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# Jellybean Madonna

By

Monica Toerien

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# Jellybean Madonna

Monica Jane Toerien TRNMON001

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

Signature: 

Signed by candidate
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 Date: 11/02/2009

# Prologue

## Sita

They found my body in the dust and the reeds. My hands were curled into fists, tufts of grass caught in my fingernails, dirt on my skin. Bruises on my arms, slits and cuts, and blood soaking the earth. My eyes were open wide. Staring into the blue blue skies. The dead girl in the reeds, case #709. Of little importance. But when I lived I was beautiful.

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I wish somebody had told me I was about to die. The days leading up to my death were so, well, ordinary. No prophecies of doom, no foreboding of my unfortunate demise. If I had known I was about to kick the bucket, I would have eaten the entire pack of Marshmallow Melts (what a waste), and kissed the boy I like. Now I am dead, and never been kissed. It's just my rotten luck.

I did sort of get an eerie feeling leading up to my sudden death. It all happened on a Tuesday, or at least, I think it was a Tuesday, because on Tuesdays we have history class with Mrs. van der Westhuizen and I was trying very hard to concentrate. When suddenly, I got this prickly feeling running up and down my spine. I think that must have been a foreboding of some sort. Because there was no other reason for it. If only I had listened. But then again, I didn't know what it was a foreboding of, you know? For all I

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knew at the time, it was a warning about my sleepover party (which turned out very badly indeed). Or maybe I was getting a sense that I had forgotten to do my homework, something like that. But it was all very strange, and it gave me the heebie jeebies.

So I just put my head down, and ignored this foreshadowing of future events. Turns out, to my own peril. Because now I am, unfortunately, dead. And try and try and try as I might, I cannot grab hold of the marshmallows. And I miss my mother, dreadfully. It's very frustrating.

I remember my life now. Half lived, in the shadow of dreamland. I remember moments; of the smell of rain on damp earth, ripe figs, bitter white milk. Eleven years are now chapters, and nothing is forgotten.

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*The grown-ups, to be sure, will not believe you when you tell them that. They imagine  
that they fill a great deal of space.*

The Little Prince – Antoine De Saint-Exupéry

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## Sophia

Of light, of beauty and of God. But first a word. Hello my child. You are not yet born. But I shall give you a voice. What is it you wish me to say? What part of the world do you want me to rearrange for you, put in order, set right? It is not kind enough, wise enough, lovely enough for you?

I do not know where to begin.

We live in the suburbs. Instead of a drawbridge we have a spiked fence. A security gate stands instead of your moat, and our castle is in fact just an ordinary little cottage. But I think you will like it. After all, I'll be there.

We have a dog named Rabbit. He hides in my clothes cupboard, his tail sticking out into the air, his nose pressed into my boots. The newspaper man throws the paper against the door at exactly six every morning. I've told him not to do that though. Your room has rising damp and a steady stream of ants. I've sprayed the ants with Doom, but I'm not sure what to do about the damp. I hope you like yellow for the wallpaper. There are seven steps leading to the bathroom. This is important if you can't see without your glasses in the middle of the night.

Your father's ghost haunts this place. He's dead, I'm afraid. That's all you need to know. I'll let you smell his old clothes. The scent of deodorant and a nine-to-five day. You'll know him then. His dirty socks are still curled into a ball near the washing basket. I'll just keep them there for a while, all right? If you're quiet enough, you can hear him whisper.

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There is so much that I need to show you. Suntanning on a Muizenberg beach, hot sand between your shoulder blades; a spider's web; a busy street corner, with fruit hawkers, and the smell of dust and cars. I want you to listen to Bach, with the windows open on a long, dry, hot summer's day. And count the Jellytots on your palm – removing the green ones for me of course, they're the best. You have yet to taste real butterscotch; I'll make you some bread-and-butter pudding. Sticky vetkoek on your fingers, candy floss dotting your nose. I will take you to watch gumboot dancing, and see the ocean from the top of Table Mountain.

Get your heart broken once – it mends stronger again – and find many people to love. Wish upon a dandelion, and watch your desires scatter upon the wind. Boerewors and chutney, *Mrs. Ball's*, a hot chip roll with lots of tomato sauce.

The touch of a loving hand, and getting a foot rub after a long day's work. Avo and balsamic vinegar on toast. Blowing bubblegum bubbles. Wine with friends and talking till late, about life, the universe and everything. Swimming in a still lagoon before sunrise. Watching soap operas till you weep at so-and-so's fate. Reading in the half-light of a beach cottage. And best of all, finding a family of your own when you're sick of me, starting from scratch.

I'll take you to the ballet, the opera and the theatre. Wait till you see Romeo and Juliet for the first time. I want you to be surprised at the ending; you'll always know what happens after that. I do not recommend opera though – you'll get a headache for certain. I'm eating ice-cream at the moment – can you taste it in my belly – choc-chip mint, or are you more of a raspberry vanilla sort of person? You're so small, I don't know if it's good for you (but ice-cream is always good for you). Don't forget your umbrella when it's

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raining, and always wear clean underwear. Carry enough money on you to hail a minibus taxi, and have a plan B.

I'm not sure we've been introduced. Not officially at least. My name is Sophia Arden. I'll be your mother for the foreseeable future. You'll love me, you'll hate me, but I'll always have tea. I'm wearing red slippers with pompoms, and my old pyjamas – bubblegum pink and faded. My hair is curly – a wild auburn tangle, tied with an old hairband. My nails are bitten (bad habit by the way), and I haven't shaved my legs in at least a month. In short I am a nail-less woolly mammoth aimlessly wandering from room to room, with strange cravings and the amazing ability to projectile vomit. Morning sickness is a bitch.

In a short while, a little sprite called Sita Patel, my goddaughter, will arrive, to be looked after till lunch, so I'd best be getting dressed. She's going to help me with the nursery – she says babies like a lot of colours, so she's drawing a series about Peter Rabbit to go on your wall. The house is a mess, and there are loose socks everywhere – and I discovered my wallet at last in the tumble dryer, wet paper money and everything. I can't keep things together at the moment, I'm so scattered.

I shall put the kettle on the stove, and make some extra eggs and bacon for my guest. Perhaps even add some mushrooms and hot tomatoes. She is going to pose for me today – as an ancient Indian princess, in a series of black and white shots against a silver grey sky. She has a smile that twinkles like royalty, and she is a perfect model for my latest project, a series entitled *Innocence Lost: Through the Lens of a Child*. I arrange the flowers in the blue vase on the table. Madonna Lilies, in beautiful silky cream. Nature's idols, they reach for the sunbeam in devotion.

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You are not to know who I was, at least not today. I destroyed my photographs once. All of them, in a rage – at myself, I think. They were too perfect, too framed, too posed. I had spent years recording my life, in every year, the same faces, always smiling. I think perhaps it was my image that I wanted gone. And it is now, burnt piece by piece, torn fragments of a broken body. I threw them away, in the trash, the faces mingling with yesterday's dinner. I retrieved them the next day – dirt-smudged and oily. I wiped them clean, spread them out across the carpet, tried to put the smiles back together again. But *I* was gone. There was none of me left.

My past can be rewritten at any moment – who do you want me to be? A bubbly girl without a care in the world? A shy, quiet introvert without much to say? Anyone, you name it my love and that was me. I rewrite it every day. What is to remain of me, my past, if there is no image, no record of what was, or should have been? The truth, and I shall say it once, is that there is not much to say – not enough, at least. Not enough for a life well lived. And those images were my embossed, glossed lies, so shiny new. The real life lived was within my own mind, and that is what I will record, document, and bring to life, for that is the only truth I know, or have ever known, and that is my history. This is my history, daughterchild.

I shall go in circles, chase my own voice where it leads. What is the stuff that makes up a life, fills the space between you and me, between birth and death – all the moments in between? I suppose I want to ask you how to fill your time. It's good to start early, get a heads up on what's to come. Begin at the end. And work backwards. Start thinking of your death, my baby. For it shall make your life.

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What is the meaning of this life, Ruby?

There, I have named you. You are flesh. You are the precious jewel in my belly.

Is it through your birth that there shall be meaning, or your death, my child? Is it through your day, one moment of kindness or tragedy, one thought, or invention, that you will be made, or in your denial of all that is offered you? The world is yours but what part of it? Are you to be the photograph, faded on the nightstand, or the footnote in history, a line in the family tree of a house that will fade into another and another until there is nothing but ash?

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The sink is full of dirty dishes, grease marks, and burnt stir-fry encrusting the pans. I put on rubber gloves and begin to scrub clean, detergent, then some more, hot water till it scalds. Dirty brown coffee stains at the bottom of china cups, tuna fish brine, a few grains of rice and grated carrots.

So I'm alone now. Pregnant. And unable to speak at all. He abandoned you, my child, your father. You shall not know him, he denied you. But his ghost lingers on. He died a few weeks ago in a car accident. I was not told, and found out too late for the funeral. I was of no importance – a silly girl in love with an older man. I can feel him now. He is restless and afraid. He speaks of a life unlived, and a darkness that consumes his soul. So he stays for you, Ruby. He stays to acknowledge his child.

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A tea cup smashes on the floor. I pick it up sadly – it is decorated with painted Beatrix Potter characters in delicate watercolour. I must get some kiddy-friendly crockery, I determine.

Of love I know little. My ghost's name was Jeremiah Sinclair when he was living. A high-powered heart surgeon, to dissect and destroy my body. He was twenty years too old for me, and I was his child, in love. His wife is a society darling, her nose in a tea cup her fingers reaching for power. I do not want to think of how I was betrayed. I still believed, like an innocent that he was unhappy with her, that she was cold and cruel.

I watched them once, coming out of the opera. His arm around hers, comfortable. Her dress was prim and expensive, her handbag gold rimmed, loud designer label. Her hair was pulled back from her crown, her expression bland. I was fascinated by her face, by what he had exchanged me for, left me for. I noted the red enamel paint of her taloned fingernails, and I thought of the marks I had left with my own on her husband's back. The Mrs. The Wife, Lilith Sinclair. Did she know about me, I wondered? Would she have cared?

They did not see me. I did not want to disturb the perfection of their union with little trifles like my pregnancy. I had been useful to him for a moment. A plaything, to toy with, a reminder of his youth. I was a virgin sacrifice to his midlife crisis. But now I was growing difficult. I had so much to scream at him, so much to say, but was stopped by his sudden death. Now I am haunted by his ghost, who will not leave me for fear of his punishment. He is plagued by his mistreatment of me, and cannot rest until he has set things right.

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And I will not let him go. I still need answers, love perhaps. I need to believe again. In myself, most of all. He cannot leave me until he loves me again. Until he loves the child he abandoned, to death and his reputation.

The sink is clean at last. I pull the plug and watch the dark brown water swirl down the drain.

It is love of you, child, that sustains me. Let there be goodness where there is none. And love. And light. But above all, hope.

The ghost speaks. He is whispering now.

What shall I do, Ruby? How do I escape your father? And what is to become of me?

You're still a tadpole, baby. A little spark of Ruby senior. Now tell me, child. Are you warm enough; got enough space to swim around in? I have childbearing hips, I'm told, so I think you'll be all right. But can you see in there? I would light a candle, make a fire. You don't need a jersey yet, or a thick winter coat, but the current's warm, and the water will lull you to sleep when I cry. Don't worry, baby dear. It's just for now. Tomorrow will be bright and sunny again. You'll see. Can you see – in there, I mean? Can you hear the sound of my voice? I just swore – don't do that.

Only in secret. Only ever in secret.

I can see the two of them together. My ghost and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair. Arms intertwined, faces frozen in those smiles. They're very happy you know. Two smiling happy faces...you should be so lucky... Aren't we perfect, happy, lucky, just a couple of happy, lucky, smiley folk?

The ghost whispers, "It is done. It is over now. You'll never be rid of me."

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And so I speak, and as I speak my words are lost.

Is it in the past? I cannot tell. Perhaps it is just a memory of yesterday. Just as powerful as a year ago, a month, a minute. I can remember my morning – the dishes are still there. I can remember the garden – the plants are still growing. I can remember the movie of yesterday. But not you, my ghost. Only you are lost. I have lost. You.

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The sound of the doorbell heralds the routine arrival of Sita, to be looked after while her mother Maya does the rounds at Woolies. I'm still in my pyjamas, and I greet the bright-eyed sprite with a hug. She is a breath of light into a cold and dreary morning. She is wearing a bright pink dress with Snoopy on the front, her thick ebony hair in two plaits down her shoulders. Her expression is slightly puzzled, as if her mind is lost in unfathomable mysteries. Puppy fat softens her curves, and she is awkward in her movements. At ten years of age, she does not know her own beauty.

She switches on the television for Saturday morning cartoons. I dress quickly, and return with a magazine. Two large hazel eyes stare fixedly at the Powerpuff Girls, while I flip through the gossip and celebrity snapshots. We spent Easter together, Sita and I, dusting for fingerprints of the Easter Bunny. Finding only mine, she reasoned that it had worn gloves, or some sort of mittens. Sita returned home with a stash of eggs, collected in her tee-shirt.

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Cartoons over, I am forced to continue our story. Of Lalita, the Tiger goddess. I want this young girl to believe in her own magical gifts, and so we weave together, this story, piece by piece until a whole is formed. Sita listens, legs flopping off the side of the couch, her shiny school shoes squeaking together.

I take a breath, and weave my tale. Of Indian princesses, lions and tigers and bears, oh my, until her head is nodding drowsily against my shoulder.

Sita looks up, dozy from her mind's eye. "And...?" she says, indignant.

"And for next time," I reply.

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My photographs of Sita are milky white, drying on the clothesline, pegged carefully at the corners. Once assembled, I begin to cut. Arms, legs, smiles are pasted together, my strangely beautiful Picasso. Her body is put together again, piece by piece, until something new is formed, and my Indian goddess becomes an artwork, no longer of life. How to understand this child? She is unfathomable, her eyes as much veils as windows. I photograph this montage again, then print out the image slowly, taking delight in the burning light on the paper.

First too dark, then too pale, I throw away the test strips. But I begin to shape an understanding of my muse. Caught somewhere in between the light, and the darkness. First she is broken, then pieced together again, the ebb and flow of creation and destruction, each coming into being only through discovery of the other. The goddess Sita of Indian myth was so pure, not even fire could touch her. But this child's face is vulnerable, her eyes wide and afraid. I leave the paper under the light too long. In the

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developer, her image is swallowed into black, and what was lines and shapes, the shading of grey tones, is lost, and she is gone.

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The crowd begins to gather around the entrance to the Baxter Theatre. We are here for a memorial concert for my twin sister Charlotte's fiancé, who drowned tragically on this day, five years earlier. Gabriel Mackenzie was a promising musician; his music lives on.

My sister Charlotte arrives, looking haggard, dark lines beneath her eyes, despite layer upon layer of make-up. She is spoilt in her misery, snapping at a passer by who bumps against her as we make our way down the stairs. She is self-indulgent on her best days, but today she is unbearable, sobbing into her sleeve, then rolling it up again neatly, and staring around her, her eyes swimming with tears. I bunch up my fists into balls, and grimace, trying hard not to scowl at her. She has never learnt to be sympathetic to anyone else but herself. I can feel we will fight unless I bite my tongue.

"All of Gabriel's original compositions..." Charlotte says, distracted, turning her head to watch the people at the ticket office. "Less people than I expected."

I ignore her.

I too have suffered a loss. But it is of no consequence to her drama. She thinks I am stealing her limelight with my distress. As twins, our lives, and our loves, have always run parallel to each other. It must be written in the stars, but a tragic love life seems to be our destiny. From a young age, our experiences would often mirror each other, down to the stubbed knee, or the broken limb. When one fell down, the other one

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started crying. And now was no exception. We were both miserable in love. We had both lost our way. I suppose neither of us were willing for the other one to have a different life experience, and so we both grieved, and suffered together. But she made more noise about it.

Death fascinates us both.

"What are you wearing?" I say, pulling at her dress.

"It's what I wore to his funeral," she says. "It's too tight now, but I cut holes in it, and made it into something new. You like?" She prances around so I can see all angles.

"Yes, fine, thought I recognized it."

"I'm a fat cow since I was eighteen..."

She looks at me to contradict her, and I do, dutifully: "No, you look lovely," I mutter.

We wait for five minutes for the others to arrive. Sita appears first, bounding down the stairs two at a time, her dark hair silky around her face. She is wearing a Scooby Doo Tee Shirt, with a sparkly headband. My good friend Maya follows soon after, looking tired, and concerned for Charlotte's well-being. She is wearing her fair hair in a long plait down her back, and her clothes sway as she moves, in layers of soft fabric and silk. The bangles on her arm clink like castanets in time to her own rhythm.

"How are you doing, Charlotte, love?" She says, giving her a hug. "Such a sad day..."

"Thanks." Charlotte looks down.

"If you like I could do some Reiki, or Reflexology on you...I'd give you a free consultation, of course." Maya's eyes are warm and kind, and Charlotte is soon pouring

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out her heart to her. She extends her arm, and wraps half of her pashmina around Charlotte in a protective gesture; she listens patiently, gently comforting Charlotte.

I take Sita's hand, and we find the kiosk to buy treats. "Endearmints or Bar Ones?" I say.

"Hmm, a tricky question," Sita says, thoughtfully. "This might take some time..."

The bell rings for us to take our seats. Sita grabs my arm, "Both," she says, decidedly.

I give in, and we carry the sweets back to the others.

"You'll get rotten teeth!" Maya exclaims.

"I promise to brush a lot, a lot tonight," Sita says, chirruping.

Maya sighs.

Charlotte opens the programme. "We begin with the concerto he wrote the week before he died..."

The music is strange and otherworldly. Gabriel was before his time, I decide. Charlotte listens, her eyes closed, while Sita kicks the chair, already bored and wanting to go home. She fidgets with the sweets, and sucks a mint loudly. Maya hushes her, clearly enjoying the music, and takes the packet of mints away from her.

Gently the notes begin to lull me into sleep. And I forget, for a moment, my own story.

## Sita

My name is Sita Patel, and I am eleven years old next week. I am in love, completely in love, with Jake. He is in my class at school, and he is a hunk of burning love, the best thing since sliced bread, the bees' knees! He is my destiny.

We sit together sometimes in maths class, because we are both really bad at fractions, but it makes him feel better to have to explain things to me all the time. Then I laugh, uproariously, at all his jokes, and the tips of his ears turn bright red. Then I say in my most flirtatious voice, "May I use your rubber? Er, excuse me, your *eraser*." And we both laugh because it is so funny (it has sexual connotations, if you know what I mean - a rubber is another word for a *condom*). Jake is very funny when he wants to be. He tells me sports jokes all the time, and I just keep laughing loudly, but have no idea what he's talking about.

Tasneem sits behind us and gets so jealous. She says mean things about me behind my back. One day she said in her nastiest voice, "Jake thinks you are not his type." This made me really upset, but I didn't show it at the time. So I asked him later if he thought I was his type, but he didn't seem to understand the question.

Maybe it's because I am an Indian. My father comes from New Delhi. He visits us once in a while, when his business is going well, and sends me postcards with elephants and tigers, and all sorts of wild creatures. One day I am going to visit him. My mother is white. She is very pretty, and blonde, and I don't look like her at all. She is a New Age hippie, and likes to wear long beads and silky floaty clothes that waft about everywhere.

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Her name is Maya Patel-Smith, and she is an artist, and a magician – not the Harry Potter kind though, that’s just in books.

She works at the College of Magic in Lansdowne Road, Claremont. She teaches classes on every aspect of magic, from pulling a coin from out of your ear, to juggling, to *A History of Houdini's Greatest Escapes*.

Mum's been teaching me some tricks. I am now an expert at pulling coins out from behind ears, and the rope trick – but one day I want to learnt to levitate, and escape a tank full of water while chained up and bound. The most dangerous trick of all is catching a bullet between your teeth. I’m not sure how that one works, but wouldn’t it be cool to learn? Then I wouldn’t have to be afraid of crime, because if someone shot at me in a hijacking or armed robbery at the Seven Eleven, I could just catch the bullet between my teeth. I would be indestructible, like Superman, or the cockroach that lives under the fridge.

You know what’s gross but totally yum? Peanut butter and chocolate powder. Mum says its like fat on a plate, but that’s what makes it so cool. But then again chocolate powder goes with everything – even those boring cheese sandwiches with the wholewheat brown bread that’s supposed to be so good for me. It’s also nice just on its own – eaten with a spoon. Mum goes ballistic when she finds me eating it like that though.

Tomorrow night my best friend for life Matilda is coming over to watch *Lord of the Rings*. I can’t wait to watch the trilogy again – we’re going to try to watch all three. I’m making popcorn especially (with chocolate powder!). I wish I had been in that movie. My second cousin once removed, Jasmine, lives in New Zealand, and she got a job

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feeding the horses. I wish I had been an elf. I'd be such a good elf – except my ears are not pointy, just normally round.

I'm going to do something amazing one day. I'm not sure what though. Something that changes the world. Everyone always says that you can't change the world, but maybe that's just because they don't try hard enough. I just have to work out what to do first. I was thinking of starting with famine.

I want to be an actress someday – on Broadway or the West End. I'm writing a play – got a little something for everyone – drama, passion, and intrigue. If you like I'll let you read some bits. It's a bit like *Titanic* (the movie). I don't want to ruin it for you if you haven't watched it, but in the end Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio!) freezes to death so that Rose, the love of his life, can be safe on the wooden plank. I wish someone loved me enough to freeze to death so that I wouldn't drown (but then they would be dead – so maybe I just want to know that they do, and then not have them die).

The only problem with finding the love of your life is that you have to have sex. And I've decided not to do that. It just seems a bit awkward, you know – and I'm not very bendy. My boobs are growing, which is a problem. There doesn't seem to be any point of having big boobs if I'm not going to have sex – they're just going to get in the way, and they seem to be mostly just decorative. I mean, when you think about it, they're really just like udders. And then I have to wear a bra *for the rest of my life* – so that's like, forever.

I like our new apartment, just off Kloof Nek Road in Town. It's really sunny, with blue cornflower wallpaper, sunflower curtains, and a mustard rug. Our old place had rats in the roof. They sounded like great big feet stomping about. We put traps out and

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everything, but they were too sneaky and just stole the bait. I don't like rats – only the white kind, those are sweet (unless they climb down your top). My best friend Matilda had a pet rat, but it got a giant tumor which grew almost as big as it was. She was convinced it was pregnant, despite the fact that it was growing from its backside.

We have a pet chicken called Colonel Sanders. We're not supposed to have it in this apartment though (no pets allowed), so you can't mention it to anybody. It's been going through some changes recently, and turns out 'she's' actually a rooster. It's becoming more and more difficult to hide, because he keeps crowing in the mornings. He sits on the bottom of my bed and cockadoodledoos, and then he comes pecking about to see if he can get any feed. I'm not a morning person, so I yell at him and threaten to eat him (but I wouldn't really because I'm a vegetarian – I don't eat anything with eyes).

## Maya

Pulling a rabbit out of a hat is not actually as difficult as it looks. Far trickier is ripping the rabbit's head off, showing it to the audience, and then screwing it back on again. That takes skill – and the suspension of the audience's disbelief. The trick is to control the gaze, to keep their focus where you want it. To cast a spell without a single person being aware of it. And of course, a magician never reveals her secrets.

Sita hates it when I rip off the rabbit's head. I try to explain to her that its not real, just trickery, but she still can't quite help believing. She knows most of the magic secrets by now, knows it's just sleight of hand, an illusion, but in her heart she still wants it all to be real, wants a magic wand to weave its enchantment.

The moment we had some order in our new apartment, I unpacked the essentials – cards, coloured rope, my top hat, and of course, the puppets. Not all magicians include puppets in their act – some think it's too childish, too gimmicky, but for me it's the heart and soul of what I do. Handcrafted in polished wood, their faces smile, painted by a delicate hand. Rosy-cheeked with spiderweb lashes and expectant eyes, they tell story after story – of leopards that lost their spots, emperors without clothes, and lonely princes on faraway planets. But they also tell other stories – of how to say *no*, of where to go if you get sick, of boundaries and of unspoken taboos. With enough laughter and silliness to keep the audience entertained, I can expose what is hidden, what lies beneath.

I've been teaching Sita my acts. Every magician needs an apprentice, and she has the gift, a born entertainer. I gave her Lucinda, a puppet with red hair and an inquisitive, rather perplexed expression just like her own. She is a natural ventriloquist, making

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inanimate objects, from the kettle to the bathmat, speak in every kind of accent, and she gave Lucinda a Scottish twang.

Sita has begun a giant card castle in the centre of the living room – she says she wants it to reach the ceiling, with multiple turrets, drawbridge and moat. We ran out of cards soon enough, and I had to give her an advance on her pocket money so that she could buy more. I'm raising a strange child, I know – delightful but decidedly odd. I wish there was a way to protect her, to let her keep this difference of hers, but the world seems much more powerful, so willing to smooth out her kinks, make her ordinary. Perhaps I too am partly responsible for this.

On our first night in our new apartment, I make Sita's favourite meal – sweet and sour veggies with tofu and saffron rice. She insists on adding chocolate powder to her vegetables. When I tell her not to, she makes the broccoli disappear with a sleight of hand. I catch her out on this, and she pulls the broccoli out of my nose. I sent her to her room, but not before a fight. I don't even want to know what she's going to be like as a teenager.

The next day we give a performance at the Red Cross Children's Hospital. When we arrive, Sita is still sullen and moody, unwilling to help out in any way. Only when the show starts does her face open up once more. She sits in the centre of the room, Lucinda on her lap, chatting to the kids until they are screeching with laughter. They are burn victims, their faces, hands, skin scarred and bandaged, but they are one of the best audiences we have ever had. They refuse to stay in their seats and sit still, and clasp each other in horror as I saw Sita in half – Sita grinning delightedly at their reactions all the while.

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After Sita's miraculous recovery, we give the children finger puppets of their own. In groups of two, they begin to tell stories. Mostly they are funny with plenty of toilet humour, but sometimes the characters are abused in the most heart-wrenching ways, and it is to these children that I give most of my attention.

Sita is remarkably silent for the rest of the day. She says she wants to go again next week, wants to show them the flying plates trick. I think she sees something of herself in these kids.

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## Sita

I am feeling a bit sad today. I think it is because of seeing those kids at the hospital – the ones me and Mum went to see the other day. They're just like me, only really bad things have happened to them. And it made me think that maybe bad things could happen to me too.

Before the show began, I had to go to the loo – Matilda says I have a bladder the size of a peanut (I can't drink a lot because then I would have to live in the loo, and how would I go to school?). While I was on the loo, these nurses came in and they started talking about this girl who was in a coma on level three. They said she had been raped so badly that they had to remove her uterus. How could somebody have done that? I don't understand. I sat down on the toilet seat and had a think about it. The toilet had graffiti on the walls that is too rude to mention.

I wanted to get the girl a roll of toffees or Mint Imperials, so that she had a treat when she wakes up, but the nurses wouldn't tell me which room she was in. They said it was not polite to eavesdrop on other people's conversations. I told them that I couldn't help it if they talked so loudly, and they said I was a very rude little girl. Then I stormed off and slammed the door to the bathroom really loudly.

I tried to find her room on my own, but I just got lost. I left some Rolos with the receptionist, and told her to send it to the girl in a coma, but I think she's just going to eat them herself.

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So then I felt really gloomy, and I had to stop from crying in all the sad parts of the *Lord of the Rings*. I tried to think of things to write in my Grateful Journal (like Oprah says).

I am grateful that I do not live in a squatter camp.

I am grateful that I do not have leprosy.

My mum lets me stay up late.

I have a pet rooster.

I did not step on that dog poo.

Table Mountain is not a volcano.

I saved all my Easter eggs.

The maths test was cancelled.

But mostly I'm just glad that it's my birthday tomorrow. Eleven is really old. Much bigger than ten. Mum says before I know it I'll be grown. I wonder if I'll remember what it was like to be me? I'm going to become a whole different person. I hope I'll be nice. Generally I don't like grown ups though. They've stopped believing in things (like the Loch Ness Monster). I told Jake that someone had taken a photo of Nessie with her baby, and he rolled his eyes and said that surely I should've grown out of believing in such rubbish by now? I told him I'd believe it till the day I die, and I will, he'll see.

I'm going to start collecting (dead) bugs so that we can see how they splat on the windscreen or window. Me and Jake are gonna throw them. When we go on holiday, sometimes there's a big yellow or red splat on our windscreen (one time we hit this dove,

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and it made a horrible brown splodge – we had to stop at a petrol station to get it off). Mostly I don't really pay that much attention to the splats though. There's an encyclopedia of bug splats that I want to buy, with all the different ways they can splat in all the different colours, so you can identify them when they vrek on your windscreen.

Mum let me stay up to watch all three *Lord of the Rings* movies, but I fell asleep half way through. I hope I don't drool in my sleep. But I can't say for sure. The only way you could tell really, is if someone watched you the whole night. Then in the morning they could tell you all sorts of things about you that you never knew!

\*

I may or may not have mentioned this already, but I really like Jake in my class. He is really funny, and he can burp the alphabet - a real plus in a man, let me tell you. You can tell I like him, because I blush when he puts up his hand to ask a very important question. He asks the best questions. You might even say that they are pertinent. Like the time he said, De Nile is not just a river in Egypt. Har, har, you know, very funny! And what's black and white and red all over (but not the newspaper)? An embarrassed zebra. Har, har! Man, that dude cracks me up big time.

Jake is super dishy. A real cool dude. But another girl, Yasmin, likes him also, and she's always like, "Ooh, Jake, you're so smart, and you're so clever, and can you help me with my homework? and twisting her hair in a very irritating way....lalala." Stupid girl. I accidentally-on -purpose stole her pink ballpoint pen. It has a tassel.

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I have a statue of the goddess Lakshmi in my bedroom. A tiny shrine for daily puja. She is my favourite goddess at the moment - but I also like Ganesh (the multi-headed elephant god). He is freaky, but actually very good. You'd be surprised. In the story of Rama and Sita (from which I am named), Sita is the very beautiful goddess of virtue and purity, and she battles Kali, the goddess of destruction. Sita and Kali represent two ways to be a girl - either beautiful and pure, such as myself, or fearsome and terrifying, such as Yasmin (I know a lot of girls like that, let me tell you...tee hee). Sita is kidnapped, by an evil god someone or other, and to prove her purity, she stands in the middle of a fire and is not burned. I tried that (quickly) with my foot once. It is not possible, no matter what the boys tell you.

Life as a goddess is not as easy as it looks. I might have a little bit of an incarnated deity in me. Perhaps in a past life I was the *real* goddess Sita herself. No, not really, but it's nice to think, isn't it? There's no harm in thinking you're a goddess. Even if that does mean you're a heathen.

I am at present, drawing a picture of princess Lalita on a giant lotus lily, sailing the ocean. I have just finished the petals of the lily - so delicate, in pale yellow and soft pink. Lalita's hair falls all about her. She is a very beautiful Indian person. Her hair is shiny like a raven's wing. The petals can close up, and she can go to sleep, safe in the pollen-centre of the flower. She is singing softly - I can almost hear her. Pity I can't bring my picture to life.

I like being a kid. I don't like grown-ups (besides my mother). Just think, one day I will be one of them. And I have no choice about it, too. Enough time passes, and you join their club. Then I will have to be all stuffy, and not believe in fairies (a simple fact,

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by the way). Imagine that. I will be completely different. It's almost as if I will no longer be me at all. There are a few essential parts of me, Sita, as I am now, preserved, that have to still be there, or I might as well be another person entirely, if you know what I mean...Like, will I even like chocolate? And they say your taste changes, so I will like blue cheese and olives by then. Is there anything I can do to stop this? I am going to write a list, and preserve myself, and make sure I never, never, never change, and that the future adult they call Sita remembers these things too.

Lest I Forget:

- 1 I do not like blue cheese or olives.
- 2 I like chocolate.
- 3 Sex is disgusting. Do not do this at home!
- 4 Fairies are real.
- 5 Jake and I are soul mates. We are destined to be married forever.
- 6 I want to sing on Broadway. Preferably *Annie* or *The Sound of Music*.
- 7 I might finally know the answer to the question they said I would know by grade ten.
- 8 Never, never smoke!!! Never! Not even if I really, really want to. Chop my fingers off first.
- 9 Grownups are not always right.
- 10 The combination to the lock in my diary is my birth-date (I might never be able to open it otherwise).

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- 11 My favourite movie is Hannah Montana.
- 12 Never, never, never marry a banker, or a businessman. Only an artist.
- 13 I am destined to be a movie star.
- 14 Drugs are not cool. This really scares me.
- 15 Always listen to children, they actually are very smart.

My mother gave me a beautiful puppet called Lucinda. It is really ancient, all the way from India itself. Many cultures have festivals involving puppets, and she is beautifully made for the festival to the goddess Parvati. She sits on my lap and I can make her speak without moving my own lips. She is really cheeky, and says all sorts of things I would never say in real life. If I have a problem with my mother, sometimes I make her say bad things to her, and then I can't get in trouble. She sits next to my bed when I sleep. I once thought she came to life by herself, but I was mistaken.

\*

My Rice Crispies are soggy at the bottom of the bowl. If I stare long enough into the milk, they form shapes, like clouds. I think I even see an antelope shape, and a bear, eating a banana. I swirl my spoon around a couple more times, and make mountains and the Grand Canyon in my cereal. A stray kernel of rice even sticks to my nose. Mum says to stop making a mess, or we'll be late.

In the car on the way to school, the windscreen is dripping with raindrops. Today is the day I forgot to do the project we have been preparing for all month. I am in so

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much trouble. I try to convince Maya that I have rheumatic fever, or typhoid, but she ignores me. I think Mrs. van der Westhuizen might give me detention if I cannot think of an excuse fast. Tasneem has probably done double the amount of work, and she's sure to get an A+.

Coughing violently, to give the impression of rheumatism, I make my way up the steps of my school. I tell the secretary I have a fever, but she is busy on the phone, and tells me to get a note from my mother, or a doctor, thanks dear, and yes, new textbooks, by next month, Cambridge Editions...yadayada...Can you hold on one moment...is there anything else, Sita?

I cough again. "I think I might be dying of rheumatic fever. That is why my project...."

"One moment, sweetheart, I just need to check the order..." She turns back to the phone.

I tug at my uniform, irritably, and look around the office. Staff portraits, a few medals and achievements from the students. Unopened packets of A4 workbooks. I practise my cough until it is less dry, and more of a death rattle. Nobody could survive a cough like that. I wander down the hall, dawdling, trailing my school rucksack behind me. Projects on the earth and the oceans line the walls, the best ones with stars next to the names of the students.

The bell rings, and I reluctantly slink into class. I sit at the back with my best friend, Matilda Khumalo, who has a large piece of cardboard in front of her, with Ancient Greece written on the top. I was supposed to do Italy. Jake has done his project on Portugal. He is looking very handsome and wearing his cap in class, which he is not

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supposed to. School rules. I smile at him, seductively, but he doesn't seem to notice. Siphon is eating a bag of slap chips under his desk, and the smell of vinegar fills the small classroom.

"Look," Matilda whispers. "I'm wearing my training first bra." She pulls her uniform off her shoulder, and shows me. "It's a sports bra." She is glowing with pride.

"Cool!" then I whisper, "I forgot to do my project."

"Well maybe we won't get to it by the end of the lesson," Matilda says. "Italy is *I*, after all, that's much later in the alphabet. I'm sure to go first."

"Nope, that's Kyle with Armenia."

"Look, I even drew the ancient gods, and the Acropolis!" Matilda points a nail-bitten finger at the cardboard. "Thor is throwing a thunderbolt down to earth, to punish the mortals. To appease him, they name a day of the week after him - Thursday." Matilda's hair is pulled back into rows upon rows of small black braids, with pink beads at the end. I think she looks very pretty. When she talks, a dimple appears, then disappears in her cheek.

Mrs. van der Westhuizen enters the classroom. She seems to be perpetually covered in chalk dust. Surely she must bath at night? She wears funny felt shoes, and a crochet top. If you talk or make her mad, she turns beet red and starts throwing the eraser. It hit me once, but only by accident, because she was aiming for Johnny, who said the *F* word.

"Kyle, you're up first," she says, her voice booming out across the room. Kyle shuffles to the front of the class, and begins. "Where is Armenia...?" Armenia is a great land....far, far away..."

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I fidget underneath the table, and try to look attentive, while all the while, I am hatching schemes to escape this nightmare. I could set off the fire alarm, or maybe keel over, in a fit of typhoid fever. If only I could come up with a *really* good excuse.

"Thank you Kyle, very informative," Mrs. van der Westhuizen says. "Next up, Bolivia...Susan, would you like to share what you've done with the class?"

I stare longingly at the back of Jake's neck. He has a very handsome neck. I am so looking forward to his project presentation on Portugal. I really know nothing about it. He has so much to teach me.

I put up my hand. "Excuse me, but could I please go to the bathroom, if I may...?"

"Of course, Sita, but don't be too long. I'm sure we're all looking forward to the great gifts of Italy."

I run down the hall as fast as my legs could carry me. There is a high window at the top of the bathroom. If only I could squeeze out of it.

An hour later, they find me clinging to the drainpipe, one story above the ground.

"It was an accident, I swear!" I cry.

"But sweetie, what were you doing on the window ledge?" the principal says sternly.

"There was this bird with a broken wing...and..." I try to think fast. I am secretly thrilled because I never had to give my presentation. I make up a story about a wounded animal. The teachers are in tears by the end. I must just remember to do my project for tomorrow.

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At break, Jake was so impressed. "How did you get half way down the drainpipe?" He offers me half his sandwich, with Melrose cheese spread on it. It was then that I had an idea. You may even call it, a stroke of genius. In a never before feat of daring, I shall equal Houdini and become an escapologist.

"Houdini?" Jake asks, surprised.

"Yes, the very man," I reply. "I am going to escape from a burning building - or a glass tank, or something..."

"No way!" Jake does not believe me.

"Yes way!" I smile, chuffed at my idea. "If I do this - escape like Houdini - will you go to the Dress up Dance with me?"

"Maybe..." Jake says, mumbling. "I sort of promised Tasneem...But I suppose, if you manage to pull it off...but you could never, Sita!"

"Sure I could. I just need to practise freeing myself from iron shackles - do you know where I can find some?"

"Nope," Jake says, taking a bite of the half of the sandwich I had given him. He is wearing his peak cap like a gangster, turned backwards - he is not allowed to wear his cap during school hours.

"Maybe if I was submerged in the underwater torture cell."

Jake gets bored, and wanders over to the boys, to play soccer on the field (even though they've just laid new grass, and are not allowed to scuff it up!).

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"What exactly is an escapologist?" Matilda asks, after I explain my whole plan to her. We sit on a fallen down tree stump. Matilda swings her legs over the edge, and her feet cannot reach the ground.

"Houdini was an escapologist. He escaped all sorts of things. He was bound in irons and chains, with his hands tied behind his back. He could escape anything."

"Wowee, imagine that!" Matilda says. "But you can't do that - your mother would never allow it."

"I know - you mustn't tell her."

"But that would be lying, Sita. I'm not allowed to tell fibs," Matilda says, pursing her lips.

"You are such a goody two-shoes," I say, crossly. "You really make me mad sometimes. Can't you see - this will make us famous."

"Or get us very dead. And anyway, who said anything about *us*? I'm not going to do it, no way, Jose!"

I walk away in a huff, and think about ways to imitate Houdini. This was certain to make Jake hopelessly in love with me. I was sure of it. But first I had to do the project, or I would have to climb out of the drainpipe all over again, and that would be horrible.

Matilda's mom phoned my mom and told her the whole plan. I will never forgive her. I don't care if she is my best friend. Now I am grounded, and no pudding for a month. Jake's going to the dance with Tasneem, and he doesn't even believe that I could have done it. Well I could have. One day he'll see. They'll all see. Just you wait. I am going to

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be the next Houdini - a master magician. Now you see me, now you don't. Poof, and I have disappeared.

I begin to write, *Italy, a land famed for its pasta and pizza and hunkalicious men...*

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## Sophia

I crack the pomegranate onto the rough bricks, the red blood of the seeds weeping into the cracks of the cement. I am in my bathing costume, complete with retro 1960s swimming cap, my feet dipping into the small pool out back. Seeds spill onto my legs, the fine hairs catching the juice. I trace red patterns on my belly, imagine a child's face, hands and curled body beginning to grow. Hardly larger than a seed itself. Then I begin to trace the patterns of her destiny. Love lines, laugh lines, lines of sorrow in my belly skin. I am her god and maker. I am creating life, and I shall determine the path she walks on. In the water of the pool itself I can see two sisters' faces looking staring upwards. My own and my identical twin, Charlotte's reflection.

*Where Will You Go To My Lovely* sings softly in the background. We plan our lives together. What shall separate us, what shall unite us? What she is, I am not, today. I am contrary. An individual, I insist, despite appearances. She is the naughty one anyway. I am the good girl.

Will my baby take after my twin, or me, feeling Ruby swim about in my own ocean. A world within worlds I am never far from my past, or my dream-landscape.

I sip a mug of hot apple juice with cinnamon, warmed quickly on my broken stove inside the house. A thick layer of spices crusts the top and I sip until I taste the sweet of the juice. I take out my camera, and begin snapping randomly. I shall document each day of my belly's development, dip the prints in sepia, add paint, if needed. An installation piece. Nine months of creation, then new life. Is it a Fall from Paradise? Make-up, hastily applied this morning, sweats off my skin, and I wipe it off with the back

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of my hand. Nobody can see me, I can run naked here. Shame only comes when I am watched. I do not like my skin exposed.

A dragonfly's wings are mother-of-pearl translucent. In a helicopter whir, it buzzes past me on some business. I try to catch its wings with my zoom, but it is too fast for me.

The back of my toenail is broken and blue from where my sister's shoe met my bare feet. Slowly the nail has peeled backwards, to reveal hard pink skin underneath. I pick at it, irritably, then stretch out on my towel, enjoying the feeling of my bare flesh against the warm bricks. Through the weave of the sunhat over my eyes, I can see the clouds, a burst of sunlight, and the green of the plane trees, abstracted to pure colour and shape. The straw of the hat smells warm and familiar, and I doze for some time.

My life is a strange story. On the surface quite ordinary, but my fantasy world exists parallel to it. I still remember the monsters of my childhood, as if they breathed the same fire as regular grownups. And now this ghost follows me in the shadows.

I have a number of bookings lined up for today. Portraits, of two families, and a wedding tonight. I enjoy the moments you cannot plan – expressions so fleeting only a quick shutter can capture it. Rained-out wedding parties huddled under red umbrellas, muddy gowns and the tears. This makes for a better story than gleaming perfection, the forced smiles of bleached teeth over fake tans. I enjoy the grizzled portraits of old men, grey beard over weathered skin telling stories in their lines. A bit of dust on the lens.

I get up and wrap the towel around me. My albino fair skin is now reddening, despite the factor thirty. A quick change in the bathroom, and I am ready. My hair is still wet so it is pinned up tightly into a pre-Raphaelite knot, the inescapable red strands

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dancing around my forehead. Three bobby pins, a quick dab of lip gloss and extra mascara and I feel prepared.

The car won't start without the help of a neighbour, so I am late for my first appointment. A bride and groom, reproducing the big day some weeks later. Their hair I'm sure was neater then, their smiles brighter. Do they feel the same way? Weeks of laundry and dirty dishes have already sullied the honeymoon. The first photos were over-exposed, the bride explains hurriedly, her large meringue of a dress swishing on the carpet. The groom is grumpy and unimpressed, but for memory's sake, he mutters. Only ten minutes, then he must get back to his work. They are fighting again, the bridesmaid whispers – he says, she says, etc. Some gossip about the stag night.

All together now...and smile! The group bares their teeth. Flash. And again – a bit to the left, ma'am, thank you...and...say cheese!

“Waste of bloody money,” the groom sulks.

“It's for our grandchildren, dear,” the bride trills.

Five rolls of film later, and countless posed smiles, I am tired and ready for coffee. I end up photographing rubbish on the side of the road. The discarded waste, cigarette stumps and shoe prints of a careless city. At least these are real, I think to myself, and feel the relief of escaping another fictional world. I enjoy the dirt, noise and colour of the street vendors on Claremont main road - the rows and rows of Simba Chips, in assorted flavours – the tomato, sweet pepper and cheese and chives. Fake gold watches, plastic sunglasses, and pirated DVDs are sold alongside the naartjies and bags of swollen grapes. I snap a blond Rastafarian making her way down the pavement, passers-by cramming into mini-bus taxis, and the jaywalkers dashing quickly across the

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street. The taxis cut wildly across the traffic, and a large truck carrying Gatti's ice cream inches like a songololo into the next lane.

I put a hand protectively over my bump. You are a small beating heart within me. I do not want to be bumped or jostled. I sit down on the curb and feel myself carrying two lives with each breath. The responsibility of this makes me dizzy. I make my way back to my car, and put on the radio really loudly. The noise gives me a sudden burst of energy, and I continue on my way.

Ruby stay with me through this.

Later that evening, I take out the contact sheet, and examine the snapshots carefully. The half-eaten cake has been turned to one side, so that it seems intact. The bride's hair has been done at home, rather than at a hairdresser, and the sleeve of the groom's tuxedo has been torn. It all seems too forced, too posed. You cannot reproduce the feel of the day.

I print out a few of the more promising images, then return to my fine art collection. A welcome relief after so many plastic smiles. In amongst the older negatives I stumble upon a photograph of my sister – but it could be of me. The only difference is in the expression. Her face is more open, ready to receive the world's attention. I have never grinned like that before. And I think I remember the day. It was last September, at a picnic at Kirstenbosch. Her hat blew off and flew down the hill. She ran to catch it, stumbling and laughing all the way. This was a close-up of that moment.

There is something different behind our eyes. Our spirits cast a glow about our features, and we become unique creations. One-of-a-kind instead of duplicates. My father used to say God was so impressed with the cast, he couldn't help but do it again.

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I dip the print in sepia, until Charlotte's face is sunset tan. A portrait of myself if I smiled more. Perhaps if I put it on my mantelpiece, guests would mistake her warmth for my own. I always see my potential in her face; and what I can never become. I am the pale shadow of her image. It is strange to watch your reflection each day in someone else's life. I cannot control my mirror image. She is loose on the world to wreak havoc in my name.

I hold the print up to the red darkroom lights. Our freckles or unique constellations on our pale skins. A fingerprint that sets us apart. I trace my own on my arm.

The door opens, and harsh neon lights blaze into the darkroom.

"Shit!" I cry, and try to cover the photographic paper. But it is too late, and the sheets have been overexposed.

Sita is standing at the door, "Oops, sorry," she says, afraid of my temper.

I throw the ruined paper into the bin, with a groan. I give her a kiss on the forehead, and usher her out of the room.

"The front door was unlocked – Mum's just dropped me off," she explains. "I forgot about knocking."

"Shall we order pizza?" I say.

\*

In the comfort of my living room, I examine the image. A waterfall, in milk-white, the water flowing across the rocks like silk through an open hand. In the distance, Sita stands

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waving, a pattern of light on the print. She will always be waving. A split second in time no more precious than the rest, but preserved, immortal. Veils of silk, caress boulders, tumble into pools about her feet. Light water plays with dark earth.

The leaves of a tree dip into water in search of blue, but sees only its own reflection in the grey-white of the print. The reflection peers back up at the sky, its edges blurred, and yearns for clouds, for rain, and to be more than merely the mirror for something else. The branches dip into itself, transfixed by its image, Narcissus, forever staring, staring... Crisp leaves blur to soft focus, as they become burns on paper, on the negative, in my mind.

The river continues on its way. Veil upon veil of soft silk, layers of white water. Now as permanent as the rocks, in the photograph, the river's movement frozen.

Sita takes the print from me. "I look fat," she sighs.

She is learning about Cubism, open textbooks strewn about the room. To demonstrate the point, I take a photograph of her, and begin cutting. Soon we have an ear, a nose, an eye, parts of her cheek, lips, torso, arms.

I hand her the glue, "Now paste yourself together again." The ear becomes her arm, her arm her ear, her eyes peer out at us from her chest, and hair springs forth from her shoulders.

"I look like Frankenstein's monster," she giggles.

"You see," I say, smiling, "something new is formed. A new perspective, new vantage point. Sometimes you need to break something apart and piece it together again, before you can see it clearly."

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I take photographs of Sita, and start to pin them onto a board. A collage of memorable moments. Snapshots of life. Or the imitation of. Is that what memory is like? Everything else fades away, and only the fragments remain, the moments of pain, pleasure, triumph. We forget the morning toast, and the warm coffee cup. The socks in the laundry, and the inbetween.

I pick up my camera and take seven photos of Sita in quick succession. Later, in the darkroom, I shall build them into a story, a movement of her head, emotion captured as she bites her lip then bends down to read. This is important to me. This day in its ordinariness. I shall pin it to the board as well. It's in the details of life that joy can be found, if I can only stop my world long enough to feel it. The seconds between time; the story between the words on a page; the moment just before...

*Snap, she is captured. She is remembered today. It hasn't passed yet.*

\*

At five p.m., the guests arrive at Olympia Café, by invite only, to celebrate the opening of my photographic exhibition. Some of the photographs depict scenes of the wild, nature in its most extreme, while others reveal human emotion, the depth of pain and suffering, joy and human triumph etched across a face.

Maya and Sita sit at a table in the far corner, drinking sparkling grapetizer. Charlotte and I met Maya many years ago, when we did an art course together, in ceramics. All three of us are now artists in some way, choosing to express life and love through art.

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Maya gets up and buys three loaves of freshly baked bread. The other guests chat, and eat canapés, tightly packed together in the small café.

The photographs are for sale, and I am thrilled to see a red sticker on one of my favourites, indicating a sale. It is a black and white print, taken many years ago, of Charlotte and her boyfriend Gabriel, while he was still with us, laughing into the sunrise. That will pay the phone bill for another month, while I complete my Masters in Fine Art at UCT. Sita is transfixed by an image of herself. I have promised to give her a copy for free when the exhibition comes down in three weeks. There are other photographs of my friends, my sister, familiar faces, snapshot moments of my life.

A cup of coffee smashes onto the floor, and I sidestep black liquid and broken china. Suddenly, I begin to feel lightheaded.

I escape from the crowd, and stand outside on the pavement, sipping my red wine slowly. There are too many people making too much noise, and my head is swimming with new thoughts and fears. The Kalk Bay Harbour shimmers in the evening light, the boats gently swaying with the tide. The ghost reaches for me, but I turn away.

Where to from here? I think to myself. And for once, I do not know. I find my camera, as always in my handbag, and take a photo of my shoes. "One step at a time," I whisper, "One step at a time...Just follow the yellow brick road...."

## Sita

It is all Eve's fault, she ruined my life. If she hadn't eaten that apple, none of us would have to suffer like we do, and get our "monthly visit from aunt Rose." Even men suffer because of her. Such bad karma.

But Mary redeemed us all. Because she never had sex, and was so pure a child was placed in her womb without ever being touched by a dirty old man.

And this is going to happen for the rest of my life, every month, month after month, until I'm a dried up old crone, and then, who cares.

I told Jake at school, but he says he doesn't want to know about women's issues, and that's final. He gets very squeamish when I talk about such things, and starts to turn greenish.

Mum says women in Biblical times used to stay in a red tent in the desert because they were so dirty men thought they should be left well alone. But really it was so that they could be left alone for a little bit and have some peace and quiet from their menfolk, who were at them day and night. She told me the story of Rachel and Leah. Jacob loved Rachel all his life, but Leah came in her place and he married her by mistake. Even though Leah bore him many sons, Rachel was more loved because he had worked for her day and night for seven years and she had beautiful brown eyes. And Rachel's son Joseph was a Technicolor dreamboat, and he said, "Let my people go!" And parted the Red Sea.

I think I feel so strongly about it all, because if I lived in India now, like my father's family, I'd be arranged married. Which gets around all the hassle of having to find someone and make them love you, but they would be horrid. Mum has promised not

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to sell me to a husband anytime soon. Mum says it would be like having sex with a cardboard box – that boring and horrid, when there's no love in a marriage. So many of the boys in my class are so small and pimply. Maybe they'll grow up one day to be dishy, so I'm going to be nice to them still, just in case. But nobody so handsome as Jake.

Mum wants to teach me to cook, so I learn to enjoy it. But if you do something well, they'll expect you to do it again. And I don't want to cook. Besides, I can make a mean macaroni and cheese with basil. But only when Mum's at work. Otherwise I like her roti and dahl – except she never uses enough salt. I eat it with my fingers, I have to wash them first though, and not in front of guests.

I am named after the goddess Sita. And I have a small shrine to her next to my bed. Before I go to bed at night, I make a small offering, so that she will bestow blessings on me. She's so holy, she can stand in fire and not be burned to death. I want to be that good, like Mary, and Sita, and Agnes in school who's "pure as the driven snow." That would be nice.

\*

The hospital floor is quiet. I peek around the corner, and nobody is there. Maya is busy giving a puppet show for the kids in the Burn Unit of the Red Cross, and she won't notice I'm missing for some time. The girl on Level Three is awake, and staring at the ceiling. She has bandages all over her body, and she looks just like me, or one of my friends (which makes me sad to think). She has just come out of her coma.

"Hello," I say.

She doesn't reply.

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"Do you speak English?" I say again. I think she's being a bit rude; I'm only trying to be friendly.

She doesn't say anything, but looks very sad. I walk up to her bedside, and sit on a stool. "Did you get my Mint Imperials? I left them for you a while back, when you were sick. I hope nobody else ate them..."

She is quiet, so I think she must just be shy. I continue talking, and hope she is listening, but her eyes look blank, like she doesn't see anything. "I like Mint Imperials myself...what does it feel like to be in a coma? Can you think, or is it like you are sleeping?"

The girl blinks. The corners of her eyes are red, and her cheeks are puffy.

"You look like a nice sort of person, maybe we could be friends when you get better," I say, trying to cheer her up. "I have a doll called Lucinda, do you want me to show her to you sometime?"

She doesn't seem interested. The television is on in the background, and we both watch it for a bit (or I think she is watching, but maybe she is just staring into space, because she doesn't seem to really see anything, and she doesn't even laugh at the funny bits).

"Please get better soon," I say. "Get better soon, and then you can be my friend..." The girl doesn't blink.

"What's your name?"

The nurse comes in, and sees me, and lets out a yell as I run for the door. She swings at me with her hand, and claps me on the shoulder. I hide near the canteen until it is time to go home.

Monica Toerien

I don't understand this world sometimes. It seems like a horrible place to be brought up in.

University of Cape Town

## Sophia

Are there any fairy godmothers in town? I would arrange for some blessings, but not for the spindle. We shall start perhaps, with my sister. Good enough as an aunt, but the 'God' makes her grand. She's my twin, Charlotte. Her red hair is mine, but tamed, and her nose is just as upturned. Three freckles separate our skin, as gold flecks in green eyes mark a change in mine. Her hands are busiest, a sculptor, an artist in training. My feet first, her head later. She sees herself in me and I her. And we are not pleased.

Or were not.

Past tense.

I hope we have grown a little now.

Charlotte places her hand on my belly as I speak. She wears a short pink bohemian dress, with knee-high boots and gold jewelry. Her hands clasp and unclasp at intervals – she is nervous, and glances at my belly, then down at her own. She lets her skirt slide high up her thighs, relaxed in my presence, she enjoys the freedom. She still grieves the loss of her childhood sweetheart, Gabriel. I my secret lover, husband of my mind, of another woman.

We sit in the kitchen, the white and blue tiles make me dizzy today, and I'm still feeling nauseous. The afternoon light makes patterns on the wall, and I watch the stories unfold dreamily. A dust ball floats past us on the linoleum, and Charlotte laughs and picks up a brush, "No excuses yet, you can still bend down."

I had not even noticed. I watch her silently, too sullen for conversation, too worried for happy chatter.

Monica Toerien

"Do you know, why the men we love are gone? Why we are alone again?" I say, sadly.

"Just the two of us..." Charlotte starts to cry, then moves towards me and places her hand on my belly. "It's the dust," she says. She wipes her eyes on her sleeve. "To have a girl is a strange fortune. Are we to raise a wife, or poet, an artist or a rebel? A lover, a mistress, or a free spirit?" Charlotte purses her bright red lips, the lipstick freshly applied.

"A rebel," I reply, decidedly. "There is so much of the world to change." I brush the lint off my purple silk blouse. I am too rude, always have been. Too full of tantrums and tears, not able to smile enough, I am told. My sister always smiled, while I grimaced. So much prettier on a girl than a scream.

\*

I fetch a heap of clothes from the dryer, underwear sticking to my leg. Sita plays hopscotch on my tiles.

"Do you have any peanut butter?" Sita says. And hops and turns.

"Blackcat, in the cupboard."

"Can I eat it with a spoon?"

"Yes you may."

Sita's mouth is full. "Ish sticky..."

"Most people like it on bread, love."

Monica Toerien

Sita finds the honey, and pours a small loop of it onto her spoon. She puts it in her mouth, adding it to the peanut butter already there.

‘Gross, child! No man!’ I hear a bang. ‘Did you leave the door open, Sita?’

“Nope.”

I am grabbed from behind by rough arms. I can feel something cool against my side. Steel. Sita screams, and is thrown against the door. The thug lunges, stabbing at my belly. I duck, it cuts my shoulder. Again, the knife bears down on me. Again.

My hands over my belly.

I begin to throw things at him. I cannot see his face for adrenalin. There is only the knife, and it is aimed at me. Sita sets off the alarm. The attacker turns around and lunges at her neck. I can feel a part of her leave her body. She is no longer whole.

A scream.

"Run!" It is my command.

She does, but he is after her in a rage.

I throw the soup in his face, then strike at him with the grater, my other hand clutching the dishcloth, flapping it in the air wildly.

Sita is safe in the bathroom. The door locked. Startled by the noise of the siren, he retreats. I am howling. A primal scream for myself, my belly and the little girl.

I do not notice until the police arrive that I am bleeding. My shoulder is sliced, and blooded. Sita will not let anyone touch her. Or unlock the bathroom. Until we force the door open. I am bandaged, the wound superficial. So all right then. Just another burglary. But he didn't steal anything.

I'm hysterical.

Monica Toerien

The police write up a report. Then leave. Sita will not be calmed. Nor will I. And the house is too silent.

I am gone for a while. My baby the only thing keeping me going for the future. And Sita will have to tread a similar path - I understand how long it is going to take, for her to see through the eyes of innocence again, to recover what she has lost. This should not be happening.

Why?

University of Cape Town

## Sita

Why would someone want to kill me? I'm just a kid! Don't they know that? I'm a good girl. I tried to say, stop, don't do that you bad, bad man, but he did it anyway. What did I do in my past life – I must have been very bad. My back still hurts from where he threw me. No one's ever thrown me before. My friend Charlie in my class sometimes picks me up and stuff, and I can jump from Sophie's shoulders to Charlotte, but being thrown feels sort of weird. Like I'm flying through the air, then just, thud, I know I've hit something hard, because I can hear the crack. But I don't know it's my back until a few seconds later when it really hurts. What if I'd been paralyzed? Then what?

And he looked sort of evil, but how would I tell if I met him on the street? He'd be just another person, wandering along. I mean, maybe he goes shopping too, and there he'll be. Just buying milk. So I don't want to leave my house for a while. I think I'll stay inside. But he got inside. It was my fault, I left the door open. I shouldn't have done that, we might have died.

I keep telling the story over and over again, but people are getting tired now, and they say they've heard it already. I don't want to go to therapy, I just cry. And she wants me to talk too much, and I don't want to talk at all. Nobody understands. People just go on as if everything's the same, but it's not, and they won't listen. They say they know, but they don't, 'cause they weren't there, now were they? Why weren't they there? Why wasn't my Mum there? She says she's psychic sometimes, why didn't she know? She should have known? God should have protected me, or else why else is there a God, huh?

Monica Toerien

What's the whole jolly point of it all if God isn't there when you need him (or her like Mum says). I mean, the bloody cheek of Him, really.

And I don't know when it's going to happen again. Because if it happened once, it'll happen twice, maybe a third time even. Until my karma's wiped clean and I'm good again. I must have been Hitler himself in a past life to deserve this. I mean, how can you help it if you were evil in a past life? Who's to tell until something really bad happens, and you know you deserved it? Somebody should've warned me, and I'd have tried to work out my karma some other way. It's really very unfair. I always thought I was a nice girl, but apparently I'm not deep down. I don't know how to say I'm sorry enough for being Hitler. I have death on my hands and I'm just going to keep on being punished for infinity and beyond until I face up to what I've done.

And my mouth was still a little bit full of peanut butter at the time. So I couldn't yell out without choking. I didn't know it was so deadly. I am so sorry for the Holocaust. I've seen pictures, and it must've been awful. Really bad. I am so sorry, I didn't mean it!

I need to wash myself clean now. Be a born-again Hindu. I need to be cleansed in a pool for my sins. I'll ask my cousin to dunk me in. We have a porter pool in our back garden (it's not full at the moment because its too clogged with leaves and plastic bags from the game I was playing). So if I admit to all I've done, and say I am truly and deeply sorry for committing such heinous atrocities, then I'll be redeemed.

My cousin was out, and my friend Jake said he would absolutely not and that's final save me for my mortal sins that I've committed in his name. Even if I promised to give him a neck massage, not even then. So I've just got this guilt hanging about me, with no way to get rid of it until somebody dunks me. And Mum said I should be proud to be a

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Hindu, with its great and proud ancestry, and proud heritage and stuff. And I am proud, but something went awry, because then why wasn't I safe, huh? This wouldn't have happened with Jesus.

\*

My room is so cool. I have a Malibu Barbie Dream house in the corner (not that I play with Barbies anymore, mind you. But I used to, when I was little). It has pink curtains with small roses on it, and my bed has a Barbie bedspread. I have all sorts of books too, because I am an avid reader. My favourite book is *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Jake calls him *hairy potty* - har, har, funny man).

But by far my most favourite thing, is Lucinda, my puppet. Sometimes I get sad, and she says things I'm really feeling. She has a beautiful wooden face, and long red hair - I think she is lovely - not like me, I'm an ugly duckling. So when I'm feeling sad, she sits on my lap and cries with me a lot. And she can say things like, "Boy, I'm feeling scared today." And then I ask her why, and she replies, "because a big bad man tried to rob me." And I say, "Don't worry, Lucinda, you're safe now. Nobody is going to hurt you." But I don't know if I really mean it, you know? How can I be sure? But Lucinda is still scared, and she cries, and cries, and I comfort her, and kiss her hair, and say things my mother says to me sometimes, like, "Hush, little baby, don't cry." But she doesn't feel any better until I check the burglar alarm, and sometimes I press it by mistake, just to be sure it works, and then my mother comes running into my room, and I blame it all on Lucinda.

Monica Toerien

Lucinda is a scaredy cat. I am more brave though. I am like Harry Potter (or Hermione Granger, I think she is so cool). Imagine fighting a Dark Lord, that must be awful. And the thing is, you can't always tell bad people by the way they look. Sometimes they might look very nice, to cover up how bad they really are underneath. It's not like they're going to go around telling people how bad they are. They want people to like them. I think there are some people in my class who should belong in Slytherin. I am for sure, a Gryffindor. I know that's where the sorting hat would sort me. I would be devastated to be anywhere else.

I took the test on the Harry Potter website, and it turns out, I was right. It came down to two questions: *do you prefer frogs; or are you more of a cat person?* If I had answered that question wrong, I might have found out I was actually a very bad person. It would be terrible to read the books, knowing I sorted into Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, or God forbid, Slytherin. Phew, that was a close one. Now I think I'll read all the books again, starting at the beginning.

My Mum gives me lots of rescue remedy, and says I am safe now. But I don't believe her at all. It helps to try to distract myself, by pretending to be in a storybook, or a heroine from myth and legend. Then I would have powers far greater than anything I could ever imagine now. Then I would be immortal. Maybe if a tiger gave me special gifts, like in the story about Lalita, then I could fly into the air, and leap away from danger. I wish I had special powers.

Excuse me, but Lucinda my puppet wants to say something: "I feel sometimes that this world is a horrible place."

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I shush her, "What's that Lucinda? Don't be silly, this world is a beautiful place. Look around you at Table Mountain. The beauty of nature. How could you possibly say that, be quiet!"

"But I'm so scared," Lucinda cries.

"There, there, you're being a crybaby," I say. "Shush, now. Be quiet and stop moaning."

"But, hic, I can't help it..." Lucinda sobs.

"Ssh, now, you've got to be a big girl, Lucinda. You've got to be brave. I'll look after you, I promise. I'm a grown up too." (I am not, of course a grown up, but she is just a puppet and doesn't need to know that). "Eat something."

Lucinda shakes her wooden head, "I don't want too, I have an upset tummy."

"Eat your veggies, girl. Or no more television for you. Broccoli is good for you." I am stern, like Maya.

Then Lucinda gets sad, and starts to sob and sob, but I stay brave and comfort her until supper.

Nighttime is the scariest of all. Lucinda keeps watch by my bedside as I sleep, so I feel a bit better, but it's still not foolproof. I am still just a kid, there is only so much I can cope with. I sleep with my hand on the remote panic button, and every night I ask my Mum again and again if we have a fire extinguisher, in case the apartment sets on fire. She says I'm being irrational, and refuses to buy one. But I don't think fire safety is something to be taken lightly.

Monica Toerien

There are so many noises outside. Like bergies, and sirens, and funny sounds: I like to know where all the sounds come from. Like what if it's the Dark Lord? Sometimes I dream that the dinosaurs have come back to life, and I am being chased by a T-Rex. I wouldn't stand a chance! I would be the one to be extinct pretty soon. I really shouldn't have watched Jurassic Park with Jake and Tasneem, but I was trying to be cool. One of the problems with peer pressure. Even the velociraptor are pretty ferocious, and that dino that spouts poison in your eye. Man, I get the creeps just thinking about it. So every night I dream I am being chased around by these horrible prehistoric monsters. Then sometimes I lift off into the air and fly. But that is impossible.

Do you think one day man (or *woman*) will have developed the ability to fly? Evolutionary speaking? That is one evolutionary leap I am so for. Like some people don't believe that we come from baboons, but I do, because I am a forward thinking kind of person. There are certain teeth I could do without, and things I don't need, apparently, for survival in the urban jungle, so why don't we evolve the ability to fly? We could evolve little feathers, and then wings, and take off into the hemispheres above. We wouldn't need airplanes or flying cars (by then I'm sure we will be transported by flying cars).

Jake says that Freud writes that when you fly you really want to have sex. He also says that all women are envious of his penis. Well I'm not. But try telling him that. He is convinced otherwise, and is very rude about it. Sex is disgusting. I am never going to have it, that would be wrong, and immoral, and just plain gross. Grown ups are stupid.

South Africa is a strange place. Just think, if I had been born a couple of years earlier, I would not have been allowed on the "whites only" beaches. I would have to

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have gone to the "coloured" beaches. And I would have had to sit on the "coloured" benches. And I might not even have been born, because of the Immorality Act, where whites and blacks were not allowed to marry. It's weird going to Muizenberg, or Clifton, now, because they were "white only" beaches. I would have been treated worse than a dog.

Sometimes I think people don't like me because I am Indian. Or they think I'm adopted, and I'm not, my Mum is my Mum for real. It makes me paranoid of people, because if I get a funny look, it's not because my zipper is unzipped, or I'm wearing strange clothes, it's because I'm Indian. One woman came up to my Mum and said how good it was of her to be raising a black child. She got very upset and said I was her biological daughter. Then the woman gave her a funny look, like she stepped in something, and walked off.

I enjoy swimming a lot more now that I know I'm swimming where I was not allowed in Apartheid. Apartheid was very evil. I don't like looking around at people, and thinking that they did this years ago. How could they have let this happen, it is very wrong indeed? I look at all the photos of the ex-Apartheid leaders, and I get very angry. They all look so ugly, and so cruel. If I were God I would send them to hell, and make them burn for a long time. I'm sure some of them are. I hope South Africa never forgets how cruel Apartheid was to its own people. It makes me ashamed to be myself. And I am a good person. Thank goodness for Mandela, I'm not sure I would have been so forgiving. I might have wanted to get revenge. It makes me very angry to think about it, and I wasn't even born then.

Monica Toerien

I am a rainbow nation child. We are all equal. Or at least we pretend to be. That is something.

*Goodnight.*

\*

I just stepped in poo. I didn't mean to, but the neighbour's new kitten just came to my door, and I swear it is a reincarnation of my dead cat, Cassiopeia. Can't be sure, it's just a hunch. So anyway, I stepped in poo. And I think some of it is between my toes. You know you're having a bad day when you step in poo before breakfast. A bad omen. But as they say, shit happens – 'scuse me – har, har.

So I tried to wash it off with the hosepipe, but it wouldn't wash, so I scraped it with the nozzle. They say you can tell a lot about a person by the way they poo. Oprah says so. Sometimes it comes out like little pellets – that means something or other, not enough fibre, or too much. And then you can get a runny poo, which means you're sick and going to miss school. That can be quite embarrassing let me tell you. Especially if it hits you unawares. That happened to me once. My Mum promised not to tell anyone though. It's just one of those things about being human – poo.

So, anyway, the cat had the same sort of look as my dead cat. So I just knew it was her. My Mum says there's a whole planet full of cats as big as sphinxes, where we are the cat's pets. So you really don't want to piss them off, that's for sure. Because then they'll have to look after you. And they might not feed you. I wonder what kind of cat food I'd like on that planet. You have to think about that sort of thing, because you just

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know that's what they'll feed you there. It's only fair after all. I can just imagine being hugged by a giant cat, so big its paws could crush you with one mighty swipe.

So cats are like an investment. You take care of them and one day they'll take care of you too. You stroke my back I'll pat yours, that sort of thing.

In ancient Egypt, Cleopatra used to keep guard cats who used to hang about above you, and in case of intruders, kill them instantly with their claws. I think they were Siamese, a killer breed. Much better than dogs, swifter blows to the throat. They could slit you ear from ear. So you've got to respect cats. Always. For these very reasons. Which is why I just know my cat is watching over me, waiting to look after me. Putting her paws together like a sphinx would do, reminding me that one day she'll be in charge of me. I cried so much when Cassiopeia died. Man, that was tough. You know it's going to happen, then whammy. Out of the blue. Just dead. I think pets have such short lives to remind us we're going to die soon too.

The laws of cat karma.

So I'm having a lot of trouble getting to sleep at nighttime. I think it's because I was almost killed. And I don't know why, so I think he might try to do it again. And I don't know who he is, but he'd bloody better not, because I'm going to get a stun gun, and stun him to death if he even so much as tries, that's for golly well sure. I will too. Kill him dead. I will first elbow him in the ribs, where it hurts a lot, then in the groin. I'm supposed to grab his balls off, then step on his foot. Or scratch his eyes out. Make him suffer, you know.

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Once I've incapacitated him, I'll tie him up with the extra clothesline I keep especially for such purposes, then make him beg for mercy. Again and again. But I won't set him free, because he's a dangerous criminal, and he's had his chances already. And he's just blown it. Finished, kaput, end of story. No more mister nice guy to you, sonny boy. You think you can just go around flinging young girls against doors for no reason. Well, I've got news for you. That's illegal. I know it is, because we called the police on you, and they said so. So the next time you want to kill someone, think again, okay, because you might really hurt someone in the process.

And I know you don't mean to really, do you? Didn't your mother ever teach you any better? Bet you didn't even have a mother, bet you're an orphan, raised for a life of crime on the dirty streets of Cape Town. Bet you were a street child, and nobody would give you money at the robots, so you got mad. I always give money at the robots now. Just in case I anger somebody and they want to kill me years later because they didn't have enough money to buy food and bread. I make them sandwiches to eat, so I do my bit and feed the poor. So why'd you go and do that, that's not fair? Everyone looks very sinister and dubious now. And suspect. You never can tell with criminals. You never know exactly what'll make them snap and murder someone for no good reason at all.

I watch out my window for a while before I go to sleep, to make sure there's no suspicious movement outside. And I don't turn off my light, so I can see to find my pepper spray (I sprayed it once accidentally, and my Mum had an asthma attack). And we should really invest in a fire extinguisher. In case of emergencies. And I keep my finger on the panic button (I rest my arm on my big cushion), so I can set it off at once. That

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really saved the situation, you know. Sophs says that I'm her hero for setting off the alarm.

Matilda's neighbour has started a butterfly business. He grows them in his pantry – butterflies that is, hatches them right out of worms. He sends them to weddings, where they explode into the air like confetti. And he collects them too. The rare and precious. He kills them, then pins their wings, and frames them on his wall. And he injects them with chemicals, using a syringe. He's like a surgeon with insects. They are the prettiest colours, rare ones, from Brazil and the rain forest. He sells them at a profit, as he buys them off the black market. He could get in real trouble if anybody caught him. Matilda says not to tell. But I *must* tell people if somebody tries to sell me drugs, then I'll call an authority.

Charlotte heard about this, and sold him some of her Dad's old butterflies – she said she didn't want them anymore, they had gotten faded. Strange habit, butterfly collecting. The butterflies remind her of her dead friend, Gabriel. They tried to set her father's collection free when she was little. Got in a hell of a lot of trouble, that's for sure. Got a big hiding – she thinks her bum's still red.

I got quite upset about the dead butterflies, but Charlotte said, "Just think how happy the butterflies would have been, if they had only known how much joy and happiness they would bring to others by their death. And they only live three humble days in total. And that's not very long, when you think about it. Now they live forever in a glass case on my wall."

Monica Toerien

Sometimes I pray at night, that if I get fat, all of it goes to my backside instead of my tummy. I know it sounds strange, but I just don't want to have to look at it. And now I think my bum's getting fat, so I know my prayers been answered. And I think I should've asked to win the lottery. I don't want to be like Carol who has a *really* fat bum, people make fun of her terribly at school. But I don't know what to do if that should happen. I'd get liposuction rather than face the humiliation of being teased by Marcus (he's total pondscum). So I don't eat Twinkies like Carol does, and I try not to do anything like she does in case that's the reason she's being teased and I don't notice until it's too late.

Nasty Chelsea in my class tried to cut my hair because I like Jake and so does she and my hair is beautiful and he wouldn't like me without my long dark hair. I went to the bathroom and cried, but I didn't let it show when I came back at all. I enjoy class soooo much better when he's sitting in the back row with the other boys. He says boy bands are lame, which I completely agree on. We are like the same person in different bodies, its eerie. He sometimes throws spitbombs, and is going to grow his hair into dreadlocks the minute he's out of this bloody school. I'd do it with him, but I saw someone take their dreds out and they had so much dandruff from not washing, their scalp was covered in a layer of white powder – so totally gross, like you have no idea. I've warned him about this, but he says you've got to go with the fro – har, har!

And I've just started wearing deodorant, because I've finally got BO. Yardley *Ballet*, or *Fire and Ice* for women, irresistible they tell me. Soon I'll be getting pimples, can you believe that? I think I have one on my chin (not sure, could be an itchy bite). Matilda says its almost certainly a pimple, and we are most excited indeed.

Monica Toerien

I tried on some base that came in a sample packet in my Cosmo Girl – but it was for "peaches and cream," and Matilda simply gasped when she saw me. Said I'm brown, don't I know, I can't wear white base! But it was free, so you've got to use up free stuff. The teacher made me wash it off in the school bathrooms. I had a white mask on, it looked silly. I'm Indian. I shouldn't try to be white. Then we got a lecture about the "rainbow nation," and how we were all equal under our African sun, and we should all write to Nelson Mandela and say a big thank you, and wish him happy birthday before he dies, which will be very sad, because then we'll miss him and wish we had written to him properly when we were little. And tell him especially about our school, and how transformative it has always been.

I want to give Madiba a hug and thank him for going to jail and saving us from Apartheid. Because otherwise my parents couldn't have got together (when they were happy), and I would be *separated* out from the others. And black is beautiful, like they say. I almost wouldn't have been born at all! I still get muddled on the words to the National Anthem though, but I have to learn it otherwise I can't sing along with the rugby players (they still need to learn it better).

Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika

Maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo,

Yizwa imithandazo yethu,

Nkosi sikelela, thina lusapho lwayo.

Et cetera!

## Maya

Everyone has their own perfume, their own scent. Sweat and breadcrumbs, rose water on lavender towels, apple peels in the trash, old socks and too much whisky. My daughter smells of citrus lemon from the handwash on our basin. Bubblegum cherry, stuck in her hair. Dirty gym shoes, hockey practice grime on vests, and her soft forehead still sweet as breastmilk. Her sadness makes her smell older, she's gone, a little bit I think. I do not know how to get her back.

The place where her baby chair used to be, is not faded like the rest of the upholstery on my tired old Mazda. I can still see the shape of it. Long legs now swing down from the seat, grubby from sport and falling in the rain before Xhosa lesson. I bandage the wound with Elastoplast, two stickers for the length of the graze. Small dots of blood on her knee. It'll scar, a little, I think. She is unconcerned with this sort of pain. She has learnt to be afraid, and that hurts worse.

Children stream out of the school in a chatter. My child is too silent. Her friend cannot reach her, but she tries anyway. The car smells of old milk, she says as we drive away. It spilt in the back, there's nothing I can do.

Lift club is noisy, so she doesn't have to talk.

"Where to, girls?"

The mountain looks smoky grey today. I have learnt its moods, we all have, Capetonians, living here. Cloud threatens to cover it.

Matilda volunteers her wrists for the others to smell. "Chanel Number Five," she says.

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“So expensive,” I say.

“That’s the only thing Marilyn Monroe used to wear, apparently. In her birthday suit.”

The teacher had made them run laps that day. They were outraged. “I think I tore my aorta,” Matilda says, indignant. “I might never have walked again.”

“And biology?” I say, “How’s that coming along?”

“We learnt about the cells today. They reproduce. And hold memory, and stuff. They’re like elephants, they never forget.”

“And women.”

“Huh?”

“Never forget either.”

“Oh my golly!” Thandi exclaims. “He’s eating a slice of watermelon in his car.”

The girls peer to look. “The man grins, his face wet with juice.”

Matilda takes a bite of her leftover soya-sausage. “I once saw a man read a newspaper on the highway.”

I honk at a passing bicycle. “Now that’s arrogance for you.”

Rondebosch. Green, leafy, large SUVs revving, as the suburban mothers pick up their tots from all the best schools. I drop a child off. I cannot see the house for the walls. And wait as she is buzzed into her Cape Vernacular homestead.

Pinelands – out of the way, but just this once. Another drop-off. Streets wind round and round, and I am lost within five seconds until a dainty hand reaches over my seat and directs me. It all looks the same. Bloody learner driver!

Monica Toerien

Back to town on the freeway. On my right is the sea, the Waterfront, large steamers. A straight line of blue until Robben Island. “We still need to go, Sita, you must learn about our history...you hungry, hon? Why so quiet?”

University of Cape Town

## Sita

When I'm ready mind you. I think I'm going to try to immaculately conceive. If I pray really hard, shut my eyes and hope, it'll happen. I'll have a baby growing inside me. I think it'll be best that way. I'll be like a seahorse, with both male and female in me. And poof. Hallelujah. I'll be worshipped and adored. Bearing the Son of God – although, I think this time it should be a girl. I mean, what does God have against girls? Doesn't he want a daughter? Unless God is a woman, then things would get tricky with the conception. Which is why God had to be a man. So he could plant his holy seed in Mary, and she could give birth without ever being touched at all. And *voila*, there was Jesus. Just like that. Amen.

It's a bit scary to think.

I will be the *chosen one*. Not just chosen for the best hockey team, or winning the lottery ticket or something like that. Chosen to prove that miracles can really happen. And it would be a lot simpler than having sex, I don't want to do that.

Ever. Never, ever.

So that's what I'm going to do. Unless someone *makes* me have a baby. Like that awful robber who threw me against the wall. Tilly says he probably wanted to *make* me have a baby. And that would be awful. So I'm going to do it myself. With a little help from God...

It'd be awfully complicated to explain where your baby came from. I'll bet nobody would believe you anyway. Like my second cousin once removed Parvati, who would never say where her baby came from. Maybe she was actually pregnant

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immaculately, who knows. So everyone who said she was a dirty rotten little whore who got exactly what she deserved, is going to hell. Or somebody just dropped it off at her door, like she claimed.

I really want a baby. I know I'm only eleven, but I think it would be nice. Or at least Mum could give me a baby brother. That would be better maybe. But I can feel my childhood slipping from me, and I want it back. So then I can watch it grow up and maybe play with it a little bit, and then I wouldn't have to go to High school.

Mum says the room filled with angels the day I was born. So maybe I was actually immaculately conceived, but she can't say anything or people will think she's crazy. I like to think that God thinks I'm special, but then why didn't he take better care of me, huh? You reap what you sew, so I'm going to be so much gooder from now on. Especially if He wants me to be a surrogate mum to his kid one day. I've nicknamed it Bimf, my future child. In lieu of other names.

I got a fright the other day, 'cause I thought I saw an angel messenger, but it was just a reflection. He smiled at me, and then waved for me to join him. He had a head of golden curls. Maybe it was Archangel Gabriel. I got an eerie chill, I thought something bad was about to happen. Then I blinked, and everything was normal again. Silly what one imagines, sometimes.

I've got to be special you know, or chosen for something, otherwise why am I alive at all? Did I just get born to muck about for a bit then die of old age? It really puts thing in perspective being flung against a wall for no reason.

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I'm perfecting the trick where you catch a moving bullet between your teeth. It needs lots of work, and (obviously!) nobody wants to practise it with me. I don't know how Houdini did it! I want to be impervious to death. So if somebody tries to shoot me I'll just catch the bullet in my teeth of steel. I shall learn to cheat death, just you wait and see...

Did you know they're opening a "nail-biting" clinic, for chronic nail-biters? I think I should go. It's in Holland, also known as the Netherlands. I bite my nails all the time till they're just stumps. It's really gross, but also, really satisfying as well. That's why it continues. There is an emotional payoff.

And today in the news in the Cape Times, a Superman saved three children from burning to death by ripping open the metal bars in the house they were burning alive in, to save their lives. With superhuman strength. Cool. You never know when someone like that is going to come along. And then what if I'd needed him, why was he sent to them and not me? Does he have special missions, or something? It must be hard to be a superhero, because as many people as you save, you also leave behind the others you can't save at all. So it must be misery.

These questions are really weighing on my mind at the moment. I am really a troubled young lady about it all. It makes you think, doesn't it? One day I'm going to save somebody's life in turn. That'll help with my karma, that's for sure. Though Sophia said I saved her life, so maybe that'll do it for now.

I'm eating lots of jelly at the moment. It's good for invalids, Sophia says. She brought me some in a blue and green Tupperware box. It's good for the soul, but it has gelatin in it, which is actually pigs' feet. What if the pigs need their feet afterwards, how

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cruel can you be, people? Just think of all these pigs hobbling around without feet. Orange is my favourite flavour, then green, then red cherry. Yellow is not so nice at all. But as a colour it's one of my favourites.

I have to practise the piano now. Then I have to do my homework. Then I have to brush my teeth. There's so many things I have to do every day. It gets a bit much. And I feel like I can't breathe sometimes. And I start to breathe really fast and things get dizzy. And my Mum says to breathe into a paper bag, but it still doesn't help because I feel scared. And it doesn't help to breathe really slowly at all. And Mum starts playing Enya, and I have a panic attack all over again. I don't know why but Enya just makes me freak out a little. It's not as calming as you'd think when you first hear about her. I just feel overwhelmed with *have to*'s. Every day there's another one.

It's like a weird creepy feeling has come over me. I used to feel nice. Well not any more, that's for sure. Like my rose-tinted glasses are gone, my Mum says. I have to face the world and life's not fair. Things feel dark. Even outside looks darker now. Like I notice the creepy crawlies instead of the good things.

I know at any moment he's going to come back to get me. Boo. Because he has it in for me for some reason. My arch nemesis. You never know when somebody hates your guts enough to throw you against the wall like that. Sheeshkebab!

And there are people that love me out there. And a whole lot of people who will love me one day, like my future husband. He'll protect me. If he can handle raising an illegitimate kid – even if it is God's son.

## Maya

I want to make a perfume, that catches the smell of rain on hot earth. The centre of a rose, and a smile after tears. This is my magic. My magic potion that I'm brewing. Aromatherapy oils stretched out before me, damp cloth, hot water, herbs. I will capture it for my daughter, give her something of her essence, seen by her mother. Footsteps in frost, gumboots in leaves, and the five seconds before eating the ice-cream cone. Find happiness in a potion, bottle, scent, so that it can be applied in moments of darkness, just before giving up hope. Neroli, sandalwood, base tones, lighter notes. A hint of honey. Lavender and jasmine. It begins with wood, and musk, with earth and the scent of the grass, and it sinks into sweetness, flowers, soft oil on the skin. Applied on the nape of the neck, the arms, dabbed along, and on the belly button.

Inside the belly button.

Where small grey bits of umbilical cord still dandruff Sita's skin. She found some, grey charcoal, once. And brought it to me. We examined it under a microscope, a magnifying glass, in the light of the window, under the lamp. Strange. It fed her as she was being pieced together, slowly. I never clean there, she said. It's been there all the while. I put it in a small gold box, and put it with her baby teeth.

One day she'll pierce her belly button, like mine, I suppose. Cut the cord with a metal stud, and fake diamond ring. Precious relics of her birth. When the cord was inseparable, and no one could touch us. Her DNA. It should be housed in stained glass, a stone monument, a Cathedral chronicling her birth and life. My African Madonna.

## Charlotte

There has always been a question on the tip of my tongue. So big that I don't have the words. So big that I don't think I will ever find the answer. To find the question is enough. To start to shape the words, to make concrete the unknown. That will be enough for now.

I have a choice. It is mine, never to be spent, never to be tested, always before me. Without it, I am a prisoner, held captive within my own life. I roll it around my mind and twist it over my tongue until it sticks in my throat, red dust and clay. I have kept silent until the earth closed in around me, and my voice became hollow. *Charlotte* a voice screams in the distance, too far away to be heard. *Charlotte remember, remember please.* But it is too late for memory.

A pair of shoes, red shoes, is all it took for me to become a dancer. In the street of course, under cover of rainstorms, I would splash until a rhythm was formed. A pattering tap, or a prance. I would sway gently, then run until my feet were blistered with the shiny red leather. They were *my* shoes, my very own, almost hidden beneath a grey smocked dress. Hand-me-downs, but never worn.

On the way to church they gleam a delicious scarlet, their toes poking out in tentative darts, flip flapping my dress into the air. When my parents aren't looking I kick up the fabric to reveal my shins, a dangerous motion of rebellion.

With an almost heel, they clack, then click along the pavement. I skip over a rubbish bag, keeping the soles above the rotting melon, its seeds fan out across a

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Kentucky Fried Chicken nugget, half-eaten. A brief tapping of the sides signifies the Two Step I am unable to sway to. One day. Some day. I think to myself.

In my parents' slipstream, I hope for a bend in the road, a moment to make my escape. Timbuktu to the left, along that side-road and away. My mind traces the passage of the shoes from the Orient to the Americas, up dusty pathways and along the tarred streets of sweat-stained cities. My best friend Gabriel always at my side. The musician, explorer, hero of my fairytales. The world is ours, by train, rail or wooden raft, *here be dragons*.

\*

I am still a child now, a small girl with pigtails and a snotty hankie bulging from my skirt pocket. The day is hot and dry, the tips of the grass turning a burn yellow, the air so still it suffocates. My dress has polka dots. In blue and red. Mom made me wear a hat, but I tip my head so that it falls behind me. I pretend not to notice.

My best friend in the whole wide world, Gabriel Mackenzie, is digging a hole. He has golden curls - his mother is going to cut them off soon. He wants to get to the centre of the earth and bring back some molten lava. He's going to collect it in his bucket. I've made him promise to bring some back for me as well. I don't want the goblins to get him.

I'm bored, and I tell him this. Gabriel pauses, resting his plastic spade on his shoulder. His nose is brown from wiping it on the back of his hand. He's also not wearing his hat.

'But we're in the middle of the Gobi desert,' Gabriel says, simply.

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He's right, of course. Golden sand stretches out as far as I can see. I am an Arabian princess, like princess Jasmine in *Aladdin*. But I don't have a flying carpet, because then I might fall off it. Gabriel is a sheik. He tells me to go fetch him his horse, but I'm a princess, so I won't. I prefer to ride on a dragon. Unfortunately my dragon eats his horse. Now Gabriel is really mad. He goes back to digging.

I'm in a grump for a few minutes, then I pick up the trowel and help him dig. I'm a bit worried about the goblins though. Gabriel tells me that if we see one, he'll squash it with his spade. Now I feel sorry for the goblin, and make him promise not to hurt it.

The dirt gets under my fingernails, and smudges great brown streaks across the polka dots. Luckily, I know mom has the kind of washing powder that I've seen on TV. The kind that removes even the toughest stains.

I can feel my neck burning, but I won't put on my hat. Then she'll win. Gabriel says he wants to invent a time machine so that he can go back to the olden days and be a knight. I'm worried that the machine will break and he won't be able to get back. I'll have to read about him in my history book: *The Adventures of Gabriel the Brave*. I make him promise not to go. He must never leave me.

I bury the hat in the hole.

\*

We are six. It's a good age. Much older than five. Five was young. Gabriel's golden hair is as long as mine. He still looks like a boy though.

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“Shh,” Gabriel says, gesturing sternly. He peeks around the corner of my father’s study. No one is there.

“But we’ll get in trouble,” I protest.

“So what?” he says. The future does not exist. It does not matter what happens then.

Gabriel raises his hammer, “Come on,” he says, beckoning.

I follow, reluctantly. I am afraid. I am always afraid. Gabriel does not feel fear. He is brave. He is going to sail the Seven Seas. I am not allowed to go with him – just for boys, he says. The walls are ochre-tinted cement. Lined with frames, butterflies pinned down, needles through their thorax, colours firmly fixed.

“We have to set them free,” Gabriel whispers urgently. “Or they’ll die.”

I am worried now. They must not die. Gabriel takes down one of the frames hanging on the wall, and taps the glass with the hammer till it breaks.

“Lottie, open the window!” he says.

I obey.

Gabriel removes the pins in the butterfly’s wings. He moves quickly to the window, and throws the butterfly into the air, “Fly!” he cries. “Fly!” The butterfly does not fly. It falls into the gutter below, limp. We stare at it. It looks a sad, dead thing.

“Told you we’d get into trouble,” I say.

\*

The snail blows a bubble of slime onto the nasturtium leaf.

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“Ready?” Sophia says. She looks very grown up in her pink blouse and shoes.

“No!” I say, indignantly. My snail is having a bad day. It’s not behaving at all like a champion-racing snail.

“Come on guys,” Gabriel says. “Stop fighting, all right?”

I let Sophia play with us at last. She fetched our Frisbee from the top of the oak tree. She was the only one who could climb high enough. I was too afraid. She would only come down once we’d promised to let her join in.

We line up our snails. My snail has a chipped shell. It must’ve gotten into a fight with a centipede, or been attacked by a killer beetle. It’s much smaller than the others. I hope that will make it speedier. Her name is Scarlett. Like Scarlett O’Hara.

“Okay...go!” Sophia yells.

“Sophs I told you, Scarlett isn’t ready,” I say.

They ignore me. We shout at our snails to go faster. But they won’t move. We’re hoarse from shouting. I eat a nasturtium. It tastes hot and the petals are hard to chew.

“Gross!” Gabriel says. “I bet it has snail slime on it.”

“It does not,” I say, indignantly. I check the remaining petals just to be sure.

Gabriel’s snail is winning. Sophia accuses Gabriel of bribing the snail beforehand. I put my hands on my hips – Gabriel wouldn’t do that. Sophia must mind her own beeswax. I stamp my feet crossly. I squash Scarlett. Her shell is crushed and she’s oozing. We can see she’s not quite dead. Gabriel has to put her out of her misery. Sophia thinks it’s funny. I am a snail murderer. Gabriel helps me scrape Scarlett off the lawn. We bury her underneath the nasturtiums.

\*

“You know, you’re not at all like your sister,” Gabriel muses.

“Oh really?” I’m making a mud hut, in the dirt, on the lawn, the muddy grass staining my pantleg with a green smudge.

“You’re more interesting, and your eyes are prettier, and,” he hesitates.

“And?”

“Your boobs are bigger.”

I look at the small hillops of fat growing from my young chest. I’ll need a bra soon. I don’t want to mention that one tit is smaller than the other.

“I suppose they are...I hadn’t really noticed.” I put my hand up against my chest to flatten my breasts back into my ribs.

“And sometimes you’re prettier,” he adds.

“Which times?”

“Well I dunno which *exact* times, just sometimes, that’s all.” Gabriel grunts, then returns to work building a moat out of twigs and fig leaves.

“We were born two minutes apart,” I mutter. “Sophia’s older, but they say it makes no difference.”

“They?”

“Gamma says.”

“She’s too old to know anything, Charlotte. Pass the mortar and bricks.”

“My turret’s at an angle.”

“You need a leaning wall.”

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“But what about if the Vikings attack?”

“Boiling water and oil.”

“Did they really used to do that, Gabie?”

“Yes, and all sorts of torture. You don’t know any witches do you?”

“None that I can think of, no.”

“They’d be drowned, or burned alive at the stake.”

“How’d they know they were a witch?”

“If they drowned they weren’t.”

“But they’d be dead then, wouldn’t they?”

“Dead as doornails, Charlotte. Totally dead.” He hesitates. “Can I touch your titties?”

I shrug. “One’s smaller than the other.”

He puts his hand on my chest.

“Feels like my flabby thigh. What’s the big deal?”

“One day they’ll grow milk.”

“Gross.”

“Tell me about it.” I roll my prettier eyes and return to my building. “Yes, one day I’m going to be milked.”

“Like a cow.”

“Or a goat.”

“Hmmm,” Gabriel thinks. “Can you make it grow milk now?”

“I think it just starts to leak one day, when people are really thirsty. Maybe when there’s a drought, and nobody can afford to get milk from the Spa.”

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“I don’t think I’d want to drink it still though. Even if I was dying and parched and stuff.”

“Babies like it the most.”

“They don’t know any better now do they. When I was a baby I didn’t know anything at all. I remember I used to think I could fly, and I tried, but almost died, so I know better know. It’s the kind of thing you can only learn through experience.”

“Sheesh, I miss those good old days.” I put my head on my knee.

Gabriel takes my hand and puts it down his pants.

“My body is my own,” I declare, and pinch him playfully.

His mother sees this from her kitchen window, where she’s pretending to cook but really spying on us. She runs outside and slaps me across the cheek. “Little slut!” she cries.

“Little what?”

“Get out of my house now!” She pushes me roughly towards the gate.

“But I haven’t finished my moat yet, and what about my jersey.” I yell. But she won’t listen. I return home, around the corner and a bit, by bicycle. His mother is on the phone to my mother. She gives me a horrible look, like she hates me, and turns away from me suddenly. I go to my room and take out my Barbies. They beat each other to death, then I brush my teeth and go to the loo, and get into my jammies, and go to sleep.

Sophia is the favourite now. She’s still pure, my mother says. She still has her virtue. I’m forbidden to play with Gabriel. On pain of death and torture and all things horrid and bad in this world. Sophia is so smug. She’s a smug little bug. She doesn’t understand, but

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she's nicer, and better, and more loveable than me, so she lords it over me like the Queen of Sheba. Doesn't she just. But Gabriel thinks I'm prettier – somewhere down the block, building his Lego soldiers in rows and rows.

My mother won't touch me, she thinks I'm dirty. She calls me a dirty pretty little thing, or Lady Muck, then she says she loves me really, despite everything I've done. But it's not true, because she gives Sophia the bigger portions of dessert, and she thinks I don't notice, but I do, and I tell her, and she says stop being nasty to my sister. End of discussion.

I think my parents just wanted one child, why'd they have to be two of us exactly the same? Sophia is so perfect all the time. I'm not as good, like a doll half price at the warehouse, because it has a flaw on its cheek.

\*

He drowns in a teacup, in a puddle, somewhere in the ocean. He has touched me more, deeper, harder, by now, and it is too late for me to be clean of him. His face is plaster white and ash, cold, deathly cold, of course. His lips are painted colour by a mortician used to thick mascara on her own cruel lids, and he has no blood there. I cannot cry, or move, or howl, or tear out my breath, so I live. And touch myself where he once did. In public, in my mind at least, and I am pure again. With him.

\*

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Gabriel is a musician. He says he has a symphony in his head, he just has to find a way to write it down. The notes, where the cello comes in, the cacophony of brass, even the tink of the triangle. He says he can hear music playing in his dreams.

At twelve years of age, I know this man is headed for great things. He shows me the scribbles, the notes on a page, music bars drawn with a blunt A4 pencil, the edge of his book used as an uneasy line. *Piano*, softly, a tumultuous crescendo, cadence, words he mutters as he scribbles quavers, frantically, in his workbook. A great concerto is being written, while the rest of us chew gum, and wonder about the latest fashion, or if we look cool.

His wild blonde hair is tousled, messy, over his eyes like a puppy, I think, as I brush it aside. Words to a great opera are written in large loopy handwriting across his exercise book: *In death I fly this cold flesh, of dark thoughts and deeds, for I fear not here, and I am free. I feel only love, for love is all.*

"Deep, man," I say. I am his muse - or at least, I try to be. But I am tone deaf and unable to sing. Useless to a man of such genius.

"Can't you hear it, Lottie? The music...it is playing now for you. Listen."

I pause. Only the sounds of the everyday. "Nothing, Gabriel." I shake my head, ashamed.

"It's all around us!" He is frustrated now. "They are singing for you."

"Who is *they*? What do you mean?" I stamp my foot like a child, but then remember I am a teen, and slouch back into my chair again.

"Never mind, then." He returns to his semi-quavers. A Mozart in training, he is young and full of ideas. But he is frustrated with his hand, his inability to capture what he

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hears. It is fast now, then slow, the notes, they do not record....but what is that instrument, there, playing? He erases his work with the back of his pencil. A thin veil separates him from this world and the next. I am afraid he will step through it, and be gone.

"There are instruments I have never heard of," he says, his face red with frustration. "Is it a zither...? I don't know." Almost in tears, he bangs his fist against the wooden table. "Maybe a sitar? I can hear a chorus, but, no human ever made that sound..."

"Gabriel," I say, soothingly. "Try to calm down, you still have so much to learn. One day you can write it all down."

There are notes behind his blue, blue eyes.

"Percussion!" he exclaims, and he is off writing again.

"What?" I say.

"Shh! You are interrupting...I can't hear if you talk." There are coffee stains down his Hawaiian tee shirt, bought on a family holiday. He told me there were Hula girls in large palm skirts dancing at the hotel. He promised me he only watched from a distance, but any reminder of his holiday makes me cringe.

I try to belly dance in front of him, to draw his attention back to me.

"Stop it," he pushes me aside. "I'm working."

"But look at this new move.... Check it out! I can make my stomach ripple in waves...and..."

He frowns, deadly serious, "Lottie, how many times do I have to tell you. If I miss the notes, I can't find them again. I have to write them down as they are playing for me."

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"Fine," I huff. "But you'll be sorry." I march out of his room, and down the green carpeted stairs of number seventeen Lintern Avenue. His mother is baking in the kitchen, and I sneak out without even saying goodbye.

I am so angry, I do not phone him that night, and the next day, I give him the cold shoulder with my friends. *He should get his priorities straight*, I write in a note to my friend in class. She writes on the back, *he doesn't know what he's missing*. We are indignant for the rest of the week - in groups, we scowl at him as he walks by. It is almost a blood feud by the time he apologizes. I accept, magnanimously, and we are back to kissing behind the old oak, after school.

\*

So I've bought a house. Or a home. A better word. It's an old stone church, that used to be a temple for a time, then held seminars for the healing power of water crystals, then back to a church again, then to me, or demolished. A strange place for an atheist – I think. But I love the windows. The stories in stained glass panes, with blue glass, then the sacred red of the heart.

Sophia's child can visit; I've prepared a room already. Then perhaps my own. But I'm barren, that's what I tell myself. Nothing will grow inside me. My better mirror, Sophia, can produce my likeness. I'll see my flesh and blood in her child too. Genetically my own daughter, within me as she grows in my sister. She'll have my eyes, I'm sure of it, but not my ears – too cruel for a little one. Never to be repeated by nature.

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I paint the walls a light mustard. Like sunshine on plaster. Cheerful. My studio, for clay, and wood, and twisted tin, is where the vestry would be. Stone walls silently watching me work. I am a sculptor. On the weekends. It does not pay, but I can twist your features into clay, and mould the wood like soft wet mud. The clay is thick and grainy under my hands, soft, despite hard work. I am not lazy.

The clay is pushed through my fingers and I dab my fingertips on the edges of the half moon I am shaping. A girl's face, a young girl, with a woman's body. Entwined in a man's torso. Inseparable, one mud. Like the ancients I am shaping man anew. Not from my womb but from the earth and water, mud and mortar, dust and clay and sand and stars. Formed by gods' warring, torn apart limb from limb, or scattered Osiris fragments for Isis to collect again.

She will put him back together once more, piece by piece, across the earth that is lost without her lover. Isis will start with his eyes, so that he may see her love, then his ears, to hear it too. Then hands to feel her, feet to find her, breath to keep him with her. Heart has not left her.

\*

Gabriel likes to watch me dance. First the pirouette, pilate, leap, spin, sway, and I've come undone. And my feet are moving outside my ballet shoes. Jazz, and African rhythms, drumbeat and gumboot dancing. To the nutcracker, sugarplum fairies, out of step, out of time, in my own time. He claps his hands, in applause, to keep rhythm, to remind me he's watching. So I impress, and I leap higher, spin faster.

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I like the feeling of my hands on my hips, the pubic bone sharp, each hand meeting at the fingertips. I am smaller than Sophia now, dainty and light, so he, my partner, can carry me about on his shoulders. Protect me.

I can be thrown in the air, light as a feather duster. Graceful as the swan that is dying as I fall to the stage. My sister is larger, no longer my mirror, she is fat, I think. The boys do not like her at all. She has no Gabriel beside her, always. So she is fierce, and brave, and always alone.

I shall teach dance. I do teach dance. First the steps, then how to lose them. Learn the rules, then how to break them. My students are wise beyond their years. Already they are cynics. Cigarettes puffed desperately to hide their mothers' milk. I watch out for the little ones. The girls without their Gabriel beside them. What are they to do alone? So we dance, till our feet bleed, but aren't we so beautiful?

And to see him for the first time. Golden curls, a broad smiling face. Too young to know he is about to die.

He takes my hand. He likes the feel of it clasped in his fingers. At three, I already know we are destined for each other. How could it be any other way?

We are neighbours – we live nearby.

He puts me on his back, and we gallop to the prairie lands of America, then Alaska, where the Yeti eats me whole. Where do I go then? Where will you go, golden boy, where are you taking me?

Monica Toerien

Don't go down to the edge of the town without consulting me. Don't go anywhere without me.

Don't let go my hand.

Your skin is sweaty, you are slipping from me.

Don't drown in your tears when you see the world. It will improve with time. I will catch each drop in the palm of my hand. So it never need stain the ground. And you will never feel sorrow again.

But my hands are full, and I will carry it. Cupped, precious liquid of life. I can still feel the tears. I am alive for you.

Don't worry, Gabriel says again. It's not as long a wait as it seems. What's a lifetime, really. I'll see you in the blink of an eye. To catch a star, then why waste the day? So much to dance and shape. Your sleep will wait, with me, always. You sleep with me always.

I'll be seeing you, baby. There's no going back then. Enjoy the day while the light is dancing. In the night, you are mine, and I won't let you go.

\*

She is fat. I am not.

She is taller. By one inch.

She is older. So I'm younger.

Different freckles.

Bites her nails.

Monica Toerien

She hates dairy. Is allergic. My bones are stronger than. So she'll bend.

When Sophia frowns, do I look like that? When she laughs, do I spit? Is my left incisor also crooked? Do people laugh at my large bum? Or call me names behind my back. I've heard them call her duckling. Do they say the same about me? If I smile more, maybe they'll be nice. Her shoelaces are undone. I'll remember to tie mine. Is my skin really so pale? I thought my hair was glossy, hers is dull. I do not like her. I do not like me.

She is bleeding, my sister, Sophia. Small droplets on her white skirt. Is her child alive? I rush her to the emergency room. Still a heartbeat. Still breathing, our little Ruby. Sophia is weeping now. She wants her. She is beautiful with her belly. I am giving birth to a niece and a daughter and myself. I am tired. It is enough for one day. I bring her Jelly – red berry. Sophia laughs as she slurps it up in wobbly spoonfuls. She is drained, but happy she still has her child with her. The dessert spills onto her skirt, and she tries to wipe the stain away hurriedly. Red on white cotton. She hands me the stethoscope to try to locate the little one. Steel on her belly.

Cold is my first memory. Being cold.

The womb was so warm. My sister was there.

Sophia puts her hands around my waist. "So I remember what it feels like to wear jeans," she says. "My pre-baby body."

I remove her hands. I feel bloated with nothing inside me. Gabriel would have made a good father.

Monica Toerien

Sophia is pale with betrayal. She needs my help with this child. She does not believe in goodness anymore.

“Well aren’t we a miserable pair of old socks,” I say, as I always do.

Sophia laughs, “I feel as worn out.”

“Snap dragon, twin peas in a pod.” Our secret handshake still remains under our skin.

“Ah, but baby makes three...”

“Bit confusing who’s who for a while.”

Sophia grimaces, and puts a protective hand over her belly. “Hope not.”

“She’s a spoilt brat already,” I say. “There’s enough room for two in there, she’s all spread out.”

“Got a double bed deluxe, food on tap. Bit of a shock to the system to face the world after that.”

I prop up her pillow. “Sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Bed bugs and all that...”

“Likewise.”

I give her a kiss on the forehead, and switch off the light. Remembering to empty the jelly carton in the rubbish bin on the way. I hear a woman scream down the hall. The curse of Eve. Better her than me.

\*

Monica Toerien

I can breathe underwater. I can breathe underwater. I can cheat death, and drowning. I can breathe underwater. It is my first dive. In Simonstown, among the rocks. I freeze over, with cold and shock. False Bay. He was too young for this, Gabriel. Tried to dive on his own, told no one - against the rules.

When was the moment something went wrong? Was it too late already? Did his foot get caught in kelp, his oxygen running out before he could free himself? His body drifted, was bloated, by the time I saw his face. I was waiting on the beach. For a day, each hour, an hour away from his life. A puffed blowfish. His left arm nibbled at, as though he were food. No longer a young man's face at all.

So I shall conquer this. I shall breathe under the waves, the dark storm of the waves above. The weight of water presses down on me, or seems to, so that I am sliding across the rocky floor of the ocean. The group is not far behind. I am counted, a number in the crowd if something goes wrong.

It is a cloudy day. So the light is poor, and dark beneath. Silver fish swim into my goggles. Inquire, and then depart, satisfied I am nothing at all to them. Would they have nibbled on his shoulder, his arm? I lunge at them. I would hack one to death on a rock if I could catch it. A squid spurts black ink from beneath his lair, darts a tentacle out, then retreats, unseen, or so it thinks. My grandfather used to tell me stories of giant squid, and the ghost ships that prowled the oceans. Where's Davy Jones's Locker? Nearby? Shall I stumble upon it as I dive?

I inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Pause. Continue.

I scream. Gurgle. Into the water. Am unheard.

Monica Toerien

His face! His face. Stares back at me through his goggles. His eyes just as frightened as my own. Gabriel?

I begin to thrash about wildly. Someone raises the alarm, and flippers pad towards me. But I am blacking out. I'm seeing stars. Is this how it felt? In an instant, I would be gone, if the others weren't here. Would that be so bad? To let go? Was he calm, in his last moments?

I can't breathe. I won't breathe. I was not imagining things. That was his face. I know it. I saw him again.

I am pulled by strong hands onto the rubber dingy. My mask is ripped off, and I gulp the clean new air of a stormy Cape day. I watch the clouds above. Just as heavy as the water had been. Those were his eyes. His face. I had a vision. I saw him again. Or is he alive, somehow, somewhere? Maybe in hiding? Was he wanted by the police?

Dammit.

I pull off the top of my wetsuit. Sticky and tight against my skin. I close my eyes.

"Charlotte Arden?"

I keep my eyes closed as the truth sinks in. I ignore the voice. My face grows redder. "Who wants to know?" My stomach feels flabby. I wish I hadn't pulled my wetsuit down.

"Nice boobies."

"Noah."

"Yes, Charlie."

"Go to hell."

"You can open your eyes now."

Monica Toerien

“I’m okay as I am, thank you.”

“Didn’t mean to startle you, Charlotte. It’s been a while.” I can feel the boat sway as he sits down next to me. His diving gear sloshing in a puddle at his feet.

“I had hoped never to see you again,” I say.

“Is that why you won’t open your eyes?”

“The sun’s in them. They’re very delicate – hypoallergenic to all sorts of light. It’s best I keep them closed for a while.”

“Did I, by any chance, give you a fright down there?”

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Thought I saw a shark.”

He grins. I know he’s grinning. I can feel it.

“Charlotte, if you don’t open your eyes I’m going to throw you overboard again.”

I could not think of a witty response. I made a sound, to cover all witty remarks.

There, I had replied.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. *Tish*”

I can hear his wetsuit slurp. “Don’t you want to see my muscles? Feel here.” He puts my hand on his arm.

“Is this supposed to turn me on?”

“Do I make you horny, baby?”

“I want to throw up and die, if that’s what you mean.”

“Open your eyes.”

Monica Toerien

I cross my arms over my chest. "Not until you've gone away."

"Bet you're picturing me naked, aren't you." Noah is smirking.

"I'm picturing you very dead," I bite back.

"Sorry I'm still alive."

I open my eyes. Yup, he's grinning. Got a six-pack. A bit taller than I remember.

Still want to throttle him alive.

"So Charlie, how've you been?"

He's shaved his head. A number two cut. Looks like a pig, if you ask me.

"Good," I say with a shrug of my shoulders.

"You've been a very bad girl, I'm sure."

I get up and try to wrestle him overboard.

"Wow, the sexual tension is killing." He lets me push him into the water.

"I would storm off," I scream, "but I'm on a boat. There's nowhere to go!"

"I'll take your dramatic exit as given." He doggy paddles in circles. "Smile, Charlie. It's only me, I won't bite. So let's start again..." He extends his hand, while still paddling with the other arm. "Noah Jackson, pleased to meet ya!"

"Charlotte Arden. Glad to remake your acquaintance. You don't mind if I ignore you the rest of the way home?"

"By all means."

We sat side by side. Every five minutes I had to slap him as he grabbed my thigh.

"You know you want me," He whispers.

"Like root canal."

Monica Toerien

The motor started up, and his grating voice was drowned away. I got out of the boat at the beach, and ran to the colourful changing stalls. By the time I was dressed, he was gone.

\*

We are fifteen, and Gabriel's cherubic curls have been replaced with dreadlocks. Instead of classical music, he pretends to listen to gangster rap. We are very cool - or at least we think we are, but really we must look very silly.

Gabriel is on top of me. My skirt is around my ankles, and my top has been thrown across the room. His hands are groping, and ripping at my nipples. He bites, and I kick him in the shins. The music is blaring loudly. Alanis Morisset, Jagged Little Pill.

*You ought to know.*

“Stop biting, Gabe.”

“Don't like it when you call me that. It sounds *gay*.” Gabriel opens his dresser drawer in a hurry, and takes out condoms.

“Not now...ouch, stop that.”

He starts licking my neck. I joke with my girl friends he kisses like a dog. All slobber and tongue. I push his face away from mine. “Exams, Gabriel. We won't have time to study.” I get up and pull my skirt back to my waist. I fasten the belt, and take two steps to retrieve my blouse, when the door swings open suddenly. Noah, Gabriel's friend, bursts in, holding a pile of dirty magazines. “Check this out, man...”

Monica Toerien

“Dude, call first,” Gabriel says. I can see he is pleased. I know he’s been trying to describe my tits, but he has no imagination.

“Nice boobs, slutbag,” Noah says. “Did I come at a bad time? No pun intended...” A snigger.

I put my hands on my hips. “See something you like? Yo Noah, where’s your ark?”

He examines my chest. “I thought you said her boobs were a double D?”

“They are, feel for yourself,” I say, grabbing them.

“I’d rather vomit and die.”

“Dude, that’s my girl you’re talking about...babe, put some clothes on will you,” Gabriel throws me the blanket, with his best impression of a pimp daddy. “Woman, you’ve got to protect your modesty.”

“Alanis Morrisset? Seriously dude, have you no shame.” Noah grimaces.

Gabriel replies underbreath, “It worked man, shut up.”

“I heard that,” I say. And put on my blouse very slowly, doing my best impression of Pamela Anderson from Baywatch.

\*

We’re waiting. We have been trapped on that Simonstown beach waiting ever since. Gabriel’s family is there. So is Noah. For news. For a body. For something to happen. I am so dizzy, I am barely conscious.

Monica Toerien

Gabriel is still my fiancé, isn't he? Surely we hadn't broken up a week before? That was a mistake. I want to tell him so. I can still feel the line of Noah's tongue, traced from knee to navel. We aren't speaking anymore. I pray, again and again, Gabriel doesn't know.

Noah is rocking. Back and forth. He is muttering to himself. Saying the Lord's Prayer over and over again. *Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come...*

Six seagulls fly overhead. I count them. My toe is bleeding. I don't know why. Nobody dares move. What will we find in the next moment? But we can't escape this hell until we know. I am counting the seconds away from him...too long to be lost at sea. I bite my lip, then my tongue, then feel my breasts. Nobody cares. I can't move. I can't make my limbs move. The air is so crushing. I feel my pulse. I hold my breath for a minute.

One minute. I'm still alive.

Then two minutes.

Then four. I am dizzy. It's been hours.

I put my watch to my ear. Small ticks. Tock, tick, tock.... Later, I smash it against a brick, but right now, my arm falls back limp.

And so we wait. And time moves on.

He is only eighteen. Too young to die. He is about to go to The College of Music at UCT, to study saxophone and piano. He wants to be a conductor one day, hear his compositions come to life.

Monica Toerien

I am strangely calm. Too calm for the truth. I try to make myself weep. But I am still. All is still. We are all quiet. Watching the ocean. I take a deep breath, for him. I try to feel his body, to breathe for him, to push out his chest underwater, to exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, keep breathing, keep breathing... I try to possess him, to possess his body, to move into him, and breathe for him, but my own lungs fill with fluid, and I cough, and choke, and I know he is dying, or dead...

What happens next? Will we collapse into grief, into agony, suffering, despair? I have never felt those things before. I do not know what to expect. Does it hurt, I reflect coldly? I do not want to feel pain.

But there's still hope now, so we are calm. Waiting to fall into the abyss, the death of us all. What's it like on the other side? When we know? Are we the same?

Will we want to live if he dies?

Should we stay alive?

I smile at a memory. Some expression on Gabriel's face when he was a boy. I can hear his music playing, playing...

Then, just as suddenly, it cuts like a knife. And I know he is lost.

My heart skips a beat, so does the clock. So do we all.

Some people go home.

Time's up.

We know.

\*

Monica Toerien

We're very civilised now. Coffee, that's all, he promises. It's been five years since I saw him last. Noah stares me down, until I inch back in my seat. I remember his sweat on my chest. On my neck. His hands through my hair. Still the same. Fingers gripping the small of my back. I bit his tongue. Made him bleed. It never happened, we both agreed. Then we forgot, in the misery.

Nothing to say, really, either of us.

"Your boobs are still perky," he mutters.

"Is that supposed to be funny?" I snap.

Pause.

"So what're you doing with yourself these days?" I stare at my baked cheesecake, too dry.

"I'm a paramedic. You?"

"Teach dance."

"You always loved that."

"Yeah."

Pause. I glance out the window.

Coffee over.

Some vague promise about a next time. We pay. Politely. I buy a toffee. He drops his change. Peck on the cheek.

The cold goodbye.

## Sita

Lalita the Tiger Goddess leaps through the forest. Given special powers by her magical beast. She can fly through the air, swing through the treetops, and pad without a sound through the thicket. She has supersonic hearing, and can hear even the smallest of mice, or the loudest of footsteps coming at her.

I am dressed in my mother's leopard skin negligée. It is too big for me, so it reaches for my calves, and luckily it's not too see-through. I pad, I pounce, I run through the overgrowth and tangle of leaves up ahead (but it's actually just the furniture and my messy lounge). I am a tiger, I gnash my teeth and gnarl, like so, growl, snarl, grrrr. I am a superwoman. A goddess of India, and I've lost my way. I take out my begging bowl, and beg a wandering monk for some food and shelter for the night. But he is not as holy as he looks, and would rather let me starve.

My foot catches on the hem of my dress, and it rips, just a little. I hope Mum won't notice. I hope Mum won't start screaming, like the time I *accidentally* set fire to the whole kitchen when making toffee tartlets. Or wore her pearls out for my friend's ninth birthday and then went for a swim. And lost them in the pool creepy crawly.

I meet a robber in the forest, Ali Barber and his Forty Thieves. They try to kidnap me, as I am a very beautiful princess after all. But my nails turn into claws, and I scratch their eyes out. Then leap over their heads in a move I've seen Princess Fiona do in the Movie Shrek, and in the Matrix. A sort of, Kung Fu kick, where you hang suspended in mid-air for a while, and they all freeze. Then you kick them in the face. And then my tiger comes along, and roars for me. And they all melt. And she opens her mouth, and I

Monica Toerien

climb into her belly where it's safe, and I stay there till they've gone away. And climb out, covered in slime from her stomach, and just walk away. So now I'm part tiger as well.

And I find my Mum's make-up, and paint my face into stripes. And paint my nails gold, and crawl around and around the room. After my game, I decide to write a play for my puppets. And I make Lucinda play Raj, Lalita's lost love (she doesn't like that, because she's actually very girly, but one has to make sacrifices for one's craft).

Lalita's birth was foretold in the stars. My Mum says mine was as well, so maybe I have goddess blood in me.

My Mum finds me stuck on top of the hall cupboard (I forgot how to get down again). And she yells, a bit, about her negligée, but in the end she forgives me because she loves me so much, but don't do it again.

## Maya

She's in bed now. It feels too dark tonight, but it's barely sundown. The curtains are creased, and are coming undone, as though a little kid had tried to climb up them. I finally relented yesterday, and bought Sita some *fancy* perfume. With pomegranate, pink grapefruit and blackcurrant, it sits well on her skin. One for her, and one for me – something to share, and compare how the fragrance mixed with our natural scent, the smell of our beings. A mother animal knows her young by their smell. She can find them again, even if they get lost in the dark.

I am going to help Sita cheat death, as that seems to be the theme of the moment. She is going to be my magician's assistant for a children's party on Saturday. The box trick, she'll be sewn in half, and live, a whole child, at the end of it.

I arrange the cups into neat rows, remove the clothes from the dryer, and walk the ten paces to my room. My eyes have dark shadows from my mascara. Sita calls out in her sleep, cat meows, then a snarl. Don't worry, no one can touch us.

## Sita

So I got sawed in half. For real, people! See it with your own eyes if you don't believe me. You can see my feet wriggle, and my face smiling, in two different boxes. And then my mother puts me back together again. She's a magician. She can do magic. She can fix anything, even the leaking faucet that won't stop dripping and has been driving me crazy for ages. The other kids at the party loved it, and wanted to know how we did it. I was limping a bit, so maybe they could guess, but a magician's assistant is sworn to secrecy. That would be going against the rules.

I am mended, healed, as you can see, not a scratch from the saw on my body. It's sharp, feel its edge. It ripped through my flesh, and tore through my bones, but now I'm healed. One Sita again. Thank goodness, or else, my feet will be walking in one direction, while I'm up with my head waving away. It would be a very difficult life, with a severed torso.

\*

The girl in the hospital, on level Three, sits up in bed.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," I reply. She looks at me, in the eye. I try to break the silence: "My Mum is doing a puppet show for the younger kids, do you want to watch?"

"No, thank you," the girl says, shyly.

Monica Toerien

I walk up to her bedside. "How are you feeling? I came to visit you while you were in a coma - the doctors thought you might not wake up. I brought Mint Imperials."

"I'm feeling a bit sore," she says, adjusting herself on the bed.

"My name is Sita Patel," I say. "Like the Indian goddess. If you'd like I'll tell you the story of the Ramayana..."

The girl nods her head, and I begin to speak. "Well, the goddess Sita is in love with Rama, but she is kidnapped by the evil Ravana...It all begins a long, long time ago..."

The girl listens intently. I hope I am cheering her up. Her body still looks broken. She should be in school - she's missing out on long division...If you skip a step, it's very hard to understand what the teacher is saying to you. She has a deep scar down the side of her cheek.

I pause in the middle of my story, "Do you want to be my friend?" I say.

The girl shrugs.

Then it is settled.

I continue with my tale.

## Charlotte

I loathe shopping with the passion of a thousand suns. In order to save money, I try to shop once every fortnight. Right now, there's no bread, a few drops of milk, and not much else, except tins of baked beans and cereal in the cupboard. And as much as I like spaghetti, I cannot have it four nights in a row. So I've given in. And am standing in the middle of the Spa on Rosmead Avenue, trying to choose between English Breakfast and Earl Grey tea.

Earl Grey. And Chai.

Next on the list, yoghurt – with choc chip. chicken breasts, guilty, as it's not free range, and soya mince. Pita bread, tomatoes, and a salad pack. Pasta sauce – chili and herb. And the Cape Times – Fisherman Drowns in Hout Bay, Community Grieves. I double back for apple juice, then Zoo Biscuits.

And in one smooth movement, duck behind a large pile of toilet paper.

“Charlotte, we have to stop meeting like this.”

“Fuck you, Noah.”

“Single, or two ply?”

“My shoelaces are undone – none of your business.”

“You're wearing slip slops – in the rain, I might add...One day you're going to have to meet my eye.”

“I straighten up – two ply. I have a delicate tushie.”

“Princess.”

Monica Toerien

He raised his eyes, charcoal green, and I counted four deep lines on his tanned forehead. He wore a scarf, and blood red jacket, baggy pants and sandals. Shopping centre chic. Or just plain sloppy. A Billabong beanie covered his shorn head. He wore glasses now, black rims. An intellectual slob. “Don’t pout, honeybunch, gives you frown lines.”

I flipped my poncho over my shoulders in irritation.

“Time for your dramatic exit?” he says.

“Think so...nice knowing you.” Attempting to be nonchalant, I browse through the canned soups. Creamed Mushroom, Chicken Noodle, Mixed Veggies. I choose two Minestrone tins. And throw in a Pea and Bacon. The fluorescent lights make me dizzy, and I put my hand to my forehead for a moment. Find Handy Andy, add a Sunlight dishwashing liquid, then make a dash for the check-out counter. Three Tictacs, and some biltong, just because. Noah slides up next to me, teller Three. He unpacks his shopping basket. I glance over. The tension between us is palpable.

The shop assistant digging for dirt, “You two know each other...?”

Feeling a bit childish, I mutter, “Truce?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Noah replies. “I enjoy making you squirm, baby.”

All eyes are on us, too curious. We ignore each other. The shop assistant whispers something to the woman next to her, and they glance back at us. Noah’s eyes are to the ceiling. I shift from one foot to the other, and pay extra just to hurry the damn thing along.

My slippers fill with fresh rain. I run in front of a car, carrying my plastic packets around my wrists and my fingers. I slide into a puddle, and slosh to my car, an old yellow

Monica Toerien

Volkswagen Beetle from the late seventies. Sliding down in my seat, I watch Noah in my rearview mirror.

The car guard knocks at my window. “Three Rand.” I fumble in my purse. “Sorry, I only have two.” We haggle till I give him five. And I drive away. Almost smashing into a reversing car. The woman in the driver’s seat gives me the finger.

Fuck shopping.

\*

I feel like Miss Havisham, of Great Expectations. I have the wedding dress. I wear it sometimes. And his clothes. I wear Gabriel’s old clothes. His old work shirt, crisp blue. I put it on ritually, slowly and carefully, and take out the photo album. Sophia took most of the pictures – she was there, but only I would know that. Because it is just the three of us in the frame: myself, Gabriel and Noah at a band rehearsal.

Sophia said that Noah tried to kiss her once, then pulled away, ashamed. Gabriel says it’s because he wants to be with me. But she’s not the same, Sophia; we’re actually quite different.

The photo brings back memories. The boys are in a band, and I’m their groupie. Their favourite girl. I’m the one with the bigger breasts. I want to be a drummer, but they say no girls allowed, or it will compromise the integrity of their sound. So I’m in the front row of their first gig. Purely, so that I can throw a pair of underwear onto the stage, and flash my tits. That’s my job. Then pretend not to know them, but want to sleep with

Monica Toerien

them, and have a threesome, whatever that means. The girls in the audience bitch about me, and snigger.

I put the box of photographs back in the cupboard to gather dust once more.

University of Cape Town

## Sita

I am related to Shakespeare. It's true, even though Matilda doesn't believe me. If you follow my family tree, you'll see for yourself. That is, if he was Shakespeare at all and not Francis Bacon. Then I'm not related to him at all.

So I have drama in my blood, and I am astrologically destined to become a world-famous actress on Broadway. I have sworn a very solemn oath to make sure it happens. I would like to play Lady Macbeth – *out, out damn spot, you, stain upon my hand. Eek, for I have killed a man, oh no, woe is me.* When I'm in grade nine the class will put on a Shakespeare play, and I am going to try to be the main actress. Like Beatrice, or Rosalind, or Juliet. But I might be cast as an extra herdsman or attendant to the Lord. That would be a total disaster. I might never recover from that crushing blow. I have tried to enunciate, for instance, whenever I am called upon to answer a maths question, I try to project my voice so that people in the back can hear me. And when my cat died, I broke down sobbing in class, just to show them I had emotional range (not that it wasn't sad, mind you).

*Mrs. van der Westhuizen, couldst thou explaineth this lasteth question thus?*

And I have learnt the entire first act of Romeo and Juliet. *Ah, to die for love upon this hand. Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? Oh Juliet (stab, stab, stab). In my bosom thus I die.*

I have practised dying in front of my mirror. First I turn pale, in shock and disbelief that I am about to meet my bloody end. Then I faint, slowly, in a swoon upon the ground. Unfortunately, I can no longer see myself then, so I don't know if I gave a

Monica Toerien

good enough performance. Sometimes I die quickly, and suddenly. One swift stab then I am gone.

Where do you go when you die? People have all sorts of theories about this sort of thing, I'm not sure who to believe. I think you just pick a team, and then apologize profusely when you get there and you were wrong. I'm sure they'd understand, you're only human after all, and what if you pick the losing team? How awful to make a mistake like that and then spend the rest of all eternity burning in hell of damnations. So you've got to be very careful who you decide to support.

And what if you have no choice in the matter, and are born into it, then you're damned before you start, you know. For instance, I am a Hindu, and my mother is a New Ager, and I've been dunked in a pool and redeemed. So what does that make me, huh? Then my mother will go to a New Age heaven, with crystals, and flying saucers, and Feng-Shui. And I might get left behind. Or else she's going to hell like Matilda says she is. So it's a very tricky sort of question.

And what if I get reincarnated as a street bergie? Then I'll be sorry I didn't give some money please. And my karma's been so bad lately, who knows what will happen in the hereafter.

Matilda did a tarot reading, and it said she would die of old age. She will be eighty-three, and asleep in her bed nice and cozy, then bam, she'll be gone. So Matilda said she will never go to sleep ever when she's eighty-three, and escape the curse that way till she's eighty-four. I hope I know her then. I've promised to keep her awake with coffee and entertaining stories about Hollywood and such like. She's already got my

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autograph – for when I’m famous, she says. She is a very good friend indeed. So I will repay her by keeping her alive when she’s a granny.

I hope people will miss me when I’m gone. I’ve made a list of all my friends, and I’m sure they’d be at my funeral – even some of my teachers. They’ll say my favourite colour was yellow – or pink – and that I like the song *Buttercup*, from the sixties. And they’ll cry, and wail, and my mother will say she wished she’d bought me that new CD player, and fed me more ice-cream. And then they’ll have tea, with little sandwiches (with peanut butter), and sigh, and mutter, just like what happened at my great aunt Gertrude’s funeral (only everyone was quite glad, actually, that she was gone, because she left behind a priceless collection of antiques, and gold jewelry). And then my mother will go home to an empty house, and give up on her reason for living, and miss me terribly, because I’m the light of her life, and don’t I just know it. But I will be up in Heaven, smiling down upon them, and granting them blessings from up above. That’s what would have happened if that nasty, evil robber had got hold of me. So it will all have worked out in the end, really.

I’m putting on a play. I cannot wait any longer. It’s about Lalita, and her quest to find Raj. Her epic quest. Matilda will play the tiger, and I, the beautiful goddess. And my friend Jake might play Raj, if he isn’t very busy doing other things that day. Mum has made me an outfit. A gold dress and veil, with matching shoes from *Pep*, half price on Tuesday. I’ve practised our love scene in the garden. Raj stands before me, a mighty warrior prince from India. And I, overwhelmed by his majesty, swoon, then cry out as the

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tiger is about to tear at my throat. But oh, no, it gives me magical powers instead. Wowee. What a drama. Sheeshkebab!

Matilda says this is entirely lame, and why don't we just go and watch some Smurfs on TV, or pretend to be Smurfette, or something. And I reply with dignity beyond my years, that this is actually a very serious thing that we are doing, Matilda. And one day you'll be pleased you were in a play like this.

"Fine, Sita, whatever!" She rolls her eyes, and then stomps off to change into her tiger outfit.

But the show must go on, as they say. And dedicated to my craft, I enact the scene where Lalita feels Raj's presence nearby, but can't really be sure. Jake would be standing about there, where the petunias are, and he would reach out his hand, blinded by teargas, and stumble forward. And then we would make sweet passionate love out in the open, like jungle monkeys.

Speaking of which, do you know Jake's parents have a sex swing in their bedroom? And his mother is really fat, so I can just imagine her wobbling in mid air. How do you have sex on a swing? I went to his house once for Kentucky Fried Chicken nuggets, and he showed me. It's really creepy.

I got a chicken nugget stuck in my hair, and the more I tried to get it out, the more it got in a tangle. Which was actually really embarrassing, because his brothers were there, and they were just staring. And then we went for a swim, and they wore 'budgie smugglers' – you know, banana hammocks (also known as the Speedo). I don't like to laugh, but they looked silly. I wore my red and white polka dot bathing suit, with matching headcap. And they gave me flippers and a nice pair of goggles to use. We tried

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to breathe underwater – you can, you know, blow out a huge bubble and then suck on it till you reach the surface. They showed me, but I just choked on water each time.

Jake's brother is having a lot of sex – everywhere, like in bathrooms. He's even got an earring, which is strange for a boy. I try to avoid him, whenever I can, but sometimes I can't help speaking to him, and he calls me names, and makes fun of my skin colour. Which is against our constitution, and our rainbow nation. Then his mother hits him over the head, and tells me not to tell my mother. She says she never supported Apartheid, and that her husband just worked for the government because he had to. They are thinking of emigrating, because this county's going to hell, but I say I'll miss Jake too much. Then she offers me more fried chicken, which I politely decline, because I can mind my P's and Q's.

Matilda and I have started a Save the Poor Fund. We busk at the side of the road in the Waterfront. I play the mini-piano, and she plays the violin. Jake says we should start with him, because he's dirt poor – har, har. But we all see so much suffering and neediness in South Africa every day that something has to be done. So far, we've raised over one hundred Rand. Mum bought me a pink piggy bank with lucky four-leafed clovers on it, and said we should keep the money safe in there. When we've raised some more she'll take it to a shelter for us. With a card saying *Love from Tilly and Sita. Please don't buy alcohol.*

Jake asked me to join a group called Nosepickers Anonymous. Apparently, certain types of dairy will produce the best snollies, and you don't want the inside of your nose to dry out too much. They all meet in secret and pick their nose. Or so he tells me.

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But you shouldn't believe everything Jake says. He wanted me to pick my nose in front of him and give him a contribution.

And you know what else, I just accidentally burnt an ant to death in my tea. It must be a miserable death, like dying in a vat of boiling lava. There must be so many different ways to die as an ant. But when you think about it, I'm just an ant to the whole entire universe. Who cares if I get thrown against a wall? I care very much, okay. Please could somebody tell that man not to do it again? They say size matters, but maybe just because I'm taller than an ant, doesn't make me more important. Maybe if giants existed, they would squash me like an ant too. So I had to really apologise to the ant, and take it outside and put it on a leaf. It all seems so unfair. That's why I know I'll be an ant in my next life, and my Mum will spray ant killer on me. Then she will really owe me big time (unless it's really happened, and that's why she nurtures me, to make amends for when I was an ant).

It's all so complicated, the universe. But my teacher says I don't have to understand it all just now – by year ten I'll get it. But by then I'll have forgotten the question.

I've decided to beat a world record to impress Jake. They have some really strange entries, like, the most cockroaches eaten (it's only thirty-six, which isn't that much, but then you've got to remember that it is creepy bugs, after all). Or I could pluck a turkey really quickly – 1 minute 30 seconds. Jeez, I hope it's not alive at the time, that would be awful for the poor bird. I'd have to report myself to anti-animal cruelty league.

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I consulted the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and discovered one entry for *Heaviest Weight Dangled from a Swallowed Sword*. That seems like my kind of entry, but I'm not sure my Mum will let me swallow a sword just yet. Guess I'll just have to keep on looking...But I can just picture Jake's face. He gasps in astonishment as the new record holder, moi, stands before him, having swallowed a sword with a sack of potatoes attached, and lived to tell the tale.

I could also try to beat the record for *The Most Ferrero Rocher Eaten in One Minute*, which actually seems like it might be quite fun. I would have to train for it, of course, and then I do like to savour the chocolates normally, but I think I might just have to look into this one. *Fastest Time to Eat Twelve Pizza's* sounds like a good one to try (in 19.91 seconds), but then I will get very fat and Jake won't like me anymore. I take, like, hours to eat just one, and then I'm so full I don't think I could eat another bite. *Most Cockroaches Eaten* would not be worth it unless I was on Survivor Vanuatu, and had a million bucks at stake. In some parts of the world people eat cockroaches for free. I'm being serious!

I think I might try *The Fastest Modelling of a Balloon Dog*, which fits into my magic act. My hands would move at the speed of light, and behold, a balloon animal right before your eyes. Me and my friends could try to achieve the world largest *Paint by Numbers*. But where would you put it afterwards? My Mum is always saying I clutter up the place, and it would be a historic achievement you just couldn't throw away. I could try to be *The Oldest Performing Ballerina*, but then I would have to wait to be really, really old, and by then Jake will have forgotten all about me. I think for now I might start

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to try to beat the record for *The World's Longest Drawing*. I've drawn a little panel of it already, and hope to add to it over time...

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## Sophia

We had one black dress between us. One, simple, lace chiffon number, cut at the knees. Small buttons, three, at the cleavage. It was strapless, tight about the waist, then flared out in a nineteen-fifties bell. When I wore it, I would twist, the fabric following moments behind me. I enjoyed collapsing onto beanbag cushions, with the skirt about me delicately. Arranged, just so. I wore sandals, no heel, with crisscrossing straps; an ankle bracelet perhaps. My hair was loose, rarely tamed, and very little make-up.

Charlotte wore it like a queen – bejeweled, graceful like a swan, she teetered on high heels. Lipgloss and purple eyeshadow, fake tattoo on her arm, her hair in a ponytail or French twist. She beamed more, waltzed around the room more, talked more, pleased more, really. I was too shy for her performance – I watched myself as I could be, one-day maybe. If something in me were to shift – some element were to transmute into the dancing girl before me. How did she do it?

I remember her crying in the dress. Listless, restless, she could not keep still. She was grieving, she missed him, where to run to? Agitated, her feet on the go, her lips pursed and tight. No one could touch her now. At this party, the guests slipping from room to room, making no impression on either of us. Faces with no meaning or consequence we did not care. I let her wear the dress – I had no choice, really, she got her way now, always. Her face was so pale – as mine would be, if I had suffered as she did.

I take the dress out of the closet, still in its dry-cleaned plastic. There is a stain, dark but still visible, on the back fold of the skirt. I lay it out before me, and adjust the aperture of my camera, setting the flash, in the dusk-light. From three angles, above, to

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the side, and above, adjusted, again. Against white sheets, this black and white photograph will be pain and history, on black chiffon lace. Turned to art, so that some meaning can be made of it. I add Charlotte's hair-clip to the frame. Steel firefly on a pin. She was wearing it when – but I shall not utter it – I don't like the way the words sound in my mouth. It looks so sweet, but she tore it from her hair, and threw it on the ground, this decoration a mockery of her suffering. I kept it, safe, and away, for myself, to remember. It matters to me. Again, a flash. I add her hat, a beanie, does not go with the outfit, but it is hers, and I want my sister in the frame, somehow.

I add her shoes, then my old ones, next to each other. The shutter flickers, wide. How strange to see yourself every day, from a distance. To hate yourself, just a little, always, and your better half.

We were born on a hot summer's day. Mid-December. We had fire in our blood. There was a fire on the mountainside as we entered the world. It caught alight in our hair, in Charlotte's passion, and in my dreaming. Charlotte was born to life. To live, and suffer, her face in the mud and the dirt and the delights of life. I was born to a twilight, between worlds, of ghosts and imaginings. Our lovers still under our flesh. To abandon and betray us, to solitude. And each other's company.

I would photograph her, then me, then us together. Each year. To document our difference. To investigate her face, then my own, and based on this evidence, condemn myself. She liked different colours – green was my own, my very own, she could not wear it ever. Or purple – I wore it first, to great praise, so it is mine. She likes pink – in all shades, who cares for pink, really? I shall be mistaken for her in it. My favourite flowers are daffodils. Hers are dandelions – weeds that swallow up a garden, intrigue her

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with their audacity. She liked boys sooner than me, was something wrong, Sophia? Why don't you kiss that one, or maybe him, why so shy?

So I felt wrong. Always. When compared with a better version of myself.

I think the ghost likes her too, sometimes. Goes to her in her sleep, like me. Does she feel him? In her bed? I am left cold, again. Replaced for the better one. Perhaps he cannot tell the difference. He does not know me at all, then. I have different freckles. I like ham on my cheese. I can't follow directions. Can you count the moles on my thigh? Remember them, my ghost, do not mistake me for another.

I am myself, alone, there's only one of me. Trace my skin with your fingertips, and commit it to memory, my shape and my self. So that you find me again. In the darkness of hell, where I have sent you. Until you see again. Who you are. I shall torment you with images of kindness. Of my naked body, and your hands on my belly. Of a life you cannot touch for death, you chose, when you left us alone. I am your tormentor, because I loved you. And you were blind to happiness.

I can feel him tear at his own flesh.

When he has shed one tear for her, then he can go, away for good. Until then he lingers, torments the living.

*In the darkness, the void, I reach out my hand to you. But you do not grasp it, and we Fall.*

## Maya

The principles of magic are as follows: you take your secrets to the grave. You control the audience, as they watch the hand that distracts the eye from the truth. Seeing is believing. And if you whisper incantations into your magician's hat, a rabbit will appear. Dark magic happens at night. Secret witchcraft of sex, bodies entwined, in the spider's web of sweet intoxication and delight. A woman weaves this magic between her legs, in the curve of her neck. Then creates her Frankenstein monster, and piece by piece a child is formed. This secret alchemy, her white magic, begins with death, as the child's soul is entombed in her womb, and dies slowly as it grows into this thing we call human. First a fish as it swims from shore to shore, a slow evolution to a baby mammal. A creature, fish gilled, purring and rolling about till it opens its eyes to the water of life, the blood of *aqua vitae*. Fists clenched, ready for a fight, as the tunnel of light fades into the screaming neon brightness of the hospital room.

But she is no longer of your flesh, and walks away.

On my lap is my doll, Pinocchio, who is crying. For fear. She is wooden, her face cannot smile unless I make it so, nor can she move unless I am here. Her skirt is spread out across my lap, my hand balancing on her leg. The babies laugh; it is their party. Their faces are full of sweets, their frocks grubby already from sticky fingers. I make her speak; she has language, my puppet. But I do not own her words. They believe she is real, as real as I am. She sings rhymes, I sneer, how silly. I tell stories, she interrupts, rudely, don't do that children, pardon me, please, thank you? Thumbellina, as big as my finger,

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went in search of Tom Thumb. Oh Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie. Did he kiss the girls and make them cry?

"How shall we make her a real girl? Any ideas, children? Turn her wooden heart into gold?" Pinocchio is slumped on my lap now, lifeless without me.

"Kiss her, like Princess Aurora, and wake her from her slumber," One child suggests. Then backs away, in shyness.

"Perhaps, perhaps."

"Break her heart and start again," another one says. "Make her cry, then she'll be real."

"Collect herbs and leaves and stir them together for sweetness," I say. "We'll brew a magic potion. Add kisses and tears and clap your hands if you believe in fairies." They do, and she lives again.

Back in my flat, the puppet is dead in the cupboard, and my daughter slumps. I pull an egg from her ear, and break an omelette on the pan. Looking for my Panacea, my medicine for my child, I choose laughter. But she is sullen. I tell her stories then. Of the ancients. Magicians, with bent blue hats, and stars on their robes, turning lead into gold. In search of the Philosopher's stone. Alchemy of the mind, body, spirit, what is base becomes gold, transmuted into light.

But I cannot bring Sita back to life. I shall start again, put her back in the womb and grow her once more. Till she is whole again.

## Sita

It's the end of the world. I know this for sure, because Matilda's Mom channelled the spirit of the great and revered personage of Saint Celeste, and she said so explicitly. She said the world is about to, any day now, explode in a giant fireball, sent by God for our sins. We might be saved by spinning into the outer universe, then being taken to an alien planet. But only if we are very good.

Matilda and I are not quite sure what to do about this. I have given up all my worldly goods and released all my material attachments. My Ma came in while I was packing everything into plastic bags, and made a big fuss let me tell you. But I need to rid myself of physical bonds. So Matilda's sister now owns my beautiful dolls, and I have given away all my Lego collectors items. And even some of my Barbies (I don't play with them anymore, but they are still my friends). And I phoned everyone I know, and told them I loved them, and said goodbye. They'll understand one day, I know it. But then I suppose they'll be dead. I wonder what it will feel like to be on an alien planet. I hope it's the planet of the giant cats, because I really think I am a cat person at heart. Saint Celeste said that you are magnetically attracted to your own kin, oh earthlings, so like a homing pigeon of God, you will land on your own planet, the one of your people, amen. Matilda feels it's a bit nutty, but I trust Saint Celeste's judgement in these matters, given that I have never actually experienced the great universe myself.

So for the past three weeks I've been waiting to expire, suddenly, and without warning. In a ball of flames. I am actually quite excited about it – I've always wanted to travel around the hemispheres, and now seems like a good time to do it, because we have

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a test on Thursday, and I haven't studied for it yet. And I don't think I will either. Seems rather silly to be wasting time studying, when this is my last time on earth. So I'm really appreciating things, like good food, and friends (who don't know what's about to hit them – I feel bad, but they wouldn't believe me if I told them anyway). And I've packed a small bag of provisions – like baked beans and candles in case of emergencies (like they did for the first free and fair elections of our new democracy – thank goodness for Mandela, eh?). And of course, not forgetting, a tin opener.

I wonder what outer space will be like? Every night before I go to sleep I pray really hard that I will go to a good planet. But it's really up to the planetary Elders. Saint Celeste said that we are almost certainly going to be the only few survivors – so I'm starting to feel really sad for the others. I'll miss my teacher, for instance, and the others in my class (but I can't really say I'm sorry about a few of them).

The more time goes by, the more I am still, unfortunately, alive. Which is very disappointing, because now I don't have any of my collectors edition Lego, and I would ask for it back, and explain I thought I was about to die, but then what's the point of doing a good deed? And then I haven't really surrendered all my material possessions at all, now have I? So I went to speak to a church man, and he said that the world is not about to end, and have I found Jesus? (I didn't know he was lost...har, har!). And he explained that I had been misled, and mustn't go to Matilda's mother anymore, ever again, for fear of my immortal soul. And I started to cry and cry, and said that I was very sad because I didn't like this world at all, and hoped the new one would be better, without school or homework, or crime, and people who threw you against walls. And he gave me

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a tissue, and said, bless you my child, you are pure of heart. And I went on my way. Still crying a bit, because now that I had to stay, the world just looked so grey and boring, and altogether miserable.

And did you know, the Serial Strangler came to our school the other week? I'm not joking, he really did. And our school is right next to the station. And he was a student teacher, and gave our class a talk, and made really good friends with Matilda and I. And he said he would help us with our homework, and there are more than one ways to skin a cat? And then he told our teacher he was going to a clinic for a while – down the road, a big pink clinic, for very sick people. And we hoped he would get better. But he didn't and then we all saw his picture in the newspaper, and the teachers went all quiet and shut the office door for a long time, and we had a very long break indeed.

And when they came out they wouldn't talk about it, but we keep hearing about him on the news. Apparently, he sodom and gomorraed a little boy then strangled him on the station, right near us. And maybe he was going to do that to me or Matilda or even Jake. So we had a lucky escape. And I even gave him my telephone number, which was silly, but he said he'd help us with extra maths. Which I am very bad at, but I can survive quite nicely without a serial strangler trying to kill me after teaching me fractions, thank you very much!

So after much reflection, I think I'll stay on earth for a while. The earthlings need me. Especially Matilda, who is very disillusioned now that her mother is a crackpot loony. I still think they might have got the timing wrong – like at the Millennium, where everyone

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was afraid of the Millennium Bacteria, and started throwing their computers away. And then we were all afraid the world was going to end. And did it? There are still people in Bunkers, afraid that if they come out they will discover a nuclear wasteland. I've seen a movie like that once, I know it for an exact fact.

And apparently, some evil person sawed a Husky puppy's head off because it would lick himself. Why would someone do that? I keep imagining the poor creature, and even though I'm a cat person, you just can't help but love puppies. Who would want to kill a puppy? I hope it wasn't a blunt knife. My mother says I'm getting all hysterical about the world, and it's actually a lovely place. And she would miss me terribly if I'm gone. But I'm not so sure at all.

There's a party in Observatory that Matilda's going to, and she wants me to come along too. And you've got to wear bracelets in different colours, and that tells everyone how far you're willing to go. Which base. I'm not exactly sure what the others are talking about, and it's embarrassing, because they stop talking when I walk in and giggle, and say I wouldn't understand.

It's going to be wild!

I'm not invited, because I'm a stick in the mud wet blanket, totally uncool. Girls from the older classes, in high school already, will be there. And Matilda (that's her name don't wear it out) says they disappear out back with the boys and go under with them. Shoshanna rides the boy like a cowboy, and says guys will dump you if you don't go all

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the way. I'm confused, and don't think I'm going to try all this nonsense. But I get worried sometimes. It's all very worrisome indeed.

The last time I went to a high school party (Tilly and me snuck in), someone vomited on my bag, and I just stayed in the bathroom the whole night. And so I don't go to parties anymore, and I don't know any of the gossip. And I get left out. I only found out that Shoshanna let Jusef put his hand up her panties, because I was eavesdropping. They won't tell me a thing.

Tilly has all the different sexual positions on her cell phone, and she even has a picture of Deacon in grade nine doing it with the school bicycle, Angelique.

That is why I'm going to try to immaculately conceive. Because it just looks so gross. I don't want someone to touch me like that. My grade one teacher used to say that I'm a late developer, because I lost my baby teeth last of the class. So all my milestones are a little bit later than everyone else's. That's why I don't want to go under just yet. Maybe even never. But men are useful sometimes; I can see why you might need to hook one. Ma and I really struggle with the plumbing and such like since we come from a single parent family, oh shame.

It's a jungle out there, you know. So I think I'll just stay inside and read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (I was at the Book Launch at Exclusive Books, and even got a free wizard's hat). I don't want to know if Harry dies or not, but it seems likely, given the total evil of He-who-shall-not-be-named. But I'm reading it very slowly, one chapter at a time, really savouring each moment till his demise. Because once I've got to

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the end, there's no going back, that's it man. No more books, ever. I'll just have to wait a while, and hope that I forget most of the bits, and then start again. As if anew.

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## Sophia

My name, Sophia, means Wisdom. And there is a rose in my garden, deep magenta in colour, that bears the same title. Today I throw poison on the ground, for the snails. And stand under my umbrella as the rain pours down. And scream, just a little, concealed by the roar of the storm. In Wellington boots, the mud rises high on the soft grass. The neighbour looks out of her window, then stares at the sight of me, in the grip of madness. But I must be outside today, even in this weather. My belly is so large, I cannot see my toes. Strange how fast you grow, it grows, baby of mine, you child.

I need a cot, for you, and infant clothes, in pink and yellow and cream. And nappies. There are books I must read, and classes to take, for breathing. I need to be taught how to breathe. Surely they should have taught me that sooner. My lungs are so tight.

Today is the babyshower. I was not supposed to know, but I overheard the rumblings of a surprise party, and they admitted to their plan. So this day is for smiling. Cake and presents. Chat and girlie giggles, and the terror of this change.

No one screams in the suburbs. I could hear her. Somewhere. And nobody could do anything. I stood up, walked to the window. Maya poked her head out of the kitchen, where she was helping Charlotte with the dishes.

“Should we call someone?”

“The police?”

“Maybe we could drive around, look for her?” Maya is hesitant.

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And by our silence, we consent to do nothing. And let it happen.

An alarm, somewhere. Then sirens. And the clink of dirty china. As we chatter and continue with our lives. Regardless.

Someday that will be me, *was* me. A moment's reflection, that is all, and then back to this everyday, normal. And hope it will last before the nightmare. Again. I cannot stand it, again.

No one screams in the suburbs. We just bite our tongue. And continue. A scream is unsettling. It is the sound that we feel. In our comfort, so comfortable, so perfect, we say. But in the dark we scream. Silently.

Then smooth it away with the light of day. Tuck it under our pillows, the crease of the bedspread. And under the mattress. Swallow it in our milk, for cereal. Pass the jam, honey, thank you dear. What time to fetch you? Are you on your way out? Kisses, mwah!

And the air feels familiar, and you know the way to the door, and the car. And you forget that a scream is lodged somewhere in the windpipe, beneath speech and your make-up, so even a cough won't dislodge it. Until you hear it. In the distance. No, it is not yours. Someone else. Somewhere else. Is dying.

But it is not you. So you continue. With your day. Your everyday. As though this were not. The only reason. The only moment. You were born. To scream. For another.

## Sita

I enjoyed Sophia's baby shower a lot; she had cupcakes, with hundreds and thousands sprinkled on top, as well as silver balls and chocolate drops. Delicious! My Mum was looking very pretty, because she is taking a self-empowerment course, and knows her own boundaries. She's living in the moment. I like her shiny blonde hair, it's so silky smooth and it glistens like a L'Oreal advert. Mine is raven black.

They also had baby hot dogs on toothpicks. Did you know that in China they really eat dogs? I wonder if they like a certain kind of dog the best. My favourite kind of dog is Labrador, but I wouldn't like to eat it thank you very much. That would be very distasteful.

Sophia's lounge is full of china ornaments: a shepherd and his shepherdess, and the sweetest porcelain doves. She has collected Christmas decorations from all over the world – and she displays them all year round. A Santa Claus from Norway, and the most beautiful wooden baby Jesus. I'd like to have Christmas every day. I would if I could, and when I'm big that's exactly what I'm gonna do. Why don't we have a Christmas tree with the lights and ornaments all the time, anyway, that's what I want to know? It makes sense; it's so pretty.

Sophia's belly is getting so big now. It's strange to accept that she's carrying around a real live baby inside there. I was once inside a stomach. So were we all. I wonder if it's very cozy in there. *The fruit of thy womb*. Then one day, her tummy will just explode and out will pop a human, like in Alien Resurrection. Sophia said I could talk to Ruby, so I put my head on where I thought she would be, and chatted to her for a

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bit. The grownups thought it was cute, but it makes me shy. I told her about life, the universe and everything. I'm quite wise for my age, you know. I thought I could hear her whisper back too.

Then I felt my own mother's stomach, and I don't think I came out of there, because I couldn't possibly have fitted in. I'm drawing Ruby a picture book, with her ABC's. *A* is for *Ant*, etc. I draw quite well If I may say so myself.

Auntie Charlotte helped me with the colours, and drew the outlines for *Bunny*, and *Cat*. I know she's Sophia's twin, but they feel completely different. After a while of looking at them, their personalities shine through. Charlotte grins in a mischievous way, and is a lot of fun, while Sophia is more gentle and reserved – easier to confide in about difficult stuff like boys. They both have freckles but Charlotte speaks with a slight lisp and a British accent from when she was in London for a year. Charlotte offers me her lipgloss, and I dab some on my lips: cherry-berry flavour. She has blue eyeliner around her eyes.

I asked everyone if they wanted me to do some magic tricks for them. They sat in a semi-circle, and I performed astounding feats of illusion and mind reading, which left them amazed. First I did the card levitation, then the Coin Vanish and the Headless Chicken tricks. I tried to escape the handcuffs, but I got stuck, and George had to run to fetch a pair of pliers. Everyone clapped and said well done, and I felt very chuffed with myself. My mother, Maya, then pulled out a deck of Tarot cards and tried to channel Marilyn Monroe. It was quite spooky and entertaining. Then she did the whole Marilyn voice, and she sang *Happy Birthday Mr. President* in a husky voice. Everyone thought it was very funny.

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When we got home, I continued my plan to beat Guinness World Record. A man in Georgia towed two minibuses tied to his ears over forty meters. I tried to tie a rope to a Mini Cooper and attach it to my ears, but I knew in that moment that I didn't stand a chance. So we scrapped that plan, because I'm quite scrawny. It really hurts to try to pull a car by your ears alone. They got quite stretched and raw from the effort. Even ear exercises wouldn't help.

I spent the rest of the evening making the rest of the picture book for Ruby. *D* is for *Donkey*. *E* is for *Elephant*. It will help her learn words one day, which is a very important part of a person's survival in the world. I even went to sleep with my crayons all about me. It's tiring being as multi-talented as I am. There is always so much to do.

## Sophia

Ruby shall be born in early Spring sunshine. She will be made of hot sun and African heat. Of braais, and watermelon, berg winds and lazy games of cricket on the lawn. Summer blue skies, washing the dog in the pool, sultana grapes and mangoes. All part of her DNA. Stewed in Cape winter rain, and wind, and storms, The Cape of Storms. With my blood, and the porridge I'm eating, and the polluted air I'm breathing, she will be built, one cell at a time. She has chocolate in her veins, and too much sugar. So I'll eat my vegetables.

Make her feet of earth and dust, the gods cry, as they piece together another body. Her eyes shall have tourmalines set deep within alabaster. Her hair shall be of the finest mink, spun into threads and sewn with a needle. Three freckles will be her mother's inheritance. Her feet will be long, for running to the ends of the earth and back, and her hands open, to receive life's treasures.

She has read Foucault, and understands the Enlightenment, Age of Reason. The words seep through my belly as I read, I know it. She listens to Bach, she kicks. But not Beethoven – no reason, it's just her taste. We chat about politics, war, how to make a good Thai stirfry. Recipes for carrot cake, and what she expects of me. This I need to know soon. It's good to have a plan. I like to think I'm baking her, my bun in the oven. If I add a bit of ginger, will she have my red hair, or eat my broccoli, will her eyes be green? What about spontaneity – is that in a walk on the beach, will she learn it from my tread? Or, patience, in washing dishes, maybe there. If I'm angry, will she have fire in her blood, and if I'm sad, will it dampen her joy? Maybe if I keep still, she'll be fine, but then

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she'll run, my Ruby, run. Away, somewhere, to get air into her lungs, and breathe. I cannot do it right. I do not know how to make her, form her from the clay of my body. My own sculpture. I was never an artist like my sister, but this I can make, my own little human.

I'll smell a rose, for rose tinted glasses. And eat lots of spices, cinnamon, cardamom, basil and large tomatoes. What will she need in a personality?

I never know when she's sleeping. Does she know when it is day? Of course, I am awake, but can she feel the sun in the air? Does she part the curtains in my womb, wake up and brush her teeth, get ready for a new day floating around in her warm bath? Then go to sleep as I drink my last cup of cocoa, for character, and roll over in my bed?

Goodnight, bug in a rug, sleep snug.

## Charlotte

In the news today. A newborn baby, found in a sewage pit. In my mind, I pick it up, clean it with a towel. Wash it. Wrap it warmly, and put it to rest. Love it, because no one else will. And hope it will feel it.

Sewerage. I repeat the words. Sewerage. Effluent. Shit. Infant, baby, child. Waste. Garbage. Hate. Poverty. Ignorance. Fear. Despair. There is a picture. Fetal. In a fetal position. Naked. Dead, or dying? I only see the headlines. I don't know until I buy the paper, Five Rand. My car swerves, slightly, as I straddle the lanes to learn more. A poster of the child, curled baby in shit, is on the lamppost. It shocks me. Into buying the paper. Was it tossed? Had it died already? Just thrown in, there. Like human faeces. Excrement of the body, to be disposed of, then forgotten. To make money, for one day, bold headlines, then over. And nobody will ever know.

What was lost.

Who was lost.

\*

His frown is serious. This *him*, this *he* that was my entire world and beyond. The world is our playground. And by *world*, I mean the swing set and the climbing tree with the wooden platform, a tree-house of sorts. Laden with figs, it was where we had our first kiss, him and I, Gabriel and me. Eve wore a fig leaf over her privates. I'd seen pictures,

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paintings. I knew this for a fact. I asked my Mom if I could go out wearing a fig leaf, but she wouldn't let me.

"Lottie?" he says.

"Yes, Gabie?"

"Did you know, fish have a two-minute attention span?"

"Hmm?"

"So they never get bored. That's why they like life in a fishbowl. Because it's always a new view every two minutes..."

"It must be strange to be a fish."

"I think if I were a fish, I'd be a blowfish."

"I'd be a goldfish, despite the amnesia. I wouldn't want to be a fish you ate."

"Lottie?"

"Yes, Gabie?"

"Will you marry me and live happily ever after?"

I ponder this. For a while. In quiet consideration.

"Yes, in the definite," I reply.

"Cool."

"Shall we do it now?"

"What, marry?"

"You did ask me after all, Gabie!" I am accusatory.

"If you want. Who shall marry us, then?"

"What about the domestic worker, Margaret?"

"Is she a registered marital official?"

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“Well, she’s very smart, you know. She knows how to get rid of even the toughest stains.”

“All right, well, if you insist.”

I climb down the rope ladder, and leave Gabie up the tree. I was a bridesmaid once, in a pink dress with a ribbon around my waist, and didn’t I look like the sweetest thing! This became my wedding dress. And after explaining the situation to Margaret, she agrees to marry us, at once!

But he left me, my darling love. When I return, wearing the dress and expectant, he had gone home – without saying a thing. I phone his mother, but she said he didn’t want to speak to me, and that he was having second thoughts about the whole thing, and had he left his rain-jacket at my place, because he thought he might have put it behind the chair in the kitchen? So I was jilted – at the altar. And only Margaret ever truly understood my pain. And after grieving over a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (his favourite!), wearing my pink bridesmaid’s dress, I put on a brave face and went into the lounge to watch *Pumpkin Patch*, and *Liewe Heksie* with my sister.

## Sophia

These nightmares will not die. I feel my stomach contract, again and again. I call the ghost, "Help," I cry. But he can do nothing. He is an illusion.

I drive myself, hunched over the steering wheel. And at the Groote Schuur hospital, I am told that it is false labour. I stay overnight anyway, with the safety of the doctors and their stethoscopes and machines. I need science, precision and reality for a time. But then the ghost is gone, and I miss him. The doctor shows me a scan, and she is healthy.

I feel my vein bulge from the IV needle. Drip, drip, the white plastic bag half-empty. Another shift, and a nurse checks my chart. The television overhead has a House and Gardens show on BBC Prime. I watch them take out the straw, create mulch, dig a deep trench, plant seedlings, pull out carrots, fix the fence, renovate the shed, paint the walls, add a plug socket, decorate the veranda, pull out weeds, and so forth. This banality lulls me, the normal, the commonplace details. I can depend on these authorities. They know how to make good compost. Life can be fixed, mended, altered, reupholstered. I am calm now, there is surety, solutions, in three easy steps. I throw a tissue across the floor, missing the wastepaper basket by a few inches. I settle down to watch old reruns of renovation shows, until I doze peacefully with my hand on my beating belly.

## Charlotte

The sunlight through the fine mesh curtains created geometric patterns of light and dark, curves and waves through the flower embroidery. I took a pencil and sketchpad, and began to draw the lines on paper, grey on white, faded, HB scribbles against grainy ivory sheets. I was looking for inspiration for my sculptures. I wanted to create some form that had never been. Some shape that had never been brought to life before. My sketch had a face, of sorts, a character within the abstract. Arms that stretched outward and around towards the stars, and a belly that grew and grew and contained the earth.

My coffee left a dirty stain against the rim of my blue and yellow mug, the one with a picture of the Chrysler building on the front, and *I heart NY* written across the top. I took another sip and got a mouthful of undissolved sugar, sweet bitter. I broke my Oreo in half, and ate the centre, then dipped it into the last drop of coffee. It was garbage day, and my home was a mess, an overflowing black plastic bag spilling its contents of old banana peels and milk cartons onto the tiles.

I put down my pencil and paper for a moment, and try to mop up the mess, but my efforts merely seem to spread the dirt around. The smell of damp and mould creeps under my fingernails, and soon I am dusting and sweeping as well. A spring-clean for a dirty old church, now my house. Saint Augustine framed in effigy in stained glass above me, stares down disapprovingly. So does his mother, next to him in robes of state. *Ag*, what do you know about mess? I mumble at them, and wonder again how I found myself in this strange place. People prayed here once, it seems blasphemous for an atheist to rule

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here now, but at least I will take care of the rising damp that threatens the walls. And maintain the garden, pull out the weeds – we're a pragmatic people.

I sit back down, the mundane interfering with great art once again. Sunlight hits my face, but this time through the blue glass of the window, and I feel he is pleased, my Saint, at my taking care of the place until a better owner comes around. The beads on my bracelet catch on the croquet of my top, and pull out a long pink thread. My drawing grows and grows until it is beyond me and I am no longer the author, but merely a hand, holding a pen that makes its own marks. Where will you lead me? I wonder to myself, then to my cat, who is purring at my feet.

Sunbeams illuminate my shadow, and like Peter Pan searching for his own, I follow it, watching it vainly as it moves with my head, my shoulders and my long legs. And I play with the distortion, first in life, then sketched in answer, on the page. So there I am, with an elongated neck, just stretching and stretching out across the wooden beams of the floor. My shadow is long, and will not listen to my commands to stay in its place, it lives beyond me, and I enjoy its darkness. I blink and smile but it does not smile back, so I twist around, and then it follows me. My cheeks burn too easily, I did not think of wearing sunscreen inside. Never stare into the sun, they say, it will blind you. But regardless, it draws me, and I try to keep my eyes open into the blazing fury, until spots appear in my vision and I realize my stupidity. There is no light without darkness, no darkness without light, they are both beautiful because one cannot exist without the other.

I draw the curtain and I grow too cool again, a respite from the burning cheeks for one moment, but then I crave warmth again. I am too hot, too cold, nothing in between. I

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find the breeze unsettling, as though it brings a storm. So I blink into the light once more and try to catch the last of the sun's rays.

I take out clay, and now my shapes, my lines become three dimensional, embodied. And a new artform is born, again it breathes alone. The garden is too pretty, my tongue tastes too sweet, so my sculpture becomes a monster to counter my mood, it compensates by growing teeth and a beard and a mouth to swallow me whole. I can handle darkness in the light of day, but at night the fears consume me, and I wait for the dawn.

Mud clay under my fingernails, Red Vixen by Revlon, and the grains collect in my lifeline, loveline, and moneyline of my palm. What does my future hold, I wonder? Brown rivers, the Ganges on my pale skin. Is there a mark on this map for the day Gabriel died, and should I have been warned, looked under my own skin to prevent it? I examine my palm momentarily. If only I could read it better. My loveline thickens towards my future, but what does that mean? And my lifeline splits into two, then three, then spiderwebs into my fingers. Blue veins stand out through my skin.

As children, Sophia and I used to guess our future, as if it was something we chose, had control over. But it seems to be happening beyond me.

The mesh curtains fall into shadow at last, the light hiding behind Table Mountain. Cool dusk settles over the suburbs, and the sound of after-school sports and taxi hoots can be heard in a distant cacophony. A grey dove beats its wings and flies up to the windowsill where it coos. And I feel a chill creep under my clothes and grip my bare feet. But my back is still warm enough to sustain my efforts with the clay, and I wet my fingers and try again to mould something original, a one-of-a-kind work of art. It has

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glass beads for eyes, two white milky orbs, and a beak or snout made of woodchips, dug deep into the clay. A tongue laps at the air, a dancing devil to point at in a shop window somewhere. A doorstopper for a house in Constantia, alongside the African curios and the *Welcome* mat.

The cat plays with a Daddy Long Legs trapped in the mesh. And I lean back on my chair, content. I'd fallen down the Rabbit Hole for a moment, things seem strangely topsy turvy today. A pale blue light descends over my work, and I switch on the lamp nearby, its bulb clustered with dead moths and insects. Purple irises catch my attention, set alongside Arum Lilies in a large bucket filled with dirty water, and I return to my sketchpad, happily ignoring the clay thumbprints that smudge across the cream of the page. I add colour this time, take out my pencil crayons and begin to match the blue of the flowers, the purple and yellow core. Lead upon crayon upon white.

I sketch until supertime, then move to the kitchen and open a can of tomato soup with a rusty old tin-opener, set it on the stove to a slow simmer, and put in the toast. When the toast pops, I hurry to spread the Butro Spread across the top so that it melts into the wholewheat. I grate some cheese, and dip it into the now hot soup. After tasting, I add some Herb and Garlic Salt. And open a trashy magazine already bent and torn from paging through, hungry for scandal. Babies, weddings, divorces, heartache and betrayal make my life seem tame, and I long to be able to afford a strapless African Queen creation, in shimmering orange. The latest trend in fringes is impractical for my hair, and I notice a good movie on SABC3 later this evening. Rugby scores hold no interest for me, and I turn the page. My star sign predicts bad weather ahead this week, so rather just stay indoors.

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Tomato soup spills across my paisley print skirt, and I run to the bathroom to find some Vanish, stain remover. Headlines, Tom Cruise for new biopic draws my attention back to the magazine, and I dab at my wet skirt absently as I read. My gold eye-shadow is smudged across my temple from a sweaty hand to my brow, and I feel the powder cake around my nose. The television is a welcome addition, and I switch on the Lotto Show Live Jackpot Draw, and wait ten minutes for *Friends* reruns. My scratch card only has two of the digits. I do not expect a win, but I enjoy the rush of buying the card and choosing the numbers each week, along with the normal groceries, the milk and bread. I never win anything – only once when I was seven, I got a book voucher on a call-in radio show when I answered the question right: Who Sang *Imagine*? John Lennon, of course. I think I'm saving all my luck up for one big shot, one chance at the million. So it doesn't matter if I fail along the way.

There is a knock at the door, and I get up to answer it, taking a last bite of my toast. Noah stands at the door.

“I brought my toothbrush,” he says, holding up a green Oral B.

I blink, and I am back there again. Noah and I are watching TV at his place. I am there for popcorn and the treacle pudding he makes so well. Gabriel and I are on again off again, and I am weepy and sad because I think he does not love me.

Noah offers me the remote, in a magnanimous gesture, and I switch the channel from the sport, to *Seinfeld*. It's the one with the Soup Nazi, and I know all the gag lines by heart already. Noah's lips are cracked and he fidgets with his tie. He has a new job as a sales assistant and has finally sold out to the machine. But on the upside he can now

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afford a second-hand car. He is worried this is how he's going to spend the rest of his life. His hair is crumpled, and I run my hands through it, tenderly. We are so used to each other's company, nothing could be more innocent. He goes into the kitchen, and brings out some leftovers from last night's dinner. I talk and talk and talk about Gabriel, but he seems uninterested. The television flickers, then goes out, followed by the electricity of the house.

"Fucking power cuts," Noah says. He sounds like Gabriel, the two of them were so inseparable growing up, they have some of the same mannerisms and catchphrases.

He finds a candle, and lights it, the shadow pushed away for a moment around his glowing gold face.

I'm not sure who touched the other first. It may have been me, I think. I reached over and pulled down his trousers, just a bit, and crept closer to him. And his hands were on my breasts, and I didn't care to stop it.

The lights go back up but we continue, on the couch and then the floor. Thankfully we are alone in the house, but we would have continued regardless. I like his scent and try to breathe him into me.

And I stay the night in his bed, and continue. And wake to find my ring on the bedside table next to me. In the harsh light of the morning, everything feels sordid. I hear the sound of the shower running, and wait till he gets out, and watch his body from where I lay curled into the bedclothes. I memorize the scars and the patterns on his skin, because I know this can't happen again. He looks stricken. I feel bloodless but still warm from his touch. My hair's a mess, and I wonder what my sister would say.

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I brush my teeth with my fingers, a little toothpaste on the tips. He jokes and says he should always keep a spare toothbrush for his one night stands. I nudge closer to him, and we remain like that for a moment. Then part again, as I roll my eyes and start to snap at him for what had happened between us. And grow even more distant as I hastily put my clothes back on, and tidy myself up for the outside world. And soon we are strangers, not even the friends we were yesterday.

And we do not speak of it again. But it replays again and again in my mind's eye, the elephant in the room. And the guilt starts to hurt too badly, and poisons my happier moments. But the sweetness of his touch lingers, despite me.

Noah's grin is cheeky, and I take the toothbrush from him. His hair is dirty tousled, darker than it was growing up. Had he planned this for some time, I wondered?

I try and find a smart retort. I hesitate for one moment, and brush my top for toast crumbs. My mind is racing, but something within me surrenders. And I let him in again.

\*

To dance is to live for me. I watch the young dancers point and pivot, distracted by my own life. I correct a knee, turn it outwards, then bend the legs into the correct position. The girl grimaces, but remains like that until she is used to the pain. Time has no meaning for me anymore. I am that girl. Gabriel is on my mind now, but so is Noah. And I am confused and upset, and ask everyone to take a five-minute break.

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I have betrayed Gabriel again, his memory as well, and I light a cigarette, ignoring the fact I quit a week ago.

“Miss Arden?”

“Yes Cassandra,” I say, looking up.

“You shouldn’t smoke those cancer sticks, it’s very bad for you.”

“Thank you Cassandra, I’ll bear that in mind.”

“I’m struggling with the last dance,” she says, tugging at her pink leotard, her white tights crumpling at the ankles.

“Of course. I think you’re missing one of the crucial steps – it was because you were late last week, you missed the instruction.”

I practise with Cassandra until the others return from their loo break. Then class resumes once again, pink torsos and white tights all in a row pointing then turning, hands in the air, baby dimpled beginners.

Class ends sooner than I had expected. A new girl in the back row puts up her hand, and points shyly to the clock, and it’s time to go.

Noah is at home waiting for me; he already has a key. The smell of baked beans, fried eggs and toast fills my kitchen, and I walk in to find him adding spices to the mix. Nobody has ever cooked for me before. “Aw, you’re just trying to get me into bed,” I say, slightly annoyed.

“Damn straight! How do you like your eggs – overeasy?”

His hair is still wet from the shower, and I brush it with my fingers. “Whatever.”

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It had been a week, and he seemed to be moving himself in. We settle down to a TV dinner, plates on our laps. Noah flicks channels absently.

“We can watch sport if you want,” I volunteer.

“Nah, it’s okay.” He flicks onto *Seinfeld*, and we stay there, rather awkwardly.

“I think I’ve seen this episode before,” I say.

“It is very familiar,” he replies.

I spear a baked bean and add some yolk. I get up to fetch the salt, and add too much. Jerry and Elaine’s banter is a substitute for our own, and we eat in silence. Noah spills beans onto the floor. “Sorry dear,” he says.

“Don’t call me dear,” I reply.

“Pumpkin?”

“No.”

“My leedle luv bug?”

“Definitely not.”

“If you say so, Charlie.”

He mops up the mess with some tissue paper, and pops a bean into his mouth.

“My floor’s not clean enough to eat off,” I say.

“The dust adds texture to the beans,” he replies. “And I think I can taste toe jam.”

The news comes on, and there’s footage of Southern Right whales getting tangled in fishing nets. Noah says he could almost touch a whale the other day, when out surfing. Then some news about a drowning in False Bay. I look down at my plate and play with the rest of the egg and tomato sauce. Noah coughs, then clears his throat, and offers to

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take the plates. I feel reprimanded, scolded by life and perhaps Gabriel, for letting Noah back into my bed.

Noah returns from the kitchen, suddenly very pale. "I told him."

"What do you mean?" I say, understanding him perfectly.

"The night before he died. I told Gabriel what had happened between us."

I feel the room begin to spin around, and I go numb. I curl up in a foetal position on the couch, and everything goes very still and quiet. This I had not guessed. Noah sits next to me, and I dig my nails into his ankle, hoping to draw blood.

"Is that why he drowned?"

Noah shudders, "Don't say that. Please."

"You've just killed him again for me," I whisper.

"I've never regretted anything more," he says. "I think I did kill him. But I blame you. He was my best friend."

"Well he was my fiancé, Noah," I say. "I loved him so much more than you could ever understand." I pause, then ask the question that is burning my lips, "What did his face look like? Gabriel's, I mean, when you told him."

"I don't want to get into it," he mutters.

"Tell me. I deserve to be part of that moment."

"Oh you were." He averts his eyes. "I told him what you were like in bed."

His words repeat in my mind, around and around. I consider taking something, and thoughts of suicide flood through my mind. I try to get up but Noah holds me back down, knowing me too well.

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“Just stay still, this is a lot to absorb all at once. It’s taken me years to come to terms with.”

“You should have taken it to your grave,” I say. “You and your big mouth! You hate me don’t you? You’ve just come back to destroy me.”

“Yes, I hate you,” Noah says coolly, his face impassive.

I reel back as if he had slapped me.

His face clears, “Or *hated*, past tense. I have been so angry with you for many years...”

“Is this your revenge? Making me Fall?” I stammer. “I thought he died loving me. That was my only consolation.”

“He is dead, fucking dead, Charlie!” He yells, his voice hoarse. “You are in love with a ghost.”

“Don’t touch me!” I scream hysterically. I lunge at him, and push him towards the door. “I let you near me again.”

“Now hang on...” he begins, but I claw at his face, and push him back through the door. I slam the door shut in his face, and lock and bolt it, then kick the door repeatedly in a rage. “You will never be him,” I cry. “You will never be Gabriel. I will always love him more.”

“I am offering you a real life, Charlie,” Noah says through the door. “Away from the past. Away from your dreaming. Don’t you want to take it?”

“Goodbye,” I reply curtly.

He was not getting through again.

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I try to rub the stain of Noah's sweat off my skin. I want to feel Gabriel and only Gabriel's touch on my body. I can still feel Noah outside the door; his shoes leave shadows in the light beneath the door. He shuffles back and forth, hesitating. For a moment, my heart opens to him again, but he walks away, and I do not call after him. I trace his image on the door, in the woodgrain. He takes my memories with him.

My Judas, my betrayer, he has killed Gabriel and me both, but feels no remorse. Or am I the one with blood on my hands? The room fills with a sickly sweet smell. A dead animal under the floorboards. I shall put poison out tomorrow. The flesh rots slowly.

I sway, holding my sides, on the hard tiles, praying – to Gabriel in one long breath: *I am sorry I loved you I am sorry I hate him I am sorry I loved you please forgive me I am sorry I love I love I love you, Gabriel please come back to me why did you do this to me my love, why?*

No answer. I am forsaken by my angel.

\*

I walk far, away from the city. The veld is blue-grey, the distant farmland purple in the watercolour light. The air smells like buchu, small bushes of the yellowing plant cluster about the slopes. Proteas dry in the summer heat, their pink velvet petals reaching for insects. A small stream drips into mud as I squelch over it in my new hiking boots, already causing blisters. The sun burns my fair skin crisply, and I regret the extra weight on my shoulders. My nose is beginning to freckle and peel. Tired already, I stop for a

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drink of water from my flask, mint flavoured, and breathe in deeply, taking in the beauty of the day. *I am enjoying this*, I repeat, trying to convince myself, *I am*.

I have become Isis, in search of my lover, his body scattered across the world. Piece by piece I try to put Gabriel back together again. I try to hold him in my mind, but his image fades, and recedes away from me. He is now buried beneath the earth, but what is it that remains with me then? Some of his soul lingers by my side. It calls out to me, *Follow me, follow me*. I push his voice aside, *not yet, not yet*, I reply.

I can still hear his music. The notes on the page, faded pencil, have outlived him. Pieces of Osiris's flesh, a memory of happiness - another limb - a trinket, love token - severed hand - his notebooks on botany, plant drawings, diagrams of animals - an eye - an old tape recording - his heart - with me always - throat - the silence of his absence, and more, and more, the internal organs, blood, veins, I put him together again. Fingernails missing. Where are his lips? The palms of his hands...?

He wants me with him. He is dangerous to the living. I cannot outrun him. He will always be my shadow. I walk on, but cannot escape him.

## Maya

In the middle of my show at the Children's Hospital, I realize that Sita is not there. The puppets continue to dance, and to sing, but I grow worried. I finish the performance, and rush to the information desk, and ask them to put out an announcement: *Sita Patel, would you please make your way to the reception, your mother is waiting for you.*

No answer.

I wait for ten minutes, and then begin searching the wards myself. At last I find her on Level Three. She is sitting at a young girl's bedside chatting, happily. The two girls are sharing anecdotes about their lives, laughing and giggling like young teenagers.

The nurse comes up behind me, "Your girl has been such a blessing to the patient," she says. "She comes to talk to her every week. She's a victim of a terrifying crime. Sita's presence has really helped...It's good to be around kids the same age."

I nod, then beckon for Sita to join me. She says her good-byes, and then skips towards me.

"You should have told me where you were, pumpkin, I was worried sick," I say, my voice stern. I try not to reveal how scared I had been to find her gone.

"Oh, don't worry, Mum, I'm alright," Sita says, and runs to the car, escaping any further questioning. We drive home in silence. As we pull into the parking lot, adjacent to our block of flats, Sita looks at me and says, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

I sigh, "I don't know, honey, I really don't know. Shit happens."

\*

I am dreaming, I know this in my sleep, but nonetheless I am scared. My feet are in one box, and my head is in another, and I cannot join the two. Two black polished pumps wriggle independently, and my face turns around, my eyes blinking frantically. My arms are pinned at my side, and I am unable to put myself together again.

I wake up in one piece, and burst out laughing. One of the hazards of the job, I suppose. In preparation for a big show at the School of Magic, I was preparing a brand new magic trick: Veils of Illusion. My image will shiver and shimmer through silk and smoke, and I shall be fluid, untouchable and intangible. Then I shall disappear, and all that shall remain is the trail of smoke I leave behind me. I can see the upturned faces, the expectant gasp, and ooh. The skeptics arguing with the true believers.

I stare at my face in the mirror, and try to remember that this is what shall remain of me after my many transformations. Until age takes it and I change again, and I no longer see myself. I open my jewelry case and take out an amber necklace, and a string of moonstones, with matching earrings. I admire it against my skin, covered in a satin slip. Rarely do I ever have an opportunity to wear my jewels, but tonight I feel like royalty, and I walk into the lounge dressed in these stones.

Sita has been drawing and drawing in the lounge, and her papers lie everywhere. Something crunches underneath my foot, and I see that I've stepped on a red crayon. She has been drawing stories of the Indian goddess Lalita, and I read her writing in thick pencil across the top. Lalita has set sail across the sea in a giant yellow lotus lily, in

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search of Raj, who is dead, or missing, swallowed up by the wave and taken away. Alone she sails, led only by her heart, the beating of which leads her towards her lover. With magical powers she can see the future and knows he is alive somewhere, but in trouble. The family that they might raise together might never come to be, and at the turn and twist of fortune they might lose each other and their lives. So she continues, this heroine goddess of my child's, through the stormy seas, feeling the compass within her guide her closer and closer towards his own heartbeat.

If only, I thought, putting the papers away to be saved and cherished. Sita is starting to believe she has tiger magic within her. When does a child stop believing, I asked myself? Perhaps that is the moment one grows up.

## Sita

Roll up, roll up! I have decided to beat the *World's Fastest Game of Operation*. Currently, the world record is at one minute and two seconds, on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2001, and I shall beat that in front of Jake and all my friends. They shall remember this magnificent achievement for years to come.

My Mum bought me a brand new set of Operation, and I have been practising like mad. The aim is to remove all of the man's organs without touching the sides. I always get stuck on the liver - then the buzzer goes off and I have to start again. I time myself. The fastest I have managed the whole thing is five minutes and thirty-seven seconds, so I have a way to go until I am ready. I practise late at night when my Mum is asleep - I do it by torchlight, so she won't see the light under the door, and this makes things so much more difficult.

I have a big sleepover party planned for next weekend; we'll have dip, with carrot sticks and celery, and all sorts of yummy eats. My Mum says Jake can stay until ten o'clock, but then he must go home because he is a boy. But the girls can stay the whole night. Matilda says she's going to stay awake the whole night chatting to me, but I think I'll get tired. I've never been up till dawn. I think I'll get grumpy if I stay up too late.

Then they'll set their watches, and time every split second of my heroic attempt. In the blink of an eye, I will have completed the game of operations, hopefully in under one minute, and then I will be in the record books, forever and ever. How cool will that be!

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The poor man in the Operations Board Game, looks so shocked to have me pick him apart. Shame, and then he's left with no wishbone, and a broken heart. I even have to remove his spare rib - what if he needs it for something? The one I do quickest is the "butterflies" in his tummy, but I always get stuck on his funnybone. They call it a funny bone, but it's not very funny when you bump it on something. It actually hurts a lot. The funniest piece of him is 'brain freeze.' I sometimes get this when I eat too much ice cream too fast. Then he's left disemboweled, and so sad, but my times are getting better and better as I practise. He has such a funny nose - it buzzes red. Poor man.

\*

The party was a washout. Jake arrived, but was moody and mean. I tried to beat the record but I got buzzed after only ten seconds because I was so nervous that Jake was there. Then it turns out he liked Yasmine all along, and he kissed her on our balcony. Matilda said not to worry, or be too upset, Jake was just a stupid boy, and there were many more fish in the sea. But I still like him, and I wish he had kissed me instead of her. I think maybe if I did one of Houdini's escape tricks, then he would be so impressed. Maybe if I was chained, and escaped from a burning building, or a water tank full of deadly sharks. I know I would win him then. He gets so impressed with stunts like that - he would be sure to see my bravery and courage.

That is absolutely the last time I invite Yasmine to any of my parties. She is a total skank. She was flirting with Jake all evening - and it was my party! Just you wait till I catch a bullet in my teeth - then she'll be sorry.

\*

I have to say goodbye now. It's hard to end a story. Matilda always says it's the worst thing about all stories, they have to come to an end. That's why she can't bear to read the last *Harry Potter* yet, she's saving it in the back of her cupboard for as long as she can bear it. Then there are still some surprises left.

And Lalita's story could go on and on and on, really, to infinity and beyond. But my Mum says that it's long enough now, and people will get bored reading on. So I've decided she should find Raj in the middle of the Gobi desert. He's starving and so thirsty he tries to suck the moisture from weeds that grow in the sand. He's been taken hostage by an evil sorcerer, who doesn't believe in true love. But Lalita prevails, and finds him and rescues him from the terrible fate that has befallen him. She uses her magical gifts, the ones that the tiger gave her, and outwits this terrible man.

And they live Happily Ever After.

The End.

Phew. It brings tears to my eyes. And I feel a little funny in the pit of my tummy about it all. And it makes me nervous thinking about the evil wizard. I think I see him everywhere now, as though he's following my every movements. I don't like writing about evil things, but you can't just ignore that sort of thing, and hope that it will go away. Wizards are very real in this world, they just won't come out in public.

Mum helped me bind the story up, and I gave one copy to Sophia as a present for her baby, because she helped me write it, and the other to Matilda, because she made me

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promise that I would. And I drew a beautiful drawing of Princess Lalita on the cover, and I think she looks a lot like me. My Mum says I'm a little tiger in disguise. And then I sat down and had a good think, and Mum said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Thinking," and she said that then I should do the dishes, and I could think while I dried. People don't take thinking very seriously these days. I am an expert at the greasy pans, I can scrub them very clean indeed.

\*

I'm all alone at the moment, because Mum has forgotten to get fresh milk for the tea. I'm wearing a little gold bindi sticker on my forehead. I exchanged it with Matilda for my furry rabbit stickers. And I've taken up Indian dancing, so I can dress up in golden jewelry and saris and wriggle my hands and belly around like Lalita. I had my first lesson on Saturday, and I put on a show for my Mum in the kitchen, dancing and dancing until she said, "That's enough now, darling."

I like being an Indian Princess. I just wish I could be one in real life too. And sail the seas in a yellow lotus lily. For all of eternity.

There's a horrible bang at the door. I jump. "Who's there?"

## Maya

I carry the groceries to the counter of the Seven-Eleven. Ouma rusks, condensed-milk variety, Tzatsiki dip and Provita crackers, Zoo Biscuits for Sita, and the usual - milk, salad pack and bread. The lady at the checkout counter is missing part of her gum, the rest of her teeth have silver fillings, but she smiles broadly regardless. I can't help but shudder, then look down, ashamed at my reaction. She asks if I want plastic bags, and starts to pack the groceries away. I buy cellphone airtime at the kiosk, and the Cape Times: Death Toll Rises in City. A pack of Dentine chewing gum is a last minute purchase, and I carry the bags carefully to the car.

Hawkers at the stoplights offer me a wire shark, and a bunch of beaded wire flowers, sixty Rand a stem. I shake my head. Another man tries to make me laugh, for a donation he'll give me Funny Money, the pamphlet of jokes that they sell at the side of the road. I hand him two Rand and take the paper. I know I won't read it but he was trying so hard, I paid him for his efforts. Then I look away, as the others in the road converge on my car, hoping for a pushover inside. Thankfully the robot changes from red to green and I move on.

I stop outside the apartment building, and stagger upstairs with my load. At the door I halt, put down the groceries, and pause. I keep looking at the ground, for too long. At the edges of my mind I know that the door's lock has been smashed. But I do not want to face that just yet. I fetch the apples that have spilled across the floor, rummage in my handbag, take out my keys, dust my jacket, then at last, look up and see that someone has

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forced the door open. It swings open, I step inside. Put down the packets; walk over to the bedroom where Sita should be. And see no one.

She is gone. I call out. There is only silence. There is only emptiness.

\*

The room starts spinning, and I try hard to remain calm. I phone everybody I can think of, but nobody has seen her. I consider the possibility she might have run away, but she had been smiling when I left her, it was unlikely. All her clothes are still in her closet, and her rucksack is still hanging on the hook on her wall.

Two policemen arrive to investigate. The door has clearly been forced, but nothing has been stolen, and the apartment is immaculate. Only a broken vase on the table next to the phone.

I begin pacing frantically. Things aren't moving fast enough, and I don't know what to do or who to turn to. Sita's toys are still on the carpet: her Malibu Barbie (she didn't like me to tell anyone she still, sometimes, played with it), and her drawings and notebooks. The policeman asks me a few questions, then says he'll send someone over again in the evening if she is still missing. The door won't lock. I check my jewellery, my money, any valuables, but nothing has been taken except my daughter. Or she has just vanished, like a magic trick gone wrong. Now you see her, now you don't.

I pick up her pink pen, the one she uses to do most of her writing. It has a troll eraser on the end, with most of its hair rubbed off. Her notepad is open, and I stare vacantly at the spidery print. Perhaps she has written something, some clue to what has

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happened, but all I find is her story. I even break the lock on her diary, a cardinal sin that she might never forgive me for. It contains only excerpts about her teachers, and what happened in school. Nothing about wanting to run away.

I cannot focus, and put the diary back in the drawer for now. A pain is beginning to appear in my chest. I think it might be grief, but I push it away. Too soon for such nonsense, she is just playing a prank on me, being a rebellious child, I reason to myself. My whole body reeling with the fear of her loss.

A neighbour pops round, and offers to make me tea, but I barely notice her in the room. The neighbour asks if Sita has a boyfriend, maybe she wants to be with him. "No," I shake my head, "Too young, too shy." I turn away from her. Her questions are empty words; so are her condolences.

I begin pacing the room. I am aware of the sound of the creaking floorboards, the silence inside the room. My hands are too cold, and my whole body is shivering in the warm evening. I will never forgive her, I think. Not once have I punished her, but if this is a prank... Anger makes me stronger once again, and the thought of disciplining her rouses me for a few minutes.

But then I remember her character; this is so unlike her. She is clingy, and does not want to be too far away from me. I should never have left, why did I leave her alone, even to go to the shops? Guilt and fear, and dread make me dizzy, and I sit down. And so the rest of the evening, and well into the night pass this way. Pacing, and phoning, and rocking. But still no sign of her.

I sleep three hours that night. The next morning I awake to a thud in the pit of my stomach as reality hits me. I feel so ill I can barely leave my bed, but I sit up, feeling

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helpless. Where to look, who to turn to? I count the cracks in the paint in the ceiling, long lines that web across the roof. Then I shut my eyes and wait for the policeman to arrive.

Sita's puppet, Lucinda, lies face down on the floor. She is lifeless without her mistress to give her breath. The wood of her cheeks is chipped by a sudden fall onto the ground; two pink circles roughly painted, imitate a blush. She cannot speak, she cannot move, without her ventriloquist. Her eyes a glassy stare. A puppet without a master, dead wood. I whisper the way home in her ear, in case Sita can hear it.

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## Sophia

I can feel Ruby kicking enthusiastically – she is going to be a champion soccer player. “Where is Sita?” I whisper to my belly button. I think I can feel the baby sigh sadly in return. I have long conversations with Ruby now, about everything from the best kinds of berry tea, to how to kiss a boy for the first time. She is already so real to me. I can't imagine how Maya is coping.

A sense of foreboding has settled upon the whole affair, and I do not want to think of Sita's round, sweet face. The last time I saw her she was wearing a pink and orange polka dot dress, with a ribbon around the waist. Two little points marked her new breasts, and she stuck her chest out proudly. She told me she even had to wear a bra now. She had the dearest brown eyes I had ever seen, doe-like and watchful. I shake myself a little. I am talking about her as if she was gone. One hears such horror stories in the news each day, but somehow they remain in the television screen or on the pages of the newspaper. Never in one's own life.

She comes to me in a dream that night. I am standing at the ocean, with her hand in mine. And a wave takes her. Perhaps it is the story of Lalita, still lingering in my mind, but then she is gone, and lost and swallowed up whole. And she is crying, and crying for help, but there is nothing I can do. Slowly my body begins to freeze over. First my legs, so that I can't run to her. Then my arms, so I can't reach for her. And I watch as she dies, calling out for help. She needs Lalita's tiger magic. The power to fight off the darkness. I touch the pages of the story, hoping for a part of Sita to leap back to life before me.

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Is this all that remains of the child, this story? She had told me she wanted to immaculately conceive. She actually believed she could do it. And the strange thing is, I believed her. Sometimes I think I did it this way too, the ghost and me; that Ruby was fashioned from starlight and God. Reality has become so distant, that only dreams remain.

As soon as I have eaten something, I send an email around with Sita's photograph attached. *Spread the word*, I write, *Missing Girl*. It is official now, Sita is in trouble.

My body is clumsy at almost nine months, and I find it difficult to move, but I get into the car and search for her aimlessly, street by street. It is hopeless, I know it, but I have to do something. So many street children, I think, as small hands are extended at a city stoplight, and then harshly dismissed by the inhabitants of the other cars, an excuse to vent the day's frustration. No longer treated as children, but yesterday's trash. I knew child prostitution was rife in the city centre.

I do not want to bring Ruby up in this world. After many hours of aimless driving, I return home, exhausted and weeping. She has been gone for two days now, and still nothing.

I phone Charlotte. "I remember the wait," she says. "There is murder in the minutes."

"She's going to be fine," I say confidently. "I just know it."

"Given the statistics of rape and murder..."

"Fuck statistics! She *has* to be fine, she's my goddaughter."

"Try to keep calm – think of the baby..."

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Charlotte's voice is soothing, but soon I am crying. She promises to get the word out as quickly as possible. I sit down heavily upon the sofa, and fidget nervously. Sita's voice is in my mind, *help me, help me*, and it is as if I am letting her die by my own inaction. But I do not know what to do. And the minutes pass, then the hours, and soon another day goes by and still no news of the girl.

As soon as I can, I pack an overnight bag and move into Maya's flat, so that there is always someone at her side, answering the phone and making sure she gets enough to eat. I sit by her side and make her eat a bowl of soup, spoon by spoon, and still we wait. And soon, we do not want to hear any news at all. Each time the phone rings, the two of us freeze, staring at the receiver, terrified of the voice on the other end. It has been too long now.

\*

I find Maya in her bedroom, rocking backwards and forwards in a trance. She is trying to commune with the world beyond, to receive information on Sita's whereabouts. She frantically writes down words, *reeds, dirt, torn, saliva*.

I panic, "Stop it," I say, attempting to shake her out of it. "This is madness."

"She is alive, I know it," Maya cries, her voice rising, then changing into an unfamiliar pitch. "Someone else is coming through – he says he knows where Sita is hiding. He says she is lost and afraid, but alive. Don't give up hope."

I shake her, "Enough, now. This is not real."

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Maya ignores me, “I am Orpheus! I must go into the underworld to retrieve my lost child. They ask me to go to sleep and go down into the darkness. Don’t look back. Never look back or all shall be lost.”

“*They?* Who are you talking about?” I begin shaking her, and her head lolls backwards.

“They say I must be alone. You must leave now, Sophia. I must be utterly alone.”

“Stand up, Maya. Pull yourself together. I’m going to give you a sleeping pill, okay?”

“No drugs,” she pushes me so hard I fall onto the floor. She has whipped herself up into a frenzied state. In the background the television blares, and shifts from an advert to the nine-o’clock news. And then we hear it: *missing girl, Sita Patel. Age eleven. Police have no leads. If any one has heard anything, please contact this number...police scour the area...*

Maya collapses on the floor, barely conscious, unable to grasp what is happening. I wait until I understand the report, then switch off the television set. I go to her and make sure she takes a sleeping tablet. Only once she is still and asleep do I realize how close I am to my due date. The baby kicks angrily. What are we to do here? This apartment feels so small. And nobody has bothered to fix the door yet.

I see myself in Maya’s situation, eleven years from now, and it makes me so afraid. I want the baby to stay inside the womb; at least there it’s still safe, and my own. I take a breath and try to hold her in.

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Where is she? Where is our Sita? I do not even clearly remember her today. She has become the *missing girl*, not the girl we all know and love. It makes it easier to deal with somehow. But the world knows now, they will be watching for her, reporting back to the authorities. At least something is being done at last.

Later that night, a reporter from the *Cape Times* phones, followed by one from the *Tattler*. I try to answer as best I can, give detailed descriptions of Sita's hair colour, face and clothes the day she went missing. "Yes, yes, she's been missing a week now," I say automatically.

\*

At least I had some warning. I'm not sure if it is a dream or a vision, my waking and sleeping hours are spent in such a daze. But Sita comes to me and puts her hand on my cheek, and she sits with me for some time until I understand what is about to happen. Her fingers are still so small, and I can smell the perfume that her mother had given her on her wrist. I tuck her hair behind her ear as I always had. She seems peaceful in this moment. She does not say a word. It is as if she has forgotten how to speak. But I understand her.

Three tears fall down her dark cheeks, and drip onto her clothes, the same ones I had been describing over and over again to the police and the reporters.

Then I blink, and open my eyes.

\*

The policeman speaks fast.

She was raped and murdered. *Fact.*

Her body was mutilated. *Fact.*

A suspect has been apprehended. *Fact.*

Coroners suspect days of abuse. *Room for conjecture.*

I go through this information coldly. Piece by piece I put together an understanding of events. My body bloodless and frozen, like Sita's now lying in the morgue.

\*

I am asked to identify the body. Maya is still in bed, sedated. I have never been inside a morgue before. It smells of death and ice. Chemicals and blood. Sita's body is lying on the table. Merely a shell now without her spirit to illuminate her eyes. Her face is covered in dirt, torn and bruised, then frozen with her blood. Her arms are clasped over her chest in a protective gesture. Her eyes are still open wide. She smells of rot and pain. I throw up on the sterilized floor. She had been stabbed several times.

I throw up again, and taste bile. A part of me wants to see the whole of her, even in this state, before I lose her completely. This is closer than I will ever be again. So I stay with her body for longer than is necessary. And the smell is still in my hair and under my nails. And her expression will haunt me always.

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"Yes, it is her," is all I say.

She is covered over again, and put away in a drawer somewhere, next to other bodies, lined up neatly in rows. Such awful company for a little girl, she will get nightmares if she wakes. It is better she remains sleeping.

\*

There is a news camera crew outside the apartment building, and I feel trapped inside. I refuse them an interview. The publicity surrounding Sita's death is overwhelming: *eleven-year-old girl, taken from her mother's apartment by the Serial Strangler. Man arrested and pleading guilty.*

We have discovered that Sita had befriended the man earlier in the year when he taught at her school, and given him her telephone number. When he was released on bail on a technicality, he looked her up. She knew he was dangerous by then, I reasoned she must have put up a fight. She was bright as a button, and had been taught to defend herself. However, she would be helpless against a grown man. The details between her abduction and her death will always be a mystery to us. Perhaps it is better we do not know. But the scars on her body speak of her struggle, and what she went through.

Maya is inconsolable, and we've had to have the doctor in to medicate her on a number of occasions, to prevent her from self-harming. She can only handle one piece of information at a time. First, Sita's death. The fact that she is gone from us. Then her murder, rape and mutilation. Slowly now there's a man involved in all of our minds, and a culprit to point our hatred towards. And the system that let him out on bail.

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Right now, my main priority is to get her to eat something. A small piece of cheese; one slice of toast, or some soup, a few mouthfuls at a time. She won't drink anything, and is dangerously dehydrated, so for a while, she is put on a drip.

The doctor has also had to take me aside, and remind me that I'm due to give birth any day now. I've been ignoring the needs of my own body and the baby. But Ruby is still kicking, reminding me of life, stubbornly refusing to be forgotten.

The phone rings constantly, an irritation now. We don't want to speak to anybody, even in their kindness. The pain here is too overwhelming and raw.

\*

The scent of orange blossom is too sweet for such a tragedy. It fills the air with such bitterness in its beauty. I destroy the offensive plant's leaves, its blossoms, small pinprick petals, in the courtyard of the apartment block. A tenant protests, but I continue, brushing her aside like an old cobweb.

I return to Maya's apartment. I take a piece of paper, and write out the life Sita would have lived. At eighteen, she would have met a boy, fallen in love. Heart broken, of course. Twenty-one, a big party, her coming of age. We'd have been so proud. Ruby would be there, my smiling child. She would graduate, with honours, then become a distinguished professional. An artist perhaps, or a lawyer. She would write out her story of Lalita, the Tiger Goddess, and grubby fingers would page through eagerly. At thirty she would start her own family. And the natural order of life would continue, through heartaches and pain, and triumphs and joy, she would soldier through. I grieve for the life

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unlived. I mourn the loss of the child, and the death of the woman she would have become.

There is death in the air. Under my fingernails. In the dirty teacups, the rolled up newspaper, the carpet. I cannot escape it. It is used in the same sentence as Sita's own name. I see the word associated with her face and her body. *Dead Girl, Sita Patel. Inquest. Trial. Suspect. Murder weapon. Strangulation. Merciless.*

I scribble down a few words: *Death has taken her .The child is gone. Innocence lost. To tell her story, through pen and ink on paper, resurrects her broken body, so for a moment, she breaths again, with us.*

There is nowhere to go but to fall into sorrow, no escape from its relentlessness. Yet still, the orange blossom lingers in the air.

## Maya

*Mummy, I burn.*

There is smoke, from my baby's body, she is smoking. Her dimpled hands. Her long black hair. Dark eyes. Curl up in flames. I wait too long, weeping outside with the guests, and I see the smoke, billowing into the air. I try not to breathe her in, then change my mind, and gulp in her smoke.

The smoke will be caught by the rain and the clouds, and she'll return to the earth. I will get her body back, in a small urn, to scatter the ashes, fragments of bone in the remains. There is nothing left of her now but memories. I never had a chance to say goodbye to my child's body. Too traumatic for a parent, I was told.

*The wheels of the bus go round and round. Round and round, round and round, the wheels of the bus go...*

I can hear her singing. She is two and a half. *Round and round.* Her face is chubby cherubic. She is covered in chocolate cake from the party.

*Mummy, mummy, round and round, the wheels of the bus go round and round...when I'm big I want to be a princess...*

I know I can't survive this.

## Charlotte

The service is long, and the space is claustrophobic and stuffy. I place a hand on Maya's arm, comforting her. She is fainting and extremely pale. It is hard to look in her direction. Some of Sita's classmates are here, shell-shocked. They are wearing bright colours in her memory. So am I but I regret it now. I should have stuck with basic black. A reporter in the corner takes notes on a small notepad, his pen moving swiftly. The floor echoes with the sound of high heels, the shuffle of feet.

We remember her life. She liked chocolate, dancing in the rain, collecting seashells, and stickers. She wrote stories. Her friends loved her. She did well in History class. Her favourite colour was pink, and she loved listening to the song, *Build Me Up Buttercup*. She wanted to be an actress on Broadway, and play a famous heroine on the stage. Sophia's photos are on display, showing Sita in different poses. She looks very innocent and wide-eyed, too young for such a fate.

The priest says the final prayer, and the coffin slides behind a red curtain. I want to grab hold of it, stop it, but it moves forward into the flames. A child weeps in the front row, and the people are silent, in shock.

Outside, in the courtyard, the guests mill around, awkwardly, speaking in hushed tones. Maya collapses, hysterical, and Sophia catches her. We stay close to her as she keens. Black smoke billows thickly into the air, and it is done. Sita's body has been burnt.

A hand touches my arm. I turn and see my Noah. I step back, unwilling to speak to him. The two of us are back in an instant, at Gabriel's funeral, where I am wearing that silly black dress; he is in his smartest suit, guilty and angry, too upset to cry.

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Noah has the same expression on his face today. At least we are civil now. His face is downcast and troubled. "I just wanted to say: thank you. I'm sorry. Goodbye," he says.

I stare at him, unsure of how to respond. It seems we will always be there, at the moment of Gabriel's death. For the first time, I feel at peace with this. Some things you can never escape.

Too choked up to speak, I extend my hand. He takes it, looks into my eyes, then walks away. I can feel Gabriel's presence with us today. He is holding me, as he always did, and I weep in his arms. Too much has been lost. I miss him.

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## Sophia

After the funeral, the guests are gathered at Charlotte's house, eating cucumber sandwiches, and talking softly. The stained-glass windows leave coloured patterns on the wooden floor. Maya has been taken to a guest bedroom to rest, barely conscious. Friends weep in corners, huddled in sorrow and shock. Pale young faces drained of life by Sita's passing.

My photographs of Sita are displayed in frames along the walls, some propped up against the furniture. Her round, sweet face is often smiling, but mostly I try to catch her off guard, pulling up the hem of her skirt, asking a question, mid sentence. Laughing. Milky white against dark black and grey, her image haunts the room, and makes some guests turn away, only to meet her eye in the next frame. The glass seals her off, like a museum curiosity.

What was meant to be a project about youth and innocence, has become a macabre spectacle. Mutilated child, eleven years of age. Before the event. Can you see it in her face, the foreshadowing of what was to happen to her? Did she draw death to herself? Somehow deserve this? If not, then we are all vulnerable, and what a world to be a part of, the onlooker shudders, and prays for his own safety. Smugly secure in the certainty that it will never happen to him.

I haven't mentioned it, but I have been feeling contractions all day. Suddenly, I am unable to cope. Charlotte is at my side, instantly.

"I didn't want to worry anyone," I say. "I'm in labour." Then, "Fuck, I'm gonna miss Sita so much."

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Charlotte calls an ambulance, and helps me into the spare bedroom. The pain is flesh, and moving through me, new life struggling for air and an escape from water and womb. Alive, skin, bones, mass of blooded hair, clumped and clotted, it is no longer within me, but its own agent. Of its self, on its own, its eyes tightly scrunched shut, unable to fathom this new wonder. Life, it lives, it is alive.

The word made flesh. My beautiful baby girl. All of life encapsulated in this one moment, she screams with healthy lungs. No longer of fluid, but of air and earth, the elements changed around her.

Disorientated, she nuzzles against my skin, the scent of her mother. And my identity shifts to become that now: mother, with my child. I own her again outside of my belly. Charlotte cuts the umbilical cord carefully. We can hear the ambulance pulling up outside the house.

The ghost is there, our holy trinity. He greets his child with a tear, "She has a strong heart." I smile at him with pity, his image fading to nothing with the live flesh in my arms. He lives on only through her now.

Charlotte takes out my camera. The shutter flicks, for a moment, and mother and child are safe within its lens, in black and white, smiling in negative. Proof of her existence, of new life. Our portrait has been taken.

Charlotte laughs. "Welcome baby girl."

## Maya

I run my finger across the skirting board, a fine layer of dust coating my skin. Sita's picture rests on the mantelpiece. Sophia took this photo on a cold wet day in June. It is in black and white, a simple portrait. From the side. Her face turned away from the camera, shyly. Her hair is up in a ponytail. She is biting her lip in frustration. Too self-conscious to strike a pose, she scowls.

I pick it up, hesitantly, my hands aching to touch her live flesh. This is all I have of her, I think, my tear sliding off the shiny surface of the print. One simple image, in light, dark shading, that holds her memory. What was she thinking that day, I'll never know. Homework, perhaps, the boy she liked. I will myself into her mind, but that is shut to me now. So is the warmth of her breath. Breathe again, child. I want to bring this flat image to life, but it remains two-dimensional. I want her to move her head towards me, and smile. Some magic must animate her features again, bring her spirit back from the dead.

But here she is captured, for me, a split second of her life that I now hold with me. Perhaps all of life is art in motion.

"Speak, speak," I whisper to the paper. "Speak again."

But she is silent.

## Epilogue

### Sita

So this must be heaven. Or at least, I think it is. I seem to be stuck in a large Waiting Room, with the words, Back in Ten Minutes on the door. It's been ten minutes. Could someone please tell me where I'm going? I'm number 77, after a man who died of lung cancer. Beware, smoking can kill you.

Nothing seems real here. The walls fade, then recede, and I can see my mother. I've tried to talk to her a number of times, but she can't hear me. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she just shudders, and wraps her shawl tighter around her. It was very upsetting at first, because I really wanted to talk to my mum, and she wouldn't listen, even when I shouted very loudly.

But then this boy came up to me, and took my hand. His name is Gabriel. He doesn't look like a normal person, so it gave me quite a skrik, let me tell you. His skin is blue, and translucent, and water flows through his hair, which is the colour of sunshine. His feet slop as he walks, and he clothes are always wet. He said he'd be my friend, and I could talk to him about anything. I said I wasn't ready to talk because something truly horrific had just happened to me, which resulted in my dying. He reached out and touched the bruises around my neck, and my bleeding skin. I pulled away, frightened, but he said not to worry, he had a plaster, and he made it better again.

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He is a conductor, because wherever he goes there is music in the air. It is beautiful - like nothing I have ever heard before. Voices from another world, instruments - brass maybe, then strings. It calms me down. He says he can compose better here - the music is lovelier than anything imagined on earth. Better than Bach, Mozart, Beethoven - if only someone would write it down. He tried, he says, when he was a living boy, but it is like catching sunshine in a sieve.

Many people are crying in the waiting room, so we all have our special friends to comfort us. But some people can't see them. All they have to do is look up. Gabriel chats to me all the time, and says not to worry, there's just been some sort of bureaucratic bungle, and things will be flowing again in no time. We will be processed soon. I don't like looking at the other people, they all seem so sad.

I'm getting really homesick, and sometimes Gabriel takes me to see my mum, but only for a few moments, because she is distraught at my tragic death. I try to tell her what happened to me. I say it again and again, then start screaming, because it was really awful, but nobody listens. I don't like to think about it anymore. Every time I do, Gabriel distracts me with funny stories about this girl he once loved. I think her name is Lottie. She had hair the colour of a sunset, and the prettiest smile. He says he's waiting for her here, between the worlds, so that he is always closer than she thinks. Sometimes, he itches to push her in front of a bus, so that she can be with him sooner, but he has to restrain himself. He grins mischievously, like a little imp, and says she had the biggest knockers.

Slowly, all my memories are becoming a blur, as though he touches the edges, and they become misty, far away. They no longer seem mine, like a movie I watched

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once with a horrible ending, which made me stay up late all night for fright of it. My mum never let me watch movies like that. I asked him once if anyone would remember me. I'm so young, I'd barely been alive before I disappeared off the face of the earth. And I was going to do great things too. Gabriel gets sad at this, and says I would have, there's no denying it. But that's life. My mum always said it wasn't fair. She's going to miss me terribly. Gabriel pulls a coin from behind my ear, and I laugh.

"That's better," he says. And soon he's a clown, and making me giggle. His hair catches fire like the sun over his watery body, and he opens up his shirt to show me fishes swimming about in his belly. He says to look at my own body, and suddenly it's filled with shooting stars.

"Wow!" I gasp.

"We can do anything here," he says. "Even fly – if you want."

"No thank you," I reply politely, "I'm afraid of heights."

So there are some fun things about being dead it seems. To pass the time, we whisper poetry in people's ears at the train station. It seems to cheer them up; some of them shift ever so slightly and look up. People respond to Shakespeare the best, and I am able to recite a lot of the sonnets by heart. Gabriel makes up his own poetry, and considers himself to be quite talented, but it's all gobbledygook to me.

If I had known I only had a few weeks to live, I think I would have done things differently. For instance, I would have eaten all the double chocolate fudge ice cream in the freezer that we were saving for special occasions. And I would definitely have skipped school, and spent all my money in my piggy bank. I wouldn't have worried so much about my maths test; it all seems so pointless now.

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I help Gabriel hand out jellybeans to the other people in the queue. It cheers them up for a moment. One woman says I have a light in my eyes she has never seen before, a fallen angel. Too good for the world. I quite agree. I'm special here. I eat some of the jellybeans myself, even though I'm supposed to hand them out to everyone else. I like the blue ones the most, they taste like licorice.

He promises to introduce me to all the Hindu deities the moment I arrive at our destination - Lakshmi, and Parvati, and of course, the beautiful Sita from myth, my namesake. Maybe I'll be able to see the terrifying elephant-god Ganesh, but I might be too frightened. They'll throw a festival for me, with singing and dancing that will continue way past my bedtime. I'll get to wear a beautiful blue sari, with a bindi on my forehead, and feast on sweetmeats, saffron and spices filling the air.

Smiling, Gabriel puts a crown of flowers on my head. In this world I am a princess, just like in my story. Here I am only beautiful. I have already forgotten suffering. A tiger appears in front of me, and roars, and I become one with it.

Gabriel takes my hand and cries, "Second star to the right and straight on till morning."

And we are gone.

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*Wait for a time, exactly under the star. Then, if a little man appears who laughs, who has golden hair and who refuses to answer questions, you will know who he is. If this should happen, please comfort me. Send me word that he has come back.*

The Little Prince – Antoine De Saint-Exupéry

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