; his fists clench themselves. "Don't talk like that about yourself," he says to her. Candy flicks her eyes up and down at him condescendingly. "Don't tell me what to do. Tsssh. Fucking lonely old doos." With each word Mr October stiffens, his control evaporating. He points again wordlessly at the woman standing behind the rest of them. Candy relents: she turns her back on him gives a high pitched whistle. "Sparkle, jou ou hoer. Die man soek vir jou."

Sparkle looks up from painting her nails. She locks eyes with Mr October. Candy called her old, but she is no older than twenty-five. Still older than the rest of them. Old enough. She doesn't smile. She examines him impassively, almost clinically before she saunters over to the car. She has barely reached the window when he says, "Get in."

"Does your father know you're doing this?" He can't resist asking.

She rolls her eyes at him, her pink-pink lipstick cracking as she smiles crudely. "My daddy doesn't give a fuck about me, sweetheart."

"Don't swear like that," he tells her, touching her chin.

"I'm sorry baby, I'll be good I promise." Her eyelashes flutter, gold glitter gliding from them like the tiniest of moths.

"Good," he says, relaxing.

"Good," she repeats, unzipping his pants.

Friday

“I’m going over to Frennie’s.”

Mr October knows that she is lying; that she isn’t going to Frennie’s at all. That she is going out with her friends, going into the city. Going to party. He knows, because he’s been following her for months. Ever since her mother died, when he became incapable of putting the thought that something horrible was going to happen out of his mind.

Too many horrible things have already happened. She is the only good thing left. In a few months she’ll be eighteen and he won’t be able to protect her anymore. She’ll leave him, she’ll go into the city to fend for herself. And maybe having a child was the cruellest thing a man could do.

She is wearing a short black dress. Too short. Her shoulders are bare; her cleavage is exposed. He wants to go over there and grab her so desperately that his fingers itch. He wants to throw her over his shoulder and lock her in her room. School. Home. Nowhere else. He wants to forbid her from leaving the house. But she deactivated that threat a long time ago: “What are you going to do? Lock me up like you did Ma?” she yelled at him, like she was throwing hot water at him, like she genuinely feared his answer. And all he could say was, “You know why your mother needed to be restrained, girl” because he had to show strength. But the bare-bone truth of it is that he wouldn’t ever be able to bring himself to do the same thing to his daughter. To lock her away. And she knows it just as well as he does.

So all he says is, “Is she picking you up?” And she says, “She’s already outside.” And he just nods. He does nothing even though he knows that she is lying to him, that she is breaking the rules. That she is sinning.

Sinning.

And then she leaves the house, and the silence in the corners intensify, like wet shadows dripping off the wall.

When she was younger, he would take her to the zoo every other weekend. The zoo, an oasis between cluttered and narrow city streets; a rich, other world that offered respite from their litter-strewn and familiar neighbourhood. All those caged animals made him slightly uncomfortable, but she loved it, so he loved it too. Their visits had a set routine: ice cream first, then monkeys. Then the aquarium and the crocodile enclosure, then another ice cream. Then up to the highest point of the zoo, via cable car, to see the lions in their mountain cages.

She loved the lions the most, and at the end of each visit he would buy her a stuffed lion toy. She must have collected about thirty of them before their visits to the zoo stopped. Because of Peter.

After Peter, everything stopped.

He sits looking out into the darkness.

Usually he simply parks near the bar or club she's disappeared into, and he sits in his car and waits for her to leave. Then he follows her back to Frennie's house, where she usually spends the night.

But tonight.

He fingers the trigger, the gun light and easy in his hand. The gun he hadn't used in four years, not since the thing at Shiva's Rock, not since he put it away for good, buried it in the hole in the ceiling, the hole he couldn't afford to fix. But late last year, on a dark October morning, he was prompted, prompted by something he couldn't articulate – a strange ghostly twinge in his stomach, an indigestible paranoia. A paranoia that proved accurate when he followed his daughter into the bowels of the city for only the second time, his gun securely at his side. That was the night he saw his daughter with that dangerous boy. The Boy. The boy who sold his wife her drugs. The boy who had so casually sneered at him, who had turned his family against itself. And Mr October knew immediately that he had been right, that the gun was necessary.

Necessary to protect his daughter from The Boy, and everyone else like him.

Since then the gun hasn't left his side.

And here he is again, making a choice. It's so easy in the darkness of his car – floating in nothingness, without gravity, without history – to entertain certain instincts. Instincts that are in his blood and his marrow.

He unbuckles the seatbelt and steps out of the car.

## 7

The boy is about to vomit. Freya can see it in his bar-bright eyes. She tries to jump out of the way, but she can't swing her legs out from under the bench fast enough. Her foot catches and the interrupted momentum throws her backwards. She falls; she hits her head on the table behind her.

*Jesus.*

Freya stands, checking for blood on her hair. She was having a good time. But she isn't anymore; the dark thing has attached itself to her mind.

The bar is overfilled. It's a small, grungy space. The wooden tables are old, beer-soaked. The dance-floor is filled with blue, frenetic light. All over the walls, the bar's logo flashes unstoppably: Oxford's, Oxford's, Oxford's. The music is too loud. It's rock 'n roll night. An Erotic Earthquake melody is playing. Freya hates Erotic Earthquake. They are Eric's favourite band. She hates Eric.

She needs air, she needs silence. It's humid, she can't breathe.

She grabs her bag. She moves towards the corridor that runs between Oxford's and Beercakes next to it: not much more than an alleyway that the two bars have commandeered as their own. A place to smoke, a place to make friends with strangers. But at least it's ventilated.

She is about to step outside when she sees him.

After months of no leads, of phoning the police every day to find out if they have found the car or the man that was driving it, here he is. He is standing in the entrance of the bar arguing with a teenage girl definitely too young to be in a place like this. His expression is exactly like she remembers it: twisted in anger. Slim and athletic, but at the same time fragile, birdlike: his eyes are and intent and dark, his mouth is sharp. These details drop and crystallise on the surface of Freya's frozen mind

It's *him*.

The man who killed her brother.

And then the bar lurches: the lights spiral, the bottles stacked around the perimeter of the bar seems to throw themselves at her; the music infects her ear, like a dozen insects. She is panicking, shaking. She retches all over the floor.

Her head spins as the warm, yellow liquid hits her feet.

When she looks up, she is full of desperation.

The man is gone.

A split second in which to make a decision, a universe of emotion exploding through her body: do something. Do something. React!

Freya runs to the door.

She passes the teenage girl in the entrance. The girl is in tears, and for a moment she meets Freya's eyes. Amber eyes, brittle eyes.

Where is he? He can't have gone far.

She pauses on the steps outside the bar; the cold night assaults her exposed face, nips at the wet patches on her jeans. Her face is flushed, hot. The parking lot lies before her, the quiet street to her right. To the left, more bars, the clashing of music, the loudness of people.

Would he have fled to the street or into the crowd?

Was he here looking for her? Does he *know* her?

He could be anywhere, in any of the deep shadows crowded before her.

But then she spots him – on the far side of the parking lot, through an open door: he is disappearing down a staircase that leads to the basement parking.

Breathing deeply, she follows.

The stairs are deserted; she can hear the soft clicks of his feet somewhere ahead of her. The staircase is narrow, it twists. There are unknown stains all over it. It smells like petrol, like the guts of a car. Freya, still dizzy, is struggling to navigate. Her foot slips; she stumbles. She stifles a squeal. The clicking of his feet stop. Freya stiffens. Has he heard her? Does he know that she is following him?

A long moment draws itself out like a last breath.

Her clothes are sticking to her body and she can smell the vomit on her shirt; adrenaline is spilling into her heart.

Then she hears his footsteps resume.

Freya picks up her pace. *Don't make a sound. Be careful.*

Should she call the police? Should she be following this man into the bowels of a parking lot? There don't seem to be any people around, even though the bars above are packed. Surely there should be other people on this staircase? This is the hub of campus drinking, overflowing with people, pumping music into the otherwise quiet Pretoria.

The stairs make a sharp turn and then end abruptly. She pauses on the last step. She fingers her phone, ready to dial the officer working on Ben's case; she has the number memorised.

Then she sees him. He is standing beside a car, his car. It's not the same car he was driving the night Ben was shot, and for a moment Freya isn't sure. But only for moment. Because she would know that face anywhere. She remembers his face with more detail than she does her own father's, her mother's. It's a tattoo.

He is looking straight at her. She forces herself to make eye contact. She has thought about this moment for months.

"Hey! Hey!" The voice echoes across the room. "You dropped your keys, dude." Two girls about her age, identical shiny hair, identical shiny dresses, identical shiny teeth, are walking towards her, giggling and holding out her keys. "Oh," she mumbles, "thanks."

"No problem." They stumble away, judging her. She pulls deeper into her leather jacket.

Behind her, the sound of an engine.

He's leaving.

She looks down at her keys. The light is dancing in little white circles over the silver.

Her car isn't parked far away. She can still reach it in time.

She runs.

Freya never wants to see anyone who knew Ben again. Never again. That world is dead; it died with Ben. And she knows that it is only a matter of time before she, too, would be dead. What is the point of living without him? But to pass the time, to numb the raw, irreparable grief, Freya has been seeking refuge in the arms of alcohol, drugs and boys. In reckless, unadulterated abandon. In dirty, inebriated bliss. That was the state in which Ben's killer found her earlier tonight – right in the middle of her suicide mission.

Freya stops under a streetlamp and watches the man pull into his driveway.

His car, a filthy green Renault, stops with a choke. She can't see him, but after a few seconds, she hears his front door slam.

They'd only driven for about ten minutes, through Hatfield, past the rugby stadium, past a church and a school, into a part of Sunnyside she's never encountered before – not the Sunnyside of high-rise flats and the hipster music scene, or the Sunnyside that gave way to the inner city, all crooked edges and bedevilled buildings. But a gentler Sunnyside, one not quite as eroded as the rest of it. A saved little corner. Still, the houses weren't quite as nice as they used to be, the gardens not quite taken care of.

The house, *his* house, is at the end of a cul-de-sac – a small white house with a blue roof, surrounded by a low fence. The other houses at the bulb end of the street are covered in darkness. She needs to get closer to the house, needs to know more about this man.

The streetlamp bathes her in a pool of light, which pulses lazily into the night beyond. Adrenaline has sobered her up, taken possession of her. She steps out of the light.

She can feel the silence on all sides of her, a silence that seems to be expecting something from her. She moves swiftly, until she comes face to face with his gate. Her fingers grip the bars. The house is surrounded by a plain garden, and has been freshly painted; ladders and paint tins are stacked against the front wall. To the right of the house, cracking the perimeter wall in two, breaking the boundary, there stands a huge tree; a sentinel, whispering in the wind. The Renault has been parked under this tree. But behind the tree, mostly hidden from view, she can see a second carport.

Somewhere behind her, she hears another door slam.

Next to the gate, mounted in the wall at eye level is a mail box. There are several letters stuck in the slot. She takes one.

“Oi!” a voice calls from the dark. “Can I help you?” A stout woman is walking towards her. Next to the woman, leashed, is a large and growling black dog. Freya quickly pockets the letter. When the woman sees her face, she stops. “Oh,” the woman seems startled, “I thought you were one of those ... can I help you?” The woman has a whistle around her neck, a Taser gun at her side and a bib that says “Neighbourhood Watch”.

“No, no. I was just lost. Sorry.” Freya begins walking back to her car.

“Yes,” the woman says, “You look lost.”

They stare at each other. The dog gives a low, loud bark. “I’ll just be going then,” Freya mumbles, hurrying away. The woman looks at her for another moment, then walks back to one of the houses beyond the edge of the light.

Freya jumps at the sound of her own car starting. But she edges it slowly around the cul-de-sac, peering into the little white house, before accelerating back up the street, trying to map it, trying to make sure she would be able to find it again. At the top of the cul-de-sac, she looks up at the street sign: Themis Street.

The Sunnyside streets are adorned, like most of the city, with big Jacaranda trees that bend their canopies across the tar, reaching for each other. They are as bare as skeletons.

She turns left, then right, taking herself deeper into the neighbourhood.

Ahead of her, almost directly parallel to where *his* house is, there is a bridge that crosses a narrow stream. Walker’s Spruit. The stream runs through a strip of parkland, and is benched on both sides by narrow lawns, each with a stone pathway. Large willow trees edge the stream, bending inward to touch the river with their long, slender branches.

She stops just before the bridge. The building immediately on her left is a doctor’s office, fronted by a parking lot. Freya pulls into one of the spaces, and switches off her lights.

She is watching the night for signs of life.

She only hesitates for a moment.

Then.

On foot, she turns down the stone path running down the parkland, past the houses that have their backs turned to the stream. She walks quietly; it is unusual for a park in this part of the city to be empty, to be safe. She walks only a few paces before she finds the back of the little white house with the blue roof. The house has a low wall at its back edge, lower than its neighbours’, low enough to climb over. A smallish lawn runs from the wall to a back porch.

The silhouette of the tree dominates the skyline above his house, and from this angle the carport behind it is clearly visible; it is covered in green netting. Inside the carport, she can see the shadow of a second car.

She breathes deeply.

That must be it. Must be the red Mercedes.

Slowly, she climbs over the back wall.

Her feet crunch on the dry winter grass/

She creeps towards the carport.

And there it is. Gleaming in the bone-white moonlight. Gleaming even under the layer of dust. A beacon, a sign, a saviour. This, she thinks, is a reason to stay alive. Here it is – the way out of – the way through – the grief.

Freya looks around her. Themis Street. A new place, a part of the city she has never given a second thought to. She can feel the streets reaching for her, whispering. She doesn't fight it; she closes her eyes and allows the neighbourhood to envelop her. The herbaceous scent of the night, the small pastel coloured houses, the slight dereliction simmering beneath the surface.

She could leave her car in the street and walk along the pathway in the park without attracting much suspicion. She could watch him; she could follow him. It would be easy to find out what his schedule is, to find out what he does when he thinks no one is looking. To find out what he does when he thinks he is alone.

And no one would see her.

No one would know.

## 8

It's his favourite place, this room. A place where he can be completely alone. Just him and his ladies. His beautiful ladies: aromatic, succulent, profitable. They gleam too, in their neat rows. Hundreds and hundreds of them, sitting beautifully on steel tables, just waiting to be harvested.

The message comes through just as he fastens the last of the bandages: *They've found the body.*

Slick's bones grow tense. He replies: *Do they suspect?*

: *they have no idea.*

: *keep me posted.*

He doesn't feel guilty. Of course, not. Some people deserved to have their throats slit.

But murder is such a waste, so messy. He isn't particularly fond of killing, given the choice. Violence, on the other hand ...

Slick begins to undress, shedding his clothes. He stands in the quiet, cool room feeling the air-conditioning on his skin, watching the goosebumps ripple. In a photograph hanging on the wall – Mama Africa eternally sequestered behind glass – he can see and admire his reflection; he has a good body, strong and lithe. He doesn't usually have a chance to see his reflection; there are no mirrors in his flat and he looks away from windows when he catches sight of himself. But tonight, he forces himself to confront it. It's a funny thing, seeing your own face after months of *not* seeing it. It is never the face you imagine you have. His own, so indistinct, so unmemorable. And lurking there, the shadows of his parents.

His parents still come to him sometimes. In dreams. Or in those moments of complete absorption when he is completely lost to himself. Unanchored. Then his mother or father's face will swerve into his vision. His mother's – wide and flat, eyes set far apart. His father's – slim and caved in, a beauty spot on his chin. When they come, they come together with other things that his young mind associated with them – his mother's apron, permanently stained, bent over the cooker stirring a big wooden spoon, smelling of onions. His father's patchwork jacket, the sound he made when he sat down – a sound of pain.

Mama Africa was much more a parent to him than his barely remembered parents ever were. What had Mama Africa seen when she looked in the mirror?

She taught him everything he knew, and yet he knew nothing about her. She gave him meaning. She gave him knowledge. She gave him a way of to access the world. She gave him language. But all of those things were also a trap. All of those things were disguises she gave him for her own selfish reasons. And what happens to you when you look in mirror and all you see is a reflection of a reflection of a thing that doesn't exist?

His reflection has no answers to his questions. There is only silence. Only silence. And in the intestines of that silence, something dark.

Something dark.

He begins to wash the blood off his face, wiping the warm, wet rag carefully over the cold, sharp wounds. He leans into the pain.

He suspects there are emotions he doesn't have access to, has no experience with. Loneliness is one; he doesn't think he has ever experienced what people describe when they talk about loneliness. He has never craved another person, never needed connection. Joy, another. Euphoria. Pleasure. He doesn't believe he's ever truly experienced pleasure. He is celibate. Although he doesn't call it that. He doesn't call it anything. He doesn't spend much

time thinking about it, honestly. Sex isn't something he wants, so it can't be something he misses. Though he lost his virginity in an uncomfortable, sweaty encounter on a dirty mattress in Mama Africa's house when he was sixteen, it wasn't a powerful moment. He masturbates very rarely; his orgasms are short, powerless things.

He's sober, too. He's tried. Tried them all. There are times when you have no choice but to sample the product. But he doesn't see drugs as an escape, he sees them as a prison. To be so dependable on a chemical feeling seems to him to be the worst kind of trap.

As for love. Well, he's never done that either. Loved someone or been loved. Did his mother love him? He doesn't think so. He knows his father didn't. Did Mamma Africa love him?

If she had loved him she would never have given him that knife.

Drugs, alcohol, sex, love: those were all things that require you to relinquish something. Reality, control, hope. Power. Especially power.

But violence, violence *is* power. Violence is how he keeps control. Control is important. He was so weak, too weak, for such a long time. At the mercy of others.

Never again, never again.

Once his face is washed, the wounds cleaned and soothed, he takes up a knife.

He stares for a moment at the blade, silver and sharp, and then he cuts into his own flesh: a long, thin incision between his navel and his crotch.

The cut flares beautifully. He can feel all his anger, all his panic, gather in his blood and flow towards the fresh wound, dripping out into the world, onto the stone floor, flowing down into the earth, and away.

The pain is fresh, invigorating. Everything is under control.

And he is calm. He is calm.

## 9

After Mr October has washed the blood off his hands, he sits on the flowery couch his wife bought years ago and he waits.

Satisfaction is running through his veins; the pure, pure bliss of letting the violence loose. Not even the memory of the horror on his daughter's face – horror, guilt, paralysis – can dampen it.

When he hears the key in the lock, he speaks from the shadows. "I'm surprised you came home."

"Never," she says, "follow me again. Do you hear me?"

“What are you doing, girl? What are you doing? Girl!” He’s yelling, ferocious.  
“You’re betraying your mother!”

She opens her mouth to speak, and then closes it again. Her lips are white.

“I’ll do whatever I have to, girl. I’ll go to the police,” he says.

She smooths the front of her dress, and raises an eyebrow at him. She says sneeringly,  
“And tell them what, exactly?”



Before



Ben cringed at the noise their shoes were making on the cast-iron staircase, which wrapped around the back of the Old Chemistry building and reached all the way to the roof. The metallic thuds rang out onto the empty campus.

He looked down into the alley between this building and the next, filled with the whirr of generators and extractor fans – other machinery he knew nothing about. This was the sciences corner of the campus and he hardly ever set foot here. It was late, everything was quiet. They were not supposed to be here. “Stop worrying,” Freya said earlier, “Everyone does it all the time. It’ll be fine.”

He could hear Alex and Adam ahead of him on the staircase giggling – high. Freya’s shoe was hanging dangerously close to his eye, hardly worn and bright green. “It’s locked,” came the whisper from above. Ben’s heart sank. But then, a moment later, “Oh, wait. It’s not. There’s just a latch.” The climb was over and moments later Ben stepped onto the roof.

The Old Chemistry building was not the tallest building on campus, nor the most august. A giant lecture hall that seated hundreds and sloped down towards a lectern, Ben had only ever attended a few classes there, none of which he remembered. But the roof of the building was a different story: easy to access and never locked, it was flat and sunken, so that a small perimeter wall surrounded the roof – a wall tall enough to protect the roof from the wind, and ensure that anyone who was illegally partying there remained unseen.

But not so tall that he couldn’t comfortably rest his elbows on it as he looked out over the campus, and the city. A panorama of lights around them, bright and sharp and full of power. The campus and the city are carpeted in Jacaranda blossoms, and from the roof, even in a post-sunset world, Ben could see the burst of purple brilliance over the campus. There had been a storm that afternoon, but the sky had cleared, leaving only a cool, refreshing openness. It was a time of year that always buoyed Ben’s spirits. The world was warm and light and colourful, and he felt full of potential.

“Pretoria,” he whispered, watching the word glide into the silver air.

It pained him, the immense feeling that he was seeing something beautiful that would go unnoticed by others; that it would disappear as soon as he looked away. Worse, that he wouldn’t remember it. He needed to remember this moment or it would be lost: this moment, when the world smelled exactly like this, and looked exactly like this, and felt exactly like this, this expansive, sublime moment. The anxiety of beauty. “You feel things too much, and you think too much,” Freya told him once when he tried to explain this feeling to her.

Alex and Adam were on the other side of the roof, looking down onto the campus. “There are totally two people having sex down there,” Alex shout-whispered to them. “I’ve never seen someone lift their leg that high,” Adam said, trying to demonstrate.

They laughed.

Frey had put a blanket down and had begun pouring everyone wine. Ben could smell it from where he was standing: acidic and sweet and cheap, the way they liked it. She brought a paper-cup, filled to the brim, over to where he was standing. She put it down in front of him like a question. He raised an eyebrow. “You okay?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, wavering. She sounded serious. He hated it when she was serious. “You’ve been distracted lately.”

“Just assignments and stuff, no big deal.”

“Not love trouble?”

“No. Not recently. Why so curious, Sizzle?”

“No reason. You just seem on edge. We haven’t spoken in a while.” She wore that little frown she had cultivated so meticulously. Three short creases just above her nose.

Ben sighed. He knew he had been distant lately, aloof. Because he had wanted to protect her, because there was a part of his life he didn’t want her to know about. And if he were honest, he enjoyed the secrecy. He enjoyed the fact that there was something that belonged only to him, that he didn’t have to share with her. That separated them. Because he and his sister had no secrets, nothing that they didn’t reveal, no emotion, no opinion that wasn’t co-owned. And for a very long time, that had been comforting, that had been a salvation.

But then something inside him changed. He began to feel angry. He began to wake up at night feeling something stirring inside him. Some terrible thing. Some terrible thing that wanted to cause pain.

“Let’s sit down,” he said, taking a sip of his wine and retrieving a joint from his pocket. Freya folded herself onto the blanket, hugging her knees. Her thick, mud-coloured hair spilled over her face into her lap. “Where’d you get that, then?”

“From the guy outside Tings ‘n Times.” He inhaled deeply and offered her the joint. She took it delicately and inhaled smoothly. “Let’s go out on Friday, even if these two won’t be there. Please? I miss you,” she said. Her soft, soulful voice was sharpened by the smoke. “Sure,” he said.

“Rusty?” She never called him Rusty; not unless she was sad.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Sizzle.”

She said, “Put on some music, Rusty.”

Ben was always put in charge of the music. He was a fluent believer in the power of music, of the power of a soundtracked life. He didn't like silence; it made him anxious. Freya was the opposite: she preferred silence, unless she was completely relaxed. She smiled at him now, as he took out his phone and plugged it into his tiny portable speaker, as he took a quick photo of the four of them in which Freya stuck her tongue out at him. Then he pressed play. “Not too loud,” he warned, “Or security will definitely hear us.”

“Bastards,” Alex said, taking a glass, and sitting down on a wooden crate. The melancholy guitar strums of “Strawberry Fields Forever” began to soak into the night. Alex, her hair cropped short, and Adam, long black hair like waves over his face, had been together forever – constantly smiling at each other, holding hands, turning inwards to develop and nurture their private jokes, their secrets. Ben supposed he and Freya were the same, although not the same at all, of course.

The crates were scattered all over the roof, together with a few tins used for making fires and dozens of wine bottles stacked against the edge of the roof. Alex said: “I hope no one else comes up here tonight,” and downed her wine. “More please, babe,” she said to Adam.

He should tell them. He should tell them *his* secret. His *secrets*. But he resisted the temptation, taught like an arrow on his tongue, and pushed it back inside: not yet, not yet.

“Mr Jones” began playing as a soft silence fell. “I love this song,” Freya said, getting up suddenly. In union, they decided to dance. Alex reached over and flicked the volume right up. “Let the bastards come,” she said. The deep bass rhythm pumping from the tiny speaker floated out over the city in a cloud.

Ben looked around at his friends and their clothes – ripped denim and leather jackets, wife beaters and skinny jeans, All-Stars and oversized cardigans. Their flowing, manicured hair, trapped and sparkling in the light, their lithe, glistening bodies moving through the warm night air. He had never felt more relevant, more alive.

“I love you guys,” he yelled at them, and they smiled back at him from their golden halo of pumping, smoke-laced joy.

# The Lamb and the Knife

(June 2015)

# 1

The massive concrete bridge twists across the highway.

Underneath the bridge, a homeless man has taken shelter. Even in the coldest hours of the night there is an endless stream of traffic flashing past; the lights are frantic, the sound unbearable. His frenetic brain is struggling to come to rest. Above him, against the broad grey foot of the bridge, a series of four drawings is illuminated by the light of his withering trash-tin fire. These are new drawings; he did not see them when he left that morning on his foray into the city to look for food, for anything.

In the first drawing, the figure of a lion and the figure of a lamb – drawn in sharp, broad lines – stand facing each other. The lion is grotesque; the lamb is full of fear. And on the floor between them, there lies a heart. The heart has been torn from the lamb, and in her chest there is a gaping cavity, a black hole.

In the second, the lamb has in her hands a large knife, which glows red – the only hint of colour in an otherwise monochrome world. The lion's expression has changed: from proud to wary. The lamb's too: from horror to anger.

In the third, the lamb has struck at the lion. The lamb has cut out the lion's heart; she holds it triumphantly. Holds it in her human hands. The lion has fallen to his knees.

In the fourth, the lamb has placed the lion's heart inside her own chest. She is smiling a red smile. The lion is dead. The lamb's mouth is open and reveals rows of small, sharp teeth.

Underneath the drawings, the words: "It comes with a price."

And from the mouth of the lamb, the city speaks; it whispers stories into the ear of the homeless man as he falls into sleep. It tells him tales of violence, of revenge, of death. This is the kind of city I am, it says. Run, run away from here.

But the man trying to sleep here hasn't been taught how to read, and in the morning his urine will wash the letters from their dirty concrete canvas. He won't remember the city's murmurs. All he will remember is his hunger, his hunger.



Sunday

Pretoria is an odd capital city. A sleeping city, which spirals out from the stubby inner precincts in waves of suburbs – valleys and valleys of suburbs, where people dutifully raise children or happily retire or peacefully grow up. It's a city designed around broad, tree-lined boulevards, great parks, shining malls and quiet embassies. It is a green city, a soft city, a city for idyllic childhoods and lengthy afternoons. A city of diplomacy, of responsibility, of solidity. A city abundant in the fragrance of mulberry blossoms and freshly mown grass. It had been a happy place to be young in; Freya had liked being wrapped in the tranquil, unthreatening landscape.

Freya is in a familiar street today; a street she knows too well. She's stopped on the pavement in front of her childhood home. It's a compulsion she developed after her parents died – touring the streets of her childhood, the streets of Before. Driving aimlessly, looking for something; not sure of what it is she wants to find.

Before.

Before is a province she's trying desperately to get away from. She's trying to scrape her past off and discard it; shed the burden of being Freya Rust – sister, art student, friend. She is trying to become lighter, memoryless.

But there are still moments hidden throughout the day, moments that are pregnant with memories and histories and facts, moments that hover above her, red bubbles full of dirty, bloodied life; when she isn't careful they burst and she drowns under the weight of herself.

Like right now, standing outside this house, massaging memories from her childhood that can't be trusted, that are nothing but enchantments, nothing but a glimmering veneer.

The house.

Hidden behind white, ivy-covered walls. With its sloping lawns, its groves of fruit trees, the large, tiled swimming pool. The broken courtyard covered by large canopies that throw thick, green shade.

They loved it in that courtyard, she and Ben; they loved the way it was slowly falling apart, disappearing into the wilderness of the back garden. It was a place they could escape to, a place of secrets and laughter. Laughter expressly forbidden inside the house. They could sneak sweets and eat them where no one could see. They could hide from the stifling, solid idea of parents and school. They could be free.

And visible just behind the hallowed walls – its dark canopy leering down – is the mulberry tree. She aches for it now, aches to be back inside branches of that tree with Ben. One of her earliest memories – perhaps her very first – is of the summer they moved into this house and she first climbed that tree and watched the mulberries grow. How when the berries first appeared, they were green and hard and covered in a prickly white fuzz. How, as the long days rolled on, they began to change. First, small red flecks appeared on the green nibs; then the fruits grew a little softer, a little plumper. A few weeks later, she drew first blood – when she pressed her too-long nails forcefully into the berry, red stuff spurted out; she watched the sticky juice ooze out with fascination. As the summer lengthened, the fruit rapidly changed colour. From their initial candy-red they began to deepen, to intensify. They became purple, purple, purple. They became glossy and unappetising and made big splashes on the ground as they fell from the tree, too heavy to live. Freya could hardly touch them without the plump rubies disintegrating, without getting purple stains all over herself. Even the bird-droppings were purple as the Myna-bird colony that lived in their garden devoured the fruit.

They became too sweet to eat.

A few years later, she had her first kiss under that tree. He came swaggering up to her, carrying a bag of fruit that rustled against his swimming costume. “Hi,” he said. “Hi.” She was busy eating a mulberry, and her hands and her lips were stained. He asked “What are you eating?” and she replied, “Mulberries” and then he laughed a little like that wasn’t something he would ever do. Then he offered her one of the fruits in his bag. They were round and wrinkled, purple, but not purple like her mulberries. Purple like bruises. They smelled sour. “What are they?” she asked.

“Passion fruits,” he said. “Granadillas.”

“Passionfruitgranadillas? That’s a silly name.”

“No, stupid. Passion fruits. Or Granadillas. They have two names.”

“I don’t think things should have two names.”

“Well these things do.”

He opened one up. It had white flesh. Viscous, velvety flesh. And in the middle of this flesh was a pocket of orange goo with black speckles suspended in it. To Freya, it looked like something from the inside of an animal. She wrinkled her nose. “Taste it,” he commanded. She didn’t want to. She wanted more mulberries. But he said, “If you taste it I’ll give you a kiss,” and she had been wanting to kiss a boy ever since Grietjie from next door had kissed a boy. So she tasted it. It had a sticky taste. Too sweet and too sour. It gave her a headache.

And then he kissed her.

And the passion fruit shells fell from her hands like the empty heart of a bird – discarded, leaking yellow blood into the earth.

Freya slowly gets out of her car, lighting a cigarette. The sky is just waking itself up, becoming blue. The morning star winks on the horizon. The world is absolutely still. The houses are lightless; there are no sounds of traffic, no signs of life. The street is enveloped in the brittle winter's morning.

Freya turns in a slow circle, closing her eyes, pulling the city through her.

The city is soaked in memories like that, memories that sit like parasites on street corners all over Pretoria and latch on to her, keep her from being free.

She thought about it, after Ben died. Thought about packing everything up and leaving. Thought about moving away, starting over. That's what Ben would have done. What Ben would have done anyway; she's always known that he wouldn't stay here, that he hated the city because it is where their parents died. He only stayed for her, and he had been getting tired of it.

But what is the point of starting over, of trying to get to know some other city, when she knows that in her core it is the grit and dust of *this* city that fuels her? This is the place she knows. She knows it as intimately as she knows her own body. She has explored its pathways, its pleasures and pains just as deftly, just as thoroughly. This city is in her guts. And it knows her like she knows it. The city and its way of life has formed her. Has made, unmade and remade her. She thinks like this city, moves like this city.

Everywhere else would just treat her like a stranger; she wouldn't know who she was anywhere else.

Pretoria is inside her and rejecting it would be an act of great betrayal.

She might as well cut out her own heart and leave it fidgeting on the ground.

### 3

A list of things Mr October does every morning: makes coffee, prays, eats a slice of toast (marmalade, no butter), walks into his dead son's room, takes a shower, cries quietly in the shower, listens to his daughter breathing through her bedroom door, leaves the house before he has to see her.

### 4

The large face-brick building stands baking in the morning sun. Heat is rippling off the

blonde bricks. The sign that stands at the bottom of the yellow lawn reads: Methodist Church of South Africa, Sunday Service: 08:00. Cars are spilling out of the tiny parking lot onto the surrounding pavements; religion is still doing big business amongst the middle class of Pretoria.

Freya considers driving her car right through the ugly stained-glass windows that frame the heavy wooden doors.

Instead, she squeezes her car onto a stretch of pavement that gives her a view of the doors, and the people who would come dripping out of them any second now. Dazed and guiltless.

While she waits, she lights a joint.

The smoke fills her lungs, dry and sweet. She sits low in her seat and lets the breeze waft through her window.

Yesterday, she returned to the park behind his house, and she waited.

In daylight she had a much better view of his garden; the grass is yellow and short, beset with weeds. His porch is rotting. And in the corner, right against the back wall, stands a garden shed. Small and derelict, it looks unused, and makes an odd contrast to the newly painted house. All the curtains were drawn; strong, thick burglar bars in front of all the windows.

What darkness lurks behind those dull walls? And how could she invite it into the open? How could she force it to reveal itself?

The parkland around the stream isn't being looked after. The grass is barely alive and there is litter everywhere; empty chocolate wrappers and vodka bottles adorn the stream, caked in mud. An abandoned jungle gym stands in the centre of the park – one swing missing, rusted and forlorn. It smells like rotting garbage.

The stream is lined with long, untended grass, dense shrubs and large willow trees. She stood in the shadow of these plants, hidden from view. It was quiet; she saw no one come through: not one jogger, not one person walking their dog.

She waited until she heard the front door open, and then she crouched down, peering carefully through the foliage. A young woman was getting into a car; even from that distance Freya recognised her as the teenage girl in the bar from the night before – his daughter.

There was still no sign of him.

While she waited, she stared at spot where she knew the red Mercedes was parked, and she stared at the great, leafless tree that grew above it. A gnarled tree that she recognised even in winter, even as grey and barren as it was. A mulberry tree. A mulberry tree exactly

like the one that stands like a great mythical ruin at the centre of her childhood.

She followed him all day.

She followed as he drove to a nearby school. She parked outside the school and waited. She followed him back home, again taking up position in the park. She watched as he washed his car (the Renault, not the Mercedes). She watched as he let himself into the shed in the back garden; he stayed in there for at least an hour. She watched as his daughter came home, and left again a few hours later. And she followed him when, just as the moon was rising, five minutes after his daughter left the house, he came out in a hurry.

She followed as he drove towards the campus, the cold night leaking into her car.

She followed as he stopped and bought himself dinner – a pie and a coke.

She followed him all the way to Hatfield.

She followed him back to the exact spot where he shot Ben in cold blood.

Back to where she had watched her brother die.

At first she thought he was on some dark errand, that he might be ready to kill again. She became sure that he was waiting for his next victim; that he couldn't be here a second night in a row for no reason. Every time another car drove past, she tensed, waiting for a gunshot. But he just sat in his car, staring at the bar, his face blighted by slants of shadow. He stayed there until four in the morning; eventually, responding to some silent sign unfathomable to Freya, he left.

Freya went home, cold and heartbroken and determined to be outside his house again this morning.

Which is when she followed him here, to this church. This ugly, silly church.

People come streaming out of the doors, laughing and chatting.

She watches the door of the church; there, in the shadow of the interior, he stands. He is collecting hymn books with a stern look on his face, the folds of skin around his mouth turned down. Sour, unfriendly. Murderous.

People walk past him obliviously, unaware that there is a killer in their midst.

She holds the letter she stole from his mailbox in her hand. Nothing of substance, just a magazine subscription renewal form. But there, printed in simple black type, is his name. This morning when she woke up, as she tried to throw the shadows off herself, she had a vision. A vision of herself walking up to him and stabbing him in the heart. And she said his name out loud for the first time; she announced it to the empty, Ben-soaked flat.

“Abraham October.”

“Abraham October.”

“Abraham October.”

Monday

Slick eyes the block of flats impatiently. If he makes the wrong move now, it will all fall apart. All because the fools weren't discreet enough. Because they wouldn't listen. Because of those stupid blue shoes hanging there for the whole world to see.

He calls a number and lets it ring three times.

Above him someone flicks a curtain aside and a moment later he is buzzed up through the pedestrian gate. He moves inside quickly. A young man stands in the shadow of the building, framed by the front door; his eyes widen as soon as he sees Slick. "What happened to your face?" he asks. Slick smiles, but shakes his head in warning. All he says is, "Get inside, Steve."

Steve shrinks back, then turns and hurries upstairs.

The flat is small and messy. The front door opens into an open plan bedroom and kitchen. A bathroom is off to the right. An unmade bed stands in the far corner. The curtains are drawn and darkened sunlight gives the flat a red taint. The smell of marijuana fills the flat. There is another young man asleep in the bed.

"Get rid of your friend, Steve."

Steve nods, makes his way through the maze of dirty laundry and empty pizza boxes on the floor and wakes his friend up, whispering in his ear. The young man nods, and jumps out of the bed. He pulls some clothes on wordlessly and leaves, not looking at Slick once.

"Wait," Slick says. The man pauses at the door, turning around slowly, but keeping his gaze to the floor. He is tall and slim and gaunt, with messy black hair. Slick takes a step towards him. He pauses. Then he laughs. "Nice tattoo," he says.

The man's fingers automatically begin to linger over his lower stomach. "Thanks," he mutters and closes the door behind him.

Slick turns to Steve, "Friend of yours?"

"Something like that."

"Does he know anything?"

"No," Steve says, "Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"Good. Where is the stuff?"

"In the closet."

“Get it. We have to move it.”

“Why?”

“The police. They know it’s here. They’re going to be raiding this place. Tomorrow. So get moving.”

“How do they know?”

“Anonymous tip off.”

“Where are we taking it?”

“Just pack it up and let’s go.”

“I’m coming with you?”

“Yes, you’re going to lay low somewhere for a while. I don’t want the police asking questions.”

“They know about me? Specifically?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But I’m not taking chances. So get moving.” Steve doesn’t move for a few seconds, then jumps into action, moving quickly to the closet and lifting the floorboards. He begins packing large green packets into a bag. “Which car is yours? I’ll start moving the stuff.”

“The Atos.

“Which one?”

“What?”

“Which fucking one?”

“The white one.”

Slick nods, and moves to the window and peers out. “Fuck,” he says.

“What?”

“Is there a back way out of this place?”

“What’s happening?”

“The police are outside. Stay here, don’t let anyone in. I’ll call you when you can come down.”

## 6

Winter in Pretoria has a particular smell. An arid smell. A cold smell – but with a suggestion of fire, robust and earthy. And a hint of concrete. In the centre of the smell, there is dust; dust covers everything in winter. It is a smell that fills your bones when you walk out the door in the morning; when you go outside for a mid-afternoon smoke-break and the sun has crisped the air; and when, at dusk, it comes rushing from the shadows like desiccated ice and the

perfume of cooling bark snaps off the trees and you rush inside the house to curl into the warmth of yourself.

But at noon the smell is at its most potent. It washes over Nolwazi as she steps from the car, and wraps her jersey around her waist.

The flat she's looking for – number E6 Jacaranda Court, Mill Street – is in a squat block of flats adjacent to an empty lot haunted by graffiti. Telephone wires span the front of the building, and flung over these, hanging from shoelaces that have been tied together, is a pair of shoes. Not old, but slightly scuffed, the shoes are bright blue with red shoelaces. Nolwazi stretches her own feet; they're hot and trapped. Her shoes are blocky and black – “practical shoes for practical ladies” is what it said on the side of the brown box they came in.

The blue shoes are an advertisement, an invitation. Somewhere on this street, someone is selling drugs. Nolwazi looks the street up and down. It is quiet, mid-morning. Apartment blocks are stacked tightly along its length. A solitary restaurant is squashed in between them, but isn't open for business yet. There is no one in the street except a beleaguered car-guard with a limp, who wouldn't be able to stop anyone from stealing the clothes off your back, let alone a car-thief. But he would know something, he would know where on this street you could find those drugs. His function as intermediary, and his discretion, would have been bought by the dealer. But he definitely won't talk to her. She makes a note of the shoes, anyway. And of the way the car-guard is stealing glances at her when he thinks she isn't looking.

“Come on up,” the voice says when he buzzes her in. The elevator rattles ominously on the way, her stomach clenching.

Eric Evans is dressed in a tank top and shorts, a uniform Nolwazi associates with joggers, a group of people she tends to dislike. He is sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter in the small flat (kitchen, two bedrooms, bathroom) eating cereal. The tip of his fringe (long, blonde) is wet with milk where it has fallen into the cereal, but he hasn't noticed. The kitchen is dank, and Eric has left the front door open to let in some light. Behind the kitchen, two doors that lead to bedrooms are closed. To her right, she glimpses a dirty bathroom, floor strewn with towels and underwear. Students. Which, if she hasn't already made it clear, are the natural enemy of the police officer.

“And on the night, you weren't with her?” she asks.

“No I was out with friends. She never invited me to those Friday night things with her brother. They were, like, sacrosanct or something.”

“What were you talking about on the phone?”

“We were maybe going to meet up afterwards. After she finished. We were planning that when...”

“Did you hear the gunshots?”

“Yes,” he swallows the last bite of his cornflakes loudly. “And then the phone went dead.”

“Did you do anything?”

“I tried to phone her back a few times,” he shrugs.

“You weren’t worried?”

“I didn’t think ... I mean, she said they were there. At the bar. I didn’t think it had anything to do with her. The shot. I thought she would phone me back when she had a moment.”

“And when she didn’t?”

He shrugs again. When Nolwazi doesn’t say anything to this, he goes on. “Look, she was sweet and cute, but it wasn’t like we were serious or anything. Just having fun. I knew her brother better than I knew her.”

“You did?”

“Yup, he’s the one who introduced me to Freya.”

“You didn’t tell the officer who took your original statement that.” He shrugs, and says, “He didn’t ask. And I didn’t think it was important. Was it?”

“Could be.”

“How?”

Nolwazi ignores this and asks instead, “And how did you know Ben?”

“He was friends with my roommate, Leo.”

“And is Leo here?”

“Sure. Yo Leo? Could you come on out here for a sec?” he yells in the general direction of the bedrooms. A young man comes out a moment later, shirtless and groggy. “Man, I was fucking sleeping...” But he stops when he sees Nolwazi. His eyes grow wide and he freezes suddenly, awkwardly. “Who are you?” he says.

“Inspector Nolwazi Mngadi. I am here to ask a few questions about the murder of Benjamin Rust. Eric here says you knew him?”

Leo visibly relaxes: his shoulders drop, his brow unfurls. Even his tattoo, a tree growing out from under the waistband of his pants, seems to expand as his stomach relaxes. “Oh, that. Took you long enough,” he says. “Yes, I knew Ben.” Nolwazi watches as Leo

moves into the kitchen and takes a seat next to Eric. “How long have you two been roommates?”

“Two years.”

“And how did you meet Ben ... er, Leo?”

“On campus, you know, mutual friends. Class.”

“You were studying the same thing?”

“No, but we both took English.” Leo pauses, then asks “Is he buried anywhere?”

“You’ll have to ask his sister that.”

“I have. She hasn’t been replying to my messages. I don’t even know if there was a funeral.” Leo gets up from his chair and busies himself with the kettle, turning his back in her. Nolwazi doesn’t know what to say to that. She takes a minute to look around the flat before having to ask the predictable, but necessary question, but before she can push it out, Leo interrupts her. “Why did it take you so long to come and speak to us? Why didn’t you come right after he died?”

“We did take a statement from Eric. We didn’t realise you knew him; we didn’t even know that you existed.”

“Yeah, you and lots of people.”

“And,” she continues, defensive, “we were following other leads.”

“But you still haven’t caught anyone, right? You haven’t found the shooter?” Leo isn’t looking at her, nor is he raising his voice, but curled up deep inside his question, Nolwazi recognises it – the anger.

“No,” she says, “but we will.”

He doesn’t respond.

“Okay gentlemen,” she tries again, “one last thing: have either of you thought about why an unknown man would stop and shoot Benjamin for no reason at all? Is there anyone that we don’t know about who would have wanted to hurt him?”

They are both silent for a moment, before Eric says, “No”.

Leo says, “It’s all people could talk about, for months and months. All anyone on campus wanted to talk about. What happened to him and why. People were scared, I think. And worried. And they like gossip, too. And Freya disappeared. We haven’t seen her since, not once. She vanished. And you’re only asking this question now.”

“Actually, Steve says he saw Freya the other night. She was out with that trampy chick Vicky.” In the wake of their words something seems to pass between them, something invisible and private.

“Who is Steve?” she asks.

“Just a guy who lives in the building. We only kind of know him.”

Nolwazi gets up to leave. “Did Ben have a girlfriend, someone else I could talk to? His Facebook page mentions he’s in a relationship, but not with who.”

Eric Evans stares at her for a second before replying, “No, I never knew or met Ben’s girlfriend.”

“Oh, just one more thing, Leo.”

“Yes,” he says, his face turned away.

“Is that your Atos parked out front?”

“Um, yes. Why?”

“And Freya Rust, she’s seen that car. She knows it’s yours?”

“Yes, yes, what’s all this about?”

Nolwazi smiles. “Thanks. I’ll let myself out.”

## 7

“I thought you said the raid was tomorrow, friend?”

“Bossman, it is. It is.”

“Then why is there a fucking pig outside my guy’s place?”

“I don’t know bossman.”

“Find out.”

Slick watches the police car pull away.

Then he stands up straight, throws the hoody back and takes the beany off. It stinks. *All clear* he types, leaning against the Atos.

“You sure your friend with the tattoo doesn’t know anything, right?” Slick asks Steve five minutes later, checking the rearview mirror.

“Yes, he knows nothing, I promise.”

“Right, well. Let’s get this stuff back to the house. And then I want you to tell me why there is so much product left. You’re not selling fast enough. I didn’t promote you just so you could slack off.”

“It’s not like you’re paying me more,” Steve mutters.

Slick slaps him across the face, and his lip splits open; Steve whimpers. “Already forgot what happened to the last guy?”

“No sir.”

“Fucking moegoe.”

Freya Rust is wearing an oversized jersey and white pyjama bottoms. She has folded herself into a chair in her small living room, and she watches Nolwazi over her bended knee. She has bags under her eyes, but she is looking at Nolwazi intently, as if seeing her for the first time.

“I spoke to your friends, Ms Rust. They say you haven’t been allowing them to see you.”

“Call me Freya,” she says, lighting a cigarette; grey smoke moves slowly upwards, hovering above their heads. Nolwazi tries not to cough. And Freya says, “Which friends?”

“Alex and Adam.”

“Alex and Adam just want me to talk to them about Ben. I don’t want to talk about Ben.”

“And Eric?”

Freya tilts her head sideways slowly, before saying, “Eric was just ... a fling. He was Ben’s friend, really. We were just fooling around.”

“It seems to me like your brother and Eric were very close.”

“Sure. Maybe.”

“Why didn’t you tell us they knew each other?”

“Is that an important detail?”

“Everything is important.”

“Well, I’m not interested in them. Or their grief. I’m only interested in who killed my brother.”

“You’re not interested in why he killed your brother?”

“It’s enough to know that he did it. Reasons won’t change anything.”

“You’re not interested?”

The young woman unfolds herself from the chair, and sits forward, “Why are you talking to all these other people? Why aren’t you trying to find the man in the red car? The shooter?”

“We’re finding it very difficult to track down that car or the man who owns it.”

Freya’s cigarette sits idling in the empty paint tin she is using as an ashtray. She says, “I think you’re probably not looking hard enough”. The flat is dirty. The kitchen floor is

grimy, and dishes are piled high in the sink. The living room is littered with boxes, filled with half eaten food. There is a layer of dust over everything, so that Nolwazi can see the girl's footprints leading from the front door to her bedroom. The air is heavy; the curtains are drawn, casting a darkly yellow glow over the space. "Let me ask you something," Freya continues, "if you do find the man in the red car, if you do manage to track him down, what happens then?"

"Well," Nolwazi says cautiously, "We bring him in for questioning. Find his gun, process his car for evidence."

"What if you don't find any?"

"If he is guilty, we will."

"If? So what you're saying is, it's my word against his?"

"I'm saying we have to find him before we worry about anything else."

Freya Rust narrows her eyes, and eases her head back. She rests it against the seat of the chair, and breathes deeply. She is muttering something to herself, and when she looks back at Nolwazi she seems flushed, angry.

Nolwazi's phone rings, and she only answers to give Freya Rust a moment to collect herself. "Mngadi?"

"I just want to give you a heads up on the drugs on Mills Street."

"Yes?"

"There's a scheduled raid tomorrow. Campus security got suspicious, tipped us off."

"So it's being taken care off?"

"Yup."

"Good." She kills the call.

"Who was that?" Freya asks, with something akin to mockery in her voice.

"A friend in the drug squad. Police stuff."

"Police stuff?" In Freya's mouth the words seem churlish, coated with contempt. "Police. Stuff. Tell me something, do you like being a police officer?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Freya Rust asks.

The question startles Nolwazi; the answer appears on the tip of her tongue like an actor being called to the stage: My father was a very violent man. He beat my mom many times. Me too, but mostly her. He always stopped before it became too serious, before he did permanent damage. But then, there was one night where something changed in him and he couldn't stop himself, and we had to call an ambulance. When the police showed up, there

was a detective with them who came and took their statements. A very tall, very kind woman. She was tough and smart and completely in control of both Nolwazi's parents. This woman managed to make Nolwazi's father's head bow in shame with just her words. Nolwazi wanted to be exactly like that detective.

She could tell Freya Rust this story, bond with her, create trust between them. But she isn't interested in answering this question, this time. She doesn't want to. So instead she says, "Because it pays well," and the irony in her voice surprises even her.

Nolwazi decides to clean a little. To give herself a reason to stay. To show some sort of kindness. Give and take. "Do you have any gloves?" she asks.

The girl motions to the cupboard under the sink. Inside there are a pair of dish-gloves, still preserved in plastic. They look like the kind a television serial-killer would use to kill his victim. Bulky and easy to wash. Neon yellow. So yellow that against the monochrome kitchen colours they don't seem entirely real, like hands from some other, stranger place, floating in front of her, dangerous and unpredictable. There is silence while she washes the dishes. The sun is bright in the sky and the windows above the sink are submerged in light; she cannot look too closely at them without red dots appearing before her eyes. After a few minutes, the soapy water warming her hands even through the gloves, the rhythm of the chore allows her to forget where she is.

Until a question comes out of the shadows behind her, quick as silver. "So you didn't do it for justice?" Nolwazi doesn't turn around, doesn't want to look back at the girl, at her folded frame, at her arms crossed against her chest, at the big, dark stain on her jersey. She says, "I don't think anyone does it for that reason."

"Shouldn't that be your reason? Shouldn't people become police officers to make sure we live in a good world, a world where bad things don't happen?"

"Yes, they should. But that world doesn't exist."

"That's cynical."

"That's reality. Nothing brings you down to earth as fast as being a police officer."

Freya Rust is silent after Nolwazi says this, so she begins drying the dishes and putting them away, not looking in the direction of the living room. The kitchen smells like lemon-scented soap and smoke, a sultry, unnatural combination. Then another question comes from the shadows. "Do you know where my name comes from?"

Nolwazi shakes her head.

"Freya is a Norwegian goddess. The goddess of love. But also the goddess of war and justice. Also an angel of vengeance. I never liked my name much. People teased me. But now

I like it, I think.”

Nolwazi moves back into the living room, Freya Rust sitting in the middle of it like a collapsing star. She notices two photographs, standing on a side table shoved into one corner of the room. “How did your parents die?” she asks.

Freya’s answer is terse: “They died in a car crash.”

“That’s awful.”

“Tragic.”

The word comes and lies on the floor between them, an abandoned balloon; Freya steps on it without hesitation: “You think that was callous,” she says.

“No, I think that was true. That’s a nice photo of your brother.”

Freya doesn’t look at it. “It’s a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?”

“A reminder to keep on living.” There is a kind of energy about her, a kind of taught frenzy that is being very carefully controlled. Nolwazi doesn’t think she can bear another moment in the presence of this girl, so she decides to get to the point. “Freya,” she begins, putting her hand out as if to steady a falling glass, “I am going to ask you this only once. Are you sure, positive, that you saw that man pull the trigger on the night your brother died?”

Freya Rust is quiet in the face of this question, unblinking. She puts her cigarette out and stands, “I think you better leave,” she says.

“Your aunt came to see me,” Nolwazi says now, looking to change the subject.

“You mean my cousin?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What did she want?”

“She’s not happy with the speed of the investigation.”

“Well, can you blame her?”

“She also seemed concerned about you. She says she hasn’t seen you since it happened, that you won’t see her, that you aren’t home when she comes by, that you’ve changed your phone number; she doesn’t know how you’re surviving.”

“I’ve got money, I can look after myself.”

“I don’t think that’s quite what she meant.”

“Well, I don’t want to see her. She’s not my family. She makes me feel guilty.” Freya looks down as she says this, and from the shadow she is casting over herself, she continues, “You know after my brother died, I phoned the police station every day to find out if there had been any leads. I came there, to check up in person. After a while, you stop wanting to

hear that nothing has been found, that nothing has been done.”

The accusation slips out into the unbreathable air and begins orbiting the two of them. Nolwazi stands, desperate to escape this strange, unpredictable conversation. Before she leaves, she can't help but ask, “Are you seeing anyone? A grief counsellor or therapist? Is there anyone who is helping you?”

Freya pauses for a minute, then says, with a sardonic laugh, “Yes, there is. His name is Abraham. He's really helping me cope.”

Tuesday



She's *home*.

The smoke, greyer than the sky above it, hangs low and stagnant over the shacks. From Nolwazi's vantage point on the edge of the township – behind her a copse of blue gum trees, ahead of her a storm of shacks charging the horizon – she can see the white roof of the police station. It towers above everything around it because it is the only permanent structure visible. There was a day in the not too distant past when the police station was on the edge of Mamelodi, but over the past few years it has been swallowed by the rapid growth of poverty. Now it's surrounded by feeble shacks: tin and cardboard and hopelessness.

Pretoria has roots – deep concrete roots that bind the city to the earth with steel and mortar, permanent, immutable. There are parts of Mamelodi that are like this, that are stable and strong –roads and schools and clinics and running water. Actual houses fixed to the ground; not the kind of house you can carry on your back, like the ones in front of her now, which quiver like pieces of grass trying to grow in the sand. Shifting, battered and easily swept aside; set to blow away at any moment. She eyes the row of temporary toilets to her left – she's trying to keep them out of her field of vision. Something about them, something about how plastic and corporate they are, unnerves her; scratches something inside her she'd rather not have scratched.

Her uniform itches. Her hazards are flashing behind in her in the grim afternoon light. The white light gives the corrugated iron houses an odd glow.

Between her the edge of the township, there is sparse veld and thorny shrubbery swimming in muddy rubbish. Blues and reds and yellows adorn the ground, calling out brand names, claiming their part in this ugly corner of the world. She watches an old woman hobble towards the toilets. It smells like wood-smoke and shit.

It is in exactly this piece of no-man's-land that, years ago, she found her first body. The rain was coming down in persistent sheets; the raindrops sat on her top lip and tasted like iron. The body was naked, blue. Covered in dirt and thorns. Covered in maggots. The raindrops turned small and white and slippery, sliding down her face, her skin prickling as if she was being eaten by tiny, scavenging mouths.

She didn't throw up. She has a strong stomach.

“Nolwazi?”

The voice startles her and her hand shifts automatically to her gun. She turns.

Frik is standing behind her, tall and smiling. “What are you doing here?” she asks. As far as she knew he has never set foot inside Mamelodi. “I saw your car, thought I’d check. I tried to call you,” he says.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“This is where I found it.”

“Found what?”

“Rebecca. Her name was Rebecca.”

“Who’s Rebecca?”

“The first body I ever found.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yes,” she almost laughs at the lameness of his response, “Oh, shit.”

“And that’s why you’re here?”

“No, I am here to visit an old friend.”

“Sorry. I should have guessed you were from around here.”

She looks at him, tall and pale in the whitewashed sunlight, looking at her with warmth and curiosity – and something else. Pity, perhaps. She hates it. He smiles at her. “You still owe me that ice-cream,” he says.

She says, “I’m not.”

“Not what?”

“Not from around here. My mother lives in Waterkloof.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s fine.”

“What does your mother do?”

“She’s a doctor.”

“Really? Which hospital?”

“Little Company of Mary.”

“No shit, my mom’s a cleaner there.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know there isn’t,” he says.

“Well, I better get going. See you Frik.”

## 10

Slick killed his father on the same day that Mrs Yengeni’s shack burned down.

The shack burned quickly; the metal sheets folding in on themselves, beaten; the

smoke was yellow and dirty and seared Slick's eyes. The neighbours, who had dampened most of the fire to make sure it couldn't spread, stood watching the smouldering shack and the sobbing Mrs Yengeni outside it, and all agreed that this fire had been inevitable. It was known, even to young Slick, that Mrs Yengeni, a foreigner whose husband had recently died in the mines, was a drunk. A drunk who was famous for passing out on her dirty mattress and forgetting to turn her rusty stove off. The consensus drifted through the air with the smoke: this was bound to happen, let's just be grateful it hadn't been worse.

But Slick had seen his father flick (carelessly) his cigarette butt across the low fence into Mrs Yengeni's yard. He had seen it fall into the gap between her floor and the uneven ground; a gap filled with newspaper to stop rain water from seeping into the floorboards and stray cats from taking shelter there. The not-completely-put-out cigarette stump had fallen into that gap, found friendly kindling, and brought Mrs Yengeni's shack and Mrs Yengeni down to their knees.

Slick wasn't the only one who had seen this act of casual and habitual vandalism. His mother had seen it too, and she bookmarked the moment in her cold and vengeful memory with a shake of her head and a sip of her home-brewed beer. And what Slick's mother marked, Slick marked too.

That evening, as the sun and the dust disappeared from the township, replaced by shattering laughter and foul-mouthed music, his mother confronted his father about the destruction of Mrs Yengeni's shack. His father, who had been in the crowd while Mrs Yengeni's shack had burned, and who had agreed with Mr Motsele, the man who ran the spaza shop, that Mrs Yengeni didn't deserve any mercy from them said: "What does it matter? She was a stupid old woman. Her shack would have burned down eventually. Building a new one will give her something to do."

Slick's mother didn't say anything, but she walked over to her own stove and began scooping some pap into a bowl.

"What are you doing?" asked Slick's father.

"I'm taking her something to eat," his mother said, "it's the least we could do." Slick knew that Mrs Yengeni was spending the night under a blanket provided by his mother, too, but said nothing.

"I'm not sharing my food with that woman."

"Yes you are." His mother continued scooping the pearly porridge into the bowl, staring at her husband, not blinking.

Violence in Slick's young life was something that usually arrived unexpectedly and

moved swiftly. He could never see it coming, and could not protect himself or his mother against it. His father's temper was not slow; it needed no kindling.

But Slick's mother fought back. She took up her frying pan and brandished it in front of her. "Not tonight husband. I have enough bruises." The fight was short and intense. His mother was no match for his hardened father, who swept her weapon aside in a few seconds and begun pummelling his wife; she folded herself up on the floor and took the beating.

The fists came without mercy.

His father made no sound as he punched. To the ears of a young Slick, it didn't sound much different to his parents' infrequent sex. His father hit his mother until she was absolutely still. Then he turned towards Slick. Slick knew immediately and instinctively that tonight was different. Usually his father dealt three or four punches before he gave up and sauntered out of the house; usually he gave Slick a passing flick against the head. But tonight there was something else in his father's eyes, something Slick had not seen there before, deep and red. He knew that his mother was dead. He also knew that behind him, buried underneath the bags of cornmeal, there was a gun.

As his father began stumbling towards him, Slick's hands found the cold metal thing. Slick doesn't remember how his little fingers found the trigger, or the strength to pull it. But the shots reverberated through the floor of the shack, sending ripples through his small spine. The aftershock threw him backwards, into the wall of the tiny room, and he had little time to recover.

He heard voices, people gathering. His father's corpse lay between him and the door.

He had no choice but to run.

He burst from the door head first, keeping his eyes down. He ran like he had never run before, like the ghosts of his parents were chasing him. He was through the sparse sea of legs collecting in front of his shack before anyone noticed. Distantly he heard the voice of Mrs Yengeni, "There goes the little bastard! He's running away! Catch him, catch him, catch him, before he kills again!"

Now, almost fifteen years later, looking down a street not unlike the one he ran down that night, Slick imagines he can see his eight-year old self running towards him, eyes wide and face wet. And he knows what it is he saw in his father's eyes that night. It was the coldblooded burn of heroin. A burn that changed the course of his life.

The past is not a place he tries to spend too much time in. People tend to exaggerate the amount of influence a childhood has on you. Of course when you tell the story of your life, your natural inclination is to start with your birth, your upbringing, your parents. Lots of

emphasis is placed on these early years in the stories people tell about themselves, which Slick thinks is a selfish strategy: look, people seemed to be saying, look at all the things that happened that were out of my control.

But lately he's been thinking a lot about how it all started. All the violence.

"Oi, bossman? Where to?" comes a voice, clashing with the echo of his memories.

"What?"

"Where to? We just gonna stand here on the side of the road?"

Slick points to a tavern across the street, a red glow hidden behind a door plastered with beer labels. "In there," he says.

"You don't think people will notice us together?"

"Don't worry whitey, you're with me. No one will care."

"It's quiet today."

"Yes, that helps too. Let's go."

There are only a couple of other customers this early in the day, who don't even look up from their drinks as Slick and the man who he has come to think of as "his friend" shuffle into the bar. They find a table in the back corner, behind the broken pool table. His friend orders a Black Label, and the girl who serves them (small, head down) leaves them be, but not before Slick notices the open cut on her forehead, the woozy look in her eyes. His friend notices it too. "That girl isn't South African."

"No," Slick says, "No, she's not." He longs for the silence of his house, the empty uncomplicated silence. "Let's make this quick. Any news on the Hatfield busts?"

His friend is looking around the bar, distracted, Slick guesses, by the exotic township otherness. The sharp smell of home-brewed beer, the sounds of people laughing in other languages, the brittle poverty. "Why did we meet here?" his friend asks.

Slick doesn't have time for small-talk, "Because I have business here. I have to pay a guy."

"For?"

"For taking care of a problem. Now fucking tell me what I want to know."

"Jeez boss, relax. You have nothing to worry about. The Hatfield raids got them nothing. No one has found any connection to you. They questioned Bra Joe again, but he can't tell them anything. It's a smart game, having students deal for you. The drug squad have turned their attention back on the Nigerians, the big guns. Not us. They can't trace your stuff back to you."

"So I can send Steve back in?"

“Give it a few weeks, and use a different locale, obviously. And no more of those stupid shoes.”

“Great.”

Slick relaxes a little, letting the anger and anxiety of the last few months drain out of him. It had been a fucking nightmare having to pull out of Hatfield like that, having no runners on the ground. A costly nightmare.

“Hey boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Could I have my cash a little early this month?”

Slick tried to keep his voice steady, “No, you’ll get your fucking money at the end of the month like you fucking usually do.”

His friend knows better than to argue. Instead he says, “Anything else?”

“Yes, any news on that phone?”

“The report came in a few weeks ago. All his records. But don’t worry boss, I buried it. No one is going to find out about that phone.”

“Good, and make sure –”

A noise from the kitchen interrupts them – a muffled cry, quickly followed by the door slamming shut, then a thud. None of the other customers, slumped over their drinks, have reacted, but Slick’s companion immediately stands up, hand at his gun, so that Slick can clearly see a badge sticking out from under his belt. “Sit the fuck down,” Slick hisses. “Do you want people to see you’re a pig?”

“But it sounds like someone is in trouble?”

“So what, this is Mamelodi, someone is always in trouble. What do you care?”

“I’m a pig, aren’t I?”

“Ja, a crooked one.”

“Doesn’t mean I can just sit by and let someone get hurt.”

“It’s over now, right? It was just someone burning their hands. Leave it.”

“Sounded like more than that to me.”

Slick sighs. “Leave it alone. I need something else from you.”

“What?”

“I need to you to do some digging for me on a guy.”

“This wouldn’t happen to be the same guy who did all that to your face?” To his credit, his friend looks him straight in the eye when he says this, and doesn’t flinch when Slick runs a coarse finger over the cut in his cheek, still caked in blood. “He’s a teacher.

Making trouble.”

“He has a name, this teacher?”

“His name is Abraham. Abraham October. He’s an old friend.”

## 11

After she found Rebecca, after the body was taken away, Inspector Pamela Malope took her aside and said, “Take deep breaths and meet me around the corner in ten minutes.” Exactly ten minutes later she appeared, her heels clicking oddly on the dirt road, looking more sophisticated than anyone Nolwazi had ever seen. She was tall and curvy and wore her hair, grey even back then, shaved short. “Come on, I’m taking you for a drink.”

They had gone into a small, unremarkable bar a short distance from the crime scene and Inspector Malope had bought her a beer and a shot of tequila and said, “Welcome to the police.” And then, when Nolwazi was still quiet, she said. “Murder is a strange crime. When you think about it, it isn’t very common or normal. It’s been made common by the media, by television shows and films. Books, too. We’re fascinated by it, and we’re desensitised. But really, when you think about, it’s a rare and peculiar thing.”

Nolwazi looked at her skeptically.

“Most police officers,” she continued, like she’d made this point before and enjoyed making it, “won’t see a murder in their lifetime, everything being relative. Murder isn’t a parking offense, it isn’t theft and it isn’t as common as people make it seem in stories. Murder is a speciality crime, committed by a special class of criminal, and you should remember that if that is the kind of work you want to do.”

Nolwazi stares out of Inspector Malope’s window. The streets of Mamelodi are quiet today, because of the service delivery protests that erupted yesterday, a common thing here, where people struggle so much to live. The protest that had brought the brick through Pamela’s window. A strong police presence is keeping people inside today, and Nolwazi is happy not to be in uniform. Uniforms are advertisements: we are the enemy. It is difficult for her to know that people no longer trust the police, that she is regarded as part of a militant machine, a fist of the state. Not a refuge anymore, not a helping hand. It all changed after Marikana, of course. With hindsight, she could see that it had been a long time coming. That Marikana was just the final phase of the metamorphosis. That what had happened *that* day had created new kind of police force. A terrified thing was born. It was worse in the townships. On the fringes, in the trenches. People became harder. Officers became crueller, or allowed their cruelty to be exposed, to be worn with sneering pride. It became a culture of

punishment without question. And the public responded accordingly.

It was this monster that she sought to escape when she left Mamelodi.

She doesn't want to generalise, she doesn't want to make it worse. But after the attack on Inspector Malope, after the thing that happened, she had to take her head out of the sand and acknowledge a rot that had set in, had spread like a virus through the minds of the police force. We are the police and they are the civilians. Us and them. Us and them. Not we. Not together. Not community. Apartheid.

She had to pull strings to arrange the transfer and that irony isn't lost on her. The system is rotten and the only way to use it was to expose yourself to the rot. But she isn't sorry. And in the suburbs maybe she could be inoculated. Quarantined from reality. It certainly seemed to work for those people. Those middle classes. People like Freya Rust. Who walks through life with eyes wide shut. Nolwazi was perfectly happy to give that a try. To drink the little blue pills, to give up investigating murders. "You have to stop feeling things so intensely," Dr Philippidis told her. Wasn't she supposed to take things personally? Isn't that what makes her a good police officer?

"Not quite," Inspector Malope said, but ruefully.

Nolwazi wishes she could be more like the woman sitting opposite her. A woman who spent her life in the township, choosing to fight crime here, choosing to live amongst the people she swore to protect. And then, when she uncovered that her superiors had taken money to hush a murder investigation, her bravery in reporting it, in agreeing to testify. She lost her job, she was intimidated, threatened. But she persevered. And then the attack. They came for her at night, with knives, with hatred. And she survived.

"Why don't you move, Mma? You can afford it."

"Because this is my home."

"But all the talk, the staring –"

"Let them talk, let them stare!"

"– the threats?"

"Their threats don't scare me, daughter."

"You could come live with me, now that the trial is over" – an offer Nolwazi has made before, a dozen times.

"I'm not running."

No, Nolwazi was the one who ran. She looks at the piece of plastic taped across the broken window, the brick that was launched through it now lying peaceably on the kitchen counter, like it wasn't a threat, a weapon. Inspector Malope follows her gaze, shakes her head

sweetly and says, “Here, drink more tea,”

Inspector Malope’s (a moniker Nolwazi always reverts to, no matter how many times she heard “It’s Pamela, for fuck sake”) house is on the other side of Mamelodi, kilometres away from the dirty ditch where she had run into Frik earlier. (He never did tell her what he was doing there.) It is so different here they may as well be in a different town: no shacks, no dirt roads, no portable toilets. Neat streets lined with neat houses, school children outside, a quiet domesticity enveloping the house, which smells like lemon-scented soap and rosemary. Only the brick a reminder of the simmering violence, the unquiet poverty, the restless corruption seething mere blocks away from here.

Out the window, the view stretches over other houses just like this one (small, colourful) to a clean horizon, made of tall grass and the sunset-tinged metal of the train track.

“How is the new job going?” Inspector Malope asks.

“It’s going fine, Mma.”

“I hear you’re struggling with a murder case.”

“How do you know that?”

“A little birdy.”

“The colonel is a letch.”

“He only looks, never touches.”

“Well, he could be a little subtler.”

They both burst out laughing. When Inspector Malope laughs, her scar disappears into the natural laugh-lines on her face, and the core of ice in her eyes melts away for a second, a wonderful second. But it is back, sharp and solid, when their laughs fall away, and Nolwazi’s eyes are automatically drawn to the scar across Inspector Malope’s throat, a flame in the dark. “I’ll get us some more cake,” Inspector Malope says, standing.

“No, let me,” Nolwazi says, putting her hand on the other woman’s leg; the leg that no longer works. “I can do it,” she says firmly, picking up her cane and stumbling to the kitchen slowly, “The doctor says I have to get used it, have to practise more.”

Nolwazi is the one who found her – Pamela – the next morning, cut open like a goat for sacrifice. The last thing Nolwazi did was make sure she caught the men who did that – it was the easiest case she ever solved. The men were arrested.

Guilty. All of them. Their sentencing hearing is tomorrow. Yet somehow she doesn’t feel healed. She came here today to celebrate with Pamela, to put this chapter behind them. But there is still the leaden, heavy thing inside her, the thing that drove her away. The thing she shouldn’t have done. The bad thing. She, after all, is guilty too.

Maybe everyone is right; she isn't ready to be back.

People have no idea what violence is. There is violence like a passion-driven gunshot to the head. And then there is another kind of violence. A slow and vital violence. A brutality that twists inside the hearts of men, and is alive. Burning with anger. A violence that leaks from the hands – wet, rancid, scorching. Unspeakable, unrelenting.

What kind of justice could answer that kind of evil?

It couldn't even be described as evil. It was something beyond evil, something that language hasn't found a way to describe, because giving it a name is itself an act of evil. Just thinking about it is corrosive.

And she is wearing thin, so thin.

Seventeen thousand murders a year, this year. That is forty-six a day. Almost two an hour. A number that sounded incomprehensibly high, and also somehow not able to quantify all the murder she has seen. On that first night they met, Nolwazi had confronted Inspector Malope with these same statistics. And Inspector Malope had paused for a minute, then added, "Of course things are skewed a little differently in South Africa. Now drink up, we have an autopsy to go to."

Skew. Yes, things were fucking skew.

The house is small and tidy. The kitchen is white and gleaming, the living room simply decorated and tasteful. Newspaper clippings from Pamela's big cases, framed and mounted on the walls, speak to a varied and muscular career, now lost in the vengeful slash of a knife. When Pamela sits back down, she lets out a big sigh, the pain hanging in the twist of her mouth, white and real. "I'm sorry," she says, "Sorry that you had to leave here." She hands Nolwazi a plate. "I told you," Nolwazi says, "It isn't your fault. I wanted to go. I wasn't coping well, anyway."

"And how are you coping now?"

"The cases are less ..."

"Less what?"

"Less irrational, less brutal. These people have everything, it means little to them to lose their things. They have insurance and medical aid and psychologists. There's more justice when you're rich. But that isn't really fair to say. Crime is crime, I know. But I ..."

"You can say it, child."

"I don't care as much. It's easier. It's easier to see someone who has everything lose something than it is to see someone who is starving to death get stabbed over a piece of bread. After what happened to you, I just –"

Nolwazi looks at her mentor, bent and broken, lonely and scared, “– it’s easier not to care so much.”

Inspector Malope touches her lightly on the knee. “You are not okay, my daughter.”

Nolwazi picks up her discarded plate, tired. Her temper is so short lately. She used to be so sure, so firmly aware of her moral core. Now she is lost, a distracted detective, a disappointing daughter all over again.

“Never mind me, Mma. How’s the new job?”

“It’s fine. I just sit in an office.”

“A prison office. Must be interesting?”

“Not really.”

“There must be something you like about.”

Inspector Malope sighs and runs a finger across her scar again. “I miss it.”

“Miss what?”

“Being out there.”

“I know you do, Mma.”

## 12

Fragments of conversation flit past him in the noisy hall, like moths. Some of them are indistinct, too muffled and light to hear; others perch on his ear for a moment, whispering. He takes in everything he hears. He doesn’t play poker to win – they don’t even play with real money because Mr October doesn’t approve of gambling. He’s here to listen, to find a reason for the whole community to be together. To put his finger on the pulse.

From table eight, in the far left hand corner, the one closest to the bar: “It’s been like this ever since they opened that bloody train station. No way to control who’s coming in and out, the neighbourhood filling up with the wrong sort.”

“And who exactly is the wrong sort?”

“These thugs that have been breaking into our houses!”

“Wasn’t your Simon one of the ones arrested for those burglaries?”

“Because he got mixed up the with the wrong sort! Skollies!”

From the table seven next to it, filled with the rivals of the people at table eight: “This isn’t about the robberies. This is about the drugs in our schools.”

“It’s all connected. These hooligans hanging out on our street corners are the ones bringing the drugs in. Selling them to our kids!”

“There is someone organising all this. Someone on the inside. These drugs aren’t

coming from the trains only.”

From table two, right next to his own:

“We have to take our neighbourhood back. We have to fight.”

“We’ve already started a neighbourhood watch. What more is there that we can do?”

“We can apply to have the neighbourhood boomed off. Build a fence! Keep everybody out.”

There’s a theme tonight, because of what happened to Ms Hendricks, the school’s English teacher and guidance councillor, attacked in her driveway. And because of the two hijackings that took place on the road just outside the station, and because of all the money going missing at the school. And because of another overdose, only this morning, this time a sixteen-year-old girl who, three days ago, had still been sitting in his maths class, hiding behind big square glasses. The conversation has taken on a different shade. There is a sharpness, a texture that hasn’t been there before. People are drinking more than usual.

“Like this car-guard outside, where did he come from?”

“What car-guard?”

“The one asking for money outside. Parked my car here for twenty years without needing a car-guard.”

“Kind of makes me feel better that he’s there”

Mr October has lived on Themis Street for eighteen years. He believed in the community completely – community, family and God. Sunnyside was a good neighbourhood, at first. A clean, friendly neighbourhood. Tightknit. A place where his wife and children would be protected. But then crime rates spiked. Robberies. Hijackings. Suddenly drugs made their way onto the streets and into the schools. And into his wife. And with the crime, there came fear. People who could afford to move away, moved away. Moved east.

In Pretoria, wealth rises in the east with the sun.

But no one at his table talks about any of this. They wave the subject away like a troublesome insect, not letting it settle, cheerfully talking about other things. Not drinking because they know he doesn’t drink, not wanting to offend him.

With his thumb he runs over the scar on his hand. He had the dream again last night. The dream in which he smothers his wife. The dream in which she has passed out cold, fallen to the ground where her energy abandoned her on the cement floor. She is slumped in a corner of the room, surrounded by the souvenirs of her day: her dolls. Her baby dolls. She’s been pulling off their heads and putting them aside in a pile (she discards the bodies in a black trash bag). A mountain of bright, artificial eyes that stare at him through the black

dream-fog. The house is dark. The house is always dark. But still the eyes are clearly visible. So cheerful that they defy darkness.

Stacked next to the plastic heap is a hoard of broken mirrors.

Mr October does not know where she has been getting the dolls or the glass, or who has been supplying them; he does not know if they represent the drowsy depths of her drunkenness or the cold peak of her sobriety. Did she start her day with this project, or is it the final expression of her addled mind? She looks almost peaceful. But she hasn't had a moment of peace in over a year. Behind her quiet eyelids, there is a maelstrom.

He picks her up – she is light because she hardly eats any more – and moves her to her mattress in the corner. She has torn up her blankets. But no matter; in his dreams the nights always seem to be warm. He looks at her face. How thin, how worn, how torn with abuse. The drugs have hollowed out her bones, swallowed her flesh. Pockmarks are scattered across her forehead, scabs and sores all over her arms. She smells of dried, dirty sweat.

The pillow appears in his hands, magical, miraculous. He holds it tightly above her face, before forcing it down on her. He smothers her until she wakes up from the impact, then he pushes harder, with more force, silencing her moans and her defences. Her arms flicker feebly at her sides, too weak to protest. The fabric of the pillowcase strains against his hand, is being held onto so tightly that it cuts into his skin. It makes a sound, the straining fabric, a sound that overpowers the dream completely. A creaking, dry sound. The sounds of a thousand tiny things tearing.

Then it is over.

His wife is still. The pillow disappears. He sits in the dark room and listens to the silence, drawing shadows into his lungs.

He says, to the man on his left, the headmaster of the school, “Do you think reporting the stolen money to the police was a good idea?”

His question melts the mood, and the people around him relax a little. “What else were we supposed to do?” replies the headmaster, and the conversation is off. Although no one, at least, goes so far as to mention drugs, or the overdose.

Until the headmaster asks, “It really has been astonishing, how fast these drugs have come into the school,” and Mr October can tell that as soon as he says it, he regrets it, and the conversation freezes. Mr October lets his words fall as gently as snow: “Well, hopefully the community meeting next week, the police will shed some light on things. Time for me to go. I fold.”

“Build a fence! Keep everybody out.”

Those are the last words that Slick hears as he steps out of the room.

He has heard all he has come to hear. No one noticed him slip into the back of the room, and hopefully no one has seen him slip back out again.

He hurries away into the quiet of the night.

Wednesday



## 14

A list of things he never taught his son: how to shave, how to tell a girl you loved her, how to be a good man, how to tie a tie, how to talk to God, how to change a tyre, how to make his famous lamb curry, how to have mercy, how to keep the woman you love safe.

## 15

Following someone is easier than it seems, because people don't pay any attention.

Freya has been following Abraham October for four days, and here's what she's learned so far: he sticks to the speed limit, he only sleeps four hours a night, his daughter leaves the house before he does and comes home after, and Freya has never seen them speak to each other. He is yet to drive the red Mercedes he drove the night Ben was killed. He has his gun with him at all times. Twice now, before he's gone to bed, he's left the house, walked across the back lawn and let himself into the shed; what he does in there, Freya has yet to find out.

She hasn't heard him speak yet; she imagines his voice is cold and rough, like a hammer striking dead iron. Like a deep, deadly fissure.

Before Abraham October, Freya spent her days doing nothing much but trying to inoculate herself against everything she was feeling. She slept, she drank. She had sex. She did these things deliberately. She didn't care that she was being self-destructive or isolating herself. It was easier than the alternative. It was easier than getting on with life.

But now there is something even easier, something even more compelling. Now there is Abraham October. Now Freya welcomes the rush of grief as she wakes up in the morning; it has become her *reason* to get up. A reason to dress. A reason to shower. A reason to stay sober. Her grief has become her power – if you were to cut her open, it would spill from her in great black waves and drown everyone in her path.

Last night she followed Abraham October as he drove out to the local community centre, a forlorn barn-like building sitting on a dry patch of dying grass surrounded by tall blue-gum trees. It was only after a shot of vodka from the flask in her purse, a couple of puffs of the joint while watching a train rattle past on the railway track in the distance, that she had the courage to sneak out of her car and over to the community centre. To walk around the back of the building – avoiding the car-guard – and peek through the window.

Poker. They were playing poker.

This morning she followed him to his school, and watched him drive through the large, iron gates. Then she rushed back to his house. His empty house.

She's climbed over the back wall, and now she's standing outside his kitchen. She has a brick with her, rummaged from an abandoned pile she found at a building site near her flat.

The back door is locked. Freya wraps the brick in her scarf and smashes through the window set inside the door. Shards of glass prick her skin, forming a pattern of red dots, a constellation of bloodspots. She reaches for the lock, and unlatches the door from the inside. She treads quietly, her body instinctively cautious; she is prepared to flee at the slightest sound.

The kitchen is white and very clean; it smells like mint-scented bleach, like stale air, like the oily-salty build-up of thousands of cooked meals. There are not forgotten items on the counters, no dirty dishes in the sink.

The living room is bare. One couch and an unstained carpet. No tables, no bookcases, no television. No magazines or artworks or photos. No adornments. Like a sparse, cheap hotel. Blinds hide the front garden from view; no sunlight can break through.

The dining room has clearly not been used in a long time; the old wooden table at its centre is covered in a layer of dust. There is nothing else in the room but a single bulb that hangs from the roof by a thin wire, and two portraits. Mounted against the opposite wall, they are framed in redwood. They are rough, pedestrian portraits done in charcoal: a man and a woman, both smiling. They look at each other from their frames. They could be anyone. They could be everyone. A spider has made its web between the two drawings. The strings of dirty silk shine red in the dimly lit room; the spider is nowhere to be seen.

She leaves the room undisturbed.

She walks deeper into interior.

The bathroom is as white as the kitchen. There are few toiletries. A bottle of shampoo, a bar of orange soap. Two toothbrushes, one white and one red. A tube of toothpaste. One bottle of no-brand headache tablets. No other medications. No cough syrup or vitamins or mouth wash. No disinfectant or plasters or shaving cream or razors.

Of the three bedrooms, she finds beyond the kitchen, the first is locked. But locked doors are full of promise. Freya kicks the door in; it's flimsy and it buckles under her boot.

The room is a burst of colour in a desolate landscape. The walls are red, the bedding pink. A row of stuffed lion toys sits on the bed. Lingerie is draped over the full-length mirror. The room is messy and musty: it smells of nail-polish, perfume and cigarettes. This must be the daughter's room. The curtains are drawn and Freya doubts that either natural light or fresh

air has been allowed into the room in some time. A plate smothered in old tomato sauce lies next to the bed. And an ashtray.

A small tendril of smoke slowly coils out of the ashtray.

How—?

Freya leans over, picking up the butt of a cigarette out of the dirty ashtray, pushing her finger into its edges – still warm.

The cigarette has recently been smoked.

Suddenly, the room changes. Suddenly it is full of shadows, full of potential danger. Freya is sure she saw Abraham's daughter leave. She *can't* be home; she can't be *here*.

Freya listens.

She can't hear anything. No sounds of muffled breathing, no rustle of someone trying to keep still. But her eyes are immediately drawn to the shadows coming from underneath the bed; she can't help but think that right beyond the edge of that darkness, someone is hiding.

Breathe.

She gets down on her knees. Her imagination is already warning her: warning her that at any moment, a hand, a fist, a knife, could come out of that darkness and grab her, stab her, end her.

Her hands are vibrating with something like fear.

She reaches out to the edge of the bed and takes hold. Then she swings her head down, prepared to meet the eyes of danger.

But there is no one, nothing.

She is alone. She is alone.

She doesn't invade any further. This room is too filled with life; it threatens to disrupt her mission. She's not here to spy on teenagers.

The second bedroom is stripped, naked. A single bed, a bedside table, a desk. No decoration, no linen on the bed. Freya opens the desk drawers. They yield nothing but a Bible. She takes the Bible out and flips through it casually. It looks new. On the first page it says "This Bible belongs to Peter." The name is scribbled in a clumsy hand, the letters oddly spaced apart. In the back of the Bible is a small square snapshot. It's a the printed image of a sonogram: white lines and bubbles loop around in a black void. On the left, there is the vague impression of a figure. A ghostly speck. It gives Freya the sensation of falling, falling. She shuts the Bible.

She wipes her fingerprints from the things she's touched, and moves on.

The last bedroom is decorated in simple monochrome. White linen, grey rug, grey

chair. The bedroom is tiled; it is colder than the rest of the house. When Freya steps across the threshold, she shudders. A pair of slippers is tucked under the bed. A dressing gown folded over a chair. The corner of a carpet flipped over, the ghost of the foot that disturbed it still hanging in the air above it.

This is his room.

It is devoid of smell. No cologne. No smoke. None of the musky sweetness she's come to associate with masculine spaces, the scents that remind her of her father, of Ben. Aside from the bed and the chair, there is a small desk with a laptop set on it. Nothing in the drawers but pens and empty notebooks. A tall wooden cupboard in the corner contains his clothes. Collared shirts in neutral colours. Black pants, boring ties, simple jackets. Underwear, socks, pyjamas. Four pairs of shoes.

On his bedside table, underneath the photo of a woman wearing a headscarf and holding a paintbrush, lies a ring, a single gold band.

It's a frugal room, and it unnerves her. Where are the signs of life? What do the people in this house do when they aren't sleeping or eating? It's too clinical to be natural, too bare to amount to anything. She sniffs one of his shirts. It smells of laundry detergent, but nothing else. It is neutral, sterile. There isn't any breath in this house, any energy. The house is dead; whatever is left here is no longer breathing.

The only part of the house with any pulse, any personality, is his daughter's room. Freya understands now why it is locked: to keep the rest of the house out, to stop it from suffocating. That room is like a hibernating animal in a dead tree: asleep for the winter, but still flush with red hot life. Once his daughter moves out (and who would want to continue living here?), Abraham would have nothing but a spider for company.

This house would crumble into ash.

## 16

Slick leans against the jungle-gym, pressing his thumb into the wound on his thigh, looking at the young woman in front of him – the girl – and the envelope she is holding out to him. “So this is where you live,” he says.

“I don't know why we couldn't do this the usual way.”

“Because I said so.” He smiles at her. “How does it feel to know you're almost off the hook?”

She regards him with her flecked, frozen eyes. “Just meet Lucky in the park next week Monday like usual. Don't come back here,” she says, turning away from him and

walking back through the yellow grass.

## 17

Nolwazi eyes the little blue hat dejectedly.

Her uniform is laid out on her bed, newly ironed and ready to be worn. She always starts with the shirt, crisp. She likes the way it feels against her skin; she likes the way she has to button it all the way to the top of her neck; she likes the way it fits her. The last time she wore it was the night Benjamin Rust died; some of his blood got on her cuffs that night, and she had to replace it. Her stockings are next. She's had to buy them herself, because the ones she's been issued with by the police department have been lost to the thorns on the untended rose bush flanking the entrance to the police station. (The night after she'd thrown them out, she'd had a dream about two burglars sneaking into her garden and stealing her ripped stockings and using them as masks.)

Then the skirt. A deeper blue than the shirt, and not pretty. A blue like a polluted sky. It fastens around her waist with a harsh click of the clip, and forces her to tighten her stomach, to constrain herself. Then she slips into the shoes, polished and black, which always, always reminds her of school (of feeling inadequate, of being a stranger), especially when she is standing in a crime scene.

And then the hat.

Nolwazi doesn't like the hat. The little blue hat. The same colour as the skirt, like a big splash of bird shit. It gives the uniform less authority. And Nolwazi needs all the authority she can get, short as she is. (Any extra height the hat might have given her is negated by how absurdly old-fashioned it is.) But she slips it over her cropped hair firmly anyway. Then the gun, the most important part of the uniform. The thing which, more than any of the others, separates her from everyone else. Empowers her. Marks her as different, as dangerous.

She picks up her badge and her purse.

She lives on the seventh storey, and her front door opens up on panoramic views of Sunnyside. A neighbourhood of contradictions. A neighbourhood between things. A fluctuating border between Hatfield – the student district and gateway to suburbia – and the Pretoria city centre – derelict, crime-ridden and impoverished, abandoned for the most part by anyone who has a choice. Sunnyside, beset by the traffic going into the city centre, noisy, bustling, overcrowded, made up of blocks and blocks of flats rising into the sky, the prequel to the true high rise of the city centre. Nolwazi loves Sunnyside. It is the only part of Pretoria

that feels truly urban to her, that feels like you live in what a city is meant to be, and not the warped inside-out cities that South Africa produces – where people live on the fringes, and the centres are characterised by danger and fear and neglect. Sunnyside has some of this air of abandonment and danger – prostitutes and drug dealers line the streets, disused buildings are common, litter and debris have claimed the pavements and parks that separate the tall, disrespected buildings, once home to the working classes of the city who have now all fled the inner-city crime rates; it isn't uncommon to wake up to the sound of gunshots.

But Sunnyside is also a neighbourhood full of hope, a neighbourhood for everyone: artists, musicians, civil servants, cops, robbers, prostitutes. The brave and the beautiful.

Nolwazi's flat is on the top floor of seven storey building named Mulberry Heights on the final corner of Arcadia Street, a long and crooked artery that connects Hatfield to Sunnyside. Her building is the colour of a fleshy nail bed. Nolwazi can't help but feel that she and her uniform must clash beautifully with the building. And she always feels, always, that the way her shoes ring out on the grey tiles in the hallway early in the mornings and late at night is something that everyone else in the building holds against her. Not that she's met anyone else who lives in the building, except the iron-haired woman who lives next door and watches the world go by through her crocheted lace curtains.

The whole neighbourhood is put together with buildings from the 1970s, the decade in which Pretoria had its architectural revolution. Browns. Oranges. Pinks. Angular, kitsch designs. And since then the people of this fine city have only added faux-Tuscan to their repertoire: incongruent things with pillars and fake shutters and Grecian water features. Nothing like American cities, which are tall and metallic, edgy and beautiful. Or British cities, historic and marbled, built from ancient stone.

Still, Sunnyside has a certain charm. A broken, dusty kind of charm.

Today, turning right where she would have normally turned left, Nolwazi heads towards the city. Hailing a taxi, she feels the slow dark magnetism of the Pretoria High Court pull at her.

Past the Union Building Park, all sandstone and symmetry and Chinese tourists, the taxi goes. Whenever Nolwazi looks up the building she experiences an odd melancholy; she imagines all those politicians in their offices, all the presidents that have walked those halls, and she wonders if they feel melancholy too. They surely must, the weight and retribution of history so solidly around them. And she thinks of Mandela, and she says a small thank you, almost a prayer.

Past the buildings and now she is in Pretoria Central proper, the traffic suddenly

fiercer, the streets suddenly louder, the cluster of skyscrapers seen from afar now all around her. Across the river; not a river at all, just a trickle, just a drain. Then right into Nelson Mandela Boulevard and then “Driver stop!” and the taxi screeches to a halt.

The courthouse is modern and rectangular. Ugly, really. She hesitates on the pavement outside. She breathes deeply. Dr Filippidis had given her one final prescription for anti-anxiety medication and she had popped them this morning, but they don’t seem to be working. She’s on the edge of hyperventilating.

Just get it over with. Just breathe.

## 18

Freya stands in the centre of the shed; in the single, perfectly square room. From the outside it is a simple brick structure with a flat roof. The inside is just as basic: it hasn’t been tiled or painted. Everything is grey cement, covered in an even greyer layer of dust. A small kitchenette is fitted with a basin. There is bathroom cubicle in one corner, without a door. Freya now understands why the door isn’t locked; there is nothing to take but a single mattress abandoned in a corner, a large paint tin that looks like it was used to hold fire and a broken chair.

But these are not the only signs of occupation, not the only tokens of whatever half-life was lived here.

There are the drawings.

All over the walls, and the floors, dozens of crude, geometric drawings have been carved. Furious lines across the cement form odd, angular faces. Some, made with charcoal, have been smudged by feet, or have long fingers marks pulled across them. Some of them have been etched into the cement with something sharper. A knife. Or piece of glass. The faces are not all the same. Some are stark and undetailed. Some again are very intricate and specific, like portraits of real people. Some are shapeless and adrift. Some are arranged around other objects, other faces, forming patterns, repeating themselves.

None are smiling.

And there is a name. Repeated everywhere. In between all the other drawings, written in the same hand, again and again and again: Peter, Peter, Peter.

Peter.

The carvings and the drawings are overlaid and overlaid again so that they form a tapestry of faces. So many of them that they paint the whole room black; the spill over from the floor onto the walls, climbing towards the ceiling. And right in the middle of the ceiling a

cross bears down on the room like the voice of God.

Freya gets lost in the all drawings, all the eyes. Reality buckles underneath her; she falls away into black space and all the drawings light up in a bright, sickly luminesce all around her. From the drawings there comes a strange combination of laughter and coughing; a hacking chorus of nothing.

But that's not all. From the roof, in big bouquets, in clusters, objects hang from thin strings. Pieces of glass. And other things, plastic things. For a moment Freya can't quite process what they are, but then they burst into focus.

They are heads. Dozens and dozens of heads.

Heads that have been torn from the bodies of dolls, swinging gently like wind-chimes, side to side, side to side. Their faces stare out in the world, reflected in the broken pieces of mirror – not glass, but mirror – which have been hung beside them. From these mirrors, the doll-heads stare back at themselves, creating reflections and reflections of reflections: hundreds of lifeless, blue eyes, staring down at her. At her, and beyond her: beyond the walls of this shed to the streets. To the streets of the city: as if to challenge how banal it is, how pedestrian.

So this is the place he comes to before he goes to bed.

Who created these sculptures? Was it him? Driven by something deep and dark, some terrible urge to create? Is this how he expresses himself? Or is that something that killing fulfils? Does he kill to understand himself?

Freya sits down on the mattress and looks outward. There is one window in the shed, through which she can see the back of Abraham's house, the red Mercedes, the porch, his bedroom window. She can see straight through the upper branches of the mulberry tree.

Freya recognises the world she has stumbled into. It's grief.

Grief.

Grief is the thing covering these walls; she is surrounded by the artefacts of someone else's tragedy. And she understands the person who made all these things, who carved their mind onto this concrete. She understands that grief isn't a thing that can be spoken about; it can't be translated into something that exists outside of you. Language isn't enough. Talking isn't enough. Even this – this angry, ragged art – isn't enough. Grief infects your blood: blue grief washes through red veins, and changes you, changes your fibre, your core, your heart.

Your altered heart.

She can't bear it any more, she can't stand it.

Before she knows it, she has fled.

She runs, runs out the shed and back over his back wall, retreating all the way to the jungle gym and is sick. Crouching down, she watches her vomit splash onto the dirt.

Freya becomes aware of how dead everything in the park is – the dead leaves piled underneath the rusty jungle gym; the thirsty grass, brown and fading, the corpse of a lizard, tipped sideways, drying in the sun. The bloodless, still sky.

The silence, the murdered sound.

She looks behind her at his sad, lonely house. At the room where the cigarette sits idling in an ashtray, at the shed full of horrors.

And she runs.

## 19

“How did court go?” The question comes suddenly, after a short and comfortable silence, in which Nolwazi had been doubting her choice of ice cream flavour and tentatively considering buying a second one.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did they get the full sentence?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He becomes silent; she is annoyed that he’s forced her to be rude. She isn’t comfortable. He’s her subordinate after all, and this is inappropriate. Sure, she couldn’t help but flutter at the idea of a date with Frik, at the idea of some semblance of a normal social life. He made her laugh, he made her feel sexy. He *heard* her. But she isn’t sure that he’s good. He might be charming, but he isn’t *good*. He’s a bully: he enjoys arresting people; he enjoys being intimidating. And he’s friends with Hans; what does it say about someone that they can be friends with racists? “There’s no changing him now, man. Just ignore him when he says things like that.” Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

The little ice cream parlour is quiet, but she likes the casual intimacy, the brightly lit red and white interior, the colourful displays, the comfortable couches. Cosy, childlike. Frik is staring into the distance, thoughts crawling across his face like restless shadows. “Why don’t you want to tell me about the court case?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you won’t talk about what happened, either.”

“So?”

“So don’t you want to set the record straight?”

“What record?”

“Do you think there aren’t rumours about why you were transferred?”

“I *asked* to be transferred.”

“Sure.”

She sighs. Things flash across her memory. Dark things, bloodied things, angry things. The image of the butt of her gun against the dark ebony of someone’s skull. The deep, deep cuts it made. Her own strength. “I just don’t like talking about it. It’s behind me. I lost control. I made a mistake.”

Frik is quiet for a second, before he asks, “Do you think there is anything worth going to prison for?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He throws his hands up – he has very vocal hands. “Just something I’ve been thinking about lately.” Nolwazi looks over at the other couple sitting in the ice-cream parlour, eating ice-cream happily in the over-heated space, in love, not caring about the winter wind outside, talking about nice things, probably. Good, kind, funny things. “No, prison is a death sentence,” she says, finally. “Nothing is worth that.”

“You can’t see yourself breaking the law for any reason? Nothing that is *worth* breaking the law for?”

“No.” She is lying.

“You are so sure.”

“I am.” Lying again. “You aren’t?”

“I’m never sure, but I think justice is worth going to jail for.”

“Justice?”

“Yes. Justice. Revenge.”

“Those are not the same things.”

“They come pretty close. Some things the system can’t take care of; I can see how someone would want to take the law into their own hands.”

“But you’re a police officer?”

“Yes, and I would arrest anyone who broke the law. But if they did it for good reasons, I would also understand them.”

“So you would take justice upon yourself, make that decision alone, and go to jail just to fulfil your own idea of vengeance?”

*But isn’t that what you did?* says the voice inside her head.

“If someone killed someone I loved, if they got away with it, I would kill them. And I would be willing to go to jail for it, yes.”

“You sound like you’ve thought a lot about this.”

He doesn’t respond, but asks, “You wouldn’t?”

“If someone killed someone I loved, I would prove they did it. I would arrest them. But I wouldn’t kill them. Retribution isn’t my business.”

More lies.

“Sometimes people have to do what they have to do. Else how do they sleep at night?”

Nolwazi finishes her cone, the last remnants of the ice cream sending a sharp, cold blast across her teeth. “You know,” she says, “That sounds like a brave thing to say, but I’m not so sure it is.” The coldness spreads from her teeth down the rest of her body, and the delicate passionfruit, so intense a moment ago, leaves a thin, sickly aftertaste that might not have anything to do with the ice cream. She waits for Frik to finish, and then stands. He stands too, and says, “I’ll just go give the car-guard his tip and then I’ll take you home.” He hands her the keys to the car. She watches as he gives the scraggly guard, his back turned against the cold, his neon-yellow bib the same colour as her ice cream, some money. There seems to be some debate about whether it is enough.

When he climbs back into the car, he puts his hand on her thigh.

## 20

Mr October stands at the kitchen sink. She walks past the kitchen, on her way out.

“Going to Frennie’s?” She rolls her eyes, and nods curtly. She’s wearing a new jacket: denim, expensive. “Where did you get that?”

“Nowhere.”

“What happened to the window?” he asks. *And the money in my closet*, he wants to add. But doesn’t.

“I broke it earlier. Sorry.”

“Has anyone else been in the house today?”

“No, Pa.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

He walks towards the dining room, stopping delicately in front of the portraits of his parents. He carefully touches the dust-mark where someone ran their thumb along the framed drawing of his mother.

He doesn't think about his parents very often; hasn't thought about them in years. His

parents had been plain people. Quiet. His mother did what mothers did and his father did what fathers did, as far as he could tell. They lived in Eersterust, out to the west of the city. A small, conservative community. He still owns the house they lived in, although he hardly ever goes there now. And why would he. He hated the place, the poverty of it, the oppression.

He takes his phone out of his pocket and dials. The woman on the other end of the line doesn't even let him say hello before she says, "She's here, Abraham. She's safe. I'll drop her again later. Don't worry." He hangs up. The same phone call he makes every night. Every night that he isn't in his car, following her around. Making sure she can live her life on her terms.

The portraits of his parents stare at him impassively. He should have thrown them out ages ago.

Is this what his daughter would think one day, thirty years from now, standing in a dining room of her own? Would she look up suddenly as she was setting the table and think about a father she had long forgotten. Would he be nothing but a rough slash in her memory, too?

Her mother would always be with her, because her mother was taken so violently, so sentimentally.

How would he be taken?

How would all this end?

## 21

Freya lies in bed. She is panting, as if she has run a race. Her fists are clenched and her shoulders are arched. Her mind is filled with the scent, the texture, the red-blooded certainty of him. Abraham. Everything she has just seen is crawling, like insects in her imagination, rustling.

She's scared, scared of what she saw in that shed, the concentration of anguish.

She is breathing fast; she feels feverish.

Her heart is beating madly in her chest.

Churning her blood.

Her black, black blood.

Her bruised, distraught blood.

Blood that no longer carries life; but carries death.

Thursday



Nolwazi knows that she's lost, but she drives for another five minutes before she pulls over to the side of the road and reaches for her phone. She has the address written down, but she's made some mistake. She'll have to call, ask directions. She begins to type in the number, but falters.

Maybe this was a mistake; maybe she shouldn't have come.

She's in a quiet suburban street; the kind of street where she grew up. Large houses fronted by manicured gardens hidden behind white walls or steel security gates roll forever onwards, each looking vaguely like the next. The sidewalks are broad, surrounded by flower beds and strips of mowed grass. She rolls down her window. The sounds of the neighbourhood filter into her car: a sprinkler system, the loud hum of a hedge cutter, the laughter of children. She is parked under a Jacaranda tree. Its branches are bare, twisting into the sky like old arms. The outside world smells like grass and lavender; and the pungent edge of freshly painted tar.

She closes her eyes and remembers days just like this one. Days spent sitting on the sidewalk with her mother, feet in the road, talking about school work and family members and when they would be able to go home and visit and what the slow-roasting oxtail would be served with. When her mother appears in her memory, her hands on her hips, face pained, Nolwazi feels like a chastised child, sent home early from a sleepover for fighting with the other children. Not that she ever had sleepovers with other children. Her mother in an old, sparse laundry room, filled with clean washing waiting to be ironed, arranged around the ironing board in haphazard piles. Nolwazi sitting in a corner, facing her mother, knees up, arms folded around them. The iron standing ready, shedding feathers of steam, red light glaring, like a mechanical bird impatiently waiting to be fed. A shirt or blouse or other starchy thing stretched tight across the board. The iron giving a satisfied hiss. And then steam fills her whole memory. Like smoke in a beehive. The details melt, leaving a harsh aftertaste.

She hasn't seen her mother in three years.

She can feel someone watching her, and welcoming the distraction, she opens her eyes. There, standing directly to her right, halfway down his lawn, between his house and his fence, is a man. He is tall and muscular, and he is young. He is watching her openly, but he doesn't say anything as she turns to look at him, not even when she offers a half-hearted wave. He is standing with his feet wide, and his arms pushed outwards. It's an unnatural

stance, a protective stance.

She is frightened by this blatant display. Would this stranger attack her? She is a woman alone, and she is lost. It is a quiet street. No one else is around. He could easily overpower her. She hears about these attacks all the time. And she knows, she knows what it feels like to think you are safe one moment and feel the cold, intense ripple of violence the next. She can taste his masculinity on the tip of her tongue; it spoils the air.

But then her training reasserts itself. She has nothing to fear from this man. She is a police officer. And he is just standing there. He has no weapon. He is behind a fence.

She looks back up at him. He hasn't moved. She starts her car, and the man gives a little jump. When he breaks eye contact and looks beyond and around her, she recognises her mistake – she isn't wearing a uniform, she's not in her official vehicle – she's in a beat-up old Toyota (peeling paint, window cracked) that she borrowed from Angie. How is he supposed to recognise that she is a police officer?

It hits her like a punch. He is the one that thinks *she* is the threat.

She almost laughs. She almost smiles at him. She almost gets out of her car to ask him for directions, to reassure him that she has permission to be here, that she doesn't need to be monitored.

But.

But he is looking at her again. He shifts his weight forward, takes a step. The air between them congeals. He is looking her directly in the eye now, and his gaze is forceful, taught like the string of a bow. Hostile. Poised to strike.

A silence made of lions.

And then she is angry. It surges inside her suddenly, like venom.

She hasn't felt this – this fierce humiliation, this blistered disbelief – since 1994, the year she was sixteen, the year she was allowed to attend the new school, the “mixed” school. Her father dropped her off down the road, outside the Post Office, and she had to walk up to the school, she and all the black students, and use the back entrance. The headmaster said this would make the transition easier. To give the old students a chance to acclimate, not to force it down their throats. She was so angry she couldn't breathe. When she reached the entrance to the school, and the headmaster was standing there, anxious and shifty, the shards of injustice shot through her whole body, and she wished she could pull the hatred and ignorance from that tiny, limp man; twist his beating heart right out of his chest and pull the little black leeches off it and throw them onto the hot pavement to burn in the sun until they were dead.

The memory unseats her, and she's out of her car before she can help it, standing on the pavement outside the house. Number 76. His fence is wrought from black steel and is patterned with hexagons, like honeycomb. She had thought she liked it when she first pulled over, but now it seems to her that every hole in the fence is an eye. A suspicious, bright eye asking: who are *you*? What are *you* doing here?

She can smell freshly dug earth, wet and peaty; the air is sour with the scent. The house behind the fence is small, whitewashed, normal.

The man still hasn't moved.

She looks back down at her phone. She can't seem to bring herself to dial. It's easier to stand here, indignant and righteous, than it is to think about what her mother wants from her, what her mother could possibly want.

Could it be about her father?

The last time she had seen her father she had told him that if he lay a hand on her again, she would arrest him. She had told him that she wasn't going to be sending him money any more. She had sat across the table from him, his small, dirty mouth turned up against her, fighting not to gag on the stink of alcohol coming off him. And he had hit her, like he always did. His punches had been weak, his slurring violence soft and wordless, and she had simply walked out of the house while his punches fell on her back; he was too drunk to stop her. Her mother, as usual, did nothing.

And after that day, her mother punished her for walking out. Her phone calls went unanswered. Her mother quit her job; her parents moved away without notice. Her father was dead within the year. So why this call from her mother now, this subpoena?

A vehicle pulls up next to her.

"Afternoon sister," the driver says. He is uniformed and in a branded vehicle – private security. "Afternoon," she says.

"Is everything okay here, sister?" he asks, looking towards the man on the lawn, who waves, and nods. And keeps watching.

"I'm looking for Broderick's Street. I can't find it."

"Why are you looking for that street?"

"That's where my mother lives."

"Are you visiting your mother?"

"Yes," she says. And with that simple word, she can't help but imagine her mother waiting for her at the top of the driveway, her shiny eyes askance. Nolwazi would say: "Why did you ask me to come, Mama?" And her mother would say: "Can't a mother ask to see her

daughter on her birthday?” And Nolwazi wouldn’t respond to that because it’s too sly, too obtuse. Or her mother would get right to the point: “You didn’t come to the funeral.”

“I couldn’t, Mama.”

“You are a bad daughter.”

“He was a bad father.” And her mother would pause, smooth the front of the apron she wears when she irons and then she would strike Nolwazi with her big, harsh hands. Fast, unrepentant. And like always, Nolwazi would let her. Against her father she could fight back, but against her mother ...

“Can I see your ID, please sister?” the security guard asks. Automatically, she reaches for her badge and her driver’s licence. But then she pulls back; she grits her teeth. “No,” she says, “Just tell me which way to go, please.”

The security guard hesitates until Nolwazi repeats her question. The security guard says, “Drive to the end of this road, turn left. Take another left, and then the first right, and that’s Broderick’s Road. But it’s not Broderick’s. It’s Roderick’s.” Then he says, “I’ll drive behind you.”

“Thanks,” she says.

But she pauses as she gets back into her car. She freezes. Goosebumps ripple across her skin.

“Actually, I don’t think I will. I think I’ll just go.”

The security guard gives her a smug look; the look of someone who has figured out a riddle. She looks behind her to the man on his lawn, his arms crossed, his shadow cast big and unbroken across the grass. Then she gets in her car and decides to go home.

“You okay, sister?”

The thing is, she did go to her father’s funeral. She *was* there. Standing back from the small, sparse crowd. Hiding from her family. Her mother. Watching the coffin as it was lowered into the wet ground, like a setting sun. Like the cool relief of night after a hot, desperate day.

Nolwazi shakes her head, her memories rattling, and says, “I am not your sister.”

## 23

There are some places in every city that are ugly. Deep-down ugly. Places that seem to drain the identity right out of you. Places that have endless parking lots, faded facades. Concrete wastelands. The sun leaches all the energy from them, burns everything to monochromes. Everything is a replica; nothing has substance. These places are overrun with fast food outlets

and chain stores and vaguely beautiful people standing in front of face-brick storefronts selling plastic things they don't believe in. There is no vegetation, no air, no relief. Harsh, unforgiving light. A mechanised desert. Parched and impregnable.

Freya looks up at the billboard: "Come shoot with an AK47!" it proclaims loudly. The shrill, sharp sounds of playing children echo from the restaurants to her left. Behind the restaurants the mall stretches onwards to the drained horizon. The billboard tells her to walk to the very back of the mall – "Right next to the Spur!"

She can smell tar spoiling in the heat, can feel the freckles on her back standing on edge. It's hazy, all of it. Walking seems to happen in slow motion. Every shadow she passes shrinks away from her. Her blood is thumping. She can't hear properly.

The sliding doors open at her approach.

"Welcome to the Boutique Gun Shop and Shooting Range. My name is Crystal, how can I help you?" The voice comes from very far away.

Crystal has bleached hair and a tan. She looks like she has beams of sunlight nesting in her smile; a smile that never stops. She is wearing a tank top and shorts, as if the cold couldn't possibly ever affect her. The wall behind her is yellow. Her whole world is yellow.

"Uh, yes. I'd like to learn how to shoot."

Crystal's smile widens. "Well, you've come to the right place. We've got four packages to choose from."

"Sure," Freya says, "whichever is cheapest?"

"That would be our Ladies' Special. Four guns, four hours, and a whole lot of fun."

"How much?"

"That package comes to just one thousand Rand.

"It costs a thousand Rand to learn how to shoot?"

"The special is only valid this week."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's fine."

Their father took them out to shoot once.

They were young, very young. It was cold and she was wearing a purple coat that her mother had bought her. She felt special because Ben hadn't been given a new coat. His was an ugly brown, the same colour as the trees; hers was bright and pristine. They were on a farm somewhere in the heart of the Free State. Where the winters are so cold that it snows, although she can't remember any actual snow. She just remembers the cold and the way the frost sat on the grass even at lunch time. Their mother said goodbye to them at the door of the

farmhouse in her white dressing gown and her angry face. Their father, a long brown gun slung casually over his shoulder took them down the dirt road away from the house to a small copse of trees. On a fencepost he had set up a line of empty beer cans. Ben was allowed to go first. He was excited. When the gun went off like the little white firecrackers they got for Christmas, Ben asked eagerly when they could shoot real animals.

“Maybe one day. First you have to hit the target,” their dad had laughed.

The sky was iron.

When their dad gave Freya the gun, setting it over her right shoulder and holding onto the back of it, he put her fingers around the trigger carefully. Then he showed her how to aim. Then he said, “Whenever you’re ready, little goddess.”

“I’m scared.”

“Don’t be, sweetheart. It’s just a game. Just breathe.”

She hit the beer can right in its heart, and her dad jumped up and down with pride. But shooting had hurt her, and the next day when their dad took the gun out again, she said she wanted to stay at home.

Today her muscles are tense with anticipation. Every part of her wants to shoot.

It’s the lightness that surprises her the most. No heavier than a bottle of water, and just as plastic. The only part of it that feels real is the trigger. The rest is toy-like, branded with a logo, like it’s proud of itself, like it is special: I am a gun. Terms and conditions apply.

There is silence – heavy, muffled silence behind the earmuffs Greg, her lazy-eyed and grungy instructor has given her. He is standing behind her. She can’t see him, but she can feel him waiting, impatient. All she can see is the target in front of her: an almost-human shaped dummy, white and featureless. Like a ghost. Between her and it there is nothing but black. Just her and the thing to shoot at. Tunnel vision.

Just breathe: Zack’s voice, her father’s, giving the same advice, two voices heard as one.

Just breathe.

She pulls the trigger. She feels the bullet leave the chamber, the pushback that ripples up her arm and collides with the muscles in her shoulder. The bullet flies true. It hits the mannequin right in the heart.

“Very good,” Zack says, not meaning it, when she takes the earmuffs off. “Would you like to try the next gun?”

“Definitely.”

Freya is awoken by the sound of a gunshot. Like an alarm clock, this is the music that wakes her almost every night.

She'd been having a dream. She'd dreamt that all her grief, all her anger, had come spilling from her cells. Her stomach heaved and her ribs burst, and from her mouth there emerged, limb for limb, a terrifying angel. The angel was sleek and sharp and dripping in purple blood, in afterbirth. It stood up and unfurled its slender wings slowly. Then, naked, it turned to face her. It had deep, cunning eyes. It looked at her with clinical interest. It lifted her chin on the tip of a long, black nail and looked her in the eyes. It enveloped her in its embrace. Then this child of hers took her up in its arms and pushed itself into flight with a fierce shriek. A battle cry. A call to the hunt. As they flew, it whispered to her in an old language: "I will kill your enemies. I will set you free."

She stands in her open bedroom door, looking back at the bed, finishing the wine she had poured them earlier. Greg is in there, naked and asleep, unbothered by the sounds of her ghostly orchestra. Freya has flashes of the day before: leaving the shooting range, deciding to get a drink at the shitty fake-saloon bar next door, being joined by Greg when he got off work, bringing him home, him asking about Ben's room, him trying to take a look inside it, she distracting him with sex.

She can't remember the actual sex.

She finds herself standing outside Ben's bedroom door. She opens the door slowly. She hasn't been inside here since it happened. No one has, after Ash finally left. Freya had refused to get rid of any of his things, had left everything just as it was. Except for the made bed, and the slightly-less-dusty spot on his desk where the police came to take his computer away, everything looks exactly like he left it. His guitar in the corner, his Placebo poster, his books. His books piled everywhere, around the room. He didn't want to buy a bookcase, said he liked the chaos. Freya sits down between two piles of books, careful not to touch them. One of them, stuck haphazardly between two piles, catches her eye. The Bible. Except it isn't the Bible at all. She picks it up and opens it. The hollow cavity falls open, revealing five bankies of weed, and a phone. It's an old phone, one of those flip-phones that were popular when they were teenagers – this is the first phone their parents bought them, and they were forced to share it. It was odd that Ben would keep it. Freya picks it up and flips it open. It is dead. Where would you even be able to find a charger for a phone this old? It still had the sticker of the Pokémon on the back, which Ben had insisted be put there. Freya almost-smiles. She puts the phone back, closes the Bible and tucks it under her arm.

Her eye catches a photograph. Photos of her parents tended to shock her. Her father

always looks out of place to her, the actual space he occupied not tallying with the one she has created for him in her imagination. She tends to think of him standing in a field of snow, his face cocooned in a furry hood, ski poles held aloft slightly, a midnight sun behind him. Possibly there is also a reindeer nearby, although this detail comes and goes. It's his Norwegian heritage. It's his tall, strong frame, his blonder than blonde hair, his fascination with Viking history, his persistent longing for a white Christmas, which initially gave her this image, despite the fact that her father wasn't really Norwegian at all, had not even ever been to Norway. He had never skied a day in his life. Her grandparents were the ones who had emigrated when they were newly married, never to return. And her father had grown up in Pretoria, just like she had. He couldn't even speak Norwegian.

It must be because he had been – always – completely remote, that she associated him with ice.

Of course, it wasn't her father who made a spectacle of this heritage; it was her mother who walked around at parties telling people about how they were Norwegian, about Norwegian food and Norwegian habits as if it wasn't merely something she had married into. She claimed it as her own, planted her flag deeply and wouldn't concede. So that when she told people, "We are Norwegian, did you know?" her father would feel obligated respond with "No, we're not. You're not. I'm not," and the conversation would come to a staggering halt until Freya's mother gave a peppery laugh and changed the subject.

Her mother, who was never as beautiful in photographs as she was in memories, but always younger.

Freya puts the photograph aside. The room still smells like him. Musty and sweet. Her heart is beating, and she places two fingers over it softly. It thumps against them as if trying to escape. Freya takes one more look around, and before she leaves, she wrenches Ben's duvet loose, leaving the unmade bed in the darkness, as if someone had been sleeping in it all along.

Freya walks back into her room and sits down on the bed. She put the Bible down on the bedside table. She looks down at the naked Greg next to her. The blankets lie abandoned on the floor. He is erect. His penis is gazing at his navel. Sitting back against the wall, she lights a cigarette. She begins nudging his erection with her foot, pulling his foreskin back with her toes and then releasing it, willing him to wake up. She wants him to leave. When he does wake up, she doesn't stop him when he gets on top of her, and while he is inside of her, she says, "I need a gun. Can you get me a gun?"

He slows down as she speaks, and says, "I know a guy, yes."

When he finishes, she turns her back on him and says, "Please go" and when she hears the door close behind him, she is already living somewhere else, a gun in her hand, a smile on her face.

Friday



The world is bright and full of laughter. Carnival music is playing in the background, and Mr October can hear the earnest yells of a friendly rugby game taking place on the field in front of him. There are stalls just like his all along the field, and in the distance a three-legged egg race is about to start. The amplified voice of Mrs Rossouw – who likes to wield the megaphone whenever she has the opportunity – can be heard refereeing.

Bang.

A balloon pops right behind him and a young girl, looking up at him, yells “Sorry!” with a wide smile, her body slightly bent and her feet planted firmly on the burst balloon. She runs away.

Mr October views it all through a cold, blue glaze.

It’s a charity day, and the school is hosting. There are games and music, a puppet show, races and a bake sale. Mr October is manning the coffee and tea table. And keeping an eye out for trouble. Mr October always expects trouble. He is busy counting out the money in the small, grey tin. Some of it is missing. “Elbers,” he says to a tall pupil walking past, “Elbers, come here. Have you seen Tshabalala?”

“No, sir.”

“Well if you do, tell him I need to see him. He is supposed to be helping me. He was here earlier but now he’s vanished.”

“Yes sir. Sir?”

“Yes, Elbers?”

“Is Ms Hendricks going to be, you know, okay?”

“I don’t know Elbers.”

“Sir.”

Mr October moves back into the shade of the canopy above him. He has never gotten used to these sunny, dehydrated Pretoria winters where the temperatures climb dramatically during the day and midday is warm and unpleasant. The day smells of dry grass and pine. His skin itches. Ms Hendricks, that poor young girl. She didn’t live that far from his own house; he had given her a lift after work once or twice. He had told her she shouldn’t live by herself. Warned her. “Nonsense,” she’d said, “it’s perfectly safe.”

“No,” he replied, “but it used to be.” And she had shaken her head like young people do at old people.

“Do you have hot chocolate?” The balloon-killing girl is back.

“No.”

“You should have hot chocolate.”

Mr October looks at her sternly until she runs off again. This morning there was a steady stream of customers, but now the ice-cream stand is doing steadier business, and Mr October is getting bored. Then a young woman is walking towards him, from out of the sunlight, her hair blowing in the wind. She stops in front of the counter, sun-speckled eyes meeting his and he has to stop himself from taking a step back.

She has the saddest eyes he has ever seen.

## 25

“Can I help you, young lady?”

His eyes are large and assured, the colour of strong tea. His nose is a hard, tough line. Everything about his face is straight, open. It has no quirks or unexpected angles, no idiosyncrasies. Everything except his earlobes, which are oddly descended, forming little half-things, little tadpoles. Freya can't believe she is face to face with him. Can't believe she is looking into the eyes of a killer. Can he feel the hatred coming off her? Can he see her anger? She feels as though her whole body is an arrow; a glowing, red arrow, and all her energy is going into appearing calm and normal.

“Young lady?” he asks again, smiling. When he smiles, it looks as though his earlobes are trying to swim up his ears.

“Can I have a coffee, please?” she says.

He turns around to prepare her drink. Freya's eyes bore into his back. It's broad and slightly bent over the table and it would be so easy to slip a knife into his spine.

She could slip away before anyone noticed, before he even got a scream out.

Freya stands with her hands clenched in her pocket. There are people all around her, pupils and parents walking between the different stands of food and crafts, and younger children running between them, yelling with glee, playing games. There is music: weird fairground music, like you hear in old movies about the circus.

“There you go. Ten Rand, please.”

Freya hands over the money as another customer walks up beside her.

She remains standing there for another second, watching him as he works. For some reason she is disappointed. She thought something more would happen. She thought... what had she thought? That he would recognise her? That he would run? That they would come

face to face and something would change? That there would be some great, dramatic shift?

But nothing had. He had served her coffee. And she had felt ... nothing. Not really. If anything, she felt more certain. Here he was, definite and solid, standing in front of her completely unaware of her identity or her history (which she felt was always visible to the world, always billowing out behind her like tendrils of alien matter).

But she is very sure of *his*. She knows him. She's seen the interior of his life, the dirty corners of his mattress. She could be close to him, touch him, hold him, and he wouldn't know who she was or what she wanted. It's comforting; comforting, not frightening, not enraging, not electric. But reassuring.

She should call the police. Call the police now. He can't be allowed to be here, in the world, existing. Living. Maybe now was the time. She had him. She knew where he lived and worked. She had found the car.

"Excuse me, are you in the queue?"

Freya shakes her head and moves away from the booth.

But something inside her resists; the same thing that rejects the thought every time she's had it. The same thing that stopped her from telling that detective about it four days ago. It is something borne from the months and months she spent after Ben's death calling the police. Months of no news, no leads, nothing. Just a constant refrain of "We're still waiting for evidence." And something else too, something from before the day Ben was killed; something still entrenched, deep and immovable, from the night their parents died.

And Freya knows that even if she could lead the police here, right now, there is nothing they could do. Would they arrest him? Take him in for questioning and then let him go? What proof did she have, really? It isn't good enough. It would be his word against hers. That detective had essentially confirmed that. And then he would *know* her and she would have to stay away from him.

And then what?

What would life be like then?

Would she go back to lying in bed all day? Going out all night and drinking so that she *could* sleep all day? Feeling nothing, being no one. Numb with the grief. Wanting to die. That is unimaginable. That is unlivable.

No. This was hers. He was hers. She would follow him until she found proof. Concrete proof that he had killed her brother, until she could make sure he would be arrested and put away. Only then could she stop. Only then could there be any hope of closure.

Slick surveys the school through tinted glasses, leaning into the shadow of the pavilion.

This is too early to be awake, and the sun and the laughter aren't helping his headache. He's chewing on a Chelsea bun, the sugary icing and the cinnamon encrusted pastry melting on his tongue, and that, at least, is a little relief against the joylessness of a school ground.

Dressed like a respectable citizen today, wearing fucking slacks.

He is only here for one reason: to get his money.

There is a group of women – the ones he bought the Chelsea bun from – who are surreptitiously talking about him, their whispers disappearing into the air before he can catch them. They've congregated in a little huddle and are eyeing him up and down. He knows this look. This is a look he gets a lot. It's the he-doesn't-look-like-he-belongs-here look. It's the look they've been giving him ever since he arrived. He licks his fingers slowly, savouring the sugar.

Three, two, one...

One of the women, overweight and wearing a tracksuit, breaks away from the group and walks over to him. "Good day, sir," she begins.

"Hello," Slick says, turning his eyes on her – it probably doesn't help that his eyes are bloodshot.

"I was just wondering if there was anything I could do to help. You seem lost, are you looking for someone?" She has her arms folded, and her feet planted wide apart. There is a streak of purple in her hair, which she has shaved very short. Her chins are wobbling.

"No, thank you."

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask that if you don't have any business here, you please leave."

"No, thank you." Slick is sure to make eye-contact with her. He is taller than her, and he wants her to know it.

"Or I will have to call security."

Slick gives a deep chuckle. "What security?"

She looks unsure now, and the first flash of fear crosses her face. She takes her phone out and says, "Or I can call the police."

Slick almost wants to dare her to do it, wants to call her bluff. But he doesn't have time for games today. "Relax," he says, "My son is in this school. I'm here supporting your

thing.” He holds up the empty Chelsea bun packet. “You know. Charity.” He grins.

She looks uncertain. “Who is your son?”

Slick looks over her head, sweeping his eyes across the rugby field and all the people on it. He points, “Over there.”

“*That’s* your son?”

“Yup.”

The woman relaxes her body, which seems to defy all the laws of gravity and sags further down. “Oh, well. Oh. He’s a good boy. He’s in my science class. I’m Mrs Retief.” She holds out her hand for him to shake. Slick takes it, revelling in the look on her face when her hand touches his sweaty, dirty one. She nods and begins to walk away.

Slick looks over at the teacher, who is talking to a tall boy dressed, like all the other pupils milling around, in a khaki uniform. His heart fills with a deep and pure hatred at the sight of the old man, but he can’t act on it today. Not here, not now. Besides, he is here for another reason. He takes out his phone. *I’m waiting*, he texts, *hurry the fuck up*.

Then he retreats further into the shadow of the building, cursing the sun.

## 27

Freya steps back.

She moves away from the stall.

Her mind is calm; she is clear about what needs to happen now, which steps she needs to take. She has decided.

But her muscles have gone slack, tender. And she is breathing heavily, like she has run a long way. She feels nauseous; the coffee has turned her stomach acidic. She needs to sit down, she needs water. Why does she feel like this, like her system is crashing? All around her people are talking, laughing, buzzing; a woman standing next to her smiles at her and says, “What a lovely day,” while taking her jersey off. Freya is still cold, colder than before.

She tries to smile back, but then has to stop herself from stumbling. She needs to sit down, needs to eat something.

She half collapses on a stone bench further down the field, away from the food stalls and the fatty smells of frying things. The blue stone is cool against her back and smells like moss. It gives her goosebumps, which rise like alert soldiers down her arms, her spine.

The bench seems to be the centre of a designated smoker’s area, although no one else is sitting there. The only other people here is a group of about five women, standing in a half circle, a circle of gossip. Freya balances a cigarette between sweaty lips, and tries to look

uninteresting. There is no wind today; the women aren't going to any trouble to keep their voices down.

"Strange that it hasn't been hijacked, isn't it? That great red car of his, just sitting there in his garage."

"But he *was* robbed, man. I saw it."

"You never?"

"Yes. Last year. The man came running past me when I was out with Skoffel, masked and everything. Ran straight past me down the road. And Abraham was sitting in his driveway. He had a big bruise over his eye. Said the man tried to take his car."

"And Abraham scared him off?"

"Ja. He had a gun with him."

"A gun? Nee man, regtig?"

"Ja. I tell you he's dangerous when he wants to be."

"Did he call the police?"

"He said he didn't want the hassle."

"That's very strange for a man always going on about the rules."

"That's what I thought too. But he hasn't been quite right since Sara died." There is a silence among the group, the kind of silence in which everyone is thinking the same thing and waiting for someone else to speak first. The words come out slowly: "You don't think that," one of them ventures, nose to the ground, "he ever hurt Sara?"

Freya's cigarette end drops from her mouth, and she squashes it neatly beneath a black boot.

"Nee, man. Sara's problem was drugs. She overdosed. I saw her a few times, there near the end. It was definitely drugs."

The women nod, relieved. "Where do you think she got the drugs?"

"Nee, how am I supposed to know? Where do the children get it? Where does anyone get it? Maybe she had connections."

"It's a shame, she was a nice lady."

"Ja, she was."

"Ja, shame."

"Shame."

Monday

Nolwazi mistakes the two flickers – as they come bright and orange through the tangled foliage hanging over the curve in the road – for the headlights of a car parked on the hill; a hill people frequently used as a venue for sex or drinking. Which, technically, is trespassing. And the old fort up there doesn't need any more graffiti on its crumbling walls. But when she rounds the corner, the sky opening up before her, she sees that she was wrong: not the headlights of a car, but two stars, brighter and fiercer than all the rest, sitting very close to each other in the sky; Jupiter and Venus, closer than they've been in two thousand years.

Is this what the sky looked like two thousand years ago?

What kind of man was looking up at that sky? What did he make of these bright shining planets? Were they an omen, worthy of worship? Or the eyes of God? Or did those people know exactly what they were looking at? Did they know their place in the universe, how small and unimportant they were? Did seeing this leave them feeling both small and great at the same time, both privileged and powerless? Did the wind crackle through the grass in the same way, did the winter smell the same? Did the frost form delicately on their feet as they looked up at the sky and forgot to move?

Without thinking, she finds herself taking the winding path up the hill.

Fort Schanskop – built by the British a long time ago and now one of the city's meagre tourist attractions – isn't her destination. Rather, she is heading for a series of small lookout points half way up the hill, overlooking the city, the city and its bright lights. The spot she chooses is isolated, surrounded as it is by sparse forest. The road is hidden behind the trees; dead grass crunches underneath her boots. The night smells like wood-smoke.

The city is frozen, quiet at this hour.

The fort is built on one of the many hills that enfold the valley Pretoria is built in. Between the fort and the city, there lies a green belt of sparse woodland, which in summer turns the city into a green-land, airy and bright. But now, blemished by winter, it pushes the city further away. Directly beneath her is a very large traffic circle. The circle is the meeting point of two highways and two of the city's main roads at the centre of which there is a series of elaborate fountains, on full display in the glare of dozens of spotlights.

From up here the city-centre resembles a giant inverted comma – the bulb end in the distance a concentration of lights (people living on top of each other, people not living at all) and the twisted leg of the comma disappearing to her right, the city spreading wide,

plateauing for kilometres in all directions. Like a spill.

Beyond that, the lights of the city are spread thinner: bigger houses, bigger yards, better lives. She's just come from one of those yards, from deep within the city's older, wealthier neighbourhoods, touched with what Nolwazi thinks of as a European splendour. Tasteful houses surrounded by tranquil gardens where ancient oak trees spread comfortable shade. Tree-lined boulevards, manicured parks, private schools, dentists' offices, exclusive malls, café-strewn courtyards. Bliss, boredom.

And tonight slightly tarnished by a stolen car ("How could someone? How could they? I feel so violated!"). She shouldn't have gone out for a simple car burglary. But there is a hijacking ring operating in the area: her new high profile case. Given to her with a stern warning: solve this one quickly. As if she deliberately allows her cases to drag out for years, as if the police aren't as frustrated as everyone else at the speed of the system.

Her phone vibrates, the light glaring out through the thin plastic of her police jacket. Frik. She doesn't answer. But then moments later a text: *about Benjamin Rust, pick up*. And the phone rings again. "Mngadi." She tries to sound professional, but she just sounds tired.

"They lied about how their parents died." His voice is rough, but friendly.

"What?"

"Freya Rust told us that her parents died in a car accident –"

"– and Philomena Ash confirmed that."

"They lied. Bjorn and Angelica Rush were killed in an armed robbery in 2011."

"Christ. Were the perpetrators caught?"

"No. Case has gone completely cold. There was a whole string of them during that time in that neighbourhood. We couldn't ever make any headway. The robberies stopped after the neighbourhood was boomed off."

"I don't understand. Why would she lie to us?"

"Because it took the police two hours to respond. Angelica Rust was alive when Freya Rust called 10111. The state's pathologist agreed that had an ambulance arrived on the scene sooner, she could have lived. We paid out a settlement to the two of them a year later. A big settlement."

"So she has no reason to trust us." Nolwazi is pacing from one end of the look-out point to the other as she talks, trying to keep warm. She comes to a stop in front of a thin tree. Its trunk is covered in short stubby thorns. She runs a thumb over the thorns absentmindedly, pricking it. A drop of blood squeezes out of the small hole in her skin. She wipes it off on the collar of her shirt. A spider scurries across the trunk of the tree, quickly followed by another.

The spiders are made white by the moonlight.

“Boss?”

“What? Sorry. I got distracted.”

“What do you want me to do.”

“Double check every detail of Freya Rust’s original statement. Go through the files from the armed robbery case, see if you can find any connections to this one. Focus on the Mercedes. And get a copy of the sketch Freya Rust gave and see if it matches any suspects from back in the day.”

“There weren’t any suspects.”

“No one?”

“Nope.”

“Well then just the car, thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing. Unless ...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you want to meet up later?”

She looks up at the sky. The full moon, bright and fierce, is friendlier than those two unconcerned planets, and it stirs something in her. A kind of yearning, a kind of love. Is it possible to be in love with loneliness?

“Sure,” she says, “My place, one hour.”

## 29

A whole crowd of people are gathering on Abraham’s front lawn. Torches are being tested, final instructions are being handed out. Pairs of people seem to be moving away in different directions. Freya is watching from the shed. The lights in the back garden have been turned on, and she is glad for her newly discovered hiding place.

Her new gun is strapped to her waist with a holster that Greg stole from the shooting range. Greg. She’s been seeing him every night since they first slept together; allowing him into her space has upset her less than she thought it would, despite the fact that the idea of seeing anyone else, of reaching out to anyone from Before still twists her heart, causes her stomach to heave. Greg doesn’t know her real name. He thinks her name is Britney. Just the kind of silly name she expects most of the girls in his social circle has. Most of the time when she looks at him, she sees a blank space, a ghost as white and two dimensional as a page. He doesn’t ask questions and neither does she, and for that reason it somehow works.

The night is scented with ice and straw. Deep winter nights are quieter than other

nights; insects vanish, there are no leaves for the soft breezes to rustle, the grass has been frozen into place. The birds have fled. The silence is starker; the silence is worse. And if following someone by car has turned out to be surprisingly easy, then doing it by foot has turned out to be impossible. Streets, even ones that are badly lit, are never as dark as you would expect; there are no shadows in which to hide in the broad avenues of suburbia. It is also nearly impossible to muffle the sounds of footsteps.

But tonight is different. Tonight, the wind is howling. Tonight street lamps have been switched off, to conserve power; the whole neighbourhood has been thrown into total darkness.

Tonight is perfect.

“Know when the animal is vulnerable, know when to strike,” her father’s voice comes into her mind as she quietly steps from the shed, ready to follow Abraham into the night.

### 30

Slick often thinks about fires. One strike of a match, one strike of lighting, and everything in this dry winter would be burned away.

His whole empire down in flames.

He uses the word empire privately; other people probably wouldn’t go so far.

When he began operating in Hatfield, he spent every night on some street corner, disguised, getting to know the neighbourhood: the students and the industries around them. He became just another bum, offering drugs. He made friends with the other dealers, he got to know his customers. He began incorporating people like Bra Joe into his network. He kept himself small enough not to bother the big dealers in the area, and started selling his own-grown product to them at a discount to keep them happy.

And he flourished.

But there is a separate enterprise, in which he plays a smaller part. About a year ago he began working as a middleman for a bigger organisation: cocaine, which seemed to arrive in Pretoria decades after it did in other middle-class utopias. And crystal meth, the sweet stuff, the stuff of poverty. In these substances he traded only lightly, only for certain clients, only on request and he was careful which of his lieutenants he let into this second, darker world. There is a lot of money to be made, but it is a process he doesn’t have complete control over. He dabbles, but cautiously. And he has already been betrayed, more than once.

Betrayal that had deadly consequences for more than one of the boys working for him. Betrayal that he could still feel in the air, a smothering presence.

The doorbell rings.

His friend is at the door, breath fogging up the doorstep. “You live seriously close to this chick I’m seeing’s place,” his friend says, pushing past Slick into the flat and looking around curiously. “Why don’t you have any furniture?” he asks. Slick looks around his empty flat, the mattress on the floor, the small table with a kettle in the corner. Why no furniture? Because what is the point? He is used to sleeping on the floor. He has few possessions. His iPod. His clothes. The photo hanging on the wall of his drug room. What else is there? How is he supposed to fill up the house? What is he supposed to put it in? He doesn’t understand what other people fill their houses with, what do they do with all that space.

But he ignores the question. “Do you have what I asked for?”

“Yeah, here.” His friend hands him a file. “Everything I could find on Abraham October. I don’t think it was him who tipped the police off about Steve. Or his daughter.”

“But the tip-off was anonymous.”

“Yes, but –”

“That’s all.” Slick puts the file down on the floor. “Get out.”

“Bossman, should we be worried about this teacher? Does he know anything?”

“He might.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“Maybe.”

“He’s a bad target, bossman. Teacher, elder in the church. He’ll be missed. And the investigation won’t come my way. It will go to Sunnyside. I can’t protect you.”

“Thanks for the advice. Get out.”

When his friend is gone, he sits on his thin mattress, watching the darkness. He looks up at her photograph. He stole it from the desk in her room, stole it on the night she vanished. On the night the men came into the house and told them all to leave, told them that her reign was over. Mama Africa.

He had to flee. Flee again. But he managed to salvage that one photograph.

The woman in the photograph stares back impassively, mysteriously. Mama Africa had no discernible nationality. Her skin was white, but heavily made up, so that it looked bleached and false. Her head was always wrapped in cloth of various patterns – sometimes Chinese, woven from silken gold. Sometimes African, the colours of the earth. Sometimes Indian, bright and bristling. Her eyes were dark, the colour of rich tea and they had a slight Asian lilt, a bent that spoke of exoticisms, but she lined them in thick dark curves, so that it was difficult for a child who had never seen anyone who didn’t look like him to tell the shape

of her eyes. She was also fond of tinted contact lenses, so that he would forever think of her eyes as green because that's the colour they were the first time he saw her. But they became other colours, other people, on other days. She was of all cultures, and no cultures. It was the perfect disguise – impregnable, intimidating, insulating – and in the time that Slick knew her she spoke at least six languages fluently, perfectly. Never in the entire time he was in her service did he ever have the courage to ask her where she came from. “Do you know what ‘erudite’ means?” Mama Africa asked him not long after she met him, in Zulu, although it seemed impossible, alien, that she could speak this language. The English word perched on the Zulu sentence like an exotic thing, a glossy parasite riding her tongue. He spent a long time, when he was younger, thinking about Mama Africa's tongue. It was little and sharp and very pink. Unusually pink.

It was she who taught him English, and when he speaks it now, he still hears her voice come from his lips; he doesn't sound like himself, doesn't recognise the round, blue sounds that tumble from him like poisonous berries. It feels wrong, weak. His own language is strong and muscular, warm-blooded and assured. But when he speaks English, his tongue has to slide when it wants to click, to snake when it wants to fly. His English is distracting even to his own ears, but he likes, oh he likes very much, the way it puts other people off – so he practices it and polishes it like a weapon. Another skill to put in his arsenal of disguises.

She was also the one who christened him Slick: a new name, better than his old name.

He looks away from Mama Africa.

She was his mother after the dark days he was forced to spend on the street. The feral bleakness of living from moment to moment, night to night, losing his humanity, losing his language. The memories he has of the time between running away from home and being found by Mama Africa, are red and black chaos. Writhing, pure emotion. No, not emotion. Instinct. It was like his brain forgot how to process memory, how to build his experience into something solid or functional. She found him, and he still doesn't know how: where she heard that there was a boy sleeping in that abandoned building. But she probably saved his life. Mama Africa saved many lives this way, scavenging homeless forgotten children from the street and employing them. She was the one who taught him all about the drug trade, its secrets and its dangers. Mama Africa, the most powerful drug lord in town. Another thing he only found out later. So the photograph is the one thing he has: the one thing he would save, if the world went up in smoke, if the house came crumbling down in a fire.

He looks down at the file in his hand, at the small black and white photo of the teacher staring out at the world: small-boned, oblivious.

Of course, sooner or later, the teacher is going to have to come crumbling down, too.

31

Freya is standing in the shadow of a tree, out of sight; she is waiting.

Abraham has been standing at the wall of the house – large and yellow – for over an hour, watching. She has no idea what he could possibly be doing, what he could possibly be waiting for. He should be patrolling; instead, after only twenty minutes he came to rest here, on this out of the way street, attentively watching.

Freya is getting nervous about the possibility of being seen or heard.

But for some reason she can't bring herself to move, to walk back the way they came. She isn't even completely sure she could find her way back without him.

She sneaks a glance from behind the tree.

He is still standing in the street, a hard, thoughtful look on his face. What is he doing? Why is he just standing there? Is he waiting for something? She fingers the gun at her side, the weight of it still novel, still unbalancing her. A thought materialises on the shore of her mind – a miraculous thought that has been taking shape for a week – and this time she allows it to solidify; she doesn't let it slip through her mind like rain through a gutter. She picks up her gun, releasing it from its holster without a sound. She raises it. She breathes in.

She aims.

She holds her breath.

Could it be over this easily? Is she really about to shoot Abraham October? She can feel the soft barrier between life and death bulging outwards, the membrane threatening to burst, and she can sense, like a faint and frenzied whisper, the sound of a world in which Abraham October is dead. A world in which her brother has been avenged.

Her breath clouds up the night air, white wisps of uncertainty.

But then, from behind her, an unnatural sound. A scratching. She lowers the weapon and frowns. It's an odd sound, and has an abnormal rhythm to it, a slippage at the end of each beat. Freya holds her breath, and slowly moves her head back behind the tree. She turns around, turning her back on Abraham. She teases her finger away from the trigger slowly. The road is wide, but surrounded by gardens and front lawns that are hidden in darkness. The street lamps aren't lit because the power outage is still in effect. Anybody could be hiding anywhere. She listens intently. The scratching noise sounds like it is close by, like it is coming closer. She can hear her breathing getting laboured: heavy, beginning to panic. Then she realises what it is – it's the sound of fabric rubbing together, of one leg brushing up

against the other.

It's the sound of someone coming towards her.

### 32

He stands at the edge of the garden, outside of the light.

From his lawn, Mr October watches the full moon rise over the city. It's the anniversary of his wife's death. It was exactly a year ago that his daughter was standing on the lawn waiting for him to come home, her body shaking with grief. A night of ambulances and explanations.

His daughter is sitting at a dining room table, laughing. Like she's in a photograph. She is talking to someone outside of the frame. Mr October hasn't seen her smile in a long time. She hasn't spoken a single word since she discovered him outside that bar last week. And she has been avoiding her usual hangouts. Following her has become difficult.

He is losing control. Again.

But at least he knows where she is on week nights. Here, at this house. Enclosed in this warm glow. This was his private reason for starting the neighbourhood watch, for agreeing to patrol the streets. So he could come stand here, in these shadows, and watch his daughter slowly join the warmth and comfort of another family.

Mr October, the spectator.

Mr October, the absent father.

Mr October. He doesn't know when he started thinking about himself like this. It's been so long since he's been anyone else. So long since he's been Pa. Or Husband. Or Abraham.

All he hears these days is Mr October.

### 33

The sound has stopped. Just as quickly as it started. But now Freya cannot help the feeling that someone is lurking just inside the distant shadows, that someone else is here, in the street, camouflaged just as she. A ghost. A ghost.

If it was another member of the neighbourhood watch, surely they would show themselves?

It takes a great effort of will for her to turn around, to turn her back on the street, and chance a look at Abraham.

But he is nowhere to be seen. The spot where he had been standing moments ago is

empty. Which way would he have gone? Further down the street or back the way they came? She begins moving again, walking fast this time, trying to catch up with him, choosing a direction at random. She's been distracted. He's led her into a part of the neighbourhood she's never been in before. A rougher part of it, nearer the train station; she doesn't recognise these streets.

As soon as she starts walking, the scratching sound starts up again.

Why are all these roads so curved, so intertwined?

This was a bad idea, this whole last week: why did she decided to follow him? What had been her real reason? What had she been planning on doing? It is stupid; this whole thing is stupid. She should have gone to the police when she first found him. She should hand him over. This daze she's been in, this other reality, it's consuming her. It's an addiction, a disease. She needs to stop it. She sees that now. Stop this and hand Abraham to the police and let justice runs its natural course. She isn't some avenging angel.

Then the silence breaks like ice; an owl screeches somewhere nearby and takes off. A bird-shadow rises from behind a wall to her left and struggles into flight.

And as Freya jumps back, startled by the sound, something heavy and solid comes out of the darkness behind her.

And catches hold of her.

Without thought, without will, Freya begins to scream.

## 34

Mr October is standing inside his shed, staring at The Creatures. Little hauntings that have buried into his consciousness, have activated his memories. All this reminiscing, all these old wounds, triggered by Sara's death. By grief. Grief, like a mythical box that unleashes into the world anger and desperation and paralysis, violence and hatefulness.

How is it possible that a life could become so eroded?

Nothing is ever going to change again, not for him. Life has reached stasis. Terrible, cold stasis. He's been spending the last year wandering through the routine of his empty life, picking up memories and shaking them loose, watching them disintegrate and diminish under the assault of time. What does the future look like? What happens in a few months when his daughter leaves – she will leave, of that he is sure. Will this be his life? This blighted nothingness, living alongside the echoes of the things that have been taken from him, the things he couldn't control. The plastic heads of plastic babies, spectres of his wife's mind, hanging in this shed; the shed he built with his bare hands.

This is his punishment for leaving that young man for dead, he knows. And for abandoning Sara to the forces of her own mind. He deserves this. He has to live with it. He won't choose the path his wife took: chemical numbing, slow suicide. He won't indulge that kind of self-mercy. This is his punishment and he will take it like a man, like a man of God. But he will make sure the one thing he has left – the one legacy he can still leave – makes an impact on the world that is good. That from all the damage done there can come some kindness: the hope at the bottom of the box. The time of silence is over; he needs to talk to his daughter. He needs to fix this one thing, this last thing. If he can.

The faded sepia photograph is too big for the frame; the bottom edge is frayed and crumpled. It shows two people standing side by side outside a church, holding hands. They look like something from another era: almost twenty years ago, now. Lifetimes. He wore an old brown suit that his father had left behind and she wore her mother's wedding dress. It had a tear in the train and had yellowed slightly, but it hardly mattered. They had not been dating for long, but they were happy enough. Besides, she was pregnant. The wedding was short, frugal and festive. There were homemade lanterns in the tree overlooking the tiny, dusty yard. Sarah had white daisies in her hair. Her uncle's accordion band was playing in the corner, the hooting, jangling music mingling with deep and sincere laughter. And there was, at least, a little space for dancing.

The wedding night was frenzied and joyful.

It was the beginning, the end.

He hears the soft tread of a footfall behind him, and turns.

She has that same note of accusation in her voice now as she does every time she speaks to him, the same barb-wire in her eyes. She pushes past him, grabbing the photo. "Where did you get this?" she asks.

"In Ma's old stuff."

"You said all the photos of her were gone."

"I lied."

The hurt that ripples across her face doesn't surprise him, but that is when he notices the residue of tears on her cheeks, the sweat dripping from her brow, the streak of wet hair sticking to her skin. She is panting softly; her dress is dishevelled. "What's wrong? What's happened?" he asks. She is looking down at the photograph, and he doesn't expect her to answer. He expects that she will retreat into secrecy, into silence once more. But then she says, "You have to come."

"You need me?"

She nods, looking down at the wet grass, at the drenched earth. “Yes, I have no choice now.” Her voice has changed, matured. Filled out, filled up. “They’ve taken Lucky,” she says. “The police. Because of me. Please, Pa. You have to help. I’ll tell you everything.”

### 35

“Sssh, pretty lady, sssh.”

The hand that is clasped around her mouth is hard, callused. It smells like dirt, old sherry and shit; it ends in long broken nails, yellow as bile. For a moment the world consists of nothing but Freya’s mouth and the hand covering it: the way the hand is moving its forefinger up and down against her cheek, the way her tongue is slightly outside of her mouth because she was silenced mid-scream. She can taste wet skin. Her own terror is still reverberating through her skull.

And then she becomes aware of more.

There is a knee against the back of her own knee. There is the sour breath on her cheek, from someone whispering. A female voice.

She stops struggling.

She is in the dead end of a street. In front of her, closed for the night (a tall grey fence, a padlock) is the train station. Harsh spotlights light up the tracks and the surrounding area. To her right is a set of kiosks – liquor and cigarettes – also closed for the night. To her left is a stairwell that reaches into the ground and runs underneath the tracks: access to the opposite platform. Beyond the stairwell is a dusty, weed covered sidewalk. And beyond that, darkness.

“Hush, pretty lady,” the voice says, and she feels the grip on her loosen. Freya immediately twitches away and around, looking behind her. The street behind her is empty, at least as much of it as she can see. The island of light at the end of this street isn’t very big.

“Were you the one following me?” Freya asks.

“No, lady. No one is following you. Just you. And me.” The woman smiles, and Freya is forced to look at her properly. She is Freya’s height, although she has a slight stoop, like she is about to bend down and pick something up; she is dressed in layers of rags, and her head is wrapped in a grimy headdress. She is looking at Freya with toothless eyes – genuine curiosity. “The train is closed” she says, pointing a sure finger at the station. “No going home tonight. No train, no taxi. Just me.”

“Do you have a phone?”

“No, no, no. No phone. No house. Just this.” She holds up a stuffed canvas bag to the

light, and then snatches it back to her chest. “And this,” she adds, pointing down into the stairwell. “No rain.”

“You sleep there?”

“Yes. No rain.”

“But it’s winter.”

The woman looks up at the sky for a second, wondering at the stars. She puts in fingertip on her tongue before slowly reaching it into the sky. “Yes,” she agrees. “Winter.” Her teeth are the colour of tea, dirt. “But it doesn’t rain in winter,” Freya insists. The woman considers this, then shakes her head. “Where are you going?” the woman asks.

“Nowhere,” Freya says. “Back there. I got lost.” She is still shaking, still bewildered by the chase.

Freya is still holding her gun.

The woman’s eyes flick down to it, and back up at Freya.

“Why were you following me?” Freya asks again.

“Not following. Not me. Not me.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name,” the woman says, taking a step towards Freya as soon as the weapon is holstered, “is Cheery. I am Cheery.”

Cheery takes another step closer and extends a hand. Freya can see blood stains on Cheery’s hand, can smell urine and unwashed skin; it mingles with the smell of old iron and cold cement that hangs over the train station.

“Do you have food?” Cheery asks.

“You are homeless?” Freya asks, shaking her head. No, no food.

“No. I am Cheery.” Cheery’s hand is still lingering in the air, where it remains untouched by Freya. “Right. Well, I’m going to go Cheery. It was nice to meet you.”

“No! No, lady stay. You stay.” Cheery pulls a knife from inside the collection of her rags, and moves towards Freya very quickly; before she knows it Cheery’s knife point is inside Freya’s navel. “Give me your things. Phone, gun. Shoes too.” Her voice is low, a voice that has been burnt by thousands of cigarettes. “Or I will do this.” Cheery pulls aside a rag to reveal her stomach. With her forefinger she points towards her navel. Freya has to look down awkwardly in order to see what she is pointing at: around the sunken navel, there is deep scarring, where a knife has carved into Cheery’s skin.

“Who did this to you?”

“A man. Long ago, a man,” she whispers, leaning in as she speaks. Only a millimetre,

but a millimetre is enough. The knife breaks into Freya skin; she feels the first drop of blood leave her body. A small cut, a sharp knife. “Your things,” Cheery repeats, smiling, “All your things.”

Freya’s gun is still in her hand; she’ll need to move fast if she wants to use it. But it won’t be faster than Cheery’s knife. She looks into her assailant’s eyes, large and tinted with desperation. Cheery needs to eat, needs the money. Freya doesn’t need her phone; she doesn’t need her shoes. Her car keys, at least, are still a secret. “You can have my shoes, Cheery. And my phone, if you want. And my cigarettes. But not my gun.”

Cheery shakes her head, “Everything. I need everything.”

“You can’t have my gun.”

Cheery’s face changes. Like mud under the sun, it coarsens, cracks. “Everything, lady. Especially gun.”

Freya doesn’t have to think before she acts, doesn’t have to consider her options.

She’s used up all her fear reserves, drained them away while she thought she was being followed. Shame at her own cowardice has hardened into something uglier. She cannot show fear if she wants to succeed. She cannot show fear if she wants to avenge her brother. Fear is for the weak. Fear and grief and uncertainty are all parts of the same debilitation – sodden emotions that lay at the bottom of your stomach like an anchor. But anger, anger and determination, those are burning, moving things. Engines, vigorous and vital.

She won’t be stopped, won’t be chased, won’t be threatened.

Before she knows it she has moved: she jumps back and smooths her gun from her side in one fluid motion. The movement forces Cheery’s knife upwards, and Freya feels it cut into her side, but she doesn’t care now.

Pain. Pain is fuel.

Cheery’s knife falls to the ground, dislodged by Freya’s momentum.

Freya moves fast, fiercely. She is on top of Cheery within seconds, her gun held aloft. She jumps on the thin fragile beggar and tackles her. Cheery falls on the tar and Freya hears the snap of bone, the swallowing of pain. She brings her gun down on Cheery’s face with as much force as she can muster. It tears open skin.

Freya strikes again. And again. And again.

Wound.

Hurt.

Cheery doesn’t struggle, nor does she cry out or scream for help. She’s stuffed her fist in her own mouth and is accepting the beating, head turned away. She is submitting. But

Freya is beyond mercy. Her heart is intoxicated, beating fast. A switch has been flicked: from flight to fight.

Her gun comes down again.

There is blood on her gun, on her jeans, on her leather jacket; gleaming black smears on her gleaming black things. But it isn't enough.

Again.

Again, again, again.

Until there is no more face left.

Just blood, just bone.

Before



Ben ran his finger along the branches of the tattoo. The skin was firm under his fingers, and cold. "You're giving me goosebumps."

"Sorry."

They were lying in bed, naked and unhurried. Pre-dawn light was filtering in through the windows. "So last night was fun," Ben said. It was almost a question. "Yes, it was," Leo said, "Really fun." He leaned over and kissed Ben. "Bit of a blur, though."

Ben was quiet. Flashes of the previous night came to him. The club, the cheap wine, kissing in the bathroom, smoking a joint, running into the garage shop to buy condoms. "That guy Steve... He's your ex?"

Leo eyed him up and down. "Yes. We dated for a while, fucked around."

"But not anymore?"

"Nah. Now he's just my drug dealer."

"He deals?"

"Yeah. His parents are broke. He needs the cash. He works for some drug lord – apparently the guy is responsible for all the drugs around here. It pays well."

Ben was surprised – *all* the drugs? Who knew the campus was so flush? – But Leo read something else in his eyes. "Why? Are you looking for a new job?"

"What, like dealing drugs?"

"Yeah. Steve says the guy is always looking for new dealers. Apparently he likes using students. But students graduate. Steve tried to get me involved. Eric too. But..."

"But you're too respectable?"

"Well, my daddy is a pastor you know," he says, the American accent falling flat.

"Yeah, yeah. The poor pastor's son seduced by the bright Pretoria lights. Drugs, alcohol–"

"– and pretty Pretoria boys."

"Is that supposed to be me?"

Leo smiled. "Dunno, I'm still deciding."

"Your parents are dead?" Leo asked later, his big eyes the exact colour of the cold coffee he was holding. His underwear was too small for him. The smoke from his cigarette fell away into the darkness of the open window. Ben was still sitting on the bed, naked and dazed.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, four years ago.”

“How?”

“Car crash.”

“And you have no other family?”

“My sister. My sister is all I have,” he said, before her remembered, “Oh, and my cousin. Or great-aunt. Or something. But she’s,” he took a cigarette that Leo handed him, “not important.”

“Not important?”

Ben got up and joined Leo, balancing himself on the windowsill. He looked out onto the street, and down onto the tops of the trees directly below the building, which were bare and sharp and moaning. “We didn’t know her. Before. She just kind of showed up afterwards. And ... she means well, but it’s as if she doesn’t know how real emotions work. Like she’s just read about them. She’s a psychologist. Freya and I don’t like to see her.”

“Freya? That’s your sister?”

“Yup.”

“You two are close?”

“We live together.”

“Does she know ... I mean, will she find out about me?”

Ben flicked his finished cigarette out into the night; the little red ember glowed brightly just before it vanished, suffocated by the cold air. He took Leo’s hand. He said, “Eventually.”

## 2

Ben and his sister spoke about their parents, and how they died, quite frequently. It was an easy thing for one of them to bring it up, and it was triggered by an eclectic list of things. Ben knew, for example, that if Freya was reading a book in which a parent died, she would become preoccupied by how her own grief – or their grief together – measured up to the grief experienced by the characters in the novel. It would become an experiment in compare and contrast, and she would quiz him endlessly about how he felt, frowning all the time, worried that she hadn’t dealt with it properly.

And he didn’t mind; speaking about the thing that happened that night was a way of keeping their parents alive. A conversation about the end would always lead to a conversation about what it was like before the end, and these conversations were usually happy ones. They could carry on for days, interrupted by sleep and classes and friends, but would always end

with them both feeling contented, feeling more like themselves.

Sometimes, the conversation turned otherwise. “Do you remember the summer that Dad didn’t live at home?” Freya would ask him, a dark thing fluttering across her face like a wing. He always did, of course. But she remembered that summer much more vividly than he did; he found he always had to dig it back up, bring it forth, and it always came slowly. Every time he remembered less, more vaguely. For Freya it was different. Every time she remembered it, it was with more colour, with more feeling. “He had to be sent away because he hit us,” she would say, surprised all over again.

“He never hit me,” Ben would say.

“You just don’t remember that he did.” And then she would brood for days, moving through the flat in silence. He wasn’t lying when he told her that he didn’t remember ever being hit by their father. He wasn’t an easy man; he was strict and distant and humourless – but Ben had always firmly believed that their father loved them as best he could: from afar. And left it up to their mother to provide the love and the warmth needed to raise children. It was definitely true that when he thought of his parents, his mother was always closer to him than his father, right up against the edge of the memory, a bright intense presence. And his father hovered somewhere in the back of the memory, colder and less definite.

But he didn’t remember any abuse.

It was as if Freya’s memories had begun to ripen, to ferment: the happy memories were intensely happy, always filled with sunlight. And the unhappy memories were heavy and dark and full of unspoken terror. He often thought it was because she was the one who saw it happen, while he slept through it. Sometimes when these conversations slipped off the edge, he could sense that she blamed him for not being there too; that in that one instance their experience differed. This was the one rift – chasm – that existed between them.

All of this, of course, remained an internal thing: they spoke about it only to each other. It was a past, a violence, which belonged only to them. To the outside world they presented a united lie: a car accident, long ago. A car crash seemed cleaner; a story that was less interesting, that would elicit fewer questions from people. They had it practised perfectly: when the subject came up they dealt with it as efficiently as possible. The only other person who knew, aside from the police, was Cousin Ash, who they kept at a mighty distance as soon as they could get rid of her. The police never arrested anyone, never made a single attempt to contact them again after the initial inquiry. As far as Ben was concerned, their parent’s case was still open.

To be honest, and this he had never spoken to Freya about, it wasn’t the questions that

Ben minded, or the shock. It was the pity. Somehow, a car crash earned less pity than an armed robbery. Accident is less heart-breaking than murder; the violence of the truth always seemed to upset people so much more than the ordinariness of a car crash.

Everyone had car crashes. Not everyone's mother was raped.

So they lied. They lied to anyone who asked, so well and sincerely that it has become second nature. They lied to everyone but each other.

Of course, lately, Ben had begun doing that, too.

### 3

The Lollipop Roadhouse sat at the very bottom corner of Church Street, the winding tributary that bled all the way from Church Square, through Sunnyside and Hatfield, to the edge of inner-Pretoria, finally washing out onto the N1, the highway that wound its way down the country, through every major city and every throwaway town till it hit the Atlantic ocean.

The Lollipop was a favourite last-stop on the way out of the city and therefore attracted an eclectic clientele. It sold cheap generously portioned food. There were usually a few students, hungry before a night of partying, or out on a study-break. A few families, too, seduced out of their homes by the smell of frying food. Truck drivers, who were filling up at the adjacent petrol station. And, inevitably, a couple of drifters in beat up cars, unfocused eyes shifting suspiciously beneath threadbare caps.

A big neon sign that rose above the palm trees planted along the curb proudly bore the Lollipop name in flashing bubble letters.

The roadhouse was essentially a parking lot, with an L-shaped building set back against the furthest corner, which housed the kitchen. The lines demarking the parking spots had faded, so Ben usually just pulled up as close to the kitchen as he could. As he parked, a waiter came up to his window to take his order. Ben ordered a hamburger, then wandered off to the petrol station shop to buy cigarettes. The air was a symphony of petrol fumes and old cooking oil.

His hamburger was delivered to his car window by a smiling waiter. The idea was, Ben supposed, to eat in your car. But most people treated it like a drive-through, driving off as soon as their food was delivered. He wondered how many people ditched without paying.

Set against the back wall of the parking lot, next to the kitchen, and surrounded by more palm trees, was a row of tables. Each table was folded into its own little enclave, closed off by large plant beddings and roofed by the palm trees, so that you couldn't see what was happening at the next table. It made these spaces gloomy and cool and private, and Ben took

refuge at one of these tables, looking out onto Lollipop and the street beyond from the darkness.

Ben fingered the Pokémon sticker on the back of his phone. He hated it when people were late. Across the busy street, another neon sign was flashing. A red flamingo, radiating into the night around it. The sign, and the house it was advertising, was enclosed behind a tall wall and a big security gate. As Ben watched, a shadowy figure was let out of the gate by a bouncer. Ben could easily imagine the satisfied look on the figure's face, as he walked quickly away from Flamingos, the most famous strip-club and brothel in the city. The figure walked to his car, and Ben watched as a car-guard came running out of the night, stopping against the figure's window as he pulled out of his parking spot. The car window opened and Ben saw a glint of silver as coins exchanged hands. The car sped away.

The car-guard then turned and walked across the street, making his way to the Lollipop Roadhouse.

The car-guard walked up to Ben slowly, holding his right leg stiff as if it couldn't bear any weight. He stopped just outside the shadows of the table and bent down to tie a shoelace. "It's me," the car-guard said, looking up. "Give me the cash." Ben examined the car-guard's face slowly. He had to be careful, even though he was prepared for the disguise; but yes, he recognised him. Ben took a roll of money out of his pocket and put it next to him on the seat. The car-guard's hand shot out and grabbed it at speed. "Did you get a new phone?" the car-guard asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Contact me on that from now on. We can cut out the middleman." The car-guard straightened up and winked at him, just as the owner of the Lollipop came out of his kitchen and began shouting obscenities at him. "No free food here!"

The car-guard turned around and shrugged at the owner, before walking off.

Ben sighed and shrunk back into the shadow of his table, taking another bite of his burger. This whole business was much easier and much more profitable than he first suspected.

He smiled. Maybe he could get an ice-cream for dessert.

Pretoria, high-summer: storms come in the afternoon, quick and violent. Just as the heat is getting too oppressive, too cloying, the wind picks up: the dry mid-afternoon breeze turns frenzied and directionless; great blasts of heat and dust tumble everywhere. Doors and

windows are closed, streets empty. Everything darkens, deepens. Bruised and heavy clouds stampede the sky. Inside the belly of the cloud-beast, there is lightning; it shoots across the purple horizon in blazing white streaks. The instinct to cower is overwhelming. And just as the sky becomes so powerful it could tear a hole through the city, leaving it burning and broken – there is thunder!

Roaring, the sky falls open. A downpour of heavy, angry rain.

A few minutes later, clean, crisp air rushes in; a cool burst of fragrant relief tames the wind. The rain washes away all the dust, clears the arid air; when the clouds dissipate the world is sweet and soft and full of life.

Ben loved the summer storms. There was something about all that icy water breaking through the heat that was mighty and impressive and liberating.

But the storm hadn't started yet.

"Pretoria is such a shit hole," Leo said, emphasising each syllable with a flick of his lighter, the flame bursting into life only to be blown out of it again by the rising wind.

"I dunno," Ben turned his body inward and lit his cigarette in the crook of his lap, "It's not that bad". The first hit of smoke was murky and sweet. He looked out over the street, the darkening sky. "I really like this time of day."

They were sitting on Leo's balcony, the sliding door closed. Leo's room was filled with the fumes of fresh paint; they'd spent the afternoon painting it a stark, vivid blue. From beyond Leo's bedroom, Ben could hear Eric playing guitar here.

"It's bad enough," Leo said. Leo was rolling a cigarette; he was using his favourite vanilla flavoured tobacco. He was shirtless, and his tree-tattoo was rippling as he hunched over, his stomach slightly wrinkled by the action. Ben has had secret visions of living in that tree, of climbing into it and refusing to come down, like a spiteful child. Leo smelled like candy, and sex. He smiled as Leo fumbled and small pieces of tobacco lifted onto the breeze and drifted between them.

"I can't wait to get out of here," Leo said, curling a hand through his dark hair and tucking his fringe behind his ear. They had been drinking beers and playing poker when their cards were swept off the balcony by a gust. In the street below Ben could see the queen of diamonds, the smirking knave of clubs. "You mean jack?" Leo said.

"My mother always called it a knave. Old habits," Ben exhaled slowly. The pre-storm silence was getting to him. "I'm not in a hurry to go anywhere."

"You don't want to get out?" Leo slipped into his hoody. There was a cheesy stain on the black fabric. Last night's dinner: Ben had cooked. "I do, obviously," he said, trying to be

reassuring. “Eventually. But it’s a nice place to be a student in. Hatfield is like a small campus town, but surrounded by this big city. Best of both worlds.”

“Not that big.”

“No, suppose not.”

“But you’re right. It’s a pretty cool place. If you’re a student. Or a dentist.”

“Or a kid.”

“Jesus, I’m so happy I’m not a kid anymore.”

Ben shrugged, “I liked my childhood.”

“Really?”

“While it lasted.” He was feeling lightheaded. “It’s difficult to imagine being anywhere else,” Ben said. “My sister and I have always been in Pretoria.”

“Just promise me you won’t become one of those people who never leave. Who becomes a speech therapist and move to Faerie Glen and have two kids and just *stay*. Forever. And don’t break the cycle.” Leo was quiet for a moment, then snorted, “Faerie Glen. Like it’s some magical forest. And not a suburban hell-hole.”

Ben couldn’t help but laugh. “Dude, relax. I promise I won’t become a Faerie Glen dentist. I just don’t know what I want to be when I grow up yet.” Leo looked him up and down – it was the same expression that sometimes drifted across his face during sex – like Leo didn’t quite recognise him. “Well when the fun’s over,” Leo swept his hands across Hatfield, “I’m out. This place is too fucking dull to be a grown-up in.”

Ben knew that Leo was right; he knew that he would leave. Leave the city which had been so indifferent to his suffering, his loss. Pretoria was too cheerful, too disinterested; evil things were whitewashed by the mendacity, the conventionality that drifted through the streets like the breeze. Lately, Ben had been craving to get away. There were better places to live. Places with bigger, taller buildings. Places with better art, better music, better parties. Places next to seas, on the slopes of mountains, on beaches. More beautiful, sunnier, lighter. Not surrounded by all this yellow grass, all this dryness, all these years.

But he wasn’t ready to fully admit that yet. Not to himself, not to Leo. Not to Freya. Especially not her.

The cigarettes were finished. The parking lot underneath them was littered with their stubs. Ben wanted to ask Leo about his childhood in the same casual way that Leo had of him. With the same flick of eyes and twist of his smile that let you feel completely present, gave you permission to be honest. Instead Ben asked “Is Steve okay? He was acting weird when I saw him earlier.”

“His mother died last week,” Leo said casually “Got shot on their farm.”

Ben didn't know what to say to this; he felt somehow unmoved by this news. He hoped Leo didn't notice that.

“Yeah, one minute your life is normal and the next it's enveloped in violence. It's a cluster fuck,” Leo said. Then he asked, “How is all that going by the way? All that stuff with Steve? The drugs.”

“Fine. Good. It's easy. He gives me some, I sell it to my friends and give him the money.”

“Have you met the big boss yet?”

“Yeah, that's who I mean. I don't deal with Steve anymore. He seems to like me.”

“Ooh, a promotion?”

“Something like that.”

Leo pauses before giving Ben a gentle kiss. “Come on, let's go buy more cigarettes.”

“Kay, cool.”

When they reached the door to the flat, the last strum of Eric's air-guitar vibrating through the flat, Leo turned to Ben and said, “I love you. Be careful.” And Ben, taken aback, said, “I love you too, babe.”

Although he wasn't sure he meant it.



# Murder

(October 2014)

# 1

Next to a dusty road, on the outskirts of Pretoria, is an abandoned school. Neglected for years and eventually set aside for demolition, its pupils and teachers were relocated to a newer school, nearer to the settlement in which they live. The old school has been a dead space for such a long time now, that most of the stories that used to live beneath its foundations have faded; their echo, their vitality dispersed by the feverish winds. There are no trees, no streets, no minds in which these stories can live, not anymore. Even the city has near-forgotten this corner of itself. Until one night, something appears. Something that breathes new life into the mortar of the fallen building, the flesh.

A painting now adorns the edge of the school. White paint on red brick, beautiful and gruesome, its fine, carefully drawn lines spread across the entire wall.

It's a tree.

A Jacaranda tree, floating.

Its branches are bare, its roots exposed. In place of leaves or blossoms, each branch terminates in the crude, imprecise shape of a bird. A dove. Each dove is attached to the tree by a noose, their limp necks grotesquely elongated. A flock of corpses. In the chest of each dove there is drawn an outline of a perfectly anatomical heart: drawn as from a textbook, in bright purple ink.

Beneath the tree it reads: "I have seen the future, brother."

And inside the roots of the tree, a system of loops and bonds, bent and twisted and gnarled together, the city awakens; the city remembers.

Friday

He locked the gun away a long ago, after that night at Shiva's Rock. After he simply couldn't abide the idea of any kind of death any more, and his gun, which used to be a tool for something noble – protecting his family – became a phantom thing that had to be discarded. If he was honest with himself, he was scared of it, too. Fearful that he might use it on himself. On Sara. But now something has changed – reverted, regressed, relapsed. Something has been shaken loose, a violence and a paranoia that would only be stilled and contained by his gun.

He is walking through the strip of uncultivated woodland to an old building at the back of the school. The building is surrounded by tall yellow grass and creaking pine trees, severed from civilisation as soon as the path turns the corner and the school is out of view. The sound of traffic vanishes and something changes; the shed is psychically remote, if not physically. The shed has been used on and off as a shooting range for those sporadic periods that the school offers shooting as an extra-mural activity.

He slips the cross off his neck. His wife's cross; he can't bear to wear it while he has a gun in his hand. Religion came late to him, came only after Peter died; after he killed that man in the parking lot. It came when he needed it the most, like a sledgehammer to the skull, which is why he believes in it. It gave him a purpose, a way forward. What had been sharp, unpredictable days became dependable, certain days. He needed to become reliable but he also needed something to rely upon. And it was more than that, besides. He needed a way to be good. A way into goodness. For a very long time, he felt that everyone around him seemed to know intrinsically what was good and what was bad, what to do and what not to do. But he didn't know, he wasn't in on the secret. And so when he found God, he felt he had been shown something which had been utterly incomprehensible to him before: a clear, unassailable way to behave.

He stands with his gun in his hand – light and familiar, not heavy at all, no burden – and shoots off one round after the other. Between the explosive roars, the memories come.

Bang.

He was young; that is not an excuse, but he was young. He had been drinking. Alone, sitting in the tiny, ugly bar. Shiva's Rock it was called, all threadbare blue carpet and bad jungle-themed art. It was Heavy Metal Tuesdays. The music – the screaming, shattered music – raged over him: a sorrowful noise. He had gone there because no one would see him, no

one would know him. Surrounded by aging men with long hair and leather jackets, cigarettes dangling from dry lips, staring at him: the interloper, the brown man in a tie and jacket. He could feel it: the whiteness of the place, the unwelcomeness. He didn't care. He wanted to feel other; other was good compared to the unbelievable weight of the familiar.

Brandy was his drink of choice; the acrid, dark smell of it wafted up to his nostrils and made him feel thinner, less real. He didn't want to go home to Sara. The Sara who knew what he was doing, and didn't care that he was doing it. Which was worse. Because her son was dead. Her son. Their son. The son. The barman glowered every time he asked for a refill. But he was staying until they kicked him out, staying until the choice was no longer his.

Finally, his ears still filled with the razor sharp pricking of the blasting speakers, last round was called and the lights switched on to full brightness. He stumbled out into the parking lot. Into his car, his beloved red Mercedes, the first car he had been able to afford, the car which had represented bright red independence, the car he couldn't part with even though he knew he should. He reversed slowly, drunkenly, out of the parking space. The palm trees in the parking lot – leaves forming spiked shadows against the sky – moved strangely, unnaturally. Such an odd tree to see in the city. An exotic tree, a sun-tinged tree.

He felt it before he heard it, the thump. He knew what it was immediately; he knew, he knew, he knew. The knowledge grabbing hold of his softened senses and stinging it into sobriety with near holy vigour.

The man he hit with his car was young too, in his early twenties. Thin and bony underneath his leather, chain-swamped uniform. It was the same young man who earlier had said: "What is this fucking oke doing in our bar?"

And for a minute Mr October felt triumph, before everything melted into panic.

And there it is: his dirty, shameful, powerful, blistering secret. There was no one to see him drive away and leave that man lying there in the empty lot, dying, dead. No one to see but God.

Bang.

They lost the baby, he and Sara. It died inside her. It was a boy. She named it Peter, the tiny corpse that came out of her. His room had already been made, in their new house. The house they were renting from an old white lady, who said when she handed over the keys, "It's a new South Africa indeed". And when that old lady died, Mr October bought the house from her son for twice what it was worth because Sara couldn't part with it, because she couldn't leave the house that had Peter's room in it.

Bang.

He has always done what is expected of him. He worked hard, made his parents proud, got a bursary, went to university, married a nice girl, had children, moved into a better neighbourhood, made a good life for his family, gave them everything they needed, made their happiness his core. Their happiness was his happiness. He didn't stray from the path; he didn't lose his way in the face of tragedy. He believed that being good would make his life good. He was strong. Why could no one be as strong as he was? Why couldn't they resist like he could; why was he burdened with strength, why did he have to harden his resolve while everyone else indulged their weaknesses?

Bang.

What choice did he have? She was a danger to Sophie; she was bringing drugs into the house. She wasn't being a mother to her daughter. He had to lock her away. He built a prison for his druggie wife. He couldn't afford to commit her. Not again. She had been to so many rehabilitation centres, had tried so many times. But as soon as she saw Peter's empty bedroom, she relapsed. She would never recover while she lived inside the house she refused to leave, the house with the dark beating heart at its centre.

He gave her food and shelter; he even gave her art supplies. He trusted her not to kill herself; she was much too selfish for that. He thought he was showing Sara mercy, but he was sentencing her to death.

That first night he locked her inside the shed he built, she pulled a knife from her skirt and told him that she knew what he was doing, and she wasn't going to be kept locked away. She wouldn't yield, she said. She used that word. Yield. It came out of her mouth in an ugly bubble. A challenge. Her teeth were nearly gone by this point; short black stumps. She came at him with her knife. And pushing her side and taking the knife away from her was so easy it broke his heart. Then he sat outside, flicking the tip of the knife across his fingernail, sending the sharp scratch into the silent, hot air. It was a Sunday, and everyone was at church. Everyone except him. He looked at their small house, at the greenless landscape. And he thought about killing her; the thought skimmed across his mind so swiftly and with so little protest, that he found himself almost getting up to do it.

Bang.

The night he found Sara dead on the floor, surrounded by her artwork, her cries for help. And the cold, crisp feeling that fluttered through him wasn't sadness or shock or grief: it was relief, relief that she was finally dead, that she was no longer hurting, that he no longer had to facilitate her shame or her grief. He never knew, never found out how she managed to get her hands on more drugs, but by the look of things her overdose had been gruelling and

violent. Her blood had foamed; her heart had exploded.

Bang.

The day he found his daughter trying to take down the things in the shed – the things he'd starting thinking off as The Creatures – and he screamed, he screamed until she came down from the ladder and slapped him. Her hand struck his cheek and he closed his mouth and they looked at each other until she went back inside the house. She never touched him again.

Bang.

In the aftermath of the final shot Mr October is reeling. All these moments, these small intense moments he can't control, can't explain, which burst to the surface, he tries to channel them through the barrel of the gun. The gun makes him feel safe, gives him some measure of control over the past.

But the gun is there for something else too, of course. The gun is there to protect them.

To protect his daughter, he would die; to protect her he would kill.

### 3

When Slick gets in the car, his knife is in his hand. "Do you have my cash?" he says.

"Yes," she says, "But not here. Not in front of the house." The boy she's with obeys her silent command and drives away, down the sleepy street. "Hello, Lucky," he says. The tall boy says nothing, simply nods.

Once they've moved onto a bigger, busier road, she hands over the cash; he counts it. "At this rate it's going to take you all year to pay me back," he says.

"That's the best I can do."

"Just as long as I get every single cent." She nods, her lips tight, her eyes hard. "Hey now, I'm not the one who came to negotiate on behalf of *my* mother," he mocks, "who made promises I couldn't keep. I'm not the one," he touches the back of her head with his dirty fingers, "in debt."

She pulls away from him, doesn't reply.

"Now you're going to do something else for me. I need you to go and make a stop outside Tings and Times. Go there and talk to a man named Bra Joe. You'll know him when you see him. Get a bankie from him, and then drive away from Hatfield towards the Engen on Church Street. Do you know where that is?"

They both nod.

“The police will be watching you. They’re going to follow you. Pull over at the Engen. Let the police search you. But don’t worry, nothing is going to happen. I just need the pigs patrolling the street to be distracted tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what I need.”

She nods.

He looks out onto the Pretoria streets, flooded with light. The tar still wet from the storm earlier, the Jacaranda trees shattered against the spring sky. He smirks, feeling the adrenaline rush to his brain, fill him. “Do you have a smoke?” she asks him.

“No,” he says. But Lucky hands her a cigarette, and a moment later she is inhaling deeply.

“Is it difficult?” he asks her.

“Is what difficult?”

“Being powerless.” She swallows and lifts her chin. She takes another drag of her cigarette and shares a look with Lucky. She passes Lucky the cigarette. Then she lets out a hollow laugh, and says, in a hoarse whisper, “You don’t own me, man.”

Slick moves quickly; he grabs the back of her hair through the gap in the headrest, and pulls. Lucky tries to grab hold of Slick’s arm, but Slick flashes his knife and says, “Just keep driving, brother. Or I’ll beat you like your daddy does.” Then he leans his head towards her ear, opens his mouth and breathes across her face. He speaks softly, pushing as much menace into his voice as possible. “Don’t talk back to me,” he says. “Don’t do anything other than what I tell you. You better hope this money is paid before the year is out, pretty girl. Because if it isn’t, I’m coming for your daddy. And then I’m coming for you. And then I’m coming for your faggy friend here. And you’ll be just as dead as your druggy mother.”

Tears are rolling down her cheeks.

“Drop me off here,” he says. Lucky pulls over, and before he gets out of the car he says, “Don’t fuck it up.”

He watches them drive away. A flashing sign that reads “Oxford’s” welcomes him to the street. He slips a neon-yellow bib over his clothes and limps across the road.

All he has to do now is wait.

### 3

A list of things he misses about his wife: the way she smelled like caramel and rain, the way she danced with one hand held slightly aloft like she was rising into the air, the batter that

stuck to her skin after she baked fish and chips, the way she said “ohlordlookathetime”, the way her body fit into his, the way she used to stroke his hair while she fell asleep, the way she loved her children, the way she loved him.

A list of things he doesn't miss about his wife: the silences she cultivated and herded around with her, the way she found it easier to be angry than to be honest, the way she secretly didn't believe in God, the fact that she had a favourite child, that she wouldn't give him blowjobs, that she wouldn't go back to work after her children were born, that she banned chocolate from the house, that she was weak, that she was weak, that she was weak.

#### 4

Slick likes disguises.

He's good at them. He can be rich or poor, he can be educated or uneducated, he can be tough or weakened, healthy or sick. He has accumulated various uniforms over the years – a police officer, an employee of a private security company, a businessman, a casual labourer: whatever is going to be the most useful, is going to blend best with his surroundings. He can be anyone he wants. Mostly he uses his disguises on the trains, changing his appearance – and sometimes even his accent – every week. It means that his clients can't get a read on him, it means anyone watching isn't able to pin him down, to know he's the *same* man boarding the train every day. Disguises work because people expect him to be a certain way: speak a certain way, move a certain way, have a certain kind of life, a certain kind of language. And he plays into that stereotype, that bland and casual racism. Misdirection: show them what they expect and they won't see who you really are.

And his favourite disguise, his most prolific, is the informal car-guard. People don't see car-guards, and don't want to be seen by them; they avoid them. Even people who have seen him before, who know him, will look right past him when he is wearing this disguise. It's a dynamic disguise, a perfect disguise. You can meet people in shopping centres, in busy streets, in parking lots, and exchange information, packages, messages. It makes it possible to meet his runners and collect money, to meet police informants without hassle. And it makes it possible to spy, to keep watch over someone without their notice.

Which is how he came to be on this street corner, on this Friday, squatting in the shadows, dressed like a car-guard, waiting in the parking lot. Waiting to kill.

#### 5

Ever since Sara died, Mr October has been looking for the signs: the signs that he didn't recognise when his wife was falling into her drug spiral. But he can't see anything like it when he looks at his daughter. At Sophie. Her life is impenetrable. She hasn't said a word since her mother's funeral. She doesn't eat the food he offers her; she doesn't tell him where she is going or who she is with. She eats dinner in her room, which she locks when she isn't there. She spends most nights at Frennie's house. She doesn't let him know where she'll be or with who. He's shouted, pleaded, threatened her, but none of it makes a dent in her determined fierceness, her coolness

But he knows where she's going. He's followed her once before, to that bar, that bar where she likes to go dancing. That's where they will be headed. She and Frennie and Lucky, and sometimes others. Like clockwork, like moths to fire. Showing off her body. Hanging out with her lithe, promiscuous friends. People with loose morals. Not how she was raised – to be only thinking of herself. But he can't blame her, and he's incapable of stopping her, of holding someone else prisoner. He has no choice but give her the freedom she wants.

He's found her Instagram account, her Twitter. Social media is all over the school, children writing things about each other, sending things to each other. Revealing, intimate things. He's searched for his own name a few times. *Mr October needs to chill. Mr October is so lame!!! Mr October should buy some new threads. Haha, I saw Mr October smoking behind the cricket pavilion.* Reduced to a joke, a curiosity.

He's seen the photos she posts of herself, breasts pressed against the camera, laughing. Her pain invisible, her life a series of flashing parties.

Fast food outlets and petrol stations flash past him. He is driving fast: too fast, not fast enough. He's in the Mercedes, because the Renault has a flat tyre; his whole body floods with anxiety whenever he drives it. He should have burned it, all those years ago, but he couldn't let the car go. He tried, took it out to the west of the city, to an abandoned quarry, determined to set fire to it. He stood in the summer air, surrounding by the pale stone and the thin sky and the sounds of a distant highway and thought about that boy – man – he killed. That man sprawled in the parking lot, the blood dripping on the pavement, sticky, black. And he couldn't do it. Couldn't destroy the car that was a murder weapon. All he could think about was the day he bought it from that old man, the old man with sky-blue eyes that couldn't see anymore. It was his first car and it cost next to nothing, and he loved it. He loved how red it was, he loved the freedom it gave him. He didn't care that the stooped old man, who ran a body-shop on the outskirts of the city, who wore a greasy white vest and had hair on his shoulders, didn't have any paperwork for the car, and would only accept cash. Mr October

didn't ask questions when he was told "If you get pulled over by the cops around here, just give them a few bucks and they'll turn a blind eye." He didn't care; he was young. He was unafraid. And later he was sentimental: the car that Sophie was conceived in, the car that took him and Sara out on their first date.

*The car that killed a man.*

He waited for the sun to set, and drove home, and he put the car away in that overgrown car-port, locked it up and let it rust, just like his gun. The next morning he bought the Renault.

He has to slow down when he passes a police car stopped next to the side of the road, on the pavement under a Jacaranda tree. Inside it a female officer sits with her chair inclined: short and plump with cropped hair, she is looking up at trees with half-closed eyes. Sleeping on the job. Still, Mr October tenses. He always tenses, convinced that one day someone is going to point a finger at his car and say: there, that's the car than ran over that metal-head at that bar. Convinced that somewhere on a camera his car was captured, the resultant image pinned to a police notice board, some chain-smoking detective vowing to make sure he is brought to justice. The brown man who ran over the white man.

Mr October found the article in the paper, about the body found outside Shiva's Rock. Found the man's name. Joey Fortuin.

Joey Fortuin, Joey Fortuin, Joey Fortuin.

He is almost there now, the streets narrowing. The campus surrounding him on all sides, serene and quiet, confined behind its wrought, blue fences, its superiority. He had hoped his daughter could attend the university. When she was younger he fantasised about her future: she was a scientist, an architect, an engineer. A lawyer, even. But the way she was going she would never perform well enough to gain access. To have a future. And he doesn't know what to do about it, how to right her course. Because he can't do anything for her when he doesn't know how to help himself, how to be better at grief. All he knows how to do is put one foot in front of the other. He doesn't know enough to hold her hand, too. Not when she won't let him.

Mr October eases his car down the street, towards the bar.

That's when he sees it: his daughter sitting in the passenger's seat and the man – The Boy – who sold Sara the drugs, who killed her, slipping out the back of the car and hurrying away.

Slick should never have trusted Benjamin Rust.

Ben wasn't Slick's first mistake, but he was the biggest.

Ben began working for him almost two years ago, selling drugs to students on the campus. Ben was good at the job, very good. He increased Slick's customer base almost tenfold. He was proactive, enterprising. Slick began to trust Ben, began to rely on him.

But then Slick began to hear rumours.

Rumours from the other people he had floating around Hatfield. Rumours confirmed by his friend in the police force and by Bra Joe, one of Ben's principle sellers: Ben was inflating his prices and skimming the extra cash off the top. Ben was stealing from him. Blatantly, fearlessly. Too smart for his own fucking good. This rich, bored boy who was selling drugs as a way of milking excitement out of the world, because of some oblique fascination with criminality, because he wanted to be defiant, playing a game, playing a game with Slick's livelihood, his freedom, his power.

Slick decided immediately that Benjamin Rust had to die.

It was Mama Africa who taught him how to kill.

Mama Africa, who aside from her work in the drug industry, dabbled in petty theft, using her children to climb through windows, to slip beneath fences, to stake out potential houses. They were her drug runners, but also her thieves. Each night after midnight they would be sent into the streets in teams of two – one child and one adult – roaming gardens, finding open windows. If they had the opportunity, they would break into houses and take what they could find. "Small bodies, for small spaces," Mama Africa would giggle; pity the child who grew up too fast to fit through a window.

Slick was particularly good at it. "Good job," Mama Africa would say when he came back from such an expedition, patting him on his head, which she insisted he keep shaved, "very slick." Most nights he was sent out in the company of a very large, very dangerous and very stupid man named Jacob. Jacob rarely spoke. He was the muscle. He was there in case something went wrong. He was there in case Slick decided not to come back with what he stole. On these expeditions, the children weren't armed. But after Mama Africa gave him that knife, Slick always secretly carried it with him. He didn't trust that it would be safe back at the house. It was too important to be abandoned.

Jacob carried the gun.

And then one night he was standing in a bedroom, the window of which he had just slipped through, standing very still, letting the room get used to him, letting the silence settle.

There was a child asleep in this room, a boy about his own age, and next to him on the bedside table, a phone. Shiny and silver. He would have to lean over the bed to get it, over the sleeping pink boy.

As his small arm shot out, the boy sat up.

And as soon as the boy saw Slick, he screamed. And Slick panicked.

He panicked.

He struck. He struck quickly. There was nothing smooth about it, nothing neat. He just thrust the knife crudely at the boy's face. And then he ran. He still doesn't know if the boy lived or died that night. All he knows is that for the first time he understood the power of fear.

When he killed again, it was to defend Mama Africa.

A man, probably a contract killer, had slipped into her parlour and tried to kill her. Not a very good contract killer, not someone who knew his victim. Mama Africa, of course, could defend herself. When he was summoned to her room, she was standing over the man with a gun. Completely composed. "Kill him," she said when Slick walked in, handing him the gun. Beneath her foot, the man squirmed. Slick did it because she asked. He had been around enough violence not to be surprised by the sound, or the feeling of, shooting someone. But he paid careful attention as the life left the man, revelled in the subtle change in the texture of the room, the small ways in which the silence mutated: there is never real silence in a room where someone died. He pulled the trigger and Mama Africa was happy, and that is all that mattered.

Slick has killed nine times in his life. He doesn't like killing, as a rule. He only kills as a last resort. Violence scares people, violence is a good motivator, and dead people are useless people. No, killing was only something he did out of necessity. If there was no other way. Killing means careful planning, it means getting away with it. It means getting to know your victim. It means having an escape plan. The risk benefit ratio is rarely justifiable. Inevitably though, there are times in life when it is unavoidable, when killing is the only choice. The night he killed his father was one of these moments. But that had been an irrational act, full of emotion, and fear. After that he was determined never to respond so instinctively again. Never to let anyone have that kind of power over him again. Being forced to kill someone, having your choice taken away, that was unforgivable.

So with Benjamin Rust, he planned carefully. He was patient. He followed Ben for over three months, learning him. Finding out where he lived, who he loved, what his routine was. It was how Slick discovered that Benjamin Rust spent every Friday night, without fail,

drinking at a bar called Oxford's. It is how he discovered that Benjamin used this opportunity to drop orders off – he would leave the drugs in previously decided upon destinations; one minute later someone would pick them up. No cash was handled. Bank deposits were made.

It was how Slick discovered an opportunity of his own.

Yes. He has killed nine times. And here he is, about to kill again.

## 7

Mr October is stricken by what he sees.

He would know The Boy anywhere. The Boy who sold Sara her drugs, who enabled her escape from this reality, who facilitated her addiction. Who murdered her. He parks his car on the side of the road, and watches The Boy walk across the street and come to rest on the inner edge of a parking space, squatting in the shade of the tree. He is dressed like car-guard, could *be* a car-guard for all Mr October knows.

Mr October dims his lights.

The presence of the gun in his cubby hole radiates through the car.

The night he came home to find his wife on the couch with The Boy is the shard that separates the past from the present; it symbolises the moment his future was torn. As he walked through the door, Sara, high and happy, pulled him into a dance and kissed him. She said, "Peter's here, Abraham, he's here, he's back!" When he didn't understand, when he couldn't indulge her, she turned violent. She stabbed him with a potato peeler; she drove the short, blunt blade deep into the hand he reached out to her – it formed a puckered scar. Her face was full of sweat, her eyes full of strangeness. The meth lay on the table between them.

"Who is this Sara!" he yelled, bleeding, not understanding, not keeping up.

"This is the man who makes me happy," she said.

"Does he have a name?" She shook her head, her tongue tasting the air, her eyes manic.

The Boy looked up at Mr October and started laughing. Laughing like a lunatic, he said, "High five, auntie October."

Mr October takes the gun out of the cubby hole.

Mr October moves slowly forward, turning back into the road. The Boy is only a few metres away, looking in the other direction. And Mr October has a vision, a vision in which he slowly rolls his car forward, sticks his gun out of the window and shoots The Boy dead.

He pauses.

Beside him is an empty row of parking spaces and behind that a dark compound

hidden behind a green fence and a row of trees that throw shade across the pavement. In the distance, just beyond where the parking spaces end (and where The Boy is standing), Mr October sees the bright neon lights of Oxford's. The sidewalk in front of the bar is oddly quiet; still too early for a crowd. There are no cars behind him, and he is frozen in the street, unable to drive forward and unable to turn back. Between the world of light before him and the dark, quiet world lingering in his rear-view mirror, he senses a membrane, a divide.

He has to make a choice. Isn't this why he has his gun in the car, to protect his daughter from men like this one. How could she be associating with the very man who fed her mother's addiction? How could she be in a car with The Boy? Is *this* why she doesn't talk to him? Is this her dark secret – that she is friends with the man who killed her mother?

He drives slowly forward.

He is almost level with the parking space now.

Then Mr October sees it, the white Citi Golf coming towards him, the orange light of its right indicator flashing like a frenzied question mark.

And then a change in the way he experiences things. A shift in reality – time and light slow down; his thoughts are swept aside by something more organic, more wild. Mr October points his gun at The Boy, an automatic response.

But then The Boy stands suddenly to attention, rising from the shade in a swift, brazen motion. He has gun in his hand, a gun that had not been there before. He lifts a gloved hand.

And.

Bang.

## 8

Slick had only one possession with him when he was introduced to Mama Africa and her house of runaways. It was a figurine made of wire, wrought by a street vendor. Red with rust, Slick had stolen it one day while he was roaming the streets of the city looking for food. The street vendor didn't notice; he was asleep on his chair. Slick was compelled to take it by something he didn't understand then, and hardly understands now: a feral greed for something beautiful, something to possess. The figurine had no face, no hands or feet. No eyes through which to see the world, no mouth through which to speak. It was old, unwanted, and only in a few places on its body did the silver wire still shine through. His first night in Mama Africa's house, he slept with it next to him; he wouldn't give it up. Until one of the other children, malicious and bossy, tried to take it from him. Slick fought; he scratched and

kicked and yelled until the other child became scared. But in the process, the wire man's hand was broken off, snapped at the wrist; the sharp stump cut across Slick's body, a straight line of blood the width of his arm. (Mama Africa, when she saw the wound, said, "Better hope it doesn't get infected, little impundulu".) The pain was invigorating and sobering, but Slick looked down at the broken wire man in disgust; he felt harmed, betrayed. The next day, he threw the wire man away.

Slick massages the scar on his arm absentmindedly – a scar many times opened and reopened in the years since that first cut – as he watches from the shadows, watches the lanky shadow of Benjamin Rust drop its sister off in front of Oxford's, and slowly drive down the street looking for parking. Benjamin Rust narrows his eyes, and then widens them when he sees Slick. Slick stands, so that Benjamin Rust, seeing him standing here, would be drawn to the parking space.

Slick is gambling; he is gambling that Benjamin Rust won't recognise him, that he wouldn't see beyond the car-guard uniform. He is gambling that even though Benjamin Rust has seen him wearing this disguise before, he won't be expecting it, he won't be able to see the truth through the darkness. Even if he did, though, he won't be expecting any foul play. He would still drive right up to Slick, because he trusts him. And that's when Slick would shoot him in the head and disappear. And all anyone would say afterward, if they said anything at all, was that maybe there had been a car-guard here tonight, but wasn't there always? No witness would be able to see past his disguise, or remember his face.

Slick smiles.

He adjusts his body language, pulls his beanie down further. Ben pauses in the middle of the road, and the orange flicker of his indicator light flashes.

But then a second car appears – suddenly, from the other side of the street. Slick sees it out of the corner of his eyes, and turns slightly: an old red Mercedes. The Mercedes pauses, the driver looking enquiringly at him.

Slick feels the first spasms of panic, feels his calm begin to crumble, like a worm burrowing inside his brain. But he doesn't have time to think, he doesn't have time to reconsider. Trust the plan, trust the disguise. He chose a quiet night, a night on which most of the students were gone for the holidays; he has orchestrated an absence of police in the area, and this other driver would never be able to identify him, never be able to tell the police a single thing. It is now or never.

Act.

Slick singles to Benjamin Rust, who immediately begins turning into the space,

signalling something to the driver of the red Mercedes; saying, with his pale, entitled hands, “I was here first, this is mine”.

Slick pulls out his gun.

Ben’s is holding a cigarette out his open window; a habit of Ben’s that Slick is counting on.

There isn’t going to be a second opportunity. Either he has to abandon his plan and try again later, or he has to act immediately. He must take the risk; Benjamin Rust could not be allowed to live any longer, could not be allowed to spend another night stealing from him.

He has to, has to die.

And so what if there’s a witness?

So what?

Slick watches Benjamin Rust’s face as he lifts his gun, sees the shock flash across it; Slick winks at Benjamin Rust in the moment before he pulls the trigger; the moment before he throws this boy away.

Bang.

There is a scream; the sound of screeching tyres.

And then Slick runs.

He has never run that fast in his life.

He jumps across the fence behind him, into the darkness of the office block, and sprints towards the other end of the block, to another fence that will deposit him two streets away. As he runs he flings his orange bib aside, takes his beanie off. When he arrives at the other end of the property, he crouches low. Panting. The tall office block is behind him, hiding the street he just came from, the chaos. He hears sirens. At least his friend is off making sure all the pigs in the area are distracted by other things; he has some time before they swarm the area. *I want to know everything you know asap*, he texts quickly. He changes his clothes: the ragged t-shirt and jeans are exchanged for a suit jacket and slacks. He straightens the jacket smoothly, whips the discarded clothes into his backpack and holsters his gun.

He breathes deeply.

Then he walks away, unhurried, into the embrace of the waiting city.



# Revenge is a Purple Thing

(June 2015)



# 1

The man is throwing paint at the wall. The city can feel it hit the bare brick, wet and sticky.

The man is dressed in a white tank top and white shorts. Paint has splattered back against his clean clothes, his bare arms, bare legs. His muscles are shining with sweat; his concentration is magnetic. He moves as if in a dance. His movements – reaching for his paint, stabbing his big brush deeply into the tin and pulling it out again with a great flourish, then throwing, dashing, tossing, the paint against the wall – achieve a pulsing, repetitive rhythm. His eyes are closed, and his movements are smooth, sweeping.

He is using bright, vivid hues of red and blue that arc through the air between brush and wall slowly, some of it missing and dropping to the pavement. It is haphazard art; perhaps it isn't art at all. But he is obviously caught up in his own energy – anger, ecstasy and passion all flashing across his face restlessly as he works.

He finishes suddenly, stopping with a final thrust of paint, almost half-heartedly, across his shoulder.

He is panting, and he puts his hands on his chest as if to still his heart. His hands are stained red.

He opens his eyes and regards his work.

On the wall, the paint is still wet, still settling. The blues and reds are running over each other, running ahead of each other, fighting for dominion. Rivulets of red and blue paint meet at the base of the wall, crash and collide.

And as the man walks away, streams of purple follow him into the night.

And from the wall, the city bleeds.

Tuesday

“What’s bothering you?”

“Hmm?” She’s sitting on the floor, back against her couch, watching an episode of *The Closer*. Her television’s screen is slightly skewed, damaged by age, and she’s in the habit of tilting her head when she’s watching. Frick’s been in the bedroom, talking quietly on his phone. “Who were you talking to?” she asks, “it’s after midnight.”

“A friend. Is it the Benjamin Rust thing?”

“What?”

“The thing that’s bothering you?”

“No, why would that be bothering me?”

“I dunno; because it’s still not solved.”

“Well, that happens. No new information, so the plot can’t move forward, can it?” She sighs, watching the screen: always new information, always a guilty conscience in TV-land. “Then what is it?”

“The shots.”

They’d heard them earlier, from her bedroom, while the white sheets were tangled about their legs. Two shots.

Bang. Bang.

They had sounded like they came from her street, right outside her window – too close to ignore. She’d jumped up as soon as she heard them, but Frick had remained still – still and naked – on the bed. “Aren’t you coming?” she asked.

“This isn’t our beat, babe. We can call it in. Let someone else take care of it. Come back to bed.”

“Someone’s been shot. We need to get there now.”

But he had convinced her. She’d called it in, radioed the Sunnyside station.

But now: “I haven’t heard sirens or seen anything out there. It’s been an hour.”

It’s the twist of his lip, the drop of condescension in his voice. It’s the way he called her “babe” earlier. It’s the fact that those gunshots sounded louder, darker, than usual; a feeling she can’t explain. She has to do something.

She’s at the door, zipping up her jacket and fastening her gun to her belt. “If you’re going to stay here,” she says, “at least call some back up.” Before her outstretched hand can touch the cold copper of her door handle, he says, “Wait, I’m coming.”

It was a mistake to sleep with him, but she understands why she keeps doing it: he makes her feel powerful – he is so submissive, so laid-back and willing to let her lead. She’s never had that with a man. Not that there had been many men. Not that any of the ones there had been had lasted long. “Too strong willed,” her mother’s voice whispers. “Always chasing them away with your strength.” Better strong than weak. Better alone than abused. Right, mom? Right?

Five minutes later – five minutes that she wouldn’t have needed to wait had she been alone – they move into the street in front of her building, torches held aloft. Guns drawn. She lives across from a large park; it’s a park famous for its drug dealers and prostitutes. On the far side of the park stands the National Art Gallery, a flat rectangle of glass and grey steel that she has never visited. She is sure the gunshot came from the park; she can’t see anyone moving through the darkness.

She motions for Frik to follow her into the park, for him to flank her.

The park is surrounded by large Jacarandas – sinister shapes in the blue darkness – and covered in patchy yellow grass slowly being eroded by years of loitering and litter. Stone pathways criss-cross the park, carrying them deeper into the interior, further away from the light of street lamps, and nearer the art gallery and the wet shadows it casts; dark pools for people to hide in.

Fast food boxes and empty soda cans collect at the feet of broken bins, the smell of rotting garbage is carried on the air.

The silence is too absolute for Nolwazi’s liking.

They search for twenty minutes without finding anything.

She called the Sunnyside station again while Frik was dressing, but still no sound of sirens, still no sign of anyone giving a shit. Frik comes walking out the darkness. “I haven’t found anything except a drunk beggar. He says he heard the gunshot, but doesn’t know from which direction it came. Didn’t see anything. Couple of girls on the other side of the park huddled away. Same story.”

She is about to give up. A gunshot doesn’t mean a body. Gunshots are a common enough nightly chorus here. But this one had been so close, too close. She’ll come back in the morning and try to find a casing.

“What’s that?” Frik says, pointing.

“What?”

“That.” From beneath a hedge planted against the outer wall of the gallery, where they have already searched, there is a hint of movement: a black shape moving through shadow. “I

dunno, I'm not sure I see anything.”

“No, there's definitely something.”

They head towards the movement.

Behind the museum, the full moon is yellow and fat. It would almost be romantic, if she didn't have her gun in her hand, listening to the dirty silence: the kind of silence which means that someone is trying not to breathe. The kind of silence that swells. “There's no one here,” Frik says ahead of her, searching the hedges. “My mistake.”

“No. Wait. Listen.”

“Listen to what?”

“You don't hear that?” Nolwazi walks up to hedge, carefully shining her torch underneath it. She wouldn't have said someone could fit beneath there, and earlier she had thought those shadows were natural, cast by the plants themselves. But now the shadows are slightly altered, sharper than before....

There.

Against the wall, cradled into the corner behind a row of bushes, is a young boy. He's forced a space between the front of the museum and the plant bedding he's taken shelter in, squeezed himself in there and made himself small. She would not have seen him had she not parted the plants directly above him, had he not moved.

“Shit,” Frik says.

“Call an ambulance,” she says.

He can't be more than nine or ten and he's wrapped in a too-large jacket. He's looking at their guns with fear. He's clutching at his stomach with red, red hands, and she can smell blood. “We have to take him to hospital,” she says moving towards him. But as she moves forwards, the boy reacts: in a split second, he's whipped out a gun. It's a frantic, fearful gesture.

He looks at her – a warning.

But she takes another step.

So he fires. The shot explodes into the quiet night.

She feels the heat of the bullet firing past her legs.

Frik is in front of her, pushing her towards the ground. She collapses under his weight. “Put the gun down!” Frik yells. “Put it down.” Frik's gun is in the boy's face, his body looming over him.

Seconds tick by.

Her own gun has fallen to the ground. She mentally examines herself. Has she been

hit?

No.

No, she can't feel anything.

She hears the boy's gun fall. From the ground, she sees the boy's terrified eyes follow Frik as he leans down to pick up the discarded gun. He is holding it carefully by the barrel. He stands back, letting go of her, allowing her to stand. He is still pointing his own gun at the boy. Nolwazi takes another step towards the boy, puts her hand on Frik's arm, pushing his gun down, away. She talks to the boy. "My name is Nolwazi," she says. "Can I take you to hospital? Will you let me help you?"

The boy shakes his head: don't come closer. Nolwazi slowly holsters her gun, showing him her bare hands. She takes her jacket off, offering it to the wounded child. He shakes his head again. Before she can move, Frik puts a hand on her shoulder. "Just leave him, babe."

"Inspector."

"What?"

"We're in the field. Use my title."

"Just leave him," Frik says again.

"What do you mean?"

"He's going to be dead in a few minutes anyway. There's no way you can get him to an ambulance on time." It takes her a moment to digest his words. Something inside her rears up and then shuts down.

Nolwazi's heart changes in an instant.

She turns to face Frik, and says, "Shut up, Frik. Shut the fuck up. Just call an ambulance."

Her breath fogs up the space between them; she hands him her phone. He regards her impassively before taking it.

She turns, and moves quickly towards the boy. His eyes widen, and he begins to scream. High pitched and brutal, it pierces the night. But she moves through the sound. She picks the boy up. He weighs almost nothing. She presses her jacket into his wound. As soon as she does this, the screaming stops. The boy's arms fall to his side. He's passed out.

"He would have shot you. You know that right, he would have shot you and left you here to die." Frik is standing back from her, his shoulders hunched, his face in shadow. He hands her back the phone. "They're on their way."

"He's just a child."

“He wouldn’t have done the same for you.”

“He isn’t a police officer, Frik. It isn’t his job to be better. But it is ours. Now fucking help me. Go get the car.”

“The ambulance is on route,” he protests.

“Go get the car,” she says again.

“What about this? I can’t break chain of custody.” He is still holding the boy’s gun.

“That’s an order,” she says.

He nods slowly, and starts back towards her flat. Then she hears the ambulance sirens coming towards them. Somewhere on the other side of the park, red lights flash, flash, flash. Frik stops; he turns around and looks at her. He shrugs his shoulders, twisting his lip into a tight full-stop. He looks at her with something akin to pity; a dark, dead pity. Then he turns and starts walking again, more slowly than before. She takes this to mean he is leaving, not coming back. Good riddance, then.

Angie had been right anyway. He does have a small penis.

### 3

Freya Rust. Twenty-one. Art student.

These words echo as she lies in bed, no longer an art student, no longer twenty-one. Barely still Freya Rust.

She woke up because of the blood. It flooded her whole vision. It spilled over her hands –she wipes them on her sheets. She sits up, letting her eyes adjust, lighting a cigarette.

“Happy Birthday, Rusty,” she says to the room, to the Ben inside her head.

Freya had been dreaming about the first time she saw a murder, about the trail of tragedy that spread from that day to this day; a life remembered in blood.

She was nine years old, and the whole world was red. They had been on holiday, in the deep north of the country, into the heat of a desert, where there was very little vegetation: barely a few shrubs holding themselves in the earth, unable to resist the tumbling balls of hot, hot wind that scraped the world clean, covering everything in a soft red dust; it stained their tents, cars and clothes, their hair, the inside of their mouths, their food.

The camp they were staying in was nothing more than six tents erected on wooden platforms and a few out buildings, surrounded by a fence designed to keep elephants out, but not much else. The camp was perched on the edge of a dry pan, an ancient sea bed where shiny rock formations glistened in the sun. Relief from the heat and the dust could be found

in a small stone hut, which overlooked the pan. Freya spent her afternoons with her head on her mother's lap, having her forehead dabbed with a wet cloth; the cloth, too, came away with a smattering of red dust.

There were no other guests in the camp. Just Freya, her family and a few staff members: a cleaner, an animal tracker and a ranger who took them out onto the farm at dusk, showing them the game. His name was Ranger Daniel, and he had skin as dark as anything Freya had ever seen; he spoke in a musical voice, a deep, melodious timbre. Freya was in love with him as soon as she set eyes on him.

Although they ventured out into the flat, sun-spiked vastness every day, most of the animals they saw came to them: there was a small, miraculous pool of water that still survived inside the dry pan, which attracted the attention of animals from kilometres around. Lion, jackal and impala all moved past in small numbers throughout the day. But there was one animal which had made the watering hole its permanent residence, a bird which spent its life patrolling the area around the pool, watching as other animals came and went. The bird was at least as tall as Ben, and its dark plumage glistened in the sun, glossy despite the dust.

The heron challenged almost any animal that came too near its nesting ground. Freya spent many hours watching the heron make itself suddenly large – extending its slim leather legs and its sinuous black neck – and swooping down on a jackal trying to drink. Anything smaller than itself was dealt a deadly blow by a sharp black beak. Only lions seemed immune from the heron's wrath. Often the heron deliberately moved away from the water, turning its back on the pond. It would fold its neck down, and partially cover its face with its wing. Feigning disinterest, turning its head ever so slightly, the bird would sneak peeks at the waterhole. Through binoculars, Freya could see it open one yellow eye every few minutes, keeping watch. As soon as another bird came into range, it would strike with incredible speed. It was playing a deadly game, trying to see which animals would be brave or foolish enough to come near its water then they thought it was safe.

Freya had never seen a bird eat another bird. She was fascinated.

Then, one morning, it came into the camp.

When she and Ben came through the flap of their tent into the early morning sun, the bird was standing a few feet away from them, its head slightly skewed, watching. It was even more magnificent from up close: its plumage shimmered in different hues of deep brown, and its neck was a cascade of black and white feather. The bird immediately took notice of them, locking its eyes on them and abandoning whatever it had been doing. It was clear that the bird was watching Ben rather than Freya; as soon as Ben moved, the bird moved too. Ben took a

step down from the tent platform, and the bird took a step towards him.

Their parents were nowhere to be seen.

The camp was set in a half moon, the straight edge looking out towards the pan and the tents placed along the curve; the kitchen and bathroom stood in the centre of the camp site. Against the outside wall of the bathroom, a tap was dripping and had formed a shallow pool during the night. It was this, Freya later decided, which must have attracted the bird. It had been standing at this pool when it first noticed them.

But now its attention was fully on Ben.

Ben took another step down; the bird mirrored him, taking a step forward.

Freya lingered behind.

The bird was carefully watching Ben, eyes sharp, neck elongated. It was moving its neck as it walked towards Ben, whipping it back and forth in an s-motion, like a snake that had reared back. In the heron's eyes, an ancient thing: lethal curiosity, apathetic territoriality. It came for Ben with a single mindedness, an eager and cold-hearted fury. It scared Freya, suddenly so close to a wild animal she had seen kill. "Ben," she said, "be careful."

Ben was now on ground level, only a few feet away from the bird. Between them, their father's car was parked. "I need to pee," he said. "It's just a stupid bird." He took a confident step forward, waving his hands above his head. The bird was still thrashing its head towards them; it was an unnatural movement, a warning. Ben began to move towards the bird, shouting loudly. The bird puffed up its feathers and flapped its wings.

Ben stopped.

Freya was still on the steps, wary and watching.

Ben decided to walk the other way around, hoping the bird wouldn't turn and follow. But as soon as Ben did this, the bird moved to head him off – swiftly, without a sound. As Ben moved back again the other way, the bird did the same. It was trapping him; it wasn't letting him pass. "Walk along the edge of the camp," she told him. He nodded. But as he turned to move along the tent edges, the heron followed.

Ben began to run, and the bird ran after him.

"Ben," Freya yelled, "Get inside a tent." Ben looked behind him and quickly entered one of the unoccupied tents.

Seconds later the bird began striking the tent with its beak, tearing holes in the canvas.

"No, stupid bird!" Freya shouted lamely. Ben was screaming at the bird from inside the tent; Freya could hear the untamed fear in his voice.

"What's going on?" Ranger Daniel said, appearing at a run from behind the kitchen.

“My brother is in that tent,” Freya said, as he noticed the bird for the first time. “Oh, shit,” he said, running towards the bird, waving his arms and shouting, mimicking Ben. Freya relaxed at this; she expected the bird to take flight. But it merely turned towards the ranger and advanced. Acting quickly, the ranger took out his gun and let off a warning shot. At the sound, Frey shrieked. She heard Ben shout out, and go suddenly quiet.

The bird took no notice of the gunshot. It continued advancing.

And then Freya knew what would happen before it did.

The ranger shot another round.

Blood burst forth on the bird’s puffed breast.

The heron fell limply to the ground.

Not even at the moment of death did it make a sound.

The gunshots brought their parents racing. Chaos ensued. But Freya only had eyes for the fallen bird, lying in its own blood. Dead. She walked towards it transfixed. She sat down next to the body. She took the bird’s neck into her lap; it was lighter than a pillow. Its blood smelled salty, like dried meat “They can be very aggressive and territorial,” she heard ranger Daniel say to her parents.

Freya looked deeply into its lifeless eyes, the down at her wet hands. Where the bird’s blood was spilling over her white knuckles, her child’s skin.

Dripping from her small fingers into the dust.

Freya felt the same way that day, sitting in that pool of the bird’s blood, as she did last night, walking away from Cheery’s dead body.

Before this Freya would have guessed that killing someone, hurting someone, would leave her feeling damaged and alien. But it hasn’t. It has left her feeling alive and triumphant. It has filled her with a kind of peace, a serene certainty.

Freya Rust, twenty-one, art student: this is the story she used to tell about herself. The story she whispered every night before she went to sleep. The story her brain knot together from facts, scenes, memories.

But stories change.

What if she tells herself a different story? A story that is more persuasive, more seductive, more intent than real life. How easy it becomes, in the solitude of grief, in the anger, to shrug off one reality and begin living in another; an awful slippage between the reality she knows and the one she is creating. She stands slowly, walking through the discarded clothes on her floor, finding herself on the balcony, looking over the dimming

lights of Hatfield, looking over the city. Cities are just like stories. A city is designed; a city is written. A city has a beginning, a middle, an end. A city has patterns, themes, hidden agendas, unexpected corners, dark depths. Just like a story, a city repeats itself; a whole collection of stories that collide and intertwine and tangle and feed off each other. Grow, change, devour, die, reincarnate. The city, documenting her grief on its walls and roads and trees. A city of stories, a story of cities.

The Jacaranda tree outside her window is bare and she can see the old women sitting in the branches of the tree, watching her, nodding silently in agreement.

She needs to do it.

She needs to kill Abraham October.

She re-imagines the night she saw Abraham in that bar. This time, she has a gun in her hand. This time, she pulls the trigger. The shots burst out. He lies dead in the parking lot.

Freya Rust wouldn't have had the courage or audacity to kill a man. But she isn't Freya Rust anymore. She is someone else, no one else.

Stories change.

*Once upon a time there was a young woman named Freya, whose brother was killed by a demon. She became a fierce warrior and avenged him. She slayed the demon. And as a reward, they made her a god.*

#### 4

Mr October remembers the happiest day of his life with savage accuracy.

It was the eve of his fortieth birthday. He was sitting on his back porch, his presents unwrapped before him (two charcoal drawings of his parents, long dead), and as Sara handed him a glass of champagne, he said, "Thank you, wife" and she smiled. She sat down across from him, her hand resting on her stomach, her dark hair wispy, her swarthy eyes distant. She took a sip of tea. "Stop worrying," he said. She was always worrying: drifting ahead, devoting her days to the future; whispering urgent premonitions to herself. "I just want the baby to come," she said.

"Where has Sophie gone?"

"She's at Frennie's. She'll be home soon." He sat back and let the early evening spread across his skin, while Sara began chatting casually about her exhibition, opening that weekend at the small gallery in Charles Street. Everything in that moment was blissful, stable. He liked his job, he liked his house, he loved his wife and child. And he was content to wake up every morning and rouse them from bed with coffee and the news on the radio,

content to spend his evenings eating his wife's samosas, watching soopies with her on the television she bought despite his protestations: "My money, my decision." In that moment time did a strange thing. Something is hadn't done since he was twenty: it slowed down.

When he was young, he always seemed to have time to spend doing not much of anything. There were hours which he could waste away with his friends; days were long and unending, nights were absolute – colourful lights flashing and warm bodies dancing. Pleasure never ceased, drama and disagreement were over quickly, no wound was deep, no trauma was permanent. Sex was beautiful, and stilling; as if someone had gone and thrown a soft white blanket over him, everything was paused. Life stopped just for him. He was that powerful; he was a god of time.

But when he was no longer twenty, the years began to hurry, began to outpace him. It happened gradually and it happened all at once. He married and had a baby, he accrued debt, he settled into a job he thought would be fulfilling, but turned out to be capricious. His life began to settle, coalesce, take on a permanent, irreparable shape. He became dissatisfied. But on the eve of his fortieth birthday, Mr October found a second adolescence, a second period of timeless happiness; a sublime state where everything was how it was meant to be. His daughter was growing into a good, kind person. His wife wasn't sick or angry or stricken; she was strong and just. His debts were paid; his work was becoming meaningful again.

And then.

Sara: losing the baby. Sara: overcome with heartache. Sara, sick. Sara, dead. And he found out that happiness could make you blind, too.

And now.

Now when he remembers his wife, he remembers her as she was in those final two months, constrained in her shed – shrivelled, pockmarked, stinking. The Sara before that, the vital, whole woman he married is trapped in a little bubble of memory which only floats to the surface occasionally. Almost twenty years of marriage decimated, struck down, overcome by that hateful, drugged-up version of Sara: "Are you going to keep me in here forever, Abraham?" she asked the first night he put her in there, her manic face aghast. "You're too weak for that!"

It's a terrible thing, to have been happy. It sits in the small of his back, like an itch, like some part of him is still sitting at that table with Sara, waiting for Sophie so they can have dinner together. Happiness, a mutable beast, dragging behind it the promise of its own expiration. How rare it would have been, how miraculous, if he had been allowed to die that day, to be taken from the world when all he knew was happiness. It would have been an act

of pure mercy.

Now all he has is the memory of happiness. A memory that is exactly like a perfect, coral-lovely shell: put it to your ear and for a moment you are lulled by the sound of a distant ocean. But confront the shell for what it is and you'll realise that it's just a dead thing. A dead thing that is far away from home, its songs nothing but the echo of a former life – nothing but a screaming, stormy lament.

## 5

“He's still in custody.”

“He hasn't said anything yet?”

“No. I had a private word with him last night. I made your feelings clear.”

“Keep me updated.”

Slick slips his phone back into his pocket. His friend sounds confident, but that's because his friend can't read the signs. Slick, though, sees them very clearly.

He has known for a while now that he would have to leave the city eventually. He knew it as soon as he shot Benjamin Rust: that was the moment he lost control of it all, that he became too confident for his own good.

His friend tells him that Lucky hasn't told the detectives anything, yet. Probably because Lucky is trying to protect Sophie; maybe she's asked him to be quiet until they pay the last of the money. *Where are you? I need to see you.* The messages from Sophie October have been coming in all morning. He ignores them. They feel like a trap.

The world is cold, and he has to buttress himself against the wind. He is sitting on a bench in the station, waiting for the train, watching the pale pre-dawn world, the metallic sky. The tracks are surrounded by lush, green vegetation, hiding the street from view. The station is quiet, only a few other commuters huddling in the warmth of the little anteroom. The man who runs the kiosk is smoking, letting the blue smoke drift in the blue air and across the train tracks, and away.

A bird hidden in the grassland gives a call, and then comes running from the undergrowth. A duck-like, mud-brown bird that stops dead when it sees the gathered people. It gives another squawk before bursting into the air, panicked.

A Hamerkop. A lightning bird. Impundulu.

It was his mother who taught him about the Lightning Bird. His mother who was neither Zulu, nor superstitious, but told these stories to scare both Slick and his father – who *was* superstitious, who believed his bad luck and his unemployment, his weakness for

alcohol, was the work of a witch – away from any wrongdoing. The legend differed each time his mother told the story: sometimes impundulu is made from lightning, and is only visible in bird form when seen by a woman; sometimes, he takes the form of a beautiful young man; most times, he is a black and white and full of rage; other times, his feathers are red and gold. But impundulu is almost always the servant of a witch.

It is said that impundulu cannot be killed by blades or bullets, only by fire.

Fire. Slick has often wondered if his father's stray cigarette that evening was in fact propelled by the rumours about Mrs Yengeni; the dark rumours that she stole children and dabbled in witchcraft. Worse, in *foreign* witchcraft. Maybe the things that have happened to Slick since then have been the work of Mrs Yengeni's impundulu; the revenge of the Lighting Bird whose mistress his father had tried to kill.

It was a shock to his child's mind when Mama Africa, the night he came running from that house covered in the blood of a young boy, had wrapped him in a blanket, put her large, slender arms around him, and called him "my little impundulu." It only struck him much later that he must have been the one who told *her* about impundulu; she snatched up his story and repurposed it for her own use. All the more trustworthy because she could do so in his own language. And now, of course, when he tells the story of the lighting bird to himself, it comes in Mama Africa's voice. Not his mother's, not his own. Mama Africa's interpretation, Mama Africa's facts.

His fingernail catches on the ridge of the scar on his arm, and the pain flares.

That morning, when he was standing naked, barefoot, on the cold cement floor, he watched the blood drip from his thigh onto the ground and he wondered: *how many times have I bled for this city? How much of me has flowed through its streets?*

Mama Africa disappeared one day, just like that. When he thinks of her now, he likes to think of her in a dark gambling den, laughing wickedly at her own victories, free of her disguises at last. There are stories about why Mama Africa disappeared – that she was caught up in a battle for territory she couldn't win, that she was assassinated, that she was arrested.

That she abandoned them.

As he dressed this morning, he thought about the threads he has spun all over Pretoria, the threads that lead from him to every person who buys his drugs, every person who is happy because of him. Who is satisfied and forgetful because of him. Who has realised that the past isn't worthy or gratifying, but destructive. Because of him. He imagined the strings that led from all the people of the city whose lives he has changed, who have been affected by him, by his power and his violence. The connections between those threads, the

coincidences. The stories, the pain and the pleasure. Slick, the puppet-master. Slick the king. And he took up the can of petrol and doused it over his thin mattress, his empty floor. He emptied it out over the small mountain of unsold drugs he had created in the early hours of the morning.

And he struck a match, and burned it all to the ground.

He can still smell the smoke on his skin, inside his hair.

He smiles.

Over the sound of the arriving train, the Hamerkop gives another call.

## 6

It's the bloody fingerprint she can never get out of her head, which glimmers across her imagination at odd moments, glistening and wet; the pristine red imprint of her mother's thumb, fine as spider's web, shining on the white handle of the phone. It's the way her own thumb fit so precisely over her mother's blood-print, so exactly that it blocked it from sight, as if her mother hadn't been there, minutes before, picking up the phone, trying to call for help, trying to live.

It was up to Freya to call the police. To pick up the bloodied phone – the landline, in her mother's study, with the large wall to floor window that looked out over the back garden, with its fig trees and apricot trees gnarled and shadowy, where anything could be hidden, anything could come suddenly out of the darkness and press its white, angry face up to the window frame and see her, see her. And she would be frozen by its eyes, unable to move. And the thing that came out of the night would have a canine smile and hungry eyes and bloody, red-hot skin, and it would press its lips up to the window and breathe and she would have no choice but to watch it as it slowly came through the window and put slender fingers around her throat and squeeze.

And she had to dial the number herself – 10111 – and wait for someone to answer and then tell the person that her parents were dead – dying – and please send someone, send the police, this was an emergency. An emergency! And put the phone back down. And stare out into the night, incapable of movement, frozen, stricken, until the light of dawn came creeping across the garden, banishing all the monsters that lived there. (“Only in your imagination, darling.”)

Except tonight, tonight a monster had come, out of the real shadows, the real hidden parts of the garden, and into the real house; and it had *killed*.

She isn't sure what woke her up, although she later realised it must have been the

smell of their blood. When she awoke, her first thought was: stew. Her mother, cooking stew. (“When you were a baby you were always waking up at the smell of frying beef”.) But her second thought was: why is it so quiet?

The silence warned her that there was terror ahead.

And only when the sun had risen did Ben come up behind her, still full of sleep, and ask her what she was doing. And in answer to her question a policeman appeared outside the window mouthing “open up” in an exasperated sort of way, as if it was her fault that it had taken them two hours to arrive, her fault that no one understood that she had needed an ambulance.

And, of course, it was too late. Too late, too late.

## 7

The first time Slick saw the teacher, he was sitting on a couch in a living room he had never been in, charmed inside by Auntie October, fascinated by what he had come to recognise as her singular pain.

His relationship with auntie October began with a phone call: “I got your number from Siphon,” she’d said, “he’s a friend of my daughter’s.” She was relaxed over the phone, open and fearless. He met her on the trains like he met everyone on the trains. When she no longer wanted to meet on the trains – “my husband is getting suspicious” – he arranged for the drugs to be delivered in person, an allowance he hadn’t made for a client before. But it was months later when she phoned asking for something else, something more. “Come to my house,” she said. This time, she sounded scared.

He liked auntie October – she was sophisticated and sincere. And sad, standing in front of the large canvasses she’d painted, all blues and greens and yellows. He hadn’t understood them, but they generated an odd feeling inside him, jarring and obtuse – the feeling that he had lost something, or was missing something he never had. He liked the way she reminded him of Mama Africa, complete with headscarf and enigmatic smile. He liked the way her house smelled like honey and cinnamon. He liked that she was kind to him. He enjoyed he liberated chaos the drugs brought out in her. She made him laugh.

But the teacher chased Slick away like he was a dog. Slick fled – of course he fled.

After that he handed Auntie October off to one of his runners. He could not risk being seen by her husband again.

That was until one misty morning when he was approached by a pretty girl in a green school uniform and a tall boy in a khaki uniform. Prestigious schools, both of them. “I’m

Sophie,” she said. “This is Lucky, Siphos brother. My mother sent me.” And he saw a business opportunity he couldn’t refuse, he saw a way to turn debt into an asset.

It wasn’t the first thing he said to Sophie October but it was the most important: “If you tell your father about this, I’ll kill both of you.”

Slick had been standing outside Oxford’s. He was there to collect a payment from Sophie – one of the last payments she owed him. He recognised the teacher immediately, knew at once that he was there for Slick, that it wasn’t coincidence. Slick still doesn’t know whether it was because Sophie October told her father everything, or simply because the teacher remembered that day he walked in to find Slick on his couch, but the moment the teacher came out of the dim winter light, and attacked him in the street – drew his blood, broke his skin – was the moment Slick decided the teacher had to die. That was the moment the teacher signed his own death warrant.

When the teacher’s fist made contact with his cheek, as the other man’s big harsh hands knocked the purple into his skin, broke it open, let it bleed, Slick remembered his mother lying on the floor, beaten down. His mind became a child, overcome with the past. He submitted. He let it happen. He hated himself.

When Sophie asked him a few days later what had happened to his face, he shrugged it off. “A mishap,” he said. She reached out a hand then, a soft brown hand with bitten fingernails, towards his wounds. But she stopped herself, she pulled back. A reflex she didn’t want to indulge. Instead she disguised the movement, pulling an envelope from her jacket and handing it over.

Now, as the train rattles towards Sunnyside, he imagines her hand reaching out towards her father’s corpse. He imagines the realisation that her father has been killed – killed by Slick, killed because of her own actions – ripping through her, spilling through her blood, her brain.

Spilling into those defiant, those unwilling, eyes.

And his smile widens, as the train carries him into the heart of Pretoria, towards the teacher and the end.

## 8

A list of things he feels as she speaks: anger, regret, sadness, fear, joy, relief.

He lets her speak, to expel all the things inside it. He doesn’t let the deep, gutting hurt splash across his face. Neither does she, he notices. She speaks matter-of-factly; she speaks badly, like an actor on a stage. They are driving back home, in the small green car that

belonged to Sara.

There is nothing they could do for Lucky; they were not allowed to see him.

“Why do you never drive the red car anymore?” she asks now.

“I like this one. It reminds me of Ma.”

“Even before then, you stopped taking it out on weekends.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

She breathes deeply; she doesn't look at him when she speaks. “Lucky was stealing. We were stealing.”

Mr October says, “So he is guilty.” She nods. Her soft brown skin is flushed, and her chest is moving up and down furiously; she is an animal trapped, wanting to run. He knows the feeling. “Why was he stealing?”

“To help me. I owe someone money.”

“You mean, him?”

“Yes, Pa. Him.” He understands. Finally, he understands: Is he surprised? It is possible to be surprised when he's been walking along a hallway made from cardboard walls, trying to hold them up, trying to keep them from falling away, hearing the sounds – dark whispers and strained screams – behind them but refusing to listen; is it possible to be surprised when the walls finally come down, and what's behind them is your own daughter? “You're the one who brought Ma the drugs?” he says.

“She asked me, Pa. She asked me. She said I could ask Lucky, that he would know how to get in touch with him.”

“Why Lucky?”

“Lucky's brother, he works for him sometimes. On the campus. Selling weed. Ma, she asked him about it one day. We thought ... we thought she wanted weed, that's all.”

“How did you pay him?”

“Ma had money, at first. And then after that, I gave him what I had. And then he said we could owe him, that we could get some in exchange for some odd jobs. He made Lucky sell at school, sometimes. Me too, but not that much. Then after Ma died he said we owed him. He said we had to pay him back monthly. I told him to go to hell, Pa. He said if we didn't pay him back he would kill you.

“Lucky helped me, Pa. We carried on selling at school to pay him back, but that wasn't enough. Sometimes we had to steal, sometimes we had to ... do other things.”

“The money in my room,” he realises, “the money the day of the charity drive?”

Another nod, “That was us.”

“You should never have gotten Lucky involved in this.”

Sophie only smiles, and says, “Lucky has always liked you. He says you are a good teacher and a good coach. He always said I should treat you better.”

“No, my girl. I should have treated *you* better.”

She is crying now, pulling air into her lungs, heaving. “This is all my fault. Ma is dead because of me, Lucky is in prison because of me, because he loves me.” How to comfort a child, how to reverse her distress? He doesn’t know, has never known. All he can think to say is, “Do you love him?” She shakes her head only slightly, but her answer is clear: no.

“Do you love me?” he asks.

And she says, “I don’t think I know what love is.”

## 9

Freya still hears it, Ben’s voice. He speaks to her all the time; he lives inside her head. At first, in the days right after he died, he said encouraging things. He told her to get back up again, to carry on living, that he would always be there and there was no reason for them both to die. He told her that she needed to live for the both of them. She managed to quash that voice until it was nothing but a hoarse whisper, a shadow in a dark cave. Then – once she found Abraham October – came a new version of the voice: still Ben, but a younger, more innocent Ben. This Ben only said a few things. He said, “Be careful” and “watch out” and “are you sure this is a good idea, Sizzle?”

Be careful. That had been one of his favourite mantras. It came from their mother, whose favourite say-thing had been “take care now.” Take care now is how she greeted everyone: her children walking out the house on the way to school, her husband off on a business trip, the lady who worked at the till at the grocery store, the cat as it jumped into the garden at night. Everyone got these same words, always packaged in the same way: with both a smile and a frown. A light-hearted greeting, but also a serious warning. “I’m just going for a swim, mom” Freya told her mother the afternoon before her parents died. Mom was lying on the couch, a magazine open and abandoned on her chest, lazily looking into the distance. “Okay, darling. Take care now.”

“Nothing is going to happen, mom,” Freya said.

“Something might,” her mother said.

As soon as Ben was old enough to talk he adopted and changed the phrase, turning “take care now” into “be careful.” He used the same equivocal tone of voice their mother did. He was always telling her to “be careful” as they moved through their lives. With a little

frown on his face. He was always feeling responsible for her. Always concerned for her safety, her happiness. She didn't understand it. She had never been burdened with this sense of responsibility. Their father said it was oldest child syndrome. "See," Ben said, "It's because I'm two minutes older than you."

Whatever, Rusty.

Would Ben approve of what she is doing? She is doing it for him, after all. Avenging his death. Making sure that the meaninglessness of it, the suddenness of it, the unfairness of it, doesn't go unnoticed or unpunished. For Ben whose sense of fairness had always been so gravely acute. Ben, who after their parents died, stopped telling her to be careful. Probably because being careful didn't help their parents any, probably because it reminded him of their mother, probably because it sounded empty and meaningless in the face of that much tragedy. But now here he is in her head again saying, "Be careful."

Even though she feels, has always felt, that being careful is exactly the thing she doesn't want to spend her life doing.

## 10

A list of violences: 16 September 2014, Peter dies inside the womb. 29 October 2013, Mr October is drunk and he runs over Joey Fortuin in a parking lot and flees the scene. 29 July 2014, his wife dies. 3 October 2015, he sees The Boy kill someone else, and does nothing about it. 12 June 2015, he finds The Boy on the street and attacks him; he is dazed, infiltrated by violence.

"What's his name, Sophie. The man, what is his name?"

"Slick. His name is Slick."

A shift in the world, The Boy given an identity.

"We only had one payment left, Pa. Last night Lucky tried to get into the tuckshop. We were all alone, we made sure the security wasn't near. We were so close, Pa. So close. We only had one payment left, and then all of this would have been over."

"When were you going to give him the money?"

"What?"

"When were you suppose to meet him?"

"This afternoon. Lucky was, after rugby practise. At Magnolia Dell."

"What will he do now that you haven't shown up?"

"I'm not sure."

"Will he come to the house?"

“No, I doubt it.”

“Has he ever been to the house?”

Sophie hesitates. “Once,” she says, “he asked to meet at the house last week. It was weird. I think, I think he broke in. I was in my room waiting for his text and I heard the glass break. I hid. I hid under Peter’s bed. He didn’t say anything. I didn’t see him. An hour later he texted and said he was outside.”

She isn’t crying any more, and she delivers her lines directly, unwavering. Like she knew this time would come, like she has made peace with it.

“I’m so sick of keeping secrets, Pa,” she continues, “Lucky. Ma. I’ve been so angry for so long because it seemed easier. But I don’t want to be angry anymore.”

They are driving slowly, because he isn’t sure. Sure about anything. Because he wants to keep Sophie talking – confessing – he wants to preserve this arrival, the arrival of the gentle Sophie; the hard, angry thing that has been living in his house isn’t there anymore. “I’m sorry about the way I’ve been, Pa. But I had to protect you. I didn’t want you to know. That it was all my fault.” He should return the favour, return what she is giving him. But he doesn’t; he wants to be a father again. He doesn’t want to say he’s sorry. Because deep down, he isn’t sorry. Not for Sara, not for that.

They drive past Oxford’s, past the spot where he saw The Boy – Slick, his name is Slick – shoot someone in cold blood and his foot almost slips, his hands begin to shake. Almost a year ago now, that night. He remembers: remembers that for a moment that night he thought he had pulled the trigger, actually pulled the trigger. He remembers thinking: a good thing has been done because that man deserved to die. But then he saw that he was wrong, wrong. He hadn’t pulled the trigger at all. The Boy had; Slick had pulled the trigger. And in the parking space Mr October had just decided to turn into, there was a blonde young man, lying dead in his seat. He raced away. Raced away, fled the scene of a crime.

Slick. That snake, that bastard: the ruination of his family, the man who profited from their grief. The presence he has been feeling ever since his wife died, the thing he has seen out of the corner of his eye, the shadow that he sometimes imagined was following him: all Slick.

He thought about going to the police that night. Of course he did. But what was he going to say? That his wife’s drug dealer just shot a man? He didn’t know what The Boy’s real name was then. Besides which, The Boy had been with Sophie mere moments before he pulled that trigger, and Mr October couldn’t drag his daughter into that. Nor could he risk Sophie knowing he was there. Most importantly, he had taken the Mercedes out that night,

broken his promise to himself to keep the car locked away. And the ghost of Joey Fortuin was a powerful deterrent.

But if he couldn't go to the police, he would make sure The Boy never got close to his daughter again. If his warnings to her, his attempts at reason, fell on deaf ears, then it would only be by following her, by knowing where she was at all times that he was going to keep Sophie safe. That night he held his gun in his hand and really considered what it would mean to kill another man: deliberately, in cold blood. He resolved that the next time he saw The Boy with his daughter, he would use his weapon.

And he did, on a Friday night barely two weeks ago. Sophie was talking to The Boy outside of Oxford's, leaning casually against the wall. The Boy was speaking to her with hurried gestures, before she turned and walked into the bar, back into the neon-soaked frivolity, the deep thud of music, the stumbling revellers. Before he knew it he was parking his car – not at a safe distance in the street, but in the underground parking lot. His gun was in his hand. He was so overcome with fear, with hatred, that he left the safety of his car and went up to the street, trying to find The Boy.

All those moments: the quiet, still moments alone in his car, the hours and hours, months and months of watching his daughter, his finger on the pulse of a danger he couldn't identify; the glee on The Boy's face when he was caught in Mr October's house with Mr October's wife, the sly smile, the red beanie, the deep, unassailable triumph in his eyes; all the anger and the hatred, the fury and the fear, the violence he had been flirting with for so many months in the shooting range, all of it was galvanised when he saw The Boy talking to his daughter again, came forth in a pure, mindless surge.

And he struck.

A violence so strong and unrestricted that it nearly blinded him. He stopped his car, he took his gun and he struck. He struck The Boy like he himself had been struck. Sauntering down the road, the fool never saw him coming. He held his gun by the barrel, and struck the back of The Boy's head. Then he kicked his feet out from under him. Not a sound came from The Boy, not when Mr October turned him around and held him by the throat, not as recognition flashed through his eyes or as he tried and failed to throw Mr October over, did The Boy make a single sound. He brought the gun down five more times, breaking open The Boy's face. He felt the muscles in his legs strain as The Boy tried to escape, the tendons in his arms stretch and recoil and he struck and struck and struck.

Before Mr October relented, before he stood, he smiled a small smile. He left The Boy there, bleeding on the sidewalk, confident that no one would see. Confident that there

would be no retaliation.

He did it for his wife, for himself. For Joey Fortuin and for the young man he saw The Boy kill that night last October, neither of whom deserved to die.

He did it for his daughter. Especially for her.

For every unfair moment, for every injustice, for every ounce of pain. For everything, for everyone. And it felt good. Even as he cleaned the blood from beneath the broken skin on his knuckles, as the thought that he should get himself tested fluttered through his mind like a moth in front of a light, did it feel good.

Now he regrets not killing Slick that day on the pavement. He could have saved Sophie and Lucky so much pain, so much trouble.

He is about to ask Sophie again when she will see Slick again, when she will pay him the last of the money. He could go with her, couldn't he? He could go with her and finish this once and for all.

But the thought comes unbidden, without mercy: *are you really so much different from him?*

After he parks, Mr October takes Sophie into his arms, the mulberry tree towering above them. He hugs her close. "She wasn't your mother anymore. She was someone else. She was dangerous, sweetheart. She wasn't in her right mind. Her addiction was all that mattered to her. We both did what we had to do." Sweetheart. He hasn't called his daughter that in a year. It's a breath of fresh air. A word that makes him feel like his old self. The rest of it, the rest of it he's said so many times that the words are empty, all the meaning scraped out of them. "I'll never let anything happen to you," he adds.

"Everything's already happened to me," she says.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Me too," she says.

## 11

In the late afternoons, Pretoria undergoes a strange transformation. Dust settles on everything, everyone, and the scent of wilderness stalks the streets, a scent that speaks of yellow grass, bushveld sunsets and the awakening of lions. The metallic tinge of the restless city is erased for a few hours, the rush of traffic disguised; the suited people hurrying, scurrying, between skyscrapers tamed. The sounds of the city change: the urban hum, the steel-fuelled beat, softens and grows remote. On later afternoons in Pretoria when the wind changes, the jungle comes crawling through the streets, seeking to reclaim the gentled people

– after the sun sets and the lights are switched on and electricity flows through the city and the mechanical bustle returns and clashes with the noise of clinking beer bottles and car engines, then the city reclaims its denizens, and it is once again easy to feel anonymous – but for one long, elastic moment in the afternoons, Nolwazi feels like part of the earth, she feels a continent breathing beneath her feet, she can hear the echo of elephants.

It is a pause in the day that Nolwazi relishes, in which she cannot help but slow down.

She stands in the courtyard underneath the banana tree, and lights a cigarette. She's smoking again; this is her fourteenth in so many hours. After the ambulance ride, after watching that small body being rushed into the white, chemical bowels of the hospital, she had nothing to do but stand in the cold and smoke the cigarette offered to her by a nurse. "Cold out here," said the nurse. She was overweight and had too-small eyes, but the corners of her face were kindly. "Better than in there," Nolwazi said. And she thought about her blackening lungs, because that was easier than being inside and listening to the sounds of people trying to live. And she thought about Frik's treachery, his cowardice. The way he shrugged his shoulders – *this isn't my responsibility*. Even his shrugs came complete with that stupid Afrikaans note that he couldn't quite get out of his voice. White boys, soft and unreliable. Her mother had been right.

In the hospital there was a white board on which the nurses marked the number of fatalities. Nolwazi wasn't supposed to see this board, but she caught a glimpse of it as she walked past a closing door; a big white board keeping track of all the current surgeries in the hospital and how many of those patients had survived. It was a replica, in spirit if not in content, of the board behind her own desk. The board keeping track of the station's active cases, of the monthly crime rates; written in green ink. The number of robberies, hijackings, rapes, murders that have taken place that month. Along with who had been assigned to those cases and how they were progressing. Benjamin Rust's name was still on the board. Benjamin fucking Rust.

As for the boy from last night, he died. The nameless boy, marked on the board at the hospital as "shooting victim #4". A corresponding entry would have gone up not soon after that on some police board. But not hers. Not her jurisdiction, as the small-lipped Inspector reminded her when he arrived and took her statement. She didn't have the strength to follow the body to the morgue. Her job had been done.

And now she's smoking again, watching people walk in and out of the place, avoiding her work. She hadn't been totally truthful with Frik last night: this god-damned Benjamin Rust case *was* beginning to screw with her. She was missing something, she had to be. How

was it possible that an unknown assailant in a stolen car had shot him and then disappeared into thin air? Ben must have *known* his murderer, he must have. She has been canvassing all other police stations in the area, looking for unsolved drive-by shootings, but no other cases fit this one's profile. It is infuriating. Increasingly – ever since that second interview with Freya Rust – she is becoming obsessed with it like she hadn't been before. An itch that had started out as a tiny bite had morphed into a permanent wound.

She kills the cigarette beneath her boot, and pulls an apple from her pocket. The apple is sour, mealy. "You should really be trying to regulate your diet," Dr Phil had said to her that morning, burrowing into her head. Right before he asked her, quietly, coolly, whether she thought she was a hero.

She is *not* a hero.

Heroes have to be a little rogue, a little independent. They have to be action stars. They have to be beautiful and witty and be able to run fast. *She* can't run at all. She sure as hell can't kick a door in. She's doesn't rush into certain danger; she's the type that waits for backup. Rushing into the dark is reckless and stupid and only ever pays off in television shows. "But you saved that little boy," Dr Phil said. "That's heroic."

"I was just doing my job."

"How is that different than what you just described?"

"It just is."

"Why?"

Because choosing to do your job is not heroic. And Nolwazi *chooses*. Every day, she chooses. And there are days on which she chooses not to care, not to put that much effort in. To sit in the sun with Angie eating salt and vinegar chips until her lips cracked. And no one cared. No one fired her. No one *died*.

It's easy to be a hero on television – there is an opportunity to redeem yourself around every corner. Every day – every hour if you're lucky – is an opportunity to be a hero. You have no choice but to be – narrative momentum is on your side. The problem with television is it has things like pace and tension and insight and plot. Plot is the thing. If you put things in the right sequence anything can be exciting. Smart, sophisticated pyromaniacs don't recur in your real life to ramp up the tension whenever your character has to be tested. Nolwazi's never met a clever serial killer in her life, and no one solves a case per week. The real problem isn't just that television makes murder seem fast and sexy, it's that television makes those things seem meaningful. And they aren't. Murders are pointless, random and tragic. Solving them is tedious, messy and cynical. You couldn't ever live up to television. Life isn't

television. Life is empty.

As empty as the grave.

“Nolly, babe?”

“Yes, Angie?” The other woman is standing behind her, uncertainty in her voice.

“There is a man on the phone asking whether they can stop monitoring activity on Benjamin Rust’s second phone.”

“What do you mean his second phone? What second phone?”

Angie shrugs, “I dunno.”

“I’ll be right there,” Nolwazi says.

She walks forlornly to a nearby bin to dump her apple.

But then she is confronted: on the rim of the bin, overweight and head cocked greedily in her direction, sits a pigeon. The green flecks on its wings reflect greasily in the sun. It has seen her apple, and it wants its prize. Nolwazi stops to take a good look at the bird: reptilian eyes ringed in pinkish flesh, wrinkled claws that seem, in the moment, to come from a prehistoric world. The pigeon erupts in bright, desperate sounds when it sees her hesitation. She looks down at fruit in her hand; it’s flesh has already begun to brown where she has abandoned her eating.

She looks back up at the bird. “Fuck you, bird,” she says. Scavenger, chancer. Without giving herself a moment to reconsider, she throws the apple violently, straight at the bird.

Her aim has always been good.

The apple hits the pigeon square in the face. It squeals loudly, frightened and hurt. But Nolwazi has already turned around, leaving the injured bird alone with its wounds.

## 12

The only time Freya’s mind is completely quiet, when the red fog that grips it releases her, is when she’s in the shooting range. When she puts on the earmuffs and stands alone in her booth, there is nothing but her and the target, nothing but the rhythmic thud of the gunshots and the pure, unblemished silence that follows.

In the aftermath of a gunshot, there is peace.

As she exits the booth, Greg is standing too close to her; a twinge of annoyance. “What do you want?”

“Do you want to see something cool?”

“Sure,” she says, but slowly. She isn’t sure at all.

She follows Greg to the back room, which is reached via a door behind the counter (Crystal's yellow smile falters when she sees Freya moving into this sacred employees-only zone). They descend a staircase, Greg taking her through a maze of underground store rooms before they emerge back into the light, behind the mall, into an empty field; one of those stretches of open veld – all red dirt, yellow grass and thorny shrub – that are spread out between the buildings of Pretoria like pockmarks. Desolate spots of nothing, of empty space, which flatten the city. During winter the air is so dry that the city is forced to enact controlled burns, and these fields turn black with ash. Freya looks down at the dead grass, the scorched earth. She looks up the sky, at the midmorning sun, pale and strange.

The whole world is black and white.

“What is this place?” she asks.

“It isn't quite finished yet,” Greg says, “and we have to wait for the grass to grow back; it doesn't even open for another month.” He walks towards the door they just came through, next to which equipment lockers have been mounted on the wall. He fumbles with a key before opening a locker and taking out a bag. Something rattles inside the bag. “Ever shoot with a bow and arrow before?” he asks, taking out two curved bows and a bushel of arrows. From the locker he also extracts a canvass target-board, mounted on a tall stand, which he walks to the back of the field, placing it some distance from where she is standing. Bright red rings surround a yellow bulls-eye; like a colourful ghost in a dead world.

Freya shakes her head in answer. “Give it a try, then,” he says. “You're the first person to ever shoot here. We haven't even finished the access tunnel yet.” He grins widely, “Free of charge.” Freya takes the bow up in her hand. She picks up the long thin arrow. The plastic point at its tip is sharpened; little artificial feathers on its end feel like skin against her fingertips. She places the arrow into the string; she seems to know, instinctively, what to do. Her feet are planted wide apart, her mind has been stilled. She pulls the arrow tight.

There needs to be a pause.

She looks up.

High against the blanched sky, she sees the solitary bird. A falcon, gliding upwards in a spiral of air, away from the world. She imagines the sound of his beating wings, like the striking of a match.

“He's too far away to shoot.” Greg says.

“I don't want to shoot it.”

“I shoot birds all the time.”

For a moment, Freya imagines herself riding in the sky on the back of the falcon. Her

hair is tied behind her in a plait that lies heavy as gold against her back, her bow and arrow is in her hand, her legs are strong and fast. She is a hunter, a warrior. From the falcon she sees the blackened land, the dusty city, laid out against the earth: a mighty city, a little city, an ordinary city, an abnormal city. She and her falcon-steed are circling ever upwards, coiling through the air. They cannot hear the world below; they are breaking away from it. Calmly, she takes an arrow in her hand and locks it into place. She can see, with eyesight godly and keen, her real-world self, still on the ground. She aims. She breathes in.

She shoots.

The air ripples. And shatters.

“Ooh, well done.” Greg says, in his lazy voice. Freya looks around. She’s loosed the arrow. It’s hit the bulls-eye. “Want to go get a drink then?”

Freya looks Greg up and down; she finds it so difficult to understand what it is that he wants. “No,” she says, pulling the arrow from the target and handing it back to him. “I want to go back inside and shoot some more. And I don’t think we should see each other again.”

### 13

Sophie serves lunch; she’s learned how to cook in the last year. She wants to show him, she says. The sounds from kitchen comfort him; this is the first time in a long time that the two of them have shared a space that isn’t silent, that isn’t rotting. That isn’t so big and empty. The house sounds like a house again; strange, how he fell back right into the possibility of a something better, when for so long he hadn’t considered there would be anything but desolation and guilt in his future. Although he has told himself more than once today that this is probably only a temporary respite; that sooner or later, his deeds will be back to haunt him. Ghosts don’t go away; ghosts remain.

Ghosts remain.

“Lunch is ready,” she says.

“Coming.” He stands in the stillness of his bedroom. Why he has kept Sara’s wedding ring on his bedside table, he doesn’t know. He no longer wears his, no longer thinks of himself as married. She betrayed him a long time before she died, and his fidelity lapsed along with that betrayal. But for some reason her wedding ring comforts him, connects him to something in the past that was generous and kind. He slips it into his pocket – he should give it to Sophie.

He puts his gun beneath his shirt, into the small of his back. Ready.

They eat in the musty dining room, under the supervision of his frowning, thin-lined

parents. The curry is deep and delicious.

They talk about Peter and they talk about Sara. They talk in small important sentences.

“When was the last time you visited the graves?” she asks.

“A long time ago,” he says.

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“Can I drive?”

“*Can* you drive?”

“I’ve been taking lessons. From Lucky.”

“Do you want to drive me to poker later?”

“Sure,” she says, with the ghost of a smile, “I’d like that.”

With each sentence, things become lighter, lighter: “I know you still follow me when I go out, Pa.”

“I know you know. I’ll always follow you. I have to protect you.”

“I need to forget sometimes,” she says. “I needed to have fun. Otherwise I wouldn’t have made it. You understand?”

He did understand.

But forgiveness is a long way off, and the grief is still there, hot and searing.

“Have you heard from Slick?” he asks.

She gives him a warning look, then says curtly, “No.”

“When will he expect his money?”

“I dunno. Not tonight. Tomorrow.”

“Can I come with you, when you go to meet him?”

“No, Pa.” She sounds desperate, alone; an animal backed into a corner. “No, please. This is almost over. I just wanted to get it over with. Please.” He doesn’t reply. Her pale brown eyes look up at him, desperate. She puts her fork down. “And don’t,” she says, “Follow me.”

“Where will you get the money?”

“I don’t know.”

He takes an envelope out of his pocket and pushes it towards her. “Is that enough?”

The square of window is frosted, but even so Freya can see that the sky outside is a dark,

oozing blue. The bathroom is filling up with steam, and when she places her feet in the shower they sting from the temperature change.

When Freya was younger her father told her that she should never-ever-under-any-circumstances bath during a storm. The lightning, he said, could strike the pipes, killing her instantly. It was a comment he carelessly flung out, but it became stuck in her brain like a fly in a trap. This throwaway warning crept into her childhood fantasy until she became obsessed with it: what happens when lightning strikes inside the house? She had visions of charred corpses, of brilliant white electricity surging through the rooms, alive and volatile and looking for victims.

As she grew older, so the idea grew. Her fascination with it became almost pathological. And she began to court it. She would find opportunities to take baths *during* a storm, to tempt the consequences. Part of her didn't believe her father at all, and so it was an act of pure spite: he was wrong and she was right, and the more she didn't get hit by lightning while in the tub, the more right she became. But part of her, some reckless, daring part, also hoped that he *was* right: what would it feel like to be hit by lightning while submerged in water? While she lay in the bath, young and full of courage, she had flashes of her family finding her shocked and dead.

That thought had made her happy, then.

But there is no one left to find her now, if she is killed. Her wet body would decompose and slip down the shower drain, and all that would be left in the bathroom would be a pile of her bones, and a smell that could have once been hers.

She steps out of the shower lightly.

She dresses: skinny jeans, green sneakers, Ben's hoody.

She puts her gun in her bag.

She walks quietly, one last time, to Ben's room. Everything is as it was, as it should be. His unmade bed, as if it was only moments ago that he left for class.

She isn't nervous, she isn't scared. She doesn't feel anything; nothing but solid determination. She is ready.

## 15

Pretoria, a city of hills. The train dips and rises, showing Slick by turn the creamy concrete walls splattered with the words "metro rail, metro rail, metro rail" suffocated between nests of graffiti – gang tags, bubbled words, protests, hate speech, declarations of love – and glimpses of the city, here are the tall, hard buildings, nestled together, here a view of red-

brick warehouses, church steeples and packed, overflowing streets: steel and steel and steel. The train rattles through it all, through Pretoria's backways, through its scars. Towards Sunnyside, towards the end of things. The dirty afternoon sunlight filtering through the window is beginning to darken. He's never liked winter in Pretoria, the dry crackling air. But he won't have to endure much more of it.

He's known – ever since the police found out about Benjamin Rust's second phone, he's known – that sooner or later the whole thing would crumble. That detective was this close to connecting Benjamin Rust to Slick, and Slick to his friend at the police. If she knew what she was doing she would draw a neat line from Lucky to Slick to Sophie, too. It might take some time, but she would. All she had to do was look closer, with keener eyes; he doesn't trust that she won't eventually figure it out. He doesn't trust that Lucky would keep his mouth shut.

It was either Sophie or her father who tipped the police off about Steve in the first place, he is sure of it. How else did the teacher find him that night outside Oxford's, if Sophie didn't lead her father to him? How else did the police know about Steve? It couldn't be coincidence. There *had* to be a connection between the two events.

The police have been sniffing around his drug operations in Hatfield for months. Raiding his runners, trying to get them to turn on him. But they've never managed to raid one of his premises before. And all of this was coming from higher up in the police force than he had access to. His friend had so far managed to warn him about all the raids, but it won't be long before they find and remove his mole. As soon as Lucky was arrested he'd warned his friend: run.

No, his time is up.

But before he goes, he has one last debt to settle. One last fire to burn. He doesn't, strictly speaking, have to kill the teacher. He could just leave, he could just let Sophie and her father off the hook. Lucky is in jail, after all, which is its own punishment, and he doesn't *need* any final payment from Sophie October. But the teacher had taken something from Slick that night he attacked him; had done what his own father had done: taken his power. Power that Mama Africa had taught him to protect with all his might.

Debts have to be settled.

Slick's been watching the teacher all week. He's been meeting Sophie and Lucky at different locations all week, pushing them more cash, pushing his way into their lives so he could get close to the teacher's house, his school. He's been outside the teacher's church, in his classroom. Inside his car. It took all Slick's willpower not to kill the teacher that first

night he sat outside the teacher's house, watching through the window. But he had to be clever. He couldn't be impulsive. Not again.

Tonight, he finally feels confident enough to strike. He knows that the teacher has his weekly poker night tonight. He knows the best time to attack is before the teacher leaves the house; Sophie will be gone. And the teacher will be relaxed, off his guard.

He checks his weapons.

In the distance, he watches the city rattle past. The city that knows him too well, has seeped into his blood, has drained him of himself. It is time to go, time to flee. The pressure has become too much to handle, the weight of his life too heavy to carry. There are only so many disguises, so many crimes, so many bribes, so many people killed before the connections begin to bubble to the surface, before the dots are connected. This last year has proved that. Benjamin Rust proved that. He's had enough of the bowels of Pretoria to last two lifetimes; it knows him too well. It can expose him. He needs to go; he needs to be somewhere that is harsher and sharper and darker.

In a few hours this will come to an end, and this blasted city will see the last of him. And then. Then, a new future. A new place in which to breathe shadows, test his resilience, be anonymous.

Time to disappear for good. Like Mama Africa.

Like a man who never existed.

## 16

Lately, Freya barely remembers anything. Everything is a blur, a haze. She is encased in a single, never-ending moment. Ben's death is still happening; it was seconds ago that she heard the gunshot ring out into the night. Her heart is still exploding; the fierce, purple energy combusting, coursing through her, driving her onwards. And beyond this moment, there is nothing but a warm darkness that Freya cannot see past, or through.

But the end is here. Finally, the end is here.

It is just before dusk, and Freya is thinking about how easy it is to watch people from a car. Nobody notices a car parked across the street or in a parking lot, nobody ever investigates it or tries to see who is inside. Nobody ever thinks it has anything to do with them. She thought that was something that only happened in movies: the suspicious car parked across the street, the oblivious victim none the wiser. She thought parking her car around the neighbourhood day in and out would arouse suspicion. But no one has said anything, no one has approached her. People just assume she's supposed to be here. People

don't look around them. People don't notice; they don't want to notice.

She is parked right across the street from Abraham's house.

Freya's eyes are drawn to the shadowy space between pavement and street that offer entrance to a murky world below. It's a hypnotic darkness; the sound and the shadows flow steadily through her. What monsters are staring up at her through the sewage grates? If she looks beneath the concrete, beyond the facades, what would she find staring back at her?

Beneath these schizophrenic streets, what kind of heart is beating?

Here is what Freya is going to do. Here is the plan: in a few minutes, she will sneak across his back wall, and she will take refuge in his shed.

She will wait for his daughter to go to her friend's house, like she does every week night.

She will wait until he leaves for his poker game.

As he walks from his front door to his car, she will walk up to him and shoot him dead.

And then she'll be free.

It is that simple.

"Only two more hours, Abraham," she whispers, "enjoy them".

Before

Ben sneaks a glance at his sister, sitting beside him, her forehead rested against the glass. She is deep in thought. She can be so intense sometimes, so fierce and so fragile in the same moment, like a thread of spider's silk; it scares him.

He is going to tell her tonight. About Leo, and about the other thing.

He has his final deliveries under the seat – he is quite proud of his new delivery system. If people wanted a hook up while they were out, they could simply message him the model and make of their car and their licence plate number, and he would wait for the bank transfer and then slip into the parking lot, leaving the package in their car. Like a spy, like being in a thriller.

But tonight is the last. He'll tell Slick tomorrow: he is out. He has been skimming some money off the top anyway, which was exciting at first but then became tedious. He doesn't really need the money. He tells Leo he does, but the truth is that their parents left them with enough. Enough for now.

Freya is tracing her finger against the window. She is always doodling the things she sees in her brain on the surfaces of things with her finger. She smiles at him. "Everything okay?" she asks.

"Yes," he says, "I'm really happy."

"That's good," she says. Then, frowning, "Eric is calling." She sighs, ignoring the vibrating phone on her lap. Ben can sense that she doesn't want to talk to Eric in front of him.

"Well, jump out," he stops the car. "I'll park. Get me a double. I'll see you in there."

"Yup," she says, "See you in there."

# Murder

(June 2015)



# 1

The city hovers above itself, looking down through the wet smog; the city lingers underneath itself, looking up from the screaming streets. From trees and skyscrapers, out of windows and through steel, the city sees the four people collide in the tiny back yard in Sunnyside.

The city can feel the halo of grief – blue like a bruise, like a fallen berry, like a broken heart – and anger – red like a wound, like a falling knife, like a burst balloon – radiating outwards.

The city can sense the impending bloodshed; the city craves it.

The city smiles.

The city rushes in.

Tuesday

## 2

Freya will never forget Ben's last breath. It touched her cheek: a warm, wet exhalation which coated her skin. In the dusky lavender light slipping through the shed's windows, Freya can still feel it there: the final evidence of his life condensing on her cold face.

She stands waiting for the man who killed her brother.

She stands perfectly still, unwilling to disturb the stale air inside the cabin, reading the symbols on the walls one more time, drawing power from them.

But something isn't right. Sophie hasn't left yet. The car that comes and fetches her every night hasn't come. And Abraham is about to leave for poker.

She watches the mulberry tree, the tree that reminds her so of Ben. It seems to be made of ice, so dark and grey has the winter made it. And Freya can clearly see the red, red berries that will hang plumply on the branches in a few months, fall to the ground and burst like wounds. She can see them as if they were real, just as she can feel the blood of the heron on her hands. Just as she can see her mother's bloody fingerprint floating above her. As she can feel Cheery's skull cracking underneath her hands.

And if you asked her right here and now, right in this moment, the ghostly tree hanging over her, what the colour of time is, she would say that it is purple.

Purple: the colour of corruption, the colour of rot, the colour of life, the colour of death.

## 3

Slick has left the bustle behind him, past the great lofty schools and the churches with their spires, walked along the blue street underneath the dead trees, following it as it narrowed and folded back on itself, until he came here, to the top of the cul-de-sac. There is the little white house behind the faded blue gate, in this unconcerned, unremarkable street, where unremarkable people live unremarkable lives; everyone getting ready for dinner, sitting on plastic chairs eating plastic food. Not knowing that in a few minutes, the texture and timbre of this street will forever change, will forever have blood on its hands.

He can feel the magnetism of the kill pulling him forward, guiding him. This kill seems more significant than the others, more significant than his father, than Ben Rust. The teacher means nothing to him, did not betray him nearly as significantly as either those people. This will be his last kill, his final contribution to this city that forged him. As he

walks, he feels lighter, he feels the warmth of a fire at his back. He imagines the whole city burning behind him, the whole Pretoria erupting into ash, blackening the sky.

He feels cleansed, unborn.

Slick is ready, ready to fade from this world.

#### 4

Before they step out the door, Mr October gives his daughter a kiss on the forehead. And hands her the car keys.

“You ready to do this?”

She nods and takes the keys from him. She has gone quiet since lunch, her eyes infused with a sad glimmer. “Everything will be okay, sweetheart. This is the beginning of better days.” His words sound slightly hollow even to him, but he tries to breathe as much truth into them as he can.

“Should we go?”

“Sure,” she says.

#### 5

The rough texture of brick is still crawling on his skin when Slick lands on the other side of the wall with a silent thud. He squats, hiding in the shadow of the wall; there is a security light atop the wall that will switch on if he moves, so he sits perfectly still. The breeze itches across his sweaty brow; he can smell himself, the scent of adrenaline, the scent of the hunt. His lip twitches, he flexes the muscles in his shoulder. He has his knife in his hand, holding the blade away from his body. His other hand is pressed down into the grass; it scratches. He can hear the slam of a door, the rumble of an engine – the sounds of a heavy day exhaling, settling down.

He tenses his muscles; he is ready to leap up. To run across the lawn, lithe and powerful, to slice at the throat of his enemy. To stab. And then to jump across the back wall and disappear into the maze of the streets, to flee into the inner city.

When he hears the click of the front door, he steps into the light.

#### 6

Frey steps out of the shed when she hears voices.

It is now or never.

She has a clear view of the front garden, and she hears Abraham and his daughter

talking as they walk down the front steps. They are about to come around the corner any second now.

Freya has a vision of Sophie's shoes pressing down on the discarded hose lying beneath the tap seconds before the real shoe comes into view and deftly avoids the hose altogether.

They are framed by the dusk-made sky, the bruised blue. Dappled in shadow from the big tree. Everything in this second is hushed: Freya stands in the doorway of the shed like a shadow-soaked ghost, watching Abraham and Sophie walk through a living world. She is on the edge of this pretty suburbia, this father and daughter walking from their whitewashed house to their car, along a paved stone pathway, underneath a mulberry tree, past a garden bench, past a rake leaning casually against the outside wall, listening to the distant humming of a pool-pump and a sprinkler system, cars on busy roads not so far away: a whole world of normal things happening just as they should.

And she, the wound on the edge of it all, the shadow about to throw balance into chaos.

She raises her gun.

And then, on the other side of the garden, there rises another shadow. Taller and thicker than she is, a shadow come for vengeance, too.

## 7

The experience of your own life is a difficult thing to describe from the inside. If he wrote it down then he could perhaps examine it with an objective eye, could reach into the abyss and explain all his choices, interrogate the turning points – sequence his life like it was something that had a beginning, a middle, an end. But lived life doesn't read like that – it's something you live from one moment to the next. On some days, things happen. Some days, things don't. Sometimes you remember, sometimes you don't. Life is much more random than memories would lead you to believe. Hindsight is a tricky, foolish device.

Stories happen in the past; life happens now.

Is happening now.

But there are moments, certain moments, where your life seems to be coming to a point: where you see your choices stretch out behind you, your consequences out in front of you and you are in both the future and the past at the same time. Suspended between the two with a clear view, a crystalline vision of your whole life. You see the points in time where things could have gone differently.

Illumination.

A young woman pointing a gun at him. And maybe this is God sending an angel to avenge all the choices he's made that led to this night, this way of life. An angel with the saddest eyes he has ever seen.

*Pull the trigger angel. Let me fall.*

The shots echo into the purple night, and the world goes black.

## 8

When the first shot rings out, Freya falls to her knees.

When the second shot rings out, she drops her gun at her side.

She watches Abraham October's face convulse, his eyes narrow. His hand comes up halfway to his chest, as if he wants to pull his heart out of his chest, before it falls back down to his side, slack.

Freya is filled with a great relief, an electric relief so powerful that her skin tingles, that she begins to cry. She hears herself screaming – great anguished screams – but they sound odd against the bliss, the sublime bliss surging through her, like gold, like joy.

The night is dark and warm. She can smell the mulberry tree; she feels Ben's breath against her face.

"I love you Sizzle," he says.

"I love you too, Rusty," she says.

After

The crime scene is smeared across her vision, a stain. It hovers just in front of, just behind, the real world. A mirage. A bloody, ghostly mirage.

Nolwazi is driving back to the station, through these quiet Pretoria streets. The city in the witching hours: desolate, peaceful, indifferent.

A few minutes ago, she had been standing amongst the corpses silently, while police activity rotated around her.

Urgent whispers, forensic teams pushing past.

A barricade of police cars at the end of the driveway; a driveway which snaked between the bodies towards the dirty street.

She had looked down at her shoes, the protective crime scene shoe-glove glinting whitely under the June moon. Her shoes caked in mud. Big spotlights had been erected, all the better to see the dead with.

She had felt, in the moment, like the axis of something. The bodies pointed away from her like arms of a clock.

She could probably close the Benjamin Rust case, now that they found the man driving the red car. Even though her instinct all along has been that something else happened that night.

Freya Rust had been sure, though. Sure enough to hunt him down.

A tangled thing. A complex knot that will need careful untying. Not her job. The job of the Sunnyside police station. Only reason she was called in at all was because her name came up in connection with Freya Rust. A courtesy call by the Sunnyside detective at the scene; an old acquaintance.

Now Philomena Ash was waiting for her. Waiting for news. Nolwazi, the messenger of doom.

She had looked at Sophie October sitting on the steps of the house and immediately recognised her, and when she spoke to her later, the girl's voice somehow both soft and sharp, Nolwazi regretted the way she had been jealous of her the night Benjamin Rust was shot. So long ago, and not long ago at all.

Sophie October is heartbroken, overwhelmed, shocked. And full of anger. Nothing wrong with anger; it can be a force of liberation. Anger can be logical and methodical. It can be used to make something; it can be harnessed, deployed, made useful. But Nolwazi saw hatred there too, pure and proud. That would destroy her. Like it had Freya Rust.

She tried to explain that to Sophie October after she questioned her. Tried to make her see. Tried to get her to understand she could break the cycle. But who is Nolwazi to be trusted by Sophie October?

Freya Rust certainly hadn't trusted her. And look where that got Freya Rust.

Nolwazi had looked at the scene around her, at the bodies and where they had fallen, the bullet casings and where they had landed, the abandoned gun on the wet grass. She looked at the blood, the pools of it on the ground, the tissue matter scattered around the scene like confetti, like horribly pink confetti. And she had a vision of events as they unfolded.

The facts as she understood them: Freya Rust had somehow tracked Abraham October down to his house. Nolwazi remembers the cracked voice, the cracked and cunning voice of Freya Rust which had said, "His name is Abraham October. He's really helping me cope."

Abraham October, for his part, had no criminal record. Upstanding citizen. Except that a few years ago he was brought in for questioning regarding the false imprisonment of his wife. Except for the stolen car he drove. She would get a stab at that red car once the Sunnyside guys were done with it. Not that she was optimistic.

Sophie October has no idea who Freya Rust was or what she had been doing there, nor has she heard of Benjamin Rust. But she told an interesting story about a man named Slick and the boy named Lucky Tshabalala who worked for him, apparently holed up in the holding cells at Brooklyn at this very moment. Nolwazi would have a quiet word with Lucky before sending him off to Sunnyside for questioning, just to sate her own curiosity. Slick, Sophie claims, had threatened to kill her Abraham multiple times, which is why he had been carrying a gun when he was ostensibly going to a weekly poker game.

The unknown man at the scene, officially named John Doe by the police, but identified as Slick by Sophie October, had no apparent connection to Freya Rust at all, and it doesn't appear that the two of them were working together.

Two unconnected gunmen, two assassins, on the same night and for different reasons? What are the chances?

As for Frik, well he is still nowhere to be found. Unable to explain why he hid the record of Benjamin Rust's second phone from her, unable to account for his fraud.

But she'll track him down.

They found the second phone during a raid on Freya Rust's flat about an hour ago, and Nolwazi is confident that on that phone she'll find some connection between Abraham October and Benjamin Rust – some piece of evidence that will explain all of this.

In her mind's eye, Nolwazi replays the events of the previous night. Freya Rust,

Abraham October, the man named Slick. A triangle of coincidence and consequence and crime.

As soon as they see the strangers in their garden, Abraham October tells his daughter to run into the house. The strangers let her escape; they are not there to harm her. In fact, she is not supposed to be there at all. She is supposed to be at a friend's house, like she is every evening. But Sophie October doesn't barricade herself in the house. No, she turns at the last minute, and pleads. She pleads with Slick to stop. Stop this pain. Her words fall on deaf ears.

It all happens, is all over, in no time at all.

Freya Rust acts first.

She shoots Abraham October.

The bullet flies through the night.

It hits him in the chest.

Abraham October dies instantly.

He doesn't suffer.

Seconds later, there is a second shot.

Slick's bullet hits Freya Rust with so much force that she is pushed backwards.

The bullet travels straight through her heart.

She, too, is dead within seconds.

According to Sophie October, Slick's bullet would have hit her father had he not fallen to the ground seconds before; Freya Rust was killed by her own fast hand. By her own good aim.

Slick, the sound of Freya Rust's anguish spurring him on, runs quickly through the garden and disappears into the night. In his haste, he leaves behind a backpack. Inside the backpack: a phone, extra ammunition, an envelope of cash, a change of clothes, a train ticket and a framed but damaged photograph of a beautiful woman. He also dropped a knife which will hopefully yield some fingerprints.

The man named Slick has not been seen since.

As Nolwazi nears the station, the glow of daylight begins echoing through the streets.

Nolwazi stops her car.

She needs a moment, a moment to breathe. When she walks into the station she won't have time for introspection or philosophy. She won't have permission to be distraught, to be angry, to be a victim. She's a police officer; it's her job not to be those things.

So she needs a moment to forget Freya Rust's dead face: the halo of dirt around her hair, her slack and empty eyes. Her skin so white and smooth that it seemed to be evaporating

into the moonlight. Forget Abraham October's browned and ragged skin, the open cut on his cheek smeared with grass and mud. The small, incredible smile on his white lips – like he was taunting the world.

She needs to forget.

She's a block away from the station. She parks under a Jacaranda tree, so grey in the early morning light that it looks to be wrought from the sky itself.

In front of her, the skeleton of a new building rises out from behind an old wall.

An old wall covered in graffiti.

Nolwazi would normally have no problem admitting that she likes the city's graffiti, likes the way it speaks and moves and changes, the way it exists in rebellion. Graffiti is a gift to the modest Pretoria streets, an extra layer of life.

But even she shrinks back from the graffiti before her now.

Before the angel who stands in judgement.

As Nolwazi looks up at the black angel, at her unbalanced scales, at her wings outstretched against an invisible storm, she is filled with a strange sense of purpose. The angel summons forth something dark and ruined inside her, something urgent. Nolwazi wants to scream at the angel, wants to break her apart. She has something inside her that needs to be understood: it is an apology.

It is an accusation.

Time has smudged the angel's features, blurring her lines. A crack has opened wide at the base of the wall on which she is painted and torn the army of people at her feet apart. The light of dawn casts a red shadow across the angel's face.

And Nolwazi's words collapse into nothing as she meets the angel's angry eye, as she watches the angel's twisted mouth preparing to speak.

The angel is looking directly at Nolwazi. The angel is looking directly at the whole wicked city.

"I see you," the angel says. "And I know what you have done."



### A note from the author

Talion, which comes from the Latin term *Lex Talionis*, is a principle of law which states that the punishment for any given crime is identical to or the equivalent of the crime committed. It originates in biblical law, and finds best expression in the phrase “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” It means, for example, that the hand of a thief may be chopped off or that a murderer must be put to death.

It is the origin of the word “retaliate”.

Talion does not exist in modern democratic legal systems, except in states where the death penalty is still implemented.