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Local Folklore

A Novel By Clayton Truscott

Part 1:

1984

Terence Jacobs never minced his words. He was quite comfortable telling the waiter at the Flaming Arrow Spur why there wasn't a tip added to his bill. "The service was shocking and the food was average. You should go to a restaurant in New York," the cold man said. He smiled at his wife, Rose, and then winked at his son, Peter, who'd been promised a trip to the United States as soon as he was old enough to go on such a long trip without being a pain in the ass. Terence rolled his eyes at the waiter and signaled for a pen. "Once you've been there, nothing in this town is any good," he said, signing a cheque. They were celebrating the boy's seventh birthday.

It had been a decent evening, despite the muddled orders, the long wait between drinks and the clown singing Happy Birthday at their table twice – which Peter loved. Terence even caught himself having a good time. He stared at Rose and listened to his boy tell stories about school; something his own father would never had done for him. Terence only became vile and opinionated when money changed hands – and this was precisely the reason people paid him to handle theirs.

It was the last week of November and there had been summer showers. The pavement glistened under the street lamps. Peter was sleepy and asked if he could lie down on the back seat on the way home. "No, my Pumpkin Eater, sit up, please," said his mom. "You'll fall asleep and then Daddy will have to carry you upstairs. You know he's got a bad back." Rose leant over and tickled her child's leg to keep him awake. Terence was glad she said it was his back that gave him issues. He thanked Rose with a pinch. It was really piles, which he suffered from chronically. Sitting down for fifteen hours a day and drinking whiskey at night had become a way of life for him, along with enduring grape-sized lumps in his ass, which felt like they'd explode when he exerted himself.

A light drizzle started falling when the Jacobs family approached the S-Bend in Humewood, a tricky road that goes into a long, blind turn as it lines up with the

beachfront. This was before the municipality had put up warning signs and a big island to stop traffic coming from both directions without any concrete between them. Terence cranked up the windscreen wipers and reached for the cigarettes in his jacket pocket. He never took his eyes off the road while lighting one. The car in front of them was speeding. Terence knew it was taking the S-Bend too quickly in such wet conditions; the stupid driver slid into the oncoming lane, as he predicted. Terence braked and kept a safe distance. "Bloody asshole," he said, slowing to a near standstill as the car in front regained control and came back towards the legal side of the road. Rose gasped.

Despite exercising caution, neither Terence nor Rose would notice the intersection light turn red. That's when a van hit them from the side. A loud bang, followed by squealing tires. Both vehicles broke through the fence that bordered the road, and rolled down a grassy embankment. People who were drinking at the nearby Gravy Train Pub heard the noise and ran over to see the accident.

Terence broke his left arm in three places and Peter sustained minor bruising; the child had fallen asleep and was completely relaxed when the cars collided. "Rose, are you okay?" Terence asked. He was stuck on his right side, unable to turn around. "Peter check if your mom's okay, please boy! Rose, answer me!"

The boy struggled to get his seatbelt undone. He heard people gathering around the cars, asking if the others were also dead. That scared him. He didn't know who was dead yet. The van driver has been flung out of his window, into a lamppost, and killed instantly. As far as full speed T-bonings go, paramedics would later say that it was a relief to arrive at the scene and peel just one body off the pavement.

"Please boy, just check if your mother is still alive," Terence urged his son one more time. Peter could see all the blood running down the side of the car, dripping onto his dad's shirt. The car's interior light had been turned on when the doors were smashed open, but his mom's head was flat against a broken window. "Is she okay?" Terence asked. But the child couldn't speak. His dad would only get an answer when someone poked a flashlight into the car, giving Peter a full view of his mother's face. The boy yelped.

2003

Ruben

Let's start with how I got my nickname. It happened ten years ago, back in standard two. I was in the school changing room, getting ready for phys-ed. Every week I deliberately picked a bench away from the crowd. My policy with public ablution blocks and changing rooms has always been simple: find your own space, get dressed (or undressed) as quickly as possible and then get out.

The new guy, Daanie Strydom, dropped his bag next to mine. I got a fright. The arrival of Daanie had been a massive playground talking point. Nobody could believe how big and hairy he was; most of the boys in Standard Five thought he was *their* classmate. The guy dropped his rods first and started putting on a ratty pair of shorts that looked like a used kitchen lappie from the rubbish bin. "They don't allow us to wear stuff that is torn," I told him, not thinking. He looked at me, uni-brow at attention. I tried to fix my mistake with an explanation. "You should get a pair from the Lost and Found quickly. They have a few extras." A useful piece of advice, at least. I'd forgotten my shorts once and had to do phys-ed in my red underpants

Daanie put his hands on his hips and looked down at me. "Why do you care?" I wasn't sure. I carried on getting dressed and pretended like I'd said nothing. He wouldn't stop looking at me, though, snorting every few moments to remind me of our misunderstanding. When I was ready to go, I turned towards the exit and bumped straight into his palm. He pushed me and said, "Look down." I did, and saw his brown pecker sticking through the tear in his shorts. The guy had a willy the colour of a briefcase or a mahogany table, unlike the pink cocktail prawns that the rest of us were sprouting. He waved it at me. "Will the teachers let me wear it like this? Hey, you think I can wear my shorts now?" It was an uncomfortable situation that made a lot of the other kids laugh, purely because they didn't know what else to do. Daanie was scarier than any teacher in the school. I wasn't sure how to make him stop, so I just shouted, "Fuck off!" It was my first swear word and I've never forgotten saying it. My mouth felt dirtied.

Silence fell across the room. Daanie put his brown shlong back in his non-school-regulation shorts. No one around us was laughing anymore. He started backing me towards a corner, waving his hand in front of my face, saying, “I’ll kill you, soutie. I’ll smash your fucking face up, you little poes face.”

I could feel the ground turn wet as we moved from the changing area to the showering section of the ablution block. It was like being growled at by a vicious scrap-yard dog. Our eyes were locked. Then he raised his enormous right arm and swung it at me, stopping just short of my chin. I pissed myself and bolted through the door, while the rest of the class inhaled their tongues.

In hindsight, I should have just gone to class. Instead I ran home (which was two kays and a certifiable marathon for any normal ten year old) and told my parents. I was given a ride back to school and escorted inside by my folks – which most of the school saw, because it was break-time by then - still in my soiled shorts and vest, with no shoes on my feet.

Mr. Simon, the headmaster, made Daanie promise not to bully me again. I got the most uninspired, “Sorry, Ruben, I won’t fight with you anymore,” you’ve ever heard, and then we were told to shake hands.

“Easy peasy,” Mr. Simon said, like Daanie and I were going to be chommies for life thanks to him.

But there was this look of revulsion on Daanie’s face that none of the grown-ups noticed. He didn’t want to grind my bones to make his bread anymore. He was only at my school for another month, but every day he’d cluck at me and make sure that everybody knew what a big chicken I was. I was soon known as ‘Colonel Sanders’, or just ‘Sanders’ for short, after the Kentucky Fried Chicken man. A parting gift from Daanie Strydom.

People sometimes ask, ‘What’s in a name?’

Let me tell you.

Every time I back down in a conflict situation, it takes me right back to Mr. Simon’s office. I’m standing there with piss-stained shorts, tears running down my face and an indescribable urge to pull my hair – a nervous tic that comes back to visit me once

every while. My parents are shaking their heads and telling me it's okay to cry. Daanie is laughing and telling Mr. Simon to check my trousers for a fanny. It's fucken horrible. So ja, there's definitely not nothing to a name when it's given to you for a kak reason. It's an anchor to your past.

2

Agnes

I need to make something crystal clear before I go into how I got arrested for vandalism: I'm actually a 'good girl'. Not only according to my Dad, his associates at the church and the teachers at Collegiate Girls High School, but by virtue. I never lie, swear, cheat on any tests, steal or treat others unkindly. I am a member of several charitable clubs and organisations, and didn't join any of them for an impressive CV or a busy social schedule.

Danny, Sarah and Rene insisted I come to a nightclub once, because in a few weeks we'd be writing exams and then no-one would have a social life until the holidays started. For the past six months I'd had no social life anyways, so the idea of mingling with people outside of school seemed like an opportunity worth taking.

They are fun girls to be around but let's be totally honest here, not the best friends in the world. Dad and I moved to P.E. halfway through the first school term, so I still don't know anybody around here *that* well. I hang around them at break time, and mostly because they're friendly to me. I don't have the luxury of being picky with friends yet.

We met at Sarah's house, a plush double-storey in Walmer, next to the golf course. She answered the door with a towel on her head and a pair of bunny slippers. Music blared from the main Hi-Fi in the lounge and Sarah danced me into the kitchen, where everyone was taking sips of Vodka out of the bottle. I was wearing my best dress, a floral number with loose arms, which she insisted was a terrible idea.

"You'll never get in like that. The bouncers will definitely ask you for ID. Come Danny, please fix this mess," Sarah said, pointing the bottle at me. She wooshed her hair

around and smelled it, before dancing to another corner of her massive house. Sarah always does that. I guess it's acceptable for someone with the locks of an Aryan Goddess.

Danny led me to the bedroom and started digging through Sarah's so-called 'cupboard'. The sheer volume of clothing shocked me. It's a walk-in closet with a section for each kind of garment. Sarah's second in command fished out a pair of hot pants, some industrial boots and a T-shirt that had a knot in the middle. After changing we did a 'Big Reveal' in front of the mirror: I looked like one of those Ring Girls at a boxing match.

"You look so hot," she kept assuring me while straightening my ratty hair with Sarah's mom's iron. The funny thing is that I looked just like her, only skankier. Danny Taylor is a beautiful girl with a great body, but she is always dressed like a tart. That night I was, too.

We stood at the bar like ornaments in a shop window. The music was so loud, all I could do was smile and nod through conversations. Someone could have asked me if I enjoyed smoking madrax with old men and I would have said yes.

Soon Danny and Rene were locked in a huddle, discussing boys. I didn't need to hear anything to know that's what they were doing. Sarah carried on bouncing around, drawing plenty of attention to herself. She can't help that. I resigned myself to admiring the posters and alcohol adverts that were spread out across the place, like some sort of nightclub feng shui enthusiast.

After a while the others wanted to dance. Not me. I said I'd stay and watch the handbags while they shook their cabooses. The last thing I felt like was having some strange guy trying to rub his package against my ass. That's called 'grinding', a new way of dancing that all the kids are doing. It's basically dry sex in public. Probably the most undignified way of hooking up since the Stone Age, when cavemen used brute force and wooden clubs to get their girls.

"We'll be back in five," Danny promised. "Just wait here and I'll make sure we aren't split up for long." Sarah was already bopping towards the dance floor and the others were getting anxious to join.

I wasn't thrilled with the arrangement, but I'd have been less comfortable trying to hold my own on the dance floor. I couldn't grind, flirt, hold my liquor or swear comfortably, but I could guard the handbags. I finished my cider, checked my phone and got to work. You're always hearing stories about people getting their bags stolen from nightclubs. Not on my watch.

3

Ruben

It was Friday night at eleven o'clock or so. I was at my student digs in Summerstrand, playing Grand Theft Auto and smoking with Kyle and Penny. The game is old now, but it's always good for starting ethical debates.

"So, Ruben, you can have a trillion rand," Kyle said, pausing the game for a moment to hit a bong. It's just your standard issue Energade bottle with a piece of hose-pipe stuck through the bottom. Not exactly top level engineering, but it'll get you stoned. Once he'd taken a hit and coughed up a lung, he looked at me and explained how I would amass this fortune. "All the money you will ever need is waiting for you. And to get it, you just have to kill the most evil man alive."

"Uh uh," I said.

Kyle wasn't done yet. "He has no family, no friends and is widely hated by everyone who knows him. You can kill him by any means and nobody will ever find out. Would you do it?" Kyle finally un-paused the game and went back to wreaking havoc on the streets of Miami.

Penny burst out laughing. "Juss, that's hectic!" She's the most excitable person on earth when she's stoned. It's hilarious.

"I know." Kyle smirked. "Here's the catch, though. If you choose not to kill him and rather carry on with your normal life, this man will be responsible for three deaths that have disastrous consequences and one car accident where someone loses a limb. They are people you will never know or care about, but they'll be innocent and helpless when this man kills them."

Penny was floored. She crawled over to the television, where a bowl of popcorn was sitting between Kyle and me, and took it back to the couch. I needed some time to weigh up the conundrum. They both waited.

“What makes this man evil?” I finally asked.

“He wacks off to babies,” Kyle said.

“Just pictures? Not real ones?” Penny asked.

“He’s been caught trying to abduct a few,” Kyle told us, like this evil man was real and he knew all about him. “He’ll succeed if you don’t act.”

“He’s dead,” I said. “I’d waste the sicko.”

“How would you do it?” Penny asked through a mouthful of popcorn.

“I’d poison him. Old school. No blood.”

Penny and Kyle both nodded their approval. I was just about to ask them for their answers when my phone rang. It was my cousin, Peter Jacobs, calling me from a nightclub in Central. “Duty calls,” I said, going to the kitchen to answer.

“Ruben,” Peter slurred – he only calls me by my real name when he wants something. “Rubes, I need you, boet. Can you drive me home?”

“Ja, of course,” I said. I was still okay to drive. Not legally I suppose, but by my own personal standards. My cousin pays me decent money to drive him around when he’s too pissed to get behind the wheel. It’s way better than a normal job and takes up a fraction of my time. Plus I get to cruise around in his car and go to some pretty cool parties when he’s feeling generous.

“You fetching Pete?” Kyle asked me, through eyes that burned like stop lights.

“Ja,” I said, looking for my scooter keys. I like to be prepared for things, so I wanted them on hand for when he called again. My keys are the most devious sons of bitches in the world, too. The second I get stoned, they run and hide from me.

“You want me to come?” Penny asked.

“No, it’s cool,” I said, checking under the cushion where I’d been sitting. Jackpot. It had started raining and things get dangerous when you’ve got two people on a scooter in slippery conditions.

4

Agnes

I checked the dance floor after ten minutes. Carrying all the bags and jackets made me look like a gypsy on the way to a trade show in Knysna. There was a grinding bonanza taking place, but no sign of Sarah, Danny and Rene, so I packed up shop and went back to the bar.

A creepy guy wearing a Bacardi necklace and platform boots kept checking me out. He started walking towards me and I went into panic mode. I whipped my phone out and pretended to be speaking to someone.

I felt a hand tap my shoulder and heard someone shout, “Hi!” in my ear. It wasn’t the creep, thankfully. It was a slightly older guy, probably in his thirties. I knew him from somewhere. He straightened his tie and smiled – a really friendly smile. He wasn’t dressed for this place, judging by the loincloths that most of the other patrons (myself included) were wearing. I thought he might be the owner or the manager, about to kick me out.

“Hi,” I said back. “Sorry, am I blocking your way to the bar?”

“No, no,” said the man who seemed familiar in a way I couldn’t place. “What are you doing here by yourself?” he asked. It was more like he shouted, because the techno music or trance (whatever it’s called) was still pumping.

“I’m not. These belong to my friends,” I said, pointing at the range of bags and jackets draped over two chairs in front of me. Agnes the Gypsy, that’s me.

“Come have a drink with me while you wait. My name is Peter.”

He seemed harmless, and this made it hard to turn down the company. He prompted me to answer with a handshake, and I couldn’t find the nerve to say no, even though I didn’t want to carry on sitting there by myself. “You are probably blocking someone else from getting to the bar,” he said. “We’ll move over there so that you can still see your friends. What should I call you?”

“Jessica,” I said.

He walked me to a leather booth around the corner, in a section reserved for VIP's. I ordered a cider. I've also heard terrible stories about girls getting their drinks spiked, so I wanted to see the bar tender open it in front of me.

"I pretty much run this town," Peter said, leaning over the counter between us. He seemed to like the way saying this sounded. "I know everyone. I've been coming here for years."

"Oh, that's nice," I said.

"Ja, it is. You've never been to The Den though," he pointed at me. "I'd recognise you. Where do you normally go out?"

"I just moved here, so I don't really know any places here." I felt a bit drunk and thought he'd know that I was lying.

"Ah, a newbie!" Peter said, laughing and leaning back. "Please, can I take you around some time and show you all the hot spots?"

"Maybe," I said, leaning out of my chair and giving the room a quick pan. There was still no sign of the girls. I was beginning to freak out.

"Ah, why? Do I look like a bad guy?" he asked me.

"I'm not sure?" I joked with him. I had no clue, really. Nothing surprises me anymore. I just wanted to leave his table.

Peter was in the throes of a monologue about being a lawyer and an entrepreneur when I saw Danny pottering around the bar, looking lost and shaky on her feet. "My friend," I said, cutting his story short. "There she is. She's looking for me." I leant out of my chair and saw Sarah getting carried through the front door by an enormous man in a black muscle-shirt. Rene was squealing along behind them. "Thanks for the drink," I said to Peter.

As I got up and collected all the bags he charged his glass. "Hug goodbye?" he asked, smiling.

Harmless, I thought, so I leant down with open arms and accidentally bumped faces with him. He took this as a sign and lunged at me like a stallion, cupping my head to secure it against his. It happened so fast, there was no way to dodge him or duck out of

it. He pulled me down into the booth with him, so that we were quite blocked from outside view. His slimy tongue rammed its way into my mouth and thrashed around like a trapped snake, before one of his hands moved towards to the bare skin below the knot in my shirt. He had rough, jittery fingers. I nearly jumped out of my boots when I felt his palm migrate underneath the lining of my skirt. He was still holding my head with the other hand, driving his snake-ish tongue further into the wild of my throat. I screeched when he tried to slide a finger up my panties, which finally sent the message across that I wasn't enjoying this. He retracted the snake, took back his hands and walked away.

And there we have it: my very first kiss at seventeen years old. It only lingered a few moments, but it was enough to make me feel sick. When I managed to gather myself, still coughing up the excess spit in my mouth, Danny was laughing at me.

I was hissing fire when I got outside. Sarah was a block away from the club's entrance, sitting with her head between her legs and her back against the wall. Rene was stroking her hair, encouraging her while she barfed a stream of vodka, carrots and two-minute noodles.

"Agnes!" Rene shouted when I got close.

I dropped all the bags in Sarah's puke and walked off, not wasting any time to listen to their excuses for stranding me inside a strange nightclub. They bellowed and meowed for me to come back, but none of them were sober enough to get up and give chase.

I walked down Brickmaker's Kloof, a steep hill that runs from St. George's Park into the Baakens Valley. It's not a dodgy road during the day, but at night it's pretty dark and scary – especially for a girl by herself. A few streetlights and the occasional passing car lit the way.

I ran up Valley Road, passing a number of run-down houses. There's a Mosque as you get a bit further up the hill, which freaked me out. My Dad works at an evangelical church and I've had it ingrained in me since birth that the Muslim faith is only a label

away from Satanism. Shaking off the chains of your childhood is never easy - especially when you're alone on a dark road in the middle of the night.

At the top of Valley Road a billboard brought me face to face with the man who kissed me:

‘Peter Jacobs Real Estate – The Nice Guy You Can Trust’

Not a massive billboard, but big enough to catch my eye every time I drive by on the way to school. Above his slogan was a big picture of him presenting the same harmless grin he'd given me at the nightclub. He was turning the open plot of land at the top of the hill into a townhouse complex.

I stared at the billboard for a long time, trying to think of a way to hurt him. And then an idea shone brightly. There was a scaffolding rig next to the billboard, with a long, wooden platform.

It was a quiet and still night, with very little traffic going by. I found an old sheet in the bushes and put it over my head and shoulders for added stealth. It stank like wee and sweat, but camouflage was an essential part of the operation.

Climbing up the rig in Sarah's boots wasn't as tough as I thought it would be. I found my super-sized marker pen in my bag and took a deep breath. I had to think hard about how to draw a penis, because my only frame of reference was Sex Ed books and the few times I'd seen Dad's when we bathed together about thirteen years ago. Like I said, I'm a Good Girl.

I checked the time – it was going on midnight when my work was almost done. It had started raining, and the rig was slippery. I kept leaning back to make sure the scaling and style was right; it needed to look sufficiently cartoon-like to get my point across. In the end, the billboard had been successfully transformed, so that Peter's head was a big penis with some hair follicles on it.

Below the sign, I used up the last of the ink to write a new message:

‘Penis Jacobs Real Estate – PE's Biggest Dick Head’

5

Ruben

I rode my scooter along the back roads to avoid police and traffic. When I got to Valley Road, a steep hill that offers a nice short cut to Central, I saw a dark figure standing on the scaffolding next to Peter's billboard. I looked closer and saw a dick where Pete's face was supposed to be.

Maybe it was my long history of self-loathing, all the Grand Theft Auto I'd been playing, the zol, the debates, three beers, or a combination of everything, but I knew I needed to act. I was pretty angry and wanted to defend my cousin's honour. So I drove a short way down the road and parked under a tree.

I made an anonymous call to the police (Peter's advice was to always remain anonymous) and told them to get there ASAP. Then I leopard-crawled back to the billboard and watched the vandal put on the finishing touches. In South Africa you're playing the lottery when you summon the police or an ambulance to a scene. They could arrive in two minutes or two hours. It's luck of the draw. Ten minutes went by and the vandal looked ready to go home, so I decided to act.

It didn't look like a big guy, which definitely played a pivotal role in my decision-making process. Make no mistake: if it had been James Small up there decorating Pete's sign, I would have let it slide. No questions asked. But it wasn't, and I sprinted quietly until I was about fifteen meters or so away from the perpetrator and yelled, "Hey!"

By the time she turned around and pulled the sheet off her face, I was already committed to attacking. That's one thing you've got to believe – I honestly didn't know it was a girl. I jumped off my left foot and did a football slide tackle in the air. My heel caught her directly in the gut and folded her like a deckchair. The cry of a young woman in pain is an unmistakable sound. I knew I'd fucked up straight away. Under the glow of a lazy street lamp, I locked eyes with her for a second before pulling my jersey over my face. You can imagine my horror when I realised that I'd just annihilated a young girl in hotpants and a cowgirl shirt. Not exactly a cool story for the water cooler or redemption for running away from Daanie Strydom.

6

Agnes

The pain was unbearable and the guy who assaulted me kept apologising. “Shit, shit, shit, I’m sorry! Are you okay? Answer me please! Oh my god! Shit! I’m so sorry! I thought you were a -! Oh my God, I’m so sorry!”

He was desperate and it was freaking me out, making me nervous that he could see something terrible I couldn’t. Like one of my legs was facing the wrong way round or my eye was out of its socket. I couldn’t answer him because no air was getting in and he was leaning over me. I caught a glimpse of his face before he covered himself up, which I thought was strange. Then a police siren rang out and he left me there. Just like that.

Two squad cars pulled up with guns and dogs, like they were there to arrest a gang. The wet cement was uncomfortable, but I couldn’t move. An officer knelt down beside me. “Miss, stay calm. Relax and breath,” I heard him say, shining a cellphone light in my face. “Can you feel this?” he asked, squeezing my fingers and then my toes. I tried to nod, but everything was painful, breathing especially. The dogs were barking and thrashing in the bushes, their masters on the lookout for baddies.

“Miss did the guys who drew on that sign do this to you? Are they still close by?” the officer asked, sounding very serious. Before I could explain, he noticed I was clutching an empty marker pen. I looked up at my handiwork. The rain had smudged some the marker pen’s ink a bit, giving Peter’s hooked grin a new, devilish quality.

Once it had been established that I would not need medical attention, it came as a rather chilling blow to find out I was going for a ride to the police station. I would definitely have played the injury card if I’d known that I was being arrested for vandalism. Hospital sounds better than jail when you’ve got to call your father in the middle of the night.

7

Ruben

I checked that she was okay before running to my bike. For the record, her health was my first priority. She was definitely awake when I left. I was pretty certain she was

winded and scratched, that's all. It's lucky that I have feminine legs and only weigh sixty-four kilos.

About fifty different courses of action pulsed through my mind when I heard police sirens, but I managed to narrow them down to two options:

1. Stay with the girl, make an official statement and risk going to jail for assault.

Pros

- * Clear my name
- * Don't look like a woman beater.

Cons

- * Probably go to jail for the night
- * Get drilled in the stinker by horny inmates who haven't seen any women in months
 - * Probably get AIDS

2. Get to Peter and ask him for advice.

Pros

- * No criminal record
- * Help and advice from Peter
- * If the girl is hurt, the police would be able to get her to hospital
- * No prison sex

Cons

- * Girl finds out who I am and tells the whole world I'm a cowardly woman-beater
 - * No sex in PE again, except with prostitutes and freaky bitches who think I'd like to smack them around

After giving it some serious thought, I buried my shame and my guilt (and there was a bloody river of it) and left as quickly as possible.

Central is the cultural epicenter of Port Elizabeth. There are cafés that stay open till late, family-run bakeries, shops that sell everything from dildos to rubber chickens, and dingy bars all in the same grid. This is punctuated by some of the finest architecture in the city, side by side with crack houses and rotting flats. It's a bit like one of those printer's trays that have a billion different kinds of toy cars and people on top of one another.

I smoked two and half cigarettes while waiting for Pete. Finally I saw him walking around the corner with a hotdog in each hand.

"You been waiting long?" he asked me, handing over his keys and a manky hotdog that looked like a recipe for spuit poep.

"A while," I said.

He pointed to the car park across the road and walked ahead. No sorry.

"Listen," I said while we searched for his vehicle, "there is something you need to see. Something happened at your building site," I said.

"Wait, are you going to eat that?" he asked me, referring to the hotdog.

"No, Jesus, Pete I'm not hungry thanks. Just listen to me, I think I'm in trouble," I told him. We found his car and I explained the situation on the way there.

We headed straight for Valley Road. I nearly creamed my pants when we saw that the girl and the cops were gone. I had this horrible vision of us arriving at a crime scene with red tape and a corpse. Heratio Cane and his boys would be scanning her stomach for shoe-prints, minutes away from connecting my size 7 Converse tekkies to the girl's fatal wound.

Peter just about fainted when he saw the billboard. "What the fuck is this?" he cried, pointing and looking back at me. "I hope you kicked that bitch so hard she can't have babies!"

8

Agnes

I've had a few tough conversations in my time, but nothing that compares to waking my father that night. He sounded sick when he answered.

"Hi Dad," I said, "it's me, Aggie."

"Agnes? Angel, hi, how are you?" he asked. My Dad's old and weary and sleeps like a grandpa.

I started crying. He is the nicest, sweetest man in the whole world and really didn't deserve the news I had to deliver. "No, Dad. Can you come pick me up, please?"

"Of course, I'll be at Danny's now"

"Um, I'm at the Humewood Police Station."

I heard him sit up quickly and knock his book to the floor. He always falls asleep reading cheesy novels that sound a bit like erotic sagas. *The Foreign National* by Angus Hightower, and *Yearning For Glory* by Shana Paulcraig. That sort of thing. "Are you okay? Agnes, what's happened?" he asked.

"Please hurry, Dad. I want to go home now."

"Yes, but tell me you're okay, Sweetie? That's the main thing. Just tell me that you are okay."

"Yes, Dad, I'm fine, I just need you to get here."

Officer Fredrik Rademeyer, the young cop who'd first spoken to me, asked me for my side of the story. I told him everything, starting with Peter Jacobs ramming his tongue down my throat, to the part where Bruce Lee almost broke me in half. He listened courteously and made no facial expressions or remarks.

"Do you believe me? My friend Danny saw – she can definitely vouch for me," I said when I was done. This was the first of several white lies I would be telling about the night.

"It's flippen amazing that you did that all on your own. Are you sure there wasn't someone else helping you?"

I took this as a bad sign and started flipping out. “Yes, I promise you. I was just angry with him for kissing me. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I probably wasn’t helping things by acting so crazy, but I panicked.

“I believe you,” he said, leading me to another part of the station. “We’ll take an official statement when your pa gets here though. If you’re telling the truth it will be okay. Trust me – I’ve been in your shoes.”

I will never forget the look on my dad's face when he arrived at the police station. I waved to show him where I was seated, at the back of the entrance, behind the main desk where the admin officers sit. But he didn't recognise me. When I peeked in the mirror across the room it all made sense. I looked like someone else. There was make-up streaming down my face, my hot pants were ripped up and my bra was popping out of that ridiculous shirt.

He hugged me tightly, but it felt like he was searching for traces of me or some familiarity in the crazy getup I was wearing.

“What did you do with my girl?” he asked.

I just bawled and quivered in his big, flabby arms.

9

Ruben

Cutting the sign down was the easy part. Securing it to the roof is where things got tricky. I balanced on the bonnet and then dropped it, making a pretty nasty dent in the process. That could wait until morning, though. I went back to the police station and found Peter standing outside with steam coming out of his ears. “Is she okay?” I asked him when we were finally on the way home.

He stared daggers back at me. “She’s gone. The cops let her go. She’s fine,” he snapped. “Why would you give a shit about her?”

“Because I kicked her hard,” I answered. “You sure she’s okay?”

“Fuck the girl! Just drive, cunt,” he said, pointing down the road.

I felt my asshole clench like a fist and wanted to weep.

“What happened? Was she there?” I could hardly focus on the road.

“I already told you she fucked off. She doesn’t know who you are and can’t point you out, so stop worrying, okay?” Peter lit a spliff I’d rolled for myself and opened a window. “Jissus, Ruben, where are your fucking brains? You don’t go around fly-kicking people. I swear, sometimes it amazes me how stupid you can be.”

I felt like the devil’s child. This girl could still potentially ruin my whole life if she recognised me on the streets. PE is pretty small and your chances of running into people (especially people you’re trying to avoid) are always high.

“But you sure she wasn’t, like, hurt badly or anything?” I asked.

“Look, she’s going to be fine. Do you want to go to jail?” he asked, blowing smoke at me.

“No, Peter, I certainly don’t, thank you,” I said.

“Then forget it ever happened, okay?” He flicked most of the joint out the window without offering me a puff, just to spite me.

10

Agnes

Dad said nothing on the ride home. His knuckles were turning white from holding the steering wheel. My dad keeps a brown blanket in the car, which I used to cover myself up. The smell of it was deeply familiar and comforting, and I just wanted to lose myself in its painless simplicity. The dashboard clock said 3:04, which came as a shock. I hadn’t stayed up this late since slumber parties in junior school.

“Why’d you do it?” Dad asked me when we were close to our house.

I didn’t know what to say, so the truth came out. “He kissed me. Forcefully, Daddy. I was so angry.”

Dad shook his head, turning onto our street, strangling the wheel a bit tighter. “He might have thought you were that type.”

Part 2

1

Ruben

Peter lives on a smallholding that overlooks Sardinia Bay. He's got a bunch of four-wheelers and a track out there, a jacuzzi, a fancy braai area and a big screen projector for watching rugby games. He pays someone to do his grocery and household shopping, too, so the place is always stocked with the best food and supplies. Pete's obviously not the kind of guy who buys three-ply toilet paper with pictures of dolphins on each square and rosemary hand soap, but that's what you'll find in the crapper. For real.

The billboard was a lot heavier than it looked. Kyle helped me get it to Peter's house, because I didn't want him to freak out about the dent in his car.

"Jussis Sanders," Peter said, "look what you've done. What am I going to tell my insurers?"

"I don't know, you could have crashed into a tree? I'm so sorry Pete, but it slipped. That thing is lank heavy." We had the billboard laid out on his front lawn. The artwork was done pretty well, to be honest. It would have been funny to see how people reacted if we'd just left it up there for a couple of days.

"Did Sanders tell you how he beat up the guy who did this?" Peter asked.

Kyle laughed a bit, but he knew I felt awful about the whole ordeal and didn't encourage more hazing from my asshole cousin. "The roof wouldn't be dinged if he went into a tree," Kyle said, changing the subject. He got up on one of the tires and inspected the dent. "This will be easy to fix." His dad is an industrial engineer or something, and he grew up around machines and cars. I was surprised to hear that Kyle couldn't fix it himself.

"Ja, I also reckon, easily," Peter echoed, nursing a Bloody Mary at noon. Like he knew shit about cars or fixing them or anything like that. If Kyle had said the dent could

be fixed by pouring bi-carb of soda in the oil filter and painting the hub-caps blue, Peter would have agreed.

“I need my car for a big meeting tomorrow. I’m taking clients around the development and can’t show up with it like this. Take it to the shop in North End, please Rubes,” Peter said. He looked at my friend. “Kyle, why don’t you hang here and wait for Sanders. I’ve got some lekker hash.” Kyle looked at me for permission. Peter always does this. He splits us up by spoiling Kyle and giving me a shit task at the same time.

The Man Test

I hate going to the car shop. All grease monkeys think I’m the lowest grade of man in the world. I fail their stupid Man Test every time. They always ask a technical question about your vehicle, which only a Real Man would know the answer to. Like what size pistons you have or how many fan belts your car has been through. I don’t even know what a fucking piston does. So I fail their test every time and get shit service, because they think I’m only a rung higher on the Man Ladder from moffies, transvestites and vegetarians.

North End is a fucking dive, too. It’s the kind of suburb where you see people sitting out on their porches, staring into the distance at nothing in particular, wearing skimpy vests in the middle of winter. There’s always a brak close by that barks like a caged jackal if you get near the gate of a house, which probably explains why the filthy streets smell like jackal piss, hobo shit and lost hope. Anyhow, the panel beater was somewhere up town, this hole in the wall shop next to an electrical supply store. I don’t know why Peter goes here when the guy can afford to go to one of the big chains like Tiger Wheel or Continental.

There was no signage outside. Just a big number 51 above the triple garages, which matched the address Peter gave me. I parked and walked over to a stocky man in an overall who was smoking a cigarette. He had dirty cheeks and dead looking fingers. They were gray from a lifetime of changing pistons and fan belts.

“Hi, sorry, do you work here?” I asked him.

He turned around and gave me this look that said, 'Duh'. It was pretty obvious that he did. His ciggie smelled of pure tar. I whipped out a Lucky Strike to match his bravado and told my story. "Err, so my cousin's car, has a ding in the roof. I'm looking to get it rubbed out," I said this with as much base and gravel as I could muster. "Could you or one of your men take a look?"

"Who?" he asked in a husky voice. The preliminary Man Test.

"Peter Jacobs," I said. My cousin is not the sort of guy who gives business to people who *don't* stroke his ego, so I reckoned these people knew who he was.

The man nodded again, then put his hideous fingers in his mouth and whistled so loud it gave me a fright. "Tuckie! Kom!" he shouted.

A lanky, rat of a man scurried out of the office. He was all nose, teeth, elbows and bulging eyes. He walked using his legs only, leaving his arms to sway lifelessly at his sides. "Ja," Tuckie said, lifting his cap to scratch his sweaty scalp. He also had grey, dirty fingers that had seen a piston or two in their time.

They barked orders at one another in a harsh mixture of Afrikaans and English, both sounding like the sort of guys who woke up and gargled cat piss first thing in the morning. They laughed a lot too, presumably at me and my lady-like fingers and lack of barbed-wire tattoos.

2

Agnes

The pain in my stomach and chest woke me up at six 'o clock. I needed more sleep (I'd had almost none), but it was impossible to get comfortable. I sat up straight in bed the whole morning, only leaving my post to use the bathroom when it was absolutely urgent. The aching just got worse and worse as the day progressed, and panados weren't helping.

Dad came to my room at lunchtime and sat at my feet. "Listen Chicken, I want you to answer me honestly," he said in a stern, calm voice. "Do we need to get hold of a lawyer to do something about this Jacobs fellow?" I could see he was tired and feeling a bit awkward with the topic of conversation.

I shook my head. "I got him back already."

He said nothing for a while, then shook his head. "No, you didn't."

"Dad, I really messed up. I just want to forget last night ever happened."

He shushed me and patted my leg. "No, don't you dare apologise! I'm glad you stuck up for yourself. That creep had no right," he said. His eyes welled up and he put his head on my shoulder, almost causing me to pass out from pain. "I shouldn't have said what I said last night. That was unfair. Please forgive me." That's my Dad for you. The biggest softie in the world.

I nodded, purely because trying to speak would have had me crying - and the pain of crying would have pushed me over the edge.

"Are you sure you are okay?" he asked, gaining composure.

"I'm fine, promise. Just a bit tired and nauseous."

"Yes, that will happen when you sip the devil's mouthwash." Dad said this with a lick of disappointment. "I'm sorry, Agnes, but we can't let that monster get away with this. Imagine if he does something worse to someone else and you said nothing? You have a responsibility, my child."

I didn't argue. My plan was to make a plea for peace tomorrow: I would gladly hand over the keys to my social life and spend the rest of the year between school and home, in exchange for Dad's silence. As far as I was concerned, that was the last time I'd ever drink alcohol or see the likes of Peter Jacobs again.

3

Ruben

I lost my cool when it came to explaining the dent. "So, I think my cousin said he ran into a tree," I told the grease monkey named Tuckie. He shook his head and sniffed loudly. His wag of a nose seemed to be picking up signals like a Bullshit Radar. The outskirts of Port Elizabeth is a car-whispering colony of petrol heads. Uitenhage, South Africa's Volkswagon headquarters, is their Holy Land. You can't lie to these people about how you dinged your vehicle. They'll fucken know how a dent happened just by looking at it.

“No,” Tuckie said in a high-pitched squeal. “Can’t be a tree.” He was standing on one of the front wheels, inspecting the damage thoroughly. “What year is this car?” he asked me. The Man Test again. It was an easy one though, no pistons, carburetors or spark plugs this time, and I thought I knew it.

“’99, I’m pretty sure,” was my final answer. That made sense to me. Peter bought it three years ago and said it was only a year old at the time.

Tuckie didn’t answer, but he didn’t laugh or correct me either, so I figured it was close enough to pass.

I stood there like a spare asshole and lit another Lucky. My lungs were sore from smoking too much of late, but it was better than trying to act like I gave a crap about the dent.

“One hour,” Tuckie said. “I’ll make it like new.”

One hour in North End feels like an eternity. I struggle to explain how much I hate this place. I sat on the curb and joined the other skollies in the neighborhood who were also staring out into space. Porch Watchers United. In the time it took to fix Peter’s roof, I noticed a whole circus crew of freaks going in and out of the garage. They didn’t just fix cars, either. Two fancy speed boats were wheeled in and out, along with a line of bakkies.

I finally got the car back to Peter’s house at around three in the afternoon. His capacity for hard-core jolling always impresses me. In the time I’d been away he’d managed to make the place look and smell like a hobo’s tog bag, with half-empty bottles of booze on the glass coffee table and ashtrays that were ready to tip over under the weight of all the stompies.

“Howzit guys,” I said, walking through the back patio.

“Sanders” Peter answered, fiddling with the control to his industrial sized Hi-Fi set. “Pour yourself a drink. And top me up, too.” He downed his drink and handed me the glass. I had a Sylvia Plath essay due on Monday, but figured that could be tomorrow’s problem.

I didn't need to ask where Kyle was. He was playing Grand Theft Auto in the projector room, so baked he could hardly spell his own name.

I sourced a bottle of Jack, already half-way finished, and fixed our toots. Peter finally managed to get the CD player to work. Brian Adams was suddenly in the lounge, standing next to me and shouting, "Eighteen Till I Die!" into my poor, delicate ears.

Peter did a dorky little head-banging manoeuvre, grabbed his new drink and danced himself outside, where his braai was lit.

"Cheers, broe. You come right at the panel beaters?" he asked me.

"Ja, it was fine, hey. No charge. Some guy named Tuckie said to give you his regards."

"Ah, that fucking bonehead is a gem. He always gives me a good deal," Peter said, taking a big gulp.

I decided to raise some concerns with him again, while we were alone. "Listen, I need to speak about last night. I'm dying inside," I said. "I feel like I need to apologise to that girl or fess up or something. What do you think?"

"Oh," Peter said. "So you want to go to jail then?"

"Of course not."

"Then why 'fess up?"

"I'm feeling bad, Pete. I kicked her really hard."

He summoned me onto the grass, where the billboard was laid out. His giant dick-face grinned back at us. "Can you believe what that bitch did to my sign?"

I didn't want to say it, but I knew that he'd done something to provoke this. It's no secret that he's mean to women who reject him.

Pete downed the last of his drink and threw the glass as far as he could into the bushes around his house. "Ruben, here are your options: You shut up and walk away, or you own up and go to jail. You're twenty years old," He said, poking me in the chest. "Trust me, jail is not a good place for someone like you."

I tried to grapple with my lot in this situation. "So she could send me to jail for this?"

“No, because I'm not going to let you fuck your life up over some bitch who deserved to be kicked a lot harder than you did.” Pete slapped my hand. “Stop pulling your hair, Ruben. You're already going bald.”

In the background we could hear Kyle had picked up a machine gun and was on the rampage. Cops were surrounding him.

4

Agnes

Dad insisted we go to church the following day. “You haven't left the house all weekend. I think you could really use the company and the comfort of an old routine,” he said. I felt miserable; my stomach and chest didn't feel any better. There was no position I could be in that didn't hurt and every movement felt like I was being kicked in the same spot.

We hit the four o' clock time service. Sovereign Leader Church has a large audience in the 13-45 year old category, so they try to keep things interesting for their younger demographic by offering a punchier service later in the day. The band plays Christian pop songs and Pastor Ritchie focuses on themes that pertain to younger people. Stuff like music, lust, greed, temptation – all the things we are faced with in the modern world of technology and instant gratification.

Our usual spots at the front had been reserved by Beryl Pederson, the head of the Society for Christian Women and a colleague of Dad's. They've become pretty chummy in the last two months. She looks like a professional wrestler, standing around 6,4 with a head of crazy hair that add another four inches to her massive frame. I said “Hi” to her at eye level while she was still sitting down – that's how big she is.

The band started playing a crowd favourite, called ‘I've Got the Fire’, which gets everyone clapping and chanting. “I've got the fire (for Jesus, Jesus, Jesus)” and so on.

I couldn't even lift my hands above my waist without feeling faint. Beryl, on the other hand, was almost bringing the roof down as the song worked its way to a crescendo. Each clap was a mini earthquake. I could imagine poor Jesus up in heaven, curled up on the floor with eyes rolling back, begging Beryl to slow down because her clapping was

setting off the Pearly Gates alarm. Every time she clapped, my chair vibrated, and I was getting closer to the point of asking her to calm down.

Pastor Ritchie Venter finally ended my pain and came on stage, along with his brand new assistant, Patrick McCracken, trailing behind. Pastor Ritchie is this lovable grandpa who always wears knitted jerseys and smiles at everyone; he has these big ears that look like dried peach slices and always cracks these silly, innocent jokes.

Patrick looks the epitome of discomfort. He's lanky and sullen. The black suits he wears adds to the stiffness of his overall impression. I hadn't seen him look at ease since he stepped off the boat from a mission church in Minnesota a few weeks earlier.

Ritchie hunched over the podium and cleared his throat. "Good evening, Ladies and Gents, it is lovely to see such a big crowd tonight." He smiled and looked up at the 700 plus people there. "Could we please put our hands together for the band again? That was fantastic!" I groaned inside as Beryl shook the foundations one more time.

"I want to bless you all and allow young Patrick to lead the sermon tonight. He did really well this morning with the old fogies," everyone laughed at this, "and now he's going to give you all quite a shake-down. Can you just put your hands together to show some support." I wanted to bite Beryl's hands off.

5

Ruben

I was confused when I woke up. The curtains in front of me were familiar, but not what I expected to see first thing in the morning. It took a few seconds to remember that I'd fallen asleep on the couch at Peter's house. The smell of booze and ash coming off the coffee table hit me in the face. We'd stayed up watching Rambo on the projector screen, drinking and smoking zol. Kyle was sleeping on the bigger couch. Pete had somehow made it to his bed. I heard him moaning and grinding his teeth in the night.

I grabbed a plastic bag and started picking up bottles. My slip-slops were sticking to the floor, which brought a flash-back of Peter doing his famous 'cat's asshole' impression, where he hisses and waves his hands around. It's pretty funny the first time.

It was 07:30 a.m., as I expected. There are only two things I can rely on in the world. Waking up early and needing to shit within five minutes of putting my feet on the ground. For some reason my body is wired to this schedule of events.

Peter limped through to the kitchen as I was leaving, wearing only boxer shorts.

“Where you going?” he wanted to know.

“To the beach. I cleaned up a bit. Thanks for having us last night.”

“You didn’t need to. Beauty comes in tomorrow. She’ll clean.” Peter grabbed a juice out of the fridge and went back to his room. There was a part of me that hoped Beauty was robbing him blind.

My first stop was McDonald’s on the beachfront for some breakfast. It’s a good place to suss what the waves are doing in Port Elizabeth. From the car park you can see the bay stretch out in front of you, Kings Beach and its old lifesaving tower to the left, Humewood Beach, Shark Rock Pier and Miller’s Point to the right.

There’s a nice promenade that runs along the beachfront, where people go for ice-creams and religiously walk their dogs. Rain or sunshine, I swear to God there are always people eating ice creams and walking their dogs there. If the world was suddenly ending in a storm of fireballs and lightning, you’d still see people in PE on that promenade with a double scoop of rum-n’-raisin, turning a blind eye while Rover shits on the footpath.

I sat on my scooter, eating my burger, and consciously tried to focus on surfing and the weather, but thoughts of the girl I’d kicked kept getting wedged in there. It’s all fair and well for Peter to say ‘forget her, move on, she’s a bitch’, but he has no conscience to report to. When I took a long, hard look at the situation, Peter was probably the biggest Dick Head in Port Elizabeth.

6

Agnes

Patrick took a moment to check the settings on his microphone. He was wearing one of those headsets that pop stars use, like Britney Spears and the Back Street Boys.

“Testing, one one two five seven,” he said. He tapped the mic three times and then gave the sound guy a thumbs up. “Good evening, everyone.” His accent sounded much stronger after hearing Ritchie speak. “I’m nervous, so please keep your boos and rotten fruit to yourselves, or at least until I’ve got a running start.” Everyone laughed at this. It was a Ritchie sort of joke.

“I’m from P.E. originally, but I’ve been living in a little town called Grand Rapids for the last year, up in the Mid West of America. Anyone here ever heard of it?” He gets a few coughs and some shuffling from the audience.

“Yeah, most people in America haven’t, either,” Patrick said. “In America there’s this whole preconception that Africa is just one big ‘ole country, where natives run around with spears and your biggest problem is a monkey stealing your dinner. But we know that ain’t true, else there must be one heck of a lot of monkeys, because everyone is hungry.” Everyone laughed at this again. His Captain America accent started irritating me.

Patrick inhaled deeply and then tensed up after this gentle introduction. He stopped talking and looked around the hall. “I have a mission.”

The audience pricked up its ears.

Patrick took a look around again, checking to see that he had everyone’s attention.

“Yeah, well, it’s not my mission. It’s God’s,” he said, pointing at the roof. “This city needs His help. We’ve got gangs and drugs and prostitution and homosexuality and all manners of sin ripping up the streets, and it breaks my God’s heart.”

“Abortion is legal, drugs are freely available and the police hardly do their jobs,” he said, listing things off on his fingers. “Doesn’t that make you angry, too?”

A cluster of people say ‘yes’ around the audience.

Patrick stepped away from the podium and walked to the front of the stage. “Who do you think has to do something about this? When your community is in trouble, who do you think people look to for leadership?”

Beryl shouted “God!”

“That’s right!” Patrick said, pointing back at her. “And who do you think can show the people of Port Elizabeth who God is?”

“Us!” Beryl wailed.

“Right again!” Patrick was starting to bounce up and down. “We’re going to unleash the changes that God wants everybody to make. We are God’s army!”

Beryl screamed “Amen!” so loudly it almost burst my eardrums.

Patrick smiled. “Good things are on the way. I've been speaking to a lot of people and I promise you BIG things are about to happen. A revival is on the way and I'm going to see that it happens! This is God's will!” He poked the podium with his index finger, punctuating his words with a bang.

After the service I stood up and the pain caused my legs to cave in. It felt like someone was driving a knife into my chest. I dropped to the floor. All I could do was lie still, while the hall around me shook under the weight of everybody’s footsteps. My heart was beating like a jackhammer again. I was glad Beryl was around, because she was able to move everybody back.

“Agnes, are you okay?” Dad asked, crouching down. I could see sweat forming across his pink face. I couldn’t answer him though. Everything was throbbing. I tried holding my breath and breathing shallow, but it only made things worse when I had to gasp for air. I heard someone suggest laying hands on me and praying, and that’s when I passed out.

7

Ruben

I took a drive to Avalanche, a surf spot that only works on rare days like this, when the tide is low and there’s a bit of swell in the bay. The water was packed with little school children who’d been there since first light. They are the sort of kids with scabs on their noses, sun bleached hair and too much energy to burn. I was just like them. Not that I’m an old geezer or anything, but at twenty I do feel like I’m in a different place. I wish I was still innocent and didn’t have ‘grown-up’ things to worry about, like university, petrol money and the beautiful girl I booted into touch on Friday night. Despite the annoying crowd, the waves still looked good enough to have a splash.

I was still in my towel when the sound of screeching car tyres caught my attention. The Guru had arrived. His white bakkie careened into the parking lot and skidded into a tiny space between two cars, right alongside me. He poked his head out of the driver's window, ciggie dangling from his mouth, just in time to see the best wave of the day pull through.

"We're going here," he said to his wife and daughter, scrunched up in the seat next to him. The Guru family members all look like tanned Michael Boltons - I swear to you. Seconds later, Guru was in a blue Speedo, waxing up his oil tanker of a surfboard and standing next to me. "Hey, Laatie, how often do the ones like that come through?" he asked me.

"That's the first one I've seen," I said.

He gave a cynical smirk and then turned to his family with instructions about where to set up their umbrella on the beach. From an outsider's perspective, they're a sweet family, but I hate surfing with him. The Guru is a one-man crowd; he's a living, breathing, Rothman's Blue smoking wave-magnet. He gets three waves for every one that other people get. The guy is just a phenomenal waterman. You could probably tie both his arms and legs together, drop him off in the middle of the bay, and he'd still find a way to dolphin-kick his torso into a decent wave. Guru and I paddled out at the same time, but he got to the backline miles ahead of me, with dry hair and about three pulls left on his durrie.

Half an hour later I was ready to tear someone's eye out with a mussel shell. People say that surfers are supposed to be happy-go-lucky types who don't sweat the small stuff. Try telling that to a guy who has had three waves in thirty minutes. My session was doomed from the start. No matter what people say about surfing being the cure for mental stress and a way to reconnect with nature, that doesn't count when you're getting mugged by a crew of ruthless twelve-year-olds.

Fucken Guru was driving me up the wall, too. Every time I'd be at the top of the point, he'd paddle around me and take the next wave. It's like the guy feels entitled to everything the ocean provides.

I was waiting in line again when a mate from school days, Barry Smith, nicknamed Butch, paddled over to me. "Colonel Sanders, nice to see you! How are you, Broe?" Butchie asked. He's one of those mellow, relaxed people you can see every six months and pick up like you'd hung out yesterday. He doesn't change, except for the crazy afro he's been growing lately.

"Okay, bru. Where have you been?"

"Aye, my cellphone broke and I've been hanging at home mostly." He is full of shit. Butchie's phone broke about four months ago and by 'hanging at home mostly', he probably means he's been too stoned to leave the house. "You getting any waves out here?" he asked.

"Nah, I'm having a nightmare. I can't get a decent wave to myself," I said.

"Aye, true story. I think it's getting worse. 'Specially with Guru out here."

"Jussis, tell me about it," I said.

"Ja, fully bru. The guy just takes everything. He reckons he owns this spot."

We both scanned the horizon and said nothing. Then Butch dropped a big question. "Hey, I heard your cousin's billboard got tagged on Friday. What's the story there?"

Here's a bit of local folklore. Everyone in this city knows everyone's business, like it's all on the fucken news channel anyways. People aren't always polite about asking you for details, because they know (that you know) the details will come out eventually. So while it might seem rude to ask someone you haven't seen in a while a rather personal question, it's at least giving them the opportunity to tell their own story, rather than allowing rumours to do it. In an odd, backhanded sort of way, it's the polite thing to do.

"Butchie, I'm not sure. Someone drew on it. I don't think he wants people to know about it. Could you try to keep it on the down-low, if possible?"

“Jussis,” Butch said, chuckling a bit. Asking people to keep quiet about a story like this is also a fruitless exercise. “That’s such a kak one. Vandals, I swear, I’ve got no time for that. That’s so blind. Did the piggies get involved and catch the ou who did it?”

I nodded and tried to wash away my look of nervousness. “Nah, the cops came, but they were too late. Lucky Pete didn’t catch the ou.”

“Ah, typical,” Butch laughed, “that’s a kak one, man.”

I wished that were true. “How did you hear? About the sign post,” I asked.

“The billboard,” he said, correcting me. “I got a picture in an e-mail. Someone sent it around yesterday.” I wasn’t sure which was more shocking, Butchie knowing how to work a computer or him getting an e-mail like that.

The words hadn’t finished coming out of his mouth when I saw a set wave feathering on the horizon. I put my head down and paddled wide. This was my wave. I needed to go in and speak to Peter ASAP. I had a terrible feeling that my life was about to get turned into an unholy fuck-up. If the news had already spread to a random guy like Butch, it was only a few turns away from getting to the girl. As luck would have it, Guru was paddling for the same wave. “Hey,” I screamed at him, “you just had one. Wait your turn!”

He didn’t answer me. “Please, bru! I’m not pulling back, I swear,” I shouted, hoping he’d have a miraculous change of heart. He just kept taking long strides on his oil tanker, though, gliding effortlessly into position while I almost went into cardiac arrest from scrambling.

Guru took off first, about twenty metres on my inside (which seemed like a kilometre at the time), so I kept paddling. As I was about to drop in, he came flying under me on the lower half of the wave. I was already committed by then and couldn’t pull off. So instead of riding straight at his head, I tried to jump over the brute, like he was a human sized cardboard cut-out of Michael fucking Bolton. I jumped as far as I could, but my leash got hooked around his arm and we both fell together. As I pierced the water, something else hit it me.

I opened my eyes while Guru was still giving me mouth-to-mouth. I chundered up water, foam and bile. My lungs burned like someone had just poured a litre of petrol down my throat and then dropped a match down there. I didn't care about sucking face with my arch enemy or how my friends would make fun of me. I wanted air - as much of it as possible. He doubled over and threw up too, I think because he hoovered some of my bile. There we were together, retching, side by side on the hot sand.

“Stay down,” Guru-ette said to me. Tanned Michael Bolton, I swear to you. “The ambulance will be here now.”

I wondered why an ambulance was arriving soon, until I tried to move my leg. That's when I felt something was wrong. I looked down and saw a big chunk of meat missing from my right calf, and fainted a second time.

University of Cape Town

Part 3

1986

Terence Jacobs could not maintain a happy marriage after the accident. His deformed wife was becoming a recluse (the surgeon predicted her scars would heal quickly and this turned out to be unrealistic). There was nothing he could do to help her. She withdrew from life. Still, it wasn't looking after Peter, or attending social gatherings and work functions where partners were invited that strained their relationship. Terence hired people to do those things. Rose simply wasn't interested in having sex.

Her left cheek had collapsed, and the skin from her chin to her forehead had been shredded by the car's broken window. On top of that, Terence's lit cigarette had burned a hole into the soft skin below her eye. The best hands in South Africa worked hard to reconstruct her face, but her injuries were severe. She looked like a monster with one sagging eye. All the anti-depressants, counselling and surprise gifts in the world could not help her accept the new face she was forced to wear.

Terence was at the first summit of a hugely successful career as an investor. He spent at least three days a week in Johannesburg or Cape Town, where real money could be made. He needed to be clear-minded and focussed on his work, but his wife's depression was a burden. This was exasperated by the absence of sex, which had always brought him and Rose closer together after he'd been away.

Eleven months after the accident, Terence started messing around behind her back. It all started with an encounter at a bar near the airport in Johannesburg. He was having a drink by himself after a long week, waiting for the seven o' clock flight back to Port Elizabeth. He was lost in thought, trying to figure out what to do about a client who wanted to invest his money overseas. It got him thinking about moving the family. He'd been offered

many a job in the USA. They could start a new life in Florida, where the best plastic surgeons in the world could be hired to fix his wife.

A dark-haired woman with freckles on her arms reached out and took his pack of cigarettes, right from under his nose. Terence didn't flinch. He was thinking about the price of houses in Fort Lauderdale.

"Have you got a lighter?" the woman asked.

Terence blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Have you got a lighter for me?" she said, putting his cigarettes into her purse.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of matches. "Yip," he said, putting it down in front of her.

"Not going to light it for me?" she asked.

"Ja, sorry. Long day," he said, sparking a match and guiding the flame over to the tip of her cigarette.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she asked, taking a drag and blowing the smoke away from him. Her lipstick made two stains around the butt of her smoke. She held it further forward and firmer than most people did, so that these prints of her mouth stood out. It was almost like she was trying to suffocate the cigarette.

"Ag, it's nothing. Just some work stuff," he said, putting his daily planner back in his brief case. He looked at the clock on the wall.

"What's work?"

"Investments."

"Impressive. You flying?" she said.

"Ja, back home."

"Where's home?"

"PE."

The woman chuckled at him. She had an animated way of laughing, literally like a cartoon character. "Really?"

"Ja. Why?"

"I just didn't think you'd be from there. What's in PE?" She made eye contact.

Terence was on the offense. He often called Port Elizabeth a mechanics' village and the armpit of South Africa, but that was his right to say. He'd lived there his entire life. When someone else said something bad about it, he felt protective. "My wife and child. What's wrong with PE?"

"I never said there was anything wrong. It's cute. You're a small town boy." The woman scrunched her face at him like an auntie would do to a five-year-old.

"It's a small town, but money goes a long way there. Plus we have the sea."

"Good for you." She smirked at him and carried on smoking. "So you just use us for the big bucks and then go back to your pandokkie on the coast?"

Terence tried to think of a funny reply, but couldn't come up with anything to match her tactless wit. He wasn't a funny guy. "Are you flying?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Where?"

"London."

"Ah, well, enjoy," Peter said. "Good time of the year to be going."

She put her cigarette out in the ashtray in front of him. "Ja, it's a pity this trip is only a week. I'll be back next Friday, though."

"You travelling alone?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That's brave for a woman."

"Yes, I know. I'm a brave woman," she said. "Thanks for the smokes. I've got to run." She got up and smouldered to the exit. Terence watched her leave and felt a strange, compelling desire to fuck someone's brains out. He was particularly aroused once he'd figured out that his smokes were gone.

1

Agnes

This is what Dad tells me about Mom. My parents had me late in life. Shortly after they got married in 1968, Mom found out she couldn't conceive. She was devastated and told my father to leave her and find someone who could give him the children they

had planned on having. Of course my dad chose not to see their childless marriage as a curse or a burden; instead they made the most of their life together and stayed very much in love. It was such a shock for Mom and Dad to find out that they were going to have a baby in their forties. After all those years of being content without kids, medical science was debunked by a miracle and they were blessed with one chance to have one child. It was always going to be risky at Mom's age, but they decided to take it.

She died a weeks after I was born, and it has just been Dad and I since. While some people say that they were silly for even trying, it has made a real believer out of my father and I respect his need for peace and resolution when it comes to the death of his wife. I think that's why I try so hard to make him proud.

So, that's how I got here – into a hospital bed with broken ribs and tubes sticking out of my arms. I've been pretending to be asleep since Dad walked in some time ago. I can't face him yet. The doctor came by earlier and explained my situation to him. He's been here since, waiting patiently for me to wake up, touching my hand and giving it a loving squeeze every so often.

I finally work up the courage to open my eyes. Dad is squashed into in a plastic chair made for a person a third of his size. We're in the far corner of a public ward, with one of those blue curtains surrounding my bed.

“Dad,” I manage to say, not realising how dry my throat would be.

“Oh, my Angel,” he says, looking rather angelic himself in his white Sunday shirt. “How do you feel?”

The answer finds its way out of my mouth without thinking about it. “Sore.”

“Don't worry, they're going to give you some pain medicine again in a bit. Just relax and try to get as comfortable as possible. Two of your ribs are broken, and one of them was putting pressure on your lung. Everything is fine now, though.” It's so sweet that Dad has memorised the doctor's phrasing, almost word for word.

“Daddy,” I say to him, unable to stop myself crying. “I'm sorry.”

“Aggie, please tell me how this happened,” he says. The unknown haunts his face.

I muster up all the strength I have, and try to be informative and concise. “Dad, someone attacked me. I was walking home on Friday, and he kicked me in the stomach.”

The news hits him like a whip. “Agnes! Oh my dear, my baby, why didn’t you say something? Was this Jacobs?” His face goes pink and the hunger for revenge is written across all five of his quivering chins.

“No, not him Dad. Someone else.”

“The scoundrel!” Dad says, almost foaming at the mouth.

I try to calm my Dad, when someone interrupts me. “It’s okay, Agnes,” another person says, stepping into view from behind the curtain. The accent is American-ish. I strain myself to look up and see Pastor Ritchie’s sidekick, Patrick, sauntering over to my bed. “Listen, young lady, you’ve been through a terrible ordeal and we’re going to handle this for you. The guy who hurt you is going to be found and punished, and the man who forced himself on you will see the world from a jail cell by the end of the year. I promise you.” He puts one hand on the bed rails and the other one in his jacket pocket.

I’m too shocked to answer. I stare at my Dad and his work buddy, not sure why or how they’re making promises like this to me – especially when all I want is to forget Friday ever happened. Dad shakes his head and leans in close. “Don’t worry, Angel, we’re going to take care of this,” he says, rubbing my feet through the thick hospital linen. He kisses me on my head and nods at Patrick.

“That’s right, Agnes, the Society For Christian Women are one hundred percent behind you, too,” says a third person, also hiding somewhere behind the curtain. Beryl Pederson wobbles in and comes to my side. Even my tubby Dad looks like a rock lizard compared to her. “This whole thing is outrageous. We just want you to know that we’re all behind our girl.”

I take a deep breath and try to remain calm. My poor dignity is aching and these people aren’t helping.

2

Ruben

Mom bursts through the public ward's double doors and collapses on me, howling like I'd survived a train wreck. "Oh, my baby boy!" she sobs, burying her face in the nook between my neck and shoulder. My Dad is standing next to her, reaching out his hand to touch me.

"My boy, Ruben, I'm so glad you're okay," Dad says, getting a finger to my arm. It's an emotional thing to see your parents so choked up over your health. I have never doubted, not even for a second, how much they love me. But to see them completely devastated by my accident really drives the point home.

"We were right there! Runt was surfing at Pipe and we were walking Chips on the promenade," Mom says, digging for hankies in her bag. Mom's handbag is like Mary Poppins' garage. I swear, she's got anything and everything in there from hankies to fishing rods, size 23 spanners and little zip-lock bags. Runt is my younger brother, in case you were wondering. That's obviously not his real name, but we all call him that because he's like the postman's child – he's the best at everything: chairman of the Maths Club, captain of the rugby team, EP surfing, the works.

Mom finally locates her hankie supply, hands one over to my Dad and keeps one for herself.

"Guys, I'm okay. I sliced through the muscle of my leg, but the doctors reckon it will heal in about four weeks. Tops."

"Oh, my Boy," Dad says again, "my heart nearly stopped when we found out you'd been in an accident. My first thought was that your crazy cousin had done something." Dad stiffens up and makes some tense faces to avoid crying. He makes no bones about disliking Peter. Peter's dad, Terence, married Dad's sister, Rose, and their life together is not something my father likes talking about.

"Guys, I just want to go home," I say to them.

"Yes, of course, we'll get the doctor. Where is your stuff?" Mom asks, handing me a pair of pyjamas to change into. That's her for you in a nutshell – Marge In Charge. Always practical.

"Butch has my board and I came here in my wetsuit. I've got no stuff."

"Okay, where is that?" Mom asks.

I suddenly realise I'm on shaky ground. My parents bought me a new wetsuit for my birthday a few months ago. Mom is savage when it comes to looking after our stuff.

"They cut it off me. It was horrible, Mom. I told them not to. All the nurses saw my willy and everything."

"I don't give a shit if they saw your willy. Why didn't they take it off of you? It's one with short legs. I know they could have done it quite easily?" My mother was a nurse back in the day. She knows a thing or two about medical procedures. The truth was that I begged the doctor to cut my wetsuit off. The thought of pulling a suit over my wounded leg was too much for me.

"I'm getting the doctor," Mom says, storming off to find answers.

3

Agnes

Dad's phone starts ringing while Patrick is explaining a few legal procedures to me. He's got a polyphonic version of 'I've Got The Fire' as his ring tone, set on the loudest volume level it can go. You've got to understand how embarrassing it is when this happens; it's like a boom-box in the room.

The problem with Dad and technology is that he doesn't know how to use it properly. "Hello," he answers, but his phone keeps ringing because he hasn't pressed the right button. Meanwhile, Beryl's face lights up and she starts singing along with the song. "I've got the fire For Jesus Jesus Jesus," the oaf wails, clapping her baseball mitts together like a seal. Patrick leans up to her and sways his head from side to side. I want to dissolve into my bed sheets.

Dad stares at the phone and can't work out the problem. He tries to answer again, shouting "HELLO! HELLO!" over the music, but it's still ringing. Everyone in the whole ward zooms in on us. The big sign at the door with 'Please Turn Your Cellphones Off' sign grows to about fifty times its normal size and we get a series of vicious stares from other patients – most of whom are very sick and irritable. Dad finally pushes the green button and answers properly. "Hello," he whispers, scurrying out of the room as quickly as a man his size can go.

Beryl carries on with 'I've Got The Fire' for another verse and tries to get some other patients singing along. As soon as she's quiet, I look at the pair and say, "Please will you both go and find the doctor. I want to go home now."

4

Ruben

I'm all sewed up and ready to go home. On the way out, Mom halts the wheelchair to study some charts on the wall.

"Mom, please, do you really need to do this?" I ask her in my whiniest voice.

"Just hang on, Ruben," she says, "I want to see who cut your wetsuit off. I'm going to find the asshole who flushed three hundred bucks down the drain." It absolutely devastates me when Mom does things like this. She is a fucken warrior when it comes to saving money and issuing justice.

I push myself a short way down the passage, checking into the rooms to see if there are interesting people inside. I know this sounds a bit sick, but I am fascinated by the drama of hospitals.

Three doors down from my room, I see her in the corner bed of a public ward. I recognise the girl instantly. She's young, clear skinned and pretty in a mousey sort of way. She's got really nice teeth and skinny little arms. She's not attached to any big machines, but there is a drip in her arm and she looks upset. No one is with her, either, which makes me feel like a total poes. The sort of girl who draws dicks on billboards at midnight, alone, probably doesn't even have a family or many friends.

I wonder if it's worth going to speak to her. Maybe this whole thing can be resolved with a simple, calm conversation. I'm a nice guy. I did what I thought was right at the time and with the right combination of words, perhaps I can make her see that, too. We might even end up dating or something.

I'm just about to wheel myself into the ward, when Peter's voice enters my head. He asks if I'd like to go to jail. I reconsider my move and look up, straight at the girl. We lock eyes and I almost shit in my white hospital nightie. My head snaps back and the next moment plays out like that scene in the Matrix, when time expands and Keanu Reeves

dodges a bullet. I turn my wheelchair around, just as she works up the gall to shout, “Daddy!”

I push my chair past a couple of circus freaks who are storming into the ward, presumably in response to the call of their vandal daughter. It amazes me how wrong I’ve read this situation.

“Come on, Mom, we’re going,” I say, aiming for the elevator down the long passage. I move the chair through the passage like a fucken Para-Olympian. Dad went to get the car and said he’d meet us outside the entrance. He’d better be down there with the engine running, because I’m not waiting around for those fruitloops to come looking for me. I’m at the elevators in record time. I repeatedly stab the button with my index finger, willing the lift to get to me faster. Mom is making headway, but she’d better hurry or I’ll leave her ass behind. “Jesus Christ, Ruben, wait!” she wails. If the girl’s family or hospital security come out the ward’s door, I’ll ramp my fucking chair down the stairs. Honest to God.

The elevator door finally opens and I launch myself inside.

“Ruben Folks, what on earth?” Mom asks, after joining me a moment later. “It’s completely against hospital rules for outpatients to push themselves.”

A huge woman comes tearing down the passage, just as the door is closing. “Stooooop!” she screams. I slap my Mom’s hand when she tries to hold it open.

“What are you doing? That poor lady?” Mom asks me. “What’s gotten into you?”

“There was another one coming, Mom. She would have held us up,” I say. I don’t give a steaming pile of horseshit about any hospital regulations. I decide right there and then to forget about Friday’s mess and move on. There’s no ways I’m going to prison.

5

Agnes

Patrick almost had a heart attack when the hospital refused to release the identity of the other patient without a police statement. So off he and Beryl went to sort it out on my behalf. To be honest, I got caught up in the moment. I freaked out when I saw the guy who kicked me and called out for my Dad – not Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee.

The doctor said I should stay the night for observation, which is fair enough. She also gave me a referral to the best (and most expensive) psychologist in the city, which Dad doesn't think is such a good idea.

"I just want to speak to Ritchie about this first. We will see if he knows someone," Dad says. It's cute the way that Dad has to consult Ritchie about everything these days, but not this time.

"Dad, I don't want to speak to Ritchie or someone from the church."

Dad nods, but I know my words haven't seeped into the department of his brain that processes requests. They are still in the lobby, looking for a place to hide so that I wouldn't be angry when he speaks to Ritchie anyways. It's times like these that I need a Mom. Poor Dad just isn't equipped to handle a teenage girl's emotional tsunamis – especially not when they end in a hospital.

6

Ruben

I get up early on Monday to have breakfast with the Runt. He's only fourteen years old, but probably the brightest kid you'll ever meet. It's weird to see him in his high school uniform. It feels like I was his age last week, and that he was just a messy little snot-face, crapping in his nappies and spilling food all over himself the week before.

"I can't believe you French-kissed Guru. That sort of makes you a homosexual now, doesn't it?" Runt says, blending a giant smoothie for us. It has everything in it, from muesli to Ginko Force, berries, yogurt, plus some weird stuff like seal shit that is supposed to give you super powers or something. "You've had a closer look at the menu at least," Runt surmises.

"Jussis, you little turd, the guy saved my life." I'm nursing a cup of coffee with my leg up on a stool next to me.

"I'm just joking," Runt says, serving the smoothie mixture into a pair of these brown glasses that Mom used to give to the maids. I don't mind using them now or

anything, but it is weird to be hauling them out from under the sink. He just likes them because of the size.

“Thank you, squire,” I say.

He drops a straw in my smoothie and pushes his chair next to mine. “What do you think cut your leg?” Runt asks.

“I’ve got no idea.” I think it’s a mystery we’ll never know. His board knocked me out, but something else slashed my leg open.

We hear the small downstairs toilet flush, and Dad comes walking through to the kitchen. “Morning, girls,” he says, dropping the newspaper down next to me. “Have you seen this?”

I look down and choke, inhaling a sip of smoothie through my nose. There’s a small article on page four of the *Daily Herald*, headlined:

‘Prominent PE Businessman Billboard Vandalised’

That’s a classic *Herald* headline. I think the editor tried to make as little grammatical sense as possible.

“Your dear cousin is in the paper,” Dad says. “Do you know anything about this article?”

I read on.

A billboard belonging to prominent PE businessman, Peter Jacobs (AKA ‘Mr. Nice Guy’), was vandalised in the late hours of Friday night. The billboard was placed at the site of his new housing development in South End, opposite the South Ender Pub. The man’s head was depicted as a phallus, while his business slogan was scratched out and replaced with ‘PE’s Biggest D*** Head’. Jacobs has stated that he thinks it was a nasty joke by a teenager, rather than a serious crime.

At this point it is not clear whether or not this incident is connected to the recent spate of vandalism and arson in the city. Last week *the Daily Herald* reported two incidents where businesses in Goven Mbeki Avenue were burgled and set alight in the early hours of the morning. A month earlier, four businesses in Algoa Park and Walmer were ransacked. The only connection at this stage is that each business (with the exception of Peter Jacobs Real Estate), has been a major supplier of electronic goods and sports gear, and has been at least part-owned by prominent BEE benefactors.

Mayor Nceba Faku said that the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Chief of Police will be giving him a report of the incidents recorded, as well as a detailed plan of action to combat crime of this nature. "This kind of thing will not be tolerated. PE is not a devil's playground. We will find the people responsible and bring them in," the Mayor's spokesperson said.

A picture of the Billboard belonging to Jacobs was sent to *the Daily Herald* editor, with no accompanying letter or return address. Insider sources say that it is unlikely that the person who hit Jacob's billboard was doing so for the same reasons as the BEE businesses.

I remember Butch telling me that he'd seen the picture via e-mail. Someone other than myself, the girl and the cops must have seen it.

"PE's Biggest Dick Head," Runt says, poking his head in between us. "That's a fairly accurate description, I'd say." Like my dad, Runt thinks Peter is an idiot.

Peter calls me soon afterwards.

"Have you seen the paper yet, Rubes?" he asks.

“Ja. Just now.”

“You know nothing, okay? This story is dead in the water. You’ve never seen this girl in your life, you understand? It’s important that we establish this right now and don’t change the story.” His voice is as cold as frozen metal.

“Yes, Pete. But she knows who I am. She saw -”

Pete cuts me off. “Bullshit. She saw nothing. That’s the long and short of it.”

I try to start explaining, but Pete interrupts me again.

“I’ve got another call. We have an understanding, okay? You stay out of this and everything will be fine. Lay low for now. Got it?”

“Yes. Just wait, though.”

“Cool,” he says, hanging up before I can tell him that the girl recognised me yesterday. An awful feeling hangs over me, like something seriously bad is going to happen and Pete is unable to see things from my perspective.

7

Agnes

I see two strange cars parked outside our house when we get home. “Who’s here?” I ask Dad.

“It’s just Beryl and Patrick,” Dad says. He knows I’m about to get angry, so he wears the puppy face to avoid a total freak-out.

“For me?” I ask, ready to explode.

“They’ve got news for us,” he says.

“What do you mean, ‘for us’? Dad, I don’t want to talk about anything with them.”

Dad huffs, sighs and clears his throat. This is his ‘You don’t know what’s good for you’ act. “Okay, they’ll just stay for tea and leave in an hour. We don’t have to talk about your incident if you don’t want to.”

I know that’s a lie.

I hold myself together for the sake of peace in the home. Patrick and Beryl are sprawled out on the fluffy couch in the lounge; my usual perch. Beryl has brought a big tray of tea, cakes and miniature sausage rolls, as it goes with church folk. In times of need, bring miniature food. I walk in and her eyes light up.

“My dear, Agnes, I’m so glad you’re feeling better” Beryl says. She walks over and swallows my whole body with her giant arms. I wince from pain.

Patrick smiles at me, but he still looks as stiff as a pulled muscle. Dad takes my nightbag and disappears into my room. He always does this – puts me in these situations with his church associates and then buggers off. I’ve spent my whole life entertaining people I don’t know.

“Agnes, can I pour you some tea?” Beryl asks. She’s wearing lipstick on her teeth and a ribbon in her hair.

“No, thanks,” I say.

“How about one of these little sausage rolls?” she asks. The tapeworm in my stomach is gnawing its own tail, so I pile three onto a plate.

I wolf my first sausage roll down in two bites. Beryl is smiling like a lunatic (the way that all old ladies smile when you’re eating their food), and Patrick looks like there is a bee in his underpants.

“You’re probably anxious to hear some news,” Patrick eventually says, breaking the silence.

“A bit.”

“Agnes, we’ll get the guy who kicked you as soon as possible,” says Beryl. “We spoke to the officer who helped you on Friday and getting a warrant is not as easy as we first thought.”

I’m relieved. It’s one thing to see the guy who kicked me by chance, but facing him with these guys would be a spectacle I don’t need.

“We’re still going to get him and make Peter Jacobs pay for the,” Beryl looks away and gathers herself, “the attempted rape,” she says. “Don’t you worry about a thing – the thread is going to unravel itself. God will prevail!”

I put my hand over my mouth and say “Hang on! That’s not what happened. Dad! Come here, please,” I call out. Dad needs to hear this, too. It’s ironic that she bought penis-shaped food when they think I was almost raped.

“Listen, all of you. I’m only going to say this once: he didn’t try to rape me. He took me to a booth and kissed me and tried to put his hands up my skirt, but there was no ‘attempted rape’,” I say, making inverted commas with my fingers.

I get three very skeptical looks from the Peanut Gallery.

“Agnes, you need help,” Beryl says. She flips a copy of the morning paper on to our coffee table and points to the small article.

The lounge falls silent, and then Patrick raises his head. “Agnes, the billboard doesn’t seem look like the work of someone who is ‘fine’ or doesn’t feel extremely violated. I saw a photo of it via e-mail. It was... definitely not fine.”

“Patrick, look, I don’t want to be rude here, but you don’t know my situation,” I start to say when Dad cuts me off.

“You’re going to be meeting with Patrick and Beryl once a week.”

“What?” I ask.

“That’s final. Agnes, you need professional counselling and spiritual guidance. This is a non-debatable issue. You should feel lucky I’m not grounding you for the rest of your life.” Dad has a strange tone to his voice and that creepy look on his face, like he’d changed his entire personality in the last five minutes. I’m not sure how to respond.

“Dad, what happened to you being proud of me for standing up for myself?” I ask him.

“Your father is taking charge, like a man of God,” Patrick says. He smiles at Dad.

“Your father is saving your life and your soul,” Beryl says.

“Peter Jacobs will pay for causing everything,” Dad says.

“Why? He’ll just make fun of you people,” I say, getting up.

“He’s not walking away from this looking like a victim!” Dad shouts.

Dad hasn’t shouted at me in my life. It shocks me to my core. I get up and limp to my room. In the background, I hear Patrick and Beryl tell my dad that he did well.

8

Ruben

Being sick in front of Mom has never been a joyride. Once a nurse always a nurse – that's what she always says. Back in school, I'd need to be vomiting blood or shitting lava to get a day off. And when I did manage to convince her that a day in bed was more necessary than classes, she'd insist I spend it resting. My friends all have stories about renting movies and lazing in front of the TV on their sick days. Not me.

With a wounded leg I am finally getting the rock-star treatment that I've heard so much about. I'm not ill, just wounded, so Mom has rented movies for me and bought a load of junk food to fatten me up. It's glorious. What's more, I now have an extension on my Sylvia Plath essay.

Halfway through *The Big Lebowski*, an unknown number calls and a man asks for Ruben Folks.

"Yes, this is he," I say, in a weird English accent.

"How are you doing? Is the leg okay?" the guy asks me.

"Fine. What can I do for you?"

"Sorry, this is Ralph Daniels. I'm a reporter for the *Daily Herald*. I'm phoning about the incident this weekend."

I nearly drop a frozen load in my PJ pants. "Excuse me?"

The reporter's voice gets all cheerful and silly. "Oh, sorry, man! There was a run-in between yourself and a Mister Alan Sharpe?"

"Alan Sharpe?"

"A surfing accident, you were hurt?" the reporter says. Fucken Guru.

"Oh, yes," I say, feeling a rush of relief. "What about it?"

"Well, we wanted to write a little article, if that would be okay? I believe Mister Sharpe saved your life?"

"Ja, but he also nearly killed me," I say.

"Oh. That's interesting. Well... we were hoping to get a photo of the two of you together for tomorrow's paper, would that not be okay then? Just a nice, easy, feel good-piece."

“Did you not just hear what I said?” I say, trying to put an end to this fucken absurd game of Mexican roundabout. “No, thank you. That’s my final answer, Ralph.”

I hang-up. Two seconds later he calls back.

“Sorry, Ruben,” he says, sounding all ever so polite. “What if we came to your house right now?”

“Still no thanks,” I say. “Listen to me: I hurt myself because of Alan Guru. If he didn't save my life after almost killing me, he'd be a murderer and you'd be wanting pictures for a totally different story.”

“Alan Sharpe,” the reporter corrects me.

“Whatever the fuck his name is.”

“What if we came right now and had a talk about it? We can clear all this up and you guys can make friends.”

Something isn't right. I hear a car outside. I lift the curtain and see Guru's bakkie. There's a skinny little prick in the front seat with him, speaking on a cellphone. That must be Ralph Daniels. “Jesus, is that you outside with Guru?”

“Do you mean Mister Sharpe?” the reporter asks.

“Yes,” I snap.

“Yes, that's correct.”

“For fuck's sake, what are you doing at my house? I don't want to make friends with him. I'm very pissed off, in case you can't tell.” I hang-up again and close all the curtains in the lounge. I can't risk that kind of publicity right now. The phone rings one more time.

“Jesus Christ, Ralph, are you a bit slow upstairs?”

“Hello, Ruben,” says a different voice.

“Hi,” I say.

“Howzit boet, it's Alan, listen bru, please do the picture. I could really use the coverage and I think you owe me a big thank you for saving your life, plus an apology for dropping in on me. That wave was a bomb, if you can remember.”

“You snaked me!” I shout. “I owe you a kick in the teeth. If you weren't such a pig in the water, none of this would have happened to me. What about my leg, hey? I

can't surf for another three to six fucking weeks, thank you very much. I've got exams now and the pain is killing me. How am I supposed to study? You want to pay for another year at university for me, because you're a greedy cunt who can't share waves with anybody, hey? Everybody hates surfing with you, you know that? Do you realise that everybody in this town thinks you are a doos?"

I'm hyperventilating and the line is silent for a moment. I don't know where this anger has been hiding.

"Show some respect, you little prick. Don't you dare speak to me that way. I'll see you in the water, okay." Guru says.

"Go fuck yourself," I tell him and then hang-up for the last time. I turn my phone off and hear his car squeal away from my house. My heart is smashing my rib cage from beating so hard, but I'm so relieved they're gone I could have a wank about it. I'll feel like a jerk the next time we surf together and he might punch me in the nose, but that's a price I'm willing to pay to stay on the down-low.

9

Agnes

I bring a milk tart with me to the meeting (on Dad's insistence). It's hardly any surprise to find that Patrick is wearing a suit. Never mind that it's twenty-four degrees. We go outside to the gazebo in the garden, where a tray of tea is neatly laid out. I offer him a slice and he refuses. He takes only a jug of water and a glass. Not only is this a bit strange, it's just plain rude. I've soldiered my way through many a stale biscuit and crusty cucumber sandwich to show some appreciation.

Patrick sits up straight and pours himself a glass of water. "Agnes, this session is about you," he says, before downing the whole glass. He gasps, gathers himself and continues. "I want you to use this opportunity to talk about absolutely anything. It's your time." Birds are chirping around us and the sun is beating down on the grass.

It takes a while for me to get comfortable enough to spit out the words that lie around in my mouth like crying babies. "Patrick, I'm going to be totally honest with you. I don't want to talk to you about anything." He stiffens up and crosses his legs. "We've

never said more than five words to one another. Now Dad wants me to open up to you about something that I struggle to talk about with my closest friend. That's what you're here for, right? To talk about the billboard incident, getting kicked and going to the night club?"

Patrick crosses his legs the other way. We sit there and stare blankly at the scenery. He clears his throat. "If that's what you want to talk about, then yes."

"That's not what I want to talk about. I don't want to talk about anything."

"Why?" Patrick asks.

"Because there's nothing to discuss."

"Agnes, why is there nothing to discuss?" He crosses his legs over again.

I want to ring his bloody neck for asking why again. "Because I am not a girl who needs to discuss my personal life with you."

"That's fine." He pours another glass of water and gulps it down. I can't help thinking that he'd be less thirsty if he wasn't wearing such constrictive clothing in this heat. "Do you want to talk about anything else? God, your Dad?"

The thought of beating around the bush for another fifty five minutes is absurd, so I quickly take the lead here and give him something. "Look, what happened at the night club was just a bad reaction to a terrible situation."

"Do you react badly often?" he asks before I can get the rest out.

"No, I've never been in a situation like that before. It was a once-off thing."

"You don't go to places like that dance club often?"

"No!" I have to stop myself from lifting out of my seat. "I shouldn't have to explain that. If you knew me at all, you'd know that's not the norm."

"You're a little girl. So yes, you do have to explain. That's just God's way."

I'm just about ready to explode. "I am a first class student at the best girl's school in PE. I study my butt off and participate in all sorts of cultural activities to make sure I'll go to a good university. The very act of going to a nightclub was a once-off thing. I'll never go out again if it makes everyone leave me alone," I say this and then look away.

“So, you used your track record to get your dad to believe you were somewhere else that night? Have you ever thought about how that plays on your father’s mind? That he might need some closure to this nightmare?”

I don’t answer. My Dad knows me.

“Okay, let me ask that a different way. Do you feel like having to see a counsellor is punishment?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what this is,” I hiss this at him.

“Agnes, it’s the opposite of that. I am here to help and lead you.”

I look up at him and want to explode. My breathing is getting harder and I’m trying extremely hard to stay calm.

“How do you feel about your attacker?” he asks.

“Look, you don’t understand,” I say, putting my hand up to stop this train. “I…”

Patrick nods. “Can I ask you something?” he says.

I don’t answer, but just keep looking ahead.

“What are you going to do when your father confronts Peter Jacobs?”

“He mustn’t,” I say, welling up.

“We’re all going to get him together. Everything is going to be alright.”

10

Ruben

I live at number 23 Shore Road, The Dunes. My housemates and I live a good life down here. It’s a row of small houses at the back of Summerstrand, almost solely dedicated to student accommodation. It’s a great neighborhood and lots of fun, but you need household ground rules, else the good times can run away with you. I’ve seen households almost evicted by giant cockroaches and dirty dishes mutate into small animals through sheer neglect.

To maintain order, Kyle, Penny and I have come up with the ‘Rules Of The House’, which governs every decision we make as a unit – you’ll find these rules plastered on the kitchen wall, seeing that most of them are broken there. Breaking one of these rules is equal to a R50 fine, which must be spent on booze.

The Rules Of The House

1. Wash All Dishes After Use

We only have three dishes, three bowls, three knives, forks, spoons and teaspoons, one frying pan, one pot, three water glasses, three wine glasses. These are referred to as the 'China' and are for housemates and in-house dates *only*. On the basis of numbers, washing up should not be a serious chore.

Inside our kitchen drawers, you will find bags of plastic cutlery, paper plates and cups. They are for entertaining casual guests.

2. Bushman Paintings Are Forbidden

If you poep in any of the two toilets in this house and leave a bushman painting on the wall, it is your duty to clean it within the hour. Failure to do so will result in a double fine.

3. No Pumping On Household Furniture

If a housemate has the place to themselves for a date/weekend/random hook-up, s/he may not use the kitchen counter, couch, toilet, washing machine or lounge floor as a bed. It is the foulest of sins to fuck where people eat and drink coffee. The only exception to this rule is the shower.

4. The House Will Not Go Uncleaned For More Than Four Days

This is one of the hardest to follow, because at present, we haven't cleaned it in close to two weeks. We've picked up our crap and wiped the counters down, but no broom has swept the floor, nor has any Jik licked the shower.

5. House Parties Must Be Decided By A Majority Vote

If one of us wants to throw a party (which by definition is six or more people at the house), it needs to be endorsed by a two-thirds majority.

So there we have it: the secret to a successful household. At present, our communal kitty for fines stands at close to five grand (and counting), which I don't assume we'll ever pay back. Still, it's nice to have these ideals to aim for.

11

Agnes

Port Elizabeth is a funny place. There's a section of the *Daily Herald* reserved specifically for local gossip and town news, aptly named, 'Skinner Bek'. It's not really news, but everybody reads it. We've been in PE for less than a year and even I know some of the people who feature – or at least know them by name.

This morning I was having my coffee on the couch, struggling to find a position where sitting doesn't feel like someone has their elbow jammed into my solar plexus, reading the Skinner Bek, when a face leapt out at me. I nearly had a heart attack when I saw my attacker: Ruben Folks. He had struck again.

Local Surfer Helps A Friend In Need (And Gets Nothing In Return)

Alan Sharpe is your everyday watersports fanatic. Unfortunately, he has been down on his luck of late. Last month his new diving shop, Water Rats, was robbed in the middle of the night, days before the insurance policy was finalised. The result of the break-in has been devastating

for the family man. "I almost had to close my doors and start over," Sharpe said. "It's been a really hard road getting things back on track, but thanks to a few Good Samaritans I've managed to stay afloat. It was touch and go."

To celebrate the diving shop's second chance, the Sharpe family went out for the day on Sunday, to surf at Alan's favourite break - Avalanche, a right hand point in Summerstrand.

All seemed to be going well, until a foul-mouthed local surfer with a bad attitude, Ruben Folks (20), tried to ride him over. Justice was served after Folks (pictured) missed his target and took a nasty fall that resulted in a bad cut and a mild concussion. Luckily Sharpe was there to pull the boy to safety, administer CPR and stabilise him before an ambulance arrived.

"I have a number of First Aid qualifications to my name," Sharpe said. "Ruben needed mouth to mouth, which is a sign that he was in bad shape. I'm thankful that someone who could help him was there."

When asked about the incident, Folks, a twenty-year-old former Grey High School pupil, responded with swear words and insults about Mr. Sharpe. It appears that he feels quite hard done by and bitter, despite causing the accident himself.

When asked how he would treat Ruben if faced with such hostility again, Sharpe said that he'd be willing to bury the hatchet. "I don't hold grudges. I just like to surf," were Alan's parting words.

It's battle stations here at 47 Church Road, Walmer. Dad flew off the handle bars when I showed him the article.

"Are you sure it's him, Agnes. We can't just go off accusing every boy on the block."

"Yes Dad, I'm 99 percent sure." I am actually certain of it, but there's always the zero point one percent chance of there being two people who look exactly alike, living in the same small city.

"A bloody surfer." Dad says, glowing pink and gritting his teeth. "Those beach bums are all the same." Apparently Dad had a run-in with a surfer way back in the day. Some guy pinched Mom's bottom when they were on holiday in Durban. Since then, he has this thing about surfers being sexual deviants.

The first thing he does is call up his posse. Beryl and Patrick are over at our house in a jiffy. They arrive in her car, a red station wagon that sounds like a lawn mower. She thunders inside with a basket of snacks on her hip.

They're standing in the lounge, mapping out a plan. "This is war," she cries, sneaking a hand into the basket and grabbing a small piece of cake. Patrick tries to do the same and she smacks his hand. "Wait, there will be none left if you carry on like that." Beryl focuses on me. "Listen, we phoned the officer, Inspector Van Tonder?" she says, snapping her fingers for help.

"Radameyer," says Patrick.

"Radameyer, yes," she says, going for another sneaky corner. "They need you to positively identify him as the suspect for a warrant to be issued."

"So what do we do about that?" Dad asks.

"We go to the beach and catch this sufer in the act," Patrick says. "It's perfect, actually. I'm going to the beach to do some marketing for my seminar, anyways. The Women's League is joining us, too. You should come, Agnes. It's going to be a hoot."

"But he's injured. He won't be surfing," I point out.

"Maybe we should check the brothels," Dad says. Beryl shoots him a confused look. "They're all perverts," Dad responds. She nods, like he's just explained everything.

"Couldn't we just look up his address in the telephone book and go there?" I say.

Beryl shakes her head and flaps open the basket. She helps herself to a Vienna sausage and bites it in half. “That’s for the police,” she says, working her mighty mandibles. “We can’t do that. Van Tonder said he’ll go round to his house when he gets back from Kimberley.”

“Radameyer,” says Patrick.

“Yes, Pat, Radameyer.”

“So Officer Radameyer is away at the moment?” I ask.

“Yes, he’s on leave until next week. He said he’ll send someone else over,” Patrick says. I notice his accent sounds slightly less American than I first registered.

I cannot think of anything worse than spending a day on the beach with them, marketing Patrick’s seminar and snooping around for Ruben Folks. This whole mission would be so much easier if I had a normal home.

12

Ruben

“Ruben, your leg stinks,” Penny says. We’re all gathered in the plastic paddle pool, having a Wednesday morning house meeting – a matter has arisen that falls outside of the Rules Of The House guidelines, and needs to be dealt with urgently. My leg is perched on the puffy railing near Penny’s face. The topic at hand is our spare fridge. We agreed to take it off a former student’s hands at the start of the year (it was a unanimous decision). Sadly, it has packed up with a frozen snoek still in the freezer – the fish has been there since February and no one is sure when the fridge stopped working. Last week Kyle wanted to cook it for supper and the smell almost knocked him out when he opened the door. It was so bad, the only course of action was to shut it with duct tape and put a make-shift warning sign on it. Someone needs to take out the fish and clean it now. God knows what is going on inside there. This is not a job we can hire someone to do – we’d need to supply protective head gear or a hefty sum of money, neither of which we have.

“Is it day three of no showering?” Kyle asks.

“Of course I’ve washed – I just can’t wash my leg,” I say, defending my level of hygiene. It’s been stinking hot all week and I’ve been sweating like a Bull Mastiff on heat. Hence the reason we’re in the ‘pool’.

“Sorry to suggest this, Sanders,” Penny says, “but I think your first proper shower needs to coincide with cleaning the fridge. By the time the bandage needs to come off, your leg will be as stinky as the fish.”

“Kak man, the fish will be deadly by then,” I say, defending myself again.

One of the girls from the next door comes around to cool off. She arrives with a tray of shots, as a way of saying thank you. It’s white Zorbas, this misty shit that costs about twelve bucks a bottle and gives you memory loss from two days before drinking it.

“Bottoms up,” she says, knocking the first one back.

We all thank her and join in the ritual.

“I have an idea,” Kyle says, sparking a joint. It was always presupposed that he would have one. The guys is like fucken MacGuyver when it comes to fixing things. “We roll it out here, put it on my bakkie and take it to the tip. There are loads of people in the township that will be able to use it. I’ll bet a million bucks that fridge isn’t fucked. It just needs a tune up.”

“Excellent thinking,” I say.

“We need to write them a letter,” Penny says. “Explain that they should open the freezer with caution.”

“Yes, yes,” Kyle says, passing the joint around.

We all agree on this and put the matter to rest for now. Odds are it will be a long time before this plan is put into action, but at least we’ve made the first big step: recognising that something needs to be done.

“This isn’t working for me anymore. Our body heat is making the pool hot,” Penny says. “I think we need to go to the beach.”

Peter has given me stern instructions to lay low, but I get the feeling I’ll be okay if I steer away from the popular beaches.

Agnes

The gang is off to Hobie Beach (PE's It beach, where the beautiful people come to see and be seen) with two big signs that say, 'Back To Basics With Jesus – Revival Seminar – Register Here' and 'The Revival Generation Seminar With Patrick McCracken!'

Their plan is to recruit attendees, covering the area from Shark Rock Pier heading in both directions to Kings Beach and Summerstrand. At the same time they'll be asking people if they know where to find Ruben Folks. I can see it now: Patrick will say, 'Do you know Ruben?' in the same voice that he asks people about their relationship status with Jesus. He's going to look completely ridiculous in his suit, that's for sure. It's about 30 degrees outside and he's wearing fancy, black, leather shoes. He has a stripe of white zinc spread across his nose, sunglasses and a black Nike hat. "Are you sure you don't want to come, Agnes? You're going to miss the first part of my revival plan coming into play," Patrick asks.

"Quite sure," I say.

Dad has his safari shorts on, with a wide-brim hat and a pair of those crazy slops that strap around your ankles. I hank him to put on lots of sun block, which he reluctantly does. "That's not enough Dad. You need cream all over your face, neck and ears."

"I've got my hat, Aggie, I'll be fine," Dad protests.

Beryl wears a provocative black dress that shows off the tiniest slit of her monstrous cleavage. The mere fact that she can hold herself upright and function like a normal person is a testament to her brute strength. Seriously, it must be like hauling two full cans of paint around everywhere she goes. What's more, she insists on carrying the basket of supplies, which is slowly getting emptier with every Vienna and piece of cake she helps herself to.

"Please leave this to the police. He's not going to be there," I say, as they're getting ready to leave the house.

"We know, Agnes. But we must be proactive," Patrick says. "You know how useless the police are in this country. I have a feeling that we'll need to serve this guy on a platter."

I'm not sure what is worse. Convincing these three about how stupid this plan is and having to spend the day with them because they've got nothing better to do. Or allowing them to go out and spread word of my misfortune like the sorrowful Gospel according to Agnes the Martyr. "Beryl, you'll need sunscreen, too," I tell her.

"No dear, I'll be fine. I'm an Eastern Cape girl. My skin is used to this sun."

"Fine. Enjoy guys, bye!" I say, waving my team of soldiers away. I settle down on the couch once they're gone and try to organise my thoughts. I'm not sure how I should be feeling about anything right now. Dad, Patrick and Beryl are pretty much running the show and handling my fate.

14

Ruben

There is a stretch of beach between Avalanche and Miller's Point that doesn't have a name. We call it Granny Beach, because most of the time you'll only see old people there, eating ice-creams or walking metal detectors up and down the sand. There's a deep gully between the rock pools where you can take dips, which is ideal for the purposes of this mission. It's a small slice of paradise away from the duck-faced girls and guys posing at Hobie Beach. We set up camp in a cluster of rock pools along the shoreline, safely out of the public eye. We've got plenty of booze, zol, cigarettes and a few beach games to keep us out of trouble at least.

Penny and some others are tossing a frisbee around. I'm sitting on the sideline, catching a few rays. Normally I'd be having the time of my life, but I'm too drunk to be here. I realised this a moment ago, when someone threw the frisbee to me and I tried to catch it with my mouth. The day has started to go blurry. I've had about six more shots of Zorbas and need to slow down, else I'll be a mess by sundown. I leave the beach to get some air. I limp/hop back up the smouldering sand to the car park, where my phone is stashed in Kyle's car.

Mom has called me six times in the last hour. I was hitting a bong when she tried the first time and not in any condition to speak with people outside my immediate friendship circle. I didn't realise she'd call back so many times.

I dial 'Mama Bear' and she answers straight away.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asks.

"Sorry, Mom, I'm at the beach. I've just checked my messages."

"The bloody police were here looking for you!"

"What? Really? No, man, why?" I feel the blood in my head drain away and feel my legs go numb. I want to hurl and fall over at the same time.

"They say you've been fingered as the suspect in an assault case. Have you seen the paper today?"

My wildest nightmare has just come true. I remember Peter's advice and make an important decision at that moment: to lie. "God, Mom, I have no idea what you're talking about. No, what's in the paper?"

Mom huffs. "Please Ruben, for God's sakes, tell the truth. We can get through this if you speak to me, but don't bullshit your own Mom."

I hesitate for a second. "No, Mom, seriously. I have no idea what you're talking about. That's crazy talk. What was in today's paper?"

She says nothing. I light up a cigarette and try to think of a convincing cover story.

"Are you smoking?" she asks.

"Yes, Mom, jeez. I'm stressed. What was in the paper? Tell me, please."

"You're twenty, Ruben. You shouldn't be stressed about anything. Are you sure you had nothing to do with hurting someone?"

I take a look around me. Penny is tossing the frisbee to one of the guys from down the street. Kyle is building a sandcastle with some other friends near a rock pool, sipping Zorbas mixed with cream soda out of a juice bottle. This is my life, too. Everyone is happy and I deserve to be the same way. I won't just miss out on the best years of my life if I land up in the slammer; I'll be fucked for the rest of it. Everybody knows that criminals end up working as janitors, fishermen or going back to a life of petty crime. I'm not cut out for any of those things. "Of course! What did you tell them, Mom?"

"I told them that didn't sound like you. My Ruben would never hurt someone and run away."

“Fuck, Mom, what was in the goddam newspaper?” I say.

“Language! Jesus Christ, Ruben,” Mom says. “It was an article about your accident. The guy who hit you says it was your fault. It was in Skinner Bek.”

“Perfect,” I say.

“You know what you need to do?”

“Please tell me. I’d love to know,” I say.

“Phone your cousin. I won’t tell your father about it for now.”

After Mom and I hang up, I notice a gray cloud looming towards us from the West. It’s moving in fast. Rain is on the way. I walk over to the sand’s edge and call Penny. She reads my face and comes over to check on me. “What is it? You look terrible.”

I shake my head. “I think I’m going to jail, Pen.” It sounds so ridiculous saying this out loud. It’s only once I see her chuckling at me that I realise how ludicrous it would be to actually end up in the joint. She puts her arm around me. “You’re not going to jail. What happened?”

I tell her about my mom phoning and her face changes shape. It’s one of those reactions when you can see a friend cannot offer you any consolations. Like when you ask them if the yellow zit on your chin is as horrendous to others as it is to you, and all you want to hear is that it looks fine. “Oh shit,” she says. “I didn’t realise that part, Ruben. She’s right, you need to phone Peter.”

I’m out of airtime, so Penny lets me use her phone. She heads off to see what the commotion on the promenade is all about (a large crowd has gathered around someone), while I seek counsel from the most wretched man in PE.

“Hello, sexy lady,” Peter answers, thinking it’s Penny calling.

“Hi, Big Boy,” I say to him.

“Oh. Howzit Sanders. What can I do for you?”

I take a seat inside the car and light another cigarette. “Peter, the cops came looking for me today.”

“What?” he snaps.

“Fuck, I’m scared.”

“Did you admit to anything?”

“No.”

“Did you claim any knowledge of the incident?”

“No.”

“Then you’re fine. Did you get a name?”

“A name of the girl?”

“No, shit-for-brains. The cop – did you get the policeman’s name?”

“No. Why would I do that?”

“Don’t get cocky.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’ll make some calls. Go home and wait for me to get back to you. This is going to be okay, but you need to stick to the story. You weren’t there that night, okay? That’s how this works.”

15

Agnes

The gang gets back a few hours later, soaking wet and burned to a crisp. Patrick looks like a raccoon with white rings around his eyes and cheeks that are fire engine red. Dad is okay, but he’s got a red ring around his neck. His pasty skin is burnt to blisters in those parts. I don’t care that he’s in front of his friends. “Dad, look at your neck!” I scream at him.

“Agnes, it’s not that bad,” he says, trying to look down at his own neck.

“You can’t see what I can,” I hiss, pointing at the red areas. “Do you think you’re stronger than the sun? Is that it?”

Dad shrugs. “Agnes, I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry for not listening to me, or you’re sorry that you’ve got a greater chance of getting skin cancer.”

Dad shrugs again and walks out the room. His classic move. I can see Beryl trying to hide behind Patrick. It's like a giraffe trying to hide behind a toddler. She is in the worst shape of them all.

“That Eastern Cape skin really did well today,” I say to her.

Patrick steps forward. “Enough, young lady. You've made your point. You shut your mouth, now.”

I laugh and leave them standing in the doorway, waiting for Dad to bring some towels. I don't need to ask them whether or not they found out more information about Ruben Folks. It would seriously surprise me if any normal teenager had taken the time to speak with the Good News Adams Family.

University of Cape Town

Part 3

1988

Although Peter Jacobs was expecting Beauty to bring his sports bag to school, he was as pleased as he was surprised to see his mother.

“Please can I skip today? I don’t feel like swimming,” he asked her in the parking lot. “I want to come home with you.”

“Not today,” Rose said. His bag was on the backseat, packed with a Speedo, goggles to stop the chlorine from burning his eyes, a big towel and a banana in case he got hungry. She leant over and offered it to him through the driver’s window. “I packed your goggles, don’t worry.”

“Thanks Mom,” Peter said, somberly. It wasn’t the swimming he disliked so much. It had more to do with Mr. O’Brien, the swimming teacher who smacked children with a flipper when they were disobedient or too slow; he was convinced the two were interlinked. “Can you wait for me, please?”

Rose touched her child’s face. “Dad will be here to pick you up.” She kissed his head; a long, stiff kiss that marked his blonde hair with lipstick.

Terence Jacobs was at his office when a policeman called his direct line. “I’m sorry to tell you this,” said a gruff voice, “we have your wife’s car here on the N2.”

“Oh my God, has she been in an accident?” Terence asked. ‘Why was she *there*?’ he wanted to ask. As far as Terence knew, his wife was home for the day.

“Yes. She’s done something,” said the officer, tripping over his tongue.

“Spit it out, Godammit, is she okay?”

“Mr. Jacobs, I’m so sorry. She’s jumped off the Van Staadens Bridge.”

He was ill prepared for this. For the last few months his guilt kept him awake at night when he was home. He was involved with several women around the country.

News of his infidelity may have spread from any and all directions. Rose *would* find out he was screwing around, he knew. A friend had even told him that people talked about the separate life he led away from PE. “Mr. Jacobs, can we have it dropped off somewhere for you? I’m so sorry, again.”

“The body?” he asked, disgusted at the question.

“The car, sir. Do you want someone to drive it back to your house? We can arrange it for you. Sorry to ask this.”

Terence sat there with the phone at his ear and suddenly felt like he was hanging above the city, for all to see and judge. He couldn’t quite grapple with the news. “Wait, please, just tell me, is my wife dead? Did she die?”

The officer paused for a moment. “Yes, sir, I’m so very sorry.”

His instant reaction was to bang the receiver on his desk; something he did when deals went bad or people had let him down. He wound up with extra force and smashed it in half. Terence sat there with just the mouthpiece in his hand. He wondered if he spoke into it now, whether or not the officer on the other side could still hear him.

1

Agnes

Sarah and I have been talking. Despite my initial impression of her, she has turned out to be a decent friend. It’s always nice when people surprise you. I’ll start going back to school soon and it’s comforting to know that I’ve got someone in my corner. As for Danny and Rene, neither of them has contacted me yet, although Sarah always passes on their regards.

My Dad’s car exhaust is one of the great recognisable noises in my life. It rattles and backfires like a shotgun; you can hear it coming from miles away. He rolls into the driveway close to eight ‘o clock tonight, with HMS Beryl and her red skadonk in tow. They are a bit like a dorky gang, in a way. I watch them take the footpath up to the house, giggling at what I’ll assume is a particularly stupid joke. Patrick has obviously had enough for today and left the party. “Honey, I’m home,” Dad says, stamping his feet clean

on the door mat. Beryl thunders in behind him and does the same; she bends the wooden floorboards and makes the walls tremble with her size 14 water skis.

“Hi dad,” I say, greeting him at the door with a kiss on the cheek.

“Hi Beryl,” I say. She lunges for a hug and I stiffen up while she pats me on the back.

“Why didn’t you tell me we were having company? I would have made more supper,” I say, sounding scarily like an annoyed housewife who’s been left on her own all day. Since they formed a Crime Stop Club, she’s been over at our house every night. I should probably have assumed she’d be here again, but this is my way of protesting their lacklustre schedule.

“Oh, didn’t you get my message?” Dad asks. “I sent it a few hours ago. Beryl and I had a bite to eat already. Have you been waiting for us?”

“No Dad, I’ve been waiting for you. And yes, I’m starving now.” I walk through to the kitchen and Beryl trails me like a shadow.

“Oh, Sweetie, go and sit down! Let me make you something.” Before I can tell her I’ve already made food she grabs my plate and cranks up the oven, like it’s her kitchen and she knows where everything is.

“Don’t worry, Beryl, I’ll just microwave it.”

“None sense,” she says, flapping her mitts at me. “Food should only be heated in the oven. Go sit down. I’m in charge now.” She smiles and winks at me.

I take exception to being lectured and manhandled by this idiot in my own home, but I’m too angry and hungry to fight. I just want to eat my damn food.

“James, James,” Beryl calls, “come in here and keep me company while I take care of our girl.”

That sets me off. I am not her girl in any way or form. Dad gets up from the couch and just about swims backstroke in the air towards her. I hear them talking and giggling, and it makes me want to explode. I switch the TV back on to kill the noise, but there is bugger all to watch, except some ridiculous documentary about insects in the wild.

Tomorrow morning I have a meeting with Patrick, which has been hanging over me for some time. Once supper is ready, I excuse myself and take it up to my room, so that I can call Sarah and vent.

2

Ruben

Peter called me first thing this morning, with fantastic news.

“The cops won’t come around again,” he informed me proudly. I’ve got no idea what he said or who he spoke to at the police station, but I’m off the hook for now, apparently.

“How the hell did you do this?” I asked him, upon hearing this glorious news.

“Don’t worry. Just stick to your story and nothing will ever come of this. Even if she recognises you and swears blindly you kicked her, you won’t be in any trouble as long as you stick to the story.”

“Peter, that’s amazing. Please just tell me how you did this. What do I say if someone does ask me about it?”

“I gave you an alibi. If *anyone* ever asks you about that Friday night, you say ‘talk to my lawyer.’ You understand? I don’t even want to tell you what I said, in case you try to retell the story and fuck it up.”

I stopped asking questions there. As far as I’m concerned, those details aren’t important. Tomorrow is another Public Holiday, which means that I have until Monday to finish my stupid Sylvia Plath essay. Celebration time starts now.

Tobey Joe’s is PE’s crazy bar. Every town has one – the place where you will inevitably vomit in public for the first time, get a hand job in the dark corner (where you think no one can see you), and take your clothes off on the dance floor. It’s where human beings go to lose their minds for a while, even decent ones with jobs, responsibilities and titles. You’ll see doctors wearing sawn off watermelon hats, lawyers dancing on tables in their underpants, mothers kissing dudes half their age and teachers digging cocaine out of their noses. All things considered, it’s one hell of a time.

We head out onto the balcony and I see Peter talking to group of people. He’s doing his famous cat’s asshole impression again, which is a crowd pleaser, but I’ve seen it a thousand times. “Mr. Jacobs,” I announce, walking out.

Peter sees our crew and breaks from his impression. “Howzit Sanders!” I can see he is shit faced, which is a great thing for me, because the drunker Pete gets the more generous he becomes. He’s not Mother Teresa just yet, but he’ll get there. He’s a complete asshole, but the guy would give you the shirt off his back if it made him look like a cool person. “What the hell did you do to your leg? Jesus cuz, when did this happen?” Pete asks, tapping my foot with the sole of his shoe.

“I was bitten by a shark,” I tell him.

“No, Ruben, lies! Really? What the hell?” Pete grabs one of my crutches and pretends to shoot me in the head. His friends are big, scary guys who shuffle away the moment we arrive. I try to make eye contact with one of them to avoid being rude, but they move on before we’re introduced. Peter has never been a very considerate person when it comes to mingling with more than one crowd. He likes to keep his various groups of friends separate.

“No, not really, but it’s a good story, anyways,” I tell him.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ll be back in a second. I need to finish a conversation with those gentlemen who just walked away.”

We all look at one another as Peter goes scurrying off to find his scummy friends.

“Who are Peter’s friends?” Penny asks.

I don’t want to know which side of the harbour canteen Peter found those sewer rats. They’re probably a gang of drug peddlers or street fighters. Peter only mixes with people who’ve got something to offer him (either socially or for business reasons, but always one or the other). I can’t see any reason why he’d mix with those guys for any reason other than protection or narcotics.

Before we head to the outside deck, I need to use the toilet – I’ve got five beers pounding against my bladder. The facilities here are worse than disgusting. I would gladly tie a knot in my cock and hold off peeing all night if I thought my body could handle it. The total lack of control and social etiquette that epitomises the ‘Tobey Joe’s Spirit’ is best displayed in the men’s toilets: the urinals are as dry as a bone, but the floors are layered in a thick sheath of piss. It’s almost like people stand on the urinal platform and aim for

the ground. You can forget about wearing slip slops here, or else you'll leave with athlete's foot or a more permanent infection that people normally pay whores to contract.

People are huddling up five to a urinal to keep the flow of traffic moving. There are loads of dudes waiting in line. This is an area where I feel society has failed men around the world. It's not fair that we have to pee in animalistic troughs, so close together that you can't help catching a glimpse of someone else's tollie every once in a while. It's dehumanising.

A spot directly in the middle opens up when it's my turn, to my absolute horror.

"Your turn, Hopalong," someone says, urging me to go forth and piss. I use my crutches to stilt across to the urinal, pushing up with my toes to keep all contact with the floor as brief as possible. I steady myself on the concrete urinal block and unzip. The guys in line are urging everyone to hurry up, saying "Come on! I'm bursting here! Do you need a catheter? Just hurry up and piss!" My bladder burns as I try my best to overcome stage fright. It's a full-on meditative battle that involves shutting out everything around me, from the assholes in the background to the close proximity of four other, freely peeing shlongs to my left and right. I need total concentration to make this happen. I dig deep and feel the water coming up slowly. It feels like giving birth. My bladder is contracting, readying itself to release nearly two litres of Black Label from its shores. I'm just about ready to go when a fucking hand taps on my shoulder and jams the whole goddam pipeline. Just like that. I'm still bursting, but no pee is coming out.

"Ruben! Holy fuck! How's the leg?" Butch says.

I turn around and see him snag a spot at the other end of the urinal, next to a stranger.

"Hey bru, ja, it's okay thanks," I say, knowing full and well that I stand more chance of growing another asshole than taking a slash.

"Hectic, you know I saw everything go down. Has Guru gotten hold of you about paying some of the medical costs?" he says, unzipping and then pissing without any hesitation. It's the most horrific miscarriage of justice that a guy with no qualms about public urination should disturb me on the verge of breaking through, and continue to stand there and pee freely while I struggle. I'm turning red in the face and pushing my

stomach muscles as hard as possible, trying to force my bladder into submission. The faintest of trickles would be amazing, just so that I can dismount this god-forsaken toilet and not feel like a failure to my sex.

“No,” I squeak.

“Bru, your leg looked seriously hectic. Like, there was red bait hanging out there. I thought I was going to vomit.”

I half-chuckle at this and try not to focus on the fact that I’ve been standing here for almost a minute, and still not a drop has left my body. Butchie’s stream is at full tilt now and I can hear it pounding the urinal wall and splashing back to the floor. He goes quiet for a bit, presumably to finish his wee, and I’m still no closer to getting started.

Butch finishes before me.

“Jussis, you still pissing?” he says, shaking off.

The people around us seem quite interested in my answer. I brush the question off, pretend not to hear it and make one last attempt. I give it everything I’ve got and finally shoot a small trickle that becomes a full-blown hose fountain once it’s going. “Ja,” I say to Butch, almost euphoric and misty eyed from the glorious release. “I’ll chat to you later,” I say, concentrating on getting my wee as close to the wall as possible.

On the way outside I see Kyle and Peter heading upstairs together. I’m curious to know why my cousin always has to steal my friends. Thank God Penny isn’t into him.

3

Agnes

Sarah, Danny and Rene are going out again. So much for exam stress taking over.

“I wish you were joining us,” Sarah tells me on the phone.

“No ways, with my luck I’ll end up seeing Peter Jacobs and get punched this time.”

“Shit Agnes, it’s not right that you feel this way,” she says. “He can’t get away with this.”

“I’ll be fine. There’s a meeting with Officer Radameyer tomorrow morning, too, so maybe something will come of it. I don’t really know.”

“Do you want me to come?” she asks.

“No, it’s fine, thank you. My dad’s going to be there.”

“What’s happening? Are you going to get him?”

“I want to, Sarah. I’m so pissed off I can hardly sleep at night. I want to tear Peter Jacobs’s head off. And Ruben Folks. But more Peter Jacobs. I wish it was as simple as going to his house and slapping him.”

“The wheel will turn,” Sarah says. “Just keep getting better. I’ve got to get ready. Talk to you tomorrow.”

This is worst part of all. I am starting to feel better, but there’s still no vent for my frustration.

4

Ruben

I’m waiting by myself at a table on the deck, keeping it warm for everybody else while they’re getting drinks. Three girls are hanging about nearby, looking awkward and unsure about what to do with themselves. They’re either foreign or lost, I’m guessing, or waiting for me to turn around so they can steal my cell phone off the table. Crowds of people keep moving in and out of the doorways that lead onto the deck, and it seems like they’re getting in the way.

“Please ladies, take a seat,” I say, pointing to the big open bench. I’m probably too wasted by now to hook up with any of them, but I can always make new friends.

They look down at me, a bit confused and tentative, before the pretty one (the leader of the group, I’m assuming) takes some initiative and sits. She’s young, probably in her late teens, with blonde hair and a perfectly sharp nose.

“So glad you decided to join me,” I say, hoping that I’m not slurring as badly as I think I am. “I’m Ruben, I’ll be your host for the evening. Why don’t you start by telling me your names?”

The leader says hers first, and then speaks for the other two. “Sarah, Danny and Rene,” she says, pointing to each of them. I can hardly take my eyes off her precious little

snot locker. I won't forget Sarah, but I've already deleted the others from my mental hard drive. As far as I can remember, their names are 'Wawwaa' and 'Wawwaa'.

"Would anyone like a cigarette?" I ask. They all shake their heads and I suddenly feel like a dirty old man.

"What did you say your name was, again?" Sarah asks, looking rather suspicious or intrigued.

"Ruben," I say.

She nods curiously. "What did you do to your leg?"

"I hurt it while rescuing a baby from a burning building."

The girls have a chuckle. "I suppose you were on your way home from playing touch rugby with the Springboks?" Sarah says.

"Okay, fine, I didn't want to tell you the truth, because it's a bit embarrassing. I was really badly hurt while rehabilitating injured dolphins," I try to keep a straight face.

"You're terrible liar," Sarah says, reaching for my pack of ciggies and the box of matches. Her friends look shocked at this. I can tell Sarah doesn't smoke and that she's only trying to impress me.

I grab the matches from her and light one up. "Okay, I hurt myself while surfing. Someone's board hit me," I say, with my ciggie dangling from my mouth. In my head, this is the coolest gesture anyone in the whole world has ever done.

Sarah draws on the cig and then coughs up a cloud of smoke. "So, are you a surfer?" she asks after putting it out and getting her breath back. The other two girls smile and prick up their ears. Thank God no one reads the fucking newspaper in this town anymore.

"Yes," I say, smiling.

"Wow, that's so cool," says the other one. "So where do you, like, like to surf?"

"Wherever there are waves, really," I say. This always strikes me as a good answer, because it's A) mysterious to those who don't surf and B) true. It's not easy to brag about surfing. Most of the time you end up using complex jargon that makes you sound like an airhead.

The others come back just in time to catch me doing Pete's classic cat's asshole impression for my new friends. I'm giving it hell, really trying to sail it home, when Kyle walks up behind me and tickles my arm pits. I almost blow out a snailie from the shock this gives me.

"Nice cat's asshole," Kyle says, putting a fresh beer in front of me. He turns to my guests and smiles. "Hi ladies, I see you've come to give my injured friend company." Mr. Fucking Cool.

They all nod at Kyle and nearly slide off their seats. He's got this natural charm and a really husky, booming voice that makes ladies go bananas. He's like the Tom Selleck of 2003, I swear. "Did Ruben tell you how he hurt himself rescuing a baby from a burning building?" he asks. Sarah and her gang almost pee their pants laughing at this.

"Where the hell is Pete?" I ask, trying to get the attention back to me. I am also genuinely worried. He's been missing for a while now.

"He's gone to arrange a taxi for us," Kyle says. "We're going to his place for an after party. Sound like fun?" After parties at Peter's house mean two things: serious boozing and jacuzzi sessions. It's awesome. "You ladies are welcome to join us," Kyle says, lighting up their faces up like a trio of Christmas trees. They all nod. "It's way out in Sardinia Bay and you'll need to have a lift home, though – unless you want to sleep over," he adds, pulling the plug on their hopes. This is Kyle's way of testing the waters: his logic is that if they're old enough and slutty enough to come with, we'll get laid. If not, we'll get 'em next time.

Penny comes back and plants a big kiss on my cheek. "Who are your new friends?" It's the worst question in the whole world to be asked when you can't remember people's names.

"Pen, this is Sarah," I angle towards my first choice. "This is Dan-unn" I say, leading on to the next person who's name is just out of reach, but I swear it's close enough.

"It's Danny," she says, smiling and shaking Penny's hand.

"I'm Rene," the last one says, before I have a chance to call her Garry or Frank or something worse.

“Nice to meet you,” Penny says, being friendly and open. She’s the perfect wingman. When other girls see how beautiful and awesome Penny is and that we’re just friends, they automatically put me on her level, thereby increasing the appeal of hooking up with me tenfold. “Did Ruben tell you he hurt himself by rescuing a baby?” Penny asks, all excited and giggly.

Sarah nods.

“He said he was going to try that on a pretty girl,” Penny says, laughing at how red I’ve turned.

5

Agnes

It’s Friday morning and my first appointment with Patrick is in two hours. Dad potters through to my room with a tray of breakfast. “Knock knock.”

“Hi Dad,” I say, acting a bit more tired than I really am.

“Morning Sweetie,” he coos, lifting up the tray to show me what he’s made: eggs, bacon, mushrooms, toast, fried potatoes, tomato and a jug of orange juice. A health buffet, in his mind. Dad’s from of a generation that doesn’t understand trans-fats, counting calories or dieting trends. I’m lucky I inherited Mom’s metabolism, otherwise I’d be as wide as Beryl is tall.

“Thank you Dad.” I smile and help him put the tray on my lap. The Andrews are a tribe of people who need to eat first thing in the morning. My friends think it’s the strangest thing in the world to wake up hungry. I pour some OJ and butter a slice of toast. Dad’s watches me closely. “So, are you excited about today?” he blurts out.

“I’m excited about eating this breakfast.” It’s the best answer I can give him at the time.

“Oh, okay,” Dad nods, giving a hopeful grin. He gets up and opens my blinds, letting a river of fresh sunshine flood the room.

“So, what do you think of Beryl?” he says, trying to make it sound like the question just sprang to mind out of nowhere.

I've got a mouthful of toast and bacon. Not that I want to say anything, but I can see Dad's face is glowing extra pink and he's just about ready to pop from the anticipation of my answer. If this mouthful of food could last forever, I'd gladly keep chewing to avoid answering him. I say nothing and hope the question will fade like a gust of wind. A few moments later Dad asks again, just as I've swallowed. "So what do you think of Beryl?" His voice squeaks like a teenager the second time.

"I don't really know her well enough to say, but it makes me uncomfortable when she calls me 'her girl' and hugs me. To be perfectly honest, I think she's really, *really* weird."

Dad nods and squashes his lips together. It looks like I've popped his head with a pin and let his soul out through the hole.

"I can see you really like her and that's nice," I add, trying to undo the hurt. I regret saying it the moment the words leave my mouth, because Dad's face is glowing again, brighter and with new vigour, like an ostrich on heat during the last weekend of mating season.

"That's great," he says, nodding again. His five chins are all curled up on the corner of his face.

"Are you going to start dating?" I ask, pointing to the big, fluffy pink elephant in the room.

"No, not at all. No," he says, chuckling like a schoolgirl, "she's just a friend, and it would be highly unprofessional for us to date when she's your counsellor and all. What gave you that idea?"

"Dad, she's not my counsellor. You're forcing me to speak to her and it's not necessary. If you want to date Beryl, don't hold back on my account."

"Agnes, no, I...I, I," Dad stutters for a second, "that's not how this is. You need to see a counsellor and Beryl is chairwoman of the Society For Christian Women and Patrick is a qualified counsellor and a great leader in the making. He is anointed. You need to open up your eyes and be thankful for what God has provided during this time."

I have an entire arsenal of comebacks, but I choose to bite my tongue.

6

Ruben

Friday morning greets me with pain, nausea and the most insane thirst I have ever experienced. I need liquid. Juice, water, coffee, Energade, anything. Just some spit in my mouth would be a start. I get up and try to limp to the kitchen. My leg is throbbing and aching worse than the day after the accident. The bandage around my calf is soaked through with blood, dripping on the white tiles in Peter's kitchen. My hands are shaking. I don't want to pull the bandage off, in case a horror-movie is waiting underneath. Panic sets in.

"Help! Peter, Penny, Kyle!" My throat is like the gravel road to Patensie, but it's all I've got right now.

Penny walks through, looking like she's slept in a cardboard box. "Ruben, what's wrong?" she asks.

"My leg, Pen," I say, pointing to the mess of blood. "Please wake Peter up. Tell him I need to go to a doctor."

Penny's face turns white. "Are you okay?"

My eyes well up. "I don't know."

"Don't worry, everything is going to be fine," Pen reassures me, anchored to the same spot, avoiding a second glance at my leg. There's no disguising her uncertainty.

Butchie suddenly waltzes in from the laundry room with both eyes in one socket. He must have passed out. I'd forgotten about him getting sick last night after smashing a half-jack of vodka on his own. He walks up to me like he's balancing across a gymnastics beam. "Ruben, your leg is bleeding pretty badly, hey," he says, leaning down to have a good look. Once he's had enough, he goes back to balancing his way to the toilet.

"Yes, that's quite correct, Sherlock, my leg is definitely bleeding," I say, hearing him wretch again.

Penny dashes into Pete's room and finds another girl sleeping in there - alone. She's sprawled out on his bed, covers half way off her. I heard snoring in the night, but thought it was Peter all along. Penny runs back over to me. "I don't think he's here."

"Where did he go?"

Penny looks at me like I've forgotten my mother's name. "Ruben?"

A moment passes, and then it all comes rushing back...

What Happened Last Night:

We had one more drink with Sarah and her friends, before it was time for all of us to go. This was a good thing. If they'd come to Peter's house, Kyle would probably have ended up scoring her and I'd have wound up speaking to the dorky one all night long. While saying good-bye, Sarah asked me for my number, which completely blew my tits off and gave me newfound strength to carry on partying at Peter's house.

After a long and detailed search that took us all over Brooks Pavilion, into some of the shittier bars that aren't worth mentioning, we found Peter and dragged him towards the exit. I was actually starting to worry. My cousin has disappeared a few times, only to turn up a day later with hardly any memory of the last twenty-four hours. As we were *finally* leaving, Tuckie, the panel beater from North End, showed up. His timing could not have been any worse. He put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Jacobs, you rooinek bliksem," he said, in a way that sounded like Pete had nailed his old lady and he was here to make him pay for it.

"Howzit Tuckie!" Pete shouted, wrapping his arms around the guy like a long lost brother. "Listen everyone, come, we're having more shooters."

To cut a long story short, we went back to the bar and started pounding shot after shot after shot. Tuckie on one end, then Peter, Kyle, Penny and several others from the neighborhood.

Peter's friends from earlier were sitting close by. They started eyeing us out, waving and calling out to Pete. Penny alerted me to this, because they were giving her the Fuck Me Eyes, which must have felt like a pack of wild gorillas beating their chests in her direction. I was nervous when they came over to the bar. There were four of them;

large, muscular, North End types who probably know how to change a piston or two, both on cars and people. They were all clad in beaded necklaces, steel toe-capped boots, camouflaged cargo pants and an assortment of tribal tattoos. I'm talking Chinese symbols, barded-wire, dragons and roses. As kitsch as they come. Pete has kept some scummy looking company in his time, but these beasts take the cake. They stood at the other side of the bar, with Pete and Tuckie, and brought an uncomfortable vibe that made everyone nervous. They seemed to view people and objects with a mixture of possessiveness, anger and suspicion. Peter tried to introduce us, but I can't remember any of their names, except Casper, the leader – a particularly aggressive looking son of a bitch.

Our side of the table decided to excuse ourselves and go home. It was late, we were very pissed and we didn't want to hang out with those guys. I was literally readying myself to leave, when Casper ran onto the dance floor, picked up a bottle and smashed it over some guy's head. Even in my unholy state, I knew something like this was coming. The whole thing happened in slow motion, but with such a surreal sense of mystery, no one could do anything about it. His attack was premeditated and unstoppable. The sound of glass hitting and cutting human flesh rose over the music, in unison with the screams of several girls who witnessed a random guy getting his nose cut off by a Black Label bottle.

A large bouncer stormed the dance floor and tried to grab Casper. The next thing we knew, the three guys were standing next to their leader, throwing punches and kicking the shit out of everybody in sight. I saw Tuckie try to jump in too, but Peter grabbed him around the arms and held him back. "Los my, you fokken teef!" Tuckie screamed, but Pete held on for dear life. Meanwhile, the guy who'd been hit with the bottle lay bleeding in the middle of a stampede with most of his nose hanging off the bone.

Penny and her friend were screaming. Hundreds of people were aiming for the same exit, trampling the weak ones who fell over. We could hear bouncers getting their asses kicked and people screaming under the frantic footsteps of those wanting to get out unharmed. Total chaos. Somebody saved the day by opening up a door that led onto the deck (which was usually unlocked). It was like a sluice gate opening for a river of human

bodies. On the way out, somebody stepped on my calf. I remember thinking I was probably going to get trampled, before Kyle picked me up like a sack of potatoes and carried me over the balcony.

Pete's cab driver was still there, thankfully and for reasons that are beyond me, and we piled in straight away with Tuckie kicking and screaming under Peter's arm.

7

Agnes

Beryl, Patrick, Pastor Ritchie and Officer Fredrik Radameyer are at the church for our meeting. Everyone is on time, seven a.m. sharp. We move into the conference room where cakes, tea and cool drinks have been laid out, along with a big jug of water for Patrick. Beryl leads Dad to a seat next to her, even though I'm the one who supposedly needs the support. Very official.

"Agnes, it's good to see you again," Officer Fredrik says, shaking my hand and taking one of the empty spots next to me. He's a lot balder than I remember, but still a young, nice looking man – except for the mustache. Probably not too much older than me. There is a terrible scar on his neck that I didn't see the first time we met. I nod and offer him a fake smile.

Patrick clears his throat and opens the floor. I strongly dislike how he's becoming the voice of the church, even in front of Ritchie. "Thank you all for coming. Agnes, we want you to know that everything said in this private meeting will be treated as classified information. We expect the same courtesy from your side. Is that clear?"

I turn to look at Dad and he shies away from me. Everyone is quiet.

"Agnes," Officer Fredrik says, "we've got a situation. Peter Jacobs is not just a bad guy who kisses girls without permission. He's also one of the biggest launderers of illegal money in PE. He's, uh, like a gangster."

This is news to me. "So this doesn't have anything to do with you making an effort to catch him for me?"

Fredrik shuffles uneasily. "Not exactly."

"Unbelievable," I say, getting out of my seat.

Patrick grabs my hand and pulls me down. “James, you need to discipline your girl,” he says, pointing at me.

“Shut up, idiot!” Fredrik says to Patrick. “Agnes, I’m very sorry. Please listen though. I promise I will help you, but I need your help first.”

I agree to those terms.

“Do you know what perlemoen is?” Fredrik asks.

“It’s shell fish that Chinese people use as an aphrodisiac.”

Beryl cackles and looks at Dad. “And you say she’s innocent?”

Fredrik rolls his eyes. “Yes, poaching perlemoen is big business in PE and other parts of the country with a coastline like ours. There are some skollies making lots of money by selling that shellfish to Asian countries. And because it’s all illegal cash, the people who do it have nowhere to put their money. You can’t sommer rock up at the bank with two hundred thousand rand, no receipts and ask them to put it in your savings account.”

The penny drops a bit. “So that’s what Peter does? He sells shell fish?” It’s amazing that I manage to say that without tripping over my tongue.

“Sort of. He’s a man who helps the people who sell the... shell... fish,” Officer Fredrik laughs at his struggle with this sentence. “Peter Jacobs has lots of money, so the perlie divers’ stash is easy to hide in his bank account. He spends it for them on whatever they need. Stuff like cars, clothes, guns – mostly toys for boys. And that way, they never get caught. Does that make sense?”

I nod.

“Okay, but things are getting more advanced now. Do you remember that advert you drew the penis thing on?” the officer asks.

“Yes, of course,” I say.

“Peter Jacobs is the face of the project. But the money comes from perlie duikers. For the first time, they’ve got someone to use their money on more than toys. Jacobs is a clever bastard.”

“So why don’t you just arrest the poachers?” I ask.

“Jussis man, we’ll have to go in and arrest half of North End, Algoa Park, Forest Hill and Sydnam. And they’ve paid off almost every officer in PE – why do you think we can’t touch him.”

“And Peter? Just arrest him then,” I say, a little irritated.

“Because he’s a link to the bigger people in this thing. We’ve arrested hundreds of divers and scallywags, but we can’t get to the okes who are behind this business. It’s *frustrating*.”

Fredrik lights a cigarette and everybody else almost swallows their tongue in shock.

“Mr. Van Tonder, Mr. Van Tonder,” Beryl says, pointing at the No Smoking sign. “You mustn’t smoke.”

“Cool it, Tannie, God knows I smoke.” Fredrik winks at me and carries on speaking. “We have word from our insider source that Peter is investing their money in all sorts of things. If he gets this right, they’ll be richer and more out of control than ever before. And that will be very kak for PE’s coastline.”

The room goes quiet. “What are you asking from me?” I want to know. “And why does the church need to get involved? You guys have nothing to do with this,” I say, pointing at everyone except Dad.

I can see that Patrick, Ritchie and Beryl are anxious to answer this question. Ritchie coughs and hacks up a loogie the size of a small dog. He pulls out a white hanky and wipes himself clean.

“There was something of the devil in him,” Beryl says in a hushed voice.

“How do you know him?” I ask.

“Peter used to attend Sovereign Leader Church, back when he worried about his salvation” Ritchie says, “He was hopped on all sorts of drugs when he first started coming. Once he got his head straight, the honeymoon with Christ was over and he got bored.”

“So what? Lots of people leave their church,” I say.

“All these alterations you see – these ended up costing a lot more than we were quoted for. On top of that, we had some financial inconsistencies,” Ritchie said, lowering

his tone. “We asked people to dig deep and help us where possible, and that’s when I saw Peter in a new light. He handed me a check for two hundred thousand rand, wearing the most victorious smile you’ve ever seen. You know what he said: ‘Looks like God needs me for a change.’” Ritchie made eye contact with each of us, to make sure we were still paying attention.

“So he gave you some money?”

“Well, that’s what we thought. He came back with some letters and wanted it all back with interest, after he was asked to leave the congregation.”

“For screwing one of the women’s league members!” Beryl spits.

“And you paid him?” I ask.

Ritchie nods.

“So this is personal?”

“Yes, of course it is!” Ritchie says.

So there we have it, the truth will set us all free. Peter Jacobs was a slimy Christian once upon a time, and Ritchie Venter is a vengeful pastor. And then there’s me, stuck in the middle. “Listen everyone,” I say, “I’m tired of this soap opera. That’s a terrible story and I’m sorry he made a fool of you or God or whoever, Ritchie, but I don’t want any part of this. I’m out!”

“Agnes, wait, please. You can be finished with this today. Now even. We just need to get a warrant for his arrest, based on your testimony that he sexually assaulted you. If we can nail him for sexually assaulting a minor, we can issue a search warrant for kiddie porn in his house and then nail him for the more serious crimes.”

“Come on! I *was* really assaulted. He tried to finger me in a nightclub!”

It looks as if I’ve slapped everyone in the room. No one can find a comfortable place to look. Finally, Officer Fredrik speaks up. “This is a golden opportunity for us to get a cheap tour of his house. It won’t be in the news, the papers, anywhere! You have my word.”

“And what about the guy who kicked me – Ruben Folks?” I ask. “He seems to have gotten off the hook.”

Officer Fredrik sighs. “Agnes, Ruben Folks is a mixed up guy. It’s Jacobs’s little cousin. There was a stitch up.”

“I want him arrested,” Dad says. At last, something coming out of his mouth that I agree with.

“Yes, you make that happen and we’ve got a deal.” I hold out my hand. Officer Fredrik shuts his eyes as we shake.

“Agnes, you’ll lose any court case against him. I’m telling you. It’s not worth the trouble.”

“I know,” I say. “I just want him to experience some of the drama that I’ve been through. I’d like him to apologise properly and not run away this time. That’s all.”

8

Ruben

“Where’s Kyle?” I ask Penny.

“He went with them,” Penny says. “Remember?”

“Try their cellphones,” I tell her. There is no time to analyse why the fuck Peter thought it was necessary to take one of my best friends with him to a party with a group of dangerous criminals. Penny’s car is parked in the disabled space outside Tobey Joe’s. She gives them both a tinkle, but their phones are off. I can see Penny is starting to freak out, which makes me worry even more. She’s supposed to be the calm one. We both know I need to get to a doctor. We can’t phone my parentals; they will probably shit themselves on the spot, fully clothed, if I tell them I’m at Peter’s with an open wound.

“You guys should take the four-wheeler to the Medi-Cross,” says the girl sleeping in Pete’s room. Her voice has a bubble in it and she sounds like an alien. “It’s just around the corner.”

Penny and I chuckle at her, which lifts the mood. ‘Around the corner’ is stretching things. It’s about ten kilometers, give or take, along a quiet back road that will probably have no traffic on a public holiday.

Penny has a surprisingly heavy foot for such a dainty girl. She pulls off and takes us up to about sixty kays an hour – that’s flying on a four-wheeler. It feels a bit awkward holding her tightly around the waist. She has a great stomach and I try not to focus on it, because the vibrating engine is making me slightly aroused. The last thing I need is to dismount the bike with a king sized hard on, in front of my best girl friend. We get as far as the Old Sardinia Bay Road before a police car pulls us over. It’s not even a traffic officer. It’s one of those traditional cheese wagons, with the wire mesh across the windows and Alsatians in the back.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Penny says, loosening the Motor Cross helmet she’s wearing. She blows air into my face and asks if her breath smells like booze.

“No, you smell fine,” I say. She smells like a pissed bergie, but I want her to stay calm.

A pudgy young officer with a moustache, a blue cap and gun in his belt walks up to us. “You two aren’t supposed to be on the road with that thing,” he says pointing at us. “Turn around and go home. You’re bloody lucky I didn’t catch you on the main road.”

I recognise the voice from somewhere. It’s very distinctive.

“Officer, I’m so sorry, we aren’t joy riding,” Penny says, getting off the bike and turning towards me. “It’s an emergency. His leg is badly injured - please can you give my friend a lift to the Medi-Cross?” Penny says this in her desperate, daddy’s-girl voice that melts testosterone like cheese in the microwave.

He bends low and takes a look at my wounded getaway stick. “Ah, fok,” says the officer. It’s the way he says ‘fok’ that gives him away. It’s Daanie Strydom. I can’t believe my ears and eyes. The last I’d heard of him was in about 1998, when he was sent off to Boys Town for setting off a firecracker in a dog’s asshole. Now the guy is a policeman with a gun and probably a license to shoot it - at people! You’ve got to appreciate that sort of irony.

I consider running for a moment. I wouldn’t leave Penny with him, though. Instead I bow my head low and writhe, like my leg is going to fall off any second, to get her off the hook.

Daanie straightens his cap and nods at Penny. "Okay. Go home," he says to Penny, "I'll take him," Daanie looks at me. "Let me give you a hand, boet. Come here."

Before I can answer, the brute is lifting me up and supporting me all the way to the police car's passenger side door, which he opens for me like a true gentleman. I am absolutely astounded by this. I expected him to take us both into the bushes for a good raping or to set off some firecrackers in our assholes, but maybe he's not that sort of oke anymore?

9

Agnes

It's straight back home after the meeting. My life is so sad right now. Somewhere in between rearranging my sock drawers and setting up my homework station, Sarah calls me. "I met him last night," she says. "Ruben Folks."

"What?"

Sarah giggles. "Seriously. We were on the deck at Tobey Joe's and he asked us to sit down. What are the chances?"

"Ewe. What was he like?" I'm actually scared to know.

"He was drunk!"

"Ewe," I say.

"But quite sweet, actually. Very accommodating. He introduced us to his friends and they bought us drinks."

"Sarah!" I say, angry with her for fraternizing with the enemy.

"No, it wasn't like that," she says.

"Was Peter Jacobs with him?"

"No, don't remember a Peter. Agnes, I have an idea, though," Sarah says. "We're going to give Ruben some payback."

I'm all ears...

10

Ruben

I am pleasantly surprised to hear gospel tapes on Daanie's car radio. I nod along and pretend to be engrossed by the program, when Daanie finally breaks the ice.

"Don't worry boet, we'll have you at the doctor in no time. It's the Good Lord who put me in that road today," he says, pointing at the steering wheel like it's God's favourite hiding place. "You must be thankful to Him for this chance encounter. What's your name?"

I am molested by a deep-seated fear that if I tell him my real name, he'll go into a spitting rage and forget all about God and all the nice things he does. "It's Ray," I say, keeping my head low.

"Ray who?" Daanie asks.

"Ray, uh, um, Raymond Charles."

Daanie nods and smiles. "Howzit Ray, my name's Fredrik Rademayer. You from PE?" he asks.

My balls drop into my feet and try to escape through my toenails. I know that's not his real name. Daanie's full name is Daaniel Wouter Strydom, and I'll be a monkey's gynecologist if this isn't him.

Four of my stitches have been pulled loose, which accounts for all the bleeding, but the wound is still fine. There's no new bruising or internal damage. I'm pleased to hear this, but don't want to see any of it when the time comes to sow my leg closed.

I'm waiting for the doctor to arrive when Officer Daanie strolls over to my bed. I notice his bald head after he takes his cap off. It's funny to me that he grew facial and pubic hair before anyone his age, and now he's losing it first. This guy is Daanie though, no doubt about it. There's this weird, ugly scar on his neck that I don't recognise, though.

"Can you please explain why I had to ask for a Ruben Folks to find a gent named Raymond Charles?"

I'm not sure why he's still playing with me. "I'm really sorry," I say, "I was just a bit spooked. I didn't expect you to come in and help. I hope you don't take it personally that I didn't give you my real name. I've had some trouble of late and didn't want any more...." Kill 'em with kindness.

Daanie, or Fredrik or whoever the fuck he is today, just nods at me and crosses his arms. "It's okay, I understand. Once upon a time I might have done the same thing." He stretches his hand out to me and then says, "I promise you, lying about your name won't make your problems go away."

It's fucking humiliating to have someone roughly your own age say this to you.

"You're quite young for an officer. How did you get that right?" I ask him

"It's a long story," he says. "Listen Ruben, I know about your trouble..." he is about to say something important when Peter comes in, looking and smelling like a party that lasted all night.

"Well, well, well, Mr Jacobs, good to see you," officer Fredrik says.

Peter is completely thrown off the wagon. You can tell he's not one hundred percent sure where he knows the cop from, but is trying desperately to figure it out.

"Hi," he says, acting as cool and collected as he can under the circumstances.

"Rough night?" the policeman formerly known as Daanie says.

Peter just shrugs the question off. His body language says 'Fuck Off'.

"Funny to run into you again so soon. How do you know Mr. Folks?"

Fredrik/Daanie asks. It's probably just the normal Port Elizabethan thing to do, asking Peter about his connection to me, but when a question like that is delivered by an officer it has a way of sounding like interrogation.

Colour drains from Peter's face. "Yes, very strange. He's my little cousin."

Officer Fredrik nods and clears his throat. He turns to me and says "Tell your friend to be careful and never drive that four-wheeler on the open road again, okay?"

I nod and he walks out.

Once Fredrik has gone, Peter grows a pair of horns and slithers over me. "What the fuck were you doing, riding my four wheeler to the fucking hospital?" He gives me a slap on the side of the head. "Hey, are you fucken stupid? Shit Ruben, I could beat you senseless for this." He gets really close up to my face and I see spit dripping from his cracked lips.

His lack of concern for anyone but himself is nothing out of the ordinary. Peter's 'Mr. Nice Guy' slogan has always been quite ironic to those who know him. He is an

asshole, born of asshole parents and raised in an atmosphere where asshole-dom is not only encouraged, but rewarded. Basically the guy has never stood a chance of being anything other than a thoroughbred cunt.

“I wasn't trying to get you in trouble. I'm sorry, Peter.” This is my big come-back. I hate arguing with Peter; he gets so vicious and unreasonable.

“Fucking irresponsible. Do me a favour?”

I look at him and wait for the bullet.

“Stay the hell away from my house for a while. You're *nothing* but trouble right now.” I'm a bit shocked to hear him get so vicious. “And keep your trashy friends away, too,” he says, adding insult to injury. Peter storms out as the doctor arrives to stitch me up. Fuck him.

Penny wheels me out in a chair. Kyle is waiting in the car, still wearing the effects of last night on his face. I can see he feels like hell. I give him a high five and get in the back, where I can put my leg up. “Ruben, I don't want to, like, speak out of line here,” Kyle says, turning around from the passenger seat, “but your cousin is a not a good person.”

“Ja, I know he gets loco when he's hung over. He went off the handlebars about us riding the four-wheeler. I'm really sorry if he took it out on you when he got home.”

“Ruben, no bru, uh, fuck,” Kyle says, flopping back down in his seat. He rests his head on his hands and sighs.

“Ruben, you need to hear this,” Penny says. “That wasn't why he was angry.”

“What happened last night?” I'm not really sure I want to hear this after such a rough morning. Kyle puts three cigarettes in his mouth and lights them all at once. Mr. Cool. He passes one to Pen and I, and carries on with the story.

“We were doing cocaine with those guys last night – Casper and them? The fucking perlemoen poachers.”

I nod. That much was obvious. Kyle is still grinding his jaw.

“Peter is their lawyer or something. He tried to explain it to me, but I didn't really understand.”

“That's fucked up,” I say.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Kyle says. “So after we all got home last night, you guys faded and Peter and I went to do more coke from Casper’s crew. The next thing you know we are on the freeway to Koega,”

“Koega!” Penny echoes.

“Ja bru, over the Blue Water Bay Bridge and passed the salt pans and the bush camp.”

I nod. The thought of being out there in the dead of night sounds pretty scary.

“We cruise on through Sundays River, and then turned onto some dirt road before Nanaga. We drove for about twenty minutes and then pulled into an old farm house, right in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere.”

“Jesus Kyle,” Penny says, swerving along the freeway towards the beachfront. “I’m sorry; I just can’t believe this story.”

Kyle shuffles a bit and then carries on. “So, this house is way the fuck out in the middle of nowhere. And there’s a party or something going on there.”

“What kind of party?” I ask.

“Not the nice kind. We pull in and about ten cars are parked outside the house, next to one another so that the headlights are together. There’s a fire pit in the middle with a crowd of crazy-looking mother-fuckers standing around it. There’s techno blaring from the cars, so loudly it sounds like Ministry of Sound is going on and guys are cleaning their guns and shit.”

This whole thing sounds like a Mad Max scenario.

“Peter tells me to come inside, so off we go to greet a bunch of huge dudes with dragon tattoos on their faces and mo-hawks and shit.”

“Peter?”

“Ja, Peter,” Kyle says, “He and Tuckie do the fucken secret hand-shake with these scary ous who look like they’ll cut your face off to make a pocket hankie. I was shitting myself.”

“White dudes?” I ask.

“Ja, white, English and Afrikaans ous. Like a mixture. Those guys at Tobey’s are small fry. I’m telling you, the guys and girls at this party were like monsters.”

“No ways... so what happened.”

“Pete disappeared into the house and left me with Tuckie!” Kyle shouts. “So we’re standing around the fire pit. Everybody is getting super excited, because they’re just about to have a little show. This one dude gets a medium sized pig on a leash and then walks it into a ring a short way from the fire pit. Then someone else brings in a pit-bull – the angriest pit-bull you’ve ever seen. It’s growling and jumping against its leash, trying to do everything in its power to get at the pig.”

“Oh my God,” Penny says. “This kills me.”

“What the fuck...” I say.

“Ja, and the guy with the dog is hissing at the pig, doing everything he can to make the dog as crazy as possible. When it seems like the pit-bull is going to snap, the guy let it go... Have you ever seen one of those dogs in kill mode?” Kyle asks, taking a long drag. He’s still racing a bit from all the cocaine.

I shake my head.

“It’s like the fucking devil on amphetamines. The pig was squealing way before they even let the go. So, this dog leaps about a meter off the ground and goes straight for the pig’s throat. It screams, I swear to God, *screams* so loudly, it drowned out the music.”

“Oh fuck,” I say.

“So ja, the pig squeals and screams as this fucking dog rips it apart. You can hear the pig’s skin tearing, but the dog can’t get to its veins, so it’s just bleeding. It changes every so often, going for the pig’s feet. You hear bones breaking and that poor, poor pig wailing.”

“Jesus,” Penny says. “I’m going to be sick”

“And then!” Kyle shouts. “The pig was still dying when those guys wanted to pull the dog away, which is impossible. Have you ever tried to get a vicious dog away from its food?”

I nod.

“The dog starts snapping at people, baring its teeth. One of the guys – this psychotic cunt with a million piercings, tries to pull the pig away.”

“So what happened?” I shout.

“The dog goes for *him*! Straight at the guy, it gets his leg and starts doing the head shake, ripping meat away, then BANG!” Kyle claps his hand. “Someone shoots the dog in the chest. It lets out a dying yelp and then lies there, bleeding out next to the pig.” What. The. Fuck. “I thought I was going to start crying when Pete finally came back out with a massive bag of cocaine. It looked like a bag of flour from the super market. A one kilogram bag.”

“What the hell is my cousin doing?” I say. “This is so fucked up, guys. I’m so, so sorry about this.” I feel a big emptiness in my stomach and want to go home, to my parents’ house, where everything is still innocent and untouched by this awful life of grown-up problems. A hard realization comes to mind. If Peter is mixing with perlemoen poachers and drug dealers, I can’t be hanging out with him. This means I may have to get a job.

University of Cape Town

Part 4

Violent Gang Assault At Beachfront Bar

Thursday night, the Eve of National Youth Day, ended in bloodshed after a group of thugs erupted at the popular beachfront dance club, Tobey Joe's. Eighteen people were treated for serious wounds as a direct result of the alleged perlemoen poaching gang's rampage, while seven others were trampled on the way out of the club's doors as patrons fled to safety. One man underwent a long surgical procedure to repair the damage to his face, when he was hit by a bottle after the fight broke out. According to one of the club's bouncers, who wishes to remain unnamed, the fight was entirely provoked in the name of gratuitous violence.

"We've had problems with these guys before. They're perlie-poachers who go out looking for fights... One moment the gang leader was on the dance floor playing the fool, and the next he had a bottle in his hand and hit one of the customers in the face. We didn't see an argument take place, some shoving - all the signs we look for when people have had too much to drink. This was purely for sport."

No weapons are permitted inside the club and bouncers were quick to take action against the gang of men, but the bad guys in this saga proved to be too powerful. "We jumped in straight away, but these guys were tough. Between the team of doormen, we've got a solid group who can handle big situations, but we were caught off guard this time."

The problem with perlemoen poaching gangs is nothing new to Port Elizabeth, which has become something of a "free for all zone," according to Officer Fredrik Radameyer, the newly appointed chief of the special unit that is assigned to addressing the issue of perlemoen diving. "We're a smaller city with less eyes on the coast, so these guys think they can get away with anything... They make a bit of money, buy some nice toys and the next thing you know, you've got a gang who think they can do whatever they like. That's not going to last. We've got a brand new team who are going to be taking harsh action against anyone connected to perlemoen poaching and acts like Thursday's violence."

Tobey Joe's owner, Rudolph Jones, has assured us that something like this will not happen again. "I would like to express my deepest sympathies to those who were injured on Thursday night. I assure that my door staff did everything in their power to stave off the attack... We are taking new, aggressive measures to assure something like this doesn't happen again."

1

Agnes

My morning routine, my classmates and my teachers are no different to how they were a few weeks ago. The old building and corridors are still familiar and easy to navigate. Everything is the same as it was before that crazy night at The Den, except me.

As it goes in highflying social circles, my good friend Rene was quick to spread word of my tango with Peter Jacobs (to loads of people). Thanks to her, the entire school is talking about the worst night of my life with their facts skewed. Some people are saying I gave him a blowjob in a VIP booth, others say it was full blown sex. It's the

height of injustice that I can be tarred a bimbo for being kissed by a sick bastard, but I can't take the credit for making him look like the true Dick Head that he is.

After my first day back, Sarah treats me to a milkshake at Walmer Park. This feels like a nice step in the right direction: we're turning a normally traumatizing experience into something cool and fun. I've only ever been to Walmer Park with Dad, to visit CUM, a Christian store that specialises in books and music. Whenever we go there Dad gets us roped into watching a live performance by the store clerk, Dave, this ex-hippie turned Reborn Christian who plays in the church band. Dave will bend Dad's ear for an hour, talking about all the great new songs he's been working on for Sunday's service. As we're about to leave, Dave will say, 'Oh, by the way, I brought my guitar to work and I could show you that new song, like, if you want to stick around and listen?' And true as Bob, Dad would rather saw his arm off with a spoon than hurt Dave's feelings by saying no. So there we sit, right near the window where people can see us, listening to Dave's crappy songs that make no sense.

We take a seat at a coffee shop and order some milkshakes. The owner comes to greet Sarah by name and our drinks arrive quickly. "Enjoy," she says, winking at me. The mall is swarming with people, but it feels like there is total anonymity to being here, purely because you can't hear anything people are saying. It's a bit like a nightclub in that way.

"When is your next big appointment?" Sarah asks.

"This time tomorrow, but I'm meeting with Dad and Beryl tonight," I say.

"Jeez, of course," Sarah says. "How's it going?"

"It's okay. She's still a moron."

Sarah nods. "I want to meet Beryl," Sarah laughs. "She sounds so interesting, like a Roald Dahl character."

"No, seriously, you don't. She's a first-class idiot." I stab my milkshake with my straw and then take a long pull, draining half of it in one sip. "I'm sure she's trying to get into my dad's pants."

"It sounds like it," she says. "It's cool that your Dad organises people for you to talk to, though. I don't think my parents could handle something like this."

“My dad has got nothing better to do,” I say, smiling at her.

“Your dad is probably the nicest man in the whole world. You’re lucky, Agnes. I can see how tough things are, but it’s amazing that your Dad loves you so much.”

This makes my eyes well up. I laugh to avoid crying, but I find the will to appreciate what a special dork my Dad is. Even the very irritating things he does, like staying to hear Dave’s songs, is a sign of what a good man he is inside. I want to know more about Sarah’s family, but she’s pretty closed off when it comes to her folks. “So what’s going on with Ruben?” I ask.

“I’m still waiting for him to get hold of me.”

“Do you think that ship has sailed?” I ask.

“No ways,” she says, wooshing her hair around. Sarah knows that guys will always follow her. “He’s going to call. When he does, we’ll take him down.”

2

Ruben

When I was eight years old, I watched *A Nightmare On Elm Street* at Peter’s house. He was nearly thirteen and had his own TV in his room. We stayed up late eating popcorn and sweets, drinking hot chocolate, watching every scene with our eyes glued to the screen.

I couldn’t sleep that night. I *believed* that Freddy Krueger was going to enter my dreams and cut me into ribbons if I dozed off. Pete wasn’t scared. Minutes after turning the lights out, he was snoring like a tiger; it’s funny that he was already a snorer at such a young age.

It was about two in the morning when I’d had enough. I got up to phone my dad. I crept across the passage of the Jacobs’ enormous house, down the creaky staircase. My heart broke when I couldn’t find the cordless phone. The only alternative was in Pete’s dad’s office – a dark room on the other side of the house and the last place I was going by myself. So I sat by the big window next to the front door and decided to wait till morning. I was too scared to go any further or to turn back. It was quiet and dark, and my

imagination was setting off firecrackers around me. Even my own breathing seemed scary.

My nose was running from all the crying I'd been doing in bed. I wiped my face on my Superman pyjamas, and when I looked up my Aunt Rose was standing behind me. She was wearing a long, red robe and her mangled face made me think that Freddy had come to get me. I squealed and wet my pants.

She quickly wrapped me up in her arms and took me to the couch. I looked up at her and my eyes filled with tears again.

"Ssshhhh, Ruben, it's okay. You're okay, sweet boy." She held me tight, rocked me slowly and kissed my forehead. Her voice was like cold aqueous cream on a dry patch of skin you can't reach.

"Mom, what's wrong with Ruben?" Peter asked. I couldn't see him standing in the doorway, but I suddenly felt a flush of shame when I knew he was there.

"Ruben is fine, sweetie, Mommy just gave him a fright," Aunt Rose said. "Go back to bed my lovely Pumpkin Eater."

Peter walked up to me and touched my leg. "Don't worry Ruben, Freddy isn't real. It's all okay here, you're safe, I promise." He kissed his Mom on her ugly side and walked back to his room confidently, through the dark passages and up the long staircase. I remember thinking he was really brave and grown up for not being scared of those things. My feeling of shame subsided and I went back to focusing on Aunt Rose rocking me gently, and eventually fell asleep in her arms.

I woke up in the morning wearing a pair of Peter's pajamas bottoms, which were much too big for me. Neither Peter nor Rose said a word about the incident, and I thought that was pretty cool of them. Peter had something akin to a normal childhood until that year. Everything changed for the worst after Rose killed herself. There are lots of people who think he's total wanker, and they've got grounds to say so, but I know there are real feelings buried beneath his fortress of bullshit. The only reason I'm telling you all this is to illustrate how fucking hard it is to break ties with him. We've been chaanas since we could communicate with one another. I know that he *needs* love to keep flowing his way.

I'm at Mom and Dad's house for supper. The topic of Peter's behaviour has been brought up (as usual), much to my discomfort. Not everything, but just the important stuff about last weekend. Their reactions are totally understandable.

"Jesus Christ, Ruben, really? He was mixing with those drug dealers who beat up people at the bar?" Mom says, dropping her fork in her plate of macaroni and cheese.

"Perlemoen poachers," Runt corrects.

"Ja, I don't want to hang out with him for a while," I say.

"Good," Dad says, cracking another beer for both of us. "Ruben, I know I'm not impartial when it comes to your cousin, but I get the same feeling around him as I did around his old man."

"What feeling was that?" I ask.

Mom shrugs and puts a forkful of food in her mouth.

Dad looks her and shakes his head. "Peter's old man was bad news. I knew he'd do something terrible one day."

"I thought Rose was just depressed about the accident?" I say.

"He caused it!" Dad shrieks. "He definitely did, but she would never admit that. God no, she defended him for some unknown reasons." Dad takes a long sip of beer. "But I mean something bigger than him being a careless idiot. Terence Jacobs was a cold man, and I always knew he'd do something to hurt the people he loved. He was a selfish son of a bitch."

"Language," Mom says, cutting Dad off.

"Sorry," Dad says to Runt, "He didn't want a family. He always saw family events as work and he wouldn't allow himself to feel comfortable around us."

Runt laughs. "My delicate virgin ears!"

Mom scowls.

Dad carries on. "Anyhow, what I'm trying to say is that Peter gives me the same feeling as his dad did. I'm glad you don't want to hang around him. What's a man his age want to hang around a bunch of pipsqueaks like you and your friends for, anyways? You've gotten away with a soft lesson here. That man is bad news. What if you'd ended up in jail?"

I look at Mom and smile, feeling a bit guilty that the lesson may not be as soft as I have led Dad to believe.

Your first sms to a potential suitor is always a bid deal. You don't want to sound overly keen, and you certainly don't want to hold back too much so that it looks like you're an asshole. I have been thinking about Sarah since Friday and it's time I sent her something.

With the help of all my housemates, we brainstormed several drafts of the opening sms, before I finally sent it on Wednesday night. This was the final draft:

Hi Sarah, been meaning to sms you all week. Been very busy. Saving babies and fighting fire. Could I please see you sometime? Ruben

3

Agnes

One of the hardest things about growing up is learning that your parents (or parent, in my case) are normal people who make mistakes and do strange things. I once imagined that I'd have a clear idea of how the world works by the time I hit twenty. That doesn't seem realistic anymore. Twenty is only three years away and my state of mind seems to have gone backwards in the last six months. Last night shaved off another year of progress at least.

Here's what happened last night: Dad and Mount Beryl walked in at about nine 'o clock.

"I'm so sorry we're late," Dad said to me, standing in front of the TV, during the last section of *Friends*. He's been coming home late for the last two weeks, sometimes with and without Beryl, so it didn't feel any different to several others. The only big change was their moods. They're normally all smiles and cutesy jokes. I turned the TV down and said "Hi".

"Hello Sweetie," she said, leaning over to give me a very scarily tight hug. Dad led her towards the couch and took a seat next to Beryl.

"Agnes, we need to speak to you," Dad said.

There was five minutes left of *Friends* and after that there was bugger all on TV for the night. I had a pretty good idea about what they wanted to say, so it didn't seem necessary to sacrifice the last of my favorite program to talk about their plan to bring Peter Jacobs down or Patrick's upcoming seminar. "This is almost finished; can it wait a couple of minutes?"

"Yes, yes of course," Dad said, looking back at Beryl. She widened her eyes at him. I could see he was stressed out and I felt bad for not cutting him some slack, but it's also my sanity on the brink here. Beryl got up and went to the kitchen, where she banged on some pots and pans while looking for the tea bags. "Does anyone want tea?" she bellowed, killing the punch line of what I'm quite certain was the funniest joke ever cracked on *Friends*. Dad said no for both of us. His face was glowing and I could see him shuffling from bum cheek to bum cheek, trying to get comfortable.

I switched off the TV and sat up. "What is it, Dad? So you have a warrant for Peter Jacob's arrest?" I asked, hoping that he and I could have a sort of preliminary discussion before Beryl joined our party.

"Well Aggie, we have some news," Dad started to say, before she appeared at the doorway, like a dark shadow looming over us.

"Were you about to tell her without me?" Beryl said.

Dad cowered and shook his head. I'd have done the same if that woman said something to me in that tone.

She shuffled to the couch. This whole tango with a big announcement seemed so dramatic and staged, it was making me irritable. "Listen guys, don't press charges. I'll do whatever counseling you need, but if you think that organizing a man hunt will make things better, you're wrong. In a year's time I'll be going to university, living a new life and Peter Jacobs will be nothing but a distant fart in the wind."

Dad dropped his head to the floor, guiltily, the way a small boy might do when getting yelled at by his mom. He looked up at me for a moment, then at Beryl. Then Beryl looked at Dad, then me. She took a sip of tea and tried to speak up, but the words seemed to catch the edge of her throat and hang on. She finally backed down and joined Dad in looking at the floor. "It's fine, guys. Come on, seriously. I've made peace with

myself. There's nothing to feel bad about. Beryl?" I said, reaching out to her and trying (much to my discomfort) to be a pal. "This is fine. You and I can work this out in counselling sessions." I touched both their hands and smiled enthusiastically.

"Beryl's pregnant," Dad said, still looking at the floor.

This was news indeed. A long silence ensued for one or fifty minutes; I couldn't tell. I wanted to faint and scream at the same time. In this life injustice will be a constant reminder of what dick heads all people can be. I had a feeling they were canoodling on the sly, but nothing led me to believe they'd been bumping uglies. I've been put through hell because some guy kissed me. I looked up at them and lost the nerve to say anything.

"What about Peter Jacobs suing?" I managed to ask, tripping over my tongue.

"It's a miracle," Beryl said. This long, snake-like smile cut its way across her massive face.

I nodded, considering for a moment the miraculous nature of a pair of old toppies like these two getting knocked up. Then my head went back to what the hell was going on.

"God is great," Beryl-zille said. I was ready to ring God's neck for this if he was really the one responsible. Something told me he didn't know a thing about this though.

"It's a sign from heaven," Beryl carried on, "this is God's baby."

I backed down and assumed the position of looking at the floor. "Have the two of you been smoking your underpants? How the hell can you be glad about this?"

And that's when Dad dropped another bomb. "Agnes, we have never had intercourse. This baby truly is a miracle."

I wanted to ring Dad's neck. "No, don't lie to me. You have sex. Thank you both for telling me, but don't pour salt on this wound by feeding me a bunch of mambo jumbo about how this came to be."

"No, Agnes. We've never been intimate. I was impregnated by a miracle."

"That is physically impossible," I said.

"No it's not," Beryl almost shouted this at me. "Not when it's God's will."

I felt a rush of blood moving towards my head like a tsunami. "I hope God doesn't have the same vision for you as He did for Mom."

Dad's face turns white.

“That's right,” I said, getting up. “This is God's second miracle baby for Dad. But the first one killed my Mother.” I walk to the door. “Fuck you both.” As the words left my mouth, Beryl gave a rattish squeak, like I'd stepped on her tail.

I quite liked thinking my father was a pillar of strength and morality. A Super Hero at times. I woke up this morning with a knot in my chest and a terrible vision: I'm waving goodbye to Super Dad. He's on a ship, standing next to a tall, moronic woman with big hair. Their sails have caught the wind and they're on course for a new country, somewhere far away, to a land of immaculate conceptions and revival movements. Their happy silhouettes are blending into a pink sunset.

I head over to Sarah's house for breakfast. She lives around the corner from the church, so I can go straight to my meeting with Patrick afterwards. I love how Sarah's mind works. “Agnes, you have got to be kidding me? A miracle baby?” She asks, spreading cream cheese onto a pair of rye bagels for us. Even the food at her house is fancy.

“Yes, I'm serious,” I say.

“What will they tell people when someone asks who the child looks like?”

“Exactly!” I shout, embarrassing myself at the volume I reach accidentally.

“Back in Jesus' times, you could get away with that. Medical science wasn't around to blow the whistle on a claim like this. Can you imagine someone saying, ‘Oh, he's got his Heavenly Saviour's eyes!’”

I almost lose a bite of bagel through my nose. We are all set to get Ruben Folks arrested, after Sarah's date with him. The original plan was to have him taken away from the Boardwalk in handcuffs, but Officer Fredrik wouldn't do it. ‘It's too public for such a horrible prank’ were his words.

“How you feeling about the date?” I ask her.

“Good,” she says. “I'm excited for this.”

“Thank you, it means a lot that you're doing this for me.”

Sarah gives me a big hug. “Of course. Let's bust this fool's balls.”

4

Sanders

It's Saturday morning and I'm as sober as a judge for my beach date with Sarah. I have not kissed a girl without the help of booze in years. That probably explains why I haven't had a real girlfriend in so long.

It's weird that I'm trying to go out with a girl who is still in high school - this is camping in enemy territory for me. I remember being her age and hating guys in my position: guys who were old enough to drive a car and get a job, but still rocked up at school house parties. My mates and I would talk about how the older guys were only in it for easy sex. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, I see the situation in a completely different light. Girls my age are still into older dudes who have more money and better means of transport. By trying to date younger chicks, I'm only participating in the cycle of life. It's got bugger all to do with an easy lay. There is no such thing. This is sexual survival.

It's one of those awesome, sunny days where there is a light breeze in the air. Our window for calmness is about three hours. That's how long the wind can go without howling in this flat city. I'm not entirely sure if I can get my leg wet yet, but it feels pretty good and the doc said that's the best indicator.

Before leaving the house, I ask Penny and her friend to give me some crits on my outfit. "You look very hot," the friend says, "Except that your fly is open."

I look down and notice my undies are poking through the front of my shorts. The zipper has been playing up of late.

"Nice one, Ruben," Penny says, winking at me.

"Please look after my car," Kyle asks, not taking his eyes off the television. He's deep into Grand Theft Auto, on the run from the cops.

"How's thug life?" I ask him.

"Just peachy. I'm going to shoot my way to safety. I'm killing all these fuckers!" Kyle says, laughing evilly.

Sarah stays in a really nice house in Walmer, right next door to the golf course. I make my way across their stunning garden (through palm trees and water features) and knock on the front door. It suddenly gets about ten degrees hotter; I pray her father doesn't answer it and that, if he does, he's not ripped like Stone Cold Steve Austin. My prayer is answered when Sarah opens up and greets me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She's wearing a pair of tight, white shorts that show off her amazing getaway sticks, and a little t-shirt that covers her belly button and displays a classy amount of boob cleavage. I can see she's got her bikini on underneath; there is a lumo green strap sticking out of her shirt.

"Howzit, wow, you look nice." Her little nose is so wonderful I can hardly stand here and not pinch it.

"You're sweet," she chirps, leaning back inside, which allows me a quick peek of her belly button. She calls out to her folks. "Bye, I'm going now," then she slams the door without waiting for a response.

Before we walk out the gate she flashes a set of keys at me and unlocks a white SLK parked in the driveway. I look at her.

"We're taking my car, if that's okay?" Sarah says. "I don't want you ditching me at the beach or anything."

"Can you drive?" I ask.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, of course you can drive." I smile at her and open the passenger door.

We park at the City Lodge, overlooking Humewood Beach. The water is clear and crisp. There are only a handful of people there, which is very surprising for a Saturday as bright and sunny as this. I change into a pair of swimming trunks, strategically keeping my tight undies on, so that if I get a horn it won't look like a bird suddenly flew into my pocket. I take my shirt off and throw it in the back of the car, and then she does the same. Sarah in just her bikini causes me serious knee pain.

The water is close to freezing, but we manage to dive underneath and paddle around for a while. My senses are practically numb, anyways. Her nipples are sticking through the

bikini and it's making me feel sick (in a good way). As far as dates go, this is the apex of my career so far.

5

Agnes

Patrick greets me in the church foyer with a formal handshake. I plod down the narrow passage that leads to his office. It's musty and warm inside, like a pantry full of spicy ingredients. We take a seat on the couch and I notice that he has tea and cakes laid out, along with a jug of water for himself.

"So, Agnes, how are you today?"

"Terrible." I figured it is pointless hiding anything, seeing that Dad, Beryl and him are the Three Holy Musketeers.

"That sounds about right for a daughter who's just learned that her Dad is having a baby with another woman. Congrats, you're going to be a big sister." Patrick says. He pours himself a glass of water and signals for me to have tea. I take a cup from him and three biscuits for dunking. Patrick downs his glass of water.

"They've spoken to you?" I ask.

Patrick nods.

"What is going on with this miracle baby story?"

He puts the empty glass down and frowns. "You don't sound very happy?"

"I'm happy they're having a baby. I just think their unconsecrated intercourse shouldn't be ignored."

Patrick closes his eyes and strains. "Why is it so hard for you to believe in a miracle?"

"Because it's impossible," I say. "Yes, it's miraculous that two people their age can produce young, but they... obviously had sex."

Patrick crosses his legs tightly and huffs. "God does the impossible every day. This is small fry for someone who created the whole universe."

I put my tea down. "Why would God give two old fogies a baby when Dad can hardly look after himself?"

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Patrick says. I’ve heard this a thousand times.

“Has the Lord considered the ins and outs of this mysterious decision?”

“It’s a miracle,” Patrick insists, turning reddish.

“Okay fine, it’s a miracle. Congratulations Jesus,” I say, looking at the roof.

“Now please explain why everyone can’t just admit that Dad and Beryl had sex to make your miracle happen?”

“Why is this so hard for *you*?” Patrick asks, making his eyebrows stand at attention.

“Because the list of things on God’s miracle to-do list *must be enormous*: World Hunger, AIDS, cancer, poverty, natural disasters. But he wastes precious miracle ammo on giving Dad and Beryl a baby? I’m sorry, but that makes God a bit impractical.”

“The Lord works in mysterious way, you obstinate mule!” Patrick shouts, holding his hand up to stop me before I can insult his God again. “We’re going a bit off topic. Shall we get back to you and your anger towards the man who kicked you?”

“I thought I could talk about anything?” I say, starting to enjoy his frustration.

“That was before you started taking pot shots at God.”

“If God is so great and so wise, how come I’m not allowed to ask him why a ridiculous miracle gets preference over so many other important ones that are outstanding?” I’m so fired up I could have a fistfight with him.

“Agnes,” Patrick says, sharpening his voice, “just think about this for a second and consider God’s logic: you go out dressed very provocatively at a place known for drugs and lust, and how are you rewarded?”

I stare daggers at him.

“With some lecherous man forcing himself on you and then a stranger beating you up on the way home. Not so?”

I hate him.

“Your Dad and Beryl abstain from sexual intercourse, despite their Christian love for one another, and what does God do? He gives them a baby. That sounds about right to

me as far as logic goes.”

“You’re a pig.”

6

Sanders

The Boardwalk Casino and Entertainment Complex was supposed to be a classy attraction that would put Port Elizabeth on the map. When the plans for construction were made public, everyone thought it was the end of our struggle for recognition as a legitimate tourist city. We’d finally have a mall and a casino that would measure up to Joburg. We’d get heaps of visitors from around the world and be cosmopolitan and hip, like Durban. The view of the ocean would be beautiful and glamorous like Cape Town, not that it would take anything away from her parade, but hell, we wouldn’t feel like a pimply asshole in a room full of dicks when she comes up in conversation.

As it turned out, the Boardwalk is pure cheese. I don’t know how our city managed to turn several acres of prime, sea-facing property into a goddam pony circus, but we did. The casino is trashy, the games centre is always packed with terrifying children (aggressive types who will probably stab you with Chip and Dip fork for tokens) and the restaurants are ridiculous. The only people who go there are Asian businessmen and local riffraff; mostly drunks who want to ride the Go Karts or gamble away their entire salary on the first weekend of the month. Peter, funnily enough, loves it there.

I suddenly understand why the beach is so empty. There is a Summer Spectacular taking place at the man-made lake inside the Boardwalk Casino and Entertainment Centre. I take Sarah’s hand and we navigate our way through the mass of people standing around like cows outside an abattoir.

“Did you know this was going on today?” she asks.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” I say.

“Good,” she answers, giving my sweaty palms a squeeze.

We manage to scrum our way to the front of the line. I start pulling at my hair when I see the tourist prices. I have exactly forty bucks on me, and a double scoop is twenty-nine. If she requests a double scoop, I’m not going to have enough for an ice

cream too, and that will make me look like A) a cheap bastard or B) one of those weirdoes who is too scared to eat in front of girls. I'm neither of those things. Just poor and hungry.

"I'll have a double scoop of Chocolate Fudge," Sarah says, swooping her long hair in front of her face and smelling it. I've noticed her do this a few times now.

I tell the ice cream scooper man what to do and order a coke for myself.

We're walking back through the crowd and I can hardly take my eyes off her tongue shaping the ball of ice cream on top of the cone. It is glorious. Probably a good thing I couldn't afford my own one, because I'd just throw it all up on her.

I'm stuck in Dream Land when some guy walks past us and says, "Hey buddy, heads up. You hanging out," pointing at me.

Sarah looks at me. "You know him?"

"No. That's strange. It's just some random dude."

We walk on a few steps before I hear someone chuckling at me.

"What is wrong with people at this place?" she asks.

"I know, the Boardwalk is such a dive. Let's go," I say. For some reason I take a peek at my lower region and finally realise what is going on. My entire package, balls and cock, is poking through the front of my new shorts. The damn fly just opens up on its own. I took off my jocks after our swim, because they were drenched and my privates would get chaffed to scabs if I went for a stroll like that.

Before I can even check if she's seen it, Sarah is in hysterics. All I can do is pull my zip up as gracefully as possible, and speed-limp out of the main entrance. She calls out "Stop Ruben! Ruben, stop! It's funny, just come back!"

7

Agnes

I'm sitting in the church garden, stewing over my meeting with Patrick when Fredrik arrives. "Howzit howzit," he says, announcing himself and taking a seat next to

me. It's another scorcher and he's wearing his full canvas uniform. There's a big Alsatian with him.

"Who is this? Can I touch her?" I ask.

He nods. "This is Hope."

Hope waits for his command. She looks uncomfortable with all the attention I'm giving her – literally gushing like an idiot. My dad won't let me have pets, so I make up for it by loving other people's extra hard. Fredrik says something that makes her sit and look less uneasy.

"She's gorgeous. You both must be boiling!" I say.

"No, fine," he laughs.

"Can I get you some cool-drink?"

"No, no worry."

"It's not a worry."

"No, it's fine, I'm not thirsty."

"But you must be *hot*," I say. "I can see you're sweating. I'm getting water for Hope, at least."

He pauses for a bit and thinks. "Ag, actually yes. Thank you."

Such a gentleman. I grab a freezing cold iced tea out of the freezer inside and bring it to him, along with a bowl of water. Hope just looks at it. As soon as Fredrik says "drink" she almost dives in. He cracks open the drink and takes most of it down in one sip.

"I thought you weren't thirsty?" I joke.

"Maybe just a little."

We say nothing for a bit. "Thank you so much for doing this," I say.

"It's no problem, Agnes..." Fredrik says. He polishes off the last of his iced tea and gasps. "Have you thought about what you'll say to him – when we have him in cuffs?"

I nod. I have done almost nothing *but* think about it.

"You know, I don't want you to be disappointed if he doesn't turn out to be the boogey man. I *know* Ruben – from years back."

“I just want him to know what I’ve gone through, because he was careless and cowardly. How do you know him?” I suddenly have the urge to know.

Fredrik nods. “We went to school together. Once upon a time.”

“*You’re his age?*”

“No, I was a few years old for my standard. And I left his school – or was expelled, rather.”

“*Expelled!*” I say, with a bit more enthusiasm than I’d initially intended.

“I was a naughty kid. I got sent to Boys Town for doing some terrible things.”

“But you’re such a nice guy? I can’t imagine you being a naughty kid,” I say.

“I was a proper *skabanga*.”

“What made you change?” I ask.

“Ah... It’s a long story,” he says. “I’ll tell you some day. I just wanted you to know that making someone pay for *their* mistake shouldn’t make you feel better. Not when it’s something that isn’t life or death. This guy,” he says, pointing outside, “Ruben. He’s not a bad guy. You’ll see.”

I smile at him and suddenly think very hard about what we’re about to do. Wise Officer Fredrik has a good point. Then my phone rings.

“Get ready. We’re on our way,” Sarah says.

I look at Fredrik and he smiles at me, accepting of my agenda.

“We’re waiting.”

“Okay great,” she says. “This *isn’t* going well.”

“Shame!” I say.

“Ja, he’s just such a prick. Really.”

8

Ruben

I’m waiting for her at the car, too embarrassed to go back inside. I honestly can’t believe she saw my boytjie after a swim in the sea, when it’s curled up like a wet nicker. At last Sarah comes walking through the big entrance, talking on her cellphone. I

worry that she's buzzing all her friends, giving them the low down on my raisin-sized nob.

"Oh my socks, words can't describe my embarrassment," I say, when she gets close enough to hear me.

"That was my friend, Agnes. She's going through some serious family stuff and really needs a friend. I've got to see her." She beeps open the car and climbs into the driver's seat.

"Is everything okay?" I say, buckling up. There's a part of me that starts to worry about why she suddenly has to go. This sounds like a big excuse to end the date. I reach out and stop her before she turns the key.

"Listen, Sarah, I'm so embarrassed, please just tell me everything is fine. Are you just saying this to have an excuse to go?"

Sarah packs out laughing and leans over to hug me. She holds me tightly, using one hand to curl the back of my hair and the other to rub my arms. Then she looks up and smiles. Her mouth makes the most incredible shape and I'm lost in the warmth of her tiny nostrils. We lean into our first kiss and I almost melt into my ankles. It's a great balance of lips and tongue, with a bit of pecking thrown in for the hell of it.

"I can't believe that happened," I say, once we manage to pry ourselves away from one another.

"Never mind, it only makes it less of a shock when I see it again." She winks at me and I feel blood rushing down into my groin area fast. "I promise you, it was just funny."

We're on our way out of the Boardwalk when I realise that Kyle's car is still at her house.

"It's not a problem," Sarah says, "I'll pick Agnes up on the way there."

"Where is she?" I ask.

"At Sovereign Leader Church."

We take the back road that goes past the airport, where they've planted a long row of palm trees to make our city look like Miami or Hollywood. Sarah is driving like a maniac, overtaking cars on blind corners and wheel spinning as she pulls off at Stop

signs. “Um, it’s sexy to see you drive like this, but you’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry, she sounded pretty upset. We need to hurry,” Sarah says, putting her foot down even harder. Her phone keeps peeping, so I’m guessing her friend is trying to get hold of her. We turn down Church Street and fly over a few speed humps.

“There she is.” Sarah points to a girl on the side of the road. She pulls the car over and hoots once, just gently, to get her attention. The girl looks up from her cellphone and waves at us. It’s her. Of all the people in this whole fucking city I expected to see, the girl I kicked in the stomach is not one of them. My entire soul goes flying out through my asshole. My heart starts to race and I sweat buckets of bile and nerves in an instant. She runs over to my window and smiles at me. I panic and reach for the door handle, but the girl blocks my path and leans against it.

“Sarah!” she shouts. “Lock him in!”

Sarah presses a button and gives her friend the Okay signal.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask her.

“I’m asking the questions here: why did you leave my friend lying on the side of the road after you kicked the shit out of her?” Sarah says. Her whole face has changed. She looks like the fucking devil.

I feel the time has finally come for me to own up to my mistake and take what is coming to me. It’s two girls, what’s the worst they can do? “It wasn’t like that,” I say. “You have no idea how sorry I am.”

“Fredrik!” Agnes looks over her shoulder and shouts to someone. “Fredrik, I’ve got him!” She’s hysterical. Then I see that she’s calling out to Daanie (or Fredrik as I now remember him), who is running over to us with an Alsatian in tow. “Fredrik, it’s him! Ruben Folks! I’ve got him!” Agnes wails, banging on the car window.

“Enjoy prison” Sarah says.

“I can explain,” I say in my sorriest voice.

“The hell you can, asshole!” Sarah says.

I look over and see Daanie coming straight for us, reaching into his belt where the gun is located. I turn to Sarah and say, “Sorry again.” I lean across her and unlock the door. Then open it, push her out with more force than I’d like to admit and slam the door

closed on her hand. She lets out an almighty screech, which prompts me to open it slightly for her. As soon as she gets her hand back I turn the key and put the car in reverse. Officer Daanie stands in front of the car. I am faced with another dilemma: Stop and take responsibility for kicking the girl, trying to steal a car and breaking Sarah's hand, or run.

"Stop! Stop, Ruben!" Daanie or Fredrik screams at me, as I go tearing off past him and the girls.

9

Agnes

Things did not go according to plan. Everybody is freaking out now. "Remember what I told you at Walmer Park?" she says to me on the car ride over to the hospital.

"About what?"

"About how my parents would handle a situation like yours? *Watch* them deal with this," she says, with chunks of burning coal in her voice.

Sarah, Officer Fredrik and I take the heat from her dad. He finds us in the waiting room, after she's been X-Rayed and had the breaks confirmed. "How the *fuck* does a little thug manage to break someone's hand *and* steal a luxury car in front of a police officer, hey? No gun, no knife? God, cops in this country are thick and useless." Sarah's dad is a tall, sexy man with a great mop of hair. He's far more the gangster stereotype than Peter Jacobs. It's terrifying to see him angry. The fact that Ruben Folks broke two of my ribs and almost collapsed a lung also highlights his argument. "And you tell me this little shit got away with almost *killing* you, Agnes? No man, uh uh, what *nonsense!*"

"Sir, I'm very sorry about this," Officer Fredrik says. "It was my fault for going along with a prank on him. I'll get your car back right away. I know this guy – he's just scared."

"You fucking well better. Because I can promise you that I'll see to it personally that you lose your job, understand?"

Fredrik nods sadly and walks out.

I give chase and stop him down the passage. “Fredrik, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say...”

“Just let me do my job for a change,” he says.

10

Ruben

Peter wasn’t mean or judgmental when I arrived at his house in a stolen car. It was beyond crazy what I did. “Calm down, Ruben. I need you to trust me, okay?” He hugged me and then listened while I spilled the story in his kitchen.

“Jesus Fucking Christ, Peter,” I said, gasping for air while he poured a very strong whiskey for both of us. “I don’t want to go to jail, please, please, please help me. Oh my god, ooooooh my god...” I got down on the ground, put my head between my legs and started pulling out chunks of hair.

“Rubes, shut up for a second,” Peter handed me the beverage. “I’ve got to make a call. I want you to get some clean clothes out of my cupboard and to take a toothbrush and some things out of the bathroom.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Just because. Then get in the Beamer and wait for me, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Be cool. It’s going to be fine, I promise, but we need to leave here right away.”

I handed over Sarah’s mom’s keys and did as I was told. You can say what you like about Peter, but when the chips are down and you need a loyal friend in your corner, I’d pick him over the law any day of the week.

We pull up to a house in the middle of North End. As luck would have it, the place is prime porch-watching property in the middle of Hairy-Back central. “Who lives here?” I ask.

“It’s Tuckie’s pad. He’ll keep you safe for the next few days,” Pete says, taking off his sunglasses and checking his phone for messages.

“For the next few days!” I squawk.

“Yes, you think I can clap my hands and make the cops understand what you’ve done? This will take a while, Ruben. They’ll throw you in jail right now if you own up. I

need time to arrange a deal.”

“Pete, I don’t want to stay here.” I break down again. The thought of being here for more than a night is killing me.

“You think jail will be more your style?” he asks.

I shake my head no.

“Good answer. Now go inside and be nice. Tuckie’s a fucken stellar guy and he’s doing you a big favour, okay?”

I nod agreeably.

“Right, now I’m going to see what we can do about the car. Your phone?” Pete holds out his hand.

I drop my cellphone into his palm. He pulls a knife blade out of the mini leatherman attached to his car keys and drives it into my phone’s screen.

“I’ll throw this away on the ride home. Bye cuz.”

I get out and have a look around. There are about twelve barking jackals having a go at me and twice as many people standing on their porches, watching my every move. Tuckie is standing at his doorway signaling for me to hurry inside.

“Thank you, Pete,” I say before running to a house straight out of my nightmares.

Tuckie’s pad is a throwback to the nineteen forties. The walls are thick, high and as cold as a witch’s nipple. The rooms are drab and there’s no linen on most of the beds. An old TV is perched on the dining room table, with most of its wires and hanging out the back. There’s a sign lying on the floor that says, ‘Palo Electricians.’ “That’s from my old business,” Tuckie says, lighting a fag as we move through the kitchen, which is surprisingly clean when you compare it to the rest of the place. He picks a set of keys off a hook and leads me back through the living room, to a side room at the front of the house. “Mind here,” Tuckie says, opening a door in the wooden floor boards. “Follow me.”

We climb down the most dangerous staircase ever built, into a basement that I never expected. Below the house a luxury pad, as big as the property above it, straight out of MTV Cribs. The floors are carpeted with something that feels like lambs’ wool. There

are matching leather lazy-boys in the lounge, a TV the size of a cinema screen mounted on the wall, a playstation, an X-Box, a huge fridge full of beer and KFC boxes lining the counter. Posters of lame action movies, like *The Fast And The Furious*, deck the newly painted walls. I look around me in pure amazement.

“Nice hey? Sorry it’s a bit dirty, I wasn’t expecting anybody,” Tuckie says. His voice cuts through my skull like a hacksaw.

“Ja,” I answer, nodding.

“You sleep on the couch. Put your bag in the spare room, just there,” he makes a spear with his hand and points to a door at the other side of the lounge. I open it up and check that he’s got an arsenal of gym equipment in there. Free weights, an ergo machine, buckets of protein powder, a treadmill and plenty of other things I wouldn’t know what the fuck to do with.

“I’m getting ripped this summer, check,” Tuckie says, pulling his bicep. “I’m gonna be fucking huge.”

I nod at him. It would be funny to see this lanky little rat with a body full of muscles. Through all of this I almost forget about the mess I’m in. “Tuckie, thank you for letting me stay here. I hope it will only be the night... like, I don’t know how long it’ll take for things to go back to normal.”

“Ag, don’t worry, I don’t care!” he squeaks. “Jussis, what a doos. What were you thinking stealing that car?”

I shake my head and tell him I have no idea. In my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined today’s date ending up like this.

“Well, at least you’re not the first poes who jacked a car from a hot chick, believe you me. I’m sure our cousins will sort it out in no time.”

Part 5

1977- Present

Sarrel Muller was strange looking, even as a kid. He grew tall and gaunt from a young age and suffered teenage acne that left trenches in his cheeks. His long nose was a parting gift from his European father, who resembled a pick-axe with a face sketched on it. You didn't have to know Sarrel well to understand that he was searching for stuff: for friendship, love, a reliable father maybe, but definitely a better life. As a young teenager, his hair would turn creamy, stiff and yellow from being treated with peroxide too many times; one of the many ways he tried to improve his appearance and win approval.

He lived with his mom, Krisaan, in a twelve-floor government complex, called 'Rots Weg', in Algoa Park. It was a tough neighborhood, where kids were naughty, scared and beaten – and usually all three at the same time. If you didn't have a father to beat you, and your mother was too washed up to do it, someone else's dad would gladly step in. That's how things worked. Everybody drank, fought and prayed. It wasn't exclusively English or Afrikaans; it was *white*. You had people in church every Sunday asking Jesus for the strength to succeed in life and be a good Christian. In their pockets would be a half jack of brandy and a loaded pistol – just in case any kaffirs or hotnots came looking for shit.

Krisaan couldn't cope. She was amongst the worst drinkers in Algoa Park. For most of Sarrel's life at home he was in charge of putting his mother to bed and cleaning her soiled underwear. It always shocked him to find that even his mother's poo smelled like brandy. She spent close to every cent they ever had at the liquor store down the road, ironically called *Spooks*; all Krisaan had in life was her Sarrel and her 'Spooks'. People at Rots Weg pitied the Mullers and offered leftover food to Sarrel on nights when they'd seen Kristaan drinking more heavily than usual. He was always a capable young man, but making food would never be his strong point.

After dropping out of school at thirteen, Sarrel tried his hand at petty crime. He mixed with poorer kids who ate better food and owned cooler clothing than he did. While the lure of nicer things was there, Sarrel was not a comfortable thief. The boy quickly learned that he was a terrible crook. His attempt at stealing a neighbor's engagement ring ended in disaster when he went back to undo his crime, and was caught. This is how Sarrel's long nose became a long, hooked nose.

Sarrel was fifteen when he stole a car after friends had told him they were all going to drive to Durban and run away from Algoa Park. They had shown him a wad of stolen money and given him directions to meet them at the corner of Hoof Straat, outside the bank. Everything went smoothly, until Sarrel pulled up to the curb and found the car owner waiting for him, a beast named Klein Spook (the liquor store owner's son), who beat the shit out of poor Sarrel. His friends watched this from inside the bank.

Klein Spook beat him close to death, which was how Sarrel became "Tuckie" to all those who knew him; he was named after a ghost the kids of Rots Weg invented, to account for all the slamming doors missing articles. "Tuckie was here," they said whenever anything disappeared. Sarrel was raised from the dead, because Tuckie didn't want him spoiling his clean run of theft.

1

Ruben

The union between Tuckie and I is a strange one. You couldn't have two people who are more unlike one another sharing the same space. This is the stuff that Disney movies are made from; only in real life it isn't sweet, sentimental or particularly funny. Just fucking uncomfortable. To keep track of my sanity, I've decided to keep a log book.

Captain's Logbook: Day 1

After a very long and detailed monologue about the training schedule a respected cage fighter drew up for him (personally), Tuckie decides we need to have supper. "I hope you don't mind, but I've got to eat lots of protein to build mass, so we're having chicken only. No fats or starch."

I tell him that's fine, but I'm not hungry, purely because I'm worried that his idea of fat-free, protein-building chicken is that old bucket of KFC that's been sitting on the counter for God knows how long. Sadly, it is.

He takes a seat in the lounge and puts the TV on. "Eat when you want to, I don't care," Tuckie says, carrying on with a drum stick in each hand. He's got a strand of chicken fat hanging on to his stupid little goatie. This is the image of him I will have forever. Tuckie and the drum sticks, watching *Die Hard* on the movie channel, making "kaboosh!" noises every time Bruce Willis punches a bad guy.

Captain's Logbook: Day 2

Tuckie left for work at Sparrow's fart. I heard him get up and quietly make his way out the front door, which is quite considerate. Especially since he's harbouring a criminal on the run and it's not like we're old buddies or anything.

I wake up at eleven 'o'clock with a kink in my neck from sleeping in a funny position. As per normal, I have to unload a morning dump within fifteen minutes. I'm pleasantly surprised by the classy two-ply bog roll and an assortment of pornographic material in the bathroom, which obliges me to have two wanks. Once I've come a second time, I suddenly start to worry that Tuckie has cameras set up on the roof and that he's been watching me choke my chicken in his toilet.

Despite my paranoia, it's nice to have the place to myself. I watch TV, make toast, think about calling my parents and end up crying a bit. God knows they must be angrier and more worried about me than ever before. There's no phone here and Pete broke my cell, so I'm stuck in the last place anyone who knows me would come looking. I smoke a hundred and twenty thousand cigarettes throughout the day and fall asleep watching TV at eight, before Tuckie gets home.

2

Agnes

The congregation is throwing Dad and Beryl a surprise engagement party at the church. To be honest, the whole damn thing is one big surprise after another. Everyone is

here at eleven o'clock in the morning, slapping Dad on the back and praising God for being so generous to the Happy Couple. Beryl is glowing in a bright yellow dress, like Twinkle Twinkle Little Planet. Dad looks hokey in a white suit that I know she picked out for him. He hasn't worn that thing since about nineteen ninety seven. It fits him like a dress, because he's shrunk so much in the last few years.

I am not in any state to be wondering around the cakes table at an engagement party for my old man. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's old Pastor Ritchie. "Agnes," he says, giving my arm a little squeeze and smiling at me. He's like Santa Claus in Bill Cosby sweaters. "How are you, my dear?"

"I'm okay, thanks," I say, trying to finish a cheese puff and force a smile at the same time.

Ritchie looks around and then puts his hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure?"

I smile nervously. My loathing for Beryl and Patrick is hard to disguise, especially given the other events in play. I shake my head at him.

"Hang in there, dear. Have they caught that boy yet?"

"Not yet." It's been a week since Ruben Folks went on the run. Sarah and I haven't spoken much since.

"How are things with regards to Peter Jacobs?" Ritchie wants to know.

"He's been summoned, but no word yet."

He nods and puts a hand on my shoulder. "You did the right thing, Agnes. Nobody should defile the institution of God and get away with it. We'll show him the rapture when he gets caught." Ritchie has the tweaked look on his face, somewhere between excitement and anger. He doesn't look anything like the warm, friendly man who plays scrabble with my Dad.

I excuse myself and head for the bathroom. In the silence of the stall, I allow myself to break down and cry into a handful of toilet paper.

When I finally leave the bathroom and go through to the garden, Patrick and Ritchie are standing in the gazebo with Dad and Beryl, getting everyone's attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Patrick says, “May I have your attention, please.” Everyone hushes down and he clears his throat before carrying on. “We are so thankful to be here today, to share in the great miracle of love between Beryl and James. Those of us who know what it’s like to meet a soul mate will appreciate how special this bond is, and those of you who are still searching for yours, like myself, can look at these fine people and see that it does happen in God’s time.”

I wish this were like a wedding ceremony where someone in the audience can speak up. My dad had a soul mate, and she died when I was a baby. Mom is probably doing handstands in her grave over Dad knocking up this bitch.

3

Ruben

Captain’s Log Book: Day 3

I wake up at five ‘o clock and hear Tuckie working out in the spare room. He’s going for it on the free weights, grunting and growling like someone trying to shit out a watermelon. Something drops to the ground and I hear him let out a king sized “MA ‘SE FOKKEN POES!”

“Tuckie, you okay?” I call out.

He doesn’t answer me. I’m sure he’s embarrassed and I don’t want to pry, so I go back to sleep.

I wake up again at seven, just as Tuckie is leaving the pad. Three of his fingers are bandaged together. “Cheers Ruben, I’ll see you later. Stay awake tonight. Peter wants to speak to you.”

I nod and bid him farewell.

The weight of my situation hits me hardest today. Something tells me I won’t have Sylvia Plath essays to worry about for a long time. I pace back and forth across the lounge, pulling out more of my hair, chain smoking from a pack of Tuckie’s Rothmans, trying to picture a situation where I don’t end up in jail. I am unsuccessful at this. A scene where the cops burst through the basement door with guns and sniffer dogs keeps playing

in my mind.

I see myself wearing an orange jump suit rolled down to the ankles, and some nasty inmate with gold teeth and tattoos on his face is pumping me in the ass. The very notion of prison – a small room with an iron door that is locked 98 percent of the time, makes me feel claustrophobic.

There is fuck all to eat in this flat, besides rice, salt, noodles and booze. I make salty pasta for breakfast and wash it down with a beer. By lunchtime I'm shit faced and sleepy and out of Tuckie's cigarettes. So I pass out.

Peter and Tuckie wake me up at six 'o clock by offering me another beer. I feel hung over and groggy, but ready to keep drinking.

Pete looks worn out. "Ruben, things are getting serious out there. Your parents have shat me out from a dizzy height, the cops are shitting down my throat and I can't carry on lying for you..."

"What does that mean, Peter?" I ask him.

"I don't know yet, but we've got to do something soon."

"The police won't come here," Tuckie says, "but you can't stay forever."

"Are you guys saying I should turn myself in?" I ask.

"I'm saying we're working on a plan. It's not going to be easy on anyone, so I need you to trust me when the time comes, okay? Maybe this weekend, maybe next week, but soon." Peter says this in a way I'm not used to. He sounds calm and calculated, rather than smug or brazen.

4

Agnes

Sarah still isn't speaking to me. I'm not sure who she is angrier with: her dad, me, Ruben or herself. Her right hand is set in a huge cast, which means that she will have to take all the exams orally. This is terrible for someone who normally gets decent marks by enhancing her good memory with a bit of cheating.

The newspaper has another article in it about Ruben. To be fair and honest, I feel like a terrible person and wish that I could take everything back.

Surfer On The Run After Arrest Goes Wrong

Ruben Folks, a twenty-year-old BA student from Mill Park and former Grey High pupil, has absconded with a stolen vehicle. The youth reportedly assaulted his girlfriend and stole her parents SLK Mercedes as a getaway vehicle. Folks, who was recently in the news for another incident of violence, now faces charges for theft and assault. His whereabouts are still unknown, despite a manhunt.

Folks has also been connected to the ruckus that ensued last week, when a gang of hoodlums attacked patrons at the night club, Tobey Joe's, on the beach front in Port Elizabeth. One of the victims is still in ICU, after a beer bottle was smashed in his face. The attackers are allegedly a perlemoen poaching group, currently under investigation by police.

In related news, Officer Fredrik Rademeyer, of the elite perlemoen poaching task force, was present when Ruben Folks fled. Rademeyer has since been suspended for reasons that are still unknown to *the Daily Herald*. Insider sources have indicated that Folks was set up by the disgraced police officer and that Rademeyer's involvement in the botched arrest has raised a red flag.

Ruben Folks' parents suspect their son may be hiding in Jeffery's Bay or the Transkei, and have made a public plea for their son to turn himself in.

"We just want Ruben to come home and face the music. It's not like our son to do these horrible things and I'm sure there is an explanation. We will never turn our backs

on him and we are worried sick," the boy's father said.

5

Ruben

Captain's Log Book: Day 5

More daytime boozing, which may explain my handwriting and poor spelling. Plenty wanking while Tuckie is at work today – four times and counting. I feel like shit. I'm smoking more cigarettes than ever. Missing clumps of hair. Wish I could grow a cool beard at least, like Tom Hanks in Castaway. Nothing but peach fuzz on my chin.

Bored bored bored bored! Even the porno mags in the bathroom are starting to look painfully familiar and uninteresting. I've pictured those hot bitches scissoring one another too many times. I'm down to checking out the small insert pictures in Tuckie's mags, which most people overlook, on account of the more easy-to-eye-fuck centerfolds. Going back to bed for a while.

Captain's Log Book: Day 6

Wake up moody and alone. Tonk. Eat noodles. Tonk again. Smoke cigarette. Beer. Playstation. Hate self for a while and cry about missing parents. Tonk some more and feel better for a while. Beer. Beer. Beer. Playstation. Unsuccessful tonk. Hate self. Back to bed.

Fuck. The. World.

6

Agnes

Dad and Beryl's wedding is in a month. We are moving into her place when they get back from Honeymoon (in Nature's Valley) afterwards and selling ours. There's more space in her double storey for the miracle baby, even though we live in a nicer, safer neighborhood that is more conducive to moronic parents and babies. To be honest, I feel sorry for this child. It'll either be born with twelve fingers, or it's going to be raised in an

environment so whacky and offbeat, the poor tike will be driven to retardation by the time he or she is a teenager.

Beryl nearly went postal when I asked her and Dad to consider rescheduling the wedding, at least until after my exams. Moving, planning a wedding and preparing for such a big change is not easy when you've got to study. She started wailing at my dad, like I'd asked her to swap beds with me. "James, your girl is just jealous because the attention isn't on her! It's been nothing but drama from her since we got together! I hope this isn't the way things are run when we're married!"

Dad was glowing like a lava lamp, saying, "Sweetie no, don't worry, Aggie is just stressed, aren't you my lovey? We can sort this out!"

I'm going to get through this week if it kills me. And once this week is done, I'll cream my exams and then march into my last year of school with my head held high. I've got eight months left in this dump, and then I'm gone.

We're having lunch with the whole family, including Crazy B's thirty-year-old daughter, Anne, who still lives at home. That's right: I recently met my new older stepsister. She's a proper fruit loop who spends all day playing War Craft and working on her 'Autobiographical novel', which I'm sure will be a humdinger when it comes out in paperback. She doesn't work, has never left PE and has no friends outside the cyber world. You can tell she's a social retard just by looking at her; she wears a pair of golden specs from the eighties, a checkered waistcoat and ballooning trousers that taper at the ankles. She has Beryl's height, but Mr. Beryl's (whoever that is) sharp facial features.

My future stepmother has cooked us a feast of roasted Chicken, noodle salad and fried potatoes. It's no wonder she is looking so astronomical at the moment. She's eating like a starving hyena. The baby is probably going to have cholesterol problems. Beryl drops a few chicken limbs onto each of our plates, and Dad plants a kiss on her walrus-like lips when it's his turn.

"I've got news, Bugaboo," Beryl says, smiling at him. Anne and I stifle the vomit in our mouths.

"Pray tell," Dad answers.

She takes a seat and asks us all to hold hands when saying grace. Anne's fingers are like biltong sticks compared to Dad's, and I've always thought that Dad had some pretty dried out palms.

"Lord, we want to give thanks today for this feast and all the blessings you have provided. We ask you, oh Holy Father, to be with Agnes in court tomorrow, so that Your will may be carried out and the villains in our society brought to justice."

It's funny that everything the church wants can be justifiably requested, as long as you say it's God's Will. Pastor Ritchie could basically say, Lord, provide me with that the brand new BMW I saw last week, if it is in your will' and true as Bob, the church will find a way to make it happen.

"Lastly, Oh Lord, we pray for your blessing on our baby girl, who you have kindly revealed to us today!"

We all open our eyes and look at Beryl. "What?" Dad asks.

"Look, it's our baby!" she says, pulling out the sonogram image of their bundle of joy. Daddy's eyes go all teary and Jabba the Hut swoops in for another big kiss. Then she waves the picture in my face, saying, "look, look, look, look! It's your new sister!"

"Ah," I say, "it's a girl then?"

"I knew it would be! A woman has a sense of her body," Beryl says.

The funny thing about the picture is the time frame written on it: twelve weeks. At most, Dad and Beryl have been dating for four, and that's being rather generous. So they've obviously been seeing one another on the sly. And if they can keep their relationship a secret, keeping their night time habits can't be that hard, either.

"That's wonderful, Beryl," I say.

"Cheers, Mom," Anne says, topping everyone's glass with wine, even mine.

"Woah there, not her," Beryl says, pointing at me. "You're in this pickle because you started drinking. We don't need you off the wagon again." Beryl hee-haws at her own joke. Dad shuffles food from one side of his plate to the next, avoiding my eyes. Anne takes my share of the wine and decants it into her glass. She doesn't say much, old Anne, but I get the feeling she isn't so bad after all.

Ruben**Captain's Log Book: Day 7**

Today is a fresh start for me. I'm trying to be positive about my situation, even if that means accepting the fact that I'm going to jail. There is no way out for me, so I might as well enjoy what little freedom I have left. Even if the law goes easy on me (which it won't), my parents will probably slice off my tollie and make me wear it around my neck. Tuckie wakes me before work this morning. "Ruben, I'm getting some *lekker zol* today. We're gonna smoke and jam play station *fucked up* when I get home." This sounds amazing. Even in times of great depravity, I have found a friend in this strange creature and feel very excited about getting stoned and playing games.

Tuckie thinks I'm crazy. He can't get over me having a peanut butter, banana and melted cheese sandwich. "Those so fucken siff, Jirre, jou teef! Nee!" he cries, all dramatically as I take my first big bite. It's Friday night and we've been playing *WWE Smack Down* on X-Box since he got home from work at six thirty.

"You can't knock this until you've tried it. Seriously," I say, shoving half the saamie into my dry mouth. Tuckie puts the spliff down and goes over to the kitchen, where he has a very conventional ham and cheese sandwich in the microwave. "Hoe laat is dit?" he asks.

I look up at him, stoned and confused.

"Jussis, what is the bloody time?" he says.

"Oh," I say, looking down at my watch. "It's nine. Nege uur."

"You fokken souties are all the same. We learn to speak your English," he says in a really funny accent before switching back to Hornish, "but none of you bother with Afrikaans."

"I know," I say, shaking my head. "My Afrikaans is baie stadig. Swak."

"Ja, dit is *swak*," he says.

Tuckie comes back to the lounge and starts straightening the magazines on the

table and picking up the cans on the floor. He goes into the bathroom and comes out blasting a can of air freshener.

“Can I help you clean?” I ask.

“No, no, just getting things nice. My cousin is coming over and he always gives me shit if his house is untidy.”

“Have I met your cousin?”

“At Tobey Joe’s. Casper. The tough one.”

I suddenly feel less than comfortable. I remember Casper being fucken terrifying. “Is this his house?”

“Ja, but I rent it from him for cheap, cheap. He’s coming here tonight.”

8

Agnes

Someone from the *Daily Herald* calls my phone. How he got my number is a mystery. “My name is Ralph Daniels,” the guy says. “Would you mind if I asked you a few short questions in connection with your Sexual Assault lawsuit against Peter Jacobs?”

“As a matter of fact I would,” I tell him, then put the phone down.

He calls back, which prompts me to answer with some mild aggression. “Ralph, this is none of your business. If you call me again I’ll file a complaint. Please respect my privacy.” After I hang up again, he calls back a third time. I cancel three more calls from him.

Before he calls again, I dial Fredrik and try to get some answers from him.

“You said this would be a private matter. The sexual assault stuff was purely to get a warrant for Peter Jacobs. Now I’ve got reporters phoning me.”

“Agnes,” Fredrik says my name in a tone unlike anything I’ve heard from him before, “I’ve been taken off the perlemoen trail. I’m in serious kak because of our ‘prank’ the other day. I’m very sorry the reporter phoned you, but there’s nothing I can do about it right now. You must decide whether or not you want to follow through with this.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Agnes, are you still pissed off that he kissed you without asking?”

“Yes!”

“Do you still feel like the guy deserves to go to jail, not just because he’s a scum bag who helps criminals rob our coastline?”

“I think so,” I say. It’s something I’m entirely unsure about. I guess this issue falls under the *Leadership Vs. Responsibility* argument that I’m still trying to formulate. If I am in a position to make somebody pay for their crimes, even if that means burning a man for a lesser crime to bring the worst ones to light, am I obligated to do so?

“Only you can say, Agnes. I don’t want to force you into anything,” Fredrik says.

“What would you do?” I ask him, in one final push for some hardcore advice.

“... I’d take him down.”

I leave it to fate. If Ralph Daniels calls back one more time, I’ll give him a story.

9

Ruben

The arrival of Casper reminds me of that scene in Jurassic Park, when the cup of water shakes as the T-Rex comes stomping closer.

We hear a car that sounds like a fighter jet flying up the road, tyres screaming along the dirty streets of North End. It stops outside the house, techno music from the sound system, making things in the house shake. Tuckie looks like a young child on Christmas Eve, his eyes wide open and hands shaking. “They’re here,” he says, getting up and sitting back down.

You can hear and feel the floorboards above us whining under the colossal footsteps of the meanest perlie poachers in the city. “Tuckie!” they shout.

The door in the floor opens, and four guys jump down the steps, into the basement. Each one lands with a thud, as their expensive trainers bend the floorboards below Tuckie’s carpet. They’re all ripped to the teeth, and dressed in dark, blue jeans, white vests and baseball hats that cover their ears. Casper has a do-rag under his Dodgers cap, like Eminem and the rappers wear. In all honesty, he looks like a fucking retard.

“Casper!” Tuckie squeals, getting up to greet his cousin and hero with a high five. Casper squeezes Tuckie’s hand, just like my Grandpa used to do when I was a young buck – except that gramps never hurt me. Tuckie’s knees buckle and he begs Casper to let him go. “Nee, los my!”

Casper stops hurting his cousin and goes straight to the kitchen. He helps himself to four beers from the fridge, tossing one to each of his goons.

Tuckie greets the others, and each of them squeezes his hand in the same way.

It’s only once Casper turns around and points at me that I realise I’m standing in the corner of the basement, isolated from the group. “Ruben!” he shouts at me, like we’re old friends. I take a baby step in his direction. “Ruben, come here!” he says, tossing his beer at me. I side step and catch it, just before the can hits the floor. If he’d thrown it over his shoulder I would have pulled off a fucken Jonty Rhodes to get it.

“Ruben,” Casper says, almost dancing over to me. He offers his hand and I almost pass a stone in anticipation of getting the squeezey-hand treatment. Surprisingly, the guy pulls me in for a little hug. “Jussos, Ruben, are you okay, boet? Shit, fokken hell.” He turns me towards Tuckie. “Has my cousin been looking after you properly?”

I’m surviving on adrenalin. “Yes, very much,” I say, feeling more paranoid than stoned.

Casper doesn’t bother to respond. He turns me eastwards and introduces me to his cronies. “Ruben, these are my guys,” he says. Casper introduces me to three of the scariest mother fuckers I’ve ever seen, and none of their names spend more than a moment in my brain’s memory bank. I give them nicknames, based on their most visible characteristics: There’s the moustache, the snowman (he is literally shaped like a six foot six snowman) and PASSOP Tattoos – each of his biceps has PASSOP written on them. Classy stuff.

I crack the beer open and take a long, well-needed sip. Everyone does the same, except Tuckie, who limps over to the fridge. Casper stops him before he can take a beer out. “Get the booze please, China,” he says, chucking the car keys over to his young cousin.

“Can I help?” I ask.

“Ja, come check Casper’s car!” Tuckie says, still excited (for some unknown reason) about helping his mean cousin.

The vehicle parked outside the front door looks like a flashy version of the time machine in *Back To The Future*. It’s an obnoxious orange colour, with a spoiler on the back that could glide a small plane. There are spinning mag wheels, neon lights on the hood and a CD that hangs from the rearview mirror. It’s cliché for all that is unholy, kitsch and supremely moronic about modern civilization. The enormous double exhaust is like pulling a brown eye at Mother Nature.

“Fok, it’s beautiful hey?” Tuckie says, shaking his head.

“Ja, it’s quite kiff,” I say, trying hard to sound enthusiastic.

“Fuck ‘Quite kiff’. This car is a poes magnet. Come, let me show you the engine,” Tuckie says, opening the driver’s door.”

I grab a box of booze out of the boot and try to talk my way out of this. “No, really, we should get back. I don’t want to piss your cousin off,” I say, trying to avoid the ultimate display of piston knowledge and carburetor talk.

Tuckie pops the hood by lifting a latch under the steering wheel – which, I might add, is almost shaped like a video game remote. It’s more of a rectangle than the standard, circular ones that every other goddam car in the world uses.

Tuckie turns the key. “Go look in front! Check, check!” The engine turns over and sounds like the devil’s workshop. He puts his foot on the juice and revs it a few times. Landmines explode in my ears. I take a step back towards the doorway. While Tuckie is revving the car some more, it suddenly dawns on me that I am seeing daylight for the first time in a week. I look up and notice the thin, wispy clouds, which mean that the wind is blowing offshore. My legs get weak at the thought of going for a surf with my younger brother.

“Tuckie, wat die fok! Man, Jussis,” Casper pushes me out the way and rips the keys out of the ignition. He slaps his younger cousin across the ears with a flat palm. “Ruben,” Casper says. I pretty much take a dump in my pants. “Go inside, you stupid poes,” he says, waving at me, “people can mos see you out here.”

10

Agnes

Officer Fredrik has been fired. Sarah's dad ate him alive. I found out about it in the bloody Skinner Bek - of all the shameless sources. The headline read: Useless Police Officer Loses Job Over Prank Gone Wrong. I feel like the most wretched human being in the world. It takes all the courage I have left to dial his number. Being the reliable person that he is, Fredrik picks up straight away.

"Agnes, what can I do for you?" he says.

"Fredrik, I'm so sorry," I say, bursting into tears. "How could I have caused this? I'm sorry, I'm so, so, so sorry."

"Not your fault, Agnes. Please don't worry. It's going to be okay."

"God, I'm such an idiot," I say. "Please tell me what I can do to help. I'll tell your boss anything. I'll do whatever it takes to get the blame for this. I'm *sorry*. It was my idea."

"Agnes, I knew better. Thank you for feeling bad, but please don't."

"What can I do?"

"You can start by leaving me alone. I just need some space, please."

Guilt is consuming me. After we hang up I call Sarah. She doesn't answer, even though this is also her fault and her father is the asshole that got Fredrik fired.

11

Ruben

Casper continues to give me VIP treatment while treating his own cousin like a pest. He leads me back inside, putting his arm around my neck and offering me the best spot on the couch. "Come, we have to drink and talk. We've got things to discuss."

"What about?" I ask.

"We have to talk about how to fix your mess. I'm sure you don't want to stay with my dipshit cousin for the rest of your life."

I nod my head.

“Peter tells me you stole a car?”

After a brief moment of false comfort, I remember why I had to hide out here in the first place. I stole a fucking car. A rather serious crime in most countries. “I did, correct,” I say.

“And that you beat up a woman,” The Moustache says, tossing a rugby ball to me from inside Tuckie’s gym room.

“Well, not really. It was more of a misunderstanding than anything else.”

“You bastard! You beat that bitch at the signboard, didn’t you!” Casper slaps the air in front of him when he speaks, like he’s swatting an imaginary dwarf across the ears.

“Uh, sort of,” I say, halfway admitting to it, purely because I don’t want to argue with Casper about the semantics of ‘beating up a bitch’.

“Ha, my friend, don’t worry. We’re going to get very pissed and think about how to fix your problem. Tomorrow is The Day for action!” Casper says this without an ounce of insincerity, which may be the scariest part of all. My housemates and I employ the same tactic when we’re discussing ways to sort out our broken fridge and new pranks to play when the Jehovah’s Witnesses come around. But when it’s something as serious as my future in society, I’d rather we took a more sober look at things.

“You know your cousin, Peter, he’s a bloody nice guy,” the Snowman says, “he doesn’t deserve all the kak he’s getting.”

“What kak?” I ask.

Casper looks at me and raises his brows. “Son, you don’t know what’s going on out there.” He points up at the roof. “That little bitch you skopped is throwing a sexual molestation case at Peter.”

This is news to me.

It is almost midnight. We’ve been drinking for a long time. Everybody is well juiced. A steady flow of cocaine keeps going around, which keeps everyone on their feet, but we’re going to run out soon and then people will fall. The Moustache keeps suggesting we hit the strip club, which gets PASSOP Tattoos really excited. Tuckie then reminds

everybody that I can't go out in public. So we drink more and make the best of the company and situation.

I haven't put more than a splash of booze in my drinks for the last few hours. The others are pouring triples for themselves. This is a good thing; I need everyone to get *properly fucked*. The booze isn't affecting me one bit. At present, I'm completely wired on caffeine and cocaine – which probably has speed, ecstasy and a thousand other bad things in it. My jaw is aching from all the grinding, but this is all part of my plan.

It's quarter to five in the morning and everybody is asleep at last. Passed out, more accurately. They fell about an hour ago. Some crazy suggestions were thrown into the idea hat last night, from me going out to sea for a month with Casper's fishermen cousins (apparently it's like a rite of passage where all the old folks teach you about changing pistons and fighting), to finding Agnes, Sarah's dad and Officer Fredrik and killing them. I was even offered a job at the car shop (Tuckie's suggestion), which I've recently found out is a front for the perlemoen poaching business.

I don't want any part of the world that Tuckie and his family inhabit. It's time to act. I keep thinking of my mom and Dad, Runt and Penny; I'm going to have to explain myself to them, and the longer I stay here, the more difficult that's going to be.

Tuckie is passed out on the couch, because Casper took his bed in the main room. Perfect. The more comfortable Casper sleeps, the better. The Moustache has made it as far as the kitchen table and PASSOP Tattoos is sprawled out a few meters away from me. They look and sound safely wasted. The Snowman is cutting down trees. He makes Peter's snoring sound like a cat's purr. I grab my bag from the spare room, which has my driver's license and bankcard. I have an emergency stash of twenty Rand in my wallet, which was all Pete could give me when we arrived here; he didn't have time to draw money on the way over.

On my way to the staircase, I see Casper's keys on the tableside and an idea hits me like a bucket of ice water. I grab them.

I attack the staircase with the soft step of a ballerina. Once I'm at the top, I hear a whisper that almost scares me to death. "Ruben, no." Tuckie is looking up at me from the

bottom of the staircase, shaking his head and waving his hands, almost doing breaststroke in the air. His eyes are bulging and there is a terrified expression on his face. I freeze.

“Ruben, come back down,” he mouths silently, to avoid waking his cousin and the gang.

I look at him and weigh up my options for a second. If I stay now, Tuckie will always hold this over my head. He worships his cousin and would feed me to a pack of starving pigs if it meant getting a pat on the head from Casper. So I do the most sensible thing I can think of at the time, and slam the door shut, bolt it closed and run like hell when I hear Tuckie screaming for everyone to wake up.

As I climb into Casper’s time machine, the jackal dogs of North End join voices and bark together in a chaotic symphony. They fucken know I’m stealing one of their kin’s vehicles. That’s the ultimate sin in this part of the Devil’s country.

I figure it will take Tuckie three minutes to mobilise the Snowman from his dead sleep, and another minute and a half for him to smash the bolted door open. I need to maximise my three and a half minute head start, so I throw caution to the wind and rev this fucker to hell. I do a crazy wheel spin as I drive away, which is probably going to drive Casper into a death-roll frenzy.

The streets here look different right now. I’m cruising at a hundred and thirty kays an hour in a sixty zone and feel as high as a kite on pure adrenalin. It’s still dark outside, which hides the usual nests of litter. Most of the homeless people who convene at the stop lights and street corners are all hiding some place warm and dirty.

The car engine is so loud it’s hurting my ears, but I can’t slow down. I manage to get onto the freeway and start cruising towards the N2 to Cape Town. The road is dead straight now. For all the dorky frills on this car, it is probably the best getaway vehicle anyone could ask for. There’s a full tank of petrol too, so I’m not worried about running out. Traffic cops are my biggest worry at this stage. It’s only a matter of time before someone recognises this monstrosity.

I pass over the lonely bridge at Van Staadens, where many people have leaped off to avoid their problems, including Aunt Rose. No matter how fucked things look right now, I'm glad that jumping over the railings here doesn't sound like a good idea.

It's getting light outside and you can see the lush trees that decorate the hillsides surrounding the gorge below. A grey sky gives way to pink streaks in the clouds. Everything looks healthy from all the rain we've been getting. I take the Mondplaas turn off to Jeffrey's Bay and cut through the empty streets, till I get onto a small road that leads me to Humansdorp. There's a twenty four hour petrol station before the freeway starts again. It's remote enough to take a chance making a phone call.

I change the twenty in my wallet for coins and drop five bucks into the machine. I don't know why, but calling Pete is still my first instinct. He picks up straight away.

"Fucking hell, Ruben, another goddam car! Are you fucking serious!"

"Pete, it wasn't like that this time!"

"You've signed a death warrant, do you understand that? We are officially fucked here. If you stop for more than five minutes, those phychos will find you and cut your head off. They're already covering every freeway from Cape Town to Durban to Joburg right now."

"Pete, they wanted to send me to sea or kill that girl. I was *scared!*"

"Don't you fucking dare play the pity card on me now! You got yourself into this shit and I can't help you anymore. I've got my own shit to worry about now."

The line is silent for a while. I'm not sure what to say or think or do now. I expected Pete to have a more encouraging response. "Don't phone the police, please, whatever you do," he says.

"What do you mean? I have to. I'm going to jail, Pete."

"They'll kill you in jail."

"Then should I keep running?"

"They'll kill you out there, too, it's a matter of time. I don't know what you should do. This is fucked. You know, *at least* you had them on your side before this..."

We both say nothing for a while. "I'm going to hide in St Francis."

“Jesus, fuck, Ruben, why? Why you had to go and do something this stupid?”
Pete sounds devastated. “You had a safe place to hide. What the fuck?”

I still can't answer.

“Well done, asshole. They've just pulled up here. I've got to go. Fuck, the cops searched my place yesterday, so odds are I'll be on the road with you soon. Do yourself a favour and lose the car. People know that car. I'll put some money in your account when the bank opens, if I can get away from Casper. You know they'll be watching me now? I'll probably have to lead them to you – do you understand that, Ruben? You are on your own. Don't call your family, don't call your friends. Don't fucken call me – whatever you do, don't call me! Just hide. I'm going to try and work something out, but please be fucking careful and stay off the radar. Wait for me to call you!”

“Thanks, Peter,” I say, pressing the ‘Next Call’ button. How the fuck he'll call me with no phone is another story.

12

Agnes

Peter Jacobs is going to jail, apparently. “You can be damn sure of that,” a policeman tells me via phone call. “We confiscated his laptop, files, passport – basically everything that can help us prove he's a bank to the perlies. Thank you so much, Agnes. We couldn't have done this without you.”

“That's great,” I answer. “So you've arrested him?”

“Um, not exactly. We don't have a warrant for that yet. The search was for sex stuff, because he raped you. But now we've got him for something else and we can proceed.”

This strikes me as insensitive, especially if this guy actually thinks I *was* raped.

“So, you've got him, but not really yet.”

“Yes, that's basically how this is.”

“But he can still run away,” I say.

“Let's hope he doesn't.”

The police are useless. It's no wonder guys like Peter Jacobs get away with doing bad things.

My soul feels broken inside. I hate everything and everyone at the moment.

Fuck Peter Jacobs for helping those crooks steal money. I'm glad he's going to jail, but I wish it were sooner. Fuck him for kissing me, too. I hope he's gets exactly what he deserves in there for taking liberties with my innocence; may the guy who rapes him have a thirteen inch penis and pelvic muscles like a steer.

Fuck the police, too, for having to use me as a battering ram to arrest a petty crook and a pervert. That should be an easy task. It *should* be a matter of me telling them it happened, and them doing something about it.

Fuck the police for firing kind, wise, gentle Officer Fredrik. He has been nothing but helpful and good to me.

Fuck Beryl, for coming into my dad's life and turning him into a mindless puppet. And fuck the church for not telling that old whore to admit she had sex with my dad. You don't get pregnant any other way today. This is ridiculous. Sixteen year old sluts that get knocked up at house parties have to face up to their mistakes all the time. My dad and Beryl should, too. Fuck my dad for not doing the right thing in this situation, either. He knows better than this.

Fuck my friends, for leaving me at a nightclub and instigating the demise of a good student. It was stupid and cruel to bring me to that place.

Fuck myself, for not being rational when it truly counted. I could have avoided this whole mess if I'd just been in a sober state and phoned my dad from a petrol station. Why did I have to go and draw a cock on the face of a gangster?

Fuck Ruben Folks, for kicking me in the chest and then leaving me on the side of the road, like a squashed insect.

Fuck the world.

13

Ruben

I ditch the car in Humansdorp and take the coastal Road that goes to St. Francis Bay, where I'll hide out until Pete transfers a bit of money into my account. I know some people there who can hopefully stash me in a safe place for a while.

The first kilometer is the hardest part of the journey. The sun is rising over the ocean, which sparkles like the city of OZ in the distance. My leg is killing me and there are ten kilometers separating me from my final destination. I pass the Kwanzamo Township, where skinny cows, goats and dogs are sniffing around the dirty gravel, and people are throwing buckets of dirty water onto the road. I keep my head down and avoid eye contact. The smell of human shit, which comes from the rusty outhouses, hangs in the air like a cloud. I have lived a sheltered life to find these areas in my own province to be like alien worlds. I try to be a better white South African by saying Molo to black people and spreading out my loose change between hobos and car guards, but what the fuck does that do? I'm still not shitting in an outhouse and throwing buckets of piss water into the street.

I limp all the way to a turn-off at an ostrich farm, which marks the last four kilometers to the St. Francis Bay Bridge, when a car pulls over alongside me and hoots. I'm so hungry, tired and scared, it seems like it's all over.

I look up and see a familiar face. "Ruben, are you going to Seal Point? The waves are cranking today!"

I shake my head. "Does it look like I'm on the way to Seals for a surf?"

His face changes. "The police are looking for you. Like, have you sorted that out yet or are you on the run, a bit?"

"Butchie!" I shout, totally stumped about what to say. I just stand there and rub my tired, sore eyes.

"What are you doing, Ruben? Why don't you go home? Your parents are looking for you," Butchie says, backing towards his car.

"No, Butch, just, like, fuck." I drop to the sitting position and take a moment to consider what to do here. Butch has seen me. Whether he likes it or not, he's in this thing with me now. "Please, bru, help me."

Butchie drives to the parking lot at Ducks, on the far side of Cape St. Francis, where there isn't much to see but sand dunes, rocks, bushes and the wild, open ocean. He parks the car and pulls out a couple of cigarettes. "You want a smoke?"

"Please," I say, taking one.

"I'm meeting the dudes at the point. What should I tell them?"

"Jesus, Butchie, don't tell anyone you've seen me. Promise me?"

Butchie nods his head. "Bru, are you okay? You look completely knackered."

"No, I'm terrible," I say, noticing my free hand is ripping at my hair. I pull it away and take a deep drag of the cigarette. "Bru, I need to borrow a blanket and some dosh."

Butchie looks around for his backpack. "Um, I've got some chicken mayo saamies, why don't I rather give you those..."

"I need cash to phone people, Asshole. I'm not going to spend it on meths or booze. Don't treat me like a fucking bergie!"

"Don't talk to me like that, man," Butch says. "This is confusing. You've been on the run. I don't know what you've been up to. This is hectic for me, juss."

"I'm sorry, Butch." I open the door and feel a fresh breeze on my filthy skin. "Just don't tell anyone you've seen me. I promise that will be bad for you. Just stay out of this. The people who are looking for me are *bad*."

He hands me the sleeping bag lying on the back seat and then reaches for his wallet. He pulls out a crinkled up fifty. "Here. This is all I have."

"Thanks, Butch."

While I'm walking away, he drives up to me and cranks the window open.

"Ruben, think of your parents, bru. You don't want to keep running." When he drives away, the words sink in hard. I will be running for a long time, unless I come up with a plan. But first I need to take a shit. After that, it's nap time.

The Moustache wakes me up in the sand dunes with a lead pipe pressed firmly into my cheek. Then a solid thump sends a sharp, ringing pain up my spine. For a moment I don't

know where I am or what I'm supposed to be doing. The urge to run is followed by darkness.

My hands are tied behind my back and my head feels like it's been dragged behind a bus all the way here – wherever *here* is. A tumble dryer, maybe. My lips are tight and swollen and my eyes burn. All at once, like a nightmare realised, the reality of my spatial situation comes alive. I'm in the boot of a moving car. Claustrophobia sets in and I start to stress out. I hold myself together for a moment and tap on the boot with my feet, to attract some outside attention, but it's not long before I'm having a fully-fledged panic attack.

“Open the fucking door! Help! Open the fucking door! Please, God, fuck, open! Help me! Heeeeeelp!?” My throat burns from all the screaming. The walls of the boot feel like they are closing in on me. The sound of my voice withers against the car's engine revving and the sound of techno music. Wherever we're going, we're heading there in a hurry.

Part 6

Sunday Bloody Sunday In The Bay

Eight members of a notorious perlemoen poaching cartel have been gunned down by former police officer, Fredrik Radameyer, in what has been described as one the bloodiest shootouts in Port Elizabeth's history. Radameyer ambushed the gang, who were in the process of executing a hostage, Ruben Folks, for reasons that are still unknown.

Ruben Folks had been missing for over a week after fleeing arrest, when his older cousin, sexual assault suspect, Peter Jacobs, got wind of the gang's plan to harm him. "Ruben called me from an unknown number and said he needed help. He told me who the guys that had him were, and I knew straight away that he was in serious danger," Jacobs told *the Daily Herald*.

Radameyer, who was recently fired for incompetence and unlawful practices after trying to arrest Folks, responded to a distress call made by Jacobs. "Ruben would have been a goner if Fredrik wasn't there. I asked the police for help first, but they wanted to file a missing person's report and go through a number of processes before anything serious could happen. I needed action. Fredrik knew where to go."

Radameyer, along with Sarrel Muller and Peter Jacobs, raced to a farmhouse near Sunday's river, where the gang was hiding out. Jacobs and Muller entered first, to negotiate with the gang. Negotiations quickly turned violent, and Jacobs was handcuffed and told he would be watching Ruben Folks's execution.

Like a Hollywood action movie, Radameyer came running out in the nick of time, armed with an automatic rifle. "He was like Rambo," Jacobs said. "He knew where and who to shoot, and took out the whole gang. It was very traumatizing."

Both Peter Jacobs and Sarrel Muller were injured in the cross-fire, sustaining gunshot wounds. Muller is still in critical condition, while Jacobs is recovering well.

Ruben Folks may have escaped the perlemoen poaching gang, but he still faces several charges relating to assault and car theft - his initial reasons for fleeing. Fredrik Radameyer is now missing, after police tried to bring him in for questioning.

1

Agnes

Dad and Beryl are talking names. So far the frontrunners are: Lucille and Beverly. “I can already see her,” Beryl says, dancing around the lounge. “Little Lucille Andrews.” She makes a basket with her arms and pretends to cradle the unborn child.

“So you’re dropping Pederson?” Anne asks, topping her glass of white wine.

Beryl looks up at her, putting her finger in Lucille’s imaginary mouth. “Yes, of course. Absolutely. It’s my honour to lose my old life and start anew with Jamesey Poo.”

Anne smirks at me. She takes a big swig of her drink and then turns to Dad. “How about your opinion, Jamesey Poo? What do you want the little rascal’s name to be?”

Dad glows reddish. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“No!” Anne jeers, “This is a two way street. I’d like to hear what you think.”

“Yes, come on, James. Spit it out,” Beryl says.

Dad stiffens up a bit and clears his throat. “I was thinking we could name her Dorothy.”

My eyes water up. “I’d love that,” I say to him and reach out a hand. It’s Mom’s name. For some reason, naming this new baby after her will make me love it.

“Is that your second name or something?” Anne asks.

“No, it’s his late-wife’s name,” Beryl says, dropping her imaginary bundle of joy. “What’s wrong with Lucille?” she asks, sounding like a spoiled brat.

“Nothing.” Dad says this like a shy boy who’d answered a maths problem incorrectly.

“I like Dorothy a *hell* of a lot better than Lucille, Mom. *Lucille* sounds like a poodle’s name.” Anne knocks back the last of her wine and goes through to the kitchen to crack open another bottle. Dad and I are left in the lounge to stifle our laughter in front of a raging Beryl.

2

Ruben

I missed *everything*. The exhaust fumes knocked me out like I'd downed a whole bottle of Zorbas. What brings me around is an argument between Peter and Tuckie over what happened to the boot keys.

"For God's sake, just try, he might have keys," Peter says. He groans a few times, struggling with something.

"Fuck you, poes, I'm dying!" screams Tuckie. He sounds like he might be.

I give the boot a few taps with my feet (noting for the first time that I'm shoeless). "Peter! I'm in here! Please open!"

"Ruben! Hey buddy, listen, I'm handcuffed here. And Tuckie's hurt pretty badly. We're trying to get you out."

"Too badly to pick up a set of keys?" I ask.

"Uh, no," Peter shouts. "It's hard to explain. Tuckie's going to be fine. Just moving is hard right now."

"Okay. Howzit Tuckie." I shout.

"Fuck you!" Tuckie screams.

I'm moments away from going into panic mode again. The boot is stuffy and hot, and the feeling of madness that comes from being stashed inside a coffin-like box is starting to creep up on me. I wish I knew some yoga moves or a meditation routine to calm me down. Conversing with Pete and Tuckie is the only stabilizing factor in this situation, though – far from ideal. "Tuckie, I'm sorry I stole your cousin's car, man. I thought you were all going to put me on a boat."

I hear him moan and shuffle.

"Rubes," Peter says, groaning a bit. It sounds like he's shuffling around.

"Tuckie's passed out. When Fredrik comes back and helps us open up, you're not going to like what you see. Be prepared. This isn't pretty."

"What do you mean?" I say, trying to keep a lid on my emotions.

"Uh, just trust me. This isn't great."

"What the fuck do you mean? What is going on?" I can feel my heart rate speeding up.

“Just stay calm, Ruben. For shit’s sake, don’t freak out. Fredrik is coming.”

“Okay, okay,” I say. “But please explain what is happening. I’m losing it in here, Peter. I’m claustrophobic.”

Silence from him. It feels like an eternity before I start to worry he has passed out, too. “Peter!”

“Fuck, sorry Rubes, I nodded off. I’m tired, man.”

“Jesus, no! Stay the hell awake, you asshole! Do not fucking fall asleep on me!”

“Okay, sorry man. It’s just these damn fumes.”

“What *fucking* fumes? Please,” I crumble as the word ‘please’ comes out, “just tell me what is going on...”

3

Agnes

My phone starts ringing while Beryl is dishing up supper. I turn to Dad for permission to answer it. “Not while we’re at the table,” he says. Beryl shrugs. She is still in a foul mood over the naming of their child. Anne comes back with an open bottle of red wine and puts it on the table. She takes glasses and starts pouring for everyone.

“Agnes can’t have,” Beryl says when it gets to my turn.

I look at Dad. He looks away.

Anne says to me, “Agnes, would you like some wine?”

I say nothing and bow my head low. My phone starts ringing again. We all stare at the roof until it stops. Then Anne looks at her mother. “Listen, Mom. Agnes is turning eighteen soon. She’s going to be able to drink as much wine as she likes when that happens and there will be nothing you or James can do about it.”

The room holds its breath. “What’s your point?” says Beryl.

“Do you give an eighteen year old a driver’s license straight away?” Anne says.

“No,” Beryl says.

“Exactly. You need to practise first. If Agnes wants a glass of wine with her family, it shouldn’t be an issue. At least she’ll learn to drink in a healthy way. We’re not going to sit here, get plastered and then run around drawing penises on public property.”

Beryl gasps. Anne looks at me and puts her hand on my shoulder. “God I’m sorry. That was supposed to be a joke.”

Dad looks terrified. I burst out laughing, though, and the giggles soon give way to hysterics. I’m almost falling out of my chair from laughing. Dad suddenly gets this hearty, Santa Claus laugh going, too. Beryl shakes her head and smiles.

“You can have some,” Dad says, after finally calming. He puts his hand on Beryl’s shoulder. “It’s okay. We are a family.” This seems to calm her nerves down a bit. Anne and I are still giggling when my phone rings again.

“Agnes, please go and see who it is and tell them we’re having supper,” Dad says.

I get to my phone and see three sms’s (Please Call Me’s, actually) over the missed calls. All from Sarah. I ring her back.

“Sarah, how are you?” I ask.

“Agnes, have you been listening to the news? Peter Jacobs’s house burned down.”

“What, that’s crazy.”

“Ja, and now Fredrik has gone missing. The last time they were spotted together was in a high speed chase that went down Cape Road.”

“Oh no. Was Fredrik chasing him?”

“No, they were together.”

Something feels very wrong with this picture. Fredrik hates Peter Jacobs. “Who were they running from?”

“Traffic officers. They couldn’t keep up and lost them somewhere off the freeway to East London.”

4

Ruben

Sirens wake me up. It’s police cars and ambulances tearing down a dirt road, coming from all directions. We’re surrounded. Then a voice asks Peter and Tuckie if they’re okay. Somebody calls out for medical assistance. There’s lots of shuffling and more people arriving. Somebody says, “Jesus, are they also dead?” These words curdle my blood.

“Who is dead? Help, I’m alive in here!” I cry.

“Ruben, hold tight!” says, Fredrik - I’m never sure what to call him – who suddenly bangs on the boot. “Check them for keys, quick. Keys! Now!” he calls out. “Fuck, leave it. I’ve got a knife. Ruben, can you hear me?”

“Ja! I’m here,” I call back.

“I’ll be two seconds,” he says. There is a scratching on the lock and then the door pops open. It’s dark outside, but the car lights around me still burn my eyes. I can tell we’re at the place that Kyle described, judging by the farmhouse. I’m greeted by a gust of wind that blows sand straight into my eyes. The wind is always here, even when you’ve been accosted by a group of hoodlums and left for dead in the boot of a car.

A blanket is thrown around me and I’m helped up. “Come, lean on me,” Fredrik says, wrapping the blanket over my head. “Don’t look, Ruben.”

“Thank you Daanie,” I say to him.

“It’s a pleasure, keep your head down, okay?”

The stones on the gravel stick into my feet and I have to step lightly. Somebody else hooks my other arm and helps me walk. I notice a stream of blood has stained the earth, and then look up. It’s Casper, minus a jawbone, with two bullet holes in his chest.

My knees turn to slush.

“Woah, stop, Ruben, look down, okay?” Daanie says.

I’m led to a stretcher and then wheeled through the open doors of an ambulance. As I turn around, I see bodies scattered, some with sheets covering them, others that still need to be hidden.

“What happened, Daanie?” I ask him.

He puts his finger to his lips. “Ssshhh. You need to rest now. You are mistaking me for Fredrik – remember? I’m Fredrik, okay?”

I nod. “Why did you change your name?” For some reason I can’t hold back and have to ask him.

“I am Fredrik, do you understand me?” he says, getting really close and saying this with considerable force.

“Why?” I ask.

“You’ll see. Just trust me – if anyone asks, Fredrik was here.” With that, he disappears through the ambulance doors.

5

Agnes

The new prefects have just been announced, and it’s no surprise to find out that I’m not going to be one of the twelve student leaders of this school. As much as I’ve tried to prepare myself for a year of anonymity, I can’t hide my disappointment. Back in Bloem I was someone who mattered inside and outside the classroom, and here I’m just a girl who kissed some asshole in a nightclub and got beaten up for it. What’s worse is that Rene, the mother of all ass-creepers, has been made one.

“Look at her,” Danny says, flicking her bob of hair around. She’s growing it out now. “I bet she won’t hang out with us now that she’s a prefect. She’s going to become a bitch. Watch. I bet you a million bucks.”

We are gathered in our old lunchtime spot, minus a gang member, in the courtyard that overlooks the school fields. Rene is chatting to the old prefects and her new colleagues, sitting in the main quadrangle.

Sarah wooshes her hair around, maybe just to stamp her authority over Danny. “It’s not like either of us wanted it. Good for her.”

I put my head down and try to stay out of the conversation. “Whatever,” Danny says. “Agnes, are you okay? You look a bit sad.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” Sarah says, pointing at my hands. I’ve been twirling a hair-tie in my fingers for the last few minutes and it has cut the blood flow to my index and middle finger; both are white.

“Ja, I’m disappointed. I mean, I would have been a prefect back home.”

“Really?” Danny says, sounding surprised.

I put my head down.

“Yes, of course,” Sarah says, defensively. “Didn’t you know that Agnes used to be like chairlady of everything? Plus she’s smart. Just look at her room – it’s covered in awards and team photos.”

“I’ve never been invited to Agnes’s house,” Danny says, folding her arms.

“You are welcome any time,” I say, still looking at the floor.

Adding to the indignity of my last day as a pupil in Standard 9, I will be appearing in court this afternoon with Sarah.

6

Ruben

I thought the worst part of my ordeal would be facing my family. I was wrong. This was the easiest by a light year. Mom, Dad and Runt come in and pour all over me, like cool water on a gravel road.

“Ruben, you listen to me, my boy,” Mom says, fishing for hankies in her miraculous handbag, “we’re going to get through this.” She holds my head and forces me to look her in the eyes. “You understand me?”

I nod at her and let the tears stream down my face.

Runt has his hand on my shoulder and starts crying; his poor face is covered in a farm of yellow pimples.

“She’s right. There is nothing we won’t do to stand by you,” Dad says. I look across the room to Peter’s bed. He’s pretending to be asleep, but I know he can hear what’s going on. Tuckie is still in the ICU, being treated for a gunshot wound to the leg and forearm.

“Ruben, did you see what happened to the guy who helped you? He’s gone missing.”

“Fredrik?” I ask, on impulse, remembering our conversation before he left.

“Yes! He wasn’t even supposed to be there. He was fired days before this happened,” Dad says.

“Really?” I ask. “But he was the one who helped us?”

“Apparently he’s fled the scene. No one has heard from him since he was at the scene of the crimes.”

The state trial won’t happen for a long time – at least a year, possibly more – but I have a string of civil charges to worry about right now. Battery, assault and grand theft auto (how ironic).

Our lawyer’s name is Ham Fennel, and he is exactly the sort of chap you’d imagine Peter getting to represent him. He’s the best there is; an old PE boy who is now a big shot lawyer at a highly reputable law firm in Johannesburg that specialises in defending guilty, rich clients.

“This guy is *incredible*. He can smooth talk his way in and out of everything.” Peter says. “Hiring him costs about three times your parent’s annual salary per day, so do exactly what he says. Okay?” These are my orders before we meet Ham at one of Pete’s development projects in Goven Mbeki Avenue. It’s a face-brick building that looks like the set of a cheesy horror movie. The walls are covered in spray paint and there’s broken glass spread out across the foyer. A musky smell, somewhere in between human shit and expired chicken, hangs in the air. There’s an office on the top floor that Pete had cleaned up for his personal use. From there you can see the whole city below you. “It’ll be worth millions one day, watch – the people who sold it to me have no idea what they’ve given away,” Peter says when we get there. It’s still a bit of an eyesore. The white tiles on the floor are stained by shoe prints. The cream curtains have turned brown in places and there is a painting of flamingoes on the wall above the desk.

“Of course,” I nod.

I was expecting an Alec Baldwin look-alike to arrive, but Ham is this ginger-haired lion with sparkly, turquoise eyes and perma-grin. “Peter Jacobs, how’s it, boet?” he says, gliding into the room on a cloud of self-worth.

“Ham! Jussie, it’s good to see you!” Pete shakes his hand and angles towards me “This is Ruben, my cousin.”

“Ruben, it’s nice to meet you,” he says. I strongly doubt that, but he says it like it’s as true as the world is round. Ham scans the room. “Jeez, can you believe this place?”

What a view!” he says, looking out the window. We take a seat. Ham pours himself some water and pulls out a file. “Ruben. I’ve been reading about you.” He opens it and runs a finger down the first page, looking over some points he has made in blue pen. “This is not a train smash, we can sort this out quite painlessly,” he says.

“That’s fantastic. Thank you,” I say.

“The first car you stole and breaking that girl’s hand is a no brainer: you were set up by an officer of the law. He ended up getting fired over it, so it’ll be easy. That’s entrapment.” He uses his hands to enforce everything he is saying. “*They* fucked up there. Okay, the second car – you were in a very hostile situation with a gang of criminals who are no longer with us today. The state will drop it like a sack of shit. You stealing that car ended up doing the cops a favour.”

I nod happily along with him.

“The third one – the girl you kicked.” He pauses for a second. “What the hell were you doing there?”

I shake my head. “She was all covered up in a black sheet. I thought she was a criminal.”

Ham taps his top pockets for a pack of cigarettes. He offers one to Pete and I. We both take one.

“That should be easy enough, but it depends on the magistrate. I mean, technically *everything* depends on the magistrate, but you know what I mean?”

I nod my head, even though I have no fucking idea what he means.

“She was committing a crime, you technically stopped her. Yadda yadda fish paste. You get it?” Pete and I nod, silently. “Who is the magistrate?”

“Felicity Murdock,” Pete says.

“Murdock,” Ham says.

“Yes,” Pete says.

“Fuck. Murdock, mother of Darla?”

“*Yes*,” Pete says.

“Awesome. That bitch has the worst case of Woman-Crazy in the world. Sorry, Ruben this is going to be tougher than I thought...”

I nearly fall through my asshole. I feel sick. “Why? What’s Woman-Crazy?” I ask.

“God, you are too young to go to jail... Woman-Crazy is the sickness that all ladies have – it’s a Jekyll and Hyde thing, where normal girls turn into monsters when you piss them off. Felicity Murdock is a prime example.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

Ham nervously settles into a short explanation of his experience with Felicity Murdock – the woman who can put me in jail by striking a gavel.

As it turns out, one of the many things that Ham has talked his way ‘in and out’ of is the magistrate’s daughter. Their last liaison, however, ended in a pregnancy, which the magistrate did not find out about, until Ham left the daughter for another woman - which prompted an abortion.

“Don’t stress about it, Ruben. Seriously, it’s all good, buddy. She probably won’t even remember me,” Ham says, tapping me on the shoulder. He’s still smiling, but I’m not sure I believe him. “Let’s go to court.”

There is no glamour to being in court. The crowded hallways are lined with dark mahogany strips that divert your attention from the cracked walls and the chipped paint. It reminds me of my grandparents’ old house in the Karoo, which feels like a wormhole that leads back to 1940.

The line outside the main courtroom is full of long faces; nobody wants to be here. This is the most depressing place in the whole world. The room is a million degrees and a layer of dust hangs in the air. An officer leads me to the front of the musky room, where Peter is seated with Ham Fennel. They’re both wearing suits, and I’m in a fucking tuxedo that doesn’t fit Dad anymore. I look ridiculous. I take a seat and they both snicker at me. Assholes. My parents are sitting at a table nearby, wearing grief and disappointment on their faces. Penny and Kyle are with them, which makes me feel a bit better. They all touch me as I walk past. It’s good to be loved.

Agnes and her father, Sarah (who still has her hand in a cast) and her dad, and a scrawny prick in a black suit are on the other side of the table. I’m guessing these are

some of my accusers, or part of the prosecution. I don't know what it's called - I don't watch enough Law And Order, clearly.

The magistrate, Felicity Murdock, comes out and reads a list of charges, staring at one person throughout the whole speech: Ham. Assault, battery, theft, bla-bla-bla, wadda wadda fish paste. Basically, I'm fucked. Her voice is brutish and raspy, like a cowboy who has been smoking Texan plains for the last thirty years.

"Mr. Andrews, is there anything your daughter would like to add?" she asks the prosecution.

They shake their heads no. Why would anybody add to this burning pile of shit on my head?

None of this feels like it is really happening; it's more like I'm allowing each moment to unfold, and the real me is somewhere in the background chewing popcorn and rooting for the surfer in the tuxedo.

Ham finally has a chance to defend me, which is what I've been anticipating. I'm quite excited to see him perform a bit of Joburg lawyer Ninjitsu for me. He whips out a piece of paper, puts on a pair of specs to read from it and then clears his throat.

"There are a few things that the official statements have failed to highlight," Ham Fennel says. "The first is what happened on the night Ruben Folks kicked Agnes Andrews. The young girl," he points, "was busy defacing his cousin's billboard with permanent marker pen, wearing a dark disguise – why would someone who isn't guilty try to conceal her identity? Her crime has been overlooked in this case. What about damages to Peter Jacobs's property?" Ham looks at the judge and says something about her being a minor. "Ruben Folks did what he thought to be the best moral action at the time. Their crimes should be equally overlooked."

The room is quiet for a moment. The judge gives a little laugh; there is no mistaking her dislike for Ham. "What's your point?" she asks.

"Would he be in any real trouble," Ham says, "if the person under the black sheet turned out to be a juvenile delinquent or a criminal awaiting trial?" He lets this sink in.

“My next point is more circumstantial. Folks has no record of criminal behaviour. He’s a university student from a solid background. He’s not a risk to society. If you let him off with a warning, odds are he’ll be so scared by this experience he’ll never put a foot out of line again.”

“He stole two cars, brutally assaulted two young girls and is the direct relative of another serious criminal who is currently being investigated for a rap sheet of crimes – Peter Jacobs – I think it’s safe to say he is building a criminal career as we speak,” the American guy in the black suit interrupts.

“Thank you, Mr. McCracken,” Ham says, “but both times it was an attempt to save his life. This boy is twenty! He’s gotten mixed up in a world he doesn’t understand. Can’t any of you see how wrong this is? Ruben Folks went on the run, because he was scared!”

I hear my Mom and Penny start bawling, on cue, and I join the party. I’m always on the run, always fucking scared. Right now I am terrified.

7

Agnes

Seeing Ruben in his ridiculous tuxedo, being charged with all these serious crimes while his family stand by him unwaveringly, changes the way I feel about this situation completely. Officer Fredrik once made a point of telling me that Ruben is no boogey man. He was probably right.

There is a break for everyone to get some air. Sarah has been in a strange mood all day – understandably, considering the circumstances, but even more so than expected. “Are you okay?” I ask her on the way to get something to drink. There’s a long line for the vending machine; it’s about a gazillion degrees in here, so it’s no wonder people are thirsty. She shakes her head. “Talk to me,” I say.

“I feel bad,” she says.

“About Fredrik?” I ask.

“Ruben, man,” she says. “I didn’t want you to get cross with me the day he stole the car. We were having a great time, so I just played along. I thought we’d be able to laugh about it one day...”

This is a conversation we’ll have to hash out another time, but right now I feel we both have a responsibility. “We need to speak up. This can’t go on.”

“It’s not right,” she says, almost bursting into tears.

“We’re doing much worse to him than he did to me...” I say.

She nods. “You like Fredrik, don’t you?” Sarah says.

I hadn’t thought about it until now, but there is a possibility I might. I’m just about to answer her when Peter Jacobs turns around and bumps straight into me. I let out a mousey squeak, which frightens him a bit.

“Sorry,” he says, scurrying off.

Sarah laughs and hugs me. “My dad is going to kill me. But you’re right. This is all wrong.”

8

Ruben

Things are about to go for a ball of shit. It is time for Agnes Andrews to make a statement. I can feel the walls closing in on me already. I’ll lose my anal virginity on my first night in the slammer, no doubt about it. She clears her throat and says, “I am partly to blame for Ruben Folks’s actions. The night he attacked me was caused by my own need for revenge on another person. I wish to drop my charge against him.”

The magistrate gives an impolite gasp. “Thanks Agnes, but you are still a minor in this case. Your dad needs to drop the charges - do you wish to do so?” she asks Agnes’s dad – who looks about a hundred years old, by the way.

“Yes, if that’s what she wants,” he says. “Drop it.”

The magistrate tears up a piece of paper and throws it in the bin next to her.

“Go, please.” She waves them away. “We live in a country where court space is rare and here you come and waste my time like this.”

Patrick McCracken just about shits his pants. He gets up, grabs his notes and storms out the room. Sarah's dad doesn't look impressed, either, but he isn't ready to throw in the towel. Sarah is up next. Her dad smirks as she clears her throat and rubs her majestic little nose. God, I'd go through all the shit again if she'd only let me bang her.

"I organised the joke with Ruben. We had been out on a date together before it happened, and I can honestly say that he would never have stolen the car if it hadn't been for me. He's a good guy and doesn't deserve this. I also wish to retract my initial charges."

A fucken bomb erupts in the stands. My family and friends are wailing and high fiving everyone, like I'd just scored a try against Australia.

"Again, in spite of these findings, Ruben, Miss Meyer is still a minor. Mr. Meyer, do you wish to drop these charges?"

He doesn't look like Stone Cold Steve Austin. Sarah's dad is more a Pablo Escobar character, with long, Italian locks and eyes made from hell fire. He looks at me and says, "Not a chance. He stole my car, not my daughter's. I am pressing on."

"Thank you," the magistrate says.

"I have a character witness, Ma'am. Ruben Folks may have mistaken Agnes for a dangerous criminal, but there is no mistaking him in this incident. He does have a history of violent behaviour, as you will now see," Sarah's dad says.

"Who is your witness?" the magistrate asks.

"Mr. Alan Sharpe," Sarah's dad says. "Please come forward, sir."

My heart explodes. It's mother fucking Guru, here to feed me to the wolves. Someone shoves a sock in each member of my tribe's mouths.

"Who is this guy?" Ham asks.

"He's this guy I almost rode over... we got into an argument."

"Jesus Christ, Ruben. Are you sure you're innocent?" Ham asks me.

Guru walks to the front of the room, wearing slacks and a V-neck T-shirt that allows tufts of wild hair to poke up near his chin. Michael Bolton with a tan, I swear to God. I can picture him bursting into song.

"State your name and occupation," Sarah's dad asks.

“I’m Alan Sharpe. I own a diving shop.”

Sarah’s Dad smirks. “How long have you known Ruben?”

“Ruben and I have surfed together for a number of years. He’s quite notorious around PE for his aggressive antics in the water.”

“That’s bullshit!” I say. Ham Fennel tells me to shut up. Peter huffs and turns his back on me, like I’m the biggest moron in the world. I realise I’m walking into a trap by getting upset.

“You were saying,” Sarah’s dad says, smirking.

“Ja, bru, you see! Ruben is an angry little guy.”

“And what is your experience with his anger issues?”

“A month ago we had a scrap out at Avalanche, a surf sport in the bay. Ruben took my wave and kicked his board out at my head. I was pretty lucky to walk away with minor scrapes. He could realistically have taken my face off.”

“I understand that you actually went on to save his life, after *he* attacked *you*?” Sarah’s dad leads him into another spine chiller.

“Yes,” Guru says, “Ruben couldn’t control his surfboard, and he ended up falling and hurting himself. He is not a great surfer and shouldn’t have tried what he did. I had to paddle him in and give him mouth to mouth.”

This has me absolutely fuming. It feels like he’s just taken a long piss in my face.

“And what happened when you tried to contact him afterwards?”

Guru looks down, all wounded and sore. “He swore at me and threatened my life.”

“Thanks, Alan,” Sarah’s dad says.

And with Guru’s testimonial, I am officially dead in the water.

“What am I supposed to do with this guy?” Ham asks me. “Why did you try to ride over him?”

“I didn’t! He took my wave. This guy is an animal. Everybody who surfs in PE knows that he’s a pig in the water.”

I turn to Peter for some help. He has his head bowed low. “I don’t know what to tell you. Wasn’t someone there with you that day?”

“As a matter of fact, there was,” I say.

Getting Butchie to stand as a character witness was no easy feat. His phone is still broken, so I have to find his mom and dad’s number in the phone book. There are about seventy-five Smiths in PE, and at least twenty of them stay at Walmer. By miracle, he answered on about call number ten.

“Howzit Ruben, aye, I’ve still got your board bru. You want to come get it?” he asked me before I could tell him why I was phoning.

“No Butch, I need a huge favour.”

“What’s up? Are you looking for skuif?” he says, lowering his voice and covering the receiver with his hand.

“No, Jussos, I’m in a bind,” I say. Truthfully, I’ve been meaning to hit him up for skuif for a long time now, but that will have to wait. “Broe, do you remember the day that Guru rode over me?”

“Shit, of course. He slanged you like a poes.”

“Excellent! Yes. Can you come down to the court house and tell that to the magistrate?”

“Aw bru, like now?” he asked.

“Aha, ja, please.”

“Aye, I’m right in the middle of something important and I’ve got min petrol bucks. How about tomorrow?”

“No, Jesus, please bru. I’m going to jail if you don’t come here. Guru is saying that I’m a bad guy and if I don’t retaliate I’ll go to jail. This is full on legal war.”

“Joh, that’s heavy, Sanders...”

“Please, bru! I’m desperate!”

“Can you fetch me, maybe? I’ll happily do it. The bromponie is running on the whiff of an oil rag right now, though.”

So off Mom went to fetch him, and when she got there he was still in the shower. He did eventually turn up, though, dressed like a moegoe, wearing sandals and a T-Shirt with a cannabis leaf on it. Even if Butchie says that I’m a saint, there is still the risk that

the Magistrate will think he's mentally unstable.

"Mr. Smith," Ham says to Butch when it's time to testify, "how long have you known Ruben?"

"Aye, since we were very young," he says.

"How long is that?"

"Since we were about ten years old or so. It's a long time. We were at school together."

"And how would you describe him?" Ham asks.

"He's a solid citizen. Everybody loves Sanders. He's like the nicest guy in the world." Butchie winks at me.

"I noticed you called him 'Sanders'. What is that?"

"Oh, that's just his nickname. He ran away from a bully once and we all like to say that he's a chicken."

"So Ruben's not a violent guy?" Ham says.

Butchie lights up. "No, no ways. Never. He's the most chilled person you'll ever meet."

Ham looks over at the Magistrate and smirks. "Thank you, Mr. Smith." He turns back to Butchie. "Butch, you were there the day that Mr. Sharpe alleges that Ruben tried to ride him over?"

"Ja, I was there. I saw the whole thing!" This is the first time I've ever seen Butchie get passionate about anything.

"What happened?" says Ham.

"Guru paddled out and just hogged every wave that came his way. He was being a pig. He always does that, I swear."

"Do you mean Alan Sharpe?"

"Ja," Butchie says, "that doos over there." He points to Guru and the people in the room laugh – except for Sarah's dad and the Magistrate. "Ruben was just paddling for a wave and Guru snaked him. It was Ruben's wave. In surfing that's really bad manners to snake." Bless Butchie's simple heart and mind.

“So it was an accident?” Ham asks.

Butchie thinks about it for a second. “Ja, definitely. You know, Ruben could have sliced Guru in half, but he jumped out and really saved the day. Ruben should have gunned for him, but he held back.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith,” Ham says.

Butchie looks at me and puts both hands in the air, giving devil horns. The Magistrate looks at me and shakes her head.

It all comes down to her decision. After a long recess, we’re back in court to hear Felicity Murdock’s judgment.

“Ruben,” Peter says to me, “it went as well as it could have gone. If they throw jail time at you there is still a long appeal process. It’s going to be fine, one way or another. I love you, cuz.” He gives me a hug that warms my soul. It’s these rare windows of Old Peter behaviour that keep me believing he’s still a good guy underneath all the bullshit.

I look back at my family and they blow me kisses. This feels just like a cheesy movie, where the judge makes the final call and I get let off at the end – only that’s not how this works. The Magistrate clears her throat and re-orders a pile of documents. “I’m going to be totally honest with all of you. This stuff here,” she says, tapping her notes, “is a tricky mess and making this decision has been difficult.”

Part 7

1

Agnes

The big day has arrived. I'm up at four in the morning, wide awake and exhausted at the same time. I go downstairs and find Dad sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee in his nightgown. "How long have you been up?" I ask, taking a seat beside him.

"A while," Dad says. He looks over at me and smiles; he's been crying.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head and reaches for a little hanky, which is soaked through with snot. Dad blows his nose and gets most of the stuff on his hands. "We're putting too much pressure on you, Aggie, I know it," he says, trying to clean the rim of his chafed nostrils.

I rub his back and give him a little hug. "Dad, it's not you – it's Beryl. She's pushing you in five directions at the same time. I'm fine. Why don't you stand up to her?"

"She's just pregnant and hormonal. I remember your mom getting all hyper sensitive, too."

"She's walking all over you. It's sick to watch and it's going to get worse when you two are married," I say, not letting him compare my spotless mother to that imbecile.

Dad shakes his head and looks me in the eye. "Aggie, you're a good girl. You're a wonderful, beautiful, darling girl and I'm so proud of you."

Now I start bawling. "Thank you, Dad."

I feel like I'm in a boy band music video, or stuck in a life where boy band music video logic is the prevailing law of the land. Nothing is normal. Gangsters, court cases, stolen

cars, dead men and crooked cops. Now my father and his earthquake of a bride are getting married on the rainiest day of the year, exactly seven months before their “miracle baby” makes its way into this world of total confusion. Tonight I will console myself by eating ice cream with my thirty seven year old step-sister, who hasn’t left the house since she was nineteen. There. I’m in a bloody music video. A kak one.

The bridal march starts to play. Everyone stares out the marquee’s door flap, waiting for Beryl to come thumping down the soggy aisle. Thick, chunky drops of rain assault the ground like gunfire from the heavens. A few minutes pass and there is still no sign of Beryl-zilla. Dad is lit up like a glow stick, shuffling from one foot to the other, while the clock above the altar taunts him.

Finally Anne comes trotting into the marquee. “Agnes,” she says, sighing, “My mom needs to talk to your Dad.”

My heart goes into hummingbird mode. “Now? What about?”

“She’s not feeling well, I think she’s got something bad.”

Patrick pokes his head into our conversation. “What’s the hold up, Anne?”

“Mom needs to talk to James. She’s not feeling well.”

“What? Give her a panado and tell her to walk her fat ass up this isle immediately!” Patrick says.

Anne’s face explodes with an expression that says it all. “Unless Dad goes to her, she isn’t coming out here. This is serious.”

Patrick turns around and addresses the congregation. “Ladies and Gents, if you’ll allow James to step out for a second, we’ll continue as soon as possible.” He goes over to Dad and explains the situation.

Anne is just about to go back when something dawns on me. “Anne, why did you say ‘Mom needs to speak to James’ to Patrick?”

Anne strains her eyes at me. “Patrick’s my half brother. Beryl is our mom. She was married to his dad years ago, before he moved to America.” She sounds surprised that I didn’t know about this. It does answer the question of why Patrick was sent to Port Elizabeth, of all places. Dad potters down the aisle like a scared child walking to the

principal's office. He slowly opens the church door, and then slips inside to see what is wrong with his crazy bride.

2

Ruben

I remember the day that Dad told me Aunt Rose had passed away. I'd never really thought about death or considered what it meant to lose someone forever. He didn't say that she's killed herself; only that she'd died. At the time, I kept thinking about her rocking me back and forth, soothing my fears with her sweet voice, and how that would never happen again. I felt a sick, hollow longing that lingered for years.

Her funeral was awful. It took place at a spooky church in Central that still gives me chills. The triangular structure of the hall and the dark, sombre walls at the entrance reminded me of Dracula movies. Up on stage, the coffin was bathed in a sheath of light from the windows above it. I remember thinking that the stained glass picture of Jesus was the gateway to heaven, and we were there to send her up.

Dad went up to the podium and read her Eulogy, which he'd written, and he bawled the whole way through it. It was the first time I'd seen my father cry – and man, was he giving it hell. Pete was next to me and he was in pieces, too. He had his head buried in his father's jacket, like he was too scared to look up and see the coffin.

The worst was still to come. Rose needed to be wheeled out the front door. I tried to get up and hug my cousin as he walked towards the stage, but Terence told me to sit down. "Let him bury his Mom," he said. Peter let rip and wailed his eyeballs out. That was the last I saw of Pete that day. Apparently the cremation ceremony was too much for him, and he had to be taken away. I wasn't allowed to go, but I often think about my cousin as a little boy, pleading for a bunch of grown-ups to stop burning his mom. It was like the child inside Peter got burned with Rose, and the kid who woke up the following one wasn't himself anymore. I sometimes worry that people have forgotten about what a shitty childhood Pete had after his mother died, and what a sweet guy he was before that. The softest parts of Rose are still inside him, but he's a heavily guarded motherfucker.

Life is the master of surprises. If you'd told me ten years ago that I'd be twenty years old, sitting in jail for stealing cars with Daanie Wouter Strydom as a warden, I'd have laughed. Boy, I would have been laughing hard. Some things are beyond our vision. As he stands here on the other side of these bars, I can't help but marvel at the empty space above his lip, where that hideous moustache used to be. Shaving it off has made him look about ten years younger. I hardly recognized him without it. For the first time he looks like a young man.

"Who the fuck is Fredrik?" I blurt out and ask him.

"I made him up and bought some illegal paper work to make him real," Daanie says. Fredrik Radameyer was a twenty eight year old man from Cape Town, with a degree in criminology and two years of experience in Special Forces. His ticket to ride.

"Why?"

"I wanted a new life," Daanie says. "But I messed that one up, too, so I've got to be the real me again – the moegoe who ended up in Boys Town. At least I can start over as my real self, with no more lies."

"But don't the guys on the police force recognise you? And they must know you've been lying?"

Daanie lets this comment pass over his head. I guess I'm not privy to all information.

Felicity Murdock went easy on me. According to Ham, this is the best deal I could hope for and to challenge her decision would only end up in a shit fight that I'd lose.

"Ruben, I see your situation as a string of bad luck – you do not seem like the kind of guy who will foster a career in stolen vehicles. *But*, there are some red flags that need to be addressed." She turned to Ham for the rest of the sentence. "It's not okay that you feel so comfortable beating up women. And while I'd love to send you to prison for a year, I'm not sure it will help rehabilitate you." I let out a little snort of relief when she said this. She shook her head and snorted back. "Still, there are consequences to everything."

So that's why I've got to spend a weekend in the slammer at St. Alban's Prison

("I want you to see and feel what a bad place prison is," she said), and then complete a year of community service at a centre for abused and battered women.

Obviously my parents are devastated and the news has spread around town like a bad fungus in a public bathroom (I'm a *Daily Herald* celebrity after Ralph Daniels wrote the story). But they're glad I'm alive and well and said that we can deal with things when I get out. One step at a time, they both said, like it had already been discussed. I can't think that far ahead yet, but I'm looking forward to the challenge when the time comes. Sarah's dad went ape shit when he heard my sentence, and swore to castrate me if I ever went near his daughter. Sarah flashed me a little smile, which may or may not have meant that we'd see how that went. I'd be a fool to trust her ever again, but we'll see. I still can't stop thinking about her in that little bikini.

I have no delusions about being okay. What I saw and did out there was heavy. I have terrible nightmares that leave me in cold sweats and soiled pajamas. "Are they also dead?" – those words will still haunt me for a long time. I'm going to need therapy and plenty of help from my family and friends.

For all of Pete's flaws and his illegal dealings, he somehow managed to escape the All Seeing eye of the law. The cops ripped up his place, went through his computer, his bank statements, investments – the works – and he came out clean. Or someone didn't report what they'd found. Who the fuck knows? Even after his beautiful house was burned to the ground, he's still not in any trouble. I guess money does buy freedom in a sick world. It's a bitter pill to swallow when you're in jail and he's out there spending dirty money, but considering the alternative makes me feel better. I'd rather be a nice guy and struggle like I do forever than be a successful poes like him and live with his demons. Pete is definitely a crooked man in many ways (just like his father) and I'll probably never know the extent of his criminal career, but I'm not sure I care to. That's someone else's job – and they'll need to work harder at it if he's ever going to get caught out. That's life: you've got to love the people who love you, even when they're unloveable.

3

Agnes

Beryl's stomach pain was first thought to be a bad case of indigestion. Dad found her lying in the fetal position, her white dress cast aside for a pair of comfy tracksuit pants. "We had ribs last night, I should have known better!" she cried, as we all headed from the church to the hospital. Dad was in the back seat with her, stroking her face and offering words of encouragement. Anne drove cautiously but fast, navigating her way through the back roads like it was some technical video game that she knew how to play with her eyes closed.

"Don't worry, Mom, we're almost there," Anne kept saying. I could see tears in the corner of her eyes, but she wasn't letting them out until her Mom was safely in the care of a doctor.

Pretty soon Beryl's condition became apparently serious, and then the wailing started. "Oh, sweet Jesus, take this pain away! Jesus! Jesus, help me, I cry!" Dad was cradling her head and holding her right hand, praying his socks off that she'd be okay. I turned around from the front seat and grabbed her other one. Seeing them cling to one another for dear life has changed the way I feel about them.

"You're going to be fine, Beryl, I promise," I said, even though I had no idea if she would be. The sight of my Dad sitting there, howling like a lost cub made me shudder.

Beryl suddenly grabbed my hand. Her grip was like a bear trap. "Agnes," she said, clenching her teeth. "We were wrong to have lied to you. You were right. It's a miracle I fell pregnant, but God didn't wave his magic wand. We did this. I'm sorry."

The shame painted Dad's face red. He made eye contact and said sorry.

"I'm sorry, Aggie," she said, echoing him. They she started praying some more.

Beryl is going to be fine, but she has lost the miracle baby.

Anne and I left her and Dad in the hospital room to mourn together.

"Drink?" Anne asks Patrick and I. It's just us three at the restaurant downstairs. Her voice reminds me that she has developed a tone similar to Beryl. I imagine I'll do the same over time. It's a bit like drinking a few drops of snake poison to build up immunity against it. Survival tactics, I guess. Patrick's American accent is almost invisible now and

he, too, sounds annoyingly Beryl-esque. Anne pulls a bottle of champagne out her bag and opens it for us. She pulls out three beer glasses and fills them. "That was close," she says, almost welling up again.

"Too close," I answer, putting my hand on hers.

Patrick just nods. He looks timid and boyish, for the first time. "Our Mom really does love your dad. You can trust her, I promise. She's a good person," he says. "She's got a really sweet heart."

I try to smile, but the result is debatable.

"Everyone lying about them having sex is way screwed up, but he's right. Mom is the real deal," Anne says, "I'm sorry to tell you."

I acknowledge this with a polite nod. There are things that I will have to get used to, and Beryl being an okay person might be one of them.

"Cheers, to family," Anne says, picking up a glass. "We might need a lot more of this to cope with the future."

I clink glasses with my new brother and sister, feeling uncertain about the years ahead. These people will take some getting used to, but hopefully I'll get there. It's going to be a while before I move away from PE and get over everything that happened here, but the worst is over for now.

The End