

Somewhere to go

A Collection of Short Stories

by

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LNGSTE006

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COMPULSORY 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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Abstract

This is a collection of inter-related short stories, which recount events in the life of the protagonist, Robert Daniels. Set primarily in Cape Town, the stories follow his journey from childhood into adulthood, exploring themes of identity and belonging. Among other things, the accounts focus on his troubling relationships with women and men, his education from primary school to university, his ambiguous relationship with his family members, and his struggles to make sense of religion.

Against the background of a country and city that are changing rapidly, the protagonist reflects on what it means to grow older. He has to work through his conflicted feelings for family, religion, heritage and country. From the loss of innocence as a child to an adult seeking a deeper understanding of himself, he confronts these experiences with humour, patience, and tenderness.

The stories of Robert's life provide evidence of human beings' dynamism, their ability to become different persons under different circumstances or in different situations.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of “The new school” was published in Agbowó (9 May 2022) as “Don’t sing; just move your lips.”

The following stories contain excerpts from song lyrics:

- “A snake in the house” – “Siembamba” by C.J. Langenhoven;
- “Car trouble” – “My father is rich in houses and lands” by Hattie E. Buell;
- “Child of God” – “Losing my religion” by Peter Buck, Michael Mills, William Berry and Michael Stipe;
- “Child of God” – “What I am” by Edie Brickell, Brandon Aly, John Houser, John Bush and Kenneth Withrow, and
- “Arbeit macht frei” – “Gin and juice” by Richard Finch, Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre and Harry Casey.

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Contents

COMPULSORY DECLARATION	3
Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	5
A snake in the house	7
The new school	17
Car trouble	28
A terrible secret	36
Down from the mountains	44
This country	53
Singing freedom	62
Somewhere to go	71
Not a problem	82
<i>Arbeit macht frei</i>	87
Intruders	95
Child of God	107
Glossary	115

A snake in the house

When Robert was nine years old, he thought that snakes were born like humans and that little baby snakes came from the tummies of their mothers. While some snakes do give live birth, many snakes, like other reptiles, lay eggs. In that way, unbeknownst to Robert, snakes were similar to chickens. How was a nine-year old boy to know this?

There are other thoughts that run through his mind at that age. "Something is different about Miriam," Robert thinks. When she is close to him, something heavy weighs on his chest and he feels as if he cannot breathe. At those times, he wishes that she would never leave; instead that she would stay with him and not have to go back to her family and him to his.

Miriam is quieter than her brothers and sisters. She has a dark skin – a much darker complexion than her siblings. Her long hair is the colour of charcoal and when it's not plaited, it hangs next to her face like an open veil. She is the most beautiful girl that he has ever known in all his life.

Robert's father treats Miriam and her brothers and sisters differently. When his father has too much to drink, he is generous. He digs into his pockets and counts out coins to the five of them – Billy, Edith, Miriam, Sally, and Paul.

"Do you know why I am giving just to them?" he says to the other cousins who look on empty-handed and open-mouthed.

"Yes," they reply.

Miriam and her siblings doesn't have a father. Their father – uncle Solly – died a long time ago, before Robert was born. He doesn't understand how they lived without a father.

“Cousins cannot get married to one another,” his mother says. Robert blushes. Though he thinks that it is his secret, the adults notice how Robert fawns over his 16-year-old cousin. She is his cousin and much older than him. When Robert thinks about this, the heaviness in his chest grows. He struggles to breathe and he wants to cry. He fears that if Miriam is going to get married to someone else, he will no longer be able to hold back his tears.

But something has happened to Miriam and now he knows that no-one wants to tell him about it. He keeps his ears open to catch the little snippets when he can.

It is the day that Robert goes with his mother to visit his grandmother in Tiervlei. They do this regularly; sometimes, even during the school term. Then Robert takes the day off from school because his mother allows him to do so.

The name of the place where his grandmother lives means “tiger lake” but he has never seen a tiger where his grandmother lives and neither has he seen a lake in the area. In fact, where she lives with his grandfather is very dry. There are no lakes and rivers. It is very far from Hanover Park where Robert and his family live.

It is not that they don’t visit on other times with the whole family. But this is his and his mother’s special time. They take a minibus taxi to the train station and the train from Lansdowne to Salt River where they run to catch the connecting train to Tygerberg station.

He knows that Mamma and Papa are from Ceres, which is a small town which is even further away from Hanover Park than Tiervlei. They speak Afrikaans but it is a different type from the one which Robert speaks at home. Sometimes he even struggles to understand the Afrikaans that his grandparents speak. He and his family speak Afrikaans very loosely and sometimes they mix it with English words. But his grandparents speak Afrikaans in the way that is written down in the textbooks that they use at school.

From Tygerberg station they walk to his grandparents’ house. He is not sure what separates Tygerberg from Tiervlei except that the streets in Tygerberg are tarred while those in Tiervlei are gravel.

First, his mother stops in at the corner café and buys a snowball. The snowballs are round pink cakes, covered in coconut, joined together with jam in the middle. They eat it as they walk and wash it down with Fanta which they share between them from a can.

“Will I be able to take the puppy home today?” Robert asks.

“Don’t be stupid,” his mother responds. “You can’t take puppies away from their mother so soon. And don’t you ask Mamma and Papa.”

Mamma and Papa have a dog called Duchess. Duchess has given birth to puppies a week ago. Robert doesn’t know how many puppies there are but he hopes to get one of them. His mother told him that Papa said that he can get one of them. He is thinking about how he will teach the puppy tricks and where it will sleep.

The small cake is done by the time they reach the rickety gate to Mamma and Papa’s house. There is a short walk to the door where his mother knocks. Then Mamma opens the door and they greet.

But before he can run to play with the dog and her puppies in the yard, Robert first has to sit quietly while they wait for Papa to join them in the living room. He greets when Papa comes and Mamma gives him a glass of cooldrink. He imagines what the puppies look like and thinks about how he will decide which one to take when they are ready to be separated from their mother.

The adults talk and he doesn’t pay much attention till when his grandfather says, “She killed them all.” He won’t get a puppy today. Robert has never heard of a dog killing its own puppies. Would a mother kill her own babies? They do not tell him how or why Duchess did this. He is not sure how he would kill a puppy. Perhaps he would pick up a rock, close his eyes and drop it on the litter. But how would a dog do it?

He imagines that there were three puppies. It seemed like a good number and “Everything comes in threes,” his father often said. Especially, bad things like death but probably also good things like puppies.

He wants to see where the puppies died. While the adults sit and talk, he is allowed to walk out by the backdoor. The yard stretches out far to the back. He never goes beyond the large rocky patch that is covered with watermelon vines. He fears what may lie beyond that patch. There he might bump into snakes, spiders and other venomous creatures.

The first few green fruits are already visible on the ground and by December they will be large green ovals. They will be sliced up and eaten and Mamma will choose some to be made into konfyt.

He loves going to the house where his grandparents live. On Boxing Day, his whole family – his parents, his brothers and he – go to visit. Then his father smokes cigarettes impatiently while they wait for the taxi and the trains to take them there. Two Boxing Days ago, when all the aunts and uncles and cousins were together as they were every year, the boys played touch rugby in the street outside the house. One of his older cousins passed the ball to him behind the try line and he scored the winning points for his team. He wanted them to play touch rugby every time that they were together after that but new games were played and very soon the older cousins no longer included the younger ones in their activities. The house is where they get together every year around that time. There are lots of food and treats and playing.

When Robert gets outside, Duchess is lying next to the shed. She gets up when she sees him and ambles over to him without making a sound and gently nudges him with her nose.

“What happened?” he asks. “Hey, girl?” But the dog turns away and starts sniffing on the ground where the puppies must have been at some point.

Next to the fence with the neighbour, there are some loose rocks and Robert walks over to them. There he sees Mr Oliver. Mr Oliver speaks such perfect Afrikaans that he rolls his Rs. He doesn't speak much though because he also stutters. But when he speaks, everyone listens patiently and carefully.

“Hey, Robert. Come over here,” Mr Oliver calls.

Robert climbs through the wire fence, taking care of the barbs.

“Are you not in school today?”

“No. My mother and I came to visit Mamma... and Papa,” he answers.

Mr Oliver has a confused look on his face as if that is not the answer that he expected. He seems distracted for a moment and looks towards the house of Robert's grandparents.

Robert assumes that Mr Oliver's own son is at school. They have played together a few times. Once, Robert suggested that they take the boy's toy cars outside to play in the front garden. A big boy walked past and saw them playing. He leapt into the garden and grabbed the cars.

"Hey! Why do you have this?" he shouted as he walked away with the toy cars.

Mr Oliver's son burst into tears and ran into the house to tell his parents what had happened.

"But why were you playing outside with the cars?" Mr Oliver asked.

"It's him!" he's son shouted and pointed at Robert. "He said that we must go play outside."

Robert is still embarrassed about that day and wonders whether Mr Oliver thinks about it when he looks at him.

"Well, maybe it's good that you are here. I need some help with something. Wait for me," Mr Oliver says.

The man goes into the chicken coop and comes back with a chicken that he holds upside down by its legs. He motions with his head and Robert follows him away from the coop to the side of the house.

"Now," Mr Oliver says, "you have to hold tight. Okay?" He places one leg of the chicken in each of the boy's small hands. "Do you have it? Hold tight, remember? Don't let go."

Robert nods. Mr Oliver points to a large flat stone and the boy goes down to his knees still holding the chicken. The axe, which Mr Oliver had been holding in his right hand all this time in such a carefree way that Robert had not even noticed, falls down and Robert let's go. He doesn't see where the chicken's head falls. He sees the headless body of the chicken run till it drops down outside the back door of the house of the Oliver family.

Mr Oliver goes to pick up the body and the boy wonders what to do next. But there are no further instructions and Mr Oliver carries the dead chicken into the house and closes the door behind him.

Robert stands alone for a moment. Then he walks over to where he sees the drops of blood on the ground next to the axe. The chicken's head does not lie too far away. The axe, it's job done, is heavy and he lifts it up with two hands. When he hears Duchess barking, he turns around and leaves the axe behind to go back to his grandparents' yard.

Next to the house, water drips from an outside tap. He tries to open the tap to wash his hands but whoever used it last closed it too tightly. Despite this, water continues to drip and he uses the little drops to try to clean his hands.

Next to where the dripping tap has created a small stream, an army of ants is marching along. Robert moves some stones to make the ants change their course when he hears Mamma shouting, "Don't mess with the water!"

He looks up and she says, "Come eat! You are going home soon."

They have to catch the train back home before the rush starts. Then the trains are full with people returning home from work. He has seen those trains with people hanging on outside the open doors and clinging on between the carriages. His mother prefers that they sit comfortably with a seat for each of them.

Once they were squeezed in a seat next to a strange man who offered him twenty cents. His mother told him not to take the coin.

"Why not," he wondered. But his mother said not to take it so he just shook his head. The man insisted and at the next station they ran out and got onto another carriage.

"You don't take anything from strangers," his mother explained later. "There are people who steal children."

Robert has come into the kitchen after washing his hands. "She must be more than three months already," his mother says while they are sitting around the kitchen table, having their tea and biscuits.

"But how did it happen?" Papa asks.

"That is what we all want to know," Mamma says. Miriam's mother had taken her to a doekom who said that someone who was jealous of the family had put a curse on them. That is the only way in which Miriam could be pregnant because she has never had a husband or even a boyfriend.

Robert has not seen a doekom ever but he imagines that one looks like a witch with a crooked nose and a wart somewhere on her face. Only a doekom was Muslim and she would be wrapped with a shawl and a scarf around her hair.

There was a snake growing in her belly, the doekom said. It was definitely not going to be a normal baby when it came out of her. They will have to kill whatever comes out of Miriam's body just like in the lullaby that adults sang for children: twisting its neck, throwing it in the ditch and stepping on its head to make sure that it was dead.

"She says that Miriam was walking down the street," Mamma says, "when she noticed a group of women standing and staring at her."

"Little pitchers have big ears," Papa says.

"They were whispering," Mamma continues without paying attention to her husband. His mother nods. "So, Miriam told Maggie about it when she got home. She is convinced that those women have something to do with her predicament."

Robert reaches for another biscuit but his mother grabs his hand and pulls it away from the plate.

"Let him have it," Papa says but the mother shakes her head at the boy and he knows better than to defy her.

"It's always the people that you least expect it from," Mamma says. "The devil appears as an angel of light."

"But why did she go to see a doekom?" Papa ventures as he takes a biscuit from the plate and gives it to the boy.

"What must you say?" his mother hisses.

"Thank you."

"Thank you to who?"

"Thank you Papa... and Mamma."

"We are children of God," Papa continues. What he means is that Christians are not supposed to dabble with magic because the Bible says that we shouldn't consult witches.

“When a snake is in the house, you don’t waste time talking,” Mamma replies. “Everyone knows that it would be foolish to ignore the devil’s work. You need to fight fire with fire.”

Then Robert hears the story again about the tokoloshe who harassed a family. The tokoloshe had come over the mountain from a river in a town far away; even further away than Ceres. He was a little black man with a long beard and fiery eyes who smoked a pipe and if he didn’t get up to mischief by himself, he would influence others to do his dirty work.

Mamma knows people who knew the family. They had tried everything to fight the tokoloshe. They put all the beds on bricks to prevent the tokoloshe from getting to them while they slept. Nothing helped. They called in a priest. But to expel a tokoloshe, you had to believe in it and because their priest didn’t believe in it, he refused to get involved.

Only someone trained in those customs would have been able to help them. Friends suggested that they call on a doekom. But they refused. So, they never managed to get rid of the tokoloshe. Finally, they decided to move. On the day of the move, the neighbours waved them goodbye. From the back of the removal truck, the tokoloshe shouted, “We are moving!”

“Oh no, we have to go,” his mother says when she looks at the clock. Robert and his mother say goodbye. Robert didn’t know that that would be the last time that he would see Papa at the kitchen table.

Not long after their visit, Papa became very ill. “He is already 81,” Robert’s father said. Robert’s mother did not want to hear this because despite his age, Papa was always healthy and never complained about any sicknesses.

“There is more to this,” she says.

Suddenly he no longer got out of bed. He didn’t get better. The doctor came and said that there was nothing more that could be done. All this time, while Papa was getting weaker, Miriam’s belly was growing bigger. He wondered what kind of snake would come out of her.

Mamma couldn’t cope on her own. Robert’s mother and his aunts took turns to stay over to help Mamma take care of Papa. Robert came to visit more frequently with his

mother. They no longer rushed to catch the train back home before peak hours on weekdays because often, they would sleep over and Robert missed a few more days of school than normal. Frequently, other aunts and cousins were also there.

One night, Robert and his cousin, Gareth, lay awake. The wall bed had been folded out in the living room for the two of them to sleep in. The grandfather clock ticks in the background. When it chimes on the hour, Gareth says, "If only that clock rang louder, Papa will wake up."

But Robert knows better. "The snake is growing larger," he says to himself, "Papa is getting smaller."

"What?" Gareth asks. "What are you saying Robert?"

But Robert is in the Garden of Eden where a snake is talking to Miriam. Suddenly, he is surrounded by lots of snakes squirming on the ground. He wants to warn his mother that the snakes are biting and killing people. Someone needs to crush the heads of all the snakes. Papa comes to help but Mr Oliver just stands and looks with an axe in his hand. "Look! Look!" Mamma shouts. There, tied to a pole, is a burning snake which could save their lives if they just looked at it. But Papa's eyes remain closed.

The clock chimed several times more before Papa died.

"Papa isn't suffering anymore," his mother tells him.

It became like Christmas time again. The house was filled with people in the days after Papa died. The uncles and aunts and cousins crowded into every little corner as they cleaned and cooked and played. There was even laughter as they recalled funny stories about Papa. Mamma never cried because she was content with God's will.

On the morning of the funeral, the hearse pulled up outside the house. Robert and Gareth stood on the stoep. Someone walked past, and shouted, "Boy, who died?"

Gareth shouted back, "My grandfather!" The person walked on without saying anything more.

"Why did you ask?" Robert thought.

A week after his grandfather's funeral, Miriam gave birth. It was a baby boy. There was nothing strange about him. He had ten toes and ten fingers. It was a miracle. If Miriam

told anyone who the father of the baby was, Robert never got to know. But she probably didn't tell anyone. Instead of the offspring of the devil, the baby was now a gift from God.

The new school

On account of being the youngest of three brothers, my mother referred to me as her baby. This label stuck with me into late in my life and when we met up with older people a common introduction would be, "...and this is Robert, the baby." The standard response would be, "Oh my word, he's big."

My mother refused to send me to crèche. To add to that, she held me back a year later than necessary before I was allowed to go to primary school because, according to her, I was too small. Finally, she had no choice but to walk me to school one day to start Sub A at Greenturf Primary School.

When I walked into the class, I knew that this was where I belonged. Today, I still enjoy the smell of wax crayons. I went to sit at my desk and watched my mother turn around one last time to wave at me. I had grown much older by the time that I realised that my first day at school was more difficult for my mother than for me. By that time, she had already died.

I was born on a Tuesday, and Tuesday's child is full of grace. I also knew that little boys are made of "Snips and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails." None of these descriptions meant anything to me but I learnt these things from my dad who would recite gems such as this to me as a toddler. I also learnt about "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and "This Little Piggy." Sometimes, I would lie next to him as he sang and recited such lines. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. I was happy.

I tried to remember what my first memory was. Before the nursery rhymes, there was a moment that I screamed in terror. I was alone but soon after I shrieked, startled

adults rushed into the room. I recall my mother picking me up. "What happened?" But I couldn't talk yet. I think that I had choked on something but what could it have been? When I tried to fill in the gaps, years later, I thought that it must have been a hardboiled sweet. But how and where would I have gotten hold of it? I must have been four years old, alone in a room.

As I got older the fear of forgetting terrified me. Then I started to write things down. Soon I realised though that I was selective with what I wrote down. I have a fond memory of my last day of my first year at primary school. At assembly, my name is called out by the principal and I am shooed to the front by my class teacher. "Let me show you this little man," the principal says as he picks me up and holds me up in the air in front of him. I am the top student in the grade and I get a book as a prize and a certificate. My mother is proud.

But I choose not to write down another memory from my first year at school. I am small so I had to do all in my power not to appear weak. I knew that there were kids who would take advantage of my size and who would try to boss me around. So, when I arrived at the point where I had to cross the street to get to the school gate and a boy put out his arm to block me from crossing, I pushed his arm out of the way and walked to the other side.

I realised later that I had defied the scholar patrol. But they all laughed as I walked and I didn't get into trouble because they knew that I didn't know better. I was embarrassed and I hoped that they wouldn't remember me the next morning when I stopped dutifully as they blocked me from crossing.

Later in my school career, we had an inter-school athletics meeting. All the primary schools in Hanover Park competed but because there were no sport grounds in Hanover Park, we were bussed to a sport ground in Mitchell's Plan.

I was not selected for the school team. Those of us who were not selected remain dressed in our school uniforms and for the day we were handed specially made peak caps to wear. We were meant to cheer on our athletes. But we moved around because there were grassy knolls and cool spots where we could take breaks from singing songs to motivate the team. At regular intervals, the points for each school were announced. Our school remained consistently in last place.

But I was distracted. I knew that on the same day of our inter-school sports meeting, my mother had gone to visit my aunt who lived in Mitchell's Plain. I had no idea where the sports ground was in relation to my aunt's house but I felt that I would be able to find it because of a few landmarks that I recalled.

There was the civic centre with the red tiled roof and a church with a tall spire. I was confident that if I could spot those buildings, I should be able to find my way. But I needed permission from my class teacher to leave the sports day early. I walked up to Mrs Baker and asked if I could leave early to go to my aunt's house.

But instead of answering me, she asked, "Robert, where is your cap?" I could not remember what happened to it but before I could answer, she asked, "Did the children from Parkfields take it?"

Parkfields Primary School was our main rival. I doubt that they knew this. But for some reason, we were meant to despise them. Mrs Baker believed that their pupils were ill-mannered and all sorts of evil things.

"Yes, I answered." Their reputation being in tatters, another blot on their name would not cause much more harm.

"Okay," she said, "you can go."

Aunty Josie's house was in Westridge, Mitchell's Plain. When I left the sports field, I walked towards a nearby hill. I marched to the top of the hill and I found myself alone. It was like the time that I was four years old on my own in a room. It was terrifying and exciting. I was not in the care of teachers or with my mother and no-one knew where I was. Beneath me the world rolled out to the horizon in all directions. This was freedom. Then I saw the civic centre and I knew where I was. I walked in that direction and soon I found myself in front of Aunty Josie's door.

She was surprised to see me when she opened the door. "Oh, my word. Look who's here," she shouted to my mother who was sitting in the kitchen.

"But what if I wasn't here?" my mother asked.

"He knows that Aunty Josie would have made a plan," my aunt said.

I was proud of my achievement and that afternoon, my mother and I were on the bus back home. I was not sure but I had a feeling that she had expected me to head out on this adventure and perhaps she was also proud of me. But I was safe again and the next day I would be back at school.

*

Primary school had its little crannies that each had its own story. I was sitting in one of those spaces when I got to know a boy with the delightful name of April. Not everyone brought lunch to school every day and under the guise of swapping sandwiches we managed to ensure that everyone in our circle got something to eat. April joined the group one day. I didn't understand why no-one seemed to be enthusiastic about helping themselves to April's sandwiches until I swapped one of my sandwiches for one of his. This was around the time that my mother started selling polony in the neighbourhood.

When we spoke about polony, it was a blanket term for all sorts of cold meats and cold cuts that came in large blocks or rolls. Mummy managed to get a meat slicer which she used to slice the rolls of various polonies into thin pieces. These slices were in turn counted out into heaps which were wrapped into greaseproof paper according to the orders that she received. She used a koki pen to write the amount of each order on the wrapped parcel of polony. For many of the customers who didn't collect their orders, she would ask me to deliver in the afternoons after school.

I was not sure what inspired the entrepreneurial drive. Mummy had always been home to look after us and to take care of the home. She was a housewife. It had not occurred to me that she might want to do anything else. We seemed to live comfortably enough at the time. So, making extra money could not have been a factor in her decision. For some reason, she started to sell polony.

The business model was fairly simple. She became an agent for Lance Seale who would drop off different types of polonies which she would sell to people in the neighbourhood. Once a week, he would return to collect the money that was due to him and deliver a fresh supply.

I often had polony sandwiches for school lunch. April's lunch comprised of two slices of brown bread spread with the drippings from the previous night's supper – no meat, just

the fat scraped from the pot in which the food was cooked. I ate his sandwich the first time and for several weeks thereafter. April and I continued swapping sandwiches until someone in our group went to tell one of our teachers who put a stop to it. The teacher, I later realised, felt that the food that was good enough for April wasn't suitable for me.

Aunty Doreen was one of Mummy's friends. She lived a few streets away from us and most afternoons she would pop in for a cup of tea. At least, once a week those visits would also be the occasion for her to collect her polony order and pay for the previous week's order.

"Children mustn't sit in adults' company," Mummy always said. When Aunty Doreen or any adult came to visit during the afternoons that the two of us were alone at home, I would greet and go to my room. I found a spot at the top of the staircase where I could sit and listen in on the conversation without them seeing me. In fact, if I positioned myself just right, I could even see their reflections in the mirror of the display cabinet that stood across from them in the living room.

Those afternoons after school passed by fast enough. Those were times that my father and brothers who were much older than me were still at work. I had some toys and I had started swapping comics with my cousins. On Friday afternoons, I used my pocket money to buy comics at the corner shop close to our home. I had started to build up a large collection of comics – mostly of the Incredible Hulk – which I could turn to when the afternoon dragged on. For some reason, the Incredible Hulk was in oversupply. But I also liked this superhero who had such extreme personalities. On the one hand, there was the quiet scientist, Dr Bruce Banner, and on the other hand, there was the raging green giant, the Hulk. I envied the part of him that possessed limitless strength that rocketed with his anger.

Greenturf Primary School, in Greenturf Road, Hanover Park, was next to Crystal Senior Secondary School. Crystal was on fire during those years – alive with protests, or "the riots" as my parents preferred to refer to those events. I recall being told to march behind a few high school students as they led us out of our school grounds to Crystal to attend my first protest rally at the advanced age of ten. Some of the parents came to rescue their children from the evils of Communist propaganda before the rally ended.

My mother though remained unaware of the event and I didn't want to tell her about it and so distract her from her Springbok Radio serial when I arrived home later in the afternoon. She was content with the knowledge that I was receiving a solid Coloured Affairs education and thus I was protected from the powers that were trying to topple the government appointed by God.

Auntie Doreen told her later about the incident and how a rude high school student said, "Auntie, the children are our future. They shouldn't have to suffer like you did," and how she replied, "I am not your father's sister!" My mother said, "No. Robert didn't say anything. But he would have known not to go." Auntie Doreen didn't pursue the matter but when I went to greet her as she left, she gave me a stern look. I could read her mind. She was thinking, "This child is trouble. Still waters run deep." I would hear that many times as I got older.

Now that so many years have passed, I cannot say for certain that we were ever given reasons for why our school moved. Perhaps we were, but it was the early part of the 1980s, and adults were not so big then on getting the buy-in from primary school kids. Perhaps the old building became unsafe and for once the government actually thought to do something that would be to our benefit. Perhaps the school became too small to house all the pupils. I don't know.

We became Newfields Primary School in Newfields, which was on the outskirts of Hanover Park. We had moved from our familiar setting next to a high school and among Council houses to surroundings where Coloured people owned their houses which did not all look similar to one another. These were *koophuise*. Each built to a unique plan and not mass produced as our own houses and flats which looked like giant Monopoly pieces.

We hardly saw the people who lived in those fancy houses. It was not like our familiar neighbourhood where people would walk the streets and lean over the fences of their houses. The older women of our former surroundings were particularly visible and audible. They didn't hesitate to urge us along when they thought we were loitering too long outside the school instead of walking straight home. They interfered in fights and were eager to put us in our places if we appeared too big for our boots.

But we moved and the old school building stayed behind. I'm not sure who were more worried. Our new neighbours or our teachers. We were instructed to put our best feet forward. We were to take care of our appearances, noise levels and tone down our rich vocabularies. During one PT period, I was lifted on to a desk – barefooted in my white vest and shorts. "This is how you must look," our PT teacher said to my classmates, some of whom were in their tattered vests and shorts, which were the colour of eggshells. Embarrassed, I coyly let my big toe from my best foot dangle over the edge of the desk.

Along with the relocation came Miss Coetzee who was to be our class teacher that year. Miss Coetzee was a woman who was ahead of her times. Long before outcomes-based education and before the South African Democratic Teachers' Union told teachers not to stress too much, Miss Coetzee believed that students should learn at their own pace. We didn't learn much in the curriculum that year but we had a lot of fun.

The periods allocated to different subjects blurred into one another as Miss Coetzee shot the breeze with us. Our reverie was only disturbed by the odd bouts of PT, music and intervals. At any point of the day, it was never certain which subject was being taught. The timetable pasted on the wall was merely a guide. Our journey of experimentation ended abruptly when Miss Coetzee disappeared from our lives close to the end of the school year. Again, I cannot recall if we were ever given reasons. There were rumours that she had an argument with the principal.

Mrs Baker returned as our class teacher albeit in a higher standard. Mrs Baker was also the school's music teacher. She was a formidable woman in all respects. I once saw her slap Amina Jacobs from out of her seat behind her desk. What Amina did or said wrong is deleted from my memory as are many other things from that year. When Mrs Baker played the upright piano, her feet tapped the pedals at a furious pace while her fingers pounded the keys. I never learnt to play a musical instrument. Mrs Baker's performances were to me no less than that of a magician at work – pulling a rabbit from a hat, sawing a woman in half or making a large object disappear.

While she inspired fear in all of us, Mrs Baker had a soft spot for me. Later, when I was in my last year of primary school, we were in choir practice to rehearse "The Holy City" for the first time as a class. This was our school tradition. At the last school assembly of the year, the departing standard five class would raise their voices and roar, "Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, lift up your gates and sing!" The point of this first rehearsal was to identify in which voice type each of us would sing. To do this, Mrs Baker walked past us and listening carefully to each singer would say, "First voice, second voice", and so on. When she came to me, she said, "Robert, don't sing; just move your lips." So, before Milly Vanilli perfected the art, I was lip-synching on stage.

Soon after she took us under her wing, she demonstrated her abilities by showing one of my notebooks to another teacher. "Look," she said, pointing to how my handwriting had improved from the scrawling lines under Miss Coetzee's tutelage. Mrs Baker was good for us. She was what we needed. But while appreciative of Mrs Baker's fondness of me, I was still wary of her temper.

Mrs Baker's reserve was tested when the oral exams for poetry were looming. During all the time that we were taught by Miss Coetzee, we had learnt only one poem – "The Daffodils."

"Oh no," Mrs Baker said, "I am not going to listen to the same poem thirty-eight times. You must each find a different poem to learn and to recite for the exam." With less than two weeks to go, we faced one of the toughest challenges of our young lives. For some it was tougher than for others. There are not many memories of my primary school years that I remember as vividly as the one of how we all in our peculiar ways tried to surmount that trial.

Perceval Zacharias never struck me as the bookish type. Perceval – I learnt many years later – was also the name of one of the Knights of the Round Table. Galahad was another but then again no-one on the Cape Flats would name their child Galahad. Perceval was bad enough for a name and I doubt that his parents had King Arthur in mind when they had him baptised.

With the exception of me, Enrico Simons was the only person in my class that I ever saw with a book other than a school textbook. Enrico's specialties were Reader's Digest condensed books and westerns by Louis L'Amour. But Perceval surprised us.

The next day he appeared at school with a thick volume called something along the lines of "The Great Children's Treasury of English Verse." He had borrowed the book from the Hanover Park public library. My heart sank. I was embarrassed by the fact that Perceval

had entered my castle and beaten me at my own game. It was no less than Bjorn Borg losing at Wimbledon to a Ping Pong player.

During the first interval, Perceval remained at his desk and took out the object of our collective desire. He called me over. He paged through the book, licking his fingers as he went along, and asked, "Should I do this poem?" But before I could answer he said, "No. Maybe I should do this one." As he paged, the crumbs from the sandwich that he was eating fell on to the book. He flicked them off casually. I couldn't help but notice the greasy stains left behind on the pages from where the margarine on his fingers made contact with the book.

The book was a treasure chest. I glimpsed the table of contents and just some of the names of the poems and poets. I remembered some of those names, like Robert Louis Stevenson and William Blake, and got to appreciate them later in my life. Perhaps that is why I still like a poem that rhymes. It was obvious that Perceval was going to hang on to his loot for the full two weeks that the library allowed him. None of us would get access to it before our judgement date with Mrs Baker.

I arrived home that afternoon, feeling deflated. Lance Seale arrived soon after that with the polony. I greeted him and went to my room. After a few minutes, I moved quietly to the spot at the top of the staircase. They weren't talking and it was only when I saw the reflection in the mirror of the display cabinet that I saw what they were doing.

On the Sunday before my poetry recital, I was saved by the children's section of *The Sunday Times* – known as the "Jellybean Journal." This was a few years before *The Sunday Times* and I developed a rather tense relationship on account of how the images on the back page made me do things of which God didn't approve.

In the pages of the "Jellybean Journal" I found a short rhyme in honour of a deer. I had never seen a deer and the lines from that poem were imminently forgettable. But when the turn came for pupils with surnames starting with "D" to go to the front, I recited the lines perfectly. I earned a smile from Mrs Baker and she pencilled in a high mark on her score sheet.

The tension was killing me but finally we meandered our way to the only surname that started with "Z". Perceval strutted to the front. Mrs Baker must have been unaware of

the arsenal to which he had access because from the way that she was tapping her pencil on her desk it was obvious that she didn't have high expectations. But even according to his usual standards, Perceval caught all of us unawares. Because when he opened his mouth, these were the words that came out: "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." He stopped.

Mrs Baker was so shocked at the pearls that Perceval shared with us, that she forgot the admonition to avoid colourful language in our new surroundings. The blackboard duster flew at Perceval as she shouted, "Don't talk shit to me!"

When I got home from school that day, Mummy called me and said, "Take this to Aunty Doreen," as she handed me a parcel of polony.

The route to Aunty Doreen's house was short and I ran from our door, across the road, and over a sandy field where some kids normally played soccer. After dodging the soccer players, I took a sharp turn and walked the rest of the way along the path to her door. The stern look of that one afternoon was still firmly printed in my mind. So, when she opened the door, I greeted, handed the parcel over and ran back home.

"What did she say?" Mummy asked me when I walked into the door.

I had already run up to the top of the stairs when I shouted back, "Nothing!"

"Robert," she called after a few seconds. "Come down here."

I left the comic on my bed and went down to see what she wanted. "Yes, Mummy?"

"What did Aunty Doreen say?"

"Nothing."

"Didn't she say 'thank you'?"

"No."

"Come here."

My mother had never hit me before that day. Yes, she had raised her voice and shouted at me. She had even sworn at me. So, it is not that I wasn't aware that she was capable of violence. But I didn't expect the first blow. I was stunned and caught on the spot as all the other blows followed. It was a while before I started crying.

“Why are you lying?” she shouted. “Of course, she said thank you. Adults have manners. You are keeping yourself big. Don’t ever lie to me again about an adult.” There might have been other incidents later in life; but that day played a big role in teaching me the importance of saying what adults expected to be said as opposed to being honest. She never hit me again after that day.

Car trouble

The display cabinet stood where it could not be missed. Yet its contents were not to be touched. Every item was carefully placed. The set of tea cups and saucers decorated with dainty flowers and gold edgings stood close to the front. There were souvenir mugs from Oudtshoorn and Durban. A set of cake forks was still in its original packaging.

Robert had made a contribution to the exhibition, albeit unintentionally. Once on a visit with his mother to Mamma, he was bored and asked his grandmother if he could play with two porcelain figures that were in her display cabinet. Mamma agreed. Both his request and her accession must have been misunderstood by the other party because at the end of the visit, she was alarmed when he told his mother to put the two figurines in her bag.

“No, you can’t take it. It’s not yours,” Mamma said.

“But Mamma said that I can have it,” he replied.

Papa convinced her that it was not worth arguing with her grandson and so Robert became the owner of two beautiful porcelain figures; a shepherd boy and his female companion, both with ruddy cheeks. But his ownership of the two ended when he arrived home and his mother announced that they were too valuable to be played with. They were placed in the display cabinet where he could look at them but, as with the rest of the cabinet’s contents, not put his hands on them.

Robert could recall only a few occasions when the cabinet had been opened to take out some plates for visitors. Those were usually events that involved church ministers. The

items were too precious to be risked in the rough hands of the men and boys of his family. His mother would not allow it.

Now, Robert had dropped a tea cup and watched it crash to the floor; splashing into a few large pieces and lots of tiny ceramic grains. It was just an ordinary cup – not from the display cabinet. But still he expected some punishment. Instead, his father said, “Worldly things. Don’t worry.” His mother shouted that he should get out of the way and she cleared up the mess on the floor.

It was a relief to know that some earthly possessions were not that important. But this didn’t stop his father from wanting to have just a little bit more. On Friday nights, Alfred Daniels brought the newspaper home after work; usually after he had made a turn at the pub. He placed the horseracing section open on the kitchen table and asked Robert to pick horses for the Saturday races. Robert must have been his lucky charm though Robert had no certainty that his selections resulted in any winnings. Whatever winnings there were, the family never saw.

Robert had gotten to know all the terms such as Trifecta, Swinger and Jackpot but he had no idea what they meant. He didn’t have a particular method to choose a winning horse. Sometimes, he would go by the number of the horse, and at other times, he would be persuaded by a nice-sounding name. From his father’s talk, he had learnt the names of some of the good horses such as Politician, Over the Air, and Tecla Bluff. And then there were times when he would close his eyes and let his pen drop on a random selection.

Alfred left early on Saturdays to return home late in the evening. Presumably, he would go to place his bets. But inevitably his outings to the Tote were concluded with visits to pubs and sometimes dropping in late at nights at homes of his friends or distant relatives.

One Saturday after his father left, Robert was home alone with his mother. Even his brothers were out, and he didn’t expect them home till late afternoon. He didn’t expect his father till even much later in the evening. It was the most boring day of the week to watch TV: just sports, which alternated mainly between lawn balls, show jumping, and motor racing. Of course, there was also horseracing.

His brothers had been home for a while when his mother reminded him to wash his hair for church the next day. He was in bed and his father had still not returned. While lying

in the dark, Robert expected to hear the front door opening soon. But it didn't. He closed his eyes and a frightful thought crossed his mind. "What if, tonight, I don't fall asleep? What if I just lie like this for hours and hours, unable to sleep with my mind unable to stop thinking? Just lying here and waiting for sleep and for Daddy to come home?"

But he must have fallen asleep because his mother woke him the next morning. As he washed the sleep out of his eyes, he heard Matthew ask, "Did Daddy come home last night?" He suspected that the answer was "no." It wouldn't be the first time that his father hadn't come home from a day out. He would eventually make it home the next day after being too drunk to drive home from wherever he was the night before.

They went to church without his father; his brothers leaving earlier than his mother and he. Like on every other Sunday, he struggled to concentrate during the sermon. He would catch phrases here and there but inevitably he would realise that he was not a good child of God; he couldn't hang on to every word that came from the altar. His mind was always too busy drifting off. He made a point however to listen carefully when the priest announced the forgiveness of sins. At least, he would be covered till the next Sunday.

At home, his mother changed into comfortable clothes to get lunch ready. He had heard her say to her friends how she missed not having a daughter. There was no-one to help her in the kitchen and with cleaning. This conversation would inevitably end in an awkward silence. The two girls that she would have had were stillborn. Robert knew that his father also regretted not having daughters. Perhaps he had a fantasy about being doted on; someone else who could cater to his whims in a way in which his wife and sons did not.

In that gap between the church service and lunch being served his father would have been reading *The Sunday Times*. Robert admired the way in which Alfred was able to read *The Sunday Times*; the way in which he spread it out in front of him while reading, his reading glasses perched on his nose; the way in which he would transition to the next page – with a twist of the paper and one shake he would continue reading. He would have finished most of the main section of the newspaper before lunch. *The Sunday Times*, which his father would normally have bought, was picked up by Christopher on his way home from church. It lay unread on the settee while they had lunch.

Today, there was sweetcorn to go with the roast chicken, potatoes and rice. His father would have had it with mango atchar, which would drip to his chin as he put forkful portions of food into his mouth.

After lunch, when everyone else would drift off to sleep for their afternoon naps, Robert would have a chance to look at more than just the comics section of *The Sunday Times*. The news had been the same for weeks. The State of Emergency and school boycotts were what people were talking about. Three school children were killed by police earlier in the week in Athlone. These were not the sort of things which the church wanted to be concerned about. It was more important to be ready for the return of Jesus. Robert had turned to the back page of the newspaper when he heard the creaking of the small gate.

His stomach tensed up as his father opened the door. His father's return home was never a happy moment unlike the promised joyful event of Jesus's second coming. The remnant of a plaster was hanging loosely on Alfred's forehead. Without saying anything, he walked up the stairs. Robert went to look outside through the window. He couldn't see the car that would have been parked in the narrow driveway. The car was an old yellow Fiat. It sometimes gave trouble and someone told his father once, "That is why it's called Fiat – first in all troubles."

Very soon there would be raised voices and his mother's level of exasperation would only get worse when she discovered that the car was missing. It was Matthew who decided to call Lance Seale that afternoon. Uncle Lance and Alfred had been friends since that time from which Robert was excluded. When his father was a priest and when he was an example of faith to so many people in the church.

"I told Lizzie that this wouldn't have happened if she let Robert come with me," Alfred said, "because then I would have come straight home."

"But where is the car?" Lance asked. Lance Seale was not a relative yet Robert and his brothers called him "Uncle Lance" as they would do with any adult male. Lance sat there on the one comfortable lounge chair with his cap in hand and large belly hanging on his lap. Robert had been listening to the two men talking for almost an hour. He knew that soon his father would want to watch *Sing Country* on TV. He wouldn't think twice to get up and do that. Any attempt at a conversation at this time would lead nowhere.

Lizzie was not happy when Alfred bought the TV. The church hadn't quite banned TVs but there was enough mention about the one-eyed devil and bringing the bioscope into the house to understand that having a TV was not the right thing to do.

"God can send His Son at any time to take us home," they were always reminded on a Sunday.

"Brothers and sisters, it says that 'the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.' With what will He find us busy?" Would Jesus take you along if you were watching TV instead of reading the Bible?

Robert had to hide his excitement when the TV was delivered. He jumped up when he heard the knock on the door and ran down the stairs to see the two delivery men carrying the heavy cardboard box into the living room. His mother wrote her name on the delivery note.

"Must we unpack it?" one of the men asked.

Robert had wished that his mother would be friendlier with the men. They were just doing their jobs. After a few minutes, they were done and had managed to plug in the TV and get a clear picture after playing around a bit with the aerial.

Robert left a note for Matthew, who was always unhappy and often angry. "The TV has arrived. I hope that it will make you happy."

It wasn't his decision to buy the TV and he could not be held responsible. He was just a thirteen-year-old child living under his parents' roof. He went along with their rules. "Honour your father and your mother," was one of the Ten Commandments. Surely, God wouldn't punish him for his father's decision.

For months, the TV was hidden behind a cloth during the day to be uncovered only when Alfred arrived home to watch the news and his regular programmes. Whenever the priest came to visit it would be covered by the cloth. The aerial remained visible but not a word would be spoken about it during those visits.

Lizzie was eventually persuaded by someone at church that there were educational programmes on TV: "It will be good for Robert." But the TV's main adherent was his father who determined which programmes would be watched. Eventually it moved into his

parents' bedroom because it was just more convenient to watch there at night, especially in winter.

Things were not always like this, according to Matthew. Their father wasn't born into the faith. In fact, he was the only one of his family who was a child of God. Robert had listened to his father talking about his childhood.

"I don't want any Blacks in my house," his English grandfather shouted when he chased his Coloured wife and his 11 children out when he arrived home drunk. Except, he used another word for Blacks.

First his father died and after his mother died, Alfred went to live with his eldest sister. He was the only one of his siblings who turned his back on the Anglicanism of his family and who decided to follow a new faith. So committed was he that he was ordained a priest in the New Apostolic Church. He never touched alcohol. But after he resigned, "all hell broke loose," said Matthew. He never told anyone why he resigned. Did he step down because of wrongdoing? Perhaps not even his own wrongdoing but something that he had witnessed?

The different time was long before Robert – the laatlammetjie – was born. He was the last by a far stretch. The ten-year gap between his eldest brother, Christopher, and nine-year gap between Matthew and him meant that he grew up practically as an only-child.

There were whole photo albums without a single photo of him in them. There they were: the happy family – his parents and his two brothers posing next to his father's old Vauxhall. That was before the Fiat, which was now missing. There were also photos of his two brothers in matching safari suits and sunglasses. Photos of him were with a pile of loose ones stuffed into an envelope in a shoebox at the bottom of his mother's wardrobe. There is one of him as a plump baby with a full head of curls perched on a small table being held up by Christopher and Matthew. There is even a colour photo of him standing alone next to his aunt's piano. But not a single one of him with his parents. It was as if he had been dropped into their world from another planet.

"You have to think about the stress that you are causing your family," Lance said. "They are worried about you."

This was not true. Robert was not worried about his father. He was worried about many other things but not his father. Before Robert was born, the Daniels's had lived on a yard with other families. He could picture this space only from when they went to visit relatives who still lived on that yard. This was not frequent but it was often enough.

There was the house built from wood and iron sheets, an outside tap and a toilet away from the house. But he suspected that some things might have changed. It was from the time on the yard that Lance was a friend of the family.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," his father always said. But it's his mother who claimed that if it wasn't for her, they would still be living in a shack on the yard. One day, she had gone to the Council offices to place them on a waiting list for a brick house. That is how they ended up living in a Council maisonette in Hanover Park. There was a hymn that his father loved to sing – "My Father is Rich in Houses and Lands", which had the lines, "A tent or a cottage, why should I care? God's building a palace for me over there."

This was part of Alfred's rebuttal to Lizzie when she spoke about the efforts that she made to get them a better house. "Pride cometh to a fall," he would say.

Robert wondered what Matthew or anyone hoped to achieve by having Lance come over to talk to his father. It was not as if he would magically make the car reappear. And did they really think that a chat was going to get Alfred to stop drinking? No amount of talking or praying had helped till now. "Stop nagging," was his father's standard response – especially to his mother's complaints.

"God can send His Son at any moment. Will you be ready?" Lance asked Alfred.

Robert knew that the church was made ready many years ago. Alfred often told them about how the Chief Apostle had promised that he would not die before Jesus returned. This divided the church and some unbelievers – a tiny minority – had left.

But many more believed in the promise. Some sold their houses and possessions, cancelled their insurance and funeral policies, and stopped their children's education. There could be no better way to prove their faith.

But then the Chief Apostle died and Jesus hadn't returned. This was a very difficult test of the faith of the believers. When he spoke about those years, Alfred mentioned the

“children of Korah” who rebelled against God. They always opposed the Chief Apostle and took pleasure that his promise did not materialise. But Alfred was one of those who remained faithful because they knew that God had changed his mind.

“Jesus didn’t come because the world wasn’t ready for him,” he told his family. But still the end of the world was near and all those who mocked God would be found wanting. Alfred just wanted his family to continue believing because that was all that mattered. God did not look on the outer appearance; instead he looked at the heart and if your heart was pure and believed that you would go with Jesus when he returned.

So, more than twenty years after the death of the Chief Apostle, the children at Sunday school still sang, “When He cometh, When He cometh / To take home his bride, / All His children, precious children / With Him shall abide.”

“Have you gone to the police? Have you made a case?” Lance asked Alfred. “You must at least sort that out. Please... if you don’t want to tell me what happened, at least, speak to your family before you go to sleep tonight. Tell them what’s bothering you.”

“Hey, look at the time. We can talk again some other time. I must go watch my TV programme now,” Alfred said.

What happened to the car remained as much of a mystery as to why Alfred resigned as a priest, and why Jesus did not return before the Chief Apostle died. They did not speak about it. Robert and his father continued to watch their favourite TV programmes. On Fridays, he picked the horses for his father to bet on. Sometimes he longed for different times; times that he had not experienced.

A terrible secret

“Do you want to go to university?” Mr Isaacs asked. It was the first week of school and he was to be my math teacher that year.

“Yes,” I answered. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do at university but that had always been my dream. On a clear day, I could see a university campus laid out against the mountain from my bedroom window. There was another university somewhere further away in the northern suburbs that was built especially for Coloured people and another even further away in Stellenbosch for white people who spoke Afrikaans. But I had a particular interest in the university that I could see from my window.

“Only baboons climb mountains,” someone had said to me once when I expressed an interest in that university. Instead, I was advised to go to the university that was built for people like me. I would never fit in at the university against the side of the mountain.

“Well, if you want to go to university you will have to go to another school. We don’t offer math at higher grade or physics. You will need those subjects to get into university.” Mr Isaacs explained to me that, if I was interested, he could speak to the school principal to help me get into another school as soon as possible. I agreed that he could do so and said that I would check with my parents.

This was not the only conversation with far-reaching consequences that I had that day. Earlier, I was confronted by my friend, Cyril.

“Do you realise that those things can ruin a person’s reputation?” Cyril said.

I was 16 years old. It didn’t occur to me that I had a reputation to protect. The “things” in question was actually only one thing: a porn magazine. Someone had told him

that I had a porn magazine. How I got hold of it was another story. But now this matter of my reputation had to be addressed.

A year or so ago, Cyril and I recited our confirmation vows in front of the church congregation: "I renounce Satan and all his work and ways, and surrender myself to Thee, O triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to Thee until my end. Amen." The vow was delivered in a sing-song manner but once we had gotten it behind us, the twenty or so of us, were accepted as full members of the church. We were now responsible for our own doings. I guess that this is where the matter of reputation came in.

But how did Cyril know about the magazine? The magazine was not in a particularly good condition. Some pages were missing and the binding was coming loose. It had been folded over several times and the pages were creased from the many occasions that it must have been discreetly stowed away underneath clothes and under assorted covers.

I had spent the previous afternoon paging through the magazine and tried to make sense of the pictures. My knowledge of the human anatomy and the female body, in particular, was rather limited at the time of my teenage years. So, seeing naked and semi-naked women in various poses was a novelty, especially when it came to those parts of the body usually reserved for private functions. Even after studying the photos quite intently, I still was left with many unanswered questions.

Later, I hid the magazine at home in a place where I kept a stash of secret stuff. This clandestine location had its own story, which on reflection, was rather innocent. At some point while still in primary school, I had outgrown the books available in the children section of the Hanover Park library. The tipping point was when I arrived at the check-out desk with three books, which all contained different adventures of the Hardy Boys.

The librarian asked me, "Is there nothing else to take out?"

There was nothing else that I found of interest. The Hardy Boys series was probably the most advanced books in the children section, amidst the many picture books and small collection of chapter books aimed at older children.

It was around this time, that someone had told me that I could sneak my way into the adult section where a whole new world would be opened up to me. So, one day, instead

of turning right to the children section, I turned left to the adult section. I was not in my school uniform. So, if confronted, I would lie and claim to be at high school. I was so enthralled that I decided to apply for adult library cards. It turned out that my application was not challenged.

The librarian who conspired with me had long brown curly hair and spoke with a lisp. I was smitten. To add to my joy, she gave me a quick tour of the adult section. I could not have asked for more.

When I returned with a book by Arthur C. Clarke, published by Gollancz, with a yellow dust-jacket to her desk, she said, "Oh, you like science-fiction?" She stood up and led me to several other books in that category. There was another time though when I came to check out *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and she suggested that it might be too advanced for me. She allowed me to take it out however, in order to see if I would be able to get into it. My infatuation with the lovely librarian led me to ask her male colleague one day whether he could recommend a book on shyness. He pointed to his nose with a questioning look on his face. He had misheard me and thought that I meant "sinus" but we eventually got to understand each other and I left with a self-help book.

I didn't want my parents to know that I had access to the adult section of the library because while I wasn't intending to borrow smutty books, I didn't want to create the suspicion that I was. I found a spot at home where I would hide the books that I checked out from the library. This was a curious decision as the kinds of books I loaned from the library were often biographies and, famously, a series of books by a Welsh vet named James Herriot. None of the books were salacious; the spicy books were the ones I paged through in the library – too embarrassed to have them checked out by the lisping librarian. But it was in this secret spot that I hid the tattered porn magazine.

Bertus had given me the magazine. He was one of the kids from the children's home who attended school with us. I did not ask him where he got hold of it.

Bertus took good care of his appearance. His hair was always short and neat and, now that I think about it, he bore a resemblance to the soul singer, Smokey Robinson. Twenty years later, he would have been known as a player. Now, he was just a sexually excitable teenager who was willing to share his loot with me.

Bertus stayed at Bruce Duncan House and when he heard that I was New Apostolic, he said, "We must pray for you. You are misguided." Bruce Duncan was a vocal detractor of the New Apostolic Church and had even written a book about the sect to which I belonged. Ten years later, he would flee the country after being accused of molesting boys who lived in his children's home. His reputation was badly torn.

The exchanges with Mr Isaacs, Bertus and Cyril were taking place during the first few days of Standard 9 as the school was getting ready for classes to start. I now had to break the news to my mother that I might be going to another school. It was already very difficult to get her attention and it would be even tougher to raise this difficult topic.

Our little maisonette had become a bit more cramped over the last few years. It was not a maisonette in the true sense of the word. It was a tiny two-storey house attached to a short row of identical houses. The bottom level contained the living room and kitchen. The top level comprised the two bedrooms and the bathroom.

Mamma had moved in with us about four years ago; a few years after Papa died. After Papa died, she could no longer afford to remain in the large house that they rented while he was alive. For some reason, it was decided that our family was in the best position to take her in.

My two brothers and I shared the one bedroom that faced the mountain. My parents and Mamma shared the other bedroom. The house was small but my father took pride in the small garden that he cultivated. When he was at home and not reading a newspaper or watching TV, this was his favourite activity. My mother was more of a lover of indoor house plants. While he would go down on his knees annually to plant gladiola bulbs and tend to the asters, marigolds and dahlias, she had a good collection of houseplants ranging from ferns, rubber plants, and snake plants to a much-loved delicious monster.

The delicious monster had to be thrown out as a result of an incident of which I was not particularly proud. One Sunday morning, the toilet was occupied and having just woken up I desperately needed to pee. I couldn't keep it in any longer and looking around I spotted the large pot in which the delicious monster was planted. There was no-one around, and I emptied my bladder while a sense of relief washed over me. I didn't anticipate the stream of piss that would flow. It flowed and flowed as if there would be no end.

A few days later, the stench from the pot plant filled the living room and my mother complained loudly that someone must have overwatered the delicious monster. Being the most likely culprit, Mamma said, "I didn't water it." But she had no way of proving otherwise. I kept quiet.

I had no idea how having Mamma living with us would change our lives. Mamma was a stern and proud woman. She was tall and had a pale complexion. In fact, she was so light-skinned that one day a train conductor asked her to move from the carriage reserved for "Non-whites" to the "Whites-only" carriage. She obliged.

When Papa died, she did not shed a tear. "They were married for more than 50 years. I cannot understand it," I heard one of my aunts say, "How can you not cry? When you lose someone who you have spent so much of your life with, how can you not cry?" Papa was a gentle person, who rarely spoke and when he did, he did so softly. He deserved to be mourned with tears and weeping.

Mamma was by no means a doting grandmother. She was equally indifferent to all her grandchildren and I have no recollection of her displaying affection to anyone. However, my brother reminded me that there was a time that she insisted that our cousins who had darker complexions had to eat outside on the stoep while my brothers and I, whose skins were of a lighter colour, could sit at the kitchen table.

At some point, I must have thought that her reluctance to demonstrate her love for me would change after she moved in with us. There were definitely opportunities to form an emotional bond. Because she didn't know the area, I would often go walking with Mamma. We walked to visit the February family who lived around the corner from us, to collect her pension, or to go to church. But I never became her favourite grandchild. I was treated just like the rest.

When she wasn't walking somewhere, she would sit around at home. Her favourite position was next to the window from where she could stare out and comment on whatever activity was taking place in the street. This was a source of irritation for my mother since she tried not to get too involved in the affairs of people in our neighbourhood.

But a few weeks before the conversation with Mr Isaacs, Mamma had started to get weaker and her routines were interrupted. She was confined to her bed. Our little house had become a nursing home with people coming in and out to visit and to tend to Mamma.

Some nights, some of my mother's sisters would stay over. That she was on her deathbed was confirmed when Mamma gave her wedding ring to Aunty Josie. Her decision to bequeath her wedding ring to Aunty Josie and not my mother, in whose home she had been cared for over these last few years, must have been linked to the fact that Aunty Josie was divorced and that there was no space for another wedding ring on my mother's hand.

When I arrived home, it was to this now familiar overcrowded condition. Nothing had changed. Fortunately, I found a gap to talk to my mother about the conversation that I had with Mr Isaacs. She had no strong feelings one way or the other and later that evening she announced to my father, "Robert is going to another school."

Two days later, still in the uniform of my former school, I arrived at Groenvlei Senior Secondary School with my report card in hand. The principal of my previous school had made the necessary arrangements with Groenvlei's principal. This would become my school for the last two years of my high school career. I had a short meeting with the principal before being escorted to my class.

Soon after I was seated at my desk one of my new classmates came to me and said, "Hi. I am Saadiqah. Did I hear your name correctly? Is it Robert? What school were you at previously?" A group formed around us and someone asked to see my report card, which was the only thing that I carried with me on that day. It started being passed around and after a while it landed with someone who turned out to be the top student in the class. Her assessment was that, though my marks were good, I wouldn't be much of a threat to her.

After a few days, it seemed that I had satisfied all the questions of my new classmates and teachers because I was no longer being assaulted with fresh enquiries. I was walking one day along the 30-minute route back home from the new school when a small stone landed next to me. I ignored it. Then a second stone landed next to me and I looked behind me to see where it came from.

"Yeah," the boy shouted. It was Peter, one of my classmates. He was also from Hanover Park and somehow we had not managed to meet each other along the way till that point. After that, we walked together on most days till we had to separate to head in different directions to our different homes.

I learnt that, with the exception of three of us in the class, all the other kids were from middle class families who lived in fancy houses, with parents who were professionals

and had lots of money. Besides Peter and me, there was Dennis who lived in a children's home much further away from the school.

Dennis cycled to school every day and often arrived late. When he stepped into class on those mornings, he would walk to the teacher and whisper something into the teacher's ear.

"What do you say to the teacher?" I asked once.

"Oh, I just say, 'Mr. Davids, I am late.'"

"But why are you late?"

He complained about the traffic.

Besides my isolation, I was also confronted with the challenge of switching from being taught in Afrikaans to learning in English. Slowly, I felt myself falling behind and constantly struggling to catch up. Perhaps I didn't belong at the new school, after all, in the same way that I wouldn't belong at the university on the mountain. But more than anything, I didn't enjoy going home.

The homeward route crossed fields where Port Jackson trees had sucked the soil dry, past the church that we went to on Sundays, past the community centre, the big supermarket, and an unfinished church building. That church building had stood partially completed for a few years now and I assumed that the congregation that had started the work must have run short of cash and could no longer take the project to its conclusion. The only evidence that it was intended to be a church was a haphazardly crafted sign that announced the name of the denomination. Thus far, it was not God's will for the church to be built.

I had a lot weighing on my mind on those walks back home in the afternoon. Deep inside me, I carried a secret greater than the hidden porn magazine, and greater even than how the delicious monster was ruined. The secret that I harboured was the hope that once I arrived home, I would be met with the news that we had been relieved of Mamma's presence.

My already cramped existence became even more suffocated over those days. I wanted it to end so that life could become normal and comfortable again – at least, more comfortable than what it was. Every afternoon I came home expecting to hear that Mamma had died. No, I walked in by the front door hoping to hear that it was over.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, when I opened the door and slumped down onto the settee. I was too exhausted to even walk into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich. A chandelier had once hung from the ceiling but when I was nine or ten years old, I kicked two socks rolled into a ball up in the air. The chandelier started swinging wildly and came crashing down.

While sitting there, a trail of consistent sniffing came down the staircase. It was Aunty Josie. Before I could get up, she bent over and grabbed me and sobbed, "Mamma is dead! Mamma is dead!" We were suspended in this awkward position for a minute but it felt like an hour. She was crouched over me; I was trying to get up while holding her as she cried, "Mamma is dead!" I felt liberated as if I had sunk into a cool bath on a hot day.

It rained on the Saturday of her funeral, and I cried privately. Her family came from far away in Ceres and I helped to direct them to the church from where she was buried.

Down from the mountains

There was a message from Charlene: "I'm sorry that I have to tell you this way. My mother passed away suddenly last night." Instagram was the only way in which the two of us maintained contact. She had abandoned other social media platforms and I had lost contact with her in every other way. I followed the events in her life that she carefully presented with photos and extended captions. She was always a better writer than me and she didn't hesitate to allow her words to breathe. I kept abreast of developments and learnt a lot from a distance.

Once, she had posted a group photo which included me. It was of the group that went on the hike in the Lesotho mountains all those years ago. I felt duty-bound to like the post and to add a comment, "OMG!" She responded to acknowledge my recognition of the moment but not saying what her recollections of that time were.

We both had left Cape Town at some point. She had moved to Kenya at another time, having become an expert on intangible heritage. Once we had met at a mutual friend's house in Pretoria. She seemed distant. I returned to Cape Town after her but did not make an effort to re-establish a relationship. Then I met her again at a book reading at the city's cathedral. We chatted and she gave me her number for if I ever wanted to visit her on the smallholding where she now lived. But I had opted to take the easy path as I had done so often before. I didn't contact her.

It was many years earlier when she sat next to me in a Psychology class at university and passed me a note, "My mom has cancer. I don't know how else to break the news." It was that dreadful disease that my own mother had refused to name. Such was the fear that it instilled in that generation; it was a certain death sentence.

Over the two years that we sat next to each other in classes and the library, I had collected a stack of notes that we had passed between each other. Her mother had recovered and I had gone on to meet both her parents. Now, her mother was dead. Did the cancer return? It was sudden, she said. I wrote a note to offer my condolences. It was inadequate, I knew. I didn't ask any questions like how she died. A lot of people were dying. I left it simple and she wrote back, "Thank you." I didn't ask about funeral details. Because of the pandemic there are restrictions of numbers at funerals and this gave me the perfect excuse.

Ours was an unequal relationship in the same way in which a mentorship relationship is unequal. But she must have gained something; why else would she have stuck around. Perhaps "mentor" is too strong a term but I was very happy to be led and I basked in her approval. I was eager to be taught new things and to have someone guide me as I tried to figure out so much. It was a course in religion, politics, philosophy, and life... and love, in general.

When we didn't share a class, we met in the library or in the Students' Union. On a sunny day, we cleared out a bubble on the steps below Jameson Hall, and sometimes we shared lunch in the Kaplan Centre where she introduced me to Falafel and other vegetarian dishes.

Then we ventured off campus. One day, I went for a walk with her from Muizenberg to St James. The plan was to walk along the beach. It was during one of the term breaks – autumn or spring – when the weather hadn't yet settled into the unbearable heat of summer or the wet chills of winter. It started off fine but then the rain came down along the way. We ran for cover into the Roman Catholic church overlooking the sea. I sat quietly in the pew and pretended to pray while she absorbed the moment. In silence, surrounded by statues of Mary, Jesus and the apostles, and the stained-glass windows, I took in the smell of candle wax and furniture polish.

I continued to eat meat; my one act of rebellion. It was easier to defy this than to obey. She had said that it was difficult for her as a Christian to reconcile her vegetarian ethics with holy communion when she had to consume, at least figuratively, the body and blood of Christ. Yet her vegetarianism was deeply spiritual.

“Yes, health reasons are also something that I consider,” she answered me. “But for me it is an ethical position. As a Christian, I am concerned about God’s creation. I see the kingdom of God as a state of peace. So, in that context, only a plant-based diet makes sense. My conscience won’t allow me to eat meat because I know that in doing so I am contributing to the suffering of other living beings. But it is also about being a good steward because there is a lot of waste and damage to the environment that goes into producing meat for human consumption.”

She invited me to the church where her father was the minister. Over Sunday lunch, I met her mother. Her mother was a former schoolteacher and now, wife of a priest. Charlene had prepared a separate vegetarian meal for her and told me that I was welcome to share with her and to also help myself to the communal lunch prepared by her mother.

The next day, we met in the library and I thanked her again for the lunch invitation and for the wonderful time that I had with her and her family. One of her friends that I had seen before joined us. The two of them started talking and for a moment I was excluded from the conversation.

Her friend had gone to watch *Thelma and Louise*. “It was great,” she said. Charlene had seen it earlier and agreed. They spoke about the scenes that they had enjoyed. “Did you see it?” her friend asked in what must have been an attempt to draw me into the exchange.

“No,” I answered.

“Oh. You must go watch it,” her friend said. “You will enjoy it.” It occurred to me that Charlene must have discussed me with her. How else would she know what I would like? I was slightly irritated.

“Well, I don’t really intend on going to see it. I have an idea of what it’s about but I don’t think it’s my cup of tea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t have sisters so I don’t really think much about those issues.”

Later, when Charlene and I were alone, she said, “I can’t believe that you said that!”

“Said what?”

“You mean all those conversations that we have had... you haven’t thought about those issues?”

I managed to make amends before she invited me along on a hike in Lesotho. I had to get fit and build my stamina so I joined her in regular day walks around Cape Town, up and down Table Mountain. I learnt to know Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head, and the various trails that led to Maclear’s Beacon. I discovered the King’s Blockhouse and the back entry into Kirstenbosch Gardens. I bought new hiking boots and a water bottle that I could swing around my neck.

The two of us spent a lot of time together. It was my complete self-centeredness – there could be no other explanation – that blinded me to the way that she felt about me. One day, while sitting on the stone steps below Jameson Hall, she told me and I had to confess that her romantic interest in me was not reciprocated. I wanted an easy walk along a promenade and she wanted much more. Her requirements were too exacting and her love was too overwhelming. I now resented having agreed to going on the four-day hike to Lesotho. There was so much effort involved in this and I had already applied for and collected my first passport.

There was a war going on at the time. Iraq had invaded Kuwait and America was intent on disciplining the aggressor. It seemed like a good idea to explain my position in terms of conflicting political interests. I was grasping for suitable analogies. We had different expectations and it would be best to maintain the friendship and to abandon any thoughts of a romantic entanglement. She told me that she didn’t want to meet the person with whom I would settle one day. The conversation ended with an awkward silence.

It was the Sunday before I was due to leave to Lesotho when Erica called, “How are you?”

“I’m good. What have you been up to?”

“A lot of things.” She had married Nathan and her second son had been born. We hadn’t spoken in several years.

Erica was my first love in high school and she had broken my heart as first loves are meant to do. I had loved Erica with the intensity of a boyhood crush. She was older than me. I noticed her when she sang at the front at the school assembly. Then I discovered that she

and her classmate walked a similar route home from school than me. Once, her friend wasn't with her and the two of us walked home together.

Then Erica invited me to party and promised to pick me up. I had prepared for the evening and made sure to wash my hair and to apply enough deodorant. Then she arrived with her boyfriend, Nathan, who I didn't know about. He drove the car and I sat on the backseat like their little brother.

It wasn't even as if I had just misread the invitation to the party. Erica had tried to teach me to dance one time earlier. She had invited me over while she was preparing for her final exams. She had slipped a cassette into the hi-fi system at her house and tried to guide my feet to move in sync with hers. My right hand was on her hip and I could feel her body moving effortlessly to the music while I tried to keep up a count in my head.

My instinct is to say that it was "Lessons in Love" by Level 42 that played in the background. But it could not have been because it would have had to be something with a slower tempo. Either way, I was not very good and after a while she gave up and laughed, "This won't work out."

There was something gloomy in her voice that day on the phone. I agreed to meet up after the trip to Lesotho. It would only be a week.

Early one morning, I left with the hiking group in a minibus van. That evening we stopped over in a small forgettable town close to the border with Lesotho. There were about 18 of us on the trip and fortunately I had met most of them so the cold shoulder that I received from Charlene was not completely unbearable. Still recovering from the talk on Jameson Steps, I had no idea how to make peace.

There was a lot of laughter and playfulness that first night among the group. Everyone seemed excited and looked forward to what lay ahead. But one of the guys, Alan, took it too far and in play-fighting with Evan, he pinned him down in a chokehold. Evan managed to twist himself out of the hold and furious at his humiliation got up and started kicking Alan who was still on the floor. They had to be separated and later Alan went to apologise to Evan. This was important since we all were going to be hiking in the mountains of Lesotho for four days.

At the starting point, our group was met by the guides who would accompany us with packhorses for the duration of the hike. The sturdy ponies would carry all the major supplies while we only had to carry personal essential in our backpacks. I began the trek with quiet exhilaration. The resentment of a few days earlier had turned into determination.

Long before sunset, we reached the village where we would all spend the night. It was a good first day and everyone managed keep up with energy to spare. We slept on mattresses on the floor in the huts that had been prepared by the local people. I didn't mind the basic state of the accommodation but I felt bitter about the lack of hot water. I couldn't shave and the stubble irritated me for the rest of the slog.

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The next day, one of the young women in the group started falling behind and I decided to join the rear group that gently coaxed her along. Charlene was striding ahead with the leading pack so this was convenient. How does one know if someone loves you in the same way that you love them? How does it even work? What makes you fall in love with one person and not another? The lust of physical attraction could not sustain me but the meeting of kindred minds was not enough. After Erica, I decided to act with caution. Amelia seemed like a good candidate for my affections.

I spotted her in church. She and her friends had moved across to our congregation because their church building was being renovated. She was new and different and perhaps this would be good for me. Amelia seemed to respond well to my attempts to talk to her. But I remained confused about the attention that she was giving to other young men. I started visiting her at home and after a few weeks, I was surprised when she agreed to be my girlfriend. It seemed too easy and now that the chase was over, the prize didn't seem to glitter so much.

Her family liked me, especially her mother. Mothers always liked me. We saw each other every weekend, we spoke on the phone and we even wrote letters to each other. We explored each other's bodies with increasing frustration at the restrictions imposed upon us. But then it ended. It lasted less than a year because I became restless. More importantly, I was trying to make sense of my life and I needed to do that without the distraction of a girlfriend. It was not that something was missing so much as that I saw a new path to travel.

It was a path that I had to walk on my own. Amelia would be a distraction and like an ancient monk who took up my mantle, I proceeded without her.

When we reached a river stream, several of the group jumped in using the opportunity to immerse their bodies and wash the parts that were skipped the previous day. I opened my backpack and reached for a razor and my shaving cream to see if I could remove the worst of the short beard that had formed. The cold steel scratched the soft skin around my throat and I abandoned the exercise.

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The next morning, our group continued the journey. From one of the mountain passes I spotted a high waterfall. Surrounded by the warm light, I thought that this was the Africa that tourists craved: The real Africa of wide open lands dotted only with bodies of water and lush vegetation. It was not the Africa in which I grew up; with tarred roads and cramped living quarters. It was also not the Africa of war and poverty, of tall buildings and fast cars.

We came to a fast running stream, which had broadened because of recent rains. The guides had to cajole the ponies across. One of them stopped in the middle of the water and let go of manure into the river. Some of us laughed at the involuntary reaction of the horse because of its nervousness. I caught sight of Charlene who wasn't laughing.

On the third day, the young woman, who had fallen behind earlier, hurt her ankle. It was a stupid mistake. It had started to rain and we had to keep moving before the clouds burst. The guides decided that she should ride on one of the horses to the camp. They helped her up and she said, "Thank you, Abuti!" to the oldest one who was closest to her.

"No," someone shouted. "It's ntate! You must say 'ntate.' Abuti is for a boy."

"Oh, I forgot," she replied. "I am sorry," she said to the old man who took hold of the reins and steered the horse forward in the pouring rain. We were all taught the forms of addresses at the start of the hike but now, with the end in sight, those lessons were difficult to recall.

I woke up the next morning to the sounds of ululation. The sky had cleared and a baby was born in the village where we had stayed overnight. This was the last day of the hike. By the evening we would reach the end point and the next day we would drive back to

Cape Town. I had managed to avoid eye contact with Charlene throughout the journey and had been able to interact at only the most basic levels.

On the way back, the minibus had to stop for petrol. It was a chance to stretch our legs and to get some refreshments. I bought a chicken and mushroom pie from the garage shop. Charlene had remained seated in the front passenger seat. There was no-one else in the vehicle and I walked over and offered her a bit from the pie.

It was an innocent gesture. I did it without thinking. It was natural to offer to share my food with a friend. But my clumsy attempt at reconciliation resulted in a contorted look on her face. I could imagine her saying, "I can't believe that you just did that after all those conversations that we have had. Did it not mean anything to you? You haven't thought about those issues?" I apologised and turned away.

The next morning, I was relieved to wake up in my own bed in the digs that I shared in Observatory. The phone rang. It was Erica. I had forgotten that I had given her the date that I would be back and had promised to meet up with her. She must have noticed my hesitancy because she offered to spare me the trouble of coming out. She would come to visit me.

She wanted to see where and how I lived. So, when she arrived I took her on a tour of the house. All my housemates were out. I made tea for us which we drank at the kitchen table where I apologised for not having anything to offer as a snack. When she had emptied her cup, she wanted to see my room. My room was sparsely decorated and I had pinned a poster of ANC leaders to the wall.

"Oh, this is why you didn't want me to come in here," she said.

We sat next to each other on the bed. She had told me about how she had made bad decisions and that she married for the wrong reasons. Nathan was a troubled man but good at heart. She loved her boys. She must have felt that my attention was waning because I was tired.

"I am going now," she said as she continued sitting next to me. Neither of us moved. She pulled me closer and we kissed. I enjoyed the sweet flavour of her mouth and the warm feeling when I merged with her.

When it was over, she complained that I had messed up her white dress. I knew that she would not leave her husband and I tried to find meaning in what had happened. I was exhausted and after she left, I went to lie down, closed my eyes and summoned the memory of her taste and scent.

This country

“Are you looking for Karl Marx?” the woman asked when I paid the entrance fee to the cemetery. I nodded; surprised at her question. It did not occur to me that his gravesite was probably the only reason that people paid to enter the cemetery.

Earlier in that year, I went to Little Odessa in New York. At a flea market, I bought a small brass badge with Lenin’s profile. I had no intention of ever pinning it to my chest but after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union it was, to me at least, a charming piece of memorabilia. Besides, buying it was an opportunity to honour the entrepreneurial spirit of a former citizen of a nominally communist country. The Russian woman who sold the little badge to me could have been the same age as the Englishwoman who directed me to Marx’s grave.

I followed her directions to the huge bust that stood in the graveyard. I was the only one at the site. Close to the grave, I came upon the tombstone of a former leader of the South African Communist Party, Yusuf Dadoo. So there was some link to home. Years later, I learnt of another connection between South Africa and Marx. Marx’s sister, Louise, married a bookseller named Jan Juta and moved to Cape Town, where she died. She was buried in a small graveyard close to the University of Cape Town. I made a mental note to go and seek out her grave at some point.

Walking through graveyards was not something that I did regularly. Three years earlier, a few months after the first democratic elections in South Africa, my brothers and I went searching for the grave of our paternal grandfather. My father had died and had been cremated and we wanted to dispose of the bouquets of flowers from his funeral. His remains would be installed in a wall of remembrance at which there would be no place to

lay flowers. We had never been to his father's grave and went on an unsystematic search for the final resting place of our grandfather.

We found a worker digging a grave. "Hello Robert," he said. It took me a while to recall who he was him. It was someone who had been at high school with me in one of the junior standards. He had dropped out during that year after being bullied by several other classmates. He still had the portly physique which was the trigger for the bullying to which he was subjected.

"Hi," I said and explained our mission.

He directed us to an office where the cemetery's records were stored. Even after going there, we couldn't find what we were looking for. Instead we placed the superfluous flowers on the graves of my mother's parents.

Around the time of my visit to Marx's grave, there was a dubious claim that South Africa was the only country where a communist party was still gaining new members. Just seven years before my call at Highgate Cemetery, the communist party was still banned in South Africa. But then in February 1990, it was unbanned together with the ANC and a long list of other organisations. The negotiations started and I thought that it would be a matter of time till we would have a chance to pursue socialism in our country in our lifetimes. But the talks dragged on and after three years it wasn't clear when apartheid would finally be buried.

On a Saturday in April 1993, I went to make me a cup of coffee. I was visiting my family for the Easter weekend. I had moved out earlier that year to a digs, in between completing my undergraduate studies and starting my first job at the university.

That period marked a new phase in my relationship with my family. My father had worked the greater part of his life for the civil service. Two years earlier, he had managed to get his act together and using the benefits to which he was entitled, he had bought a house and we had moved from the Council house in the Coloured township, Hanover Park, to a three-bedroom house in a new development in Eerste River. By this stage, my eldest brother had married and at the time of my visit, it was just Matthew who still lived at home with my parents. My father's love affair with alcohol had not changed and he soon found drinking spots closer to the new home. My connection with religion had taken a new turn

and in a dramatic move, I resigned from the sect into which I was born. This caused a lot of unhappiness to my family.

Having left the church, I no longer had to hide my political persuasions. Members of the church were not allowed to get involved in anti-apartheid activities because the church said that anyone “who opposes the government opposes God” and even though there were strong anti-apartheid sentiments in the Coloured community, many Coloured people were anti-Black so were not supportive of the ANC. Even in my own extended family there would be regular disparaging references about those with darker skin colours or kinky hair. Those comments, while made in jest on the surface, served to create clear lines of division.

I tightened my hold with both hands around the cup to allow its warmth to sooth my palms. The radio was playing softly in the kitchen and at first, I didn’t hear clearly. The newsreader continued and my thoughts began to focus on the story that was unfolding. I put the cup down and felt paralysed.

Drops of rain drizzled down on me as I walked out towards the carport on the side of the house. Matthew was busy outside with something.

“Chris Hani has been shot,” I said to him.

“What?”

“It was just on the radio.”

“Is he dead?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god!” He picked up a dirty cloth and wiped his hands. We walked together into the house to hear if there was more news. Our father joined us in the sitting room. The three of us stood around the radio before Matthew decided to switch on the television.

“What happened?” My mother shouted from the kitchen.

She carried a kitchen towel with her as she entered the sitting room. A tool of the trade. There was always something in her hand. A feather duster. A cloth and a can of furniture polish. At night, knitting needles. The devil finds work for idle hands. She never said it but that was the message she tried to convey.

When I was younger, my cousins always eagerly wanted to have sleepovers at our house. “Aunty Lizzie always makes us tea before we go to bed,” one of them confessed once. Till then, I had assumed that all mothers were as doting and industrious as mine.

As the Saturday of Chris Hani’s assassination moved along, we all kept checking on the news. Later, Matthew went to buy a newspaper and finally we could start watching the first news bulletins on television.

Hani was gunned down on the same day that the Two Oceans Marathon was being run. A good day for an ultra-marathon because the light rain provided relief for the hot and exhausted runners. But the winner’s accomplishment was eclipsed by the slaying that brought the country to the edge of an abyss. I couldn’t even remember the winner’s name.

Uncannily, I was involved in organising a public meeting that Chris Hani addressed at UCT during Orientation Week earlier that year. Leya and I had been given the task of organising a big event, which could serve as a drawcard for students. We wrote to the ANC and motivated why they should send a high-profile speaker to address UCT students. Then we listed our selections. Chris Hani was our third choice; a fact, which he mentioned in his speech. We had booked the New Science Lecture Theatre as the venue for the mass meeting and designed the posters to advertise the event.

By the time of the event, Leya and I had been pushed aside as the original organisers. Such was his magnetism that everyone wanted a hand in claiming Hani and being close to him. My only interaction with him was limited to greeting him briefly on arrival in the Students’ Union. Once he sat down, I approached him and said, “Comrade, would you like a cup of tea?” He graciously accepted.

Chris Hani was a radical. As the leader of the South African Communist Party and the face of the ANC’s armed wing, he represented everything that the majority of white South Africans feared about the future.

South Africa had been plagued by the death of so many people before the murder of Chris Hani. Even counting all the killings in those years before the release of Nelson Mandela, the death toll seemed high. But this one murder had made a big impact.

By the evening, my mother was busy in the kitchen. The smell of fried fish floated into the sitting room. The fish would soon be covered in a curried sauce to make pickled fish. More pickled fish. We had pickled fish on Good Friday.

We watched the news of the assassination on TV. We watched it in silence. From the corner of my eye, I saw my father shaking his head. Matthew sat next to me on the couch. No-one said anything. I wasn't particularly disturbed by the image of the corpse. Chris Hani's head was covered by a piece of cloth. It was framed by a pool of blood. The body lay quietly. The limbs extended themselves as if the man was asleep. *Twinkle, twinkle little star.*

In the background, a line of white men stood – some in uniform. They positioned themselves with unreadable expressions on their faces. As if they were members of the mourning party, they adopted solemn faces. However, the body was that of a black man. Not one of theirs. Over the body, another black man stood. Alive and crying. His tears were not only out of grief; they were also out of fear.

The light drizzle became a storm over the next few days. The rain grew stronger as the Easter holiday continued into the new week. The weather played along to create the general air of depression. By Tuesday, the whole of the Cape was being battered by pouring rain and heavy winds.

I lay in bed as the rain pounded down on the roof. It made me think of singing *Mister Noah Built an Ark*: "The rain came down in torrents. The rain came down in torrents. And only eight were saved."

The newspaper stories alternated between new information on Chris Hani's killing and reports on the weather. Eleven people died during the storms. Drownings. Exposure. Boats in Kalk Bay harbour were damaged. But the bad weather did not keep protesters off the streets. In reaction against the assassination, there were stonings, petrol bombings and marches throughout Cape Town.

"These people are mad," my father said. It was with great relief that I realized that he was referring to whoever killed Chris Hani; and not to the protesters. I had just read in the newspaper that UCT students had joined the protests and that there was a protest march in Main Road in Rondebosch.

"I hope that things don't get worse. People must just stay calm," I said.

“But they are angry,” he said. “Can you blame them?” It was peculiar how the emotions of sadness and anger often overlapped. “How would you feel,” my father continued, “if someone killed a person who you loved?”

I greeted my family and returned to work on the Tuesday after the long Easter weekend. Tension hung in the air and life on campus did not follow the familiar patterns. The atmosphere was dark and damp. I didn’t know how normality would come about again.

Later in the evening, Nelson Mandela addressed the nation on television: *“Tonight I am reaching out to every single South African, black and white, from the very depths of my being. A white man, full of prejudice and hate, came to our country and committed a deed so foul that our whole nation now teeters on the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we may know, and bring to justice, this assassin. The cold-blooded murder of Chris Hani has sent shock waves throughout the country and the world... Now is the time for all South Africans to stand together against those who, from any quarter, wish to destroy what Chris Hani gave his life for – the freedom of all of us.”* He already started to act as a President. It was only a matter of time before he would be elected.

It was Wednesday when the skies began to clear. I woke up with a stuffy feeling in my head. It was still cold and I had to pull together all my strength to get up from out of the bed.

I took the shuttle up to campus. The Cape Town winter had signalled its approach. There would be cold days of endless rain. I didn’t want to be on the streets on those days. The campus was still struggling to come to life after the short Easter break. There were no classes but there would be a few students hanging around the library and in the Students’ Union. The teaching staff would mostly be absent except for perhaps a few who would be working on some or other project. But I was part of the backbone, as the Registrar referred to the administrative staff, of the university. My colleagues and I would stick to normal working hours despite the weather and the time of year.

There was a part of that worldview that appealed to me. Life would go on. The sun would rise and set no matter what happened on earth. From the snippets of conversation that I overheard traveling to campus and from the newspaper headlines plastered against lampposts, the mood in the country did not mirror the clearing skies. Nelson Mandela had

appealed for calm but would people pay heed? A few kilometres from the Upper Campus, barricades had been burning over the long weekend. It wouldn't take much for them to flare up again. But I was allowing my life to settle into its familiar routines. This was my way of incorporating the uncertainty into the normal course of things. So, when I stepped out of the lift, I was happy to find our department's secretary, Shamilah, already sitting at her desk in the reception area. It was going to be a normal day.

At lunch time, I stepped out of the office to the coffee shop behind the Methodist church. It was a good walk, just off the middle campus – the sort of exercise that I had convinced myself was necessary. There and back. Having lunch on my own in a restaurant was a ritual that I performed often. The food was good and cheap and the place had, what I thought was, the best lemon meringue pie. Old white Christian women served the food, smiled and were overly polite. My lunch break ended too soon and I started the walk back to my office in the Students' Union.

When I reached the office after lunch, I found Shamilah, crying with the *Cape Argus* open in front of her. A march in honour of Chris Hani had turned violent when some youths broke away from the crowd and started looting shops around the Grand Parade. Even Desmond Tutu's appeals had failed to stop the destruction that ensued.

"What's going to happen?" Shamilah asked.

Shamilah's fears for the future were justified. On a Sunday, a few months later, men with hand grenades and assault rifles stormed into a church in a white suburb. They threw the hand grenades and sprayed bullets into the congregation. Eleven people were killed. What shocked me was that one of the congregants had returned fire. "What sort of country is this," I thought, "where people go to church with guns?" Then, towards the end of that year, something similar happened at pub close to where I lived. A group entered the Heidelberg Tavern in Observatory and fired shots into the crowd, killing four people.

In February of the following year, a date was set for South Africa's first democratic elections, and it seemed that a new day was possible. I had joined an ANC branch to help with preparing for the elections. The branch was a motley crew composed of mostly white liberals, former PFP members who didn't feel at home in the Democratic Party, some students, former UDF activists and a tiny group who considered themselves communists.

One evening, we were sitting around readying elections posters to be hung up on streetlights when someone said, "A few years from now, we will probably all belong to different political parties." There was some uneasy laughter from a few people and a sneer from Claire. Claire was a white woman who did not hesitate to display her political colours. She was a self-declared radical who usually wore a scruffy red SACP t-shirt. Claire once complimented my housemate, Sipho, on something that he said in a meeting. When we spoke about this afterwards, Sipho said, "I am not the sort of Black person who appreciates being patronised by white people."

We campaigned very hard for the elections. One of the former PFP members had a copy of an old voters roll, which we used to call up people to canvass for the elections. We also went door-to-door to win over potential voters. On one of those visits, a resident told us, "I'm not racist but if anyone steals my power tools in the garage, I will kill them."

The elections were extended from one to three days. I had agreed to be a party agent and during the course of one night a comrade and I had to sit in a car and watch a polling station where ballots were kept under guard by the police.

I had gone to my family home to vote at the nearby high school. My father had gone to vote somewhere else. By the end of the day, he had not returned and I doubt that he got around to voting.

We were very excited when the first results came in and the ANC won the Northern Cape. However, despite the fact that the ANC won nationally and every other province, it fell short in the Western Cape to the National Party. It would seem that the majority of Coloured voters had decided to throw their lot with the old apartheid rulers as opposed to supporting the party recognised by the majority of Black people as the liberators.

Our branch went ahead with the party that we had organised in anticipation of celebrating the ANC victory. After all, we could celebrate the national results and it was also an opportunity to pat ourselves on the back for all the hard work. We had the party at the house of a white ANC member who would soon thereafter be sworn in as a Member of Parliament.

At the party there was a lot of analysis of the election results. I was standing with a glass of wine and chatting to someone when I heard Claire saying, "How can the Coloureds

be so stupid?" It must have been the look in the eyes of the person to whom she was talking which made her turn around. She saw me. I looked at her in her tatty SACP t-shirt and walked away to pour myself another glass of wine.

Singing freedom

We were in a night club in Long Street and the DJ was playing music that we loved. Then he played a remix of “Bare Necessities” from the Walt Disney movie of *The Jungle Book* and after a pause of a few seconds, we laughed and danced along. Hakim walked over to where Grace and I were talking.

“What are you gossiping about?” Hakim asked us.

“Do you see those two women who just came in?” Grace pointed at two women dressed in tight jeans, high heels and tops which showed off the shapes of their breasts. “Do you think what I am thinking?”

“What are you thinking?” He said as he shook his head.

“But seriously,” I said, “What do you think they do?”

“Oh. So, because they are dressed like that, you assume that they are prostitutes?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said.

“Wow. That’s what I don’t get about you people who call yourself progressives.” Hakim said. “You say all the right stuff in public but then in private you have all the same prejudices like reactionaries.” I could tell that he wasn’t really upset with us but I adopted a serious expression.

“Ok.” I said, “You are right. For all we know, they could be brain surgeons.”

“Definitely,” Grace said. “I think that they are brain surgeons.”

Hakim laughed and took another sip of whiskey. After that, whenever we saw someone who we thought might be involved in sex work, we referred to them as brain surgeons.

It was just a matter of months before I would leave Cape Town for a few months in America and one party merged into the other as we found reasons to have yet another farewell gathering. The next evening, I went with Grace to a house party. Most of the guests were familiar to me but there were three people who I had not met before and who stood out.

“What do you do?” I asked one of them.

“I’m a hairdresser,” Nicky answered. Underneath her flowing clothing and long straight black hair, I knew that she was hiding the external organs of a male body. Later in the evening, we danced together. The pace of the music changed and I found myself embraced in a slow dance with her. She whispered into my ear the lyrics of the song to which we were moving, “Like a moth to a flame / Burned by the fire / My love is blind / Can’t you see my desire / That’s the way love goes...”

Hakim was the DJ and he knew how to keep us all dancing. He had a great music collection. At his home, he organised his CDs according to the first names of the artists, which I found peculiar because I would have done it by the surname as one would do with book authors. But this worked for him. “When I look for Frank Sinatra, I find him under ‘F.’ Why would I look under ‘S’?” he asked me. When he played music for us, who cared how he organised things as long as he knew how to find the right tracks to keep the party going. His eyesight was getting worse and he more often than not used a magnifying glass to read the track listings on the CD covers.

Hakim was married but made no secret of the fact that it was an unhappy marriage. “Ruhksana blames me for the death of her son,” he told me. She rarely joined him at parties, and I met her the first time at their home.

“Sometime, I go to meetings of The Compassionate Friends,” she told me. “I used to go much more in the beginning. They helped me to deal with the loss. They are just ordinary people who have all lost a child and they support one another. We talk about things that other people won’t understand or that they don’t have the time to listen to.”

Her anger was buried in a shallow trench beneath her sadness. I had never seen her smile and she had a lot of complaints about Hakim and the people with whom he hung out. She didn’t like Hakim’s friends but for some reason, she tolerated me and I spent the night at their house once because I had drunk too much to drive myself home.

“If they were good friends,” she said, “they wouldn’t let him carry on the way that he does. For someone with diabetes, he needs to take better care of himself.”

Ruhksana, formerly known as Roxanne, had converted to Islam when she married Hakim. She had a son, Melvin, from a previous marriage.

“He was a real mama’s boy,” Hakim told me. “He had no drive; no ambition. He was just lying about at home. I organised a job for him; to help him get somewhere.” He was killed in a freak accident at work. “So, if I didn’t get him the job, he wouldn’t have died.”

I didn’t know what to make of it when Hakim declared his love for me. Initially, I assumed that it was some kind of joke. But he insisted that he was serious. I cared for him but not in a romantic or physical kind of way. As it were, I struggled to love women in that way. How was I supposed to have a love affair with a man? I had experimented with fellow boys when I was a kid but I assumed that this was a normal part of growing up. One such boy was Sebastian. One day, we went to find a spot on the school field far away from the rest. We laid down and I was eager to get started. But he was more cautious.

“Hang on,” he said as he looked around. Only when he was sure that no-one could see us did he guide my hand to his crotch while at the same time starting to touch me.

Several years later, I met Kevin. We were both on the last train from town. As I was walking home from the station, he moved closer to me and we started talking. It felt safer walking with another man as opposed to walking alone at that time of the night. I think that he had been drinking.

He dropped me safely at home. Then on another day, he came to visit unannounced. I wasn't home and he left a message for me, saying that he was a work colleague. One Sunday evening, he found me in and picked me up. We drove to the home of another friend of his from where we drove to a beach. His friend was a slightly older man who was introduced to me as Uncle Stan. We pulled into a gravelly parking lot near the deserted beach, where we drank beers while talking. At some point, Uncle Stan started to sing some silly romantic song and Kevin laughed.

"You can laugh," Uncle Stan said, "but I know that your dick is hard."

"Don't be foolish, Uncle Stan," Kevin said.

"It's not a secret," he said. "My wife knows where I am. She knows what I am doing."

While we were not engaging in any sexual activity at that moment, I couldn't help feeling that we were transgressing. "When we were young," an uncle once said to me, "we didn't have moffies. That is a new thing. If someone wanted to act like that, we would beat him till he came right. We didn't stand for that."

But here we were; three men sitting in a car in the parking lot of a beach; drinking beers and talking. This was perfectly normal. Yet, I knew that at any moment that could change. This is what Stan's wife knew. But not then nor at any other point did we do anything more than talk and drink; the things that ordinary men do. Now, with Hakim, for the first time, there was the prospect of doing something more.

On a Saturday, Hakim and I went into Cape Town to watch a movie at the Labia, an art cinema close to the Mount Nelson Hotel. There are parts of Cape Town where activity levels take a dip at certain times on Saturdays. It was the lull between the morning bustle and the night time buzz. Across the road, close to the Company Gardens, a family of tourists was lost. The adult man in the group had a street map spread open in front of him. At the robot, a beggar stood with a cardboard sign. I had found myself in that interregnum previously when the streets were populated mainly with a sprinkling of tourists and tramps.

The Mount Nelson Hotel was not the sort of place that appeared welcoming. Yet, it reminded me of another hotel – the Metropole Hotel in the lower part of Long Street. Several years ago, we went to pick up a work colleague of my brother who was visiting from Zimbabwe. He was allowed to stay at the hotel because it was an international hotel, which

was allowed to accommodate Black guests from other countries. It was that time on a Saturday when the streets were similarly deserted.

Hakim and I decided on a movie to watch and made ourselves comfortable in the smart cinema seats. I wasn't really interested in what was on the big screen in front of us since it was no secret what the real intention was of coming to the darkened theatre. Hakim moved his hand up my thigh. We kissed while he continued to touch me with increasing intensity. I was surprised at how natural it felt.

He claimed that his love was all-consuming. "I want all of you," he said. I had no idea what that meant and what would be left once his passion had devoured me. "I want to taste every part of you." His desires could not have been satisfied that afternoon but we had already crossed further into a new territory than I had anticipated. We left the cinema and Hakim wanted to extend our time together. I was willing.

There was an ATM further down the road and Hakim went to draw cash. "Fuck!" he said. "That's what happens when you're not talking to your wife." Ruhksana had cleared out the bank account. I wondered if this was a deliberate attempt to sabotage our outing. With less money at our disposal, we had to be inventive. I suggested a hotel bar where I knew that we could drink while the bartender would supply us with bowls of free nuts and chips.

At the top of Long Street, someone called my name. It was Mitesh. We had not seen each other since we were students together. He passed a curious look to Hakim and I could see that they didn't care much for each other. It was one of those things when you dislike someone whom you had never met before; but you just instinctively disliked the person. That was what happened between Mitesh and Hakim in that moment. It didn't bother me.

"How are you? What are you up to?" I asked.

He was teaching maths at a private college. Hakim seemed annoyed by the intrusion. I introduced them and then we parted.

Later, as we were walking, Hakim asked, "So, who was that?"

"I just told you," I said. "But it's funny because I just remembered about the only time that we ever went out as friends. I don't know why but we never hung out together again after that." It must have been my second or third year of university. We had gone into

a packed flat where a student party was happening. I entered the flat and was struck by loud unfamiliar music. It wasn't clear from where in the flat the music was coming. It was booming and the tune was difficult to follow over the even louder conversations. I had not been in this flat before. The place was crowded and Mitesh and I had to weave our way carefully through the mix of people. On a couch against the wall, four guys were slumped. One of them, with a bucket hat and a yellow t-shirt called me over.

"Hey," he said.

I waved a greeting and he motioned me to come closer. I bent down to his level and he grabbed my collar.

"Who are you?"

I assumed that he was joking and I said, "Thabo Mbeki." But the joke did not ease the rising tension. The hatred in his eyes remained. Mitesh must have realised that this wasn't going to end well and he grabbed the drunk guy's hand.

"Hey, hey, comrade. Leave him. He's with me."

"Hai, Mitesh. Our movement is being infiltrated. We must be careful. There are agents everywhere." That year people were being killed far away from where we were. On the East Rand, Inkatha and ANC supporters were killing one another and the paranoia had reached the university.

Mitesh managed to get the drunk comrade's hand off me without saying much more, and steered me to the booze in the kitchen. He got hold of two beers and passed one on to me as he said, "Don't worry about that." I doubt that I was ever in real danger of being beaten up but I appreciated being with Mitesh that evening.

Yet, the confrontation left me taken aback because it struck me that somehow I had stood out enough to attract suspicion. Mitesh was known to most of the people at the party, which was the passport that allowed him entry. I wondered what it was about me though that announced that I didn't belong. There were the obvious signs such as my lighter skin colour and my facial features which were not easy to slot into a box; and I wasn't wearing a t-shirt that demonstrated my political allegiance. Perhaps the comrade on the couch was on to something and, in fact, I didn't belong.

“So, that was it?” Hakim asked.

“Yes, then we just never had a reason to see each other again. We got busy, I guess and we studied different things.”

The day of my departure was approaching and I spent the last few days packing. At my final farewell party, Hakim gave me a cassette tape on which he had recorded a compilation of songs for me. One of the songs was “New York State of Mind.” That was the last time that I saw him before I left for six months. We hadn’t gone out again since that Saturday and we didn’t talk about it again. It never occurred to me to ask or answer the question of whether I was (or we were) gay. I listened to the tape a few times during the time while I was in America but I cannot say that I missed him.

*

At the entrance to a club in Philadelphia the bouncer asked me for my driver’s licence. I wasn’t driving. This was one of the ridiculous features about life in America. Once, in a small town, I was given a warning for jaywalking. Earlier that day I had gone to buy some beers at a convenience store. As I was walking, the siren from a police car sounded behind me. Over the loudspeaker, the officer instructed me to turn around and to take out my driver’s licence. But when I turned around, he looked at me and told me it’s okay and drove off. I guess that I looked old enough to buy beer.

The only form of identification that I had was my green South African identity book.

“What is this?” the bouncer asked.

“It’s my ID.”

“He’s not from here,” James said. “This is what they use as ID where he’s from. He’s from Africa.”

The bouncer frowned and waved us in. We danced and I noticed that there were only men around us. I went to the bar and ordered three beers. James and I came with his friend, Ben.

“He’s a puppy,” James told me about Ben. Ben had recently come out as gay and James saw himself as a tutor. “You see: I’m gay,” James told me. I didn’t respond. He told

me about the difficult experiences of being a Black gay doctoral student in the History department at Princeton.

When we left the club, we went to an adult store. There were video machines where one could preview porn movies. We each moved off on our own. Later, James told me, “I checked out all the movies that you selected.” I wasn’t aware that he was following me. “You only looked at heterosexual porn.” I shrugged. What was I supposed to say?

After we dropped Ben off, James and I stayed up and talked in his apartment. I promised him that I would send him a UCT hoodie and that he would send me one from Princeton. That never happened.

I had been back in South Africa for about two months when I was at a party with Hakim again. He was playing all the great tunes as usual and it was as if we had not been apart. He asked me to refill his empty glass. I came back with whiskey and ice for each of us. He asked me, “Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Like what?” I wondered.

“You are walking differently. It’s that confidence that comes from when a man has been having sex,” he said and nodded his head in the direction of Lily. Lily and I had started seeing each other but since she hadn’t quite ended things yet with her boyfriend, we had stopped short of making our relationship public. I guess that we were not being discreet as I had thought. “Don’t be a stranger,” he said.

As I stood, drinking my whiskey, I confessed to myself that I did not tell Hakim what happened later that night after the party that Mitesh and I were at. We left the party and met up with Leya and a group of her friends at a Greek restaurant in Main Road. Leya was beautiful, tall and intelligent. She could choose to be a supermodel or an astrophysicist and was desired equally by men and women.

Once we had eaten and had some more to drink, we moved down the road towards the digs in Rondebosch where Leya lived. She shared the house with Jane who wasn’t with us that night. I was not quite sure whether Leya and Jane were lovers or just very close friends. By now, there was a lightness in the atmosphere. Whose idea it was I cannot remember, but we started singing freedom songs and toyi-toying as we made our way to

the house. The group had thinned out and it was only Leya, Mitesh and I who arrived at the front door.

Mitesh wanted to know where everyone was going to sleep and in, what I presumed was, his drunken state suggested that we all sleep together in one bed. But Leya shook her head and led me to her bedroom. "You can sleep here," she said. "I will sleep in Jane's bed. She's less likely to mind if it was me in her bed rather than one of you." By then, Mitesh had started snoring on the couch where he had fallen asleep. I lay awake for a while, revelling in Leya's clean white sheets against my body. I imagined that I could pick up her sweet scent. I fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Leya must have gotten up early to make Jane's bed. I heard voices and as I stirred awake, the bedroom door opened. Jane came in, greeted me and turned around again closing the door behind her. Later, Mitesh, Leya, Jane and I drank our coffee together awkwardly. I didn't think that I had to explain anything and I doubt that either Mitesh or Jane would believe me if I said that I slept alone in Leya's bed. Secretly, I was probably enjoying the impression that was created that Leya and I had slept together.

Either Hakim was very perceptive or I was just more transparent than I thought. It would have been great to have an air of mystery about me. But I think that all of us can be read far easier than what we care. After several years, and some drama, Lily and I married and pursued lives outside Cape Town. We had been living in Pretoria for a few months, when Grace called me one Monday morning.

"Hello Robert," she said and I knew that something was wrong. "Hakim has died."

"Oh my word. What happened?"

"The doctor says that his heart just gave in," she answered. His funeral would take place according to Muslim custom later that day and there was no way that I would be able to get to Cape Town in time to attend it. There wasn't much more that I could say.

"I am sorry," I said. "Please, also tell Ruhksana. Send her my condolences."

Somewhere to go

I was sitting at a bar in the industrial part of Mafikeng, when I overheard the person sitting next to me saying to her companion, "This is a one dead horse town." I thought that her mangling of the expression was extremely apt. The bar was in an old disused warehouse. Her comment reminded me of a conversation that I had once with Richard Fisher.

I had never seen horses in town but Richard, one of my colleagues at the university, said, "Donkeys are a big hazard on the road." He was talking about the road from Lichtenburg to Mafikeng. "Especially on Sunday nights," he continued, "when people are rushing back to Mafikeng from Joburg and Pretoria. It's dark and when a donkey is crossing the road you will see it too late to avoid hitting it. Colliding with a donkey at such a high speed is a messy affair. Often they are not able to separate the human remains from the donkey pieces."

That same road passed Rooigrond Prison, where Eugene Terre'Blanche was kept after he was convicted for assaulting two Black men. At the time that I travelled that road, Terre'Blanche was still imprisoned. He was only released towards the end of my stay in Mafikeng, and five years later he was beaten and hacked to death by two Black farmworkers. The two crimes were not related and there was speculation about the motive for his murder, ranging from a dispute over payment to the rejection by the Black men of sexual advances by Terre'Blanche.

I arrived in Mafikeng on the first Sunday of a September. This would have been the start of Spring and I carried this knowledge with me as I walked to the university campus on my first day of work on the Monday. I was not used to the extreme heat of this dry town.

The following Saturday, I needed a haircut and I went to a hairdresser at Mega City Mall in the Mmabatho part of the town. I couldn't find an ordinary barber. I asked one of the hairdressers how much he would charge for a basic haircut. He looked at me and said, "No, I cannot cut your type of hair."

The dean, a middle-aged Indian man, invited me to dinner with his family one evening and I recounted the story. His wife recommended an Indian woman who owned a salon in Mafikeng who would be able to cut my hair.

I discovered that people used Mafikeng and Mmabatho interchangeably and I explained my confusion to them. "Actually," the dean said, "Mafeking has an interesting history. It once was the capital of Bechuanaland. It was only when Bechuanaland became independent as Botswana that Gaborone became its capital. Then," he continued, "Mmabatho was the capital of Bophuthatswana when it became independent. But the strange thing is; things were going so well in Bophuthatswana that the white people of Mafeking, which was then part of South Africa, voted in a referendum to join Bophuthatswana. That's when it was renamed Mafikeng and it was treated as a suburb of Mmabatho. So, it was only after 1994, when Bophuthatswana became part of South Africa that, Mafikeng and Mmabatho merged and became one town and the capital of the North-West."

That was very interesting and I told him so. I had been appointed to a position in the university administration and had been allocated a staff house in the Mmabatho section, on Steven Biko Avenue, which turned off from a number of other streets named after heroes of the struggle against apartheid. The house had three bedrooms and was far too big for my needs.

When I arrived, the government had announced that the university would be merged with the mainly white university in Potchefstroom. One of my new colleagues said, "In the business of mergers and acquisitions, there are no mergers, only acquisitions." I thought about this often, especially as the date of the merger approached. We had several meetings with colleagues from Potchefstroom and several of those meetings became quite heated. Besides the fact that the two university campuses were about 200 kilometres apart, they had very different histories and traditions.

After a few months of living on my own, Frida became my housemate for a few days. Her stay was transitional till the university could find her more permanent accommodation. She was a Canadian professor who had come to do some research into Indigenous Knowledge Systems. When she moved out, she invited me to dinner one evening as a token of appreciation for hosting her for those first few days of her stay.

I was surprised to find myself in the company of Frida as well as two Americans, two Norwegians, and an Argentine. I wasn't aware of the international community at the university aside from the large number of Batswana students. The Argentine was the partner of one of the Norwegians. Everyone else was associates on the Peace Studies programme at the university, which was run by a Tanzanian expat.

Over dinner, someone made a comment about a strange structure that stood close to the university.

"What is it?" I asked. It was a huge construction shaped like two large white hands cupped together and holding a bowl up in the air.

"It's a water tower," Ciara, one of the Americans said.

"What is a water tower?"

"It is what it says. It's a tower that holds water."

I still didn't quite understand but I decided to let it go. To me, it looked more like a stone monument. In fact, I discovered that evening that something significant had happened close to the tower, which could have provided a valid reason for a memorial statue. Frida mentioned that it was there that three of Eugene Terre'Blanche's supporters were shot dead in cold blood by a Black policeman. I remembered the incident because it made news headlines at the time.

In 1994, with weeks to go to the first democratic elections, Lucas Mangope, the President of Bophuthatswana, refused for the Bantustan to be incorporated into South Africa. He received support from right-wing Afrikaners, including Terre'Blanche's organisation, the AWB. This was a tactical mistake though because it inflamed the resistance to the President and turned members of his army and police force against him. The AWB retreated and as they did so, they started randomly shooting Black people. Members of the

Bophuthatswana forces returned fire and the car in which three AWB members were traveling was brought to a standstill. The three who were wounded, stumbled out of the car and were lying on the ground being questioned by soldiers in the presence of TV crews and photographers when a policeman shot and killed them.

“They were driving a blue Mercedes,” Ciara said. I was amazed at how she seemed to recall this detail. The images from those events were broadcast around the world but I didn’t pay attention to the car in which they were driving. Ciara was a petite, pale-skinned redhead, and I soon realised that she was the sort of person who retained such information.

“Mangope was a strange character,” I said.

“Oh yes! Did you hear about the donkeys?” Frida said.

It was a time in the evening, when after having had too much to drink, the conversation was uninhibited. We were sort of freewheeling and making loose associations. So, I thought that this might be an appropriate moment to tell them about what Richard Fisher had told me about donkeys on the road.

“Well, that is how it started,” Frida said and tried to bring the attention back to herself. She told us that one night Mangope’s wife was being chauffeured on one of the rural roads and narrowly avoided colliding with a donkey. As retribution, Mangope ordered the culling of donkeys. “20,000 donkeys were killed by the army,” Frida claimed. I realised that there were much more that I had to learn about this part of the world.

It all seemed preposterous but this turned the conversation to animal rights. I got up to pour Ciara and me another glass of whiskey. She had now taken a seat next to me. I told them about how I had recently converted to veganism. My decision to give up meat followed reading JM Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and thereafter works by Peter Singer and pamphlets by PETA.

Ciara said, “Being a vegan in Mafikeng is not easy. It might be easier to be a vegetarian. I tried getting tofu at Pick ‘n Pay. They didn’t have but the manager said that he would try to order some.” She had been a vegetarian for much longer. “I was 14 years old and I just announced to my family one day that I would no longer eat meat.”

She loved whiskey in acknowledgement of her Irish roots. A few days later, after having bonded over a bottle of whiskey, we had sex for the first time.

*

According to my calculations, the road from Lichtenberg was one of four ways to get into and out of Mafikeng. The other route to Gauteng from Mafikeng was via Zeerust. There was a third route and that took one to the border of Botswana. The fourth one took one deeper into the North West province to places like Stella and Vryburg, which were once part of the Republic of Stellaland. It was a perfect little town to lay siege to.

The Siege of Mafeking is probably what the town is best known for. For 217 days during the Anglo-Boer War, Boer forces besieged the town of Mafeking. The townspeople had to resort to eating horsemeat and even the meat of donkeys and dogs before the siege was lifted. The court interpreter, Sol Plaatje, wrote about how the Black townspeople received smaller and inferior rations of food than the white people.

The name of the town has gone through various versions: Mafeking, then Mafikeng, and now Mahikeng. Every new form of the name was an attempt to capture the original meaning of the name, “place among rocks.”

I read “Mafeking Road” by Herman Charles Bosman before I had been to Mafikeng. After I left, I read it a few more times. Unlike my story, very little of Bosman’s story actually takes place in Mafikeng. The story is about the cowardly retreat of Boer soldiers after the lifting of the Siege of Mafeking. But I am drawn to his story because of some key points that the narrator makes about storytelling, and which I think might be relevant to this story. He says,

For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe on your veldskoen, and at what stage of the story you must start talking about the School Committee at Drogevelei. Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out.

What follows is perhaps the part of the story that I should have left out.

I had expected Ciara to come to a braai to which a few of us had been invited one Saturday. The main attraction at the braai was two snoek, which the host had bought from some traders on the outskirts of the town. I had no idea how fresh snoek could have been transported so far away from the coast.

“Have you ever seen a fish grow in the ground?” Billy asked Tiego who also claimed to be a vegetarian but who ate fish.

Tiego tried to explain the different kinds of vegetarianism from ovo-, lacto-, pesco-, and ovo-lacto vegetarianism to veganism.

“Yes, I know that,” Billy replied. “But a fish doesn’t grow in the ground,” he continued, answering his own question. “So, if you eat fish, how can you call yourself a vegetarian.”

I found a quiet spot and called Ciara’s number. There was no answer. I tried a few more times and left two messages. By the end of the evening, she had not turned up at the braai and she had not returned my calls. It was an odd feeling of disappointment. I had looked forward to seeing her and wondered why she hadn’t let me know that she had changed her plans. When I returned to the group, the conversation had moved on. Billy and Tiego had turned on Thato, who listed all the achievements of Mangope.

“The ANC inherited all these world-class institutions,” he said. “What did they do with it? Bop recording studios, Mmabatho airport, Mmabanas, the arts council... They were just spiteful. All because they hate Mangope, they will destroy the things that he built to erase his legacy.”

Earlier in the week, I had been in a meeting to talk about the merger with Potchefstroom University and the debate had become tense with the other side. Someone from Potchefstroom University was arguing why they wanted to retain their name, their language policy and a few other things.

“We have a history,” he said in a heavy Afrikaner accent. “We are proud of what we have achieved. It didn’t just fall out of the sky. We fought hard for our right to exist. We can’t help it if you are not proud of your history or if you don’t have a legacy that you want to protect.” He recounted how the university stood apart even from other Afrikaans

universities in the country. They were Doppers who had broken with the main Afrikaans church, the Dutch Reformed Church, in the early nineteenth century.

The meeting spiralled downward after that. Someone from our side shouted, “Let’s cut the crap” and accused the speaker from Potchefstroom of racism. The meeting ended soon and we agreed to reconvene another day.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” I ventured, turning to the conversation at the braai. “Why would the government punish the same people who are voting for them?”

“That’s their foolishness. They don’t want to give him any recognition,” Thato answered.

“Actually, Mangope still has a lot of support around here,” Billy said.

“So, the siege of Mafikeng is continuing under same new guise,” I said.

“Ja,” said Thato, “and Billy has just admitted it. The ANC government is punishing the people of the town for their loyalty to Lucas Mangope.”

The next morning, Ciara called. “Hey, Robert. Why did you call me so many times yesterday?” she asked.

“What happened last night? I was waiting for you at the braai and I thought that something had happened.”

“I had gone to Botswana with the others. We just decided in the morning. Then when I came back across the border there were all this missed calls and messages waiting for me. I was so stressed out. I thought that there was trouble back home. But it turned out to be you and I had to listen to all these messages.” She sounded annoyed.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I was just a bit worried. Can I see you later?” I didn’t understand why she was irritated. I had just left two messages.

“I have a ton of things to do. Papers to grade and stuff. I will let you know. No. Let’s rather see in the week.”

Loneliness dogged me for most of my life and it seemed worst when I lived in Mafikeng. It was loneliness, I believe, that drove me to do some reckless things. These actions obviously also revolved around alcohol, which remained the most accessible cure for

loneliness. As the sun dipping towards the horizon in the sky the day after my chat with Ciara, I started to think about somewhere to go. Even though I knew better, I couldn't decline the temptation.

As I was driving down Tillard Street, a thunderstorm broke out. This was common in this part of the world. The prostitutes who usually stood down the street had run for shelter and the street was deserted. I went in the direction of Tusk Mmabatho.

Tusk Mmabatho was one of the monuments of Mangope's rule. The hotel and casino, formerly known as Mmabatho Sun, was another effort by the former president to elevate the status of the Bantustan. Older even than Sun City it was the first place that South Africans could go to gamble legally.

Another monument that Mangope erected was the airport, which boasted one of the longest runways in the world. Despite being labelled Mafikeng International Airport, the only commercial flights were to Joburg and back – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. With the support of Israeli investors, Mangope had also seen to the construction of an Olympic Stadium in the early 1980s. When I arrived in the town some 21 years later, the stadium had fallen into disrepair. It would never host an Olympic event.

But my favourite anecdote of Mangope's attempts to create an international capital city in the desert was his decision to import Jacaranda trees in order to emulate Pretoria. The problem was that the climate wasn't conducive. So, the Jacaranda trees that lined the main street of Mmabatho, although they produced a few lovely purple flowers, were all stunted and did not in any way recreate the impressive sight of the ones when they were in bloom in Pretoria.

I pulled into the parking lot of Tusk Mmabatho and walked to the casino. It was a busy weeknight and there was a small crowd around the roulette table. On a night like this, it was difficult to get a comfortable seat; not just a seat but a seat positioned just right so that you could reach all the spots where you wanted to place your bets.

I recognised one of the regulars in the perfect seat. She wasn't planning on leaving soon. "See how pretty it looks," she said to me, pointing at the chips of different colours spread over the roulette table. For the first time, I appreciated the aesthetics of the table

and understood why so many people were drawn to it. I had a few drinks and lost some money before I left.

I saw Ciara a few days later. She had calmed down and seemed less agitated than she sounded when we last spoke. After we had sex, we lied down together in silence on the bed. "I missed you," I said. She winced.

"What?" she asked. "I think that you have to go. No, you must go."

"What just happened?" Briefly, I thought that she was joking. But deep down I knew that she meant every word.

"Just go."

"You're being a bitch," I said.

It was true that in a few months, Ciara would be back in America or somewhere else in the world. The prospects of anything more continuing between us beyond then were slim. Perhaps it wasn't wise to suggest that what existed now was more than just an antidote for the isolation that both of us felt in this desolate town.

The next day, the entrance to the university was blocked off by burning tyres and other junk. While the meetings about the merger were going ahead and student leaders were involved it never occurred to the university management that dissatisfaction was brewing. The leaders of the protests demanded a meeting with the Minister of Education in order to put a stop to what they referred to as the takeover by Potchefstroom University. For the rest of the week, there were no classes.

Towards the middle of the week, I used the opportunity of the student protests to check in on Ciara and her circle of expats. They were having a small gathering at the house that Ciara and the other American shared. This time she seemed happy to see me. They were all desperate for news. I ended up in Ciara's bed again that night. "That was great," she said. "I was so tense before this. You were so good."

It took a court interdict and action by the police before classes resumed. The talks about the merger also resumed. I was preparing for a meeting when Ciara called me.

"Can we meet?" she asked.

"Ok. I will come around tonight."

“No, I want to see you now; in my office, not at my place.”

I walked over to her office. It was a tiny little space but she was lucky to have her own workplace on campus.

“How are you? Is something wrong?”

“I need you to stop coming around.”

“What do you mean?”

“You must stop bugging me. You are constantly around. Whenever, we have something you are always there in the background and then you wait till everyone is gone and you are still there. It’s a bit creepy. And now, my period is late.”

“I’m confused. I thought that everything was good between us again.”

“There is nothing between us. You have to stop seeing me. You are taking advantage of me.”

“How am I doing that?”

“You wait till I am drunk... Just go.”

I got up from my seat and left. That night, I went with Billy to an informal jazz club in Mmabatho. As I walked in, I saw someone looking at me. He turned to someone and said, “Boesman,” and laughed. Since I arrived in Mafikeng, many people had asked me whether I lived in Danville, which was the Coloured township. Once at a meeting in Potchefstroom, someone had asked me, “What nationality are you?” But I had never been identified as a Bushman, which I presumed was meant as an insult.

Over the next few days, I wrote some bad poetry and drank too much. In addition to everything that was going wrong, I felt betrayed by some of the students who had participated in the protests on campus. Somehow, I had been left out of the loop. The university management was convinced that the student protests were being fuelled by outside forces who were using the occasion of the merger to fight other political battles. It struck me as something that would have been said during apartheid when the grievances of dissidents were not taken seriously.

One evening, a few weeks later, my phone rang and I answered. “Hi,” the person on the other end said. It was Mpho, one of the people who worked in the university’s communications department. I wondered if there was something happening on campus at that time of the night.

“How are you? What’s up?”

“I am good,” she answered. “I am sitting here with someone. We were wondering whether you wanted to join us.”

“With who are you? Where are you?”

“Just hang on.” She handed the phone to the other person.

“Hello. How are you?” It was Ciara. “We are here at Tusk. Are you coming?”

I was tempted. But I felt comfortable at home and weighing things up, I didn’t think that it was worth going out to join them for drinks. That would probably have been the last time that we would have seen each other. At some point, I don’t know when, Ciara was gone and the merger with Potchefstroom University went ahead.

Not a problem

Centurion Mall is a patchwork of shops and restaurants. I was walking from one end to the other; in the direction of the lake from which mostly a foul smell arose. This was the same side where coincidentally most of the restaurants were located. My phone rang and it was difficult to hear above the noise around me. It was Christopher. There was a problem. This is what I could decipher from the voice on the other end.

“Sorry. Just say it again,” I asked.

“I spoke to Cecil. He says that he is gay.”

“Ja?” I was still struggling to understand what the problem was. Okay. I had to pause a bit and wrap my head around this. Years ago, Cecil was a six-year old boy. Lily, who was my girlfriend at the time, and I had taken my nephews and nieces out for the day. We ended up somewhere in a shopping mall outside Cape Town. The day was a success and at some point while walking, Cecil threw his hands up in the air and shouted, “Don’t make me any more happy!” That was my enduring memory of my nephew, which was very different from my memories of his father, Matthew.

There were lots that remained unsaid between Matthew and me. Matthew seemed to carry a heavy burden. Occasionally he said things, which came from seemingly nowhere and often they raised more questions. He had a tendency to sulk and I wondered if he was not perhaps born with a caul. I never asked my mother. I knew however of the superstition that babies born with a caul could see spirits and were often troubled by visions of dead souls.

Once I chatted to an Anglican priest who wrote poetry. “The Hebrew scriptures,” he said to me, “speak about the scapegoat who takes on all the sins of the tribe and is sent into the desert. A lot of our children are the scapegoats inheriting the trauma – conflict, forced removals.” I thought that, perhaps, in our family the scapegoat was Matthew.

The three of us, my brothers and I, all shared some traits but in Matthew all the bad ones seem to have been amplified. He was a night owl. He was restless. He was bad with money. He was impulsive. He spoke his truth without consideration for others. He had internalised the belief that bad luck followed him.

There were happy moments between the two of us. We went to go shopping in Claremont. I was a little boy and he decided to treat me to a milkshake. As a result, he didn’t have enough money for busfare. So, we walked home. I remember walking across the bridge over the railway line on our way to Hanover Park. I was happy.

On another occasion, I remembered sitting in the passenger seat with him driving. It was almost Christmas and Dione Warwick was singing on the radio. The song was “Heartbreaker” and every time that I heard that song afterwards, I thought about that moment when it felt that we were close without having to say anything to each other.

But then there were so many other moments that pierce my reverie. Eventually, one day, I confessed to a cousin, “I don’t like Matthew.” I experienced his wrath; the sudden mood-swings, the judgement and the vengeance. It was not just me. The rest of my family detected that something was amiss. We joked that he has a mad streak. He was not well. He seemed to lack any softness. And even when he cried when our father died, I could not find it in me to comfort him.

When we passed into adulthood, I decided to keep my distance from Matthew. I helped him out with his financial problems when I could. There were many – mostly because of bad calls on his side. After a few years, he owed me a large sum of money, which he promised to pay me back though I knew that he was not able to do so. I showed affection to his children. But mostly, I remained guarded because I knew his bad side.

About Cecil, I wanted to ask Christopher, “What must I do? What can I do?” But instead I said that we must talk when I next visited Cape Town.

When I got to Cape Town, I arranged to meet Cecil. He confirmed what Christopher told me. He was gay and he had known since he was at least 12 years old.

“So, what is wrong with that?” I asked.

“My father doesn’t want me to be gay. Uncle Christopher came to visit once and I overheard him asking my father how he would feel if one of his sons were gay and he said that he would kill him.”

Later, when I relayed this conversation to Christopher he said, “Yes. After he said that, I decided not to talk more. That’s why I thought that perhaps you must try. Do you remember how Matthew reacted to Barry?”

Christopher had a habit of keeping the TV on while we are talking. I found it very distracting. The TV was tuned to CNN and the coverage was about a mass shooting that took place at a gay nightclub in America. My attention was divided.

Barry was a cousin of ours who was gay. “How is Barry?” I asked. I hadn’t seen him in several years.

“He’s not doing well. He’s a bit of a drifter now.”

I remembered Barry as an exciting person with interesting friends that we used to meet when we visited his family home. Barry was different. He listened to classical music, dressed well, was a fashion designer and artistic. The church banned him from receiving Holy Communion. Matthew detested him. But Matthew was not alone in that regard.

I once saw another cousin of mine knitting. I must have been about nine years old and I asked her to teach me. She started and then she left me alone for a few minutes to practice on my own. I heard a conversation between her and another family member. When she came back, she grabbed the knitting needles and wool from me.

“No,” she said, “I don’t want you to turn out like Barry and then your parents will blame me.”

There were already some sensitivities around this. I had been known to play with dolls. Then one winter evening, I was walking home from church with my mother. I was dressed warmly and my head was covered with a cap till over my ears. Only my face was visible and a woman walked past and said, “Oh, what a beautiful girl.”

My mother shouted, "No! He's a boy." She seemed very disturbed by the mistake and the woman apologised.

Years later, the church changed its position on homosexuality and became more accepting. They started support groups for gays and lesbians and encouraged straight members to tolerate their homosexual brothers and sisters in faith. Matthew told me that a friend asked him what would be next. "Will the church also allow paedophilia?" he had asked.

"I don't have a problem with gays," he told me. "My only thing that I have always told my sons is that they mustn't do drugs and they mustn't stop believing in God. Other than that they can carry on with their lives. But the problem isn't Cecil. When he's at home, he's fine. But when he goes to visit Christopher and his family then he's a different person. Then he acts like a pansy. It's like they encourage him."

"So, you don't care if he's gay?" I asked.

"I don't have a problem, like I said. He just mustn't act like he is. He mustn't be open about it. I don't want anything bad to happen to him. There's a lot of violence in this country," Matthew said to me. "I don't want him to get hurt by people who hate gays." Just a few years earlier, a famous dancer, in an act of homophobia, was stabbed to death by a 14-year-old girl close to where Matthew and his family lived.

"So, how was the talk with Matthew?" Lily wanted to know when I got home.

"Okay," I answered. I told her about our conversation.

"So, what did you decide?"

"What is there to decide?" I detected irritation in my voice. "My brother is from a different generation. He just has a different temperament. He says he's fine but I know he isn't."

"Does he think that he has failed as a father?"

"Probably. In his narrow way of thinking that is exactly how he would feel. Until he comes to terms with what sexual orientation means, nothing will change. He's probably also embarrassed about what people will say. But this isn't my problem," I said. "Cecil isn't my

child. This isn't my responsibility. I don't even know how I got involved. They will need to figure things out for themselves. Fathers and sons always have to."

"Did you and your father figure things out?"

"It's not the same."

I decided to create some space between me and them again, like it was before. I followed Cecil on social media and I saw his transformation unfolding. He became more confident about himself and seemed to be enjoying life. I got to see photos of the person who I presumed to be his partner. I didn't check whether his parents followed his Instagram account.

When I thought that enough time had passed, I went to visit Matthew.

"Cecil has moved out," Matthew's wife told me when I asked about him.

"He lives close by," Matthew said.

"With his friend," my sister-in-law added.

"So, he's fine?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "He doesn't come to visit but the two of them, Matthew and him, take the same bus some mornings. One morning, he was with his friend and he said to his friend, 'That's my father.'"

Arbeit macht frei

I was in Cape Town for the weekend and my friend suggested that we go to the Obz Festival. Since moving from the Western Cape, on all my visits to Cape Town, I had decided to do the touristy things in between visiting family and hanging out with friends. Attending the Obz Festival fell into the right category.

Henry, my friend, came along with a friend of his, Ida. She was a Psychologist who lived in the same block of flats that he did. We found a spot outside a Mexican restaurant in Lower Main Road. It was up from where I used to live a few years previously and down from where a great uncle of mine died during the Spanish Flu epidemic. I only learnt about the death of this person when I went to search family records at the Mormon church in Mowbray. His death notice was the first to appear.

“What about your mother,” the lady at the reception desk said. “People often overlook the mothers when they do their family histories.”

“So, what?” I wanted to ask. My brothers and I were more interested in the history of the person who gave us our surname. But I was surprised to find the death certificate of someone with my surname and my eldest brother’s first name pop up on the screen. It was even more shocking to find that his place of death was just a few metres away from where I was living at the time.

For a long time, that was the only official record that I had of anyone close to an ancestor. But this man, a railway worker, died without children. His meagre belongings were catalogued on his death certificate. That was the end of that line of the family. If it wasn’t

for his brother surviving the epidemic my brothers and I would not have emerged into the world.

Ida, Henry and I sat outside in the heat. We ordered a pitcher of margaritas but couldn't quite decide on what to eat.

"We will decide later," Ida said on our behalf to the waiter. There was a lot of laughter all around us. It was summer and Cape Town was in a festive mood. The three of us had nowhere to go and we were going there with a lot of enthusiasm.

"I feel old," I said to them. "I have all these memories flooding back. Just on the other side of the street there used to be a club; I can't remember the name."

"Stones," Henry said.

"No. Not Stones. Before Stones. There was a night club at the bottom that used to play nice dance music. The name will come to me." It was a club where I spent many hours on weekends and even on some weeknights. "Some nights, we would just sit there, beers in hand, and watch the girls dance. There was that one song by Snoop Dogg that I heard there the first time," I sang, "Rollin' down the street, smokin' indo / Sippin' on gin and juice, laid back."

"With my mind on my money / And my money on my mind," Henry joined me in singing.

One Friday night, a pretty young woman asked if she could empty a jug of water over me. I said "no" to what could have been the start of an interesting relationship. But at that moment my mind was occupied by my mother's warning not to go out with wet hair. I really didn't want to catch a cold.

I moved into the digs in Observatory shortly after I started my first full time job. I shared the digs with three other people. I had graduated and needed to start working. So, I learnt of a vacancy in the Student Affairs Department and I was appointed in a temporary capacity after I spoke to the head of the section. The job was advertised and I applied. I watched nervously as the other applications came in. I was interviewed and got the job.

My first boss was very thrifty. My name was stencilled on to the back of the white Perspex nameplate that my predecessor had used, and nailed to my office door. The job

involved writing minutes for committee meetings, managing funds for visiting speakers, and helping student clubs and societies. I had to mediate between the Chinese and Indian factions of the Mauritian Students' Society. Another time, two beautiful students walked into my office and asked for the forms so that they could establish the Molecular Biology Society. Then one day my office phone rang.

"Hello," I answered.

"Is this Robert Daniels?" the man on the side asked.

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"This is John Coetzee from the English Department. Could you please send me the application forms for the Students' Fund for Visiting Speakers through internal mail?"

He had only won one Booker Prize and had not yet won the Nobel Prize but he was probably the most famous person to whom I had spoken at that point.

Soon, after starting my first job, I applied for another job. I was bored and overworked in my position at the university and applied for anything that would take me to the next pay level. So, I applied for the position of Personal Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor. I must admit that I had little idea of what the job entailed. The incumbent, someone who had I gotten to know, was far too polite to dissuade me from applying.

Sometime in February, I was invited to an interview for the position. It was only the second time that I had been for an interview for a job and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. My favourite exchange revolved around an arbitrary question.

"So, tell me Robert. What turns you on?" Dr Hamilton asked. "What is it that makes you tick?"

"I like reading."

"So, what are you reading at the moment?"

"Uhm. Well, I've just finished reading this book, *Origins Reconsidered*, by Richard Leakey."

"Ah. You know that I've met Richard Leakey? He's an amazing person. He doesn't have legs. Do you know that? He lost both his legs in a plane crash." I didn't know that but I

met Richard Leakey a few years later when I had to introduce him to the audience at a talk on human rights.

I thought that the interview took a turn for the better when we shared our mutual admiration for Leakey. I was therefore surprised when I didn't hear back for several months afterwards. I had just about given up when the call came.

"Robert," he said, "It is Dr Hamilton."

"Hello Dr Hamilton," I replied.

"By the way, what should I call you? What do your friends call you? Is it Robert or Bobby?"

At the end of the call, my strike rate for job interviews was confirmed as a solid 100%; two out of two. I was on a roll. A few days later, I took a call from Blanche Dixon. Blanche was the university's PRO and she called to invite me to a dinner at her house. "It's informal, Robert. You don't have to dress up. You'll see how informal Dr Hamilton and Alice are. They're very relaxed." She sent the invitation and directions to her house via internal mail.

My idea of informal was a tracksuit and running shoes. I didn't have a car yet and I was too embarrassed to ask Blanche about lifting arrangements so I walked from my digs to her house in Newlands.

Everyone was polite enough but it was clear that I had a very different understanding of "informal" from the others. Dr Hamilton wore smart trousers and a blazer. I guess the fact that he wasn't wearing a tie meant that he was dressed informally.

I didn't remember much of what we spoke about but at some point the topic of the Station Strangler came up. The Station Strangler was a serial killer who had lured several young boys to their deaths in Mitchell's Plain. In early 1994, as the country was preparing for elections several identikit images of the suspect had been released. We spoke about how the National Party was using the identikit images of a dark-skinned man to scare Coloured voters.

After the dinner, I walked back home. The walk took about an hour and at the point where Lower Main Road branched off from Main Road, a group of prostitutes tried to get my attention. I was almost home and I rushed ahead without responding to them.

After telling Henry and Ida this story, we somehow got onto the subject of work. Not the physical activity but in the sense of occupations, jobs or careers. This was interesting since there we were: a psychologist, a computer science lecturer, and me – a general manager. It reminded me of when I went to interview a few people for an assignment for my Industrial Psychology course.

The assignment was on choices of occupation. I decided to focus on minister of religion as an occupation. This is partly because I was doing some religious exploring and partly because I wanted to make the point that Jesus had made a mid-life career change from carpenter to preacher.

For the assignment, I interviewed someone who worked at the Cape Town harbour as an evangelist to sailors. I also interviewed the Anglican chaplain to UCT students. The interview with the evangelist was very entertaining. He told me about some of his encounters with fisherman and I felt that he was trying to convert me.

His most compelling story was about a hobo who stood up on a train station and shouted to God, "Deliver me from my drunkenness." Apparently, the hobo sobered up immediately and never drank again. I don't know how he confirmed either of these claims.

My actual work experience was limited. I had done stocktaking in a supermarket and then at the end of my first year of university, my father arranged for me to get a holiday job at the Epping Market. My father worked for the greater part of his life for the hospital services of the Cape Provincial Administration. His job at the Epping Market involved buying fresh produce for all the hospitals and my job was to assist him by keeping careful records of everything that was bought and at what price and then delivered to the different hospitals.

I would consider this my first real work experience. We had to get up at a ridiculous hour in order to get to work before the market opened for business. Fortunately, it was a short day. But I used the time early in the morning, when the others went on to the trading floor in order to buy stuff, to take a nap. I had to schedule the naps carefully in order to be awake when they returned with the goods. I also wrote poems on the back of old brown

envelopes which were marked with the Cape Provincial Administration as return address. In my sleepy state, akin to a drunken stupor, the poems seemed good. But I threw them all out. My father's advice to me was always to look busy and he encouraged me to carry a piece of paper with me wherever I went in order to avoid the impression of being idle.

My father, his white boss and I were admin staff and therefore a rank above the rest who were referred to as labourers. There was a lot of horseplay among the labourers, which I suspect was part of the physical aspect of the work and the fact that everyone in the workplace was a man. But there was someone who took his job very seriously. The cleaner explained his methodology to me once.

"I'm going to sweep all the dirt onto this heap now," he said. "Then I sweep another heap of dirt together. And once I have a few heaps, I combine them all before I scoop it up. That's how I organise my work." He took a great deal of pride in his job and thought through how to do it very carefully.

Another one of the workers, Adam, was an entrepreneur. He would buy on the side and sell. My father claimed that he was very wealthy. "You must never tell people where you work," Adam said to me once. "Because when people know where you work they want favours. It starts off with a few potatoes. Then they want squash and before you know it they want pumpkins. Rather tell them that you work at SASOL. Actually, no," he said after pausing. "If you tell them that you work at SASOL, they will ask for coal. Rather don't tell them anything."

I needed money for university so I had to explore all possible avenues for funding. In addition, to holiday jobs and other part-time work, I also managed to get financial aid, which was a combination of bursaries and loans.

One day, I received a letter in a yellow envelope. I opened it and read, "*We have pleasure in advising that the Selection Committee of the abovementioned Trust have decided to award you an amount of R1 500 for the 1989 academic year to proceed with your studies. We wish you every success in your future studies.*"

My father belonged to a union that was known as the Public Servants League and I qualified for a bursary with them. In order to get it, I had to hand in a copy of my results, my ID and my father's payslip as proof of his employment. Once a year, I would travel into Cape

Town and walk to the offices of the union to hand in certified copies of the required documents. Then I would be handed R100, which was the full value of the bursary.

At the end of my second year, the University started a part-time employment agency and I went to hand in my CV at the Student Advice Office. This led to my meeting Professor Ewan Gray at the Faculty of Medicine and one of the most bizarre experiences of my working career. My job was to transfer some numbers recorded in one book into another book. This was all done manually with pen and paper. I had no idea what I was doing and how this was contributing to whatever research Professor Gray was engaged with. Whenever I finished one hardcover notebook he would hand me another book. He discouraged me from working too fast since he had been allocated a certain amount for his research and he wanted to make sure that I was paid for all the hours that he had calculated this part of the work would take.

Professor Gray had a lovely secretary, Farida Baboo, who made sure that I was comfortable and had all my needs seen to. A few years later, I learnt that Professor Gray left his wife, married Farida and went to America.

“I’ve told this story to many people,” I said to Henry and Ida. “So, a few years ago someone contacted me. He said, ‘Robert, I think you once told me a story about how Professor Gray helped you out and went out of his way to invent extra work for you because you really needed the money.’ So, I said, ‘Yes, that’s true’ and he said, ‘I am in contact with his daughter. He is ill with cancer of the pancreas and has been told that he has about six months to live. I thought that the story was quite sweet and I wanted to relay it to his daughter.’ I told him to go ahead.”

“So, if he was such a good guy, why didn’t he just give you the money instead of making you do mindless work?” Ida was trying to be controversial, I thought.

“Well, I guess that it was about instilling a sense of duty, you know... the nobility of work; teaching the lesson that nothing in life is for free,” I answered.

“Arbeit macht frei,” she said.

I decided that I wouldn’t go to Ida if I ever needed a psychologist.

After my short stint with Professor Gray, a friend organised a part-time job for me at the Architecture Library. So, I had to go to meet the head librarian. She was a very fastidious, yet charming, individual. She had an impeccable handwriting and guided me on library protocols and etiquette. During the quiet times in the library, I browsed through books that had been returned before the assistant returned them to the shelves. I learnt a lot more about architecture than I cared to know.

We ordered another pitcher of margaritas. The waiter brought it to us.

“We really should order something to eat,” I said. I was now just a little bit more than tipsy and told them the story of the only time that I made a pass at a waiter.

I had gone out for drinks with a cantankerous friend of mine to a dodgy pub in Woodstock. We were being served by a pretty waiter in a white blouse. She had short sleek black hair and clear brown skin. During the course of the evening, I asked for her number. When she brought it to me jotted down on a piece of paper, she said, “Don’t let my boyfriend see that I gave it to you. He’s sitting right over there.”

Her name was Moeneeba, which she had written very neatly above her home telephone number on the bit of paper that she handed to me. I called her the next morning. By this time, the effects of the alcohol had worn off and in the cold light of day, I realised that I wasn’t really interested in pursuing anything more with her. We ended the conversation on a pleasant note and we didn’t have any contact after that.

The music in the background was getting less distinct and I could barely make out the tune that was being played. The images of my two companions faded and I found myself drifting off. I might have closed my eyes, as if meditating.

“Robert, are you still with us?” Ida asked and laughed.

“Yes,” I answered. “I just remembered that the club was called Dukes.” I wondered what would have happened if I had allowed that girl to pour the jug of water over my head.

Intruders

“Your neighbours are also Capetonians,” the real estate agent said when she sold Lily and me the house. I was to discover later that she meant not only that they were from Cape Town but, more importantly, that they were also Coloured. In the first few months of our move, we would see them occasionally and wave at them as we passed each other in our cars. The old white woman, Maureen, who lived on the other side of us was much more friendly and we exchanged introductions over the low wall between us within the first week of our move.

The house was perfect for us. It was located in a charming suburb in Pretoria with views of the Union Buildings, close to UNISA and the University of Pretoria, and accessible to the city centre, the highway to Johannesburg, the airport and shops. On a good day, one could hear the noise from the rugby stadium. It would not have been difficult to sell it, and it came at a good price. It needed some minor renovations on the inside and the empty pond in the garden needed repair. There were several loose bricks lying around and on over a few weekends I had gathered them and stacked them next to the pond. I wasn't sure what to do with them but at the back of my mind, I had an idea of building a small garden feature once I had rehabilitated the pond.

It was just the two of us and our three cats. We'd only ever had cats. But then we added a Jack Russell puppy, Carrie. We had emerged from a bad patch and one day when we were at the vet to buy special food for the one cat who had an allergy, there were some puppies up for adoption. We had no experience with dogs. She was extremely cute but difficult to manage. When I told someone at work about the puppy, he said, “Do you live on a farm?” Apparently, Jack Russell Terriers are highly energetic and need a lot of space to

exercise and for stimulation. They were after all bred for hunting. We did not know what we had let ourselves in for.

Lily had found a puppy training school close to us. One Saturday, we went. The class started with a video introduction of the training method that would be used since it was commonly accepted that the focus of the training should be on the owners and not the puppies. Carrie was a star pupil but after several weeks, we realised that she behaved only in class where she received and expected lots of positive reinforcement. Back at home, she refused to obey instructions. It was thanks to her that we finally met our neighbours; the fellow Capetonians.

Carrie had bolted out of our property and into the neighbours' yard. Lily and I went over to retrieve her. The man was home alone and invited us in. It was a beautiful house and we might have been slightly envious. He told us that it was just him, his wife and their daughter who lived there.

"How did the dog get out of your property?" he asked.

"I'm not sure if she slipped out when the housekeeper left today," I said.

"You must check. Maybe the width of the palisade fencing... or perhaps one of the vertical posts are loose."

"Yes," I said, "I will have a look and maybe put some wiring at the bottom."

We declined the offer of tea but before leaving we extended an invitation to them to join us for lunch on the coming Sunday.

On Sunday, the bell rang and I opened the gate for them. The girl, carrying flowers, was followed by her parents. Lily had prepared a beef lasagne with salad. We even had some desert. We learnt that he had grown up close to where Lily lived in Cape Town. The woman was from the northern suburbs of Cape Town. They met at university. She worked for a government department. He was an engineer. The daughter was precocious and joined in some of the conversation.

Over lunch they told us about living in the area. "These people are racists," she said. "I had family over from Cape Town once over the holidays. We had a braai at the back and during the afternoon, some of us were relaxing and taking a nap on the grass. The one

neighbour looked over the wall and shouted, 'You don't belong here!' We had done nothing to them; just minding our own business and having a good time."

"We don't worry with the people around here," the man continued.

They had problems with getting good help and they had to employ another person, in addition to the domestic worker, to drive their daughter to school and back. That explained the third car. He had a passion for shiny things and had a motorbike as well. They owned another house and were thinking of buying a restaurant franchise.

"So, Robert what do you do?" the woman asked.

I confessed to being a fellow civil servant. Lily had started a consultancy and, at the time, worked from home on most days.

"So, what do you think about the girl?" I asked while we were cleaning up after the guests had left.

"Oh, she had a lot to say," Lily answered.

"Ja, real miss know-it-all," I said.

We had always assumed that we wouldn't have children of our own, and if we really wanted, we might adopt at some point. We had ready opinions about other people's children, most of whom we found terribly annoying.

There was a burglary at their house a few weeks later. It happened in the dark of night, and the intruders were scared off by the panic alarm. They jumped over the wall into our property before making their escape. The next day, the man came around to trace the getaway route of the burglars.

"It's terrible," I said. "That feeling of being violated must be horrible. And the fact that you were home. I'm just glad that no-one was hurt."

"Yes," he said. "This neighbourhood watch is also useless like the residents' association." I had recently joined the residents' association and had been elected to the executive committee. I wasn't sure whether he was aware of this. As the two of us walked in our yard, we found a stainless steel dinner fork, which must have been dropped by the thieves as they were taking off.

“It’s strange,” he said, showing no particular interest in the fork on the ground. “Why did they come over here?” I thought that the fork might have fingerprints on it so I didn’t want to pick it up.

“That was an odd thing to say,” I said later to Lily. “It’s as if he is accusing us of having something to do with the burglary. And he’s so negative about everything. They should really get involved in the community instead of just complaining.”

“Well, they were negligent.” We had discovered from the neighbourhood watch’s crime report that one of their cars – a BMW – had the key in the ignition that night. Because it was parked in by another car, the thieves couldn’t drive it out of the driveway.

“It’s bound to happen if they’re going to show off their wealth like that,” I said. “These criminals know who to target.”

“Oh, yes. They are ostentatious,” Lily said mockingly. I loved to use the word, “ostentatious.” “By the way, I think that there’s a mouse in the house.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look here.” She opened one of the kitchen cupboard doors and pointed to little black droppings.

“Oh dear. We will have to get something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I will have search for something on the internet. There must be some humane way to get rid of them.” I was still in my PETA-period and aimed to do as little harm as possible to sentient beings. “Of course, I don’t understand why these cats are so useless. Shouldn’t they be catching mice?”

What we thought was a mouse turned out to be a rat. I saw it one day, scurrying around at the back where some logs of wood were piled up. I knew from its size and the long tail that it was a rat. I hoped that there wasn’t more than one breeding on the property. There is a reason that Mickey Mouse is not a rat. Mice are small and cute. Rats are vermin who carry disease.

On a weekday, when I arrived home from work, Lily told me that Carrie must have run out again. We weren’t certain when or how she got out of the property. We designed,

printed and put up a few posters in the area. No-one contacted us and we assumed that she was gone for good.

It was bad timing with the dog away and a rat on the loose but I had to go on a mission to the Comoros. Our ambassador to the Comoros had an inflated sense of the geopolitical significance of his posting and, exploiting the President's desire to establish us as a regional superpower, had argued for and been granted a large South African delegation to help with the Comorian elections.

I went to a travel clinic to get my Yellow fever vaccination and anti-malaria tablets. I asked a colleague to go with me and had him talk to me to distract me while the nurse administered the injection. We flew via Tanzania and from Tanzania, we took a flight on Yemenia. It was the first time in my experience of flying that taking off was accompanied by a prayer. I found this pretty ominous. We had a bumpy landing and the steward assured me that this hadn't happened before. Three years later, Yemenia Flight 626 crashed into the sea off the coast of the Comoros shortly before landing. Of the 142 passengers and eleven crew that had been on board only a young girl survived.

*

When we exited the aeroplane at just after midnight, I was hit by intense humidity. I couldn't understand the obsession with this country made up of three islands. The French had decided to hang on to the fourth island in the archipelago from where they maintained a military presence. In addition to various United Nations agencies, there were the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the Arab League, and the Francophonie that were all involved in some way on the islands.

"This country has had more than 20 coups or attempted coups since independence from France," Johan said to me over dinner in an attempt to brief me. Johan was the IT guy at the embassy. Behind his back some people alleged that he was actually a spy, and I discovered that when he was drunk, which was often, he did his utmost to cultivate this impression. He certainly lacked the sophisticated mannerisms of James Bond. I had nothing on which to make a definitive assessment. If he was a spy, he would be following in a long line of French and white South Africans who had turned the Comoros into their playground. Bob Denard came to mind.

“So, beside mercenaries and the Coelacanth, what else is Comoros known for?” I asked in order to keep him talking.

“Not much more. Well there is ylang-ylang, and then there is always speculation that gas might be discovered off the coast somewhere.”

We were talking in the restaurant of the Itsandra Hotel where I was staying. We were sharing a particularly bad bottle of white wine between us. It was the best that the hotel had in stock. There was a strong scent of citronella in the air. In addition to cream which I had applied to all my exposed parts someone had also placed a candle on the table to ward off mosquitoes. I was wondering if Johan had any views on the name of the capital, Moroni. This was also the name of the angel who had supposedly revealed himself to the founder of Mormonism. I had difficulty making sense of this since the country was majority Muslim.

I wasn't sure what purpose I was serving on the Comoros. “They seem to have everything under control,” I told the ambassador. We had an argument earlier because I had gone to the bank with Azali, the driver and interpreter, to change some currency instead of using the services of a local woman that he had suggested. But he had missed the appointment that we had made to meet at the hotel and I couldn't wait any longer.

“You mustn't trust these people!” the ambassador shouted at me. “I know who you must deal with. I cannot help you if you do business with people that I don't know.” He came across as a character from a Graham Greene novel. He was a dubious personality, and I soon discovered that he was intensely disliked by some of the locals. I had picked up that he had a habit of walking into shops and taking small items without paying for them. He had already run up a tab at the hotel with I was wary of being stuck with and which I would have to pay on checking out.

That evening, he invited the South African delegation on the island for a braai at his residence. I met his wife, a Swedish woman whom he had met and married while in exile during the apartheid years. He left the goat carcass in the hands of another embassy official who proceeded to overdo it resulting in the meat being even tougher than I expected it to be.

The day before the elections, I left the morning meeting at the embassy and asked Azali to take me to a nice beach. Thus far, I had only looked upon black lava rock along the coastline. We drove to a beach with white sand. When we stepped out of the car, we saw a photo shoot taking place in the distance. They must have chosen this beach for its secluded location because the woman being photographed was topless. When the model saw us, she covered up her breasts and the photographer put his camera down. We stood around a bit longer before we drove off.

“Do you know where the hotel is that Sol Kerzner built?” I asked. “Take me there.”

“Yes,” he said. Once the country’s only five-star hotel with a casino and 182 rooms, Le Galawa Beach Hotel now stood abandoned. “It was just here that the plane landed in the ocean,” Azali said. “The people who were living in the hotel and the local people helped to rescue the passengers.” He was referring to the hijacked plane that ran out of fuel and crashed into the Indian Ocean about nine years earlier. The flight was hijacked by some Ethiopians seeking political asylum. The plane ran out of fuel and crash landed into the bay. Three quarters of the passengers, crew, as well as the hijackers died. There were about 50 survivors with injuries. The people and staff staying at Le Galawa at the time helped with the rescue operation, using every boat available.

Death was always lurking somewhere in the vicinity on the Comoros. Even during daytime, I had seen large black bats flying high in the sky. I had at first thought that they were a kind of bird. When Azali told me that they were fruit bats, a shiver ran down my spine and I thought of the rat that had set up residence back home.

I woke up early on the day of the elections. At one of the polling stations, some South African observers had caused confusion by insisting that the ballot papers had to be stamped before being issued, like was done in South Africa. I had to explain to them that that was not the case in the Comoros. But by then, they had already taken control of the voting process and had stamped and issued hundreds of ballot papers.

“We are just observers,” I explained. “You cannot do this. You just observe, make notes and then write a report to say whether you think that the elections were free and fair. Don’t interfere in the process.”

When I bumped into a South African journalist later at the hotel, he said that the elections went well. "Nothing unusual," he said. "Here and there, there were children trying to vote but no large-scale voter fraud." He was about to file his report. Sambi went on to win the elections. During the campaign he had promised not to impose Shariah law. That pleased the French and all the other observers.

That night there was a party at the hotel. They had organised a band of local musicians to provide live entertainment. The band leader was happy to hear that we were from South Africa. "I've been to South Africa," he told me. "I played at Sun City." Then he led the band in performing "Malaika" for us.

*

I was in transit in Tanzania and had just gone through passport control when Lily called. At first, I couldn't make out what she was saying. After some time, I picked up through her sobbing and the airport noise that her father was very ill and probably dying. She was going to Cape Town.

When I landed in Johannesburg, I only had one night at home before I had to make plans to leave for Cape Town to join Lily. I could hear the rat scampering about in the kitchen. I would have to deal with it when I got back.

Lily's father had died of organ failure by the time that I landed in Cape Town. On a Sunday, just two years earlier, I answered the phone. It was Christopher. "Where are you?"

"In London."

"It's about Mummy," he said. He didn't have to say more.

I was booked to fly back to South Africa the next day in any event. But from Johannesburg, I had to make plans to get to Cape Town. Her body was in the cold room at the funeral undertakers. I didn't know how to refuse to go to see her when Christopher and Matthew took me. I went in alone with the undertaker and looked at her face. I didn't know what else to do. I nodded and left the room in which she stayed behind.

I wasn't quite ready to deal with another death. After her father's funeral, Lily decided that we had to take his dogs with us. He had spoilt them and there was no-one else in Cape Town who could take care of them without separating the three. So, Miranda,

Skipper and Trey followed us to Pretoria. We were lucky that we had a big property. So, the dogs had plenty of space to run around.

Trey had a heart condition and died soon after his arrival in Pretoria. A few days after that, Lily called while I was at work. Her voice was breaking up and I dropped the call to drive home. Skipper had been attacked by another dog. She had called the security company and the guard who arrived had tried to beat the dog. After several beatings the dog ran off. There were two dogs but only one was attacking while the other smaller one was just barking in the back.

I realised that I had to see how I could reinforce the fence and gate in order to prevent dogs from coming in and out of the property. We took Skipper to the vet. He had sustained some injuries, which were not too serious. We discovered that the offending dog belonged to new people who had moved in across the road from us. I walked over to the house but I couldn't find a bell to ring at the gate. The property was in darkness but I knew that someone was at home. I shouted, "Hello! Excuse me." There was no answer immediately but after a few minutes a little girl peeked out. "Is your father at home?" I asked.

A while later, a stocky Black man walked to the gate. I explained the reason of my visit to him while we stood outside with the palisade fence and gate between us. I could hear from his accent that he was not South African and from his general demeanour I took him to be an academic, probably an expat at either UNISA or the University of Pretoria. Yes, he was aware that his dog had been running out.

"We tied the dog up but then the neighbours next door complained and said that they would report us to the SPCA. But we need a dog to keep guard here. I am worried that the dog might attack the small children. But there's a lot of crime here, we've been told."

"Ok," I said, "but you have to do something. You said yourself now that the dog is a danger to your children. And if he's attacking other dogs you don't know what he might do next."

"He's normally fine. He only runs out when the small one does and then he follows. I will close up all the holes in the fence."

"Ok. Please, do something," I pleaded.

I told Lily about the encounter when I got home.

“Well, there some more bad news,” she said.

“What?”

“Look in the fridge.”

I opened the door. The rat was scuttling about in a bowl of mashed potato that Lily had made the previous day. I closed the fridge door. I shared Winston Smith’s fear of rats.

“My god,” I said. “I’m not touching that thing. I’m going to buy rat poison. Fuck PETA.” In the morning, the rat would have had its fill and left the fridge, I thought. Now, I was just too stressed. “I’m going to bed,” I said. “I will deal with it in the morning.”

Lily gave me a look as if to say, “That’s what you always say.” I was not in the mood to argue. I went to brush my teeth.

The next morning, the rat had vacated the fridge. We decided to throw everything out not knowing what it had touched. “I will see to this today,” I promised. Lily was going out for the day.

I went to buy rat poison at the nearest supermarket. It was a gloomy Saturday. I assumed that the Blue Bulls were playing at Loftus Versfeld. It was too quiet on the streets meaning that those who weren’t at the stadium were watching the game at home or in bars. Someone once warned me, jokingly, to be wary of being out on a Sunday if the Blue Bulls lost on the Saturday. “Their supporters will be in a bad mood,” he said and laughed.

There was a low-key restaurant close to the supermarket where I bought the rat poison. I went in for a light snack and a glass of wine. The waitress brought my order when my cell phone rang. It was Maureen, the old woman next door to us. “Robert,” she said, “there’s a racket coming from your place. Are you home? The dogs are barking. I mean, I’ve heard them bark before but never like this. I think that something’s wrong.”

“Hi Maureen. I’m just out right now. Thanks for letting me know. I should be home soon.” If someone was breaking in the alarm would go off and the security company would despatch a guard. I finished my glass of wine and paid the bill. It was a ten-minute drive home.

I opened the gate as I entered the driveway but something was blocking the entrance. I got out of the car and stepped towards Miranda's bloodied body. It was a red and white furry heap. I walked in and called for Skipper. He walked out cautiously to me. I didn't know how I was going to relay the news to Lily. I waited for her to come back home.

She seemed more calm than me when I showed her Miranda's remains. I dug a hole and buried her in the garden next to the empty pond. "Maybe, I will build that garden feature here and it can mark her grave," I thought.

"I bought the rat poison," I said when I walked into the house. "I'm going to put some pellets in the kitchen cupboard."

"Ok," Lily said. She was watching something on TV. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I'm not hungry."

Later, I told her that I was going across the road.

"Why?"

"I need to tell this guy of the dog what happened. I mean, it can't go on like this. What next?"

Again the house was covered in complete darkness. I couldn't find a bell to ring. I shook the gate and shouted. The man came walking out slowly.

"Your dog killed my dog," I said.

He looked confused.

"You said that you are going to do something. Now my dog is dead. It was my father-in-law's dog. My late father-in-law. My wife is very upset. I told you that your dog is a problem. What are you going to do?"

"I am still thinking about it."

"Well, when are you going to stop thinking about it? What must still happen? It cannot go on like this," I shouted.

"I am also a man," he screamed. "You, white people in South Africa," he continued, "are used to going around telling Black people what to do. I will make my own decisions. Please, go. Leave me and my family alone. You are scaring my children."

I stood in silence. I was not about to humiliate myself by trying to explain to him that I was not white. He would laugh if I said that I was Black. And if I said that I was Coloured, he would perhaps only know it as an American slur not having spent enough time in South Africa. I didn't have the patience to stand there and explain the complicated roots that emerged in Europe, Asia and Africa to make me stand there in front of him, asking him to take responsibility for his dog that killed my dog. I could understand why he might think that I was a white South African. Perhaps I should have done more to hide my anger, which might have presented itself as arrogance. I shook my head and walked away.

The next morning, I went to make myself a cup of coffee. I was angry and I was toying with the idea of asking a colleague at work to lend me his gun or better still to come over and shoot the dog. He was a lawyer. So, perhaps he might not agree.

In the kitchen, I noticed red spots leading towards the back door. It was blood. I followed the trail to the door. When I opened the back door, I found the body of the rat. It had managed to squeeze itself through the opening at the bottom of the door before it died. I felt disgust and looked for a spade to pick up the remains.

"What's happening?" Lily shouted from inside.

"Nothing," I answered. "I'm just doing something."

I carried the dead rat down to where the pond was; still empty. I collected pieces of wood and twigs and built a small pyre on top of the pile of bricks next to the empty pond. Then I threw the body and top and set it alight to make sure that there would be nothing left for Skipper or the three cats to consume. The garden feature was not built and the pond remained as it were; an empty shell.

Child of God

Over dinner one evening in a nice Indian restaurant in Observatory, Maira said “no.” The restaurant was called Cassandra’s. Once to my shame, a few years later, I forgot to tip a waiter in that same restaurant. It was an honest mistake. On another occasion, I asked a waiter whether they served salomies.

“No,” she replied.

“Do you serve rotis?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you serve curry?”

“Yes.”

“Well, can you wrap the curry in the roti?”

A friend reminded me of this incident when we were both a bit older. He thought that it was one of the funniest things that he had ever witnessed me do. In good conscience, I didn’t mean for it to be funny.

The restaurant was owned by a white woman who named the establishment after herself. Inside, on one of the walls, the story of her journeys in India and of her immersion in Indian culture and spirituality was recounted in elegant lettering. Another of my friends once said, “She didn’t quite immerse herself in the art of good Indian cooking.” I don’t agree with everything that my friends say. I thought that the food was quite good hence my having visited the place a few times.

I was in my mid-twenties when I decided that I was in love with Maira. Maira was a big fan of (in fact, besotted with) Michael Stipe. At the time, I wasn't too sure who Michael Stipe was. She had managed to find a way to add random excerpts of song lyrics written by him to her e-mail signature. So, in our e-mail exchanges, if I scrolled right to the bottom of her messages, I was treated to new words of wisdom from Michael Stipe on a regular basis.

I eventually discovered "Losing My Religion", and realised that Michael Stipe was the lead singer and songwriter of the band, R.E.M. "Losing My Religion" is a song that can easily slip into the soundtrack of one's life. Now, there's a worn-out phrase. I've heard 30-something-year-olds talking about soundtracks of their lives? "What life?" I want to ask. But, to come back to the song, it has a haunting melody and some really good catchy lyrics.

The only other popular song that I can recall from my twenties that referred to religion was "What I Am" by Edie Brickell. I found these lines from the song quite amusing: "Philosophy is the talk on a cereal box / Religion is the smile on a dog". But "Losing My Religion" seemed more appropriate as a theme to my own experience of leaving my religion behind. I discovered subsequently that, according to Stipe, the song was not about religion so much but more about obsession.

In hindsight it was quite a relief that Maira didn't feel the same way about me as I professed to feel about her. It saved me (and her) a lot of future trials. Perhaps Michael Stipe would have said it better, "Trying to keep up with you / And I don't know if I can do it / Oh no I've said too much / I haven't said enough."

I am not sure what Maira's religion was – if she, in fact, was the adherent of any. She didn't hang around long enough for me to find out in any case. If she was a Hindu, which was a strong possibility, there were not many Hindus that I knew before I met her. My father had a Hindu friend and one day, I went with him to visit the family at their home in Rylands, which was the only Indian area that I knew of in Cape Town. It was a Saturday afternoon and I was distracted by an ornament on display in their living room. It was a human figure with three heads.

"What's that?" I asked the son.

"That's our god," he replied.

When I relayed this story to my mother, she had one more reason to disapprove of my father's friendship with Mr Naren.

"There are idols in that house," she complained. This was added to the prior sin that my father and Mr Naren drank whiskey together.

Growing up as I did, my life existed in the innermost of a series of concentric circles. In terms of physical space – where I lived – I was excluded from interacting with people who were not classified "Coloured". So, that immediately cancelled out people who were White, Black and Indian. Well, Mr Naren's son ticked the Indian box.

One day, my father took me along to do an odd job (of painting) at the house of someone with whom he worked. I wasn't quite sure what the working relationship was between my father and the white man for who he did the painting job. I remember the house in a quiet suburb, the TV in the living room (we didn't have a TV at the time), and the little boy who was at home but didn't play with me. While my father painted the outside walls of the house, I found ways to entertain myself. Now and then, the boy would pop his head into view and pull a funny face at me.

When I was at high school, I was chosen to participate in the UCT Mathematics Olympiad. I had never been to the main campus of the University of Cape Town previously. I got lost looking for the venue where I was meant to write my test. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that I had to write the Afrikaans version of the test; Afrikaans being my home language. Finally, I thought that I found the venue. As I was about to enter the lecture hall, a white girl exited and said to me, in Afrikaans "This isn't for your people."

Inside the circle of racial identity there was a smaller circle that excluded people who were not Christian. Our next-door neighbours were Muslim. During Ramadan, they would bring over food after they had broken their fast. My mother would give the Muslim children in the neighbourhood coins when they came to greet on Eid. So, while we never engaged in trying to make sense of one another's beliefs, we managed to live side-by-side in relative peace.

One day, I stood in the council office in a queue with my mother to pay the rent when a man walked in and started speaking loudly, addressing everyone in the hall. "Ladies and gentleman," he said. "Just this morning, someone I knew passed away suddenly. He

wasn't ill. He was young. He was healthy. He had a family. But just like that he was taken away. We don't know when it will be our turn. So, I am just here to tell you all that you must reconcile to God. Turn away from sin and accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour." Then he walked out again.

A man with a kofia behind us shook his head and said, "Why can't it be like in the old days when Christians just kept to themselves and prayed in churches and left the rest of us alone?"

That man's brand of Christianity was prevalent where I grew up. It was the same version as practised by people who preached on open squares outside supermarkets on a busy Saturday. Sometimes, a large tent would be pitched on an open field to announce the arrival of a popular preacher. For days thereafter, the tent would be filled by the curious, the faithful and those who wanted to turn away from a life of sin. At night, one could hear the generators whirring to keep the lights on inside the tent and to keep the sound system going. I had never ventured into one of those tents but from what I heard at school from others who attended the gatherings, the preacher usually preached powerfully, the music was good, and miracles happened. Among others, these miracles included people being healed from illnesses and demons being cast out. None of these happened in my family's church.

Another popular venue that was used by such preachers were busy train carriages. One of my cousins recounted an anecdote. Every day on his way to work, a train preacher would get on at the next station after his. The preacher would greet everyone and then start speaking in a loud voice, proclaiming damnation on various sins and promising salvation to the captive audience. But one morning, when my cousin stepped into his usual carriage there was already another preacher on board. He must have started his sermon at a previous station. So, when the regular preacher climbed aboard at the next station he was faced with a conundrum. He decided to sit down and support the new preacher by shouting "Amen" and "Hallelujah", presumably hoping that the sermon would end soon so that he could take over. But this didn't happen and as the train came nearer to its final stop in Cape Town, the normal preacher stood up, walked over to the new guy, put his hands on his head and said, "In the name of the Lord, please keep quiet!"

Our religion was a much more reserved affair. And this was probably the smallest innermost circle in which I existed. Because from my earliest memory, I believed that I was a child of God, which made us separate from the rest of the world. So, in a nutshell, while there were other people who were good people and while there were other people who called themselves Christians, only we would go to heaven.

There were a few other curious things about our religion. One thing that stood out was the belief that Jesus was going to return at any time. This meant that we had to be on our guard constantly because when he returned, he was going to take those with him who were ready. The rest – the vast majority of the world – were going to be left behind on earth and subjected to a lot of suffering leading up to the end of the world. The church was also extremely conservative and supported apartheid and some of its German leaders were Nazis before and during the Second World War.

I wasn't sure when I started doubting. I suspect that most religions required some sort of suspension of rational thought. But, as I got older, I found it more and more difficult to reconcile some of the more outlandish claims of my religion with what my head was telling me. I suspect that the ultimate deal-breaker is an unanswered prayer. One can spin most things when it comes to religion but a god not giving in to a reasonable request from a child must count as unforgivable. Not all my requests were reasonable, I admit. So, I did the whole act with a few bricks as a stone altar and dry twigs on top and asked God to set it alight. One of the prophets in the Bible did it successfully on a larger scale. But in my case God didn't oblige. But then I also prayed to ask God to make my father stop drinking so that we could all be happy. God also didn't answer that prayer.

Despite all my doubts, my whole life was invested in this religion. My whole extended family and most of my friends were all adherents. Then to make matters worse, I started a relationship with Amelia at this awkward time. I was on the cusp of something new; I just didn't know what. I had become increasingly irritated with people in the church. I had just started university and felt that the demands of the church were beginning to interfere with my studies.

I can hear Michael Stipe singing, "Oh life is bigger / It's bigger than you / And you are not me." At some point I must have heard it played on UCT Radio. Because after successive years of participating in the UCT Maths Olympiad, I became a UCT student. I must have

found my way to that same venue in which I wrote the Maths Olympiad test several years previously. But it all seemed very different.

I found a route that I liked to walk from Mowbray up to the main campus. I passed an old windmill just before the pedestrian bridge that crossed the M3, as I would walk towards Devil's Peak. Mostert's Mill was about 200 years old and I was curious to know what it looked like inside. The structure represented a milestone in Dutch colonial expansion in the Cape. It was around here, close to the banks of the Liesbeeck River, that Jan Van Riebeeck first usurped land from the Khoi people and granted large tracts to the first Dutch free burghers. One day, the gate to the mill was unlocked and I walked in towards the wooden door in the mill's main structure.

I dared to open the door to explore some more when I became aware of a presence behind me. He was an old man, dressed in overalls and a dusty brown cap. We greeted. When I asked, he couldn't tell me much about the mill or the old whitewashed building next to it. "I am just the caretaker," he said. "But tell me: Have you given your heart to Jesus?" I looked at him with confusion, shook my head, greeted and walked out towards the university campus.

It became a bit lonely. I was caught between my private thoughts and a public life. I had to go through all the motions of going to church and pretending to believe what those around me were believing. But secretly I was moving further away from the religion into which I was born. And I was feeding the clandestine existence more by what I was reading and thinking.

By the time that I met Eric, I was ready to be pulled away from it all. He said that it was odd to find a young man in the Religion section of the Cape Town City Library on a Saturday morning. He was right. He shared some of the books that he liked and so a significant friendship started – never mind that he must have been twice my age at the time. He was married once, he told me later, but was single when I met him. We spent lots of afternoons together after my classes and on weekends. Many years later, after Eric had died, someone I met claimed to have known him and alleged that he had a "naughty" side. I never got to know that side.

I wrote letters to announce my decision to leave the church, which might have been construed as being melodramatic. My parents were inconsolable as if I had died. Faced with the prospect of my eternal soul being damned, I suspect, in some ways I had died to them. At least, one of my brothers was unforgiving. I didn't cover myself with glory insofar as Amelia was concerned. I tried to convince her that I was leaving her for religious reasons, which was true to an extent but also cowardly. It wasn't as if my decision required me to go on a long solo journey and that she would be some distraction on that path.

For some reason, I felt real anger at everyone. I had what I wanted but it wasn't on my terms. I blamed the church for having put me in this untenable position where the only way in which I could live my life freely, I had to cause so much pain to others. Seeing the hurt that I caused meant that I had to justify my decision, which meant lashing out a bit and obsessing to convince myself and others that I made the correct decision

What does it mean to be an adherent of a religion? It is like being in a relationship. It is a close and deeply intimate thing that also involves a lot of public actions. There are rituals to express one's love and commitment. Sometimes, the relationship doesn't work out.

For a long time after I left the church, I still lurked about on the internet and visited its website and sought out chat groups. I picked verbal fights with members and read official and dissenting views. So, "Losing My Religion" was perhaps an appropriate theme because these activities became an obsession.

I had to let go because my family remained members of the church. So, over the years I attended funerals, weddings, confirmations, and baptisms. I made amends, sort of, with some people.

My nine-year-old daughter claims to be an atheist. I suggested to her that perhaps she is a pagan because she believes in fairies. But unless she finds a religion of her own one day, she will not experience the sadness of losing it. Nor will she know the relief of giving up trying to make sense of everything after having tried so hard to figure it all out.

After several years, I found myself living within walking distance of the university again. On a Sunday morning, I noticed some smoke on the mountain. It was just to the right and slightly above the university. I didn't pay much attention to it at first. But soon, with the

cacophony of helicopters trying to douse the flames and as news reports starting coming in, it became clear that this was not a small fire. The university's main campus was soon affected with devastating consequences to the library, student residences and some other buildings. The fire jumped across the highway and started an assault on Mostert's Mill.

It was now more than twenty years after I had first set foot on the grounds where the mill stood. Just a few weeks earlier I had taken my daughter to view it as part of her school project on historic landmarks in the area. Later in the afternoon, on the Sunday of the fire, we went back as close as we could to view the gutted windmill. During the course of the next few weeks, we would learn that the Friends of Mostert's Mill would do all they could to restore the monument.

Shortly after that, I bumped into Maira and her two children. It was a Saturday afternoon, and we were all together at an outdoor market. We greeted but didn't find much more to say to each other. I wondered how much she remembered and if she still showed such deep reverence for Michael Stipe.

Glossary

Arbeit macht frei	German phrase meaning “work sets you free” known for being inscribed at the entrance of the Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz.
Coelacanth	Fish that was thought to be extinct till it was found to be living in the Indian Ocean, mostly around the Comoros.
Doekom	Traditional healer in the Cape Malay community.
Drifter	Person without any fixed abode.
Fruit bats	Tropical bat; among the largest bat species.
Koophuise	Afrikaans term meaning “self-owned house” as opposed to one owned and rented out by a municipality.
Laatlammetjie	Afrikaans term meaning “late lamb”, referring to a child born long after other children in a family.
Milly Vanilli	Duo who had their Grammy Award revoked when it was discovered that they did not sing any of the vocals on their music releases.
PETA	Acronym for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.
PT	Physical training; also known as physical education.
SPCA	Abbreviation for Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
Sub A	First year of formal schooling; now known as Grade 1.

Tokoloshe	Mischievous spirit in African mythology.
UNISA	Colloquial name for the University of South Africa.
Yemenia	National airline of Yemen.
Ylang-ylang	Tropical tree, commonly grown in the Comoros, and used for perfumes.