A Time of Angels

A novel

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Under the supervision of Professor John M Coetzee

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Declaration:

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

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Dedication

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For the Master: JMC
For the Nobleman: BRL
For my travelling companions: D, G & R

How is the face of God?
Is that God weeping, over there
on the bench in the park
all alone
his back bent, his head down?
Why does he weep?
Is it because life is tearing
all along its seams and across its grain?
Has he come down from his place to look
at what we do to Creation?
Has he come to witness
the unravelling of his work?

Figure on a Park Bench 2002

When Primo Verona's wife, Beatrice, left him for Pasquale Benvenuto, their close friend who ran the delicatessen on the corner of Long and Bloem Streets, Primo cast a spell on Pasquale's shoes so that ever afterwards their laces would spring undone as he walked out his front door. It was an easy enough spell to sidestep. Pasquale, not aware that it was magic he was dealing with, merely cursed the quality of modern laces and wore shoes that did not need them.

Primo also prepared two spells designed to harm Pasquale's reputation as the best baker and salami maker in Cape Town. One of these would bring sourness to his renowned salami, his *salame Fiorentino* in particular. The other was to impart the bitterness of aloes to his extraordinary fruited bread and so undermine his culinary confidence.

However, Primo did not activate the two damaging spells; he merely composed them and put them on hold. He withheld them because he was not a malicious magician and had no real wish to harm Pasquale Benvenuto. He wanted only to remind him, often, that Beatrice was a married woman and that she did not belong in another man's bed. This message Primo hoped the shoelaces would convey.

Creating the spells gave him a certain satisfaction, but, the truth is, they did nothing to relieve the feelings of betrayal that he harboured in his heart, for he and Pasquale had been good friends for many years. He could not live without Beatrice and slid into a depression.

Pasquale Benvenuto made such delicious meals that he had driven many competing chefs to hang up their aprons and break wooden spoons in despair. (The suicide of the Mount Nelson's Sous Chef, Vincent Martineau, was attributed to the acrimonious and protracted legal battle fought between him and Pasquale over the origination and proprietorship of the recipe for *polenta alla Madiba.*)

For Pasquale, the preparation of food was not unlike the creation of a fresco or a painting. His kitchen was his canvas; his pigments the reds, greens and golds of tomatoes, peperoni, fresh meats, herbs, eggs and cheeses. So good was his culinary art that even Atheists, when eating at his tables, might be driven to believe that a God did indeed exist – a God of the kitchen – and that his name was Pasquale.

He worked with great confidence and passion, often calling out to his ingredients, urging them, encouraging them towards the masterpiece they were destined to be a part of. He listened to opera or recited poetry as he worked, delivering from memory Shakespearean sonnets as he carved meats and cut up vegetables. People who worked with him adored him, loved his volatility, were in awe of his skills, never argued about measures or weights and never ever spoke with any favour of other cooks and eateries while in his presence.

Most other cooks, Pasquale believed, worked in only one dimension. They threw ingredients together, without thought to perspective, simply to arrive at a plateful that merely satisfied hunger. Cooks who were artists of the culinary – and he considered himself master of them all – took into account the essentials of depth and balance with every meal prepared. Most importantly, they chose their ingredients with great care and combined them with respect and not a little homage.

"The English cuisine must be the worst in the world," he once told Primo when they were discussing the merits of Mediterranean cuisine. "Followed shortly by the Russian and then the German. Their offerings are a mere confusion of ingredients."

They were picnicking in Van Riebeeck Park, the two of them and Beatrice. Pasquale had spread a cloth over one of the cement tables near the river and laid out a feast of breads (focaccia, *filone* and *schiacciatina*), sun-dried tomatoes, roasted brinjals and zucchini, marinated peppers, olive and potato pie, mozzarella and pecorino cheeses, wines and mineral water.

"Just look at the English roast and Yorkshire pudding as an example of gustatory paucity – and don't raise your eyebrows at my words – or the English sponge cake, for that matter. It's spiritless food. Dry. Lacking in delicacy. English sponge can never be compared to such as *panforte Senese* with its moist content of fruits and spices. Or *bostrengo*, a rice cake full of fruits with rum and coffee and cocoa and honey. Actually, now that we're talking about it, I think I'll bake one when we get back. We'll eat it at midnight tonight. With coffee. And *Anisetta*."

He took a mouthful of wine, and continued, "A tomato served without garlic, without *basilico* or parsley has potential, yes. I can't deny that because it's a glorious vegetable. But does it have character on its own? Yes, indeed, if organically grown and picked when sun-ripened. And can it be rendered tasteless? Yes – by the many cooks in this city who are guilty, daily, of destroying the very spirit of the poor tomato and then giving its pulped carcass

a deceptive Italian name. If there were kitchen justice they would hang for such a crime.

"Meat not fragranced with rosemary and origanum, not studded with garlic, not marinated in wine has no character either – it has no *innerness*. You might as well dry your meat on a campfire. Or roast a cat. Actually that Devonshire in Constantia serves cat, I'm sure of it. People think they're eating hare. And they pay for it. God! The world is full of fools."

"Let me be the devil's advocate," interrupted Primo. "Have you ever tried lamb cooked slowly in its own juices, with no herbs at all, no wine, not even salt and pepper, only onion and carrot, served on plain boiled white rice, or with plain boiled potatoes? There's something to be said for the simplicity of such a meal."

"Simplicity! Don't be ridiculous!" exclaimed Pasquale. "You're talking there about food for slaves, for prisoners, for foot soldiers. Not for anyone with taste or discretion. We are both of Roman descent, I remind you of that, Primo. Our cultural make-up is Roman, therefore noble, therefore we eat as *I* cook. Not the way Saxons and Goths and Huns cook. Now, here, try this. Taste this mozzarella with olive oil and fresh tarragon, and revise your opinion of simplicity."

An onlooker would have noted that the party of three picnickers laughed a lot under the wide expanse of the Cape sky; that they touched each other frequently; that the woman with long loose hair that gleamed in the sunlight was exceedingly beautiful; that she had taken off her shoes and was paddling in the shallow waters of the river while the men had their animated discussion. It would have been clear that this was a friendship strong and good. It would also have been clear, from the way each man glanced occasionally at the woman as she moved through the rippling of light and shadow created by the overhanging milkwoods and wild olives, that both cared deeply for her.

Although such dishes as his *lasagna verde*, *osso buco*, *polenta pasticciata* and *vitello alla Genovese* were legendary and without rival, Pasquale's fame rested on the salami he cured and his fragrant fruited breads. "My father's legacy," was how he referred to the breads. "Some fathers leave behind money and property. My father gave me the recipe for fruited bread. I could wish for nothing more. But he did give me more, as you see. He gave me my art form. He taught me to cure salami and to cook unspeakably delicious food. I learnt from him how to turn the mere beating of

eggs and sugar into sonnets, and the whipping of cream, lightly flavoured with vanilla, into ballads. Mind you, my looks too are his. So I have a lot to be grateful for."

Pasquale had no time for people who counted calories, who fussed about what was fattening, and who thought creams and butters were unhealthy. Guilt, he maintained, belonged only to the religious – it had no place at the table, and certainly not over the meals he cooked. Food, as far as he was concerned, was to be eaten for the pleasure of it. Servings were to be generous, and however much one ate, one should never deny oneself the gratification of dessert. A little sweetness and then a bitter coffee were the way to round off a good meal.

His delicatessen and bar, *Da Pasquale,* stood last in line of a row of Victorian shops which had been restored but never modernized and so retained their architectural charm. It was a favourite meeting place of the local community, a nexus of social energy, open every day from nine in the morning until midnight and always full. Four regular waiters and several student casuals served coffees, cakes, meals and drinks to patrons who had seemingly insatiable appetites. At weekends Lazar's Hungarian Trio played a repertoire of Spanish, Gypsy, Italian and Greek music. Their violin, guitar and cello sent music spiralling among the drinking and dining patrons, never intruding but always touching hearts lightly so that people felt good being where they were, and lingered long after their meal was done.

Every Saturday night, late, Long Street's prominent merchants and proprietors took over the window table to play poker. They dressed for the occasion in black suits, with black waistcoats and black satin ties held down by diamond studded tie pins, playing into the early hours – *Da Pasquale* stayed open until the last hand. The only woman among them, Romana of Romana Florist, also wore black – ritually the same antique full-length velvet dress with ivory silk collar and cuffs.

Pasquale never gambled, though he enjoyed the tension of the often fast and ruthless hands. Primo and Beatrice, when they were all still friends, would also share the evening, as did Dr Adam Baldinger, the local general practitioner – a tall dark-haired stately gentleman, never seen without his long black trench coat. These three did not gamble either. Beatrice worked at the bar while Primo, Pasquale and the doctor, drinking espresso – Pasquale's laced with *Strega* – would debate and discuss philosophical and theological matters.

The questions that recurred most frequently concerned good and evil and the nature of God: Why did evil exist? Was it an external force, an intrusive

influence? Was there indeed a Devil at work, upsetting God's plan of perfection? Or was the human soul intrinsically evil? Was God really all powerful? Or was God merely an existential legend, a legend seeded and nurtured by religious leaders in pursuit of their own omnipotence?

These questions and their answers struck each other like swords clashing, sending sparks of iron to iron flying about, resolving little but exploring the deep cavities of philosophical and theological debate nonetheless:

"Evil exists, yes! It's called *slap* chips and steak. And Hell exists too, at the Holiday Tavern buffet!" Pasquale would shout.

"Perhaps evil is an external energy, which enters the human psyche at certain times of collective stress, like times of war and conflict," Dr Baldinger would offer. "Or could evil be seen to be our infidelities? Our betrayals? Our dishonesties? These negatives which cause harm to others on a greater or lesser scale?"

"Evil is surely just our inhumanity – man to man, man to beast – issues with which God seems not to be bothered," Primo would suggest. "It was once believed that sin and evil-doing were the causal agents of plague and destruction; and that, in the absence of verifiable wrong-doing, witchcraft and devilry were at play. One would be compelled to call upon the agency of God for miracles and redemption. God seemed often, and still seems in modern times, to be absent. Or at least distracted."

"About the existence of God, I'm not so sure. No religion has adequately interpreted, for me at any rate, the force of God. If I accepted that there is a God, I would still doubt that he is omnipotent, omnipresent, all-pervading, as religions would have us believe. How do we answer for war and mass destruction, if God is all-powerful? Would a caring God not intervene to prevent such horrors?" Pasquale would argue.

"But perhaps God is not caring! Why should God care? Why should a Divine force be bothered with the human condition? I know a Yiddish saying – *God is not kind. God is not your uncle. God is storm and fire aplenty!*" Dr Baldinger would exclaim.

"God is not your uncle! I like that. Beatrice! Please, the doctor needs a whiskey for his wisdom. Primo, more water? When are you going to learn that water is for fields and fishes? At least take a drop of wine with it. Beatrice! Pour me a Cointreau, please. And we need something to eat. Where are all my waiters?"

Thus the magician, the doctor and the master cook challenged each other, often furiously, while alongside them the poker hands of Long Street's businessmen flashed as players cursed, shouted or exclaimed with satisfaction.

There is good magic and there is bad. Primo, a born visionary and soothsayer, worked in good. With his well-honed supernatural skills he could correct imbalances between negative and positive energies and predict the future (though he never read his own or that of his family). He restored positive vibrations to rooms and houses where conflict or death had left residual negativity. People came from far off to have their future clarified and to ask his advice. The police regularly called on him to trace missing children.

His readings of the future were clear and accurate, though he took it upon himself to edit them, toning down bad news and never delivering foreknowledge of death. He did not charge for his services, believing that to put a price on his clairvoyance would reduce its energy. Instead he accepted donations. He kept a bronze urn at the entrance of his consulting room into which his clients dropped generous wads of notes, so he was never short of money. Some also brought him carefully chosen gifts: trays of halva and baklava; portions of *tiramisu*; bowls of chopped herring; slices of honey cake and fruited breads. All bought from *Da Pasquale.*

Primo's first experience of premonition happened before birth, when, in his mother's womb, he had a vision of her untimely death. His mother's midwife reported that he was born crying inconsolably, clinging to his umbilical cord. She had to wrench open his little fists, so tight was their grasp.

"It was a sign, a sign. He knew," the midwife announced knowingly at his mother's funeral, while other mothers whispered among themselves and tut-tutted with pity. For his mother, wheeling him in his baby carriage when he was but three months old, had misjudged the speed of an oncoming delivery motorcycle as she crossed Wale Street and was struck down. Primo escaped death because she took the impact while the baby carriage shot across the road and came to rest against the pavement. He suffered no harm.

Primo was brought up with much love by his devoted watchmaker father, Eugenio Verona, who was also a collector of clocks and watches, and by his widowed aunt, Lidia. Both were aware of his unique talent and encouraged him

towards magic and the supernatural, never letting him doubt his unusual abilities.

His widowed aunt more than filled the role of mother, smothering him with love, care and visionary storytelling. Each night she sat at his bedside and told him wondrous tales of knights and path-finders, of light-bearers, kings and queens and humble folk who championed good and justice. She told her stories with such clarity and magical wonder that the boy could all but see her characters before him on the candlewick bedspread, in the soft glow of his bedside lamp. His aunt's compelling voice opened the volumes of humankind's eternal lore and he would fight to stay awake for fear of losing one word or one chapter of her fantastic tales. But alas, slumber always overtook him and he would tumble into dreams that had a texture not unlike the stories she told.

While his widowed aunt enriched his imagination with the fantastic, his father introduced him to the discoveries and ideas of Galileo, Copernicus, Socrates and other luminaries.

"These are among the true men, the golden men," his father told him. "These are the ones whose example we must follow in this transitory life. Not the warmongers, not the mad men who rule the world, but these, the philosophers, the poets, the artists, the explorers – those who hold life in awe, who question, who postulate."

Eugenio Verona taught his son Hebrew and Latin, not sending him to school until he was eleven, but educating the boy at home. Primo was taught about time and precision and the exact and extraordinary workings of the universe. His father also explained that time and space were infinite and so, early on, Primo came to understand his mortal size in relation to the depth of the cosmos.

On nights when the sky was clear, father and son would look out through their telescope at the universe, marvelling at the great and systematic movement of stars and planets.

"We are looking at the history of stars, my little one," Eugenio told his young son. "What we see twinkling from space is but a story from long, long ago – the story of stars. No one knows whether the light we see is from stars that still live. They may be dust already. Or cosmic ash. And in their place there may be million upon million of new stars whose light we two will never see, for their light will only reach our planet when we are long dead."

In the background of Primo's enchanted star- and story-filled childhood could be heard the comforting and ever-present tick-tocking of his father's many clocks.

There was something else in the background, though. Something secret, black and horrible, something seldom spoken about, seldom externalized. It had to do with the darkness of the human soul, for both Primo's father and his aunt Lidia were survivors of the Nazi Holocaust and neither had properly come to terms with their macabre experiences of that genocide.

Though by day they led composed and seemingly contented lives, at night, during the deep hours of darkness, they were each confronted by recurring grotesque imagery stamped upon their psyches. They never spoke about the hells that clawed at the edges of their sleep, nor about the keen hatred with which men turn upon each other. These nightmares they kept to themselves, gasping in disbelief as they woke each morning to find that they were indeed still alive.

Yet it was all there, the opposite of the good, counter-pointing the fantasies and innocence of childhood. Eugenio and Lidia's experience that evil was a more powerful energy than good, that good was a mere butterfly in the face of a storm, influenced Primo and fuelled his questioning into the nature of these opposing forces and the drama they continually enacted in the arena of the human soul.

Primo's house in Kloof Street (the extension of Long) was the last in that road still used as a home. Here he lived and practised as a soothsayer. In its time this had been a residential area of good standing, but now most of the houses had either been demolished to make way for high-rise office blocks or renovated to serve as fashionable restaurants and architectural studios. The pavements teemed with opportunistic homeless people who loitered, begged, drank heavily and fought amongst themselves. Feral street children roamed around in packs. These two groups gave the area an unpleasant undertone.

This was the house Primo had grown up in. Built in the late 1920s, it was semi-detached and single-storied. He occupied both sides, using the front door of 21 as his professional entrance and 21A as his own. Each side had a passage leading down the length of the house to a large farm-style kitchen – Primo's

father had broken through from the kitchen of 21 to that of 21A. There was some duplication: two sinks, two back doors, two built-in *credenze,* two bathrooms leading off the passage and two deep tiled fireplaces.

On one side were the fridge and stove and a large Oregon pine table with four yellow Formica kitchen chairs. On the other side stood the reflector telescope, permanently pointed at the skylight, through which Primo still studied the stars and planets. There was also an ottoman couch, faded and in need of re-upholstering. A large worn Bokhara, its colours uneven and softened by time, covered the wooden floor. Primo's father had taken down the wall dividing the two back yards. There a garden of shrubs and herbs grew with a fig tree in the centre.

Leading off the passage of 21A were the bedroom, lounge and a permanently locked room. In the lounge stood an art-deco sofa with two matching armchairs and a second worn Bokhara. An art nouveau lamp, its base the curving figure of a woman, was in the corner. A display cabinet protected a collection of small porcelain animals, a bag of marbles, a fairly valuable Susie Cooper tea set and a blue Venetian glass jug. On the wall hung framed prints of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* and Evelyn de Morgan's *Aurora Triumphans*.

The bedroom was simply furnished with an uncurtained four-poster double bed, wardrobe and dressing table, its drawers still untidily stuffed with Beatrice's underwear. The window was curtained in thick dusty-pink brocade-like cloth and lace. A large framed photograph taken on their wedding day hung above Primo's side of the bed. Like all colour photographs processed in the 1970s, it had faded to a dull pinky-brown so it had a fairy-tale romantic quality to it. Primo and his beautiful bride posed in the centre of the wedding party, with two late-middle aged couples, one on either side of them, the rabbi behind, and a large group of friends immortalized in their laughter of the moment. On the left side, behind a low wall, clustered a group of ragged street people. If one looked closely at the photograph, a handsome man wearing a well-cut suit could be seen leaving the group.

When Beatrice lived at home the photograph stood on her dressing table. It was the only thing Primo had moved after she left.

The lounge of number 21 served as Primo's study. Here were an armchair, upholstered in Sanderson linen, a typist's chair and a desk piled with books and journals. Bookshelves lined the walls. Crystals hanging at the window caught the late afternoon sun, splintering it into rainbows.

The room which Primo's aunt had used as a pantry on the 21 side was now his consulting room. Its window, which looked onto the well-trafficked Kloof Street, was curtained in red velvet. Two chairs faced each other across a round table on which were placed a crystal ball and pack of Tarot cards. Wrought-iron candelabra, holding ten candles each, hung against two of the walls.

On this side of the house there was another permanently locked room that no one entered.

Primo's father and aunt, having given Primo a wonderful though somewhat isolated and eccentric childhood, decided, when he reached his mid-twenties and manhood, to die. They felt, when he married Beatrice – whom they had known since she was a little girl, and whom they loved dearly – that their earthly duty to him was done and their reason for living fulfilled. They believed that in death their nightmares would end.

As far as Primo could establish, his father and aunt had just lain down, each on their own bed, and died. They left no notes and there was no violence in their dying. Their deaths appeared to have been simply a quiet planned falling into deep and eternal sleep, and were a great shock to Primo. It had never occurred to him that they would not live to a ripe old age. Also, because they had both died together and without explanation, he felt betrayed, abandoned and angry.

Newly married and living in Beatrice's flat, Primo had come to visit them on the afternoon of their deaths, as he did every day. It was bright and wintry (he remembered the shaft of sunlight on his aunt's alabaster-like face). The house was filled with the ticking and gonging of his father's clocks. Not finding his father in the front workshop, he glanced in his bedroom and thought that the still figure, lying on his back, a crocheted blanket across his legs, his hands folded across the chest, a light smile on his lips, was merely asleep.

How unlike his father, Primo had thought, to take a nap. He made his way to the combined kitchen. As usual the table was laid in readiness for his visit and afternoon coffee: cups and saucers set out, a plateful of home-made brioche covered with a lace doily, a pot of his aunt's fig jam, a jug of whipped cream, sugar cubes in the bowl. There was no hint of anything untoward, though normally at this time of day his aunt would have been in the back yard tending her garden, and there would certainly have been something good simmering on the stove.

Primo walked down the second passage to the room he had shared with his aunt and which, since his marriage, was now her own. His aunt was lying on her bed in exactly the same position as his father. Now Primo realized something was wrong.

"*Zia Lidia,*" he whispered from the doorway, and again, louder, "*Zia Lidia.*" But she did not stir. Her face, white and still, the shaft of winter sunlight accentuating its morbidity, frightened him.

He walked back to his father's room and stood at the bedside. His father's eyes were not fully closed. Primo touched his cold forehead, noticing white dry saliva at the edge of his lips, and felt ill.

After the inquest (which revealed nothing) and the funeral, Primo locked and never again entered the bedroom he had shared with his aunt. He locked his father's workshop and left the many clocks to run down, so the rhythmic sounds of time passing, which Primo had known throughout his life, grew silent.

He decided, with Beatrice, to move back home. After gutting his aunt's pantry on the 21 side and transforming it into Primo's consulting room, they repainted the entire house and refurnished his father's bedroom. Beatrice bought new linen and hung up the two Pre-Raphaelite prints. Then Primo and Beatrice got on with life together, sadly at first, for Primo missed his father and aunt and found it difficult to adjust to their absence. Beatrice too found their loss hard for they had loved her as a daughter.

When she left him for Pasquale, Beatrice had not given Primo warning either, and the pattern of her leaving had a disturbing resonance. He had just returned from the Namib desert – where he had gone to buy crystals – and found her gone. Unlike his father and aunt she had taken most of her clothes. Like them, she left no note of explanation but had phoned him (at exactly twelve past five – he remembered this small detail) to say that she had moved in with Pasquale. It was as simple as that. What he could not remember was whether she had said for how long she would be away, or why she had left him, or whether he had done her wrong. All this was erased by the tsunami of emotions that overwhelmed him.

Abandoned again, he had sat at the kitchen table and wept.

The community to which Primo, Beatrice and Pasquale belonged was a mixed one, but its core consisted of Italians and Jews who ran small businesses in Long Street, between Wale Street and the Buitensingel intersection leading to Kloof Street. It was a close-knit community of traders, financiers and restaurateurs whose parents had left Europe before or after the Second World War and sailed to Cape Town. They had set up shops and businesses (living upstairs) in a Long Street which was at the time run down and not as fashionable as it would become in later years (though it would never lose its seedy side).

Long Street, lined by double-storied Victorian buildings, some classic and some modernized, had always been busy and noisy, but over the years the focus and content of its shops, and the type of businesses which operated from it, changed. Sack General Dealer, once a housewife's paradise of kitchen utensils and haberdashery, was now Sack Antiques. Stern News Agency was now Stern Cartographer. Solomon's Pawn Shop had evolved into Solomon Financial Services. Biccari Jewellers, which dealt primarily in diamonds, had its beginnings in scrap metals. Only Baldinger's Apothecary had not changed and, with its late-Edwardian interior and collection of original jars and tubs, was now a veritable museum of pharmaceutical dispensing. It was run by Alexia Baldinger, the wife of Dr Adam Baldinger.

There were more restaurants than in the old days, and the clubs that had opened in the late 1940s to cater for ex-servicemen were now up-market and addressed professionals and high earners. A heady cosmopolitan atmosphere was generated by the genteel Kennedy's Cigar Bar, the lively Bregman's Afrika that served West African cuisine, the serene vegetarian restaurant, Emerich's Bliss, and the warm passionate *Da Pasquale*. These restaurants stood in line with Tafelberg Bottle Store, Clarke's Antiquarian Bookshop and Romana Florist, across the road from Sissy-and-Esquire (a clothing and body-decor emporium) and Stairway to Paradise, a brothel run by Pasquale's sister, Virginia.

Some of the upstairs apartments had been converted to backpacker lodges and drew many young foreign tourists to the area. These travellers were occasionally mugged and robbed, for though this part of Cape Town was trendy and wealthy, gangs of street children and vagrants roamed here too, as did criminals and a host of illegal immigrants trying to wrest control of the vibrant drug trade from local merchants.

Although Primo and Pasquale were deeply fond of each other and had been close since childhood, theirs was, on the face of it, an unlikely friendship. They both loved poetry and philosophical debate, but where Primo was a quiet, introspective, rather shy person, Pasquale was passionate, volatile, noisy, energetic, unevenly tempered and prone to manic outbursts. Pasquale drank too much, while Primo never touched alcohol.

They were both striking in their looks – tall, well-built and attractive to women. Though Pasquale used this to his advantage, Primo gave it no attention. Pasquale dressed elegantly, chose his clothes well, had a personal tailor, enjoyed his body, fragranced himself with expensive colognes, always took note of his reflection when passing a mirror; Primo dressed conservatively and modestly in linen suits, or cargo pants with plain cotton shirts, his only break in style being the purple velvet cloak he wore while consulting.

As adolescents, just out of school, they had been conscripted to the army and served together in Angola, where they were exposed to the frank horror of war. Here their innocence was shattered and the idyllic world of their young lives splintered before their eyes. War came upon them as a great and marauding slayer of everything good, sparing them nothing of its brute demeanour, hiding none of its harsh truths. It wounded their spirits and marked them each deeply and indelibly, though differently. They would carry these markings for the rest of their days – Pasquale occasionally violently reliving the horrors he had been exposed to, Primo internalizing and suffering over them.

As a young man Pasquale adventured through many romantic liaisons and affairs, but Primo did not. Nor did he give much thought to love and relationships, seeming not to notice when women flattered him and so never responding to their flirtations. Until one day, browsing in Sack Antiques, he came across a print of Dante Gabrielle Rosetti's *Beata Beatrix* and, seeing in it a beautiful and haunting resemblance to the real Beatrice, felt a new deep emotion within himself and realized that he loved her.

Primo bought the print, and another, Evelyn de Morgan's *Aurora Triumphans*, not because the subjects of this second print showed any resemblance to Beatrice, but because he found the three angels it portrayed, beguiling. He had both prints framed and invited Beatrice to meet him at the third bench in Government Avenue, where, under the oaks and watched by squirrels, he presented them to her and asked her to marry him.

He knew that Beatrice and Pasquale were lovers, but he also knew that Pasquale made love to many others and that he had no intention of ever marrying Beatrice. Primo's proposal was well planned and rehearsed. He intended to recite, in Latin, the poem by Gaius Catullus, *De Acme et Septimio*, for he believed that none of the ancient poets had captured so true an image of the passionate devotion and ecstasy of lovers as had his favourite bard in this poem. He would recite it, then translate it, then take Beatrice's hand and slip onto her finger a ring fashioned – by the jeweller Biccari – from antique Russian silver and an aquamarine.

That was his plan, but, under the oaks, Primo's inherent shyness trapped his song of love. All he managed was to take Beatrice's hands and ask, "Would you like to share your life with me? Would you like to marry me?"

Completely taken aback at his proposal, and later wincing at how she had ruined the romance of the moment, Beatrice asked, "What will Pasquale say?"

"But you're not still going out together. You're good friends, not lovers."

"No, we're not. I mean, yes, we are. Not lovers. Friends. Sissy Plumb is his love of the moment. So it's really over with us – physically I mean. I suppose ours wasn't a proper relationship – always on and off. He's more of a brother, isn't he?"

Primo took her face in his hands and kissed her mouth. "Marry me, Beatrice," he said. "I'll love you and cherish you for as long as I live."

On the afternoon of Primo's marriage proposal, and while he and Beatrice strolled arm in arm through the oaks, Pasquale was in his kitchen stirring up a *salsa pizzaiola,* humming alongside Bizet's *Carmen* and reflecting, as he crushed garlic and chopped origanum, on the versatility of the humble tomato. Had he but asked Primo to read his Tarot spread, he might have had forewarning of what was to come. But he was a man who lived confidently in the moment, and never enquired into his future.

Later that night, as Primo was about to fall asleep, he realized that he had forgotten to give his betrothed her ring. He dressed hurriedly and ran all the way to her flat where, now fired with a sense of romance and chivalry, he shouted up to her to come out onto the balcony. She stood on the veranda, all lit up by flashing neons, her hair rippling in the wind, her long white nightgown picking up the lurid colours of the pulsing 7Eleven lights.

"Will you marry me?" he shouted above the roar of traffic, his unbuttoned linen shirt blown open by the wind, his chest shining as its film of sweat picked up the lights around him.

"I have a ring!" He held it up. "Chests of diamonds and rubies! And a castle with a moat! And fine weavings to wrap you in! And fields of fynbos! And a small orchestra to play at your bidding! All for you! If you marry me!"

Street people gathered around him, looking up at the beautiful woman he was calling to, cheering her and offering him drinks of meths and cheap wine. He ran to the security gate as it clicked open, then bounded up the stairs to her second-floor apartment to find Beatrice on the landing, laughing like a delighted young girl. He fell to his knees, took her hand and slipped the ring onto her finger.

"Come inside," she said, touching his hair as he knelt before her.

"No, my Lady. I won't enter your chambers until you are my wife, " he replied, walking backwards into the lift and bowing as the doors closed.

When he got back home, breathless with joy, his father and aunt were waiting, in their pyjamas, on the stoep. He lifted his aunt into his arms and swung her round so her plait whipped the air and her laughter and protests rang out.

"Beloved son," said his father. "We wish joyous life for you both."

"We have nothing to give Beatrice," lamented his aunt, distractedly doing up Primo's buttons. "I have nothing belonging to our family. Not our mother's ring, not our mother's gold chain, not our mother's bracelets. The Gestapo took everything."

Eugenio put his arm around his sister's shoulders. "You must tell Beatrice about our mother's jewels. Just describe them to her, so she has the picture in her mind of what should be hers now, as the betrothed of our son. And tomorrow we will call the jeweller Biccari to fashion something especially for you to give her. Come, let me get you paper and pencil and you can draw the chain our mother wore, so he makes an exact copy. He is young and talented and he'll make a true replica, of this I'm certain."

"But let's first go in and celebrate. Was that cake I smelt baking earlier? Have you baked a cake, Lidia? Then let's eat it now. It's such a beautiful night, we can sit out at the back."

Father and son escorted Lidia inside, arm in arm with her in the middle, smiling over her head at each other.

In her flat, Beatrice sat before the two prints Primo had given her. Yes, she agreed, there was a resemblance between the Beatrix of the Rossetti painting and herself. And, the three angels of the second print, as Primo had pointed out, were utterly beautiful and brought with them a powerful and wondrous quality of light and darkness. She kissed Primo's engagement ring. "I'll love and cherish you too, Primo. For as long as I live," she whispered.

Primo courted Beatrice with old-fashioned gentility, not making love to her until their first night of marriage, in her Overbeek apartment, with the neon lights of Long Street flashing on and off and streaking through the bedroom. He had arranged with Romana Florist to fill the flat with roses. The bed was strewn with marigold petals and lavender.

That Primo was virginal and unskilled was not a problem, for Beatrice, young as she was, was no stranger to the territory he had not yet entered, having been introduced to it by Pasquale while still at school. Primo explored her body with a tenderness much like that of walking through an unspoilt field of flowering disas, or touching the leaves of pelargonium to release their subtle fragrance.

Beatrice was dressed for the wedding by Sissy Plumb of Sissy-and-Esquire in a gown of raw silk beaded across the bodice with tiny pearls. She wore her long hennaed hair loose, plaited through with fresh jasmine. All the Long Street community came to their wedding, which was officiated by Rabbi Steinberg but held in the garden of the Lutheran Church at the top of Long Street, (to the consternation of the Rabbinical Council). Lazar's trio played Gypsy music that spun its way through the branches of cypress trees, around the church steeple and out into the traffic where it was soon overpowered, but not before it moved hearts and made guests reflect on passion and beauty.

Primo's father and aunt, grey-haired both and deeply shy, walked arm in arm, and sent a ripple of interest through the crowd of guests, for they were dressed in post-war attire (highly fashionable at the time they were last worn, but now quaintly out of place). Lidia had on a beige striped suit, its jacket elegantly cut with padded shoulders, the below-knee length skirt slit seductively at the back. She walked in high chunky shoes and on her head wore a coquettish beret with a pheasant's feather (dulled by time) sweeping elegantly across it. Eugenio's

suit was also striped, with turned-up trousers and a close-fitting jacket. Had they been strolling through a park in 1950, they would have cut a fine figure.

Primo bought dozens of sugar buns and Cokes for the street children, and a crate of beer and flagons of wine for Long Street's paupers and lumpens who joined in the revelry with relish. They were soon drunk, brawling and incoherent outside the church walls, or leaning over the gate making pronouncements on Beatrice's beauty and the generosity of her new husband: "Hey! Miss Beatrice! You got yourself a good man. And Mr Primo! You got a lekker good woman. And Mr Primo! Thanks for the party, hey. This is a lekker party. Hey! Mr Lazar! You play so sweet on that fiddle, man. As tru's God."

When Beatrice had told Pasquale she was going to marry Primo, he had not properly thought through the implications of this. They had grown up together and been friends forever – they would always be friends. She had worked for him since he opened *Da Pasquale,* first waitressing, and then at the bar. She was part of his family and life.

Only when he saw her in her wedding gown, at Primo's side, dazzlingly beautiful under the pink oleander and embraced by the blue plumbago of the garden, laughing as Primo whispered a tenderness, did he realize that there would now be a shift in the dynamic of their relationship. He had lost the woman he cared for more than any other, to his best friend.

Pasquale left the wedding early and went home to drink. On his balcony, a bottle of *grappa* in hand, he worked himself into a state of anger and anguish at his foolish lack of foresight. Cursing his immaturity and stupidity, he decided to kill himself. He took a pistol to Signal Hill, planning to blow his heart out in the eucalyptus forest that still grew there at the time. But he couldn't pull the trigger. Instead he went to his sister's newly-opened brothel, intending to lie with all her prostitutes, one after the other without stopping, until he died from exertion and loss of body fluid. But he couldn't do this either. For the first time in his young life, his libido failed him and he could not service even one of Virginia's ladies. So he drank and wept and became violent, throwing bottles around and smashing tables.

Virginia had him taken away and he spent a good two weeks in the Volks hospital, sedated. His parents sat at his bedside, day in and day out, dozing off now and then, wiping his forehead, whispering to each other.

"We should have encouraged him to propose to Beatrice years ago – after he finished in the army," said his father.

"Yes," agreed his mother. "But there is nothing to be done now."

When Pasquale recovered, he invited Primo and Beatrice to dinner. He closed the delicatessen to other patrons and laid on a feast of *parmigiana di melanzane alla Calabrese, tortellini alla Romagnola* and *agnello alla pastora.* He brought in Lazar on his own, so only violin music filled the restaurant that night. They ate till the early hours, Pasquale and Beatrice drinking wine, Primo content with mineral water. For dessert Pasquale offered them *miele e ricotta.* "To wish us a continuing sweet life together," he said, smiling into Beatrice's eyes.

When it was time to leave, Pasquale saw his friends to the door. Heady on three bottles of Villiera Chenin Blanc and not quite steady on his feet, he announced, "I'm going to fetch you back one day, my Beatrice. I'll come on a white horse, a horse with bells tied to its mane, clip-clop, clip-clop, up Kloof Street and I'll bring you back here to live upstairs, above my shop.

"No! Don't laugh! Watch out for that, my Primo, my best beloved friend. I will fetch your wife, my lover. You must keep watch over her day and night. Remember, she was mine long before she was yours."

They had all three laughed that night, at the door of *Da Pasquale* in Long Street, as good friends laugh, and felt pleased with their friendship. Had Primo but once thrown his own Tarot spread, he might have had some forewarning of the truth concealed in jest.

Pasquale never married and instead devoted his energies to his profession. He took one woman after the other, refusing to commit to any. He was often abusive so none of his lovers stayed long with him and nothing of depth ever matured between them. There had been times when, in a drunken capricious rage and after a weekend of sex, he had beaten his current lover, angered that she was not who he wanted her to be. He had once picked up a young hooker in Green Point, and thrown her from the car when he had finished with her. A number of charges were laid against him and he was saved the indignity and scandal of appearing in court by paying his victims large amounts to drop their case.

Beatrice remained his only woman friend and continued to work at the bar of *Da Pasquale.* As the years passed he confided in her more and more and his love of her matured. This never troubled or threatened Primo and never gave

rise to jealousy. And because Pasquale also loved and admired Primo, the friendship triangle remained a complex and enduring one.

The Long Street crowd were city people who had no experience of natural wilderness, though they occasionally picnicked on Table Mountain. None of them, except Primo, had any understanding of unspoilt nature. His psyche alone bore the illuminations of the unblemished earth, and these he had garnered from the Angolan savannah and a single visit to Zululand when the police had asked him to track down a kidnapped baby.

His intuitions and visions had led him to a remote area of forest where the small limbless body was buried in a shallow grave, the victim of a muti-murder. Primo had found the body within the first few hours of the day, but asked the detectives who escorted him whether they would remain with him through the night until the next morning, so that he might walk through the forest, because a sense of otherness had woken in him, under the great mass of tangled trees, and he wanted to stay with it for a while longer.

It was a sand forest surrounded by woodland, and what inscribed itself on his heart was its sacredness. He did not recognize the trees, could not name the lala palms and monkey oranges, nor the silver cluster leaves and the velvet bush willows. The black thorns too bore no name. But all of them together, tousled and entwined and bound by vines, decorated with orchids, informed his sensitivity, so he could ever after close his eyes and feel poetry within him.

It was this poetry which fuelled his love of Beatrice, this quiet earthly meeting of words which could never be spelt out or written, but which murmured and sighed the way wind did through the Zululand forests.

In the month that Primo travelled to the Namib desert to buy crystals from the goatherds who roamed the rocky outcrops, the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn formed a peculiar conjunction, all clustered together and visible to the naked eye – even in Cape Town's bright sky.

Coincidentally, on the second Saturday night of that month, at the regular *Da Pasquale* poker game, an unusual and recurring hand was played: the dealer repeatedly put down the same five cards. This happened regardless of who shuffled or dealt. The players, all seasoned and skilled gamblers, were amazed and perplexed by this, for none, in their long careers, had ever experienced such

a phenomenon. Dr Baldinger attributed it to the energies of the planetary pageant that adorned the night sky.

"Sack! Have you fixed the pack?" asked Solomon.

"What are you suggesting? That I cheat? I'm a skilled player. You know that. I can swear for my honesty and integrity on the fortune of my shop."

"Biccari! What are you doing? Have you got cards up your sleeve?"

"Don't insult me. How long have you known me? When have I ever cheated?"

"Is it you, Stern?"

"Are we not principled players? Is that not what has held us together for so many years – our sense of honour and trustworthiness? Please, do me a favour. Why should I now fix a hand?"

"Bregman, what are you up to?"

"Nothing but fair play, and you know that. I'm as amazed as you are at this. Stern's right, we don't need to check each other's honesty. It's there. It always has been."

"Emerich! Tell me what you know that I don't. Is it you, manipulating behind our backs?"

"I can't believe you suspect any of us. This is just some weird coincidence, or an outsider is somehow influencing the cards – but there are no strangers here tonight," answered Emerich, glancing around the delicatessen.

"Romana! Last to answer. What about it?"

"I'll step out now if need be – you'll see this has nothing to do with me. But I'm in agreement with the others. For what to cheat? There's no point in playing if we play dirty. Give me the pack. Let me deal the last game."

It was two in the morning. Beatrice, Pasquale and Dr Baldinger stood around the players. Everyone was quiet.

Romana shuffled twice and dealt two cards to each. The players noiselessly pushed their bets to the centre of the table and waited tentatively as, one at a time and slowly, she dealt another three cards, face up in the centre of the table: The ten of hearts.

"No! Surely not again?" she said.

The jack of hearts.
"Impossible!" said Biccari, under his breath.

The queen of hearts.

"No! This is ridiculous. Not again." whispered Solomon.

The players and those watching took deep breaths. No one spoke.

"Last two cards, guys," said Romana, forcing a calmness to her voice. "Anyone betting?"

She waited. Biccari and Solomon put their money down. She slowly peeled back the top card and placed it for all to see: The king of hearts.

"What the hell is going on? This is ridiculous!" said Stern.

Then she dealt the last card. It was the joker.

"Damn misdeal! Again!" exclaimed Bregman, slamming the table. "Where does this damn joker keep coming from? Someone keeps feeding it into the pack."

Emerich loosened his tie and stood up. With his hands in his pockets he looked down at the spread of cards.

Sack swung round to face Pasquale and, with an accusing look, asked, "Are you the joker tonight, Pasqui? Have you got something to do with this?"

Pasquale burst out laughing. "Me? Tell me, Sack, how do I get near your cards?"

"It's the planets," soothed Dr Baldinger. "Five planets. Five recurring cards, one of them an intrusive rogue – the joker."

"Pour us Chevas Regal, Beatrice, please," said Solomon. "Nothing else. Neat. No ice. Then we're going home. This is unsettling. What a night."

"Make it double tots, Beatrice," said Pasquale. "On the house."

The players all stood. They knocked back their drinks, grimaced, and bade each other goodnight.

With a puzzled frown, Dr Baldinger turned to Beatrice and asked, "Shall I walk you home, Beatrice? When will Primo be back?"

"In a fortnight. We've still got to cash up. Pasquale will walk me back, thanks."

"Well, goodnight then. Goodnight, Pasquale."

"Goodnight."

Pasquale drew the blinds and switched off all but the lights over the bar. Beatrice cashed up and locked the day's takings in the safe at the back.

"Come, Beatrice, let's go. Don't leave your jacket."

In years to come Beatrice would look back on this night and ask whether there had indeed been something at play, some force that nudged her and Pasquale at the door so that they brushed against each other, then touched each other, then held each other's hands.

Pasquale took her by the shoulders and, though she stiffened momentarily, she offered no resistance when he kissed first her hair, then her brow, then her lips, which, though he had wanted to, he had not kissed for twenty years. "Beatrice, come back to me," he whispered. "I've waited my whole life away for you. Don't go back to your empty house. Stay with me tonight. Forever."

A motorcyclist whined up Long Street. The lights of the bar danced on the bottled colours of bourbon, Sabra, Amarula, Johnny Walker and Dom Pedro, and shone back from the bevelled mirror behind them.

At that same moment in time, under the Namib sky, Primo, in his sleeping bag, looked up at the abundance of stars – milk spilt across the blackness, with five planets clustered in a group, like angels gathered there, discussing something. Primo realized that if he were in space somewhere, looking back, he would see

six in the group, for the earth too would be visible in the cluster, with the moon humbly among them.

He lay awake until the dawn, which, as though it were a paintbrush, drew a line of red across the horizon. A lone bat-eared fox barked close by.

Pasquale lived in the apartment above his delicatessen, and it was here that he led Beatrice, up the ornate but narrow Burmese teak staircase at the far end of the shop, as though he were leading her back into the time of their childhood friendship and adolescent love. About this too, Beatrice would later reflect. On how this was not a betrayal of her husband, not an affair, not anything meant to hurt him. It was merely a time of gamboling, a time of play while he was away, a time of exploring where her life might have taken her had she chosen a different path.

The apartment was a spacious bedroom cum living room, fabulously furnished with a double bed and sumptuous silk and brocade bedding. Persian carpets covered the floor and two deep black leather couches were festooned with richly coloured silk cushions. On the walls hung a selection of original oil paintings – some very valuable (Pasquale had a Monet) – and a carved Zanzibarian door. At the end of the bed stood an inlaid rosewood table.

The large bathroom, fitted in the 1950s, had, in its centre, a ball-and-claw tub with brass fittings, a pedestal washbasin and a unique original Victorian water closet decorated with cherubs and pink roses. An Afghan Kelim served as a bath mat. Against one of the walls stood two ornate Louis XIV armoirs. A carved, ivory inlaid kist had been placed under a huge gilt-framed mirror salvaged from the lobby of some demolished, now forgotten, hotel in Uitenhage.

Pasquale lit two large candles and a bedside lamp, threw open the balcony doors, drawing the white muslin curtains closed so they billowed slightly in the light breeze. He put on a cassette of Nicolo Paganini's 24 Caprices and turned to face Beatrice.

Holding her gaze he took off his clothes, then came towards her with his arms open. He ran his hands through her thick hair, holding her to still her trembling, and began to undress her, undoing her fastenings, kissing her arms, pulling her garments from her, dropping everything to her feet. She had merely to step from them, like a birthing Venus, into his arms.

Pasquale led her to the bed and spread her out on the red silk cover, then stepped back, looking at her naked body for a moment. He lay down next to her, running a hand across each breast, kissing her stomach.

"I will make love to you slowly and with deliberation, Mistress," he said, and laughed. "I will inflame your beautiful form as it yields to my hands. Here on my own bed I have the softness of your flesh, of your skin, of your hair – how is this possible? – You are forbidden fruit. You are the wife of my best friend. You are the only woman I adore.

"Why did you leave me, my cherished one? Why did you marry another?" he asked, biting against her fingers as she tried to hold his lips closed, to stop him from saying more, then kissing her mouth with tenderness. "I love you, Beatrice," he whispered at her ear.

Beatrice could feel the wetness of his skin against hers, and remembered their youthful love and the play of their bodies. His hands, as he explored her now, seemed to have never forgotten her, though her body was no longer that of the girl she had been.

"You have not changed," he whispered. "You have not changed and you have not aged, and I know you as my own. I will recite you poems, if you want, I can recite Neruda and Tennyson while I make love. As I used to. But I can also be silent, so you can just listen to my heart bursting inside me."

While he made love to her, his face close to hers, she could taste his tears, and she held him close to herself, wanting to say that nothing had changed between them, yet knowing that everything had changed. Nothing could ever be as it had been. And nothing ever would be again. They both knew this.

When they were done with their lovemaking, they lay together for a while. The Paganini cassette had reached its end. The traffic outside offered in its place an awkward music. Pasquale got up, opened a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. Then he ran the bath for her, adding essential oils to the water, so the mixed fragrances of neroli, bergamot and carnation rose in the steam, permeating the room.

He tied Beatrice's hair back into a knot.

"Don't close the door, Beatrice," he said as she went through to the bathroom. "Bath with it open. There must never be closed doors between us again."

He replayed Paganini and cocooned himself in the covers while Beatrice lay in the hot water. A shudder of emotion seized him and he began to cry again. But the frantic passages of the violin filling the apartment wrapped up the sounds of his weeping, so Beatrice did not hear.

They made love often, after that first night, and Pasquale paid great attention to the detail of his lovemaking. For him, love and sex should be art forms, like cooking. He believed that, if love was a central component, one couldn't just mix the ingredients of a woman's body with a man's without some thought, some preparation. So he approached the pleasuring of Beatrice, the excitement of their orgasm, the tenderness after their passion, in the same way he did the presentation of a thoughtfully made *zabaglione*, or *budino Toscano*.

In contrast, it never occurred to Primo – sensitive though he was – to *prepare* to make love, to soften the lighting, to sprinkle the linen with rose water, to place on Beatrice's tongue a fragrant *amaretto,* no larger than an almond in its shell. This Pasquale did. And, because Pasquale was a lover and not a husband, he was aware that at any moment his beloved might be reclaimed, or might wish to return home. So every instant of love became, like the last moment of life itself, a treasure.

Whenever he and Beatrice were to make love, Pasquale would have ready a bottle of Thelema Sauvignon Blanc in an ice bucket and a Kanonkop Pinotage wrapped in a starched linen serviette, cork off and breathing, as well as a pewter platter of mini garlic pizzas, thin slices of *cotechino* and fragrant biscuits redolent with rosemary.

He always undressed her. " I like to unwrap you myself, as though you are a gift; I like to release you as though you are a butterfly inside a pupa," he once told her. He kept a pile of poetry books and various collected works at the side of the bed and would read to her to tantalize her with the achings and musings of lovers who had captured to words that which he longed to. He always liked to run her bath afterwards, and wait for her to come back to bed so he could hold her until she fell asleep.

This was generally the ritual of their lovemaking, fuelled by Pasquale's passion for life, by his volatile explosive moods, by his love of Beatrice's ample rounded form, by his desperate jealous need to reclaim the past and fill it with their togetherness. It was lovemaking tempered by Beatrice's soft quiet nature,

quite the opposite of Pasquale's, and was marred only by the fact that they both loved Primo.

One night, after they had closed the delicatessen and were upstairs lying on the bed, Pasquale teased, "Beatrice, if Botero lived in this town he would ask you to model for him. I can just see you as his Colombiana eating an apple, or his Donna undressing herself."

"Are you saying I'm fat, Pasqui? His models are obese."

"No. No. I don't mean to say you're fat. Yes. His models are obese. No. I just mean his style, his style. He paints so voluptuously. His women's curves are so like yours. There's more flesh to them, I admit. But the *feel* of their bodies that he captures – that feel is yours, my precious rounded one."

"They're not very pretty."

"No. Pretty they are not. They look like the whores who work for my sister. I've told you – I'm talking *feel*. They feel like you. Your beauty he hasn't captured. That's why he'd need you as a model – to introduce your loveliness to his canvases."

He took a handful of her hair and began to plait it, becoming pensive and saying, "I want to tell you something, Beatrice. Through all these years that you've been married to Primo, when I slept with others, it was always with my eyes closed. Literally. In my mind I always saw you. You must believe this. I never wanted other women's bodies. I only used them. In my soul I made love to you. I remembered every part of you. Your body remained in my mind like a map of my way, a map of my own love."

Beatrice said nothing. She could sense where his conversation was heading, and did not want to follow.

"It's been hard for me, all these years, to have you so near me, working with me, being such a close friend, yet not mine," he continued. "Part of me was content to have you, almost at my side, enjoying my life with me, almost completely part of me, almost mine. Primo could have moved away with you to another town, and then I would not have had you, as I have, as my wonderful and good friend. But I wanted more. I've always wanted more of you. I've wanted all of you. Can you understand this?"

Still Beatrice said nothing.

"Did you think of me, Beatrice, when you lay with Primo? Or did you just forget my body all those twenty years? Tell me. Did you ever think of me when your husband made love to you?"

"Don't ask me these questions, Pasqui. Primo and I have a good strong marriage – you know that. And we are good strong friends, the three of us. You're just going to work yourself into a jealous mood. Don't, please."

"I'm jealous already. I've always been jealous. So tell me at least that I am better than Primo. Tell me that my body is firmer, stronger, sexier; that I satisfy you more than he does. Tell me, Beatrice," he said, pinning her arms down and biting at her neck. "I want to hear you say it because I know he doesn't make love like I do."

"Stop it, Pasqui. Or I'll go home!" she laughed, trying to break loose.

"No! I'll shoot myself if you leave me again. I'll stand in my bar and shoot myself publicly. Then I'll come back and haunt you. I'll pull at your legs while you lie in bed.

"Come, my darling. Lie back. Relax. Open yourself to me. I won't ask you again. But one day you'll tell me, of your own accord. You'll tell me that you missed me, and that you made a mistake leaving me. You'll write me a poem and I'll wear it stapled to my heart until I die."

In her brothel, Stairway to Paradise, Pasquale's sister re-created the atmosphere of a nineteenth century bordello, costuming her ladies – among them two dwarfs – in corsets, suspenders, lace stockings and seductive gowns. Heavily perfumed and made up, they lounged invitingly in the deep armchairs of the salon or at the bar, fluttering false eyelashes and pursing red lips.

Like her brother, Virginia was emotional, impulsive and drank too much. Like him too, she was a perfectionist in her work and had amassed a small fortune, for her brothel generally served only the rich and famous. A true artist, she had defied the insipid laws of segregation during the apartheid years and refused to separate people by colour.

"Beauty is colour!" she challenged her more reserved clients. "And inside, believe me, is all the same."

She mixed her staff carefully, as though on a palette, employing those with skins of black and brown, pale whites and toffee browns, mustards, ivory and pearl. These she offset against gaudy and strident decor so that entering her brothel, with its gold ceilings, its emerald, ruby and topaz walls, its windows draped in gold chiffon, was like stepping into an oil painting peopled with striking big-bosomed women. She was never harassed for contravening the immorality laws because, among her brothel's regular patrons, were some highly placed ministers and their deputies.

She had scoured South Africa to find two dwarfs prepared to service men who were bored with the ordinary. On one of her explorations she found the metre-high Lillian Meintjies of Ficksburg. Lillian was the youngest daughter of the postmaster and lived a lonely life, crocheting baby jackets and booties to sell at the local home industry bazaar. She had spent most of her life indoors avoiding people, not from shame, but through a lack of pride. Virginia changed all this when she employed her. With her hair permed and dyed red, a tattooed spider on her rump, whips and a leather jerkin, Lillian was in great demand at Stairway to Paradise.

Virginia found Sara Kloppers, who stood just a little taller than Lillian and had a poorly reconstructed harelip, in Caledon. Here she had earned her keep as a scullery hand at the Brazzaville Bar. Sara was more than happy to change profession and, like Lillian, settled into Virginia's pleasure house with great delight. The Little Ladies, as they came to be known, their breasts bursting against lace, boned corsets, their bellies adorned with rings, often worked together, pleasuring a client simultaneously.

Virginia employed the dwarfs because she was drawn to the macabre. "There is beauty in what is conventionally thought ugly. Those stumpy little bodies! Why, they are just like scarab beetles, quite as lovely!" She encouraged Sara to wear an amethyst stud through her disfigured lip. "Why cover it up, Saratjie? Enhance it!"

Virginia herself serviced only one client, Dr Cloete van Rensburg, Cape Town's leading plastic surgeon. He visited Virginia's private apartment, on the top floor of the brothel, a few evenings each week. She loved him and believed that theirs was not a professional relationship, but one true and deep, though it was not. He always paid for her services, putting money in the top drawer of

her dressing table, which by now was very full, because she refused to take it from him.

Cloete was younger than she and still a maverick at heart, one who enjoyed club life and his freedom. He did not want to commit himself to any long-term relationship or to have children, yet. He felt that, though he enjoyed Virginia sexually, they had little in common and he found being in her presence for too long rather stifling. Whenever they made love she wanted him to stay the rest of the night, to sit with her on the balcony and look out over Long Street, across at the stars above Signal Hill. She would have a platter from *Da Pasquale* set out with wine on her table. Because he did not want the relationship to develop beyond the confines of the top-floor room of Stairway to Paradise, he never took Virginia out and seldom stayed long, preferring to play pool at Starkey's in Green Point or drink at the Stag's Head down in Hope Street. (Cloete did not mix with the Long Street crowd – he was not overly fond of Jews.)

So Virginia would remain on the balcony alone, naked in good weather, covered in a fur coat in winter, drinking wine, watching the moon and stars rise and sometimes set. She did not know that Cloete frequently visited the bed of her friend Sissy Plumb.

Virginia had been married for a short time, five days to be exact, to Count Cesare de M., a Venetian nobleman and homosexual fifteen years her senior. He lived with his devoted and demanding mother in a restored *palazzo* overlooking the Canale della Giudecca in Venice. They had met on a *vaporetto* while Virginia, just out of art school, was holidaying in Venice to study the city's masterpieces. It was a chilly day and the colours of the canal water were blends of deep grey and aluminium. Tiny raindrops had settled like clusters of translucent pearls on Virginia's Titian hair and lambswool coat. She looked beautiful. With hindsight she would realise she also looked vulnerable because he played a mean hand, the Count, enthralling her with his charm and intelligence, romancing her on gondolas and in candle-lit restaurants, accompanying her to galleries and churches and showing her how the quality of light had been variously interpreted by different artists.

They married in a civil ceremony with only his mother present, and planned to spend the following months in Cape Town before settling in Venice. However, the Count did not consummate their five-day marriage and this confused Virginia, who made no demands because she was young and rather in awe of him. For their last night in Venice she ordered dinner to be brought up to their

room, hoping to arouse him with candlelight and romantic ambience. They were staying in the presidential suite of their hotel, where one of the Count's young boy-lovers worked as a waiter. This young man, by some fateful coincidence, happened to be the one assigned to bring dinner to their room and service their needs that night.

He arrived bearing a platter of dressed trout and vegetables *sotto olio*. This he placed on a table in the centre of the room, arranging two plates, cutlery, wine glasses and serviettes. Virginia was late in returning from the flower market, for on her way back she had sat on the Accademia Bridge to watch the setting sun darken the colours of the canal. It was early evening when she opened the door of the hotel room.

The Count and his young man did not hear her enter, nor did they hear the door click shut behind her. They became aware of her only when she screamed. As they leapt apart from their embrace, Virginia threw the flowers across the room: lilies, irises, roses and baby's breath. She took off her shoes and threw them at her husband.

"*Animale!* You bastard!" she shouted.

"No! No! It's nothing! *Calmati! Sta calma! Ti prego!"* he petitioned, his arms outstretched towards Virginia, who picked up the tray of dressed trout and hurled it at him, narrowly missing his head. It crashed through the lead-glass window and sailed out over the pavement below and into the canal.

She pulled her wedding ring from her finger and threw that at him too. It spun through the broken glass, following the tray and trout.

The Count tried to leave the room with some dignity, to explain, to come to some agreement, but this was not possible. He stepped around the flowers, looking stonily ahead. He and the waiter took the service lift to the ground floor and smoked a cigarette in the passage. "I did it for my mother," the Count explained to his young friend.

On the black waters of the Canal Grande, bobbing in the wakes of *vaporetti* and motorised gondolas, trailing streamers of mayonnaise, floated the trout, just for a while, before sinking into foul silt.

These were the dramatic five days of Virginia's marriage. She returned to Cape Town, sulked around her brother's delicatessen for a few years, strolled up and

down Long Street and the Company Gardens with her aging parents, sat with them in De Waal park, all the while planning a future for herself.

She decided to open a brothel because there had not been one in the city since the Blue Lodge closed down some eight years before. (Whores could hire rooms at the Crown Hotel in Roeland Street, but there was no comfort or classiness involved). She bought the old Meyers Building, had it restored and expensively furnished, and set up for business, targeting rich professionals and high-ranking politicians. She did not return to her maiden name but continued to call herself Contessa Virginia Cesare de M., living upstairs in her brothel, drinking hard and smoking filterless Gauloises. She never healed within herself the feeling that she had been duped and betrayed.

Primo had felt comfortable and secure within his twenty-year marriage to Beatrice. They had consoled themselves to not having conceived a baby, though Beatrice occasionally cried about this, generally after a sad dream. Primo was a kind, generous husband who never made demands and never quibbled over how she spent his money.

He had felt comfortable too within their community of friends in the Long Street territory they all frequented and which was the canvas against which he and Beatrice lived out a satisfied life. As a professional soothsayer and magician his services were in constant demand and he worked long hours. Even so, he and Beatrice socialized a good deal. When she worked at night, he would join her for an hour or so for dinner, eating with her and Pasquale. Then he would go home to read, or study the stars if the night was clear. He would stroll down to fetch her later, stopping for a coffee or a cup of rooibos while she and Pasquale cashed up.

When Beatrice left him, all this changed. She took with her their shared context. The little rituals of their day-to-day living were no longer there for him, nor were their shared habits at home. The pleasures they had enjoyed together of going to City Hall recitals, watching movies at the Labia, browsing the antique shops in New Church Street, strolling Long Street in the evenings, their good times at *Da Pasquale,* their Saturday nights at the poker games with their philosophical debates and arguments – all these pointers to Primo's social stability were now gone. He could not do alone the things they had once done together. He could certainly never look Pasquale in the face again, let alone enter his delicatessen; he had no wish to speak to any of their friends. Primo even let slide his good friendship with Dr Baldinger, and because many of their friends were also his clients, he stopped working.

So as not to meet anyone he knew, Primo avoided Long Street and instead caught taxis into town to shop at OK Bazaars. Rather than take coffee at *Da Pasquale* (the very thought made his stomach sour) or Kennedy's, he would stroll up to the Malay Quarter to eat samoosas and drink sweet mint tea at one of the sidewalk cafés. Looking out across the city, with the spectacular mountain massif as its backdrop, he would reflect on the pattern of betrayal in his life.

Even his mother, he felt, though her death was untimely and accidental, had betrayed him. For she had left him before he could form memory of her, before he had captured her smells and feelings and sounds to carry with him through life. He did not have her laughter or her crying or her tenderness in his heart. He had only her absence and his questions of how it would have been to know her.

Primo unplugged the phone and stuck a note on the front door of number 21, advising his clients that he had retired. The note referred people to his apprentice, Beulagh September, who lived in one of the few houses still standing on the edge of District Six, and whom he could recommend with confidence, for she had a sharp sense of clairvoyance.

His sudden retirement caused great consternation and his clients, without considering his wishes, continued to call, hoping he would soon come back to work. They still bought him trays of delicacies, placing them at his door. These he merely stepped over and left for the rats and street people to carry away. His clients would strike the brass knocker (a bat) in desperate disbelief, not accepting the ghastly possibility of having to deal with their future alone. Primo would not answer but would sit in the kitchen or in the lounge or in his study wishing they would go away. Nor did he read the many cards and letters that crammed his postbox.

To stop himself brooding, he turned his attention to the eternally perplexing problem of good and evil. He took from his bookshelves his father's well-paged and worn copy of Dante's Divine Comedy and, beginning with *L'Inferno*, settled down for a long journey through the levels of the Afterlife.

Primo let the household fall apart. Stale breads, mouldy cheeses and withered vegetables cluttered the two *credenze*. Bottles of sour milk and fermenting fruit juices emitted an acrid lingering smell whenever he opened the fridge. The two sinks were piled with dirty plates, mugs and

take-away trays of half-eaten portions. A frying pan of congealed rancid oil stood on the stove. A roast chicken, forgotten in the oven, started to smell. A vase of dead grey flowers stood forlornly in the centre of the kitchen table. Primo did not water the violets that lined the kitchen windowsills and their leaves drooped. The plants on the stoep languished with thirst; the paved courtyard at the back took on a look of neglect as papers and packets, blown in by the swirling southeast wind, collected in corners and got caught in the branches of the fig tree.

Sometimes Primo would wake in the night wanting Beatrice, wanting her closeness and her body. He missed her warmth and her dream murmurs. He missed it that sometimes in her sleep she reached over and held him. So he never took over the double bed, but continued to sleep on his side only, expecting her to come back. It was always a shock, when he woke late at night, to find her not there. On those nights he would ease himself out of bed, open a drawer, fumble for a handful of her underwear and bury his face in it, breathing in the fading smell of her perfume.

Then he would throw a gown over himself, step into his slippers and make his way down the passage to the kitchen. Here he brewed coffee and pondered the fate of his marriage, wondering how it had come about that both Beatrice and Pasquale had dealt him such a blow. Primo was hurt that she had left him for a man he now dismissed as a mere baker, a man who had once been a good friend. No, not merely a good friend, he lamented, a friend who was like a brother. With these sad thoughts he would stare at the patterns on the Bokhara spread across the floor, marvelling at the palette of its colours: deep reds and blues, ivory and yellow ochre, rose and madder. *Whose fingers worked this? Who gathered wild berries and crushed the colours from them? Who composed this pattern?* he would ask aloud. Then he would turn to his telescope and, focusing on whichever planet was visible between the city buildings, seek solace from deep space.

While looking into the vastness of the outer world, he would caress his wife with his thoughts, hoping they would somehow reach her. Perhaps in her sleep his lips would touch against her hair, he thought. Perhaps she would sense him close to her, his hand on her breast, or against her shoulder, as though they were still lying together, in their own bed, in their own home. *Don't leave me forever. For without you, I have no meaning. Without you, I have nothing to live for, only these walls and furnishings and the emptiness of the night. Come home and I will say nothing. I will ask nothing. I will just hold you, for I love you.*

Sometimes he would stand in his garden, under the fig tree and speak into the crisp night air. *If I imagine myself making love to you, will you feel my body against yours? Will you feel me as I kiss your face, your neck, your thick hair, so like the coat of a wild creature? Will you remember the pleasure my body gave you, the pleasure my hands brought to you? Will you remember how we made love, my dearest?*

Perhaps the shrill cries of seagulls or the whine of traffic would respond to him. Even the sharp lashing curses of a drunk bergie might reach his ears. But he could not hear his wife's voice carried by the wind through the lonely night.

Primo did not eat regularly. He took to wearing his velvet cloak, which he had generally worn only when working, all the time. He let his hair grow long, tying it back in a thick ponytail. Though everyone understood why he cut himself off without so much as a goodbye, most thought he was over reacting to Beatrice's affair. Though they gossiped with passion, no one stood in judgment of him or Beatrice, or even Pasquale. For affairs, it was generally accepted, are like the seasons of spring and summer, bursting with colour and passion, but inevitably running their course and returning to the stable autumn and winter of marriage.

"Everyone has affairs, for goodness' sake," Alexia Baldinger said to her husband while cashing up one evening. "Primo of all people should know this. He must have seen hundreds of *ménages à trois* in his crystal ball. Everyone is always in someone else's wife's bed. Only last week I saw Cloete van Rensburg coming out of Sissy Plumb's place. Isn't he in a relationship with the Contessa?

"And anyway, that triangle between the three of them has always been there. Pasquale was on the scene before Primo was. And Beatrice has always been free and easy with Pasquale, hasn't she? And still working for him all these years – I mean, she's right there all the time, always in his space. Actually, it's amazing this didn't happen years ago."

"Alexia," replied her husband. "It's not for us to judge. All I can say is, I'm very worried about Primo. He's disconnected his phone and won't answer the door. He's just closed himself off. It's not healthy. I wish he would at least let me in, but he won't.

"And I had a strange encounter last week. You know that woman, Beulagh September, the one who's been studying with Primo? She stopped me in Loop Street, at the post office, and asked about Primo with much concern. He keeps

coming up when she visions with her crystal ball. She sees him, with a bloodied rag tied around his blinded eyes, and with a dead albatross tied around his neck, walking out into the sea then drowning. She unsettled me – not with what she visioned but with her anxiety, which matches mine. Not everything these crystal balls throw up is true. And anyway, she's still an apprentice. She's not an experienced soothsayer. Primo will never take his life. I know that. I am just so concerned about his isolation. He has shut himself away from all of us. It's not healthy.

"I'll go round tomorrow and try again. Maybe he'll answer the door. I'll take him some food. I'm sure he's not eating properly."

Dr Baldinger helped his wife pull down the blinds and lock the shop. They walked up Bloem Street to their home in the Bo-Kaap, stopping first at *Da Pasquale* for a cappuccino.

The human face is a canvas upon which age weathers and defines itself. Across it, time etches as it passes, leaving behind a legacy of wrinkles, blemishes and muscle without tone.

Virginia's lover, Dr Cloete van Rensburg, made his wealth because women wish to erase these testimonies of time. Though he could not stop the ageing process, he could waylay it by cutting away redundant skin sagged beneath the eyes, or by stretching skin back from the face and pinning it down to the scalp, beneath the hairline. In this way he surgically stole from time at least ten years of its facial inscription, transforming dermal etchings into mere filigree tracings.

Nor did he confine his art to the face. He also sculpted the body form by lifting drooping breasts, augmenting small ones; he tucked away tummies and trimmed off unflattering folds; he sucked out deposits of fat from thighs, buttocks and even chins.

Cloete was a master of fine suturing; his stitching was careful and precise and one might compare him to an embroiderer, though the threads he used were not cottons and silks dyed to fine colours. His needles were not hand-fashioned from the finest silver nor were they straight, but curved and made from alloys. They were single-use needles that were thrown away by the hundred, incinerated with bloodied swabs and bits of flesh.

He was a man who, driven by his profession to improve and rejuvenate the human face, had become obsessed with the whole notion of beauty. *What is beauty?* he wondered. *Does it exist at all? Did the perfect face, the well-balanced face portrayed by the Greeks and Romans and later by such masters as Raffaello and Michelangelo live only, though eternally, in works of art?*

He used the classic faces from these artists' works as the yardstick against which to measure beauty, though he had never come across a living person whose features he considered to be as balanced and aligned. When he looked in a woman's face, even the prettiest, he saw its every imperfection – an eye some milimetres out of alignment with the other; the deepened brow lines on the more expressive side of the face; the irregularity of the nostrils; the too-short distance between the arch of the cheekbones and the jawline.

If the human form is malleable, plastic, mouldable, can its components be worked upon to create perfection? he asked himself. *Can I create it? Who were the models the classical artists portrayed? Were they angels, and not human at all? Did angels visit those master artists in the night, and model in their candle and oil lamp-lit studios, so that by morning the square of marble or the canvas had been worked to represent a creature not human at all? Were the studios in fact holy places, like temples, where angelic visitors took up positions, letting artists copy them into material form but without wings, pretending that their art represented the human face, the human body?*

Cloete accepted that he had never brought classical perfection into existence. He had never managed – not even in his finest surgical work – to remould a face into one of pure beauty, where the balance – in his estimation – between nose, cheekbones, brow and jaw was true and perfect.

Even so, he satisfied the vanities of countless women: those who wished to fill out their lips and those who wished to cut them back; those who wanted to augment their cheekbones; those who felt their noses dominated their faces; those who wished to inhibit the wrinkle-producing muscle movements of the face; those who wanted to laser away superficial layers of the skin, vapourising the signs of age and allowing the skin to regenerate to a new youthful deceptive texture.

His waiting room was always full; the great leather sofa and two deep armchairs seated an array of women – and often men – who were displeased with their appearance and were seeking to perfect it. *(In whose terms?* he wanted to ask them. *By which definition of beauty shall I work and within which parameters?)*

As if replying to his unvoiced questions, there were those who brought cut-outs from magazines, and those who named the models he should work from: Julia Roberts for her nose; Angelina Jolie for her lips; Victoria Beckham for her high cheeks; Kerry McGregor for her breasts.

Some patients did not want their identity revealed and arranged consultations in private hours so they did not have to wait publicly. But most sat happily in his waiting room reading magazines, chatting idly about the latest trend in nail colour or dress style. A comparison of his appointment book with Primo's would reveal that they shared many clients.

There was a certain intimacy between the surgeon and his patients. For the patient, in confiding her displeasure in her appearance, her need to perfect it, her need to look as she thought she was supposed to look, revealed vulnerabilities – both psychological and emotional. Also, particularly where procedures to the body were concerned, she would have to undress. Some women found the atmosphere in Dr Van Rensburg's bright sterile examination room, with its stainless steel instruments and smell of antibiotic solutions, erotic. He too enjoyed the nudity, the intimacy, and the sense that here was a person yielding completely to his skill, to the work of his hands, to his care, to his precision.

When he took his patients to theatre, when they lay anaesthetised before him, as senseless and vulnerable as a piece of clay, he – masked in his sterile green cotton garb and gloved hands – became a god of sorts, an artist-god, who could transform what had been created by another, greater god into something deemed better by the patient. The patient would wake and, once the healing and bruising of surgery had passed, she would look in the mirror and behold a better face, a rejuvenated countenance, and be pleased.

At post-operative examinations he would note in the patient's file how well the augmented breasts sat or how improved was the now taught texture of the facial skin or how flat the abdomen, now free of the kilos it once carried. Yes, he too would be pleased. But not satisfied. The clay form he had worked upon had been merely enhanced. He had not rendered it into the perfect body or facial form. His work remained below the benchmark of beauty as he judged beauty to be.

At the end of each day, in his elegantly furnished office, when he wrote his theatre notes, he looked across his desk at the framed reproductions on the opposite wall. Their faces would gaze out from serene and still positions,

frozen in time, their beauty captured forever by their artists: Rossetti's Girl at a Lattice and *Bocca Baciata;* Prinsep's Leonora; Da Vinci's *Testa di fanciulla;* Nimue in Burne-Jones's Beguiling of Merlin.

Sometimes he would take from his drawer a postcard of Michelangelo's sketch of *Testa di Adamo* and study it closely, though he knew well its every detail. Inside himself he ached, so moved was he by the sheer and absolute beauty that the lines depicted.

Cloete's other lover, Sissy Plumb, was the owner of Sissy-and-Esquire, a clothing and body-decor emporium. She too was obsessed with appearance, but appearance of a different sort. She worked with the decoration of the body. She took the body form as it was – fat, thin, ugly, good-looking – and dressed it, robed it, suited it, attired it. She used the skin as a canvas to be tattooed and inscribed with permanent inks. People came to her shop with nothing much in mind, not knowing quite which garment they should wear to weddings, to work, to funerals, to the theatre, to seduce, to rebel, to cope with turning fifty, to heal the heart after a husband's infidelity, to break out of a dull life.

Perched on a high stool at her till, she summed up people as they walked in. Peering at them over her lightly tinted retro diamanté sunglasses, she knew what they needed even before they opened their mouths. It might be a little black leather skirt to be worn without underwear and with a transparent blouse; or a red outline tattooed around the nipples; or a 1920s dress suit worn with an outrageous orange shirt; or a simple cotton shift worn with a string of amber beads and leather sandals. Sissy could read the body's cry for adornment and she furnished this need as no one else in Cape Town could.

At Sissy-and-Esquire, you could buy spectacular clothing (new, seconds and antique) and have your body pierced, bolted, tattooed, scarified or branded. Sissy's emporium stretched from Long Street all the way back to Loop Street; its two stories and basement housed marvellous clothes and body coverings that she sourced through agents from all over the world.

Two seamstresses and a Malay tailor made up garments for Sissy's own label. She stocked Victorian, Edwardian, retro and sixties clothing, mink coats and fox-pelt stoles – complete with foxes' heads and tails. She sold military jackets (very pricey if they were pre-1900 and bullet-holed), 1920s beaded dance shifts, camel-hair capes from Kashmir, chastity belts, whalebone corsets and burial shrouds. Her stock was seemingly unlimited, its variety outrageous. She

even had a selection of flamboyant hats worn by the Empress Alexandra, last Tsarina of all the Russias, and a little sailor suit (not for sale) said to have been worn by her son, Tsarevitch Alexis, brown-stained by one of his haemophilic bleeds.

Sissy herself dressed only in white, cream and brown linens. She kept her hair short, spiked and gelled, and smoked through a long holder she claimed once belonged to Alice Keppel, the mistress of King Edward VII. Her fingers were clustered with silver rings, her arms heavy with bracelets.

Sissy's black cat, Esquire, wore a diamanté collar and slept most of the day on the counter, by the till. Her guard and chauffeur, Meduro, a refugee from the Congo, sat on a high stool at the entrance, preventing street children and other undesirables from entering the shop or harassing customers on the pavement. He was a hugely built man and very black. He shaved his head and wore a single silver earring in his left ear. His right upper arm bore the deep scar of a machete attack and his back the keloid lines of a lashing. He wore tight denim jeans and military-style boots, with his upper body naked and oiled on hot days.

Sissy rented out two basement rooms to body artists and here they pierced and tattooed clients. Meduro, working in a third basement room, took care of branding and scarification, two new body-art forms. He strapped Sissy's customers down on a surgical bed, heated his irons over a small gas burner and branded them from a choice of some fifty designs, on whichever body part they requested. Because the branding left a smell of burnt flesh, it was done late Saturdays, after the front of the shop had closed. Also, though they considered themselves to be tough macho types (they were generally young neo-Nazi tourists), most of Meduro's clients let out blood-curdling screams as red-hot iron touched flesh. Sissy did not want to disturb other customers.

Scarification was a longer process and each design generally took some months to complete. Most chose to have their patterning done on parts of the body that could be covered: the torso, breast, stomach, back or buttocks. Meduro would cut patterns through the skin, removing the epidermis. He patted pulverised herbs into each incision, to coagulate with blood, then sent the customer home until the scabs hardened. These he later lifted with a surgical hook (a gift from Dr Van Rensburg), allowing the incisions to bleed and repeating the process a number of times until permanent scars were established.

Sissy promoted another form of scarification, one just emerging among the ultra-fashionable – that of designer scars which showed their bearer to have survived a life-threatening attack or accident. These customers she referred to

Cloete, who surgically reproduced scars across the jugular, scars that looked as though the throat had been hacked, jagged scars that ran down cheeks and across temples, scars across the wrist to denote suicide survival and even Harry Potter scars to the forehead.

Sissy Plumb was a Boksburg girl, the daughter of a used-car salesman who never made good and who drank heavily, beating his wife and abusing his daughters. Sissy knew she was cut out for better things and her artist's eye craved the chance to create adornment and art. She ran away to Cape Town when she was fifteen. For a number of years she picked up commuting businessmen in hotel lobbies and at the airport, charging high money for good quick sex in their hire-cars, parked on Signal Hill overlooking the glittering lights of the city.

She opened a small shop in Long Street when she was not yet twenty, by which time she was already hardened and ruthless. At first she dealt only in secondhand garments and costume jewellery. But with her single-mindedness and good eye for dress, it was not long before her shop had grown into an emporium.

Sissy had been married three times, to a merchant banker, a photojournalist and a lawyer. She had driven two to drink and drugs and one to suicide. She was manipulative and enjoyed the control she wielded over men. She bored easily in relationships and made sexual and emotional demands few were prepared to meet.

Now she shared her bed with Meduro and Cloete – though Cloete did not know Meduro slept with her – in the roof apartment above her shop, which was furnished completely in white and had glass walls and views all round the city. When Cloete called, late at night, Meduro sat motionless on a stool, concealed behind an elaborate Chinese screen, watching their sexual play through the tiny hole an emperor had once used to spy on his concubines.

Sissy enjoyed having sex with Virginia's lover. It gave her a sense of power to have an affair with the partner of a friend. She also liked to have Meduro watching. This heightened her pleasure.

"How is the Contessa tonight, Cloete? Drinking a bit much again?" she asked, arching her eyebrows, one night when he had come straight to her from Virginia. "I've seen her naked, so I know you've done her breasts. Those scars

– was that an error or did you mean them to be so prominent? Is that your signature, Cloete? Is she your work of art?" She lit a cigarette.

"You could say so," he replied, undressing himself, then taking the cigarette holder from her lips and resting it on an ashtray. "All my work is my art in some way or another. Like yours is. Don't you feel you are painting when you drape someone with cloth? And isn't there often a little imperfection in your art? Are your seams always straight? Are your choices always right?"

"Always. I make no errors.

"I want to know whether she chose her breast size. Or did you? They're a bit on the large side, wouldn't you say? She knows what I think about them, so you can be frank with me. She won't mind.

"I'm sure you like what you've done for her, but don't you prefer my little breasties, my natural little ones? Aren't they better than her pile of silicone?"

Cloete unbuttoned Sissy's dress and took it off, throwing it down at the foot of the bed. He ran a finger across her clavicle, then kissed her neck, cupping a hand over each small breast. He did not answer her probing, but pushed her back gently onto the bed.

He had worked on her body too. Not her breasts, but her lips, augmenting them so they looked permanently pursed. And he had tidied the lobes of her ears, stretched from heavy earrings. She had wanted him to trim her inner labia so that they remained concealed. "I don't want to look like I have a red camellia flapping around down there, do I, Cloete?" she had reasoned. But he had refused.

After Cloete left – he never slept over – Meduro would pleasure Sissy, for in truth only he could fully satisfy her. "It's the *chiaroscuro*, Meduro, that I love," she once told him. "My pearl-white skin against your swamp black. And there is still a savage in you. White men are so lame."

He called her *Maman* and spoke French, the language of his country's colonisers.

Beauty, Pasquale once told Beatrice, takes many forms. They had just made love and were lying on the bed. He had already finished a bottle of wine.

"Is my fruited bread, hot from the oven, its almond-sugared topping turned to copper, not a thing of beauty? And isn't the purple-green of *carciofie alla Veneziana* a splendour to behold?"

"Are you comparing me to an artichoke, Pasqui?" she asked.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer artichoke?" he teased. "Of course I do, because you have a soft heart. And I compare you to a summer fig, red and ripe. And also to a grilled salmon, trickled with olive oil and touched with sage, because you are delicious. I can't resist you."

Then, in a more serious tone, he said, "I need you to make a promise, Beatrice. I want you to promise never to phone Primo. Promise me! Because if you do, I'm afraid you'll want to go home – you'll leave me a second time. You'll hear his voice and be enchanted all over again. And Primo will want to speak to me too. I won't know what to say to him. How will I explain myself to my lover's husband? To my best friend?

"Pasqui, you agreed not to make demands. You can't ask for more than I give you."

"You must understand that if you leave me a second time, I will die, Mistress. Die! Remember that, every time you think of your husband and my best friend. I have stolen you. You are mine now. You can never go back. In fact, I forbid you to phone him. I'm going to cut the phone lines and throw away your cell phone."

"Stop it, Pasqui! You're getting obsessed. Every time we get into bed you bring up the same subject. Of course I'm going to phone Primo, and you won't stop me. I'm just waiting for the right moment. You know I love him. He's my husband. Even though I love you, you can't make demands like that.

"Why has this happened to me? Why do I love two men and why do two men love me? Some women have no one of their own. Like Sissy. She only has the men she trawls for and her black man."

"It's because she's thin. She has no breasts, only ribs. You have breasts and this little roll here in the middle. And these thighs, like legs of beef, dimpled and good. That's why you have two men who love you. But why compare yourself to Sissy? She's cheap.

"Anyway, her black man has no choice. He works for her, so how can he refuse her? If you asked him, behind her back, he would also say she's too thin. Black people like each other fat. He has a big lover in Khayelitsha and he goes to her on his day off. Once a week he has the fat woman he wants."

"That's not true."

"No, it's not true. He doesn't get days off. Sissy makes him work every day. Now stop the talking and let me kiss you. And don't say *Stop it, Pasqui!* he mimicked, then grew thoughtful and asked, "Why did you marry Primo? Why did you marry him when I was making love to you? When you were mine already?"

"Pasqui, please stop."

"No. I won't stop. I want to talk about this," he persisted. "You left me for Primo twenty years ago. And if you hadn't married him, if you'd married me in the first place, Primo would still be my friend. But now, because you went off and married him, we have a mess. Don't you agree there's a mess?"

"Yes, there is a mess. But you started the mess. You were never faithful to me. Right from day one you had a run of other girls. You hurt me, and you know you did, so don't pretend. At least I only had one other lover. And I married him first."

"But you agreed to marry Primo without asking me first whether I minded! How could you do that? You told me when you'd already accepted. You didn't give me a chance. How do you think I felt? Betrayed! That's what I felt. If I'd known you wanted marriage I would have married you immediately and finished with the others. I just had sex with other women. I was stupid. Immature. I did not know how to value you. But I loved you.

"At least I would have given you a baby."

Pasquale got up, tied a kikoi around his waist, opened a second bottle of wine and filled his glass, then went out to the balcony. He leant over, looking down at the traffic. He turned back to Beatrice. She was crying. He lay with her. "Don't cry," he soothed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I made the mess, in the past. And now."

He ran a finger across her lips and kissed them, tasting salt tears. He held her hand, kissing each finger, quiet for a moment, then said, "Do you remember

when we first made friends with Primo? When we saved him from those horrible kids who had cornered him outside my father's store? And he couldn't speak English properly – do you remember? They were pushing him from one to the other. Was he crying, Beatrice? He was, he was crying, I remember."

"Yes."

"We've been friends so long," said Pasquale.

"Yes."

"And now? Is it over? Do you think so? Will he want us again, in his life?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Shall I take you back home to him? Shall I just accept that these glorious weeks of having you as my own had to end? It can just have been an affair. A short romance, though I want you forever."

"We've hurt Primo. I should have just asked if I could stay with you awhile. He would have let me. He never denied me anything. He would have agreed if I'd asked to share my life with both of you. He's always known I love you."

Beatrice spent the first seven years of her life in a bachelor flat in Mill Street, with her unmarried mother who was secretary to an attorney in Leeuwen Street, close to the law courts.

Beatrice remembered nothing of the flat except two plastic garden chairs, two mattresses with bedding, a cooler bag and hot-plate. Once there had been a floral carpet and a green-and-beige lounge suite. There had been a coffee table and a glass bowl filled with plastic grapes that seemed so lifelike they made your mouth water for sweetness.

Once there had been a double bed in which a man slept with her mother – a man who smelt musty and sour but also fragrant, and who always had Sen-Sen sweeties in his trouser pockets. He was a man Beatrice never saw during the day, and whom she called Uncle.

There had been a dressing table in her mother's room with a matching set of crystal cosmetic jars and a perfume atomizer. And there had been a painting on

the wall, an oil painting in an ornate gilt frame, of the Doge's Palace in Venice, with gondolas in the foreground and angry storming clouds piling up in the sky behind. The colours were a tempestuous mix of reds and darkening blues and deep sea-water greens tinged with orange. Beatrice did not remember the painting itself, but inside of her was a memory of storms. So whenever she saw clouds amassing in the sky, like great galleons preparing for war, blackened and dark and imposing, a sense of familiarity stirred in her.

The same sense of familiarity stirred when certain types of middle-aged men came close to her – men who smelt of cigar smoke and strong after-shave; men whose hair was plastered down to cover a receding hairline; whose skin smelt of alcohol, as though they had drunk so much that their pores were sweating it. This sense of knowing the stranger did not happen often, for this kind of man did not regularly enter Beatrice's life. But in the once or twice that she had brushed against such a person in the street, or outside the cinema, her hand had automatically gone up to her cheek, as though to protect it from being painfully pinched and twisted. Then a deep and primal rush had come over her to run away, and keep on running.

One day the Uncle had stopped coming to the flat, and her mother had stopped going to work. Instead she sat in the kitchen smoking cigarettes. One by one everything in the flat was sold and taken away, even the painting and the crystal jars, until Beatrice and her mother were left with just the plastic chairs and nothing else. The Uncle came by once more and took Beatrice and her mother to a boarding house in Long Street. Beatrice never saw him again.

The boarding house was the old Blue Lodge and here her mother slept or wept for weeks on end, until the proprietress, a fat balding woman called Ruby, told her that the credit the Uncle had left was used up, and she must now work for her accommodation, or leave. So Beatrice's mother (her name was Frankie) began to work as a prostitute, servicing men (mostly sailors) while her daughter played on the pavements with Pasquale and Virginia and the many children of Long Street's shop owners and merchants.

One day, Frankie asked Pasquale's parents whether they would look after Beatrice for a month while she went to Johannesburg to find her brother. Standing at the counter of their grocery store, she explained that she wanted to make arrangements to leave Cape Town and begin a new better life. Over the year that she had lived at the Blue Lodge, she had befriended Cornelia and Massimo Benvenuto, and they had grown fond of her, much as they would have been fond of a foundling. Each evening she came down to their shop to buy the same items: two buttered rolls, six slices of salami, a tomato and a tin of soup.

Cornelia and Massimo pitied her frailty and inconfident nature, and nurtured feelings of care for her, wondering what had driven so lovely and sensitive a young woman to a life of prostitution. (Each evening Massimo wrapped two slices of fruited bread for mother and daughter to enjoy with their supper, in a room he guessed to be bleak.)

On the day of her departure, Frankie had dressed Beatrice in a yellow frilly party dress, and brought her to the Benvenutos with a small suitcase of clothes. She had kissed her daughter goodbye, left a phone number (which later proved to be wrong) and disappeared, never to be seen or heard of again. When Beatrice had started to cry, Pasquale led her to the back of the shop and gave her his bag of marbles. "You can keep it till she comes back," he had said. "But only if you don't cry."

Cornelia and Massimo always hoped Frankie would return for Beatrice, so they never handed the child over to the welfare, knowing she would just be placed in an orphanage. They never for one moment believed that she had intended abandoning her daughter, but thought that some misfortune had befallen her, and that she would come back one day.

Beatrice too waited for her mother, and even though she became the third well-loved child in the warm and caring home of Massimo and Cornelia Benvenuto, she never stopped wondering why her mother had not fetched her.

(Years later, an image came up in Primo's crystal ball – but he did not tell Beatrice – of an old hobo-woman standing outside a toyshop, her face pressed against the glass, weeping:
She stands looking in at the shop window from morning till night;
The porcelain doll inside the shop window has dark thick hair and rosy cheeks;
The doll wears a dress of yellow lace and ribbons;
The old lady unpacks her trolley;
She lays out cardboard and a blanket; beds down on the pavement for the night.)

As children growing up together in Long Street, Beatrice and Pasquale had a close and good relationship. Virginia, a rather prim-and-proper little girl, seldom joined them in their rough and tumble games, preferring to stay indoors while the two of them had fun outside in the street. At first they played with Long Street's many other children, but once they befriended Primo they spent their time with him. They became his only friends.

Primo was an isolated, shy boy, not accustomed to playing with others. Children found him odd and teased him because he spoke a strange mix of Italian and English and often slipped unwittingly into Latin. This was because his father, in his choice of literature for his son's reading, ignored the English classics and concentrated instead on such Roman poets as Catullus, Tibullus and Ovid. And of course, even as a young boy, Primo's intuitive and magical powers were evident, and many mothers warned their children to keep away from him, disturbed when he responded to their unvoiced thoughts.

After Beatrice and Pasquale had rescued Primo from the group of taunting children, they brought him into Pasquale's father's grocery store. Massimo Benvenuto took one look at the trembling boy and sat all three children at the table in the back kitchen. Here he served them slices of fruited bread and cups of warm milk, with a drop of Marsala stirred into Primo's. Then, together with Pasquale and Beatrice, Massimo walked the boy home to his father, the watchmaker in Kloof Street.

Massimo was acquainted with the watchmaker and saw him in the synagogue once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Neither man knew that this was the only time the other attended. Each had his reason for not worshipping regularly.

The watchmaker wanted little to do with God, for God had failed him at his time of greatest need. He addressed God only once a year, and that was to atone for neglecting his ancestral religion. Massimo, by contrast, was not concerned with organised religion and believed that he adequately worshipped God through the way he lived his everyday life. He acknowledged that he had to face God directly for the forgiveness of the past year's sins and shortcomings and this is why he attended the Yom Kippur services.

Massimo knew no more of the watchmaker than that he was a widower with a young son. So he was surprised when, on striking the knocker, the door was opened by a woman – a beautiful woman he had never seen before, one with deeply lovely eyes and silvered raven hair held back in a long plait. She was joined at the door by the watchmaker, Eugenio Verona, who shook his hand and invited him in, calling out to his son, waiting on the stoep with Beatrice and Pasquale, "Primo! Invite your friends inside. Come in and offer them something. *Zia* Lidia has fresh *biscotti*, I'm sure of this."

Eugenio and Lidia led their unexpected visitors down the length of the passage into the large kitchen. Eugenio invited Massimo to sit on the ottoman while

Lidia ground freshly roasted coffee beans and filled the espresso machine. She arranged *biscotti* on a plate and listened shyly as the visitor introduced himself. Primo took his new friends out into the back garden.
It was a long afternoon in which Massimo learnt that Lidia was Eugenio's twin sister ("Though not identical," she had pointed out). The two men spoke about the Italy they had known as young people, of the war, of their journey out from their war-ruined motherland.

"Our parents were killed by the Fascists, early on in the war," was all Eugenio disclosed about his family, while Lidia brewed fresh coffee and brought out more biscuits, offering nothing to the conversation.

Massimo explained his visit. He had come about their son, who was a regular customer in his shop. He had noticed, he told them, that the boy was always alone, always shopping and running errands, but never in the company of other children – never playing. "Should he not be playing with others?" he asked them. "Going to school? Learning to speak English properly?"

Massimo would relate to his wife, Cornelia, as they lay in bed that night, whispering so as not to wake the three children who shared their room, what a strange and lonely air Lidia had about her, and how beautiful she was.

"She's his sister, Corrie. Fancy none of us knowing the watchmaker has a sister."

"But who has ever seen her?" asked Cornelia, not giving him time to answer. "Why does she stay indoors, never come out? What kind of life are they leading? Does she speak English?"

"No, she can't speak English, and yes, it seems she stays indoors and never goes out," answered Massimo. "That's why we always see the boy doing the errands. She has no world but the one inside that strange, double house.

"Poor boy!" said Cornelia. "What an unnatural life they force on him. Should we try to make friends with them, invite them out for a picnic or a walk along Signal Hill?"

"You must of course invite them, Corrie, but I don't think they'll come. Still, we can help the boy. Such a nice boy. So good and responsible. With such maturity in those deep eyes. We must get him out of that house more. And what a house! I've never seen so many clocks. Granted, he's a watchmaker. But they're all ringing and striking together. It's enough to drive the sane mad."

Massimo's visit to the house of 21 and 21A Kloof Street marked a turning point in Primo's life. For a start he was sent to school, and the English he spoke shed its Latin component and strong Italian accent. Most importantly, his friendship with Pasquale and Beatrice took root.

The careful selection of meats is as important in the making of a good *salame* as is the choice of herbs and spices and the final curing process. Pasquale regularly made three types of salami: *Crespone* (also known as *salame Milanese)*, *salame Genovese* and *salame Napoletano*. For favoured customers he made *finocchiona*, a variation of *salame Fiorentino*, which was flavoured with fennel seeds. The recipes for these salami were regional. The first was particular to Milan, the second to Genoa, the third to Naples, and the *finocchiona* to Florence. That Pasquale was skilled in the making of all four types was exceptional and unheard of outside Italy. He owed this talent to his father, Massimo Benvenuto.

Paquale's grandfather, Avram Benvenuto, had been a successful and well-respected lawyer in Rome during the 1920s and 30s. His career and reputation flourished until 1938 when, because he was a Jew, they were cut short by Benito Mussolini's restrictive racial laws. Among other things, these limited his law practice to serving only Jewish clients, so that his work was severely curtailed. Daily life for him and his family became increasingly difficult. Although Jews in wartime Fascist Italy were at that stage still free from the danger of deportation, there was always the threat of arrest and internment.

After Mussolini's fall in July 1943 most Italians celebrated the short-lived tenure of the new prime minister, Pietro Badoglio. Avram Benvenuto, a man of foresight and intelligence, did not. Six German divisions with one hundred thousand soldiers were stationed in Italy during that July. An additional twelve divisions poured into Italy, and in September Germany formally occupied the country, re-establishing Mussolini as its puppet dictator. [1] The arrest and internment of Jews was soon to become government policy. By the time the October roundup of Jews for deportation had begun, Avram had already placed his wife and two daughters in a convent where, with false documents, they passed for Sicilian refugees. It was more difficult to find a place for his ten-year-old son. The night before the occupation, Avram handed him into the safe keeping of his tailor, a veteran who had distinguished himself and been decorated for bravery in both the Libyan and First World Wars.

[1] Susan Zuccotti. **The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, Survival.** Page 73.

Avram had left his son standing at a pre-arranged meeting place two blocks from the ancient Roman Theatre of Marcellus. He had watched from a dark alley as the limping figure of the tailor emerged from the shadows, altering his pace so the boy could fall into step beside him. Both walked on and disappeared into the night. The boy carried no case, so as not to arouse suspicion. In his jacket pocket he had a photograph of himself and his family. (Behind them, in the photograph, hung the intricate sixteenth century tapestry that his father had given the convent where his mother and sisters now hid.)

Avram lingered in the shadows, watching his son walk away, imprinting into his mind, with great care, the image of the boy looking back just once. (It had been impressed upon him not to wave.) Avram went back to their apartment for a few nights to close his affairs and leave some precious belongings with the concierge. He then went from house to house, warning Jewish friends and acquaintances to use false names and hide in convents or small villages. He planned to keep moving about the city, changing accommodation as often as he could until he found himself a secure and permanent hiding place. He wanted to remain in Rome to be close to his family.

The tailor, a proud old man who had lost a leg to a complicated injury, was disgusted by Mussolini's unequivocal allegiance to Hitler. Two weeks before, his youngest brother, a liberal journalist sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, had been arrested. He had disappeared without trace.

The tailor bricked up the window of a small storeroom adjacent to his workroom at the back of his home and positioned a cupboard in front of its door. It was here that Massimo was to hide, together with the tailor's nephews – two brothers – one a butcher and the other a baker, and a statue of the Virgin Mary.

The butcher and the baker, to avoid being conscripted, had moved from their home town, Sansepolcro, and sought sanctuary with their uncle. The statue had stood in a shrine in the baker's kitchen. She now looked down at them from a corner shelf with a serene smile on her ageless face. The brothers and the statue had been in hiding since 1940, when Italy became Germany's ally in war, and welcomed the young Massimo with care and understanding.

He joined them in their confined and cramped hiding place where they could not raise their voices and where they spent their time sitting or lying on mattresses, taking turns to walk around the room, for there was not much space.

Very early each morning, long before dawn, the tailor would push aside the cupboard that sealed their door, and the three would come out of the room to stretch their legs, look at the sky and rinse out their slops bucket.

Whenever they heard the tailor's heavy scissors crash to the ground, they were silent, for this was the tailor's signal that someone was knocking at his door. In the beginning, each day was marked by the comforting sounds of the tailor's sewing machine at work. As his work grew scarcer, however, those reassuring sounds ceased.

The tailor did his best to procure food for his concealed family, having assured Avram, "I will care for your son as though he were my own." Avram had given him a considerable sum of money, knowing food would become increasingly expensive and difficult to buy. Each night the tailor brought in a pail of fresh water, a loaf of bread, fresh beets and herbs, boiled potatoes, perhaps an onion. Occasionally there would be eggs. Once he brought in the luxury of wild hare, roasted slowly with garlic and rosemary.

To help cope with their confinement and pass the time, the butcher and the baker began to describe the preparation of their culinary specialities. They began on the day when the boy was in despair and weeping softly, for he had imagined that his father would visit, but this was not possible.

"Suppose," began the butcher, winking at his brother. "That I were to take a half-kilo of donkey meat and a half-kilo of horse but could find no other meat because our esteemed *Il Duce* had eaten it all himself. Would I be able to make a *salame* good enough for King Victor Emmanuel to enjoy? And what if I had garlic but no cardamom? Or what if the peppercorns had been confiscated by a heartless Fascist? What could I prepare to place on the royal table? Could I make a true *salame*? Or could I only make up a sausage without taste, a sausage moist and flaccid, a sausage fit only for Nazi palates?

"Come, boy, sit up, do not lie there in sorrow! These are important questions I raise. I want your opinion! Imagine I have a kitchen. Better still, imagine this room we call home is a kitchen equipped with chopping boards and knives and a cooling room and graters and pots and steaming cauldrons. So come inside it and help me sort through my recipes. Stop your weeping now! We must solve this problem before the war ends and the last Nazi has mended his ways, for after that we will have food aplenty and no time to discuss the basics of a good *salame*."

"And imagine," continued the baker, taking his brother's cue and looking up at his statue of Mary. "That we must bake a fruited bread for the Christmas table of the Holy Virgin, but we have no crystallized fruit, no sugar, not a drop of sweet wine. What if the flour were black? Could we bake her a cake so sweet that she would come down from heaven to our wartime Italy to fetch it?"

"No, it will not be possible. The salami will have no taste and the fruited bread will be bland. Neither will be fit for King or Virgin," continued the butcher. "We must fetch the ingredients we require and do the job properly. Come, boy! We are going on a journey or two. We are going to ride camels and mules across Asia. We are going to take a ship from Naples and sail the high seas from there to Africa because we must buy, from merchants in faraway lands, the choicest spices and herbs and preserved fruits to make the best salami and fruited bread ever made since Adam followed Eva out of Paradise!"

So the butcher and the baker took Massimo on a long imaginary journey, first following Marco Polo's route from Venice through Asia Minor to collect ingredients for the salami and fruited breads they wanted to make. The journey had its hazards: the butcher described bandits and lepers in the hills, and the baker told of snakes and scorpions among the desert rocks where they slept. They described almost impassable canyons and flooded rivers. They had to eat the flesh of serpents baked in the hot sun; they lost their way in the Gobi desert; they escaped galloping hordes of Mongols and survived fevers and deliriums.

The butcher and the baker outlined a second provisioning journey, in which they raised the sails of a great ship and set off, leaving behind the Mediterranean, crossing the Atlantic ocean almost as far as Brazil, then catching the winds that carried their vessel down to the edge of Africa. From there they beat their way up the east coast until the trade winds puffed their sails, taking them to the spice islands of Pemba, Mafia and Zanzibar, then on to India. On this journey they bought sacks of cloves, vanilla, cardamom, nutmeg, mace and ginger.

But this was not all they needed, so they had to travel again. On a third journey they sailed to the Americas to bring back the finest sugars and stone ground flours. All these they stored in an imaginary dark and cool cellar under the tailor's house.

"The best place to buy meat will be the markets of north Africa," announced the butcher. "For there the livestock grazes on sweet exotic grasses so the meat is succulent, like pummelled veal. The milk is not good, it is too pungent, but the

meat has the wonderful taste of the earth. We must sail across the Mediterranean again. This time, I think we will take a Phoenician sailing vessel to Alexandria. We will be guided by the beam of a great lighthouse and we will consult Nubian herbalists, not Egyptians, on how best to cure meat, for we do not want our salami to taste of saltpetre, do we?" he asked, hugging the boy who was cradled in his arms.

Outside in the real world, grown men at war were trashing Europe. But in his hiding place Massimo, who had lost all sense of time and reality, was learning to cook. He and his fellow fugitives put on imaginary white aprons, sharpened their knives and began to process and cure a variety of salami.

"Of course, *salame* is not *salame* without pork. You Jews must relax a bit with those antiquated rules the rabbi gives you," the butcher argued. "We need the succulent meat of piglets fed only on oats and cream."

"Leave your provocative talk about pork!" the baker responded. "And before the war is done, find a way to make salami without pork for our Jewish boy, one so delicious that it will seem that a pig fed entirely on milk and honey was sacrificed in the making."

"And what might you know about meat, dear brother?" asked the butcher, in mock argument. "You with your lily-white pastry hands. Don't talk to me about pigs and pork and I won't talk to you about sugars and flour. Stay in your cake department."

And so, throughout their confinement they travelled the world, collected ingredients, argued their way through countless recipes and worked hard in their kitchen until they had prepared a good variety of Italian salami. So involved in their fantasy did they become that they could virtually taste their abstract meats and, with their eyes closed, identify them:

"*Fiorentino!* With fennel. *Mamma mia!* I will die it is so delicious."

"*Crespone!* Oh God in Heaven, yes! Yes! Aha! And with whole pepper corns."

"*Napoletano!* I am speechless. It is more than perfect."

"*Genovese! Santa Maria!* I can taste the pork. Is there pork in Paradise?"

When their cellar was finally hung full with salami, it was time to turn their attention to the fruited bread, for the baker had made a vow to the Virgin Mary

that, before war ended, they would have for her an offering of the best fruited bread in Italy. In the meanwhile, Massimo had developed a special relationship with her. Every night, in the dark, while the butcher and baker slept, her statue came to life and stepped down from her plinth, assuming human proportions. In the glow of her halo she lay with Massimo, as his mother used to, holding his head in her arms and singing Hebrew lullabies. The Virgin Mary let him play with the ruby-red beads of her rosary, as his mother had let him play with her jewelled necklace.

When he awoke each morning she would be back on her shelf, smiling down at him.

It was now the baker's turn to take the lead. The fruited bread must have fragrance, texture and a taste that did not overwhelm but was discreet and demure. It must be light and airy but not vacuous. The yeast must not leave a heavy taste. The delicate flavours of vanilla and cinnamon should be well balanced with those of ginger, nutmeg and mace, for too much of one spice could overpower another and ruin a fruited bread.

Sometimes they would bake as many as six breads a day in their quest for the perfect loaf. In the evenings, they would taste and discuss each one. These were always good, but not good enough. Sometimes it was a gingerbread that came out of the oven, sometimes fig bread. Once, as they were still working out the quantities of orange and lemon peel, the bread was slightly tart and deemed a failure.

It so happened that a perfect fruited bread came out of the oven on the very morning that the tailor, tears streaming down his wrinkled face, moved the cupboard aside to announce, with a bottle of wine in hand, that war had ended. A few weeks earlier, Mussolini had been executed by Communist partisans.

The four stood silently for a moment but soon became raucous as they embraced and laughed and shouted for joy.

"Wait! Wait! One moment, please!" demanded the baker, his hands in the air to stop his friends from leaving the room. "Before we rush out to the free world, we must first complete something. We are not yet finished in here. I must open the oven."

Massimo, the butcher and the tailor stood to attention while the baker, humming softly, lifted from the imaginary oven the finest fruited bread ever

made. First he sprinkled it with finely powdered almonds and sugar soaked in a rare Macedonian wine, then he raised it in the air and, with his eyes closed, announced, "Holy Virgin, *Regina Mundi*, accept this our humble offering in thanks for our safekeeping and the liberation of Italy."

He placed the fragrant bread, light yet bodied, rich with crystallized kumquat, red fig, ginger and the peels of mandarin, onto an imaginary altar in the centre of the room and bowed his head, for he knew the mother of God was smiling down from heaven at this little miracle, as was the statue.

The tailor, limping on his ill-fitting prosthesis, led his nephews and Massimo out of their hidden room, through his modest home and into the Italian sunlight. No one spoke until the butcher turned to Massimo and shook his hand. "Young Massimo," he said, "These are not tears in my eyes. I am not crying. It is only that my eyes are not accustomed to the brightness. You were brave through our ordeal and I would like you to take my salami recipes into your future and make your fortune with them."

The baker placed his hands on Massimo's shoulders, saying, "Nor do I cry; mine are tears from heaven. Forget our captivity and remember only our freedom. The fruited bread is the miracle of life. Hand it on to your children. And be wise, do not circumcise your Jewish sons. Hide their lives behind their harmless little foreskins in case this anti-Semitic madness ever sweeps the world again.

"As for us, we had commissioned the making of a sailing vessel, in the very month those ill-bred Nazis arrived. We will now fetch it from a secret shipping yard near Naples, for it is sure to be ready and waiting."

"Yes," said the butcher, taking over from his brother. "We will sail away to the east, for silks, and only hope that pirates in the South China Sea do not apprehend us."

"Nor pirates in the Bay of Bengal," interrupted the baker. "We will fetch you when you are a grown man, when you have completed your studies and found your bride. We will clothe her in silks and fineries, and we will prepare the wedding feast ourselves. I alone will bake the cake. Twelve tiers it will have, each different and the whole coated in rose-fragranced cream and cherries."

"But before we sail," said the butcher. "We will go home, back to our home town, to look again upon the greatest picture in the world – Piero della Francesca's fresco of the Resurrection of Christ, to pay homage before it, for

we too have been resurrected from a tomb, and we too walk out now alive and redeemed from war."

"Now stop your weeping, boy," soothed the baker. "Your father will be here to fetch you, this very afternoon, I'm sure of it. Think of the reunion with your mother and sisters. Think of the feasting and celebrations. Think of the space you will have – you'll be able to run and play again. Those thin little legs will fill out. You will have colour in your cheeks.

"Until we meet again, may the Holy Virgin protect your coming and your going. Now goodbye."

The brothers collected their few belongings from inside, then embraced the young Massimo and their uncle, and set off for the station with the statue of the Virgin Mary and a shared case, each wearing a new suit that their uncle had made in anticipation of a free Italy.

But things were in turmoil. The trains were not running. While deciding what to do and how to get back home, they were apprehended by a deranged soldier who shot them behind the station, maliciously and without ceremony, accusing them of being deserters and thieves. (*Who in war-torn Italy can buy a new suit?* he had wanted to know). A stray bullet cut across the Virgin's forgiving face.

Massimo waited for his father to fetch him but was soon to learn that neither his parents nor his sisters had survived the war. The old tailor, unable to trace any living relative, kept him on as his own son, sewing him a new suit of clothes every year – until arthritis crippled his hands – and imbuing him with a good sense of dress and demeanour.

"Massimo," he would mumble through lips holding pins as he measured cloth. "At night, a man wears pyjamas. And during the day, in his *orto*, while he digs potatoes and feeds the chickens, he wears an overall. But otherwise, he wears a suit. A man always wears a good suit."

"And Massimo," he would call out as he cut cloth. "When you marry, your wife must not work outside of the home. You must make enough money to keep your wife well. Women must be loved and cared for."

"Massimo," he would point out as they sat on the bench outside their front door. "Do you see that woman there, across the road? She has been trying for many years to marry me. Ever since my Enrica died, she has come to me at the

market, every market day, and asked if I am tired of living alone. I do not live alone, now, I tell her. I have a son.

"So come, my young son. Why are you so quiet all the time? What can you tell me that I need to know about life?"

The boy had little to say, for his thoughts were always out to sea, fighting wind and waves, braving calms, hauling in nets of silver barracuda, watching the Southern Cross slip down into the ocean as the earth turned; or riding mules across endless red landscapes, gathering wild honey, looking out for vagabonds and all the while laughing with his two friends, the butcher and the baker.

When Massimo reached his twenty-first birthday, he decided to travel, hoping to come across his friends somewhere on the high seas. By then the tailor was in the care of nuns, for he had grown feeble and forgetful. He passed his days dozing in an invalid chair, under the cypress trees of their convent garden, dreaming of military manoeuvres in the hot Libyan desert.

Under a bright blue sky Massimo said his sad farewell. Black swallows circled overhead, and church bells celebrated the *Festa del Sacro Cuore*. The tailor, in the twilight of memory, thought that Massimo was setting off to war in the African desert.

"Mind," the old man cautioned, lifting a warning arthritic finger. "Do not drink water from wells, for the enemy pours poison into them. And mind, if they capture you, slit your own throat, for they are bastards of cruelty. They will tie you upside down to a palm and leave you to dry out slowly in the sun, while hawks pick at your eyes.

"And my son, if you come across a mound marked by a small wooden cross with the letters G B 1911 scratched on it, will you greet Giacomo Brescascin, my Captain. Tell him I have fresh water for his men."

A nun stepped forward and whispered to Massimo that it was time for him to leave. The old man was crying, calling out for help, for he could see in the distance a convoy of lost ragged soldiers dragging a wounded comrade, battling to find their way through desolate desert terrain.

Massimo took a train to the docks of Naples, where he was surprised to find not a single sailing ship or Phoenician boat destined for the Far East. Disappointed, he bought a one-way ticket on a British vessel bound for Cape Town. He had with him a leather pouch containing his mother's ruby necklace. His father had

left it in safe keeping with the tailor. He also had the money his father had given for his son's maintenance. The tailor had not spent a single lira of it.

Massimo arrived in Cape Town speaking the rudimentary English he had learnt from the galley hands on board ship. He had found his way down to the kitchen, drawn by the dull smells of boiled potatoes and grilled meat, to investigate the culinary sacrilege being committed there. During the six weeks of passage, so as not to be idle, he washed dishes and harnessed all the English he could. He tried to teach the ship's cook the secrets he had been given, but the cook was an unwilling pupil. He had always boiled cabbage and carrots and had never used herbs and spices. Why should he now change?

"Salt and pepper! Is quite good enough!" he shouted in staccato sentences. "Garlic! Makes breath stink! Women! Do not kiss stinky breath!"

With a cigarette held in his lips, ash dusting his work surface, his great arms covered in tattoos of anchors and eagles, he rolled out pastry and wrapped it around sausage meat. "Sausage roll!" he shouted. "Very good! Very easy!"

In Cape Town Massimo took a room at the Flamingo Hof in Kloof Street. Each morning he was served what was described as an English breakfast. This comprised two fried eggs, fried tomato, sweet corn, baked beans, fatty bacon and sausage served on a greasy white plate embossed with a Union Castle logo. Toast stacked in a pewter rack, little rounds of butter, marmalade and a pot of strong black coffee completed the meal.

Every morning Massimo sat alone at a table covered with a starched white tablecloth, listening to and absorbing the English spoken all around him. A set of heavy cutlery, also once belonging to Union Castle Lines, flanked his plate. Around him, at the other tables, sat uniformed men, clerks and secretaries who ate hastily and then rushed off to their jobs. He had nowhere to go. Also, his period of confinement had distorted his sense of time, so he never hurried and would spend an hour, if not longer, at breakfast in the gloomy dining room of the Flamingo Hof. He would reflect upon the English breakfast before him, which he never ate. It had been fried up the night before and heated through for the morning meal. The oil used was not the finest, nor the freshest. The tasteless sausage had the impossible texture of cardboard and would never be suitable for the table of King or Virgin.

One morning a heavily built man wearing khaki shorts and big boots, strode over to Massimo and, showing off to the ladies in the dining room, asked in mock Italian-English, as he lit a cigarette and picked a fleck of tobacco off his tongue, "Whya yoo nevah eata tha food? The food no gooda eenuf fora yoo? Yoo wanna tha macaroni? Si! Si!"

The ladies all sniggered behind their serviettes. Holding the stage he continued, "Yoo wanna your mama cooka yoo tha spuugetti?"

Massimo, aware he was the butt of a joke and not knowing how to respond, looked down at his greasy breakfast. Though most mornings the sight of oily eggs did not bother him, this morning he felt the nausea rise up. He slapped his serviette to his mouth as the retching seized him, pushed his chair out from under himself and ran from the dining room, laughter bursting out behind him. To his absolute shame, he threw up in the hall. Amid the laughter, the man's voice boomed, "For Cris' sake! The little wop's hurled his gut!"

Massimo could not stay at the Flamingo Hof a moment longer. As he packed his suitcase he finally faced the fact that he had no one in the world to call his own. His parents and sisters were dead and his beloved surrogate father was senile. There was no way of locating the butcher or the baker – he reasoned they were probably on the high seas somewhere, or trekking across the Himalayas in search of yak butter. As he reflected upon the cold hard race of people he now found himself amongst – in the five weeks he had been in residence not one person had greeted him – there came a tap at his bedroom door. He opened it hesitantly. There stood a young lady. She had come to tell him, shyly, that she was not one of those who had laughed at him, and that she had found the man's performance disgraceful. Massimo could just understand what she said and was touched by what he recognized as simple open honesty. He stepped back and she entered.

They sat on the bed in the dingy bedroom of the Flamingo Hof that had nothing of comfort in it, and she put her arm around him, for he had started to cry and she had never seen a grown man cry. Massimo settled into her embrace as though he had always known her. Cornelia Boshof was her name, she told him, and she had come to Cape Town from the Boland to look for work.

They checked out together and walked the short way to Long Street, she a willowy girl wearing a simple cotton frock, her long blond wavy hair tied back from her face; he a tall slender upright young man carrying both their cases. They booked into the old Phoenix Hotel, where the breakfasts were also greasy, and where they slept in separate beds until they married some six months later.

Each morning they drank their coffee on the upstairs veranda. Leaning over the ornate Victorian balustrade, watching traffic flow by down below, Massimo wondered how he could earn a living good enough to keep his wife and still be able to afford two new suits each year.

"Corrie," he announced one day, pointing across the road at a derelict building which had its windows and door boarded up. "You see the building? You see the building there? I am to open a grocery shop. I am to make salami and fruited bread to sell. That is how I will make our money, Corrie. That is how we will live."

After much deliberation, and against Cornelia's advice, Massimo decided to pawn his mother's ruby necklace. He took it from its pouch and held it to the light. The blood colour of its nine jewels made his heart ache. "My mother, she will understand, Corrie. And I only give it for pawning. I do not sell it."

In Solomon's Pawn Shop he looked down through the glass counter at the lockets, bracelets, signet rings, fob watches, strands of pearls, gold chains, cameos and mourning brooches that others, in positions similar to his, had pawned. A deep sadness seized him. The necklace had been his grandmother's and she had given it to his mother on her wedding day. He closed his eyes and remembered them against his mother's neck, remembered stretching up as a child to touch them when she leant down to kiss him. He remembered learning to count to ten with the aid of the jewels. "Nine rubies and your mamma's heart makes ten," his mother's voice rang out now from memory.

"Is there something I can do for you, sir?" asked Emanuel Solomon, behind the counter. "Are you wanting to buy something?"

His voice brought Massimo back from his reverie. "No, not to buy. I come to pawn. I come to pawn the rubies of my mother."

He took the necklace from his inner jacket pocket and placed it into Mr Solomon's outstretched hand, saying, "I am to rent the empty shop on this road and I am to open a grocery store. For this, I must have cash."

Emanuel Solomon gave a hard look at the man with the rubies who spoke English laden with a strong Italian accent. His eyes were tear-filled and every now and then he wiped his nose on a white handkerchief. Mr Solomon

recognized all the tell-tale signs – for he saw them often in his profession – of young men breaking their hearts as they sold (for pawning was really selling) their mothers' jewels, or their fathers' watches or their grandfathers' gold sovereigns, just to have some necessary ready cash.

He estimated each oval jewel's weight: the central ruby at a carat and a half and the other eight graduating from one carat to a half-carat each. With a loupe and under the strong light of his lamp, he checked for the growth lines within each jewel to confirm they were genuine. He judged that the exquisite necklace was of French craftsmanship and dated it mid-eighteenth century. Assessing a value, he made his offer.

"I sell my mother!" Massimo suddenly cried.

"Yes, indeed," said Emanuel Solomon. "You'll be sorry to lose this. And lose it you will. For collectors come here and buy what they recognise as unique. This is an extraordinary piece. Let me suggest something. I'll pawn it for you. But I won't place it here, on view. I will keep it in my safe, as a deposit against a loan adequate to set up your shop. When you pay back the loan, with interest, I'll return the necklace."

Massimo, overcome by the stranger's offer, burst into tears.

In their Phoenix Hotel room that night he recounted to Cornelia how Emanuel Solomon had wrapped the necklace in tissue paper, then sealed it in a buff envelope and locked it in his safe. He had filled out a loan form that they both signed and shook Massimo's hand.

"I am to bake a fruited bread for him, Corrie. The first fruited bread in the city will be for our new friend, Emanuel Solomon."

Massimo took his wife's hands and kissed each one, then led her to the balcony where they sat, looking across at the shop, and made plans. They would live upstairs, above the store, as did all the other Long Street shopkeepers and their families. On the balcony they would grow potted lemon trees and palms. In the back courtyard they would nurture herbs and vegetables and climbing roses. They would cherish every moment of their life together, and take nothing for granted.

Massimo opened his grocery store, *Da Massimo*, on a rising moon, because the baker had once cautioned him to never begin a new enterprise on a waning moon, or it would surely fail.

In his later more affluent years, Massimo would describe how, in the beginning, his store had been *an illusion of a grocery store* because, to make the shop seem generously full, he had stacked the top shelves with empty boxes. Standing at his counter, a customer had no reason to doubt that the shelves were heavy with additional stock of imported *Buitoni* pastas, *Motta panettoni*, *torroni*, *Cirio* tomato conserve, olive oils, balsamic vinegars, and coffees.

Massimo made a living good enough to repay his debt to Emanuel Solomon and retrieve his mother's ruby necklace. In time he was able to buy the shop and refurbish it. For this was another thing he had learnt during his confinement, that to pay a landlord was like pouring water into a cracked jug. "For what to enrich a landlord?" he remembered the baker asking.

Ever mindful of Emanuel's kindness, he baked him a fruited *challah* every Rosh Hashana, round as tradition required it, to herald a good year ahead.

Though Massimo excelled as a grocer, he never managed to establish himself as a salami maker and baker of fruited breads, for in those early years only the small Italian, Portuguese and Greek communities had any appreciation of these two products. Not even his fruited bread made inroads onto the tea trays of the English and Afrikaaners, who remained loyal to their sponge cakes and scones, *koeksisters* and *boerebeskuit*. (*Leave little mouthfuls out to tempt them. And if it takes a century to change their tastes – let it take a century,* the butcher advised him in a dream one night.) So Massimo left slices of salami and fruited bread in bowls on his counter for customers to savour and enjoy, though it would be his son and not he who conquered the conservative English and Afrikaans palates.

Massimo and Cornelia had two children, both born at home, above their shop, delivered by Simeon Baldinger, the apothecary and father of Dr Adam Baldinger. Massimo named their son Pasquale, after the butcher, and, following the baker's cautioning, did not circumcise him. He named his daughter Virginia, in honour of the Virgin Mary to whom the baker, Leonardo, had dedicated his work. Throughout his life Massimo heeded the tailor's advice by never letting his wife go out to work, and he always wore a suit, however hot the weather.

Each Easter and Christmas, he sent cards to his two friends. Never sure of where they might be, he posted several at one time, *poste restante*, to Cairo,

Istanbul, Zanzibar, Bombay, Beijing and Madeira. He also sent cards to the tailor, even though he was senile. The nuns would tell the old man they were cards from his son, in Africa, and he would weep, for Africa meant only three things to him: desert sands, thirst and death.

Virginia had shown no interest in the kitchen – her talents, when she was young, lay with the visual and fine arts – but the young Pasquale absorbed their father's culinary litany with wonder. As he grew up he helped in the grocery shop after school, serving at the counter and stacking shelves. All the while he listened to his father's fantastic stories of journeys and provisioning. His father taught him to cook, and even as a young lad Pasquale could prepare food that brought songs to the lips of the coarsest man and lightened the dullest heart. More than this, his father also taught him where to source such rarities as hundred-year-old Chinese cherries preserved in Juniper liqueur.

Long before it was fashionable to eat Italian, Pasquale renamed and transformed his father's modest grocery shop into *Da Pasquale*. It was destined to become the most popular delicatessen and bar of the day.

He and Massimo trained five Zimbabwean women to work in the kitchen. Even in those early years, owners of competing eateries tried to lure them away with fabulous promises in order to acquire the Benvenuto recipes. But their assistants were loyal to Massimo and Pasquale. In any case, the Benvenuto recipes were difficult things to give away, for they were not static. A *ragù* made in a fit of pique or passion did not have quite the taste of one cooked during a time of melancholy. Unlike a Woolworths meal, which had the same colour, texture and taste every time one bought it, each meal from *Da Pasquale* had a uniqueness to it. It bore the signature of the day and Pasquale's temperament.

His temperament could be wild at times, for his experiences as a young soldier in the Angolan war had left him brutally stripped of his mental equilibrium. He was medically discharged before completing his military service and later suffered a series of breakdowns. There were times, as a young man, when flashbacks tore him from the present and threw him into flaming villages; garbed him again in the camouflage of a soldier swinging his automatic rifle from right to left and right again, at hip height, mowing down children and women and old men.

Massimo tried to hold him when such ravings seized his son, but Pasquale would throw his father off, raging, his mouth twisted, his teeth bared, his arms

in a spasm. Cornelia would run down to call the newly qualified Dr Adam Balidinger and send Virginia to fetch Primo. Primo would hold his friend down while Dr Baldinger injected him with sedative. Pasquale would be hospitalized until the nightmare of war retreated once more into the shadows. These traumatic episodes left him with an unresolved anger and a temper that was easily provoked.

Massimo and Cornelia aged with grace and dignity, living with Virginia in the back ground-floor apartment of her brothel. It had a small courtyard with a fountain where Massimo still tended potted lemon trees and palms. Cornelia spent her time knitting jumpers for her family, for Beatrice and Primo, and for Virginia's ladies.

On the mid-winter morning of his seventieth birthday Massimo's memory cast up before him the painting of The Resurrection which the butcher and baker had described and which, though he had never actually seen it, he could now identify.

He lay in bed, in the winter-dark before daybreak, and stared in amazement at the resurrected Christ through a dream space that was neither waking nor sleeping. He could hear his friends' voices clear and strong in the background, as they said goodbye to the youth he once was. "When we have finished our journeying, and you are a grown man, we will meet together in our home town, Sansepolcro, at Piero della Francesca's fresco. Come with your betrothed to where the Roman soldiers sleep with the Christ figure standing behind them, tall and triumphant over death. You will find your way to the fresco without difficulty. Ask anyone for direction to the Law Courts. We will be waiting on the steps for you."

Massimo tried to hold onto the dream, to stay in that place of mirage, but could not. Cornelia was up. She had opened the shutters to let in the winter light. Virginia had brought them their coffee. The image of the painting had dissipated into day.

He dressed solemnly and, as soon as the shops opened, made his way to Clarke's Bookshop to ask if there was a book on Piero della Francesca.

The bookseller showed him a framed print of the Resurrection hanging on the wall, – *the most beautiful painting in the world*, his friends had said. The young woman told how the first owner of the bookshop, Anthony Clarke, as an Allied gunner officer during the Second World War, had held back from shelling the

town, where there were thought to be German soldiers, because he knew of the fresco and did not want to destroy it.

Massimo stood before the framed picture for a long while, holding his hat in both hands against his chest. *Yes*, he thought. *It is as my friends described it: The sleeping Roman soldiers – how could they sleep with so imposing a figure rising from the dead behind them? Yes, the pained face of the risen Christ contrasted with his strong beautiful body. Yes, the sarcophagus with its straight lines. Yes, the sinuous cylinders of the tree trunks in the background – those on the left bared by winter, and those on the right heavy with leaves.*

"Has this picture always hung here?" he asked.

"No," replied the bookseller. "I went to Sansepolcro last year, to see the original. I bought the print there.

"The fresco could have been destroyed by just one shell. But it wasn't."

"Where is Mr Clarke?" asked Massimo.

"He's no longer alive. But he's well honoured for having saved the fresco. There is a street named after him in Sansepolcro – Via Anthony Clarke."

Massimo thanked her and walked out, blinded by tears.

A few days later, he woke early and, with an intent look in his eye, dressed hurriedly and set off down Long Street, heading for the sea, calling for Cornelia to follow. Alarmed at his uncharacteristic behavior, she went after him, imploring him to come back home. Anyone leaning over his balcony that early morning would have seen an elderly man wearing a suit, his white shirt unbuttoned, his black jacket and tie flapping behind him, a hat perched on his white hair and a singular expression on his face, striding, somewhat shakily, ahead of his wife. The onlooker would have noted that the old lady wore slippers, and a dress so hurriedly put on that it was inside out. They would have marvelled at her long grey hair, loosened from its usual coil, and the ease with which she kept up her husband's fast pace.

Massimo led the way down to the docks and out to the end of the breakwater. Here he stood, waiting for a vessel to come over the horizon, a great merchant ship in full sail, bearing a cargo of pepper, vanilla pods, nutmeg and mace, and, smuggled in its hold, bales of cashmere and pure Chinese silk. He had an appointment to keep with his old friends, Pasquale the butcher and Leonardo

the baker. He had promised to meet them, after their last trip from Bombay. Perhaps he could catch a ride with them now and sail with his bride back home to Italy.

While Pasquale, Virginia and Beatrice and all their friends frantically searched the streets and parks of Cape Town, Massimo stood on the end of the breakwater for the whole day and night, in a roaring north-west wind, with Cornelia at his side.

Primo found their bodies, visioned in his crystal ball:
Grey mist rolls in from the sea, now covering them;
Then lifting and moving back to the ocean;
They lie snuggled together, the old lady wearing her husband's jacket;
The old man's hat blown away by the wind and caught against a dolos.

The forces of both good and malevolence, once set on a trajectory in the form of a spell or incantation, are not easily recalled. Until now Primo had restricted his services to soothsaying and harmonious magic. When people asked him to cast spells that harmed their partners and spouses, he declined. He refused to enchant and influence reluctant lovers on behalf of rejected and spurned suitors. He would not bewitch. He did not help his friends manoeuvre their way out of difficult poker hands.

So he had no experience of malicious or manipulative magic. His shoelace spell had been cast only to irritate, not to cause harm, and Primo delighted in the harassment it would cause. But the spells set to spoil Pasquale's fruited breads and salami were by their nature in the realm of evil, and even though Primo believed he had, as he said to himself, *put them on hold*, the truth is, he had not adequately harnessed them. He did not know that they had taken their course and would indeed reach their targets.

After Beatrice had been gone nearly six weeks, with no sign of returning, Primo again tried his hand at intrusive magic, asking aloud: *Why have you not phoned? Can you leave and just forget me? Where has our good past gone? Can it just evaporate to nothing, become mere shimmering, be reduced to this, to your leaving me with no word of farewell, with no understanding of my broken heart?*

He prepared a spell to influence her aura, her energy field, so that she would suddenly think of him and come home. Then he would ask her, under the fig

tree, to forgive whatever wrong he had done, and come back to him, for his life had no meaning without her.

Primo wondered: *Do you lie with him in his arms, in his bed? Yes, there is no second bed in his room, and there is no second room. Do I come to mind when he holds you? Or does he have you now, as his own? Could I have loved you better, when you were with me? Yet I love you so well. No other woman has turned my head, nor my thoughts, nor my heart. Only you. There is no other. No other woman has known my body. But I have failed you, it seems.* He could have looked into his crystal ball for answers, but he did not. *How did he lure you? Has he always been there, lying in wait, pretending to be my brother, waiting for me to be away, and then taking you from me?*

Even though the spell Primo prepared was not a complex one, he misaligned certain of its coordinates and invoked not the return of Beatrice, but the arrival of the Devil.

The Devil did not arrive in any spectacular fashion. His presence was unannounced and he came without fanfare. Primo barely noticed him as he stood on the stoep of 21A, waiting.

Primo had just returned from the shops and was fumbling for his keys when he became aware of a presence at his side. He turned to face the person, about to explain that he had retired from his profession and could be of no help, when he intuited that this was no mere mortal, but a supernatural visitor. Though surprised, he unlocked the door and motioned to the Devil to enter, leading him down the length of the hall to the kitchen. The Devil looked around at the disorder and mess, his eyes settling on the withered violets.

"Why did you call me?" he asked Primo, his amber-brown eyes penetrating but kind. "What is it that you want?"

"I haven't called anyone. I'm a recluse. Who are you?" asked Primo.

"I am the archangel Lucifer, Guardian of Hell. The Angel of Dresden."

The visitor was not wearing a red cloak, nor did he have horns and tail. His face was not blighted with pockmarks nor was his breath foul. In fact, contrary to all religious imagery, he looked just like an angel, robed and winged, with thick shoulder-length mahogany curls. He was tall, as tall as Primo and, like Primo, strongly built with powerful shoulders and a broad back. His robe was woven

of the finest cream-coloured linen and had two openings on the back through which his wings – splendours in rose-crimson and gold – emerged. An embroiderer might have observed that the edges of these openings were decorated in herringbone stitch; that the yoke was worked in two-sided Italian cross-stitch, whipped-run and tambour, all in fine gold thread; and that the edges of his wrist-length sleeves were finished off in griffon Assisi work. On his feet, the Devil wore embossed, kid-leather shoes. About him lingered the soft fragrance of tambotie.

"The archangel Lucifer? Guardian of Hell?" Primo repeated cautiously, recognizing nothing of the demonic in his visitor, yet sensing he had seen his face before. That he was supernatural there was no doubt; that he was angelic was also obvious, for his great wings, at rest against his back, reached from above his shoulders to the backs of his knees.

If his visitor was indeed the Devil, he was extraordinarily beautiful and serene. Perhaps, thought Primo, he was not the Devil himself but a minor, recently fallen angel in the Devil's service. Whatever the case, he realized that the invocation he had released to call Beatrice home had gone awry. He raced through its components, trying unsuccessfully to trace his error.

"I seem to have made a mistake – I was trying to call my wife back home. My wife has left me," he said. "I used a spell, an incantation I hadn't used before. I've been finding it lonely without her. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

Primo's visitor stood before him, majestically, with no hint of judgment or anger. Though not smiling, there was something in his look that touched Primo to the core. Feeling foolish, Primo continued, "I'm not sure how to make amends. Is there something I can do to help you get back home?"

Yet even as he made the offer, he was filled with an overwhelming need to prevent this extraordinary being's departure. Why? He could not say. He just knew that, above all, he must delay his celestial visitor (he could not possibly be infernal) for as long as possible.

"But you are here! Have you come a great distance? Yes, you must have. Have a rest. Please, take a seat. Sit with me. Spend the afternoon. We can talk a bit. Are you busy? Must you rush off anywhere?"

"Not really," replied the Devil. "I have time enough." He turned the kitchen chair, which Primo had pulled out for him, and sat sideways in it, so that his wings did not cramp against the backrest.

At that very moment, at *Da Pasquale*, twenty-four fruited breads, just out of the oven, were lined up on the kitchen's central work surface. All had an inexplicable bluish bloom to them and they tasted impossibly bitter. Next to them lay as many salami *Fiorentini*, each cut down the centre, and splayed for inspection. They too had a bluish tint and they tasted sour.

Pasquale, verging on hysteria, was pacing up and down. His staff stood around the kitchen, too shocked to speak. Beatrice, ashen, followed Pasquale as he strode, trying to console him, but he pushed her aside.

The delicatessen was shut and the blinds drawn. A sign announced unceremoniously: *Closed.*

Within a week of the Devil's arrival, Primo's world had refreshed itself. Primo could not say exactly what his visitor had brought with him. He knew only that his life had changed forever. It had a glow to it, as though a shaft of light had penetrated it. He had not brought up the subject of his visitor's true identity, but he was certain that he was no devil.

Primo set himself to cleaning the house, sweeping out the signs of misery and slothfulness that had settled after Beatrice left. He filled a vase with red chrysanthemums and placed it in the centre of the kitchen table. He polished his crystals, swept the back yard, watered the garden and the stoep plants, trimmed the dead leaves from the violets.

The Devil had given him a robe. It was wrapped in papyrus and tied with plaited hemp. Primo, too moved to say anything, took it tentatively, first holding it to his chest, then opening it carefully. It was made of indigo tussore silk. A line of double-chain stitch ran from the shoulder line to the cuff of each sleeve.

When Primo put on the garment, he felt as though his skin had been wrapped in air, so light and unobtrusive was it. He turned a sleeve back and noticed that the seams had been stitched by hand.

Primo looked into the Devil's eyes, and they spoke back to Primo. They spoke as though they had sighed; as though they were darkened underground pools. They spoke of such depth, such purity and honesty, that Primo realized his visitor had told him no untruths. These were the eyes of truth itself. Primo felt shaken and confused, for that gaze conflicted with every religious notion of the

Devil he had come across. Yet he acknowledged, in a hoarse whisper, "Yes, you are Lucifer. God's archangel. Lucifer, the Guardian of Hell."

And the Devil nodded and said, " I am that one."

"Why do you have two locked rooms?" asked the Devil, the next day. "What do you keep inside them?"

"My past, I suppose," replied Primo, without looking up. "One was my father's workshop and the other I shared with my aunt. I locked them both when they died."

They were sitting at the kitchen table. Primo was servicing his telescope and had its parts spread out on a large square of red felt. He polished a lens.

"May I look inside?" asked the Devil.

"They've been closed for many years."

"Things should not be left locked forever."

"Another time, then," said Primo, uncomfortably.

"There is no time like the present."

Primo lifted the lens to his eye and, turning towards the light bulb, peered through it, then polished it again, saying nothing. Some moments passed.

"Well?" probed the Devil.

They had the radio on and were listening to the Soweto String Quartet, live in concert from the Grahamstown Festival. Violins threaded a trail of frenzied sound round the room, chasing the viola, halting in midair as the cello responded with sage slowness.

A bee, which had found its way into the kitchen during the day, struck repeatedly against the bare bulb, until the Devil stood up, cupped his hand around it and released it out the window.

"I'll open one for you. You may look inside but then I'll have to lock it again," said Primo. He put the lens down, wiped his palms against his sides, switched

off the radio, walked to the lounge, opened the display cabinet and took two keys (the old heavy latch-lock type) from the Susie Cooper sugar bowl. He chose one and put the other away.

If he had stopped to look at the framed print hanging above the sideboard, he would have noticed that the image of the third angel, the one with thick mahogany curls, standing in the middle of the trio, was no longer there. Only two angels sounded their trumpets in *Aurora Triumphans*; only two put night to sleep and wakened the dawn in the epic painting.

With the Devil following, Primo made his way down the passage to the sealed room on the 21A side and unlocked it, pushing the door open before him.

The room was spectacular for its stillness. Though everything in it spoke of time, mechanism and movement, nothing moved. Four longcase clocks stood against the opposite wall. Around them, placed side by side, their beautiful dials seeming to gaze across the room, hung a collection of clocks: a French provincial *comtoise*, an eighteenth-century tavern clock, a rare hooded wall clock, several nineteenth-century bracket clocks and two railway clocks. There was also a 1950s kitchen clock with the *Coca-Cola* signature across its face.

Five lines of pocket watches, some with their chains, others without, hung against the second wall, one beside the other.

The third wall of the room was fitted with a large chest of many small drawers, each with a small brass handle and each filled, in order of size and type, with thousands of watch parts that Primo, as a child, had loved sorting on rainy days.

The surface of a workbench under the boarded-up window was lined with an assortment of mantle and table clocks of various vintage. Under the workbench were stacked a number of wooden boxes and a leather suitcase.

A roll-top desk, its open surface covered with small boxes of watchmakers' instruments, watch parts and a magnifying glass, lay open, as though waiting for its master to sit before it. A chair stood at a slight angle to the desk, as though he had just that moment stood up, pushed the chair back and left the room, intending to return. Thrown against the back of the chair was a grey cardigan and on its seat a worn, embroidered cushion. A gossamer of dust covered everything.

Primo did not enter the room. He stood aside as the Devil stepped in, pushing away the cobwebs. The Devil surveyed the contents, his eyes resting for a while on a gold cherub standing atop an ornate mantle clock, baton in hand, in perpetual stillness, about to strike the hour against a gong.

He turned to Primo, who, standing at the threshold, felt the need to explain, saying, "My father was obsessed with time. He believed that this bracket of time of which we are conscious is but a single thread of true time. He imagined that true time has innumerable dimensions; that there are ribbons of time running concurrently, like the warp and weft of cloth.

"My father was always seeking true time. He reasoned that if time were multidimensional, then history must unfold in countless ways. There was a certain time in his own past life, and that of my aunt, that he wanted to return to and divert along another route, so that what had happened to them would become another event. He wanted to change their own history."

Primo remained at the door while the Devil sat on the watchmaker's chair, picked up a gilt lantern clock, ran a finger around the fine filigree work and touched, one by one, at second intervals, each of the numerals of the hour.

Putting it down, he turned to face Primo and said, "I think we should wind the clocks. Come, I'll help you. We'll wind them together."

Trace smells of fine oil and camphor reminded Primo of boyhood days spent in this room. A rush of memory ran through him. He remembered his father's hands, his delicate fingers, the nails he always cut short, the gold band on his finger, the white cuffs sticking out from his jersey, his back bent over his work, his voice, his gentleness, his brown polished shoes, his grey tweed trousers, his canvas apron. Primo ran his trembling hands through his hair and stepped into the world he had not entered for nearly twenty years.

Beginning with the longcase clocks, Primo and the Devil worked methodically and without speaking, winding and setting the mechanisms, swinging pendulums back into motion. It took most of the evening, and as they progressed the comforting music of Primo's childhood began to play again in various tones of ticking, tocking, striking, chiming, whirring, ringing and gonging, until finally every clock was active.

When they were done, they went back to the kitchen, leaving the door open so that the sounds of time filled the house once more. Somehow the bee had found its way in again. To stop its mad banging against the bulb, the Devil switched off the kitchen light. A soft glow came through from the passage, and he and Primo stood in the semi-darkness, the innards of the telescope spread out on the table, twinkling in the half-light.

"Shall we go for a walk?" asked the Devil. "The night is lovely."

"Yes," agreed Primo. "I'll finish this in the morning."

Pasquale's misfortune had thrown the Long Street community into disarray. They had already lost the services of their soothsayer, and now, to make matters worse, *Da Pasquale,* which had closed only once in its entire history, for a month when Massimo and Cornelia died, was permanently shut.

On that appalling afternoon when his salami and fruited bread had 'blued', Pasquale sent his staff home, determined to get to the root of the problem without interference.

Suspecting fungus, he threw all his stock into the back alley – where street children and bergies fought over it – and he scrubbed down the entire kitchen and every utensil. Over the next fortnight, drinking vast quantities of Red Bull and sweet black coffee, he restocked his larder, then began making small batches of fruited breads and salami. He worked carefully, paying the utmost attention to every measure and every step. Even so, fruited breads came out of the oven bitter and the salami, before their curing process had begun, expressed a sourness. And still the blue blush covered everything.

Pasquale grew increasingly frantic, unpredictable and impossible to reason with. He did not eat and lost weight rapidly, started to smoke and wept openly at the least provocation. Virginia showed no sympathy when Beatrice phoned her.

"I can't stand this!" she said. "What did you call me for? I've got my own troubles. He can cook other things. Why stay hung up on the damn bread and salami? Send him back to his psychiatrist. Just get him some medication. You know he's mad."

One night, alone in his partly lit shop, drunk on bourbon and slouched across a table, Pasquale had a vision. At the bar, with her back to him, her blue cape falling in pleats down to the floor, sat the Virgin Mary, lit up by her halo. Pasquale did not realize who she was and, thinking her a customer who had come in for a drink, wondered how she had entered the locked premises. Unsteadily, he rose to his feet and shakily addressed her, "Madame, can't you read? We are closed. There is a sign on the door. *Da Pasquale* is closed. Will you be kind enough to go out the way you came in?"

The vision turned to face Pasquale and he saw, through a mirk of caffeine and alcohol, a woman beautiful beyond description, radiating tranquillity and peace. She smiled, serenely, and he felt himself shrouded in benevolence. Her halo throbbed and in its light he recognized the baker's Holy Virgin whom his father had often spoken of.

"*Sacra Vergine!*" he gasped. "You are real!" As he said these words, the Mother of God smiled, then evaporated from his sight.

"No! No! I don't mean you to go! No! I am open for you! *Santa Maria!* Forgive me! Forgive me! I did not recognize you!"

Pasquale lunged towards the bar to apprehend her, grabbing at the counter, at the bar stool for something left of her texture. But there was nothing of her to hold. She had disappeared. He slumped to the floor and wept like a baby.

Next morning, even though his head ached, Pasquale reflected on something his father had once told him, and in this way understood the Virgin's visitation of the night before. His father had said that the butcher and the baker were philosophers and that, in addition to travelling and cooking, they discussed theological matters and ethics. They revealed certain Catholic mysteries, among them the fact that the Virgin Mary, as the Mother of God, was a willing emissary when it came to sending prayers directly to the Divine ear.

How obvious, Pasquale reasoned. He must turn to her! She had come to tell him that he must call in the Catholics to bless him and his workspace, and that he must place her statue in his kitchen to overlook his work, as the baker had always done.

With single-mindedness, Pasquale set off to find a statue that looked exactly like the baker's. She would have a serene and beautiful, ageless face; she would

be wearing a long white dress that did not lie against her body to reveal her womanly form. It would fall down in folds to her unshod, delicate and perfect feet, on each of which rested a pink rose. She would wear over her shoulders a long cape of the palest blue, its hood not quite concealing her hair; her arms would be stretched out, palms turned upwards; around her head would be a halo of gold.

He searched Sack Antiques and scoured the junk shops of Kalk Bay, Brooklyn and Goodwood. He questioned immigrant vendors at Green Point market, hoping they might know of a statue looted from an Angolan or Mozambican mission. In the Catholic Bookshop he found only small cheap plastic replicas of Our Lady of Lourdes, pressed by the thousand in Hong Kong. Finally, after days of searching, and on Beatrice's suggestion to ask at Catholic institutions, Pasquale found her. At Nazareth House, on a shelf in the lobby, stood a replica of the baker's Virgin Mary.

Of course, the Mother Superior of the convent, Mother Bernadette, could not sell her, nor hire her out. What was he to do? He would have to tell her the truth, quite simply. This he did with such sincerity and anguish, that Mother Bernadette, who was nearing her sixtieth year in the holy order, was utterly charmed by this intense Jewish man before her. Even though she had chosen a life free of men, his fine looks were not lost on her.

"She was given to our convent by Mr Umberto Biccari, the father of the jeweller," she explained, looking across her desk at Pasquale. "He was a prisoner of war, captured in North Africa and interned at Zonderwater. He presented the statue some years later, when he had settled in Cape Town, as a way of saying thank you, I suppose, to God, for sparing his life, when so many of his comrades had died."

Pasquale stood up and began pacing the small office as Mother Bernadette spoke. He lit a cigarette and offered her one, too preoccupied to notice her smile when she declined. As he listened to her voice, he took in the things of the room – a vase of plastic flowers, a picture of the Sacred Heart, a crucifix on the wall behind her with the figure of Christ hanging in perpetual agony.

"Will the Biccari family mind if you lend me the statue?" he asked. "I know Biccari the jeweller well – we have been friends for many years. And he is a regular customer of mine. I can ask him myself, if it makes things easier for you."

"Of course they won't mind. I wonder whether they even know about the statue. Old man Biccari presented it before he married, before he had children. And of course, the Biccari family is no longer Catholic – he married a Jewish girl. I'm quite sure that if Umberto Biccari were alive, he would allow me to let the statue stand in your kitchen, for a while, to help you through your times of trouble.

"You said earlier that your father was Italian. Was he also a prisoner of war?"

"No," answered Pasquale. "Not in the true sense. Not really. But he was confined. He hid with friends."

"Ah, yes. I understand," said Mother Bernadette. "Well now, let's take this chair through to the lobby. If you stand on it, you'll reach her quite easily. She's rather heavy. But before you go, you might be interested to know her history. After his release, after war ended, Mr Biccari wrote home, to his family, and asked that they procure a statue. His sister found this one for sale at a market.

"You'll see, when you look at her closely, that the statue barely survived the war herself. Her cheek was grazed by a passing bullet, or perhaps a piece of shrapnel. Mr Biccari had the scar repaired."

As Pasquale reached up for the statue, his eyes met with hers and he noted, with a slight shiver, how much they resembled the eyes of the Virgin Mary he had seen at his bar.

"Thank you, Mother Bernadette," he said, holding the statue. "I will take great care of her, I assure you."

"I know. I don't have to ask you to be mindful of her. I know she'll be in caring and safe hands.

Mother Bernadette watched Pasquale walk down the convent driveway with the beautiful statue in his arms, and smiled.

Not only did she agree to let the Virgin Mary take up temporary residence at *Da Paquale*, she also asked Father Michael, the convent's priest, to bless the premises and deal with any Roman Catholic souls who, she reasoned, had got lost on their way to Purgatory and somehow become holed up at *Da Pasquale* to wreak havoc upon breads and salami.

Father Michael blessed *Da Pasquale* and sprinkled holy water in all corners. He sanctified and sent on their way the lost souls he believed, in agreement with Mother Bernadette, to be at root of the problem. Finally, after Pasquale had placed the statue on a shelf overlooking the kitchen, Father Michael recited what he held to be the most beautiful of prayers, the *Hail Holy Queen*. There was nothing more for Pasquale to do now but begin cooking. Confidently he pledged the first batch of fruited breads to the sisters and inmates of Nazareth House, and to Father Michael.

"Beatrice!" he called out, as he measured and weighed his ingredients. "I haven't told you for some weeks that I love you!

"Well, I love you! Can you hear me? Where are you? Are you drinking at the bar? Come here! Come eat some maraschino cherries. Come kiss me while I work!"

Beatrice was at the bar, laughing with Dr Baldinger, whom she had just let in. "No," she called out. "I've opened up for a customer. I'm busy.

"I know you love me, Pasqui. But I'm drinking with the good Doctor. Save me the cherries for later! If we come through to you, you'll get your ingredients confused."

"Yes, Pasquale," said Dr Baldinger. "Let the dear Beatrice serve me. Your delicatessen has not seen a customer for so long. Let us take a little drink of liqueur. You get on there with your baking. We'll come through to taste the finished products later."

Beatrice put on a Tchaikovsky cassette and *Da Pasquale* filled with the sweet sounds of dancing violins. She stood smiling across the bar at Dr Baldinger and he gleamed back at her as they listened for a moment to Pasquale hard at work, singing and eulogizing his ingredients. Then they walked through to his kitchen and sat on high stools while he got on with his creation. The sweet smile of the Virgin Mary gave an added feeling of joy to the kitchen.

But, after hours of preparation and baking, when Pasquale opened the oven he immediately saw that the problem was still with him, for blue vapours permeated the hot air. He threw himself down against the counter and wept, howling in madness. His heart was broken. He made his way upstairs and sat forlornly on the balcony, his face in his hands, trembling.

"Do you think the time is right now, to open the second locked room?" asked the Devil. Primo looked up from the light meal he was eating: ricotta sprinkled with fresh dill, slices of ripe tomato, a trickle of olive oil, a trace of balsamic vinegar, crushed garlic. They had fires burning in both the deep fireplaces and this radiated warmth throughout the house.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's probably time now. But let me finish eating first. I need to work up some courage." He smiled sheepishly and broke a small loaf in half, thoughtfully picking up crumbs and placing them on his tongue. "Are you sure you don't want to eat anything?"

"Quite sure," replied the Devil as he traced a finger over the cross-stitch flowers of the tablecloth.

When Primo had finished, he cleared the table, took the key from the display cabinet and led the way down the second passage.

He unlocked the door and pushed it open, switched on the light and stepped in, the Devil behind him. The room, simply furnished and almost empty by comparison to his father's workshop, smelt musty.

Two single old-fashioned iron beds, their mattresses slightly sunken, were covered with candlewick spreads. One was pale blue (Primo's) and one pink (his aunt's). Each had, at its foot, a folded crocheted rug. On the pink bed rested a worn teddy bear, its head drooped at a questioning angle, its button eyes still bright, its black nose missing.

Except for a cupboard and a trunk, there was no other furniture. Above the blue bed hung a framed sepia photograph of a beautiful young woman holding a baby, with a handsome man at her side. This was Primo's mother, with him in her arms and his father beside her. A lump of anguish settled in Primo's throat and he felt his eyes smart with the threat of tears.

Primo had shared this room with his aunt until he was twenty-five years old, until he had married Beatrice and moved to her flat. Had he remained a boy that long? Had his childhood run on and on, intruding into his manhood? he wondered now as he looked around the room, remembering how his aunt had wanted to rearrange the house so as to accommodate Beatrice, rather than let Primo leave. She and his father, holding back tears and overwhelmed by an

uncontrollable fear that they might not see him again, had watched him pack a single suitcase of clothes.

"He must live his life," Eugenio had said on their first night without Primo, in their house which now felt so empty without him.

"Yes," Lidia had repeated, enunciating each word. "He must live his life."

The Devil sat on the blue bed and pointed at the trunk at the side of the closed wardrobe. Without a word Primo knelt beside it and opened it. The sickly smell of old trapped naphthalene escaped. He lifted out the contents: a couple of plain blouses with buttons down the front; two simple pleated skirts; two cardigans; the elegant suit and beret his aunt had worn when she left Italy for Africa – and to his wedding. These were the garments of a modest, humble woman. He had forgotten that he had folded her clothes and packed them away, after her death, after their deaths. It had been like dreaming, then; putting away forever what had once been part of people, on that cold night, not unlike tonight, when the ice wind was blowing, as it was now, when in disbelief that they had died and left him, he had closed the doors to the lives of his father and aunt, and locked them away.

He lifted from the trunk a book of Italian fairy tales, a biscuit tin containing unused embroidered handkerchiefs, a bundle of crochet hooks, some balls of wool; a few crochet squares that had been the start of a new blanket. Here was his aunt's whole life.

He reached deeper into the trunk and lifted out bed linen wrapped in tissue paper, so old that the paper crumbled as he touched it. He brushed it to the floor where it settled like huge flakes of dirty snow. The embroidered linen had formed his aunt's trousseau.

The Devil took the folded cloth from Primo's hands. The linen was no longer white but yellowed and rust-marked. As the Devil opened it out to see it better, it fell apart at the foldlines, which had perished. Primo continued to unpack tissue-wrapped linen and pile it between himself and the Devil, on the bed. Neither spoke. The Devil was engrossed in the stitches, the precise and delicate designs. He picked up a sampler, checking each line of work. Here were some unusual stitches and he studied their route through the symmetrical weave of the linen.

"This is very beautiful embroidery," he said. "Your aunt was a good needlewoman. It seems such a pity these things were put away. Why did she

never use them?" He placed the linen neatly back in the trunk with the flakes of tissue which he carefully picked up.

Primo could not answer, for he knew very little about his aunt – she had never spoken about herself. He could tell the Devil that she had been a teller of enchanting stories, that his parents had allowed her to choose his name and that she loved him as though he were her own son.

He could also report that his aunt – like his father – had been a survivor of Auschwitz, that she bore a tattooed number on her left arm, that she suffered regular nightmares and that she was a widow.

The truth is, Primo's aunt was not a widow. She had never married.

In the rainy early morning darkness of 16 October 1943, during the sixth week of Italy's occupation, German SS police sealed off Rome's old Jewish ghetto. Armed guards fired shots and pounded on doors, demanding that all Jews come into the streets. They were herded into waiting trucks and transported to a detention centre at the military college, not far from the Vatican City. There they remained under guard for a few days before being trucked to the cargo-loading platform of Tiburtina station (bypassing the passenger terminal) and pressed into freight cars for deportation to Auschwitz. [2] Twenty-year-old Eugenio Verona and his twin sister, Lidia, did not escape this first massive, carefully planned roundup.

When the heavy door of the freight car crashed shut and gloom descended – the only light came through a high, barred narrow slot – Lidia could barely move, and the crush of the other prisoners crammed into the car pinned her arms to her sides. She could not see where her brother was, did not know whether he was squashed against the splinter-filled sides of the car, whether he had fallen and was now gasping in the trample of legs and feet. She hoped he had made a dash down the platform and escaped.

Lidia's long plait kept catching between her back and someone's body. Against her shoulder pressed a face; against her side pressed a shoulder; into her lower back pressed an arm. Her own body was pushed against that of a man, so closely that she could feel his form – his thighs, his chest, his face, unshaven for some days. She could smell his acrid sweat and his dry breath, sour from thirst. The body of this man received hers, and stopped her from falling.

[2] Susan Zuccotti. Ibid. Page 101.

In the darkness, the voice of the man whose body allowed hers to rest began to whisper. "I will tell you stories, *Signorina*, while we journey," it said. "I will tell you stories of knights who ride their white horses, at slow pace, through all our histories, through all time, bearing a flaming torch of light to illumine the darkness, to show us the way through human ignorance.

"I will tell you of angels who visit us in our darkest hour, of how they caress our weakened limbs and breathe against our tormented souls. I will tell you stories, and you must listen to my voice, and not to the groaning in your throat, nor to the sighing in your heart."

The voice of this man was soft and unobtrusive, yet it rose above the clickety-clack of the train labouring over the tracks, above the rasp of metal on metal. The voice filled time-present so completely that it carried her into imagery beyond the confines of the freight car.

Because of it she would never recall the sordid details of the dark journey from Rome through Orte, Florence, and Padua through Austria and Germany, and into Poland where the entrance to Auschwitz waited like the portals of Dante's hell. She would forget the crush in the freight car, its floor awash with excrement and vomit, its walls marked with the blood of hands and faces that abraded against them. She would forget the futile disputes, the curses, the agitation, the cramped aching of people crushed together in so small a space.

Her memory would begin only when the train reached its final destination, when the doors of its carriages slammed open and the human cargo disembarked into a night lit by harsh floodlights and guarded by armed soldiers with dogs. From there she would remember her trembling legs, her throat cracked by thirst and how it was now her turn to help her companion, for he could barely walk. She would remember finding Eugenio in the confused and silent crowd, and touching him briefly. She would remember being separated from the men, herded off with young women. She would hold in her mind forever the horror of the hell she had just entered.

Above all of this, imprinted in her memory, would be the stories the stranger had told her. And his name: Primus.

Eugenio Verona had never once doubted that he would survive Auschwitz. His anger, his sense of violation, his disgust at the depths to which humans could fall – these were all factors which strengthened his will to live. If he survived, so too, he believed, would his sister; after all,

they had been conceived and born together.

After more than a year of living through the grotesque; of being courted by death and finding reprieve; of seeing his emaciated fellows shorn of their dignity, forced to animate a monstrous drama of filth, disease and barbarism, an end to the nightmare finally came. In the early days of January 1945, with the Russian front rapidly advancing, the Germans ordered a mass evacuation of Auschwitz and its satellite camps. Some twenty thousand prisoners, clad only in their mean and ragged prison suits and ill-fitting wooden clogs, were set on a gruelling march towards Buchenwald and Mauthausen, while the ill and weak were abandoned to their fate. (History would record that the column of evacuees vanished, almost in its entirety.) [3]

Eugenio, among the prudent few, hid, and so escaped the march and certain death. He found Lidia, abandoned, barely recognizable, wasted, burning with scarlet fever in the hospital barrack.

When the first Russian patrol came in sight of the camp, Eugenio was one of the first to see it. Four young soldiers rode up on horseback and stopped at the barbed wire fence. [4] Perched on their horses, saying nothing, they merely surveyed the dead sprawled across the cold yard, and the few still-living emaciated human forms. To Eugenio it seemed that four archangels, their cheeks rosy from the cold, had ridden in to redeem him and his sister. Four archangels wrapped in fur and thick coats, bearing Sten guns – not flaming swords – and riding horses that snorted white steam into the cold air, stood solemnly at the perimeter of hell. Eugenio made his way back to the barrack where his sister lay close to death and, cupping his hands around her hollow face, forced her to find the will to live.

(Primo would never know what the stars and planets had really meant to his father. Eugenio had never disclosed, when teaching his son to view and understand the explosion of starlight and stardust through their Kloof Street skylight, that he imagined this to be the Diaspora of his fellow inmates at Auschwitz.)

After liberation, Eugenio and Lidia had made their arduous way back to Rome and tried to reconstruct a semblance of their former lives. Eugenio helped his sister search for her storyteller, though she did not know who he was. She knew only his first name. Together they read

[3] Primo Levi. **If this is a man**. Page 161.
[4] Ibid. Page 187.

the list of survivors' names that was posted outside the synagogue and regularly updated, hoping, because it was an unusual name – the Latin Primus rather than the Italian Primo – to find it included. It was a fruitless search. So many people had disappeared, so many identities had been erased that it was impossible to trace a person without knowing his full name.

In the freight car, Primus had said nothing about himself. He had only recited stories, and told her that he had witnessed the confiscation of Rome's Jewish library. "I believe," he had whispered. "That what is written, what is given to the world in literature, exists forever. Though the books and parchments be burnt or shredded, the author has created and given lore, so it exists in humanity's collective soul. No bonfire of pages, no torching of script can extinguish lore. Ever."

Perhaps he was a librarian, perhaps a published author, perhaps a publisher. Eugenio explored all these possibilities for his sister, standing alongside her while she described her lost friend, as best she could, to publishers, writers' associations, newspaper editors, survivors who worked at Jewish institutions. It was useless to say that he had been wearing a light-coloured suit – a tailor-made suit (she knew this from the stitching on the lapels which she had felt with her fingertips) – because everyone, on entering the camp, had been stripped of their own clothing and dressed in degrading prison garb.

She could have identified him by his voice which was soft and narcotic. It was a voice like web-fine threading that wound itself about her, enchanting her and lifting her away from time-present. But this was no help in her search for him.

It became clear to Eugenio that the man named Primus, his sister's storyteller, the man who had helped her through the first stage of their nightmare, had not himself survived Auschwitz. He did not express his view, though, not wanting to crush Lidia's hope.

Finally he decided they should emigrate, leave the sorrows of post-war Italy, and try for a new life in Africa. He packed for both of them, and they travelled first to the Belgian Congo, then to Southern Rhodesia and finally settled in Cape Town. Here he met and married an Afrikaans girl, Susanna le Roux, and set up house for his wife and sister. Unable to secure work, he apprenticed himself to a watchmaker before opening his own workshop in the front room of their home.

In central Africa, Lidia had found the heat unbearable and was afraid of the wide openness. In Cape Town she made no effort to meet people or make

friends. She stayed indoors and began to embroider a dowry of household and bed linen. Eugenio bought her yards of first-grade cotton and linen and these she measured out, cut and hemmed as top sheets and under sheets, pillow slips and bed covers, table and tray cloths, serviettes and runners. In the top right-hand corner of each item she embroidered her initials, entwined with those of the storyteller: *LV & P.* She used white thread, working some in drawn thread and satin stitch and others in split-stitch, cross-stitch, Cretan, feather and twisted chain. When each piece of work was complete, she wrapped it in tissue and placed it in a trunk with a few mothballs.

When their son was born, Eugenio and Susanna allowed Lidia to name him Primo, after her storyteller. From his first day of life Lidia told the baby his namesake's stories, cradling him in her arms, for the last thing the storyteller had said to her was, "Promise me that you will live. Promise me that my stories will live."

She had promised.

Primo had shared his aunt's bedroom because she was afraid of the darkness of sleep. Even though they slept with the passage light on so there was always a glow to the room, she did not want to wake up and find herself alone. When he was very little she had shared the bed with him, holding him close to herself, for it gave her comfort to feel his warm baby breath against her and to hear his heart beating, urgent for life. When he grew taller and needed his own bed, she kept the beds close together, so she could hold his hand in the dark, with her fingers on the pulse of his wrist.

Sometimes, when he was older and they had moved the beds apart, he would be woken by her soft crying, and he would lie very still, frightened by her night terrors. There were times when she would call out to him, call him by his Latin name, Primus, and he would go over to her bed in the semi-darkness and hold her hand and try to comfort her, though she was still asleep. As the years passed, she called out less and less, though she still wept or whimpered, late in the night.

When he was a grown man he never questioned that they should still share a room, for he had comforted her throughout his life, and it never occurred to him that it was not his role to guide her out from the darkness of her horrors. If she cried out, he would sit at her bedside and tell her the stories she had told him as a child. Even though his soft voice never woke her, it seemed to soothe her

nightmare, for she would moan something incomprehensible, then breathe evenly, roll over and sleep peacefully.

Primo Verona's sense that evil might be a more powerful force than good was seeded by his father and aunt but it had taken root from his own observations of life, particularly during his time spent with Pasquale in military service in Angola.

When both young men had received their military call up, on leaving school, their fathers had stood alone, Eugenio on his stoep, Massimo on his balcony, to wrestle with the fact that they would be betraying their children by allowing them to become soldiers and go to war.

Each father had learnt that war offered no redemption – it either took lives or it inscribed them indelibly with the death of others. Each grappled with the inevitability of war, with the right-or-wrong of handing over to the military the first born, not knowing whether the son would return, certain only that the bonny youth who marched forth would not be the man who returned.

They anguished over whether they were true South Africans, whether the wars of their adoptive country should be theirs, as Italians, as Europeans who had already had their share of war. Could they answer for their sons, each asked themselves, who were born on this African soil? Should they pack up everything and leave? Flee? Return to Europe where there was no Apartheid to defend, no *swart gevaar*, no enthroned Nationalist Party that decreed every white youth be handed over to the military or face imprisonment.

Both Eugenio and Massimo, each in his own way, had called out to the God of War, had summonsed from their mythologies and religion the commander of that energy which compelled men to war, one upon the other. But the God of War had merely hissed at them and left them to wrestle alone with their guilt as they waved their sons goodbye in the company of hundreds of parents at Cape Town station. They stood on the platform with Virginia and Beatrice watching the train, young shorn men leaning out its windows and waving, snake its way out of sight towards the training camps where their sons would be taught that the enemy was black; that the enemy was a communist; that the enemy would kill white women and children; that the enemy was pouring over the borders of Angola and Mozambique; that white South African youth had the duty and honour to enter those countries and destroy those who would otherwise destroy them.

After their training, Primo and Pasquale were sent to Angola, to the bush which spread out before them in an elegance of wilderness, coloured with the luteous dryness of savannah, filled with birds and beasts and insects they had not known before, as city boys. They were at first deluded by this vast beauty. It did not appear to be a war field, a place where plunder and death could enact. This deception was short-lived however, and their naivety overturned.

They had been attached to a reconnaissance group of seasoned soldiers. This group was hyped up by an earlier ambush in which three of their company had been killed. The soldiers entered a native village in curved formation, Primo and Pasquale at the flanks. The village seemed deserted, like a still picture-postcard before them, with three old men sitting on a log outside a hut, in the morning sun.

As the group of soldiers advanced, the old men rose shakily to their feet, lifting their hands in the air. They called out in Portuguese – a greeting, a surrender, a supplication. The soldiers paid no heed. They swung their automatic rifles in a mowing movement and fire rattled out, puncturing the old men, opening them so that their innards burst forth in a mess of blood and death.

Primo watched, all in slow motion – for time had seemed to stretch, allowing him to witness every detail of the encounter – while Pasquale and the others turned to crazed men, screaming and cursing as the forces of killing seized them. He was aware of himself frozen, his rifle heavy, his arms hanging and limp, unable to stop the killing, unable to call the group to sanity. Primo had noticed, as the massacre unfolded, that the old men's ribs had been showing, so emaciated were they, and that their legs were thin and bent like sticks. One of the men had wet himself in terror.

When they searched the village, they found no one. "It is a village of old dead men," Primo had whispered. Later he would remember thinking, *I am one of a pack of mad dogs.*

The next day the group came across a deserted village which they searched for enemy soldiers. They found an ill old woman, lying on a reed mat in the darkness of her hut, with no possessions except a clay pot of brown water. A small boy lay with her. Primo's fellow soldiers shot them both in a rain of bullets that hardly gave their targets time to know what was happening. Then they caught a young woman, the child's mother, he presumed, and tore her apart, as a pack of starving dogs would tear a weakened foal. Inside a second

deserted hut, a basket of grain was stabbed with a rifle butt and the golden kernels spilt across the ground. (*Like the sun weeping*, Primo had later reflected.) An enamel bowl was kicked across the yard. A lactating dog, her teats pendulous between her wire-thin legs, was shot. Goats bleated in terror and ran away. The huts were torched.

That night, when they reached base camp, Primo had to guard a deep pit in which prisoners, brought in by another reconnaissance group, were held, some of them wounded. They had no water and were naked. The heat of the day had sucked them of their life force, so they lay languid and parched and mostly silent, though the wounded ones groaned and one cried out occasionally. Primo had thrown his water bottle to them and later his ration pack. He sat under the quarter moon, in the great depth of the Angolan bush, as the sounds of crickets and night birds filled the air, mindful that the theatre of war had seized him as an unwilling extra and that there was no easy way to walk off the stage – not until the curtain was drawn closed and the orchestra of evil stopped playing. They had dressed him up for battle, the brigadiers and commandants and the generals of Pretoria, and sent him to act out their murders for them.

On that same night, Pasquale had his first dance with madness. He started sobbing like a child. Then he began tearing around, shooting and screaming until someone knocked him unconscious with a rifle butt.

Under the stars Primo emptied his rifle clip of its bullets. He never reloaded it. If death confronted him, he reasoned, death could lead him away. He would never kill.

Primo had expressed to the Devil his idea that evil might be the greater force, and asked his opinion. It was a mild day in late winter, when early spring warmth had taken away the sharpness of the cold, encouraging new leaves to bud and bulbs to waken. They were in the study, Primo sitting deep in the armchair at the window, the Devil standing, paging through Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

"Dante never met me – in his earthly life, that is," he said, putting the book aside and turning to face Primo. "He wrote this epic without any knowledge of Hell in the Afterlife. His descriptions are quite inaccurate. God has not set up places of torture. The Divine does not demand punishment for earthly sin and has not tasked me to inflict eternal punishment."

"You don't punish?"

" Of course not."

"Then who does?"

"No one. There is no punishment. There is only containment. Containment of the evil energies that human souls bring with them to the Afterlife."

Primo held a mug of coffee between his hands, close to his face, savouring its warmth. "Then what exactly is it that you do?" he asked.

"In the Afterlife, you mean? Or here?"

"In the Afterlife, really. But also here."

"I am an embroiderer," said the Devil, smiling and running his hand across the stitches covering the front of his robe, touching lightly with his middle finger a line of silver-threaded Romanian couching. "I embroider the garments of angels, their robes. I also restore old celestial embroideries and ancient weavings."

Primo stared at him, not sure whether the Devil was teasing.

"Look at my fine work! Come. Feel this texture."

Primo's eyes followed the Devil's finger as it traced the stitching across his yoke and down a sleeve. He put his hands out, tentatively, and ran them down the Devil's arms, feeling the raised stitches against the soft linen. Each sleeve was a field of stem, double and bullion knots worked in purples and olive greens.

"I embroider while I watch over Hell," continued the Devil. "That is my work. I am the guardian of Hell in the Afterlife. I keep watch."

"So what happens in Hell – in the Afterlife, that is – if it is not a place of punishment?" Primo asked.

"Nothing of importance," replied the Devil. "People just while away the time. We have clubs there, smoking dens and casinos. Most tend to play cards or gamble." His eyes were glowing with mirth. "But there are some who choose to pass their time more constructively."

"I'm confused," said Primo.

"Yes," said the Devil. He flexed his wings slightly, then sat down, sideways, on the typist's chair, swivelling slowly, to the left and to the right. "So let me explain. It is a fairly straightforward matter.

"Evil is indeed the greater force. There is no equipoise, no balance between it and good. Evil is not something set up as an opposite energy to that of the Divine. It is a singular force born and nurtured in the human soul.

"When the human soul crosses to the Afterlife, if it brings its evil with it, that evil must be contained or it will contaminate. The task ascribed to me is to see to the containment of human evil; I safeguard those evil energies.

"For this I have divided Hell into two levels, the Underworld and the Deep. I separate those human souls who are merely bad from those who are truly evil. The truly evil are kept in the Deep – they may never leave. The merely bad are kept in the Underworld, where they bide their time until they become good. Then they may move on to the next levels of the Afterlife.

"There are many who choose to stay on in the Underworld. For some it is a time of perpetual recreation. They aspire to nothing higher.

"There are also those who choose to stay with me. They enjoy my company."

The Devil spread his wings their full span, twinkling in gold dust, then drew them in. "You are smiling," he said. "Do you think I jest?"

"No. It just seems so – what word should I use? So *unexpected*. So simple."

"Yes, it is simple. Except that there is another Hell, a third Hell that I watch over, one that is indeed terrible. It is here on earth. It is considered to be the true Hell. There you find Dante's torture, the scorched air, the dismembering, the death of beauty. This third Hell is war – it is the battleground where the human soul wars one upon the other. It is the scorched earth, the fields of those dying at the hand of others, the bombed and burning cities.

"I am the Archangel who circles the burning landscape of battle, the one who holds back the conflagration of war, who holds back the flames of human conflict, so they do not spread out of the confines of this earthly time. I draw the firewalls, as though they be curtains, to shut the Inferno in where it belongs, so it spills not out. For this I am called the Angel of Dresden.

"I am alone in my work with fire. No other helps me. And it is an almost impossible task that I am assigned. You must agree. For the flames spread furiously. Your father was correct. Time is webbed and woven. So the fires of human warring can easily spread out and through all the levels. Were I to leave the war fields and the burning ravaged cities unattended, the whole universe, as known to the human mind, could combust. Can you imagine the conflagration? It would be beyond Dante's wildest imaginings!"

Primo, well versed in discourse, and never without a point of view or an argument, now found himself completely at a loss for words. He had listened intently to the Devil's description, absorbing its every detail, yet was unable to respond, so stunned was he by what he heard.

There was silence between them. Primo tried to read the Devil's eyes, to read the language that his angelic form spoke as he sat, still sideways on the typist's chair, his leather-clad feet placed firmly on the ground, his great wings at rest. His form spoke of dignity and nobility, as it always did; and his eyes of depth and compassion and infinite wisdom.

Were you there with me that day, my friend? thought Primo. *When my fellow soldiers shot the old woman and the child? Did you watch the old men die like dogs? Did you hold the flames of that burning village, Lucifer? Did you hear the wounded child scream as the fire caught him? Did you lift him from the flames, when I could not?*

Still neither spoke. The Devil seemed to wait for Primo and his thoughts.

"Why has God given you this terrible task?" Primo asked, finally. "Why do you alone safeguard the fires of human conflict? Why has the Divine thrown you into the midst of our destructions and hatred?" *Are you not his favourite angel?* he thought. *As you would be mine, were I God*? *Should he not keep you at his right hand, as I would?*

"We have each a task," said the Devil. This is mine. Thus is my name Lucifer, Light Bearer. Light in its pure form, as you know, is fire."

Some days later, Primo and the Devil were in the back garden, sitting under the fig tree. Primo had always believed war to be the most demeaning of human activities. Now he felt a deep shame, shame for his own kind, shame for what this angelic being had had to witness since the dawn of time, for war, he reflected, has always been man's brother in life.

War has walked alongside us, thought Primo, looking at the Devil. *It has walked as our domesticated dogs and sheep and goats have, loyal to us, sleeping outside our dwellings, waiting for us to wake, never falling behind but keeping pace with us as we walk through time. And you have been there too, as a warden of our folly.*

How is it for you, to witness brother against brother? For we are all brothers – are we not seeded from the same cosmologies and borne upon the same testaments?

Are you present at all our conflicts? Do you witness them, right at the front? When we are gallant silver knights on horseback? When we are warriors plundering and slaying? When we dig trenches and fill them with our poets? When we march our children ahead of us to do our killing?

Were you at Hiroshima, the greatest of our conflagrations, that multiple incineration where we lost what we had left of our innocence?

Or do you only come to our fires afterwards, after we have done our filthy deeds? When the music is stilled and all art turned to nothing?

The Devil faced the sun, enjoying its warmth. Around him the low branches of the fig tree, with their new small-budding emerald green leaves, seemed to hold him.

There was a knock at the door.

"It's probably one of my clients," replied Primo to the Devil's questioning glance, but making no move to answer. "We'll just ignore it and they'll go away."

"Is that the right response? Should we not open the door?" asked the Devil, as the person knocked a second time. "Perhaps you are needed."

"Everyone needs me. But as I told you and as I try to tell them, I have retired. I don't want to deal with their everyday issues any more. I feel I have moved on," said Primo.

"Answer this one. I'd like to see who it is," said the Devil.

At the third knock Primo asked, "How will I introduce you? As Lucifer?"

"You won't need to introduce me. I will not be visible."

They walked down the passage, Primo without enthusiasm, for he had become protective of his privacy and felt irritated that their discussion had been interrupted. It was with reluctance that he unlocked the door.

Leaning against a pillar stood Virginia, smoking, wearing a tight short black dress and knee-high black boots.

"Contessa, what can I do for you?" greeted Primo without warmth or interest.

She threw her cigarette down and put it out with the tip of her boot. Frowning deeply and without greeting him, she said, "Primo, I know you've stopped working, and I'm sorry to trouble you, but I need you to do a reading for me. Only one. I have to clarify something. It shouldn't take you long."

The Devil nudged Primo, who in turn gestured to Virginia to enter, following her into his consulting room, where she sat at the round table. He lit all the candles and a stick of incense. The room was darkened by the thick velvet curtains but glowed warmly in the candlelight.

Virginia looked unusually unkempt and tousled, as though she had been crying. There was the sickly sweet smell of alcohol on her breath. Her hair fell forward and she kept flipping it backwards off her face with an affected movement. She sat with her legs slightly apart. The dress crept up her thighs and Primo could see the small black triangle of her underwear. A strap slipped, exposing a pale shoulder on which was tattooed a red rose.

Primo, with the Devil standing next to him, lifted the cover from his crystal ball, rubbed it and waited. Both looked into it as, out of its opaqueness, a convex drama emerged:

The figure of a seated man smokes a cigar; a glass of whiskey is balanced on one knee, a woman is perched on the other.
The woman throws her head from side to side, laughing;
The man pulls the dress off her shoulders, kisses a breast;
A door bursts open.
A dishevelled woman enters, takes a pistol from her bag and discharges three bullets.
A fountain of scarlet blood spurts from the torso of the man.
A trickle of crimson oozes from the right breast of the woman.

Both fall to the floor.

Primo grimaced and glanced at the Devil, who then walked round to stand behind Virginia and place his palms over her eyes, closing them. She lifted a hand as though to brush something away, a cobweb perhaps, but her arm fell to her side. Her head dropped gently to her chest. She was asleep. The Devil lifted the limp arm and settled it on Virginia's lap, then returned to look again into the crystal ball.

"This is sordid. We shouldn't have let her in," complained Primo.

"Do you generally reveal this sort of foreknowledge?" asked the Devil, not responding to Primo's judgments.

"No," replied Primo. "I never do."

The Devil was silent, looking across at the slumbering Virginia. "When I rouse her, you should caution her against violence."

A dribble of saliva trickled down Virginia's chin. The Devil suggested they go for a walk.

They strolled all the way up Kloof Street until they came to the ruins of the old orphanage. Here they sat under the gnarled wide-spreading oaks, looking across the city at the smooth curve of Table Bay.

The Devil, with his eyes closed, sat sideways against an oak, listening to the rush of fluids within its trunk and to its leaves murmuring.

Primo wanted to probe deeper into the mysteries the Devil had presented, but did not disturb him in his musing.

If I could paint, I would paint your image as I see it now – your wings sparkling like the pink pearl of shells, your long curls the red of cedar wood, your robe the blue-crimson of evening. I would capture you forever, with your shadow which is light, not darkness.

How does the fire of war not burn you, not scorch nor blister you – you who are named for Dresden?

How do you hold flames without their terrible testimony marking your beauty, your countenance?

The Devil opened his eyes and turned to face Primo. A shaft of afternoon sunlight danced on him.

Do you read my mind? Do you read my offer? I will come with you. I will guard the flames with you. I will hold back the walls of fire, so you need keep lone watch no more.

"We can go back now, the day is getting late," said the Devil, standing and shaking out his wings.

"Yes," agreed Primo, though he wanted to stay.

After his disastrous failure, Pasquale hauled a box of brandy upstairs and went to bed, sucking his way into an alcoholic temper. The room was littered with empty bottles, the bed wet with perspiration, brandy and vomit. He became abusive – shouting and swearing every time Beatrice came into the room. She was in despair. Once he hurled a bottle at her. Narrowly missing, it had shattered against the wall, leaving a splash of brandy-gold running down to the floor. After some days he staggered downstairs, naked and thin, trembling and weeping. He went into the kitchen, took the statue of the Virgin Mary from its shelf and, pushing Beatrice out of his way as she tried to stop him, smashed it to the floor. He then locked himself in the larder intending to die a slow dark death.

Sobbing, Beatrice crept on her hands and knees towards the broken pieces of china and began to pick them up – a cheekbone, a beautiful mouth, a thumb and index finger, a rose, a fold of the blue robe. The now sorrowed eyes stared deeply at Beatrice, as her mother had done, lying on her bed at the Blue Lodge, broken by anguish, torn apart by feelings of abandonment.

"Frankie," Beatrice cried, clutching the shards as she made her way to the bar and phoned Dr Baldinger, barely coherent.

He came over immediately. She was crouched over the shattered form, crying tears which were old, and which had been buried deep within her since the day her mother had told her she was going. "I'm just going to find someone, Baby. And get a nice job and a nice house and then I'll fetch you. And I'll take you to

a toy shop and you can choose any doll you want, because you'll be brave, waiting for me."

Dr Baldinger lifted Beatrice from the floor and took the pieces from her hands. He took a hanky from his pocket and gently wiped her face. With his arm around her shoulder, holding her to still her shaking, he looked in horror at the broken statue spread across the kitchen floor. Too aghast to speak, for he knew the statue's history and the trust with which it had been lent to Pasquale, he led Beatrice through to the bar where he poured two glasses of Port, handing her one and saying, "Drink it, drink it. Don't cry, my dear."

He sipped slowly, pensively and when Beatrice was calm and quiet, said, "We must pick her up, Beatrice." He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. "Every last bit of her. Come. Let's begin. I'll just phone Alexia to tell her I'll be late."

They spent the night picking up all the broken pieces, placing them on Pasquale's work surface, carefully assembling the different parts, slowly recreating the broken form until the shards lay there like a large and difficult puzzle ready to be glued together. The splintered statue looked as a broken body might on a mortuary slab, awaiting forensic examination.

"I'll ask Cloete to help," said Doctor Baldinger. "He did his internship at the military hospital. He's repaired many a body blown by grenades. But I can just imagine what he'll say to such a request."

Cloete van Rensburg, although he had burst out laughing when Dr Baldinger phoned to ask him to reconstruct the statue, found the request rather charming and agreed to mend it. He arrived at *Da Pasquale* with tweezers, a surgical gown, his surgical loupes and tubes of superglue, and began the painstaking process of repair, watched by Dr Baldinger. His concentration was deep. His hands worked deftly and confidently. His posture hardly changed and he did not speak as he glued the pieces together. It took him little more than an hour to repair the whole form and an hour to do the face alone, which he had left till last.

Dr Baldinger paced, as an expectant father might outside a delivery room. Beatrice, a migraine pulsing at her temples, sat at the pantry door, trying to soothe Pasquale while he sobbed. When he grew quiet, and it was obvious he had fallen asleep, she went upstairs to lie down.

Finally Dr van Rensburg stepped back, stretched, took off his loupes and gown and asked for a cup of coffee. He pointed out to Dr Baldinger that the face would always show signs of its breakage.

"I see she's already had a minor repair – here across the cheek," he said. "But with this new larger restoration, the eyes look more sorrowful than they probably did before. And look here at the mouth – the balance has been disturbed. She has lost the open innocent look I imagine she once had. Her face now speaks of tribulation. Mind you, all reconstructed faces do. As you know, traumatic injuries to the flesh never happen neatly, and then the trauma lines dictate how the surgeon must work. You see the same here – the face shattered in three lines, so the hairline repair will always bear witness to the breakages."

"Her innocence has gone," said Dr Baldinger.

"You could say so. But it probably went with the original old fracture. Where is Pasquale, by the way?"

"In the pantry," replied Dr Baldinger. "He won't unlock it."

"You should leave him there. What the hell was Beatrice thinking she'd achieve by leaving Primo for him? I know you're all friends but you must admit, Adam, the guy's a lunatic. Shouldn't you hospitalize him? It might do him good to be sedated for a while. It would give Beatrice a moment to think about what she's done."

"That's a bit harsh – he's just passionate – a bit volatile. Yes. I might have to sedate him. I'll see what state he's in when we get him out. But I won't hospitalize him. He's just been drinking heavily. And he's worked up about errors he keeps making in his kitchen.

"We are indeed all good friends. So I won't pass judgment on what's happened. Though it distresses me deeply. My concern lies with Primo more than with Pasquale. But right now we must just get the pantry door open."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I won't stay for that. To whom shall I send my account? Full reconstruction is not a cheap job, as you know!"

"Thanks for your help, Cloete. I really appreciate what you've done. Let me have your account," chuckled Dr Baldinger, placing the Virgin Mary back on her shelf from where she again looked down at the kitchen.

"It could be high," said Cloete, grinning as he looked up at the statue. "She's as close to perfect as I could possibly get her. So you can just owe me a good meal. Take me to the Brass Bell on a full moon. I like watching it over the sea."

"Right! I'm off!" he said, folding up his gown and packing his things. "I'm operating at eleven. An ambassador is coming for a blepharoplasty. A man whose country is at war. How's that for vanity and cocked-up values?"

No one could persuade Pasquale to unlock the pantry door – not Dr Baldinger, not Beatrice, not Mother Bernadette and not Father Michael, who had come to see whether Pasquale was back at work, and was shocked to hear that he had locked himself away. (Beatrice had led them through the kitchen to the pantry door and they had glanced up at the Virgin, both nodding to her in homage, neither noting through their myopia that her trusting and pure face had a new expression to it; nor that she was now laced in the fine lines of repair.)

All three implored Pasquale to come out, while Dr Baldinger went to look for a locksmith. In response Pasquale merely howled like a madman: "What's happening? Beatrice! What is ruining my fruited bread? My innocent salami? I want to die, Beatrice! I can't live with this! It's driving me mad!"

"Shouldn't you call the fire brigade, dear?" asked Mother Bernadette.

"Yes," agreed Father Michael. "He could do himself some damage in there. You do need to open up. You must get him out."

"I think I'll call my husband," replied Beatrice, fighting back tears and overwhelmed by a sudden need to turn to Primo, to his calm bearing and steady quiet love. "He'll know what to do."

Beatrice had never known Primo to do anything spiteful or malicious, and because he did not cast spells, she did not suspect he had anything to do with Pasquale's predicament. She had not spoken to Primo since she had left him but the time had now come. Without giving thought to how she would ask for his help, she left Mother Bernadette and Father Michael imploring at the pantry door and set off up Long and into Kloof Street. She took the familiar three steps of the stoep and faced the two doors, unlocking 21A. As she crossed the threshold she felt the sensation of walking through spider webbing. Primo was not home.

To Beatrice's astonishment, the once-locked room on the right was wide open and all the timepieces were ticking. The house had a brightness to it, as though the roof was glass, and there was an unusual fragrance about, which she did not recognize. It was clear to her that Primo no longer lived alone, for she could see signs of someone else's influence – someone creative and sensitive; someone who enjoyed fresh flowers; who opened windows wide for breezes to tumble through; someone who liked order; someone young at heart, for there was gold glitter sprinkled about the house. Primo had taken in a lover, she concluded; how uncharacteristic of him, and how quickly this had happened. Beatrice felt a pang of jealousy.

She walked down the second passage and stopped in amazement. The other once-locked room was also open. The window boarding had been removed and the contents dusted. As though an enchantment had been lifted, Primo's childhood room welcomed her and she wondered, looking in at its simple furnishings, who had convinced him to do this, when she had not succeeded.

She sat on the blue covered bed. Everything seemed to have changed. The darkness which the closed rooms forced upon the house, had dissipated. The wind which whistled through the cracks of the boarded up windows, throwing a haunting through the house whenever the Southeaster blew, was still. The weighted unspoken sorrow with which the very bricks groaned, had lifted. Above all, the terrible sense of aloneness which the house always harboured, particularly when Primo was not home, and which she could not bear, was gone.

Beatrice was in the kitchen when Primo and the Devil came in from their walk. So unexpected was her presence that Primo was overcome with emotion, thinking she had come back home. He took her in his arms and, barely keeping back tears, whispered his familiar endearment, "Beata Beatrix". Holding her tight to himself, feeling all his resentment lift, he ran his hands down her long hair and breathed in her presence. When he looked into her eyes he read, with disappointment, that she had not come home. She had come to ask for something.

"What is it, Beata?" he asked softly. "Has something happened? What's wrong?" He was aware that his heart was pounding. Mild panic ran through him. Had Pasquale been abusive? Hurt her in any way? He loved her so dearly, wanted no harm ever to befall her. "Tell me what's the matter," he urged.

The Devil, invisible to Beatrice, reclined on the ottoman while Primo and his wife sat at the kitchen table. Beatrice struggled to ask for help for the man she

assumed Primo must now hate. Primo took her hand. "Tell me," he said, then listened as she described the misfortune that had struck Pasquale and his subsequent breakdown. She said nothing of the violence that now raged through him.

"I need you to help me find out what's wrong. And to get him out of the pantry, Primo. Can you come back with me? Can you break the door down? Can you talk to him?" she asked, and started to cry.

Primo recognized immediately that his malevolent spells had somehow activated and was stunned at the magnitude of their impact, and by the fact that they were also threatening Pasquale's health. Though he was not a man who spoke untruths, nor one who excused or hid his actions, he did not tell Beatrice of his role in Pasquale's misfortune. Instead he looked across at the Devil, his friend, but was not sure what he read in those cabochon-jewelled eyes that held his gaze. He went through to the bedroom to fetch tissues. Seeing himself in the mirror, he noted deep sorrow in his eyes.

Returning he said, "Beata, I can tell you without hearing any more, that this is bewitchment. Pasquale's breads and salami have a spell cast upon them. He won't be able to get himself out of this predicament. I'll have to do it for him."

Primo listened to himself speaking as soothsayer and magician. "I'll work on it tonight, Beata. I'll look through my books. This isn't my field – bewitchment – you know that. But it's a small thing, I'm sure.

"I won't need to speak to Pasquale. And, no, Beata, I won't break down the pantry door. You'll have to call the fire brigade for that."

They sat in silence. Primo felt himself the shy youth again, self-conscious and stumbling, unable to speak his heart. He was overwhelmed by feelings of anguish, wanting to break down, to ask, *Why did you leave me, when you know I am nothing without you?*

Instead, he took his wife's hand and asked, "Beata, had I forgotten in the everyday to tell you that I love you?"

Beatrice, looking at his handsome, dignified countenance and only now facing the wrong she had done him, said, "You did tell me, Primo. In the everyday and in everything. I didn't leave you for want. Nor for anything lacking."

She held back what her heart ached to say: *But you too have someone else. There is someone new here, in my place.* Instead she said softly, "I shouldn't stay, Primo. I'd better go back and get Pasquale out, Primo."

"Beata," he said, running his finger under the gold chain which hung at her neck – a wedding gift to Beatrice from his father and aunt– looking at the thick links and then into her eyes, remembering how his aunt had drawn its design on a piece of paper, for the jeweller Biccari to fashion. It was a copy of the chain Primo's grandmother had always worn, and which Lidia and Eugenio had handed over, along with their mother's ring and bracelets, when the Gestapo extorted fifty kilograms of gold from the Jews of Rome, falsely informing people that by paying it over, they would avoid deportation. [5]

"This will always be your home. You have your key. I'll never bolt the door from the inside."

Primo walked her out to the stoep where they stood awkwardly for a moment. "Primo," she said, unexpectedly. "Will you help me find Frankie?"

Beatrice had never asked Primo to trace her mother or find out what had happened to her. He had always known there would come a time when she would want to take this path, to search, to uncover locked secrets, but he chose to not prompt her in that direction, knowing it would only bring pain. He wondered, now, what had stirred in her to make her want to open the closed trinket box in which she had hidden away her childhood yearnings for the mother who had left her in the care of others.

"You will hurt yourself, Beata. But yes, we can look for her, if you want."

"I do," she said. "I never did before. But now I do."

She said goodbye and he repeated, "This is your home, Beata."

Primo held his wife and kissed her lips, lightly. He watched her until she reached the traffic lights, then came inside and stood before the Pre-Raphaelite print in the lounge. He touched its lips and then his own. "Beata Beatrix," he whispered. "I love you."

"I should wake your client now," said the Devil, standing in the doorway, watching him. "It will soon be dark. She ought to go home."

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[5] Susan Zuccotti. Ibid. Page 109.

On her way home, Beatrice stopped outside Sissy-and-Esquire and asked Meduro whether he could break down the pantry door. Meduro, leaning against the shop window, wore a white shirt tied in a knot at his waist, the buttons all undone, the pepper-corn hair of his chest forming a small path towards his navel. Tight denims accentuated his strong thighs. His sunglasses were perched on his head.

"Sure," he said. "It is no problem. I just tell Miss Sissy where I be."

He arrived at *Da Pasquale* with a sledgehammer and asked Dr Baldinger and the locksmith to give him space. With two blows he knocked the door open. Pasquale lay in the farthest corner, naked, weeping softly, his body in foetal position, his arms wrapped tightly around a ten-kilogram can of imported tomato concentrate. His skin was clammy and his hair drenched in sweat.

Meduro carried the limp Pasquale upstairs and helped Beatrice wash him. They oiled him with lavender and dressed him in his pyjamas before tucking him under the feather eiderdown. Then they stepped back so Dr Baldinger could examine him.

That night Meduro said to Sissy, "Such a one, such a one as Mr Pasquale, in Congo, we leave him to die. Such a one who is so thin, so mad – for what purpose is there to help such a one to live?"

Sissy laughed. "You say he's mad, Medu? He's lost it completely? That's funny.
He's always seen himself as the great lover-boy of Long Street. So what's happened? He has a little affair with that air-head Beatrice and bang go his senses.

"I'll tell you, the next one to go mad will be his sister. When she finds out Cloete comes here, she'll also throw a fit or two."

They were sitting on the carpet at the foot of the bed, playing bao and drinking rum. She had on a transparent white gown. He wore a cloth around his loins. Esquire sat between them, staring at the mahogany seeds of the game. Scented candles gave a tranquil light to the bedroom.

"You like your friend, Virgin?" asked Meduro.

"Virginia? God, she's no more virgin than me, Medu. You must get people's names right. Contessa is how she likes to be known.

"Sometimes I like her. Sometimes I like her around. Not all the time. Sometimes for coffee and to find out what's going on with everybody. She knows everyone's business and I like to know too. And she buys a lot from me, you know that. Now she also wants a little scar pattern across her body. She'll come in soon for that."

"I do a good job for her. You know what pattern she want?"

"No," said Sissy, refilling their glasses. "Something tribal, I think. You help her decide.

"I like more to play with her man – with Cloete – more than with her. Do you mind when I play with Cloete, Medu?"

"I mind, yes," he said. "Dr Cloete not my friend."

"Actually, he's not mine either, Medu."

She untied her belt and shrugged so her gown fell off her shoulders. "Come, Medu. Come kiss Maman, come make love to me. When he comes tonight, I won't answer the door."

Meduro moved the bao board aside and crawled over to her. He took off his loin cloth and knotted it around his head. Then with a gentleness which belied his strong physique, he pushed her backwards so she lay on the carpet. He kissed the flatness between her breasts as his hands began to caress her body, preparing it to receive his. Esquire arched his back and sat close to them, watching, it seemed.

Sissy did not tell Meduro that there had been times when she and Virginia had lain together, in the top-floor room of the Stairway to Paradise, and that their women's bodies had touched each other with a skin-to-skin softness not unlike that of mist touching fine fynbos; that Virginia's tongue, exploring her body, had aroused her quite as much as any man had ever done; that this had been as close to love as she had ever come. Though she loved no one.

Sissy Plumb serviced the fashion needs of most of the Long Street community, but she was not well liked. She was seductive and predatory and she damaged marriages. Women were unsettled by her, particularly those who were not good in bed, those who were unimaginative in love, and those who could not stir their husbands' passions because they had no confidence in their bodies.

Sissy, as well as knowing how to adorn the body, also recognized when a body was poorly satisfied sexually. She had a carnal sixth sense and she used it to her advantage, drawing frustrated men to her as a luscious swamp lotus draws night insects.

Two men who were not easy prey were Primo and Pasquale, Primo because he disliked her intensely, and Pasquale because he had already had his time with her and had paid dearly for it. She had long ago ensnared him with her seductive vines and led him through a frenzy of sex on the bar counter of his delicatessen late one night; in the back row of the Labia Theatre while *Bonnie and Clyde* was showing; in De Waal park when the fountain still worked – at midnight, naked under its gushing water; and in the men's changing room of the Long Street baths. These sexual encounters soon brought about the end of Beatrice's relationship with Pasquale.

All through their teenage and early adult romance Beatrice had pretended not to be hurt by the many other girls he messed around with. Sissy, however, was someone she knew she could never sexually compete with. Beatrice recognized she would never hold Pasquale as her own. The time had come to let him go.

It was on the day that she decided their relationship was over, that Primo, with his marriage proposal in mind, invited Beatrice to meet him in Government Avenue. She thought it was to warn her about something, to caution her about Sissy, for he often gave unsolicited readings into the futures of his friends. But he had something more special in mind. He had come to save her from the terrible aloneness she had prepared herself to face in giving up Pasquale as her lover.

Even though he tried, working through the night and consulting his many volumes on magic and sorcery, Primo could not reverse the bad spells and energies he had set. Fuelling themselves with self-generating meanness and spite, the spells had mutated a hundredfold, forming interlocking barbs of malice. Only a black-magician, experienced in the structuring of evil, would have had the skill to disempower them, and even he,

not having cast the spells himself, might have had difficulty. Primo had to ask the Devil for help.

The Devil reminded Primo that he was not versed in the construction of evil. "Evil is not my work," he said. "But let me try to unravel your spells. I imagine them to be like an entanglement – a disorderliness of energy that we would have to undo and straighten out."

While the Devil worked in the garden, under the fig tree, Primo lay on the ottoman, emotionally exhausted by Beatrice's visit and his futile attempts at negating the spells. He was grateful for the Devil's help, given so willingly and without question, and reflected on this kindness, wondering how he would have managed had he been alone.

The Devil untangled the spells as though they were a mass of entwined embroidery cottons, following each line of each spell into the centre, combing them, unknotting and diffusing their malignancies. It took him the whole afternoon. When he had finished he left the house and went out on his own.

Dr Baldinger was puzzled by Pasquale's presenting symptoms of fever, derangement and muscle wastage, for there was no evidence of bacterial or viral infection, nor of parasitic infestation. He paced up and down, his black coat swirling as he turned on his heel at each end of the room.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say there was bewitchment here," he muttered. Then he turned to Beatrice and said, "Though I am reminded of his old breakdowns. I thought he was well recovered from all that."

Finally he simply recorded Pasquale as suffering general malaise, dehydration and anxiety. He set up a drip and sedated Pasquale, who slept the sleep of death for the next twenty-four hours. In this time he did not toss or turn and seemed spared dreams and nightmares. Once or twice he opened his dark eyes and stared into the distance.

While Pasquale slept, Primo came to complete the Devil's work by realigning towards good the energies of the delicatessen and the apartment. On the landing he noticed a basket full of Pasquale's shoes, and realized he had not told the Devil about the shoelace spell. Well, he thought to himself, he would not bother the Devil with this; perhaps at a later stage he would tackle the spell himself; for the moment he was sure Pasquale could live with it. He found

entering the bedroom of his wife's lover distasteful, though he kept jealousy at bay. Even so, the sight of Pasquale's pale and death-like form disturbed him, and he felt remorse for having caused his near-demise. He embraced Beatrice and greeted Dr Baldinger and Father Michael with a nod.

"Good to see you, Primo. How are you? What do you make of this?" asked Dr Baldinger. "Some enchantment here, perhaps?"

"I make nothing of it," answered Primo, bluntly.

"Ah, Mr Verona, how nice to see you again!" exclaimed Father Michael. "How grateful I still am to you for helping us locate Sister Mary Agnes when she went missing."

He turned to Dr Baldinger and said, " Poor dear, she quite forgot she was a nun. At the age of seventy-five she told the security guard she was going home and walked out the front gate, brazen as you please! We hunted high and low for her. We all imagined the worst, of course. It was Mr Verona here who found her for us, with the help of his marvellous crystal ball. You'll never guess where! Gambling at the new casino out in Goodwood!"

Dr Baldinger smiled. Everyone knew the story of Sister Mary Agnes and how she had crept into the geriatric section of Nazareth House, taken a set of clothes from one of the residents, filled an overnight bag with brass candlesticks from the chapel and then asked a bergie to pawn them for her.

"Where is the good sister now?" asked Dr Baldinger, well knowing that she was living in Brooklyn with a group of the orphans she had once cared for, now grown and into all sorts of illegal rackets and schemes. She had turned her back on her past pious and holy ways and set herself on a gambling trajectory, amassing a small fortune, then losing it all.

"Ah, she's back in Ireland. Retired now and in care. Back in the home country," replied Father Michael.

Dr Baldinger turned to Beatrice and, clicking his bag shut, said, "Beatrice, you need to strengthen him up. Good chicken soup, made with giblets and lots of root vegetables, will do it. And give him beetroot tonic. Old-fashioned remedies these may be, but they'll get him back on his feet."

He and Primo walked out together. "Primo," asked the Doctor. "How've you been?"

"I'm well, under the circumstances," said Primo.

"Then don't make yourself so scarce. I miss our friendship. Answer your door sometimes."

When Pasquale woke up, the memory of what had happened hovered over him as the remains of a nightmare would, and he had little recollection of the details of his ordeal. No one brought up the subject, fearing they might re-invoke the troubles by merely mentioning them.

Da Pasquale reopened soon after the Devil had removed the enchantment which plagued the fruited breads and salami. It was a Saturday and the south-east wind had cast a cloth of cloud across Table Mountain. Pasquale saw this as a good omen, believing it symbolized one of his own tables, spread out in generosity and good welcome. His return to the kitchen was prodigal, and he was welcomed joyfully by his ululating staff. They set to work at once.

From his newly provisioned storage bins he took stone ground Wuppertaal flour which he mixed with equal quantities of ground almonds. In a separate bowl he prepared a fondant paste of ground hazelnuts and rose water, working in orange rind and pulverized roasted fig. To these he added his liquids, yeast, spices, sultanas and cherries. He worked up a large marbled dough that was then allowed to rise before being shaped into individual loaves and baked. The first batch of fruited breads he lifted from the oven was perfect. Before they cooled he poured on a topping of ground caramelized almonds.

Pasquale decided to wait a few months before curing any salami, for he was still weak and tired easily, but his staff felt confident that life had, by some miracle, almost returned to normal.

Mother Bernadette and Father Michael came to visit late that afternoon.

"We've decided, the other sisters and I, and Father Michael here, to let our statue stay with you indefinitely," said Mother Bernadette.

"Yes," added Father Michael. "She certainly brought an air of benevolence and beneficence to your kitchen, we all agree on that."

"If you will allow her to continue to oversee your kitchen and good work," said Mother Bernadette. "We would be delighted to leave her with you. And we feel certain that old Mr Biccari would not object at all."

Pasquale turned to face the statue. He did not remember smashing her and no one had told him of his drunken deed. The Virgin Mary's look had changed, he thought now, but could not quite work out what was different about her.

"She has aged with me," he said.

"Oh, Mr Benvenuto, she is ageless. Time does not touch her, nor line her face," said Father Michael. "Now let us not keep you from your work. Good day. Let me just add how pleased we are to see you well."

That first Saturday night of reopening, *Da Pasquale* was full, with every table occupied and all space at the bar taken. Friends and customers came in, shook Pasquale's hand, embraced him, commended his recovery (though he still looked wan), wished him back his strong stature and lifted their glasses to good life and health. Lazar played his violin and mellowness settled over everyone. Before the card players took their places at the window table, Pasquale led Biccari through to his kitchen, to show him the statue of the Virgin Mary.

"Do you know this is from your father, Biccari?" he asked. "No? Come sit and I'll tell you a piece of your history while you play cards. But I'll say this first, that it is only since Mother Bernadette lent her to me that I am well. She is a statue of miracles. Beatrice will pour us all another round of drinks, to honour your father's memory."

"We should throw a party for you, Pasqui," suggested Sack, putting his arm around Pasquale. "To celebrate. We thought we'd lost you there for a moment."

"That's a damn fine idea," said Stern. "We need to liven up a bit – now that we're out of the doldrums."

"How does a street party sound?" suggested Bregman. "We could close off Long Street, bring in music. What do you think, Romana?"

"It's a wonderful idea. We haven't had a party for so long. It's time already."

"We should all wear masks," said Virginia, who was sitting at the bar, drinking vodka on ice. "I think it should be a masked party, a masked fancy-dress, to give some sense of artistry to the occasion." She lit a cigarette and drew deeply.

"A masked party, yes," said Sack. "We can create a Venetian carnival right here in Long Street."

"Let everyone know. Invite everyone, " said Solomon, shuffling a pack and handing it to Emerich.

"Yes," agreed Dr Baldinger. "Invite Primo too, and someone make sure he comes. It's time he came back to us. He's locked himself away for long enough now. I miss our debates. I need some philosophical challenge."

"You know," said Emerich, pausing as he dealt the cards. "I saw him out walking the other evening, wearing a long robe, the kind Orthodox priests wear, talking to himself with great animation. He needs our company."

Yes," agreed Biccari. "But now tell us, Pasqui, this story about my father and your statue."

Beatrice looked away. She had wanted to visit Primo, to thank him. She also wanted to reflect with him on what she had done to their marriage, to try to undo some of the hurt she had caused, but when she had mentioned this to Pasquale, he had started to cry. They were the tears of a broken man and they disarmed her. She had lain with him, stroking his wet face, stilling his trembling and realizing that he had not fully recovered.

She would look out for Primo at the party, she decided, and to make sure that he came, she would phone Dr Baldinger the next day to say she would deliver an invitation herself.

Virginia brought Beatrice's thoughts back to the bar by knocking her empty glass against it, saying, "I'm not going to stay long, Beatrice. Just give me another double to celebrate my brother's good health. The Stairway's busy tonight. We've had a busload of Japanese tourists book the place out for the whole weekend." She crushed her cigarette stub into the ashtray and lit another. Her hands trembled.

That morning Cloete had unlocked his surgery to find her waiting for him, brandishing his breast-reduction scissors and a scalpel. "You too are a bastard!" she had growled between clenched teeth as she made a strike at his face. He

caught her arms and prised the instruments from her hands, throwing them across the room, then forcing her down onto the couch.

A thin line of blood beaded across his cheek. Virginia began to cry, saying, "I know what's going on. You can't fool me. You're a liar and a cheat, aren't you? Who are you two-timing me with? Is it someone I know?"

Cloete kissed her lips, smarting at the stale taste of brandy and nicotine.

"No one," he said. "I have one angel and that's you. Now give me back my key and let's just talk, shall we? We'll make a little love here like we used to and then just talk sensibly, like two adults. You used to like that, remember? Love in my examination room?" He unzipped her black dress and pulled it down. She was naked underneath. Across her breasts marched a newly incised line of tribal markings – single vertical cuts – the scabs just dry. Cloete turned away in disgust.

As he locked the door of his office, so they would not be disturbed, he realized the time had come to end their relationship. It had entered unnavigable waters and he was no seaman.

The Devil handed Primo a card. "Someone slipped this under the door," he said.

It was an invitation to a masked party to be held in celebration of Pasquale's recovery and the reopening of his delicatessen. The party, it said, was to be held in Long Street on the following Saturday night. Primo tossed the card onto the table. The Devil picked it up and read it.

"You ought to go," he said, responding to Primo's lack of interest. "You should reintegrate. This might be a good way of doing it."

Primo looked across the table at his friend, at this angel who had come into his life at its lowest point and comforted him. He did not want the company of others, did not need others to love him or give him a sense of relevance. He was content to live with the Devil.

"Why should I reintegrate when I have you?" he asked. "I no longer have need for people. I actually enjoy seclusion. I would only like my wife back. Only my wife."

A sudden fear came over Primo – that the Devil too would abandon him. "Are you thinking of leaving me, Lucifer?" he asked. "Is that why you want me to reintegrate – so that you can go back to the Afterlife, back to your own world?" *You must never leave,* he thought. *You must stay here, with me, where there is no fire.*

The Devil flexed his wings. A shimmering of fine gold dust whirled through the shaft of sunlight coming through the kitchen door. He did not answer Primo's questions. All he said was, "It will be good for you to go to the party. It would not be wise to cut yourself off for too long."

Then he said, "I am sure your wife will be there. It might be the right time to make things good again. Would it help if I go with you? I can stay at your side."

Neither spoke for a moment. Then Primo said, "Yes, I'll go to the masked party if you come with me. But I want you to be visible. I want you to show yourself to everyone, to be seen as my friend. I would go if you came openly as my companion, so I am not seen to be alone as a discarded husband or an abused friend."

The Devil, pondering Primo's request, turned to look out the door, at the rosemary bushes crowned with blue flowers and at the fig tree.

"This is a difficult request you make. It would not be a safe thing for me to do. I would put myself in great peril. For, in order to be fully visible, to others that is, to those who are not clairvoyant as you are, I would have to incarnate, be made flesh. I could become trapped.

"As angels, we are discouraged from taking material form. If something should happen, if something prevented us from leaving the confines of flesh, our angelic energies could forever become ensnared."

"No harm will come to you," said Primo. "We'll be in Long Street and I know it well. The clubs will remind you of the Underworld – the gambling, the smoking, the idling of time. It must all be the same, here and Hell. You'll feel at home."

They sat silently for a moment. Then Primo said, "I need you, Lucifer."

"You tempt me," responded the Devil.

"Yes," agreed Primo. "I tempt you. Come with me."

"Will you be mindful of me?"

"I'll be mindful, Lucifer. I'll watch over you. I'll not allow any harm to come to you."

"Who will we say I am?" asked the Devil.

"No one will ask. We'll all be costumed and masked, of course," replied Primo.

"How shall we costume ourselves?" asked the Devil.

"As devils!" laughed Primo. "Let's go as devils!"

Primo reclaimed Long Street as his own on the day he bought two black suits, one for himself and one for the Devil, from Sissy-and-Esquire, and carried them home, beautifully wrapped in tissue and tied up in a box. Sissy Plumb had asked him why he wanted *two* dress suits, in exactly the same trouser size but one with an extra-large coat instead of a jacket, and both with red silk lapel-roses. He refused to tell her, even when she probed as she wrapped his parcel.

"So, you have a twin brother, Primo, one that you've never told us about? You bugger – what other secrets have you got?" She sucked on her cigarette holder, held in the smoke, then blew it above him.

"Tell me, what's the occasion? Is there a wedding coming up that I haven't been invited to? A bar mitzvah? Or is it the masked party? Don't tell me you're coming to that, Primo! I know you hate raving it up.

"By the way, have you got over your jilted-husband complex? Won't you mind seeing Beatrice at the party with her lover-boy, hey? Be honest now."

He said nothing, so Sissy tried another tack, "Well, you've gone your whole life wearing those tired linen suits of yours and now you're busting out and buying two new ones! What's got into you?"

Primo thought Sissy a fool at the best of times, and had never engaged in conversation with her. Even when she asked bluntly, peering over her diamanté sunglasses, "*Who* are you taking with you to the masked ball? Who

have you dragged out of the woodwork? You can tell me – I won't spill your little secret," he merely smiled.

It was late in the day. The traffic was heavy with commuters leaving the city centre. As Primo strolled down the pavement, glancing in at *Da Pasquale*, at Kennedy's, at Stairway to Paradise, his carriage was upright and his step brisk. He found he was singing to himself. His heart had brightness in it.

The setting sun lent a particular light to the evening, so that all colours seemed polished. Primo wondered, as he climbed the steps of his stoep, how it was that he had never properly attended to the scarlet of the geraniums or the puff-blue of the pelargoniums filling the planters and pots cluttering the veranda. He looked up at the sky – cut through with streaks of cloud – and realized, with great satisfaction, that he was happy.

Primo unlocked the door and walked in as his father's clocks began the noisy business of striking six o'clock, in welcome, he thought. "Lucifer!" he shouted. "I'm home!"

He put the box on his bed, untied the strings and took off the lid. From the top drawer of Beatrice's dressing table he lifted out all her underwear and stuffed the fuss of silks and satins into the second drawer, cramming it shut.

In the top drawer he carefully placed, side by side, two new shirts, two cummerbunds, two bow ties and two crimson lapel-roses. He hung the suits, which Sissy had sprayed lightly with lemon grass, in his wardrobe. He had bought two devil masks from Golden Dragon Gifts in the Malay Quarter. These he placed on the dressing table.

Primo went to the kitchen and put on the coffee. On the table stood a bowl of fuchsias and a box of eats from *Da Pasquale,* left on his stoep that morning by Dr Baldinger and brought in by the Devil. The windows and back doors were open and the evening air tumbled in, swirling round the fresh flowers, lifting their fragrances and diffusing them about the house. In the back courtyard, the Devil was repotting the violets.

Primo opened the *Da Pasquale* box. *Why not?* he thought as he ate a *polpetta* and then a second, still warm and delicious. Taking his coffee outside he greeted the Devil and sat down on a chair under the fig tree. Watching the Devil at work he realized that he loved looking at him. There was an air of

great beauty and effortless serenity about him all the time. His face was youthful and unlined, yet wise with age.

Today he was wearing a white vestment that seemed to have been sewn from a single piece of cloth, for there were no seams at the sleeves. Instead there was a myriad of tiny pleats running down from the neck, giving the impression that the garment could be opened out, like a fan.

The Devil wore a different robe every day, though he had brought no luggage. Primo had put a duvet and pillow down on the ottoman, but there were never signs that the Devil slept. Did he go home each night to change? Primo wondered. It seemed intrusive to ask. Perhaps he slept sitting up; maybe his wings were bothersome.

The Devil stepped back from the violets and, with a look of satisfaction, took off his gardening gloves and asked Primo to help him carry in the pots. Together they lined them up along both kitchen window ledges.

"We have wonderful gardens in Hell," remarked the Devil, dusting the leaves of the violets. "We mirror the gardens of earth, and the seasons. Some are laid out with beautiful walkways and fountains and recesses where souls can sit to ponder. Others we leave wild, to seed themselves and follow their own designs. In spring the whole of Hell is heady with fragrance." He paused. "I speak of the Underworld, of course. Nothing grows in Deep Hell.

"Well, that is not entirely true. There is a garden there. It is a paper garden, a garden of flowers folded from papyrus and linen paper. And it is quite beautiful, for the flowers are exquisitely made. They are not brightly coloured, but have the natural tones of the papers we use: whites and creams and buffs. They are laid out in formal gardens, like works of art, and there is a stillness there because there are no bees or butterflies. Nor is there any fragrance to speak of.

"You are wondering who folds the flowers?" he asked, reading the question in Primo's eyes. "Those in the Underworld who do not play cards. "

He sat down at the kitchen table and asked, "Have you bought our suits?"

"I have," answered Primo. "We're going to be a sensation."

"Indeed," replied the Devil, with a twinkle in his eye. After a pause he asked, "Would you like me to show you how to fold a marsh lily? Do you have any papyrus or linen paper? Even crêpe paper will do."

On the night of the masked party Primo reflected, as he stepped out of the shower, on the perils of incarnation that the Devil had mentioned. *What could trap Lucifer? If he became trapped in his incarnation, would the entrapment be perpetual? Would Lucifer remain angelic within the human form, or would his energy devolve to a human one? If so, once the human form he had taken died, would he revert to his angelic state? Did other angels incarnate at times and unwittingly become trapped? Are there angels trapped among us? Are there angels on earth?*

These were Primo's thoughts as he shaved, then brushed his thick curls. He was pleased with the reflection that looked back from the mirror. There was strength in his eyes. The expression lines on his face spoke not of anguish but of a journey, as a map would. There were none he wished to erase.

He went through to the bedroom where the Devil, wearing only black trousers, held out the dress shirt. The sight of him startled Primo. His torso – ivory white, smooth and hairless – seemed to have been cut from marble. His immense wings, at rest, had a sheen to them that glistened in the light of the room as did the thick mahogany curls that rested on his broad naked shoulders. Primo's eyes traced the form of the Devil's upper body: the strong neck, the lines of his pectoral musculature, the firm biceps and triceps, his large hands – all of which spoke of great physical strength.

Are you a man? Primo wanted to ask. *Pure man? First man? Made by the direct breath of God? Unspoilt by evil?*

Seeming to read his thoughts, the Devil spread his wings, then brought them to rest against his back again, as if to say, *I am no man. I am an angel.*

"I can't put the shirt on," said the Devil. "There are no openings for my wings." Primo took the shirt and, with a pocketknife, cut two long slits down the back of it. He helped the Devil's wings through them. He lent him a pair of socks and black shoes. He stilled an urge to take the Devil in his arms, to caress the wings.

"I'll help you with your coat," Primo offered.

The Devil's wings lay against his back. Primo held them down with the cummerbund and helped the Devil put one arm then the other through the tailcoat sleeves. He turned the collar down and ran his palms over the hump formed by the wings, flattening creases and making sure no feathers were visible. The Devil turned and they faced each other as Primo pinned a red silk rose to the Devil's lapel and then one to his own. They clipped on their bow ties. Then they stood before the long mirror of the wardrobe door. The Devil's mahogany curls and Primo's black curls, streaked with grey, tumbled to their shoulders. They looked like brothers, though one stood upright and the other had a disfiguring hump on his back.

If the Devil was still apprehensive about incarnating, he did not say so.

For the party, Long Street was closed to traffic between Bloem Street and the Buitensingel intersection. Tables and chairs were set out on the pavements outside cafés and restaurants. Streamers and balloons waved in the breeze.

Although it had been billed to start at nine o'clock, the hour at which night would darken the long summer day, by seven the road was already a crush of party energy fuelled by music, drugs and drink. Smells of hot chips, popcorn, fish sizzling on skottel braais, garlic rolls, fried onion and boerewors mingled with the heady aftershaves, perfumes and perspiration of the milling crowd.

As darkness fell, the streetlights were turned off and fairy lights, draped across balconies and shopfronts, were switched on. They twinkled and, with the subdued lighting of cafés and restaurants, gave a gentle and romantic touch to the street and its crowd.

Vendors sold bunnychows, sosaties and salomies. Stands offered spiced wine in paper cups. Tequila shots were on sale at several corners. Dealers selling cocaine, Ecstasy and Mandrax were out in force, some strolling up and down, others doing their business outside Bregman's Afrika and Emerich's Bliss. Hookers leant up against walls or stood invitingly outside clubs.

The area between Pepper Street and Orphan Lane was reserved for dancing. Here the Billy Monk Jazz Band from Manenberg and Lazar's Hungarian Trio alternated, giving time to tango lovers, rockers and *langarm* dancers alike.

Restaurateurs struggled to cope with the demand for food and drink, every table being taken. There were queues. Most sidewalk vendors sold out long before the night was done.

A mixed crowd of wealthy locals, tourists, backpackers, dancers and Congolese and Zimbabwean *kwerekwere* jostled and swayed, hungry for sensation and pleasure. Drunks, bums and street children wormed their way in and out among the revellers, scoring scraps of food or picking pockets and handbags. Though the body of the crowd moved and pulsed, squirmed and danced, its masked faces were expressionless.

Many of the masks were simple, full face in black or white. Others were elaborate with attached hairpieces. There were character masks among them too: Goldilocks, Marilyn Monroe, Nefertiti and Cleopatra. A pig and a sun god sipped vodka from straws. Harlequin sat with Snow White on his lap, the two drinking and fondling each other.

A group wearing Venetian masks lounged outside the recently reopened *Da Pasquale*. Around the white-clothed tables, drinking wine, sat Pulcinella, Pantalone, the Plague Doctor and a number of figures wearing classic white masks. Inside, the poker players, in their tell-tale black suits and wearing white half-face masks, concentrated on their cards and gave little attention to the surrounding revelry. Dr Baldinger – wearing a white surgical mask and identifiable by his black trench coat - watched them play.

At a nearby table, costumed in a black suit and tie, a wig of knotted hair and a white full-faced mask, sat the Hunchback of Notre Dame, alone. This figure was tall, drank a lot and did not revel or laugh.

Because Pasquale still tired easily, he closed shop at eleven and went upstairs with Beatrice. He was too weak to make love, too tired to hold her. "I feel so feeble. I'm still so weary from that illness. You go back to the party if you want."

"No, I'll stay with you. It sounds rowdy now."

Beatrice tucked him up and dimmed the lights, then sat on the balcony looking down at the street party below, wondering whether Primo had come, and with whom, and sorry she had not seen him.

The card players moved on to Kennedy's Cigar Bar and resumed their game at a centre table. Untroubled by the loud music and tightly packed patrons, they

drank and challenged their luck and skills. Dr Baldinger, who had earlier walked Alexia home, stood watching them.

Primo and the Devil, attired in their new suits, their curls brushed out and lying heavily against their shoulders, walked up and down Long Street, each wearing a horned mask that completely covered his face. They cut identical figures and had the same way of walking: tall, upright and confident, each with one hand in a pocket. Except the Devil had a hump on his back. So there were two hunchbacks in the crowd that night.

Neither Primo nor the Devil ate, nor did they drink.

"I recognize everything; yes, this is so like the Underworld," said the Devil. "Except for the children. There are no children in Hell. But the jazz bands, the roistering, it's just like a reflection. This is obviously why the newly dead have no trouble adjusting. It must all be the same for them, superficially."

Two hookers fell into step with them. One pressed herself against Primo, took his hand and held it to her breast. He pushed her away. The other linked arms with the Devil and offered him quick sex in the alley for a hundred Rand.

As the night progressed, the better class of people left the street and headed for the clubs and bars, leaving the riff-raff outside. The musicians packed up and went home. Disco music now throbbed. The street crowd, meanwhile, had become an animal of one body, one drunken spirit, swollen with people drawn by the music from all over the city, heaving up and down Long Street. The edges tattered as people peeled away to drink, to urinate against walls, to vomit cocktails of alcohol and drugs. Some fell and were trampled. Men's hands pulled at girls' skimpy tops, grabbed at breasts, pinched thighs. Women shrilled in protest. Pressed against shopfronts, couples kissed and caressed; some fornicated in alleys, driving their passions with fury into each other's bodies. There was foulness in the late night air.

"Let's go inside now," suggested Primo, and he led the Devil into Kennedy's where they made their way to the bar. Primo ordered a glass of tomato juice.

Inside Kennedy's, Harlequin, with Snow White perched on his knee and nibbling at his neck, sat at a corner table. He noticed two figures in black at the bar, masked as devils. One leaned over the counter, to pay the barman. The other, a hunched figure, looked around at the people in the club. This second

figure turned in Harlequin's direction. The clasp of his devil mask came undone and the mask fell, revealing a face of extraordinary beauty.

Across the room, Harlequin, immediately struck by the beauty of the man looking towards him, removed his own mask, to better see the face of the hunchback and so revealing his identity: Cloete van Rensburg. He asked Snow White if she knew who the hunched newcomer was.

"That's Primo's gay-boy," Snow White told him. "You'd think he'd score better than a humpback."

"Are you sure?" asked Cloete, staring across at the stranger.

"Of course I'm sure," she replied. " That's Primo with him. I sold them those suits. I measured them up myself. Armani. Expensive. Primo paid for both. The lover's a bum."

She took off her mask and laughed. "Hey, man! Primo finally read his own crystal ball and found out he's a moffie. Good on Beatrice.

"Hey, everyone! Primo's climbed out of the wardrobe at last!" she shrilled above the din of drinkers.

Cloete elbowed his way through the crowd and stood before the unmasked stranger. Sissy followed.

Even though he had been drinking heavily, Cloete's senses realigned themselves enough to realize that here was the most beautiful living face he had ever seen: the face of perfection, the *Testa di Adamo* released from its deft lines and given living form. His thoughts fumbled to find a word to describe the face. All he could come up with was *angelic*. He did not need his measuring calipers to verify the symmetrical alignment of its features, the equipoise between brow and jaw, the correspondence between the orbital cavities, the balance between lips and nose. The rush of emotions that seized him – elation, disbelief, wonder – curdled under the influence of alcohol and expressed themselves aggressively. He grabbed at Primo's arm. "Who is your friend, Primo?" he demanded. "Introduce me to him!"

Primo pulled back his arm and knocked over his tomato juice. Red spread across the counter.

"Who are you?" demanded Cloete breathlessly, leaning close to the Devil's face.

"I am Lucifer," replied the Devil.

"Lucifer!" shrilled Sissy. "How hard-core can you get? Hell, Primo! You've found yourself some kinky stuff here – a hunchback called Lucifer. Why've you kept him all to yourself, you old chop?"

Primo did not want to engage with either Cloete or Sissy. Sissy would draw unwanted attention and Cloete's uncharacteristic aggression alarmed him. He took off his mask and indicated to the Devil that they should go. The Devil nodded, but as he turned away from Cloete and Sissy, Cloete grabbed at his coat and shouted, "No! Don't go! I have to speak to you! Where'd you come from? Who are you?"

Primo pushed Cloete hard and out of the way so he fell against the bar. A ripple of agitation ran through the club, as though a challenge had been thrown down and now the drinkers, through a blur of alcohol, were weighing up how to respond. Primo and the Devil shoved a way through the packed Kennedy's and out into the street crowd, trying to edge their way along the pavement.

The outside crowd had more than doubled. Primo felt a sudden panic rise. They must get home. The City Hall clock struck the third hour of morning.

"Stay close to me," he urged, but as they pushed their way through the crowd, its wave-like movement seized and separated them, so the Devil was driven forward and Primo back.

Inside Kennedy's, Cloete pushed his way through the club crowd to follow the stranger. He had to apprehend him, find out who he was, photograph him, make a plaster cast of his face, record the finesse of his features, document their lines and balance.

Throughout the evening, though Cloete did not know it, the Hunchback of Notre Dame – the second masked hunchback at the party – had been following him, watching his every move, watching him cavort with Snow White (her identity revealed by the clusters of rings on her fingers). Now the figure stepped out from a corner and barred his way, leaned into him, pulled a pistol from a pocket and fired a single shot into his heart. The Hunchback of Notre Dame then spun round to face Sissy and fired twice, shattering her breastbone and pulping her lungs.

The Hunchback dropped the weapon, stepped backwards out the door and merged into the street crowd as the club patrons – all except the card players – galvanized into action by the three shots, stampeded outside, screaming, "Murderer! Hunchback! Hunchback!"

The poker players pulled off their masks and put down their cards. The club had emptied except for them, the barman and the two bodies lying in their own blood on the floor. Dr Baldinger checked Sissy and Cloete for a pulse but found none.

"They are both dead," he said softly. Then he called out to the barman, "Cover them with something! And turn off the music! The party's over!"

In their apartment above *Da Pasquale*, Beatrice shook Pasquale awake.

"Something's happened, Pasqui! There's shooting. Someone's been shot!" A shiver of terror ran through her as she thought of Primo.

"It's nothing," Pasquale reassured her, understanding her concern. "Primo wasn't at the party. We would have seen him. Have you forgotten how he hates parties? It's just gangsters shooting.

"Come to bed. Come warm me. I feel so cold, so deathly cold. I am overcome by remorse for my greed of you. I have done such wrong to Primo."

Meduro had been waiting outside for Sissy. In place of a mask he wore black-lensed glasses. Sissy had dressed him in a sleeveless silver vest and tight leather trousers. His arms were oiled and they shone.

She had given him a gift that evening, a small articulated silver fish with emerald eyes, and this now hung from his pierced ear. The slightest movement of his head caused the fish to move too – it seemed to be swimming below his lobe.

He had been leaning against Kennedy's door when the first shot rang out. He turned to see the hunched figure fire into Sissy's breast, then slide out and into the mass. As Sissy crumpled to the ground and the screams of shocked revelers shredded the air, Meduro plunged through the crowd, bounding through it with little hindrance until he reached a hunchback, one no longer wearing its mask, one with a beautiful face and mahogany curls that tumbled onto his shoulders.

Meduro caught the figure from behind, shoved him through the mass of people and into Orphan Lane, where he threw him to the tar. Then he pulled from its sheath a knife, which he plunged and plunged and plunged into the breast of the black-suited figure, howling, "*Tu a tué ma Sissy! Tu a tué ma Sissy! Meurs toi aussi! Assassin!*"

Leaving the stranger for dead, he edged his way back to Kennedy's where he pulled away the tablecloths that now covered the bodies, pushed Dr Baldinger aside when he tried to intervene, picked up the pistol and lifted Sissy's lifeless form. He carried her home and placed her tenderly on her bed. There he lay with her, on the white damask cover, folding his body around hers, in the sticky wet scarlet of her congealed blood, crying, with Esquire purring at their side.

Outside, sirens cut the air. Floodlights were switched on, shocking the semi-darkness. The crowd hushed as police cordoned off the area and tried to establish order.

Meanwhile the Hunchback of Notre Dame had slipped away and into Stairway to Paradise. Inside the lobby, the figure ripped off its mask and wig, cast them to the floor and strode up the stairs. The dwarfs, who had been waiting up for her, picked up what she had discarded, locked the front door and followed her. They had not opened the brothel that night so none of the other girls were in.

In her own bedroom now, Virginia, breathless, tore off the suit. She pulled out the drawer of Cloete's two-hundred rand notes and emptied it over the balcony. The money floated down to the street below. Then she took from her safe her grandmother's ruby necklace and put it on, poured herself a brandy and sat, naked, on the veranda watching for the half-moon to set, fingering each of the jewels as though they were prayer beads.

The dwarfs took her costume out to the back and burnt everything, gathering up the ashes and flushing some down the toilet, releasing the rest to the south-east wind that came up the next day.

Primo, separated from the Devil and unable to release himself from the hold of the crowd, felt suffocated by his panic. He screamed, called out to the crowd to yield a path so he could reach his friend. His pleas rose as vapour, unheard. Then, as suddenly as it had tightened around him, the crowd released its grip and he found himself stumbling up Orphan Lane, reaching the Devil where he lay – apparently without life – seeming to bleed from terrible wounds to the chest. With a sense of horror choking at his throat,

Primo presumed the worst – that the injuries, severe enough to kill a mortal, had trapped his friend's angelic force.

Primo tore at the suit, thinking that the clothes too were a confinement, and that they were ensnaring the Devil's angelic energy. He pulled off the coat, then the dress shirt – carmine with blood – the trousers, the undergarments, the socks, the shoes, until he had just the naked winged body of an angel in his arms, its hair matted in dirt and blood, its face pale blue.

The crowd was inward-looking now, its collective mind blurred by drugs and alcohol and the rush of violence that had rippled through it. No one noticed Primo lift the Devil across his shoulder and carry him home; no one saw the great wings of the creature he carried, fall forward like the useless vans of a dead albatross. If anyone had, they would have merely rubbed their alcohol-hazed eyes in disbelief.

Primo staggered under the weight of his sacred load, leant up against a traffic light to catch his breath, then stumbled home and up the steps of his stoep. He locked the door and bolted it.

Primo laid the Devil's body on his bed, dusting off with his hands the gravel and bits of tar that clung to the wings. With warm water he sponged clean the wounds and blood; he brushed the curls. Then, with great care, he dressed the Devil, guiding the great wings through the openings of his robe, marvelling at the Devil's light weight now, when he had been so heavy before, amazed as the puncture wounds disappeared.

The Devil, now in his own garment – the one of rust-red silk, embroidered simply with lines of bullion knots – shuddered and opened his eyes; those deep and wondrous eyes, all-knowing like the very wells of life itself and which Primo had grown so to love. He knelt at the side of the bed. "Lucifer! I thought they had killed you," he cried.

Outside, the dawn moved up Kloof Street, lightening up the morning.

Virginia waited for the police to track her down, but they never did. It was Meduro they arrested for double murder, finding him still curled around Sissy's bloodied body, clutching the pistol, sobbing while Esquire paced and meowed.

It took five men to seize him and handcuff his arms behind his back. He fought like a wild beast being taken into captivity, knowing he would die behind bars, sensing that his captors, like all uniformed men, knew nothing of mercy and justice.

"*Maman! Ma Sissy!*" he screamed as those arresting him tore Sissy's body from his arms, kicking Esquire aside, smashing glass and sending furniture flying as they battled to harness Meduro's terrifying energy. In the struggle, they ripped his silver vest from his body and tore the fish from his ear lobe. Crimson blood dropped against his panther-black skin.

Virginia shut herself in her room and left the dwarfs to deal with her other prostitutes and with concerned friends and patrons. The dwarfs scurried around, frantic and wide-eyed, like two meercats whose burrows had been scorched by veld fire. Pasquale sent her a tray of food but she ate nothing. He phoned her, but she lambasted him and told him to leave her alone. She sat on the balcony looking out at Signal Hill, drinking, thinking her own thoughts and reading, over and over again, the storybook she and Pasquale had found among their father's possessions after their parents died. It was a hand-bound book of fables written in elegant, cursive script, the dark ink speaking of a time when people wrote with fountain pens.

The author of the stories, Primus Corgatelli, was the youngest brother of the tailor Attilio Corgatelli, who had hidden their father during the war. Their father had come to own the manuscript because, when the tailor died, the nuns who had looked after him in his senile years had posted it to Massimo. They could trace no other living relative.

Primus Corgatelli had been a journalist who wrote for the resistance newspaper, *L'Italia Libera*, during the years leading up to the German occupation. Following an anonymous lead he had gone to the synagogue, which also housed the Jewish community's offices, to witness and report on German soldiers confiscating the contents of Rome's Jewish library, and loading them into two railroad cars marked *Munchen.* [6]

Primus Corgatelli knew that the library contained priceless manuscripts, incunabula, prints and books, many of which had been brought to Rome by Jews expelled from Spain and Sicily in the fifteenth century. [7]

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[6] Susan Zucotti. Page 113.
[7] Ibid. Page 116.

He watched from across the road, noted how the precious cargo was loaded into the cars, how scrolls fell to the ground and were kicked aside without respect. He should simply have made a mental note and walked on briskly without drawing attention to himself, so that he could file copy and notify his readers of this desecration.

But he was also an author, a writer of tales and fantasies, a master of literature, a student of the written word. He could not stand back without protest or watch without objection as the ancient texts were transported into oblivion.

Forgetting caution, he strode over to the soldiers and called for an explanation. They were angered at his effrontery. "Are you a Jew? Are you a lover of Jews?" they demanded, knocking him down and kicking him. "Are you a Jew-lover?" But they did not wait for an answer. He was arrested for hindering them in their work, detained and a week later transported with Jews to Auschwitz. Primus Corgatelli took no suitcase with him on his final journey, no identity document, no money. He had with him only what he wore: a fawn suit, tailor-made for him by his brother.

The five-day train journey had weakened him considerably. A young woman, debilitated by lack of food and water and by the foulness of the wagon, had fallen against him. He had held her up as she lapsed in and out of consciousness, whispering stories to her to keep her alert, knowing that if she fell down, she would die.

When the transport train disgorged its cargo, he was not one who passed favourably through the first selection. His ankles were swollen, his back sprained and painful. He could barely walk. So he was not chosen to survive and work. He was selected for immediate extermination.

His suit did not go with him to the gas chamber, nor to the inferno of the crematorium. It was sent to Germany, for civilian use, with the bales of other stolen clothing. He went to his death naked, not yet fifty years of age, reciting to himself the first lines of Dante's epic: *In the midway of this my mortal life, I found myself in a gloomy wood, astray, and gone from the direct path.*

It was midnight of the day after the masked party. Primo and the Devil lay together on the bed, where they had lain all day, the Devil on Beatrice's side. They listened to the melodic sounds of varied chiming as the clocks struck the hour. A single candle gave a glow to the room. The screech of an ambulance tore its way through the hum of Kloof Street traffic. As silence fell

again, Primo heard Beatrice unlock the front door and try to open it. The bolt held it fast. She called his name.

The Devil lay still, on his back, his arms folded behind his head, his wings tucked beneath him like the hull of a barque. Both he and Primo looked up at the pressed metal ceiling, taking pleasure in the repetitive patterns that decorated it, saying nothing, listening to Beatrice calling and to her continued knocking. Anyone able to observe the angel and the man may have noted how alike they looked, like brothers lying there; both wore embroidered robes, their hair loose and spread against the pillows.

"I'm sorry," whispered Primo. "To have put you into such peril, to have brought you so close, so close to . . . " He could not say what he wanted to.

The Devil did not respond.

"I suppose you'll want to leave now. I'll understand that. I won't try to stop you. Only, I would ask whether I could come with you. There will be nothing for me here, once you leave. I can help you in your work. You need not be alone with the fire."

The Devil ignored Primo's request. Instead he said, "Shall I tell you a story?" (This is how Primo's aunt always began her tales.) "It is the story I feel you have always wanted to know – that about God. The story both sad and glorious and which I really should not tell. "

"Yes," said Primo. "Tell me. Then perhaps I'll understand why you have been tasked as you have."

"The story cannot be held by mere words. I would have to show you. You would have to follow me."

"I will follow," whispered Primo, rolling to his side so he lay against the edge of a rose-crimson wing.

The Devil spoke again and Primo felt himself tumbling, as he had tumbled into his aunt's stories, into a tale so webbed by silks of narrative and enchantment that everything material in the bedroom seemed diminished in size.

Around Primo flickered the knights and path-finders, the light-bearers, kings and queens and humble folk who had once championed good and justice in his aunt's stories. The Devil's voice led him past these figures, beyond the plateau

of the legends his aunt had known. It led him far beyond the sounds of his father's clocks so their ticking and tocking fell away like shattering crystal, taking with them time as he had always known it, and its confines. Beatrice's voice, calling him, and her knocking at the door, grew softer and softer until he heard it no more.

The Devil's voice, enchanting and alluring, like symphonic sound moving through layers of light, ahead of Primo, urged him not to fall behind.

Primo had the sense of a membrane tearing and yielding passage to him, allowing him entrance past great walls of galaxies, through the corridors between them where star fields hummed and pulsed. On the tips of galactic spirals, child stars exploded to life; ancient red stars burst and died, showering magma-red across interstellar black velvet. Primo became aware of an extraordinary energy, one that seemed to enter into him and align with his very heartbeat. His whole being throbbed with it.

He found himself on a great weaving, a work fashioned from pulsing energies and elaborate sequences of light. Successions of time threaded through and into each other, sequined with suns, patterned with luminosities, stitched through with the elements of silver and gold. Colours pure and rich blended with each other: scarlets; mulberry; greens of sap; browns of lichen; sanguinaria; safranine; white opal. Primo recognized the energies forming and re-forming in the warp and weft. They were the energies of forests and oceans, great savannahs and tundra. He was looking at the carpet of the earth but he was not on the earth. He was somewhere else. The Devil had said he was showing him God, but this was not God. This was a carpet, a matting, a weaving. He spun round, panicking, suddenly aware of his minuscule size, his inconsequence in relation to this vast, seemingly non-ending masterpiece of design upon which he stood. He was but a small creature standing on a piece of woven infinity, and all about him now sounded a chorusing, a trumpeting of bird calls, the braying of wild beasts, and the sighs of fishes. He fell to his knees and saw that, embroidered into the weaving, were tiny beads. Each was a piece of life, a whale, a fish, a serpent, a bird, a mantis, a wasp, a cedar, a yellowwood, a wildebeest . . .

He became aware of deep silence falling. A wind blew, lifting the edges of the weaving and sending a ripple across it. Primo now saw that it was unravelling, that whole pieces had burned away, were charred, frayed, shredded. The threads holding the beads had been torn, so the beads were loose, scattered about, falling off the tapestry. *Falling to where?* he wondered. *Where?* Primo scrambled to gather them up, but as he touched each one, it turned to sand. He

leapt to his feet, sweat running down his face, terror seizing him. "Lucifer!" he screamed and his voice echoed back from the chasms of time. "Lucifer! Lucifer! Lucifer!"

"I am here," said the quiet voice of the Devil, at his side. He was holding threads of light and threads of darkness, a thimble and needles of silver and gold, a handful of the tiny beads which he put into a pouch. "There is nothing to fear, except that you will have knowledge now, when before you had none.

"Here is God's story before you – the warp and weft of creation; it is the very stitchery, composition and threading of life within life itself, for God is the true embroiderer. I only embroider celestial garments.

"This you stand upon is the mere edge of God's work, the outerside. This is the piece given to the human soul, but the human soul disrespects it. As you see, the human soul spoils it, tears it, disregards its sanctity. Look how ruined are the fibres. See how the stitching is plucked out, how the beading is picked off, how the beauty is blighted."

"What are you showing me?" cried Primo. "That God is nothing but a piece of carpet? That God is vulnerable? That God can be torn up by us, like a mere length of linen?"

"No," replied the Devil. "And yes. The two together. No – God is not vulnerable. But yes, God is. This I show you is the tearing up of the Divine masterpiece. For God is both the embroiderer and the embroidery itself. This you see is the undoing of creation – creation as the human soul knows it. This is the tapestry of the earth, nothing more, nothing less. I try to repair it. I try with my threads to restore the edges, manipulate it, rejuvenate it, restore its pristine beauty. But I am assigned much to do, as you know. And the forces of human fire and plunder are great indeed – human warring is not restricted to men alone. Mankind wars against the earth, against other species and kinds; it wars against creation itself, and therefore against the Creator. Indeed we may speak of human evil being the greater of the powers. What strength has good in the face of this enmity?

"Now follow me, and lose not sight of me," he urged. "I will show you more of what you want to see, though I should not, for it is not your time. Hold steady, do not be afraid. I am with you."

Primo followed in the Devil's wake, drawn as though by white wind rushing through a tunnel of gold.

Suddenly, four archangels stepped forward, with blazing swords held high and mighty wings outstretched, diverting the Devil's passage and halting Primo. The light of the fiery angels burned Primo's eyes and he raised his hands to shield himself from their bright whiteness. His limbs grew feeble, weighing him down. He felt all his strength and movement draining from him, as though a net had been thrown over him or a powdered opiate blown into his face. His robe dissolved, like rice paper on the tongue.

He tried to hold on to the Devil's transport; he tried to grasp the Devil's energy, to realign himself with the Devil's tale. But he could not.

The archangels moved towards him.

"Who is it who dares to witness?" asked one.

"Who among us opens the door to the Afterlife, and who among us affords a passage to this mortal?" questioned the second.

"Cast the mortal back! Or we must blind him!" said the third, striking the air with his flaming sword.

"Throw him down from here! Madden him with the vision he has presumed is for other than angels," called the fourth.

White light sliced across Primo's brow, knocking him unconscious and back through the edges of the unravelling great work, through the undoing of silk, through torn gossamers and tarnished once-lustrous weaves, through millions of tiny beads falling all about him as glitter and rain and dust storm. A black void enveloped him for endless time until he finally awoke on his bed, crying, naked, cold and shivering, drenched in sweat, feeling cast up onto an empty riverbank, as though thrown up from a boat wreck onto a beach of river stones.

The Devil was gone.

A single rose-crimson feather remained where he had lain, powdered lightly with gold dust.

Beatrice was still banging on the door, calling Primo. He rose, painfully, to let her in.

It was five minutes past the hour of midnight.

Glossary

Amaretto	A macaroon
Agnello alla pastora	Lamb and potato casserole cooked with tomato and pecorino cheese
Anisetta	A liqueur made from star aniseed and other aromatic ingredients
Basilico	Sweet basil
Beata Beatrix	Blessed Beatrice
Bostrengo	A rich sweet rice cake traditional to Marche, near Umbria
Budino Toscano	A dessert made with ricotta cheese, ground almonds and candied orange peel
Brioche	A small rounded sweet roll made with a light yeast dough
"Calmati! Sta calma! Ti prego!"	"Calm down! I beg you!"
Camomilla	Camomile
Carciofi alla Veneziana	Stewed artichokes
Challah	Shabbat bread – plaited for Shabbat and rounded for Rosh Hashana (New Year)
Chiaroscuro	The treatment of light and shade in painting and drawing
Cotechino	Pork sausage
Credenza (pl. credenze)	Sideboard
Il Duce	Benito Mussolini. Italian dictator, founder and leader of the Italian Fascist party
Festa del Sacro Cuore	Feast day of the Sacred Heart
Filone	Classic Tuscan unsalted bread
Grappa	A clear spirit distilled from the remains of grapes after pressing
Lasagna verde	Green lasagna
Miele e ricotta	Dessert made with ricotta cheese and honey
Ménages à trois	A threesome
Orto	Kitchen garden
Osso buco	Stewed shin of veal
Palazzo	Palace
Panettone	Spiced cake
Pantalone, Plague Doctor Pulcinella	Venetian masks and costumes: The Old Merchant, the Plague Doctor and the Simpleton
Panforte Senese	Dessert made with nuts and candied fruits
Parmigiana di melanzane alla Calabrese	Eggplants baked with minced beef, Parmesan and herbs
Peperoni	Peppers
Polenta alla Madiba	Polenta (maize meal) cooked Madiba style
Polenta pasticciata	Polenta (maize meal) pie
Polpetta	Rissole of meat with herbs
Poste restante	Post held for collection when delivery is not possible
Ragù	Bolognese sauce
Regina Mundi	Queen of the World
Sacra Vergine	Sacred Virgin
Salsa pizzaiola	Sauce richly flavoured with garlic and herbs
Santa Maria	Holy Mary
Schiacciatina	A small flat salted bread
Signorina	Young lady
Sotto olio	Vegetables served in oil
Strega	A herbal liqueur
Swart gevaar	Black peril
Tiramisu	Dessert made from mascarpone cheese and boudoir biscuits
Tortellini alla Romagnola	Tortellini filled with turkey
"Tu a tué ma Sissy! Meurs toi aussi! Assassin!"	"You have killed my Sissy! Die yourself as well! Murderer!"
Vaporetto	Venetian boat-taxi
Vitello alla Genovese	Veal cooked with white wine and artichokes
Zabaglione	Dessert made with egg yolk and Marsala

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Rossetti, Dante Gabriel	**Bocca Baciata**

Note on Bibliography

I was inspired by Jill Paton Walsh's ***Knowledge of Angels*** to discuss within the novel the concepts of good and evil. From Angela Carter's ***Nights at the Circus***, I took the idea of the Devil's wings forming a hump under his jacket; from Elizabeth Knox's ***The Vintner's Luck***, the idea of an angelic visitation and friendship, and from ***Crowds and Power*** by Elias Canetti, the concept of the crowd being a single organism.