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When in Broad Daylight

I Open My Eyes

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A dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of MA in Creative Writing

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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.

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One

If Maria Petros is feeling nervous, she's hiding it well. It can't be comfortable to face a semi-circle of philosophers, especially when they're waiting for her to speak. She is taking her time, sitting calmly in her armchair, giving the group time to settle, look around the room and focus on her. Her voice, when it comes, is low and clear. 'Thank you all for coming this afternoon. Professor Sullivan has asked me to conduct a session for the department. He's told me, briefly, about the situation.'

Behind her is a bay window: the view is partially obscured by a tree outside, its fine black branches pressing lightly against the glass. On the opposite side of her therapy room is a fireplace containing a gas fire; above the mantel is a large painting depicting throngs of bright figures in feverish activity.

The Head of Department, who is sitting in the chair nearest Maria's, says, 'Please – call me Luke. In this room I'm not a professor.' A rustling, just short of amusement, comes from the other philosophers. 'Just so that everyone is clear, this isn't really a therapy session; nothing so formal. Only a discussion that Maria has kindly agreed to guide.'

Maria nods seriously. One would guess her to be a modest person, not given to reflection on her appearance, yet she must be aware that she is striking. Her blonde hair is cut short, page boy style, with a thick fringe in front, she wears no makeup, her button-down shirt is masculine, and high heeled black boots hug her jeans.

'I want to reiterate my view that we need something like this,' says Luke, who is not dressed warmly enough in his thin brown sweater. He is keeping close to Maria's gas fire, his legs outstretched towards it. Surely the heat will harm those leather shoes. 'It's poisoning the department, this situation. I don't think I'm putting it too dramatically.'

For a moment, only the faint roar of the gas heater can be heard.

‘Do the rest of you feel the same?’ Maria asks.

‘No,’ says Joan Castle from deep in her sofa, into which she has substantially sunk. ‘In fact, only Luke and Kristof think this is a good idea. The rest of us have objections.’

Maria seems unperturbed. She inclines her head as if to say *Go on please*.

Cyrus Jackson speaks up. ‘No offence intended, but most of us reject the principles of your profession. It simply isn’t tenable to believe in psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, whatever you want to call it.’ It appears that Cyrus could say more – much more – about this, but he closes his mouth firmly and sits back in his chair. Cyrus comes originally from Atlanta, Georgia. His suit, a silky grey weave, remains uncreased despite his movements.

Maria is listening with care, as if she is trying to hear a faint melody beneath the words. She turns her head back to Joan, whose choice of clothing – today, a voluminous purple tied dress – is sometimes mistaken for gaiety of spirit. ‘Actually, the department is larger than this,’ says Joan. ‘Some people didn’t come today because they refused. And of those who *are* here, some of us are present only out of respect for Luke.’

Luke’s face shows a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. ‘There it is, Maria. You’ll find that philosophers, or at least our philosophers, aren’t loath to speak their minds.’

‘I’m glad to hear that.’ Maria looks anything but glad. Her face is grave; she seems to have taken to herself these objections, and to be burdened by them. Perhaps this is her habit, swallowing the disquiet of others. It is soothing to feel that someone else is absorbing negative feelings from the air.

One philosopher has not yet spoken. He sits the furthest from Maria. Among the group, only he is directly facing her, and throughout the exchange he has been watching her. He is dressed simply: light brown trousers, a white long-sleeved shirt with tortoise-shell buttons.

He seems a little foreign. Perhaps his black hair, cropped and soldierly, contributes to the impression. Or his sharp green eyes – but maybe there has never been a period or location in which those eyes blended with their surroundings.

‘I’m not sceptical,’ he says. ‘I welcome this.’ Maria shifts in her chair, recrossing her legs. The zip of one of her black boots is half undone, and calls to be fastened securely. ‘I know,’ says the philosopher, ‘that my colleagues have serious concerns. But Luke is right that the department has been poisoned. There’s a seepage into our lives of a sickening hurt. With all our skills, we seem unable to get ourselves back on some equilibrium. Even if there’s only a small chance that this will help, I’m glad to try this session. It can’t harm us. Maybe it’ll do some good.’

In a Sigmund Freud voice, Joan says, ‘And vot are you hiding beneas zis appearance of reasonableness, Doktor Kristof Zoetman?’ She laughs. Yet her colleague’s mild, reasonable manner seems to have settled the matter somehow.

Maria, by a small movement of her mouth, appears – despite her professional demeanour – to be pleased by Kristof’s contribution. The human being in her, glad to find an ally, has peeped out from behind the psychologist. ‘I see that you all have various opinions about whether this session is a good idea. I hope it turns out to be fruitful, but of course I respect the views of those of you who think otherwise. Maybe one of you could explain what brings you here. I know the outline already, but I’d like to hear it again, with everyone present.’

Luke begins. ‘Last year,’ he says. Then he takes a breath. ‘Last year, we had a visitor from the Netherlands, a young philosopher called Saskia Zeilmaker. She was working in political philosophy, and was interested in the connection between power and corruption. She asked: can one use great power wisely, as Plato demanded from the rulers of his ideal city? An

important question, which she wanted to explore in a local context. Saskia came on a two-year grant from her government to complete a post-doctoral study here.'

'Most of us aren't interested in that kind of applied stuff at all,' says Joan. 'We're more straightforward analytic philosophy –metaphysics, that kind of thing.' Maria nods. It is not clear whether she knows what Joan is talking about. 'But we do get foreign applicants who want to do applied things, and if they're any good we accommodate them.'

'Anyway,' says Luke. 'She'd been with us for a year and a bit, and everything was going well. Then three months ago, on a Monday morning in mid-March, she didn't come to work. We called her a number of times that week, but there was no reply at her flat.'

'At the end of the week I went over,' Joan adds. 'Buzzed a few times. No reply. The neighbours hadn't seen her since Friday.'

'So we called her family in Groningen,' says Luke. 'She'd spoken to them the week before, said everything was going well. That was the last they heard from her.'

There is a pause in the room, and once more the fire takes prominence. The gas hisses from its pipes, and is burnt away by the flame.

'Naturally,' says Cyrus, 'we worked through the possibilities systematically. We called the police and the morgue; nothing. We checked with the customs authority: she hasn't left the country, at least via an airport or border post or ship. We put up posters, spoke on the radio. Now we're at a loose end.'

Maria is nodding as she listens. She looks earnest and concerned; when the philosophers stop speaking, she continues nodding a little longer.

All this,' says Kristof, 'wouldn't usually be your concern. It would solely be a matter for the police and other authorities. But for us it's also become a terrible psychological strain. To understand this, you really need to know something about our relation to Saskia. She was – is

– a remarkable woman. Warm and kind, as well as brilliant; enthusiastic, modest. One doesn't often meet someone like that.'

'Breath of fresh air,' says Cyrus briskly.

'That's right,' says Luke. 'Her presence brought life to the department; we were planning to make her a permanent offer, and hoping she might accept. Part of what makes this so dreadful is the uncertainty of what's happened. It's a hard thing to say, but sometimes I think that if she were dead, it might even be easier. We could seek help individually – for all I know, some of us have done so' – Joan and Cyrus look away from Luke, dissociating themselves from the suggestion – 'but the disappearance has been a blow to all of us jointly. I thought that at least for one occasion, we should come together for psychological guidance. If we can learn how to cope with this, how to go on, we might even – if we can ever be of any more use to poor Saskia – be able to help her one day. It was Kristof who recommended you, after I broached the idea of a debriefing with the department. I'm a real believer in therapy, unlike some of my colleagues. He said you came highly recommended by the psychology department.'

Maria nods, absorbing the compliment with a small smile, and sits back. 'I'm hoping we can explore in more detail,' she says, 'what Saskia means to you. To become clear on that would be a first step towards coping. That's why I asked you all to bring something to this session, some object that makes you think of Saskia, and to describe the emotions it brings up.'

Once more there is a silence. Among philosophers there is seldom quiet; usually they have many firm ideas and are able and willing to express them at length. But producing objects in order to describe the feelings they elicit is not a familiar task.

‘I’m afraid I forgot to bring something,’ says Cyrus decisively. Maria looks at him, nods without challenging the remark.

‘I remembered the request, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to do it,’ says Joan. ‘I found it a little embarrassing.’

Maria turns to Luke who, in his eagerness to speak, has cleared his throat. He is holding up a postcard with tack on each corner. ‘I took it from her office,’ he says. ‘A picture of Picasso’s goat. A sculpture made out of waste material, bits of string, metal, things he found in dumps. A tender, brave goat! Cocking a snoot at the whole world, tough and ready for anything. Saskia kept this card up on her office wall. She told me that when she spent a year in Paris as a student, she visited the goat at the Picasso Museum once a week. I wasn’t surprised. Funny, fearless – I think she saw something of herself in that goat.’

‘Well,’ Maria says. ‘That’s certainly something for us to talk about.’

Luke adds, as an afterthought: ‘Her office is still vacant. No one has been given permission to occupy it. Even the administration wants to keep it open.’ He looks down at his hands, and again the room fills with silence.

‘I see *you* like art too.’ Kristof is smiling as he looks at Maria. The painting above her fireplace is a copy of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It is perhaps an unusual choice for a therapist, this picture with a thousand mad cavorting figures. Maybe it is too dominant, too disturbing for a room in which people are asked to recount their own stories. There is a risk that it will somehow entwine itself into the narratives.

Maria nods, possibly in agreement, or perhaps as an invitation for him to carry on speaking. ‘And you, Kristof – have you brought something?’

‘I have’ – and he bends forward to a black sports bag on the floor in front of him, and unzips it. Out comes a plastic sleeve with a glinting disc. ‘I came with a portable sound

system of my own, but I see you have one yourself.’ Kristof gets up and crosses the room. His movements are smooth, quick, efficient; they have the elegance of a philosophical argument. ‘Just a moment.’ Maria’s hi-fi, the box and speakers tucked into her bookshelf, is dealt with swiftly: Kristof’s hands move over it, tapping, sliding, and then he is returning to his chair as the machine whirrs, readying itself to play.

There is a subterranean roll of drums. A violin calls out, a series of long notes. In the far background, a kind of rattle. Everyone in the room listens to this assortment of mournful sounds, but with varying degrees of attention. Joan looks at Cyrus; each of them maintains a poker face. Luke seems to be incorporating the music into his mourning, a soundtrack for his sorrow; his eyes are downcast.

Maria appears to be waiting for a natural break in the music, but every pause is brief, soon interrupted by a drum roll, a gong or a chorus of high wordless human voices. After a few minutes, speaking over a rattle, she asks Kristof what the music signifies for him.

‘This is something I shared with Saskia,’ he says. ‘Morton Feldman’s *Rothko Chapel*. Painting was her main artistic interest, not music, but she loved this. I wasn’t at all surprised, because she had – has, I should say – a truly soulful presence. And under these strange circumstances of her disappearance, the music takes on a new and frightening meaning for me.’

Luke sighs, and the gas heater hisses. For the next half hour, Maria elicits further expressions from the philosophers about their feelings for Saskia, the meaning to them of her disappearance, and the strains they are under. Luke produces a further object for discussion, a photograph of the end of year departmental braai. He and Saskia are sitting on deckchairs, she grinning toothily, a tall and heavy woman; each are holding almost empty wine glasses. Behind the two of them, walking past, is Kristof, his image rendered blurry by his movement.

‘How would you describe your emotional states since her disappearance?’ Maria asks.

‘I don’t think I’m much changed,’ says Joan. ‘A little angry, maybe, irritable.’ This remark is greeted with silence.

‘I feel totally alert,’ Cyrus remarks. ‘I get into bed at night and I lie there, waiting to get up, immediately, ready for the slightest change in air pressure. I’m not scared; just watchful. All the time.’ He brushes the side of his suit, though there is nothing on it.

Sullivan admits to feeling guilty and ineffectual. ‘What more could we do?’ he asks. ‘I mean, we’ve gone over everything – police, hospitals, morgue, newspapers ...’ he goes through the list, as he has clearly done before, many times. ‘But I feel we’re not doing what we can, we’ve missed something, there may be some clue that we’ve just been too careless to notice.’

‘That’s the job of the police,’ says Joan.

‘The police,’ Luke says bitterly. ‘How much have they done?’

The conversation is rendered ominous, melancholic by Kristof’s music. It seems that Maria is hesitant to ask him to switch it off, because of course it has a special meaning to him, and no one else in the department asks either. So, accompanied by bells, violins and rattles the gathering goes on, and once the music draws to a dreadfully sad close, it seems to them all that the session is at an end.

‘I would, of course, be happy to see you all again if you like,’ Maria says.

‘Thank you so much,’ replies Luke. He looks deflated. ‘We’ll let you know. Meanwhile, we much appreciate your help.’

Kristof removes his CD and then stands, waiting, as his colleagues leave. He appears relaxed, though only he is left in the room with Maria.

‘Is there something else I can help with?’ she asks.

‘I know it’s a little unprofessional of me, we should stick to Saskia’s disappearance, but I couldn’t help noticing your picture,’ says Kristof. ‘I love the Bosch, and I’m amazed that someone has taken the trouble to paint it for themselves. Quite a big copy too, about half the size of the original. Did you do it?’

Maria laughs. ‘If I tried, it wouldn’t look as good as that, I can tell you.’

‘Who then?’

A pause: ‘My mother.’

‘Impressive. Talented artist.’

‘I suppose so. It was a long project for her. She had a huge book of Bosch reproductions which she kept open on the table as she painted.’

‘She did a wonderful job. She’s captured how funny Bosch is, and how shocking. I’m intrigued by the blank space at the bottom.’ He points to the lower right corner, where there is a patch of white canvas surrounded by images of naked men and women being tortured by demons in hell. ‘She’s left out the satanic bird,’ he says.

‘I suppose she didn’t get a chance to finish the picture,’ says Maria.

There is a silence; Kristof has noted her reticence, and is choosing a new topic. ‘I like your books too; an interesting mixture of psychology and mysticism.’ He goes to the far end of the room, and peers at the shelves. Lying on one of the lower shelves, hidden from Maria by his body, is a blue ceramic gecko. ‘I was glancing at their titles in the session. I don’t know anything about those topics, but the titles are evocative.’

Maria doesn’t reply, but retains her smile.

Kristof shoulders his bag, ready to go. ‘May I use your bathroom?’

Inside the room, Kristof looks at himself in the mirror. He urinates, raising his head as he does so, humming softly to himself. As he flushes, he flips open the cupboard door above the washbasin. There is a white-painted shelf, empty except for some medicine bottles and a box of tissues in shadow at the back. Kristof removes the ceramic gecko from his pocket. He places it on the shelf, in the middle, as if it is an actor standing before an audience. Admiring the scene for a moment, he then closes the cupboard doors quietly, washes his hands and leaves.

‘It was good to meet you,’ he tells Maria before leaving. ‘I’ve never been to one of these sessions before, but I found it strangely cleansing, short though it was.’

‘Well,’ says Maria. ‘Please feel free to contact me if you’d like to speak further.’

There is ambiguity in her words. Is she referring to the whole group, or just to him?

‘I certainly will,’ says Kristof. And off he goes, sports bag over his shoulder.

Two

Taxis are zipping along the Claremont Main Road, veering from side to side, treating the dividing line as no more than a long spill of paint. The air is filled with hooting and auto emission fumes. Pedestrians bob between the Saturday morning traffic. An old woman follows her own Zen path straight across the road, ignoring the cars weaving around her; a bus bears down on a trio of sauntering young men, who respond with comic running gestures, swinging their arms without speeding up.

Kristof's small white car passes down the road in the left hand stream of traffic. He is singing a musical piece, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, imitating highlights from the various instruments. Nearing the finale, he takes a neat left turn into the underground parking lot of a shopping mall.

He runs up two flights of steps and emerges next to a shop that sells occult books and computer war games. Then Kristof turns left and strides past a bowling alley fronted by twitching fluorescent lights and a brace of loitering, scowling teenage boys. Near the alley is a cafe, Divine Muffin, and next to that is the Post Office. As he approaches its glass doors, Kristof sees the Saturday morning queue, a samba line snaking back and forth until it reaches the counter, where five employees are attending to customers. He joins the back of the queue and takes a thin philosophy book out of his pocket, but does not open it. The line is unusual today: it is visibly moving. In fact, the employees of the post office are handling customers at great speed. Behind the counter they bend to write, stamp blue messages onto black-edged forms, smile as they hand over packages. Patrons walk away from the counter slightly dazed, as if they have just received an unexpected kiss.

In front of Kristof is a young woman whose strong back is covered by a light cotton shirt, her dark skin visible as a shadow through the white material. She is wearing new blue jeans, and as he stands behind her Kristof begins to whistle. It is an old German hymn, yearning, intensely spiritual. His performance, while not showy, is uninhibited; he whistles as he would in his own bedroom. The woman turns and smiles.

‘Wow,’ she says.

He nods and continues whistling.

‘That’s quite something.’

He stops and looks at her.

‘Are you a musician?’ she asks.

‘I wish I were. I love music. And you? Are you a musician?’

‘I wish! But I’m a huge music fan too.’

The two music lovers smile. They are moving steadily forward, thanks to the hyperthyroid tempo of the post office employees.

‘What’s going on with them?’ asks the woman.

‘Maybe they’re high on life,’ says Kristof. She snorts.

Half a minute passes. ‘Can I ask you something?’

She turns to Kristof. ‘What?’

‘It’s personal. You might not want to answer.’

‘If I don’t want to, I won’t.’

‘Do you come here often?’

She laughs. ‘As often as I need to.’

‘Me too.’ There is a pause. ‘I’m Kristof. Would it be very rude if I asked your name?’

‘Umm,’ – she bites her lower lip. ‘Nomsa.’

‘I’m very glad to meet you. Would you believe it, we’re at the front already.’

Nomsa goes left, Kristof right. The woman at the counter deftly takes his ID book, stamps a form, has him sign it, and passes him a package. Standing behind her is a grim man, heavily built, arms folded: a post office inspector.

As Kristof walks away from the counter, he neatly slits the cardboard package open and shakes out the hard-covered book inside. It is called *Under the Skin of the Earth*, and is a collection of photos, taken with powerful flashes in trenches at the bottom of the world’s oceans. Waiting for Nomsa while standing at the back of the post office, he flips through the book. There they are, all those miraculous beauties and horrors, captured by explorers deep in their exploration vessels, alone in the profound darkness. A metaphysical lesson reveals itself in *Under the Skin of the Earth*: that reality outstrips the imagination. One sometimes encounters works of philosophy in which the author dismisses a possibility – some social arrangement, or state of mind – on the grounds that he cannot imagine it. But why be bound by his pitiful capacity to imagine the contents of the world? Not a single philosopher could have conjured up the hideous features or otherworldly physiology of these creatures, yet they exist in abundance.

As Nomsa arrives, Kristof slips his book back on the way out. ‘Did you get what you wanted?’ he asks.

Nomsa smiles and holds up a thick, broad letter.

‘While I got my package,’ says Kristof, ‘I was thinking it would be nice to have coffee. Maybe at Divine Muffin. What do you think?’

‘I shouldn’t. I have a lot to do.’ She flashes him a smile of consolation, and turns to go. Her white shirt, her jeans.

‘Are you sure?’

She turns back and nods. *Sorry.*

‘Would you give me a minute; then you can go. That’s all, just a minute.’ She is silent, waiting, as he looks at her with his sharp green eyes. ‘Well, okay. I guess I’m older than you – by nine, ten years? – but I’m not experienced at this. Now and then I’ve met someone by chance, and thought – well, this could mean something. But I’ve never done anything about it.’

Her eyes are nicely made up, a curve of black, and her hair is braided. She looks like a woman of ancient Egypt.

‘I don’t want that to happen again. Just a cup of coffee.’

Nomsa appears to be working something out. A variety of expressions pass across her face; she is performing a kind of moral calculus. Then she reaches an expression of anxious pleasure. ‘Fine.’

They walk over. She is a tall woman, nearly his height, and strong. She walks with a wide stride, two silver bangles on her left wrist tinkling. His glide is smooth and quiet.

Divine Muffin is almost empty. On Saturday the students lie in late, and it’s too early in the morning for shoppers to be taking a break from their chores. ‘Here?’ Kristof asks, pointing to a small round table. On the floor a squat portable bar heater, its three strands glowing red, peeps up like an obliging dog. Capetonians are never prepared for winter, and their response to the long annual cold season is improvised and patchy.

The waiter comes over to give them a pair of laminated menus, slightly sticky. He is a middle-aged man with a grey ponytail and muscular arms. Even on this cold day he is wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Along his forearm is a tattoo that says ‘Baby, don’t cry.’ Kristof watches the message undulate slightly as the man wipes the table. Punctuation is arresting in a tattoo; skin mutilations usually neglect this aspect of language.

‘You know what I like about this place?’ Kristof says. ‘They don’t flood you with choices. There’re very few flavours, but they’re all good.’

‘What do you recommend?’

‘That’s a big question. It depends what kind of person you are.’

She arches an eyebrow.

‘Actually, I’ve learnt some things about you already. For instance, you’re ambitious.’

‘Oh *really*.’

‘And also sensitive.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘People are what they seem to be. You just need to watch. For example, the way you move – I can see you’re on your way. Also, you’re open to the world.’

Nomsa laughs. ‘You’re making it up.’

Tell me I’m wrong.’

She ruminates. ‘Well, I do have a career in finance.’

‘There you go.’

‘And I have other interests, social concerns.’

‘Exactly: a woman of substance.’

‘One day – when I’ve made enough money for it! – I want to produce documentaries. Real South African documentaries, you know.’

‘Oh?’

‘To show South Africans to each other. Beneath our differences, we’re all the same, deep down.’

‘Unity amidst variety,’ says Kristof, nodding. ‘Do you know Frances Hutcheson’s work? Hutcheson thinks that unity amidst variety is *beauty*. That’s just what beauty is.’

‘Wow,’ says Nomsa. ‘I mean, that’s exactly – that’s what I want to do.’

‘Are you from Cape Town?’

‘Joburg.’

‘Is your family still there?’

‘My dad is.’ She rolls her eyes.

‘Looks like it’s not bad having some distance from him.’

Oh, he’s not so terrible. I mean, he kind of is.’ They both laugh.

Kristof says, ‘Now I know what kind of muffin you should have. Coffee caramel. Coffee because you’re strong, capable, alert. And caramel because you’re also kind of a sweetie.’

‘Oh my God. You’re such a flatterer.’

‘It’s not flattery if it’s true.’ The waiter comes over to take the order: two coffee caramel muffins.

Half an hour later, Nomsa has told Kristof about her job, recently begun, as a junior analyst at a stockbroking firm; the pressure she feels from her father, a tycoon in Johannesburg, for his only child to succeed spectacularly in business *and* to begin a family and raise children, especially now that she is already twenty seven; and the feeling on some days that she is on top of the world and on others that she is a failure. He nods, grimaces, laughs and shakes his head at the right places. ‘You’re a good listener, you know?’ she says. Then she adds, ‘Look, I should have said something earlier. I have a boyfriend.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Kristof says, grinning, comically slapping his head with his hand. ‘I should have known. Lucky guy. I’m not going to try anything. I respect your choice.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Of course, you didn’t know me when you met him.’

Nomsa swats at Kristof with a serviette.

‘Just kidding. Anyway, at least I can be your once-off muffin friend.’

The waiter comes for their plates. ‘Can I interest you in anything else?’

‘No thanks,’ says Kristof. ‘I’m happy with what I’ve got here.’

‘You’re bad, you know that,’ says Nomsa, slapping Kristof’s hand.

Kristof allows himself to be touched, but does not offer any physical movement in return.

Along with his muffin, he has drunk two strong black coffees. His eyes are sharper than before, his gaze more intense. ‘Since we’re only here for coffee,’ says Kristof, ‘there’s a kind of freedom in that. I can speak my mind.’

Nomsa waits, her hands now clasped around her cappuccino for warmth.

‘Life is short and tough, and there aren’t many moments of grace. But here we are, and there’s that rare electrical spark when two souls touch. Even if we don’t see each other again, I’m grateful for that.’

Divine Muffin is getting busier. The tattooed waiter and his colleagues are taking orders, juggling plates on their forearms. The air smells of bitter coffee and baked goods.

‘Okay,’ says Kristof quietly. ‘Well, that’s off my chest. It was lovely to meet you, to have coffee with you. And so goodbye.’

When he gets up to pay the bill at the counter, he puts his hand down on hers for a moment. Her hand is warm, the same temperature, as if they are two parts of the same creature.

Kristof turns off the Main Road and drives a few minutes until he is on the street containing Maria’s house. Two days ago he drove up this road to the departmental counselling session with her.

Kristof does not see Maria on the street. She is probably in her house; her car is in the driveway. But he drives around a little more in the area, wide roads with broad tar pavements, patches of trees and grass. The streets are calm compared to the Main Road: there are few cars driving, and no hooting. Kristof moves slowly, cruising. The yellow light of this sunny winter's morning sharpens the scene, making every tree crucial, rendering the criss-cross green wire fencing of Paradise Primary School dramatic. In a cul-de-sac, protected from cars by a bollard, three kids are playing piggy-in-the-middle with a tennis ball. He gives them a wave as he passes them. Polite children: one boy waves back, smiles, before throwing the ball high over a girl's head. Then Kristof does see Maria. (He often experiences coincidences of this kind; he seems to be a locus of unlikely events.) She is wearing a pair of black jeans and a green shirt this morning, an arresting combination with her short blonde hair. Maria is walking up the street, weighed down with shopping bags. Her pregnancy is a subtle curve. It seems that Kristof's colleagues did not notice it at the session – at least, no one mentioned it afterwards – but to an attentive viewer, it is quite obvious.

‘Hi,’ he says, opening his car window and leaning his head out, smiling. ‘Would you like a lift?’

‘Oh, hello,’ she replies after an uncertain moment, her hand above her eyes to shield them from the morning light. ‘Sorry, I didn’t see you at first. That’s very kind of you –’

‘Not at all.’

‘But I’m happy to walk, thanks.’

‘I think that’s great,’ says Kristof. ‘That’s the right decision.’

She laughs, lowers her shopping bags to relieve her fingers.

‘That’s the way to exercise – doing real chores. The hunter-gatherer way. Carrying shopping bags is the closest we get to our primal way of life. Except that we don’t hunt down

our shopping.’ After a pause, he says: ‘Well, I won’t detain you any longer. I hope you have a lovely weekend.’

‘Thank you. You too.’

‘It’s a day that makes you glad to be alive, isn’t it? I find that life – just bare life – is quite underrated. Breathing, for example, and seeing the sky. Enormously satisfying, in certain moods. Almost unbearable. But maybe that’s only my morning coffee speaking.’

‘Well, that’s a good recommendation for coffee. Maybe it would save people from coming to psychologists!’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. Psychology is about as essential as a profession can get. People underestimate the power of words, I think.’

There is a pleasant silence between them. His arm is hooked comfortably out of the window. Her face is a little moist from carrying the bags, even though it is a cool day. It appears that Maria has pushed herself.

‘Goodbye then,’ says Kristof. And off he drives. His car, he notices through the rear view mirror, is observed by Maria as it zips up the road.

Three

Morning sickness does not only happen in the mornings. After lunch Maria bends, hands on knees, vomiting – a force beyond her control – onto the paving stones outside the house. Her nausea has only escalated since her meal of salty crackers and ginger tea, supposedly a palliative. When she came out earlier to fetch the post, moving from the comforting gloom of her therapy room into the sharpness of a sunny winter's day, her sickness peaked.

The paving stones are wet with vomit. This sight, plus the acrid smell, brings the nausea swimmingly round again. Frustratingly, morning sickness– which is like seasickness, to emphasise, perhaps, that her body is now a vessel complete with cargo– does not recede after a good vomit. It persists. (The obstetrician made it clear that it *should* diminish when she entered her second trimester – though, chuckling, he could not be sure of this.)

She goes inside to boil water for pouring over the paving stones. While the kettle is on, she heads to the bathroom to rinse and brush her teeth. The room remains as her mother left it on the day of the accident: new age magazines in a wicker basket and Claudia's collection of green frogs, plastic and ceramic, on the window sill, the front frog coquettishly lounging on its side in a pink petticoat. She should chuck all this junk out, she thinks as she brushes her teeth, but even the thought is wearisome.

Maria picks up one of the frogs, feeling its plastic lightness, its lack of substance, and stares out the open window at the ivy-coated wall of the neighbour a few metres in front of her. She can hear the drain pipe trickling water, and wonders idly when last Claudia's gutters were checked – now, strangely, her own. It's been nine months since the accident in the forest, and she doubts her mother paid the gutters much attention before then, knowing her

attitude towards household maintenance. The phone rings, disrupting the tedium of her thoughts, and she rushes to get there in time, still clasping the plastic frog.

‘Maria, Kristof here. So pleased I caught you. Do you have a moment?’

‘Of course.’ How strange it was bumping into him on the weekend, and now a further call from this man, just five days later.

‘I phoned to thank you for last week’s session. I forgot to mention it when I ran into you. A group of philosophers, I imagine, isn’t an ideal set of clients.’

His voice is light on the phone, making her feel that he’s smiling as he speaks. ‘There’s no need to thank me,’ she says, though she’s pleased. Few of her clients ever show any kind of appreciation.

He carries on: ‘I know it was only one session and not quite proper therapy, but I feel that you’ve really made a difference to us,’ he pauses, ‘to *all* of us, even those who were a bit sceptical. I thought you managed to – shift something, maybe.’ A pause: ‘Perhaps *Rothko Chapel* helped –?’

Maria senses his tentativeness, and knows that she is meant to say something about the music. Mostly she remembers the endless length of the piece. ‘It was a *very*,’ she casts around for the correct word, favouring a policy of honesty, for the most part, towards her clients, ‘insistent piece of music, in its subtle way, demanding one’s attention for its duration. I’m pleased to hear that the session had some effect – an event like the one you’ve all experienced is bound to be very traumatic for everyone.’

There’s a short silence on the phone. ‘Though of course people experience trauma in different ways,’ she adds lamely. There has been no mention of a further session. Truthfully, she is ambivalent about her desire for a further session, and would feel fine about not seeing Joan and Cyrus again: their particular brands of dissatisfaction, Cyrus’ hyper-vigilance and

Joan's open hostility, were unpleasant. She feels differently about Luke, who appeared flustered and anxious – mental states she is more comfortable with – and Kristof, who would make an excellent patient, with his capacity to access and reflect on his feelings.

'Unfortunately,' Kristof says, as if reading her mind, 'I'm not sure if there are any further plans to schedule another appointment. I would definitely be in favour. But in any event, I do hope we get to meet again.'

Maria says nothing; she is not quite sure what he is proposing. He was a patient after all, though the debriefing session was hardly long-term therapy. She's run similar kinds of sessions at companies where employees are dealing with trauma of some kind, and some of those 'patients' she wouldn't even recognise if she met them on the street.

'Perhaps we will,' she says finally.

After they hang up, she realises that the conversation has left her humming to herself as she goes to the kitchen to fetch the boiled water (and thankfully, her nausea has also passed). She remembers then the disappearance of the pottery gecko after last week's hour with the philosophers. At least, she thinks it happened after that session. Maria keeps a careful check on her therapy room, really her mother's old study, so it is unlikely that she is mistaken. Patients often leave their belongings behind – a desire to keep a part of themselves with her between sessions – but no one has ever removed one of her possessions. Because her next patient arrives only in half an hour, she heads to the study to search for the missing gecko.

The lizard, its blue tail curled tightly around a rock, is very familiar; her mother used it as a paper weight when writing letters, a habit of hers. Since Maria has lived in the house, the gecko has presided on her most academic bookshelf, the one that contains her complete edition of Freud as well as Bowlby's classic, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* – and none of her mother's books. She checks the room thoroughly, including the bookshelves, the

mantelpiece above the fireplace, and her desk in the corner next to the bay window. She looks behind the cushions of the two armchairs, and the two-seater couch. Nothing.

Perhaps it has slipped behind the bookshelf, which she tries to edge carefully away from the wall. Not only doesn't she want the books to tumble out, but she has developed the notion, irrational and exaggerated, that her pregnant belly is fragile, and also larger than it really is. She's nervous of anything knocking against her stomach, which in fact hardly looks different from the way it's always been, a slightly rounded hardness the only discernible change. Whatever cells are replicating within are entirely safe from external harm – of course she knows that! – yet she can't stop the feeling that the foetus is breakable and under threat. She crouches down and reaches behind the bookshelf. Something brushes the tip of her fingers and she leans further inwards to get a better grip, carefully placing a protective hand in front of her belly. No, not the gecko, only the sharp corner of the edge of a book; pincer-like, with thumb and forefinger, she extracts the soft cover backwards.

Maria sits down on the floor cross legged and traces her fingers over the cover, the only part of the book she has ever liked: black, with a red star, sun and moon, all heavily embossed. The title: *Seeking the Stars*. She wonders how it came to be there, and imagines that her mother must have read the book in this room.

She flips through the pages, a series of interviews with various local spiritualists written by a surprisingly well-respected journalist. It was published a week before the accident; the day of publication was the last time Maria saw Claudia alive. Her mother was a popular astrologer, composing birth charts for her many clients, delivering predictions, even appearing annually on television around New Year's time. There was also a scandal in the *Sunday Times*, Maria remembers. A Member of Cabinet had consulted Claudia, the appointment paid with government funds, before embarking on a major foreign policy trip to

China. Somehow news of the consultation had leaked out, earning the politician the Mampara of the Week award from the *Sunday Times*. This encounter brought Claudia a good upswing in clients.

Desperate people, of course, will do anything to find out what happens next. It hasn't skipped Maria's attention that her mother's work focused endlessly on the future, whereas Maria's own profession, at least the way she practises it, deals predominantly with the past. The day of the book's release is etched strongly in her mind, not for Claudia's achievement in having a whole chapter devoted to her – 'The Abyss and Beyond' – but because Maria left Lionel that day. Nearly two years after they had first met, she managed to claw her way out his life, packing all her belongings into a compact blue suitcase, which she hoisted under her arm before attacking the stairs at a gallop, two at a time, from his front door to the driveway. She was drunk. A bottle of white wine before Lionel had arrived home that afternoon made the packing less systematic, though more manageable. Every few minutes she took a break to lie back on the bed, closing her eyes, the room tilting in sympathy. With the desperate hours of the afternoon looming, she had gone over to her mother's house to see the new book.

'Don't you just *love* the cover?' Claudia stroked it, leaning forward in her chair, her thumb rubbing the embossed design. The curtains were open and the sunlight cast a broad beam of light into the room, making the dust motes whirl. Her mother was in her mid fifties. People often expressed their amazement to learn that Maria, seventeen years her junior, was her daughter. In the sunlight streaming through the window, her long straight black hair was gleaming, creating the effect of an aura. A striking face, her eyes dramatically outlined in black, her mouth bare.

When Maria was four years old she remembers her mother returning late from a party and coming into the bedroom to check on the sleeping girl. Claudia was dressed in black, carrying

a long gnarled stick, wearing a pointy hat. Maria had startled awake, crying, convinced that a witch had flown into her window on a broomstick. The night, as Maria remembers it, was spent running to her mother's bed in tears, seeking comfort. Each time Claudia had steered the little girl purposefully back to her own bedroom. *There's no comfort to be had in others*, she had told her. *Learn to be alone. And I'm not a witch. I've just been to a dress-up party.*

'I particularly liked your chapter,' Maria told her mother on the day the book was published, promising herself she'd be pleased for Claudia, no fighting allowed when her mother was so proud of herself. Also, this served to distract and prevent her from asking Claudia whether she'd followed up with the psychiatrist she'd recommended. It would only provoke a fight. Her mother had been hospitalised once, years back, for what Maria had ultimately come to understand as depression following an episode of mania. After a week Claudia had checked herself out, her mood more stable, but her resolve even stronger: never again would she stay in a mental institution, she'd said. No more psychiatrists. Through the years she'd tried to explain to her daughter that *her* life was meant to be lived unmediated by medical intervention, and her *condition*, if that's what Maria wanted to call it, was *spiritual, a seeing to the essence*. If Maria didn't understand, then that was her deficiency.

'Tell you what,' said Claudia, 'I'll do a tarot reading for you today. I haven't done one for you in ages.'

'No, I just don't feel up to it. Do you mind?'

'Okay.' Her lips pressed together, a negligible gesture, but enough for Maria to intuit she was angry. 'Are you tipsy?' her mother asked. 'Is that it?' Claudia regarded drunkenness as a weak way to get to the other side.

'No, I'm not. Bring out the cards. It's fine – do your reading.' Already Maria could feel the buzz of the alcohol dissipating. 'Come on!' She forced a cheerful note into her voice.

Claudia stood up. She was shorter than Maria, yet she carried herself proudly, head lifted, shoulders back, and often appeared taller. As she rose, the beam of sunlight shifted from her hair to her waist. Maria could hear the slamming of cupboard doors in the dining room; usually Claudia kept the cards close by, always at the ready for dealing with a wide variety of mishaps, personal or practical. Perhaps something was distracting her mother.

A few minutes passed. 'Got them,' she called from the kitchen. She came back to the lounge and banged the cards deck down on a small glass table between the two of them. Then she sat, her palms against the glass, closing her eyes and breathing deeply, while Maria felt a rising prickle of irritation. 'Think of a question for the cards.'

'Like what should I eat for supper?' It hit then that she'd *left* Lionel and she wanted to weep with the loss of him; instead, she bit down hard on the inside of her cheek, her teeth cutting into the flesh.

'Don't be silly, Maria – a real question. You don't fool around with the cards.'

Alright, then, a question: would she return to Lionel? And what about a child – please *when*; would she remain childless for the rest of her life? More than one question. She watched her mother, the way the cards energised and interested her in a way that Maria herself never had, either as a child or now – the force of Claudia's belief in her magic tricks. She dealt and shuffled, lining them up in neat rows; bizarrely, it was the only time that her mother seemed ordered and reasonable. At intervals, upon command, Maria selected a card at random, closing her eyes in a pretence of concentration to please Claudia.

Maria doesn't recall much of the occasion. Her mind was too much with Lionel, and the physical ache of missing him. The brightness of the cards, the archaic images of devils and magicians, she remembers – and that she drew the character of The Fool, causing her to laugh. Her mother, who had been keeping her head down, lightly touching the deck of cards,

looked up sharply. Near the conclusion of what felt like an endless reading, Maria's eyelids growing heavy from the drink, she definitely drew The Tower: lightning smashing into a high stone turret, two figures hurtling head first towards the ground. Unusually, Claudia must have noticed how the card resonated with her daughter, because she leaned across the table and gripped her hand, her fingers dry and foreign, faintly embarrassing, within Maria's. It was the part of the afternoon she remembered most strongly, her last vivid memory of her mother: not the card itself but Claudia's uncharacteristic behaviour. It had been rare for her to show her daughter any kind of physical affection, and Maria had always craved more. When the intimacy of her mother's fingers became unbearable, Maria pulled her fingers free as Claudia leaned in and said: 'I'll do what I can to help you.'

Four

Kristof is behind his wheel, whistling in heavy traffic on the coastal road. At twenty kilometres an hour, he is passing the stone mansions of St James on his right. To his left is the light blue sea, as playful as a toddler. The third car in front of him is a black Pajero containing Maria (it has been five days since Kristof spoke with her on the phone) and a man called Lionel Lightly. So: Lightly, the feisty politician, expert at playing up his Cape Flats roots with funny, apparently straight-talking sound bites for journalists – and Maria. He had been in the news just a few days before, commenting on the opposition party's criticism of affirmative action. 'When *we* give the people opportunities, it's *unfair*. When *you* shot them with rubber bullets and hit them with sjamboks, that was *justice*, as I recall. I only got a coloured education, so I suppose I'm being *dof*. But to me it sounds like you maybe got things the wrong way around.'

Earlier this morning, after Lionel had parked outside her house and gone in, Kristof left his car – which was a little way up the street – and peeked into the Pajero. According to a red-bordered letter on the passenger seat, Lionel owes nine thousand rand to the South African Revenue Service. Then he returned to his car to keep watch. When Lionel and Maria emerged from the front gate Lionel opened the car door for her and stood aside with exaggerated courtesy. He had the intimate animosity of an ex-lover.

One possibility: were they off for a Saturday morning reconciliation outing? Lionel's Pajero pulled away just after nine a.m., and Kristof followed it at a careful distance. After a time, he found himself along the coastal road towards Kalk Bay. It was a long time since he had gone this way.

At their destination, Maria and Lionel park near the pier and walk towards it. As long as they're sauntering on that bare white concrete strip jutting into the sea, he can't follow them incognito. Kristof sits in his car, parked some distance from the Pajero. He watches the pier for a while, observing the pair from behind; they are taking their time on that exposed strip. Then he looks to the Main Road, finds a particular shop and studies it carefully. He closes his eyes, takes several slow breaths. The decision is not made easily. Finally he reaches into the glove compartment, retrieves a large pair of sunglasses, puts it on and looks at himself in the rear-view mirror. He opens the car door and heads over to the shop. Above the door is a sign, *Bobbejaan Books*, burned with a poker into a long plank. Kristof enters, and at first there is no one to be seen inside.

He browses among the shelves, observing the books through his dark glasses. There is *Politics*, with memoirs by Dutchmen of the early Cape, Boer War generals, men of the Nationalist Party, and a host of ex-political prisoners, now in government. Nearby are several shelves of *South African Literature*. Reviews of a work by a new author have been cut from newspapers and pinned to one of these shelves. It is reported that his prose is sinewy and austere, and that the novel recounts the experiences of a mute young man wandering through the semi-desert of the Karoo, continually ignored or misunderstood. An entire section of the bookshop is reserved for *Classic Erotica*, a collection arranged chronologically, from lewd Roman poets to a set of novels from the Weimar Republic bound in white calfskin. Kristof passes his finger along one of these shelves, just touching the books as he reads their spines.

'May I help?' asks a woman in a black sweater. She is sitting behind a dark varnished table containing a phone and a writing pad where she has been inspecting a set of thick volumes. Behind her is an open door, perhaps leading to a storage room. She has blonde hair,

tied back in a ponytail, and is in her mid-fifties. Her sweater is snug on her slender body, and her manner is friendly.

‘Just looking,’ Kristof says. His voice has changed, not his usual pleasant baritone but a deeper bass register.

‘Ask if you need anything,’ she replies, and turns back to her volumes. Her fingers, their nails glinting with red polish, turn the pages of the volumes efficiently.

Kristof moves through the shop. On a table display – *Foreign Languages* – is a water-stained volume with a helmeted soldier on the cover, looking into the distance with implacable resolve. It is a German illustrated work about the battles of World War Two, published in nineteen forty nine. The book gives off the atmosphere of a family album, perhaps because the photographs have been manually inserted into their mountings. Kristof turns the pages of brown-spotted paper, observing pictures of men huddled together over their machine-guns or marching up winding mountain paths. ‘France 1940’, ‘Greece 1944’. The album has an awful charm. It is very expensive.

No other customers are in the shop. Kristof straightens up and watches the woman behind the counter until she looks up from her desk at him, her primitive sense alerted to his stare. Then, with his gaze still fixed on her, he picks up the book and walks slowly to the exit with the volume in his hand. Finally he opens the door.

‘Excuse me,’ says the woman in the black sweater. ‘I think you’ve forgotten to pay for that book.’

Kristof turns towards her. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Sorry,’ she says, standing her ground. ‘The book – you’ve forgotten to pay.’

There are moments in which one's everyday interactions dissolve into something elemental, and one comes to see other people in their anxious and defiant nakedness. She feels it too, and she is standing her ground.

'I haven't forgotten to pay,' Kristof says, still in his deep voice.

'What?' she says, but surely in her blood she knows what he means.

'Let's suppose,' he continues, 'that I *am* stealing this book. I'm violating your ownership. But this is an abstract way to put it. I'm *insulting* you; I'm saying that what is yours, I will take. I'm not just flouting morality, but showing contempt for *you*. So I understand your anger, your humiliation.' She opens her mouth, but says nothing. 'But think about this: what will happen if you make trouble for me now; if you scream for help, or call the police? What will happen?'

Still facing Kristof, she moves slowly backwards towards the table.

'I'm not someone who enjoys violence,' he adds, 'but I'll use it if I must.' They stare at each other a moment longer. Kristof puts his hand to his heart to communicate something – what could it be? It is clear that she has no idea. Such a gesture rarely accompanies robbery. He looks at her a moment longer and then slips out as she stands before her desk.

Then he sets off strongly for the pier, walking quickly as he holds the book under his arm, and stands behind a car close to it. He sees Maria and Lionel walking beside the sea wall, nearly back at the parking lot. She has on a short pale cream dress, just a few tints away from white. Her long legs are covered in skin coloured stockings, and she is wearing soft brown leather shoes. Walking next to her, Lionel is like some prehistoric fish that has struggled its way out of the deep sea; seeing a beautiful creature of the land, the ancient fish squelches along beside her, desperate to make her its own, though it can only grunt and puff.

Suddenly Lionel does a peculiar thing. He turns Maria towards the sea, faces her towards it, as if to say: look, there is my element, and you could never survive those cold salty depths, and the predators, of which I am one.

Maria doesn't like it. She turns back again, like a spring that has been forced down, returning to its proper place. She raises her left hand to him (she is left-handed; so is Kristof) and then curls back her fingers to show only a thumb. Then she points an index finger, and finally the middle finger too. Lionel cannot endure those provocative fingers, and flashes out his wide, fleshy hand to grip hers. And at that point Maria must be saying something particularly defiant, because his right hand lets go of her left, speedily withdraws itself, and then delivers a sudden push to her shoulder, and she staggers backwards.

Lionel does not have a talent for physical violence. He is an amateur, but of course amateurs are dangerous; one cannot quite predict what they are going to do, since they follow no rational pattern. Then the scene turns operatic: Lionel feels remorse, and he supports Maria as she straightens herself up. Meanwhile, the fisherman on the pier have turned to see what is going on. Some are watching, amused, but others make their way towards the pair. One of them says something to the couple, but is ignored. Lionel appears to be humiliated by the encounter, ashamed of what he has done. They spend some time in soothing talk, standing close together at the end of the pier, and then walk off the strip, Lionel, docile, alongside her.

From his position behind the car, Kristof moves around the vehicle to keep himself invisible as the couple pass some metres away. He watches them get into the Pajero and drive off; then he emerges from behind a car.

A fisherman passes near him, coming off the pier with his rod and bag of catch and teenage son.

'What happened?' asks Kristof.

The fisherman looks at him. 'Sorry?'

'There seemed to be a disturbance there.'

'Not my business. You have to ask those people,' says the man, and goes off with his boy.

Kristof walks to his car. As he reaches it, there is a commotion behind him. It is the woman in the black sweater – she has crossed the road from the bookshop – with a man. He is about sixty, and the lines on his face are those of a mountain. He is tall, powerful. He too is wearing a sweater – thick, brown – and black boots.

'It's him,' says the woman.

'You!' says the man.

'How may I help?' Kristof asks, using his deep voice.

'You stole that book from us.'

There's no sense denying it, and the position has changed. He takes the book out from under his arm. 'Fine,' he says. 'Here's your thing.' The man receives the account of Germany's glorious adventures. The woman is looking at Kristof. 'Don't I know you?' she asks.

'Now you do,' he says, fumbling with the door of the car.

'I don't want to see you in our shop anymore,' she says. But she cannot seem to tear herself away. Suddenly she points a finger at him. 'Of course!' she says. 'I know exactly who you are!'

'You don't know me at all,' Kristof says. He gets into his car, and as he drives away they make no effort to stop him.

Five

The slam of a hard object against glass: Maria jolts awake. In her mother's double bed she lies on her back, paralysed, interlocking hands draped over her belly to form a barrier. *What was it?* There is only the distant drone of a few solitary cars on some highway. She slides her foot down the cold sheet to break the paralysis, making it possible to move her arms and shift onto her side. 2:36a.m., says the bedside clock. Maria stays like that until her breathing settles and her heart slows to a regular rhythm before flopping onto her back again. From this angle through the window in front of her she can see the stars, pointy and bright, in the night sky. Claudia, opinionated about almost everything, believed curtains to be unnecessary. 'I must look at the stars,' she would say. 'So many of my night hours are spent awake, the stars my only companions.'

The house emits its usual sounds, all easily identifiable: the north-westerly belts against the awning outside the window, water drips from yesterday's first winter storm and a rat, possibly more than one, scurries across the beams in the roof. She can hear too the high-pitched squawks of the rodent's offspring. Is that what woke her? Yet the noise, as she remembers it, was sharper, less repetitive, rather as if someone were trying to gain entry – not the shrill bleat of hungry young.

Even while she was sleeping, Maria felt disturbed. She is haunted by strange and vivid dreams. They began a week after her mother's death. The police report hadn't come out yet, and all she knew was that her mother had fallen to her death from a precipice in Newlands forest on a Sunday morning. *Such a major event*, the police said in her meeting with them, *takes time to investigate*. In return for her long wait, the sergeant and his assistant had

promised to pray for her. She told them rather to concentrate their efforts on police work, which produced a suspicious silence in the room.

Maria's dream that first time came as a block of colour, fiery orange, filling her vision. Parting the orange curtain, Claudia glided through, her long black hair framing her face, thick and glossy. There were more dreams: sometimes her mother stood at the top of a stone tower, similar to the one on the tarot cards she used. Maria had the sensation, comparable to that which she felt with her clients, that Claudia was about to confess something important. If asked, Maria would have said that her mother was trying to say goodbye. Despite their difficult relationship, and her sense that she was never truly desired, Maria believes Claudia wanted to offer her farewell before killing herself. Sometimes she thinks this is only what she *wishes* to believe, but she feels it strongly.

Of course she expects such dreams, this re-encountering of the dead during sleep, when the unconscious has free reign. She recreates in her night life a wish: a *living* Claudia. But – and here she can barely give voice to her thoughts, because she has always imagined herself as not only intuitive and astute but also rational – there is something odd about these night images. Always it appears to her as though she is awake, and even upon waking, she has the sensation that she was not asleep, so vivid are the dreams.

Maria forces herself up from the warmth of the bed for water. These days she gets so thirsty: it feels more like she's drinking than eating for two. She makes her way to the bathroom used by her patients, where the light is dimmer, to avoid a further push into wakefulness. The spare functionality of the room – only a toilet, a tiny porcelain basin (if the tap is turned a touch too hard, the water sprays the tiled floor) and a medicine cabinet – makes it ideal for patients.

She bends her head, gently turning the tap, and gulps greedily from the cool trickle, letting the water flow for a moment over her dry lips once her thirst has abated. A sleeping pill is what she wants. Since her mother's suicidal plunge, she has not only endured unsettling dreams, but also battled insomnia. For this she resents Claudia. Maria has tried everything to cure herself, from Valerian root to long and tedious runs in the late afternoons – nothing worked, so many wasted hours. Eventually she grew tired of the endless silent nights, the thoughts that circle in the early hours of the morning; instead she found a doctor with an easy hand who, himself, struggled to sleep. Now, with the pregnancy, she dare not risk the blank pleasure of a sleeping pill – though, on a few desperate occasions, she has sliced a pill into quarters, knocked it back with a capful of wine – but the nights for the most part are black, taunting and never-ending. She opens the medicine cabinet, knowing precisely what it contains: Panado (many patients come to therapy with a headache, or develop one during the session), a spare box of tissues and a brown bottle of PaxMax, a herbal remedy for anxiety. Perhaps that might do the trick.

It takes a moment to register – her thoughts are confused, a stew of recently departed sleep hormones overlaid with adrenalin – that the missing blue gecko is there, in the centre of the bottom shelf. How odd! But there it is, sitting slyly, body curved in mid slither, reptilian head facing her. Maria picks up the creature so that it lies flat and cold in her palm, more weighty than anticipated. She flips it onto its back, noticing the contrast between the blue glossy surface and the white underbelly with its thumb shaped indentation.

Again she mulls over the idea that one of the philosophers placed it there ten days ago – but which one? She rules out Luke immediately: too adult, too serious, too disturbed by Saskia's disappearance; such behavior would never occur to him. Also, if she remembers correctly, he didn't leave his seat. Perhaps Joan Castle? Joan, however, does not seem to

possess the levity required for this type of action. For her there would be no point in such a silly act. And Cyrus Jackson? Too smooth, too efficient to waste time with hijinks like this. Kristof, she thinks, the cheekiest of the group, is the prime suspect. A prank like this would probably appeal to him. Maria leans against the wall, closing her eyes to better extract the memory of that session. She remembers, she thinks, Kristof's meander to the bookshelf at the end of the session, his quick tracking of a finger across the spines of her books. At the time she'd felt the gesture to be strangely intimate, his silent touching of her books about psychotherapy and attachment (and her mother's on mysticism) as though his fingers were learning her contours. And hadn't he asked to use her bathroom after that hour? The possibility tips her into full consciousness. Despite the late hour, and her frustration at not sleeping, she smiles, amused by the trick. Of course she can understand the wish of a patient to get one over the therapist, to level the power. Perhaps he wants more presence in her life, a sly colonization of her bathroom evidence of this. This desire she understands: most of her patients crave more of her than what she can offer them. She walks back to the bedroom with the gecko in her closed hand. The lizard takes on the warmth of her skin as she lies in bed holding it.

Maria must have drifted off, because when next she opens her eyes the sky is white, and a high pitched chirping comes in volleys from outside. She turns, the gecko on her pillow more endearing than sly in the light of day. Its presence, calm and thoughtful this morning, lifts her mood despite yesterday's awful blow up with Lionel. During the fight her attention had been drawn to a youth of no more than seventeen, an inflamed red eruption of pimples on his jaw line. He was fishing, his body as taut as the line.

'Look,' she said to Lionel, desperate for a distraction. 'He's caught a fish.'

‘I don’t give a fuck. Listen to what I’m saying: I want you to move back in with me. You’ve been in Claudia’s house now for months. A dead woman’s house – ’

‘My mother’s house.’

‘I know,’ he touched her shoulder, ‘that’s not what I meant. It’s not about her, it’s about wanting you back with me.’

‘What’s changed, Lionel?’ She can’t even believe she’s having this conversation with this man.

‘You’re carrying my child for a start.’

‘*That’s* going to make you faithful – don’t make me laugh. You think having a child is going to turn you monogamous?’ He places his hands on her shoulders, making an effort to be gentle, though his fingers are digging into her skin. Lionel faces her out to sea, as if he’s adjusting a mannequin in a shop. ‘Having a child together *does* change things. How can it not? You’re carrying my baby, Maria.’

She felt her old surge of anger towards him. ‘So that’s what’ll make me your number one, that I’m carrying your genes? Tell me, are your genes so great? And how long before I slip down your list again? How long until I’m not your number one,’ she holds up her hand, index finger outstretched, ‘or even your *two*,’ second finger snapping up, ‘or *three*? How long until I’m your number ten, or fifty? It all depends, Lionel, doesn’t it, on how many women you can lure into bed? And for some reason there are lots of us out there – myself, idiotically, one of them.’

‘That’s totally unfair. I’ve *told* you I’ve changed, I’m a completely different –’

She rolled her eyes, snorted in derision. That’s when he pushed her. Of course he says he didn’t. ‘Are you out of your mind, do you think I would deliberately hurt you? What kind of a madman do you take me for?’ He said he tripped – over what? – and fell forward, bumping

hard against her shoulder so that she stumbled but righted herself before falling. It must have looked odd, she thought afterwards: out of nowhere, Lionel falling on top of her as she staggered backwards under his weight. Muscle weighs more than fat, she'd thought irrationally at the time, and Lionel, though short, was solidly packed.

'Even if it wasn't conscious, you wanted to hurt me,' she told him, and he shot back that she spoke a lot of crap – and so their fight continued, but at least they stopped talking about her moving back with him. Finally, apologies and protestations of love, from his side, followed. At one point he put his arm around her and they stood on the end of the pier, her body stiff next to his.

'I can't live without you, you know that don't you?' he said.

'No, I can't do this again, Lionel. It's – just exhausting.'

He was silent for a while. Then he quietly said, 'Also, of course, to lose your only parent, and so suddenly. It takes a long time to recover from that.' She'd said nothing. Afterwards, as they walked back to the car, he held her hand. 'I'll be here for you, Maria,' he'd said as he opened her car door. '*Please* think about what I've said. I need you with me. You need me too, especially after the accident.' He touched her belly with his hand as she sat. Inside his car she kicked away the papers and old water bottles that formed a thick layer of muck at her feet.

'Sorry,' he said as he closed the door. 'I'll clean it up.'

On and off, this relationship, and each time it drained her. The instability of their bond was caused not only by his host of infidelities, but by a secret she had kept from him: the being inside her, growing stronger by the day, was the child of another man. Her pregnancy made her want to cling to Lionel, a strong force despite his unfaithfulness. But it was brutally unfair

to keep the secret from him. Several times she had broken it off not only because of his affairs, but from disgust at her own deceit.

She glances again towards the lithe gecko, now perched on the bedside table. This time the lizard reminds her not of Kristof but of its actual owner, Claudia, and the task of finally cleaning out her mother's bedroom that Maria has set for today. The room is unchanged: the desk piled high with astrology books, the cupboards stuffed with her mother's clothes. Maria has to manoeuvre past objects, the wooden chest at the end of the bed, the recliner chair, to get between the door and the bed. Not only large barriers but small ones add to the chaos; aromatherapy burners lie scattered on the floor. She sits cross legged on the unmade bed, gathering her strength for the clean-up ahead.

Her mother's death in September, and still she hasn't cleared out the room. It is not like her to live in such a mess; she deals with it by using the bedroom only for sleep. She wouldn't have moved into the house at all if the break up with Lionel hadn't occurred at the same time as Claudia's death. Her plan today is to pack the stuff, all of it, into boxes and give it to a charity; let them dispense the junk. At least the room will then become more habitable.

Although she hasn't cleaned out the place, she has searched it a number of times, digging her hands into drawers, rummaging through the contents of the bedside cabinet. What is she looking for? A communication, some kind of explanation from Claudia. A farewell note, written only for her. She has read the police report, which was produced some months after the event, so many times that she knows it by heart: *survey of scene showed no evidence of foul play... woman in her mid-fifties... judged a suicide.*

The scent of lemons in the bedroom is strong – from the residue of the oils in the aromatherapy burners, she guesses. Unbidden, the memory rises of the first time she took her

mother walking in the forest. Exercise, Maria had told Claudia, has been shown to be almost as effective in lifting the mood as anti-depressants. And the fresh air, the scent of pine, would be rejuvenating.

‘I’m not depressed. There is a difference between a depression and the abyss. The abyss needs to be travelled – it’s a long descent.’

But despite their arguing, Claudia had for the first time followed one of her daughter’s suggestions. After their first trip together, her mother went alone, preferring the solitude to her daughter’s company. ‘When I’m by myself,’ Claudia said, ‘I see things there that aren’t visible elsewhere.’

Before Maria can stop herself, she heads to the kitchen for half a Hunter’s Light to steady her nerves for the day ahead. The rest she pours down the sink, watching it fizz like acid. *I’m past the first trimester*, she tells herself, as she begins with a buzz of activity. *A small drink is fine*. She opens drawers, chucking clothes – first underwear: panties and bras, almost unbearable to touch – into black bags. Outside, Chicken and Egg, Claudia’s two black Labradors, are lolling in the sun. Chicken is on her back, her legs parted to expose a tender belly to the weak light; Egg lies panting on his side. They are the laziest dogs Maria knows. Her mother rescued them from the SPCA, naming them on their day of arrival. (Maria: ‘You can’t name a dog Egg!’ Claudia: ‘Oh, Maria, show some spark – Chicken and Egg, a perfect unit, just like the world and the afterworld.’)

She’s doing the clean-up too quickly, grabbing huge handfuls of fabric (she doesn’t bother to pick up a flowing green skirt that falls to the floor), filling bags halfway, knotting the top with a twist and a pull, lining them up like schoolchildren all in a row in the passage. She flings open a narrow cupboard: shoes, and behind a row of empty shoe boxes, hidden from her initial view, is Claudia’s laptop. Her machine! Maria had forgotten about that. How

sceptical her mother had been when she bought it – how would she ever learn? – but when Claudia found out that she could do complex birth charts using software, she became determined to master it. She would sit too close to the screen, now and then giving it sharp slaps as though to force the electronic circuits to release their secrets to her desires.

Maria powers it up before she can stop and think about what she's doing. Perhaps here she'll find the communication she's seeking, the final note, lovingly crafted. A cursor appears; the computer is demanding a password. Who would have thought Claudia could get it together to protect her documents? And what word would she choose? Maria types *Claudia* – a good first guess, she thinks – but without success. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she types her own name. *Incorrect. Please enter the password.* Perhaps she should try some esoteric astrological term, or the name of one of her mother's lovers. She hits the machine in frustration and then, because she's embarrassed by the impetuous gesture, she finishes the job of cleaning out the bedroom properly. She spends that afternoon walking Chicken and Egg, their energy suddenly boundless for their Sunday outing in Newlands forest.

Six

The next day, Monday, there is no time to deal with Claudia's computer. Bar half an hour for lunch, her patients came one after the other, back to back, from nine in the morning until five. Usually six patients are her maximum, anything more strains her capacity for empathy – but Sharon, who has been in therapy for almost five years now, phoned unexpectedly between sessions. Maria could barely hear what she was saying through the sobbing, twice asking her to speak a bit louder. They scheduled an emergency session for two that afternoon, typically the time Maria uses to write up her morning notes.

On arrival, Sharon slips off her boots and leaves them at the door. In the short walk from door to chair Maria senses the young woman's despair, and braces herself physically, her spine becoming erect, her body still; patients gets easily distracted. Sharon sits cross-legged on the chair, knees climbing the armrests, head bowed, silky brown hair draping her face; already she is regressing.

'What does it feel like? Give me an image,' Maria asks.

'Like a vase that has been pushed to the floor and shattered into a million pieces.' Maria leans forward to hear better through the crying; Sharon's hand beneath the curtain of hair shields her eyes. A crude barrier, and unnecessary, as weeping is Maria's currency. She thinks sometimes that if laughter brings an expansion of gesture, sadness mostly contracts physical movement; soft-bellied creatures who have lost their shells.

Maria feels for her patient's loss. Sharon's first great love affair, three years in total, has ended badly: a cheating boyfriend, a fight ending with two sharp smacks through the face. 'Red handprints like *this*,' she holds up her palm, fingers spread, 'on his cheek. I've never hit anyone on my life – I'm not a violent person.' Maria nods, not in agreement, but as an

invitation for Sharon to continue talking. Physical violence, she believes, comes more easily than we care to admit.

Sharon has with her a photograph of her boyfriend, Marcus. It's not unusual for patients to bring something along: a poem, extracts from diaries. One man, a bodybuilder, even had her admire his body. In shorts and a vest, he turned poses in her office, having propped the accompanying photographs taken during competitions on the table next to him. Strangely, she remembers the veins running like earthworms beneath the bronzed skin more clearly than the inflated muscles.

Sharon offers her photograph shyly to Maria. She and Marcus are at the beach, his arm draped around her shoulders, hers around his waist. She is in a yellow bikini and he wears blue surfer shorts, the colour of the sky. Wherever possible – hips, thighs, chests, the sides of their feet – the two press into one another, forming a single unit. Maria hears the instruction as clearly as if Sharon had spoken it: make it possible for me endure the loss of this image. It will take time, sure, but the girl is young, only twenty three, so she has time in abundance. Maria feels confident. A photograph's power can lessen; a broken vase can be glued back together.

Fortunately the next day is quieter with fewer patients and no emergency sessions. She has time to phone Zac and arrange to see him about Claudia's laptop.

Later that morning she drives slowly up Kloof Street, her mother's machine in the passenger seat next to her. To the top, then down again, a loading zone in front of the Ocean Basket is the only space available. A car guard in a luminous orange vest plants himself in the narrow space, twirling a hand towards himself while she tries to reverse. 'Come, sisi,' he

says, as she hits the pavement but avoids him. He tells her he'll watch the car in her absence; she mustn't worry.

She heads towards CATS – Cape Town Shoots, a film school where Zac maintains computers, stop-motion cameras and editing machines. She knows the school from giving therapy there a few years back, a couple of hours a week. Late adolescence is a specialty of hers. There were many problems, mostly substance abuse, which she – unlike many psychologists, who don't like dealing with this sometimes intractable issue – is adept at handling. Angling her shoulder as a shield, the cigarette smoke dense and irritating, she pushes through the students clustering around the double front doors. Right outside the entrance, partially blocking the way, is a pair of skinny white legs. They belong to a girl dressed in black, wearing the shortest mini Maria has ever seen. She's covered in piercings: nose, lower lip, a thin thread of studs up her ear...where else? She steps over the legs carefully while the girl flashes a surprisingly warm smile at her.

'Have you come to audition as an extra?' she asks. 'For our movie.'

'What's the role?'

'A witch, you know, like a magician. A sort of wicca thing,' the girl snakes her hands through the air as though casting a spell herself. Is she kidding? Maria looks closely – part of her training to look for the meaning behind the words – but the girl's face appears guileless, innocent.

Maria smiles: 'No, sorry. I don't do witches. I do a good psychologist though.'

'Awesome,' the girl says to her departing back. 'But witches are more fun.'

The Bio Café is packed with students banking a mid-morning shot of caffeine. She looks around for Zac – late, as usual – while watching a trio of young men play pool. One of them is clearly much better than the other two and his aptitude has seeped through into his

swagger. He sinks one ball after another, somehow making her think of Lionel. They haven't spoken since the incident at Kalk Bay two days ago. Maria checks her phone often, holding back on the desire to call him. There's a tap on her shoulder. It takes her a moment to recognize Zac.

'I can't believe it. Wow, look at you.'

'Sixty five kilograms. Half of me is gone,' he says.

'How did you do it? You look *amazing*.' It's true and it's not: he's slim, sure, but he has suffered: sunken skin, dark rings under his eyes. Even his black hair, always thick and curly, looks less lustrous, or perhaps it's because he has clipped it close against his head and there's no bounce left. He looks shorter, Maria's height now, as though his great girth had added stature.

'Ja. Extreme makeover, man. People hardly recognise me anymore.' He's smoking (the Bio Café clearly has no rules against this), drawing deep drags, tapping the cigarette at intervals so that the ash falls to the carpet. 'I was doing like this rich guy's machine, he lives in this mansion up in Camps Bay, and he couldn't believe the change. You're not a big fat slob anymore, he said.'

'Nice.'

'No, it's true, I'm not a big fat slob anymore.' He slaps his lean stomach aggressively.

'It's incredible. I'm so impressed, Zac.'

He reaches for the machine: 'So, is this the baby that's giving you a hard time?'

She nods. 'You think you can crack it – get past the password control?' She wonders if she's trying too hard to use his lingo, when she's about twenty years older than anyone else in this place.

‘Sure. You know I can do anything.’ A lazy grin, and he lets the cigarette drop from his fingers to the ground, grinding it out with his foot. To his credit he picks up the stompie, only to toss it onto an empty table. She hands the machine over and he balances it on his palm, levering the top open with his other hand: ‘Alright, are you rushing off somewhere? Why don’t you have a quick cup of coffee and I’ll see what I can do now.’

‘Okay.’

‘My advice – go next door. This place – ,’ he shakes his head.

She heads past a bin choked with rubbish, black flies busy around its perimeter, to leave the Bio Café. Outside the film school another young woman has her legs spread out in front of the door. Passing her, Maria can hear the heavy repetitive beat of the music from the girl’s earphones. She is grateful to move away, even more so when she finds the coffee place next door practically empty, only a couple sitting in the corner. Despite the emptiness, she goes to sit outside on the pavement, preferring the anonymous bustle of the street. The coffee is strong and aromatic, and a large heater, shaped like an old potbelly stove, warms her back. Perhaps a short SMS to Lionel, just to see how he’s doing, would be okay. She extracts her cellphone from her handbag and begins to tap away.

She met Lionel at an AA gathering for ex-addicts who were now sponsors, helping others to overcome their dependencies. The meeting took place at the counselling centre, directly opposite Christ’s Kitchen, a self service restaurant for the reborn. Frequently people went straight from the meeting to the restaurant, ex-addicts finding religion as enticing as a new drug. The meetings happened every two months and were an opportunity for sponsors to receive some psychological input or supervision from professionals. Maria had been part of the programme, providing guidance to the sponsors, for a few years already. The structure of

the meetings was always similar: an expert in addiction, the label loosely interpreted, would give input on some topic, but most of the time was reserved for sponsors to discuss issues relating to their sponsees, a kind of case supervision. There were always a couple of psychologists, sometimes a psychiatrist as well.

Typically for these monthly affairs, the room had too few chairs. This scarcity of resources created an edge of aggression, causing people to mark their space with briefcases and handbags. The fluorescent lighting sucked colour from faces, reducing the attendees to uglier versions of themselves. It was a functional venue, allowed to go to seed as a mark of its integrity; even the arm chairs, fundamental equipment for any psychologist, needed replacing. Their seats, made from a brown synthetic material, had worn away in places from too much sitting: a hazard of the job. There were about thirty people there that night – two psychologists, the rest sponsors, most of whom Maria knew – and about half had nowhere to sit.

She stood by an open window, not willing to enter the fray for chairs. The room was stuffy on this uncomfortably hot summer's night, and the heat caused her cheeks to flush a faint pink (she knew this from an earlier trip to the bathroom). The skin felt tight above her cheekbones, as though it had been pulled and stretched to cover the bones in her face.

Already Maria felt sluggish and irritable from the stuffiness of the room, the lack of foreplanning with the chairs. Outside she could hear the occasional snippet of conversation between students, even the loud and cheerful singing of two girls making their way to their residences around the corner. As she waited for someone else to sort out the chair shortage, she idly stretched across a long wooden table to scoop up a handful of peanuts. The tips of her fingers grazed the edge of the bowl, her reach frustratingly short.

‘Here. Let me help you.’ A man picked up the bowl and moved to her side of the table. Slightly shorter than average, stocky, a touch of grey at the temples, a flattened nose like a boxer. None of the puppyish wanting to please that she’d noticed of many of the other sponsors towards her, or the other psychologists. Instead he peered at her over the top of his glasses, which were pushed down to the bridge of his nose, the look of an exasperated teacher. ‘Lionel Lightly,’ he offered a hand. ‘Yes, I know, I should have been a singer.’ She let his powerful fingers squeeze hers.

She knew Lionel Lightly, or more precisely, she knew of him – who didn’t? He seldom came to these meetings, possibly she’d only seen him once previously, and then he’d been involved with a group in another room. But everyone had read about his coke addiction in the papers, ‘minor experimentation,’ as he called it. Unfortunately it had skewered his chances of becoming Minister of something or other (perhaps Health, she thought), and he’d checked himself into a private clinic. That was a few years back and now he had returned to politics, currently more popular than ever – an ANC MP, rising fast up the ranks. Who can’t help but admire someone who has fought his demons and won, and wasn’t that what Lionel had done? He was often in the papers, outspoken and charismatic, as comfortable in Bishops court as he was in Manenberg. If she remembered correctly, he’d grown up the fifth son of farm workers just outside Malmesbury, part of his legend.

‘Do you sing?’ she asked.

‘Only in the shower. I’m full of bravado when there’s no one around to watch me. I’m pretty good then.’

Someone had finally located more chairs and people were wheeling them in, two at a time, office chairs. He went to fetch one for her, hoisted it above his head and plonked it down next to the open window. ‘Good move,’ he indicated the window with his head. ‘Getting hot as

hell in here. I'm up front tonight, otherwise I'd join you. If it gets too boring you can always climb along here.' He pointed to a wide ledge located right outside the window. 'Shimmy down the drainpipe and make a dash for it.'

'How far will I get before I'm caught?'

'Pretty far, I reckon. But if I see you doing that, I'm going to give chase. With this heat and my talk, I'll probably be the only one that active. We'll be a sleepy lot tonight.'

He was wrong. She was fascinated by Lionel, observing the effect he had on his audience, how alert people were when he spoke: their sidelong glances to neighbours, the vigorous head nodding, their laughter that was a touch too loud. A charismatic speaker creates a sense of unity within the audience, she thought; bonds them to one another.

He spoke about how, when he came out the addiction clinic, after he had been given the 'all clean' (two thumbs raised), he took up running. 'Boy, did I run,' he said, 'I was like a lean, mean...' here he paused, allowing the audience to fill in the missing words, while her eye swept over his body: he sat with thigh muscles thick and spread, elbows resting on knees, leaning in towards his listeners. 'Running machine,' he finished, to a titter from the audience. 'Believe me, no sex, I wasn't in a space to have a girlfriend. Of course now, seven years later, things are a little different.' Again laughter. 'The point is,' he paused, held up a finger, 'you need replacement activities and for a long time, running, instead of,' here he closed a nostril, sniffing loudly and animatedly, 'worked. Still does. The thing is,' he repeated, before pausing, taking his time, knowing the audience was enjoying his show, 'that as sponsors we have to help our sponsees find those replacement activities to take their minds away from the drugs, which is why I'm here to introduce Dr Alexander Voget, a psychiatrist, with a strong interest in music, or music therapy, and how it can be used to help us with our addictions.'

Maria remembers little about Dr Voget except for his eyebrows: bushy and grey, voluptuous, overflowing the upper wire rim of his glasses, reminding her of a river in full flood. One line from Voget's talk, which was long, and rambling, far less adept, less playful than Lionel's had been, struck her. 'The brain that engages with music is changed by this engagement,' he had said. This intrigued her. She had been reading about early attachment and its neurological effects on the young brain: how poor attachments could affect the underlying structures of the brain, making later stable attachments sometimes impossible to achieve.

When Lionel spoke again she kept her face turned to him as much as she could without making it obvious, dropping her gaze when his eyes met hers. Could the power dynamic in their relationship have been worked out as early as that? Possibly. Right from the start Lionel led and Maria followed.

During the break – a plastic cup of overly sweet apple juice and a jam biscuit (ex addicts enjoy their sugary treats) – he returned to her side. He was wearing a tie-dyed blue t-shirt, half moons of sweat flashing whenever he lifted an arm. She liked it that he did nothing to hide the stains. He must have seen her eyes straying to his underarms: 'Look, I'm sweating,' he said, 'You make me anxious.' That was the moment she knew something would happen between them. 'You didn't jump,' he tapped the window frame. 'I take that as a good sign.'

'I was worried that I might lose a shoe if I squeezed myself out that window.'

He looked down at her black boots. 'I would have picked it up and looked for the foot that fitted this precise shoe.'

'How sweet. And if I turned into a pumpkin?'

He laughed and patted her shoulder in an easy gesture. Through her shirt she could feel his warm palm cupping her upper arm. 'Come, let me show you something,' he said. She

followed him out the room, still holding her cup of apple juice to an adjacent room. ‘Did you train at this place?’

‘Yes, but it looked very different in my day.’

‘Okay. So do you know about this other room?’ She did, but made out as if she didn’t. He pushed open the door for her to enter first, and flicked on the lights. They spluttered for a few moments before the fluorescent globes caught and lit up white. The room had an unpleasant odour: damp, overlaid with lavender scented air freshener. There was one large internal window, which faced the room where the meeting was taking place. Maria watched an elderly woman examine a poster about child development pasted to the wall. The woman removed her glasses, letting them swing freely from a gold chain around her neck, to stand with her nose practically touching the pictures of crawling infants and walking toddlers. The poster showed the development of babies, from one-day old to adolescence, an echo of the evolution of human beings. Afterwards the woman straightened and faced the window. No flicker of knowledge; it was clear she could not see inside. Maria enjoyed watching this unknown woman who had no knowledge of being observed.

‘One way mirror? She kept up the charade of surprise.’

‘Quite right, Maria.’ A shock of pleasure – she didn’t remember telling him her name. ‘You see him,’ he tapped on the glass, ‘the guy with the yellow jersey. Asshole. I *know* for a *fact* he’s still using, and he’s sleeping with the woman he’s meant to be helping. She came to see me afterwards, in a state. What should she *do*? Should she *report* him? Felt guilty because she enjoyed it, not that she said so.’

‘Did she?’ Maria felt a quickness to her breathing, her heart beating a shade too fast – *such indiscretions*.

‘What?’

‘Report him.’

‘No, she thought it was her fault in some way. That she had come on to him, been too provocative.’

Before she could stop herself she looked down at his left hand, which was resting on the table. No ring, but he caught the gaze and reached for her hand, turned it palm down: ‘Share alike, Maria. And, no, I’m not married, nor am I involved with anyone. Not yet.’

He leaned forward then and kissed her gently, only their mouths touching briefly. Behind him there was movement in the main room: silent, less urgent, because they couldn’t hear it.

‘You better be getting back. Are you up front again?’

‘Stay here. Watch me.’

‘*Here?*’

‘Yes. Behind the one-way glass – it’ll give me a kick. Make it easier to get through the rest of the evening.’ He flipped a switch from a small contraption on the table, the main room springing to life: she could hear the shuffling of people sitting down, muted conversation, a high-pitched woman’s laugh.

‘Okay. I’ll watch you, Lionel Lightly.’

Should she have walked out then? Gone back to her seat and left immediately after the meeting? In retrospect, that is precisely what she should have done. Even after Lionel had resumed chatting to the audience, she could have stood up, walked out the observation room and left the building – got into her car and driven home. There is a point in any love affair when both options are open: to leave or to stay, neither choice fraught with difficulty. That hour, though it felt much shorter, sitting behind the one-way glass, watching Lionel, was the window period for her escape – intact, free from hurt. Maria should have been wiser and less impressed by his authority, his charisma. She should not have been taken in by the covert

glances through the one way glass towards her, the discreet wave, the wink directed her way. Any man who insists you watch him, admire him, even when he cannot see you, can only lead to trouble.

She finishes her coffee. Still no Zac, nor a response to the SMS she sent Lionel. Her next patient is due in forty minutes. As she's dialing Zac she sees him coming towards her, holding the computer under his arm. She stands to meet him.

'No luck, I can't crack the bugger. You sure you don't remember the password?'

She hesitates: 'It's not actually my machine. Belongs... belonged to my mother.'

Zac raises his eyebrows in mock surprise: 'Can't say I'm shocked,' he says, 'I've lost count of the number of people asking me to hack into other people's machines. Anyway, let me keep it for a few more days, I'll give you a call.'

She thanks him, turns to go.

'Shit, Maria, hang on, I almost forgot to give you this,' he says, slapping his forehead. 'Losing my brain. If it wasn't screwed in – ' He hands her a silver disk with no label or writing on it.

'Here, found it in the computer. Reckon it's your mom's.' He hands the disk to her. 'I'm going to spend some more time with this baby, then I'll give you a ring,' he says over his shoulder as he's leaving.

The car guard appears pleased to see her again. 'See, sisi. Everything is alright.' She roots around in her bag, finds a coin and gives it over to the cupped hand.

Her fingers are trembling slightly when she slips the disc into the car's player. The first communication since Claudia's death. What is she imagining – that she'll hear her mother's voice saying goodbye, and explaining just what it was that made her jump to her death? It's

probably not even audio, but rather just a blank CD, or perhaps birth charts – charts for clients desperate for good news, who will never hear from their astrologer again. There is half a minute of silence. Then it starts up, the notes rising and echoing, discordant and creepy. Her body shudders, understanding before her mind does. *Rothko Chapel*. Kristof's music. *What the hell?* Her hands are slippery on the steering wheel, but she forces herself to listen to the entire piece, hearing it as if for the first time. The instruments make sounds like trapped screams, reaching out from far, far away.

University of Cape Town

Seven

Kristof has heard nothing from the owners of Bobbejaan Books. Presumably, since some days have passed, he can now relax. Unimpeded by his students – many of whom have left campus for their mid-year break – he is listening to John Adams' *Phrygian Gates* on his office speakers. His identification with the music is intense: he is at one with the pianist, running through the piece with all its disconcerting intervals of charm and anxiety. Then the office door opens a little and a bearded grinning head appears around the edge.

'What's happening, baby?' it says.

Kristof observes the head for a moment. Then he says, 'Where is the rest of your body?'

Laughing, the man enters the room – a tall fellow. He turns to peer at the set of Greek volumes on the bookshelves, and says, 'Oy.' Then he lowers himself to the chair on the other side of Kristof's desk. He shrugs off his rucksack, this giant furry octopus, squirming left and right, easing the straps off his arms. Once the rucksack is on the ground, he rolls his shoulders to relax them. 'You're looking good,' he says to Kristof. 'Slender, fit. My God! How long has it been?'

'Nearly twenty years.'

'And what is this nightmarish music?'

'Don't worry about the music, Bernstein. It's too hard for you.'

'It's horrible – but man, it's good to see you. How *are* you?'

Aren't you meant to be somewhere else – out the country?'

Bernstein laughs: 'I *have* been away all this time, only coming back for quick trips to see my parents. But now that I've returned for good, I thought I'd look you up. Good old Google

led me here. Almost twenty years – this deserves a celebration. Look, why are we sitting in this weird office of yours? You're obviously doing bugger all here. Let's go out.'

Deadpan, Kristof is watching Bernstein. 'Alright, just to humour you.'

In the corridor, Bernstein lollops alongside Kristof. They pass Luke Sullivan, who is plodding down the passage towards the bathroom. His eyes are downcast. The group counselling session with Maria two weeks back has not done him any visible good. Since then there has been no update on Saskia. The rumour in the department is that the police have taken to barking 'No new evidence' whenever they hear Luke's voice on the line.

'I know exactly where we should go,' says Bernstein. 'Our old place. Is it still there?'

'Yes. Objects continue to exist even when you're not around.' In the sunshine, they walk to Kristof's car, and a few minutes later he takes a turn onto the highway towards the city centre.

'It's good to be back,' says Bernstein, his window open, the air blowing through the car on this unseasonably warm afternoon. 'So different, Cape Town. Bigger. Faster.' He puts his arm out of the window, letting it rest on the shell of the car. 'So how are you? I haven't seen you since – hell, the last day of school. I did call your parents' house a few times, you know. I left messages for you. Did they give you my messages?'

'Yes. Sorry, I should have replied.'

'You should have. And then time just rushes on, and we lose touch. But it's so great to see you! It's like the last two decades have been nothing at all, a feather.'

'For you, maybe.'

‘Oh, I realise that *your* life is weightier than mine. You were always a deep kind of guy – and now you do it professionally. A philosophy professor! Your *job* is to be deep. Tell me something wise.’

Kristof makes no response. He is driving along the M3, the lower slope of the mountain on his left. In a meadow three zebras stand in a patch of light, chewing on the yellow grass, their tails gently swishing.

‘You were a weird guy, make no mistake. Everyone thought so. Clever, aggressive, best avoided, that was your reputation. Remember how snooty you got after you found your weekend job at that shop?’

Following the curve around the mountain, they are now directly facing the sun. The windscreen is a dazzling slab of light, and Bernstein puts on a pair of sunglasses. Kristof does not.

‘So that shop – what actually happened there? My mother heard from yours that you needed some time off afterwards, had to start varsity late. Course, I didn’t hear anything, since you never wrote.’

Kristof has switched on the car radio and turned it to a channel that plays Top 40 hits through the decades. The Flying Lizards’ *Money, That’s What I Want* does not have a calming effect on Bernstein, who speaks over the clanging music.

‘There’s a lot to talk about!’

‘Is there?’

‘I’ve got so much to say.’

They take a seat in the Company Gardens restaurant. ‘Does this place still have the same menu?’ Bernstein asks. ‘Look at that,’ he adds, peering at the thin typed sheet. ‘Only the

prices are different.’ They are at a green wrought-iron table that tilts when either of them leans on it. Bernstein folds a serviette into a tiny white square and places it under one of the legs, causing no discernible difference. This café is a little-known oasis to one side of the Gardens, shielded by foliage. There is a scattering of regulars. One man has been there every time Kristof visits. During the week he wears an elegant suit and keeps his advocate’s robes folded on the table as he sips his coffee; on weekends he morphs into an aging fat-bellied man with constellations of holes in his T-shirt. But many of the customers arrive by accident. Through the leaves, like Victorian explorers, come tourists who do not expect this place, and their relief is palpable when they see that finally, after roaming about a garden in which they have encountered a prehistoric tree, a pond of gaping koi, a perplexing art gallery, a gloomy and neglected natural history museum, and a dusty rectangle that is used for nothing at all, they find themselves at a little restaurant in a clearing bounded by lush palm trees.

A middle-aged waitress, heavy and shapely in the bosom, bustles up in her pink uniform. ‘For you today, gentlemen?’

‘What I’ll have,’ replies Bernstein, ‘is two toasted cheese and tomatoes. Both for me. I’m hungry! And one for my friend.’

He turns his smile to Kristof. ‘That’s what we used to eat, right? Seems like a million years ago and like yesterday, doesn’t it?’

‘Does it?’

‘To me it does. Sorry I haven’t made more effort over the years. But then again, you didn’t try to speak to me at all as far as I know. I had a feeling you didn’t *want* to talk.’ Bernstein’s arms are travelling around the table’s surface area. They roam hairily about, tapping, claspings, questing. ‘Anyway, look at you now! Smart clothes, cushy job, a calm sort of manner with me as if you’re a lord listening to a babbling peasant.’

‘Nicely put.’

‘You were always in the clover, and you still are. But what about me? I mean, I got home after that last day of school, took off that ridiculous uniform – purple! we looked like a bunch of aubergines – and my mother said, what’s the plan now? She knew I didn’t want to go to university and listen to lectures for three years. My school marks would have made that a bit tricky anyway. But she was hoping I’d take a short course in something useful. I had no intention of that! I wanted adventure. You remember what it was like – Mandela out of prison at the beginning of the year, wild, fantastic.’ The table between him and Kristof prevents Bernstein from earnestly gripping his old friend.

‘I didn’t even say goodbye to people, except my parents. And I didn’t ask for money, because I’d saved enough working at that bottle store. While you were swanking around at that bookshop, I was earning cash with a crate of beer on my back. Anyway, it crossed my mind to apply for an expedition to the Antarctic, but even I realised that they get those things together with more than a week’s notice, and anyway they wouldn’t need someone who’d just finished school. But still, I was looking for something *searing*. I wanted to go somewhere very hot or very cold. The idea was that I would leave and purify myself, become a sort of dry, clean husk, and then I would return to this amazing new country, and I would also be *new*. This must sound insane to you.’

‘Not mentally ill. But slow-witted.’

‘So I went to the Northern Cape. How much hotter and drier can you get than that? I hitched. My idea was to take the road up the coast as far as it would go. There I was, not yet eighteen, going up the national road, and mostly sitting on my arse. Sometimes I slept in a hostel, sometimes in the bush on the side of the tarmac. I often woke up at night in my

sleeping bag, sodden with sweat, but I had to stay in it. If I lay on the sand, the bugs ate me alive.

‘After a week, I was dropped off by a Simba Chips truck in a tiny town just south of the Namibian border. I thought: I’m not going any further. And tonight I’m going to sleep next to the ocean. Blue sky, rocks, clashing frothy sea! This is where I’ll be cleansed and refreshed, and then I’ll be ready to return.’

The toasted cheese arrives. ‘Eat it while it’s hot,’ says the waitress. Bernstein stops speaking in order to gulp down one of his toasted sandwiches, thick buttered white bread, oozing cheese and stuffed with wedges of tomato. He eats with the speed of someone who wants to polish off the food before it’s taken from him. Bernstein is a messy eater, but frequently uses his paper napkin to wipe his chin. After the sandwich, he says: ‘I wanted to tell you all about this twenty years ago. I knew you’d get a kick out of it – and over the years, every now and then, I’d imagine recounting it to you. I even wrote you a letter once, sent it to your parents’ place, but I doubt you ever got it. Or at least you never responded. Funny, that. It still feels like yesterday to me, though.’ With his greasy fingers, Bernstein pats the top of Kristof’s hand.

‘One afternoon I reached this Northern Cape dorp. In the evening, I took a saunter through town – bottle store with a Coke sign, houses with tin roofs – then followed a path next to the sea. After about half an hour’s walk up the coast, I saw a bit of coastline I liked, where the rocks jutted into the sea. I found myself a smooth broad stone a few metres from the water, a little elevated, and shook out my sleeping bag.’ In the air above the table, Bernstein smooths the invisible bag. ‘If you think that sounds stupid, well, you aren’t seventeen anymore. Though maybe you’d never have done something like that.’

‘It was a lovely night. As I looked at the sky I felt happy and free. I was in my sleeping bag, the ocean roaring at me, a warm layer of rock beneath me. Then I thought: what does all this mean? I was lying on a ruined promontory, the sea battering it for millenia, and under the water there’d been a billion years of hijinks. All those creatures evolving stronger teeth and faster fins, swimming through a graveyard of swirling particles from a trillion fish before them, devoting their lives to *eating* one another – and to laying eggs for another round. What was the point of all these weird and intense happenings, you know? To me it just seemed like hard work for no reason. And from that perspective, human life seemed much the same, and just as pointless and ridiculous. Then, feeling a little dizzy – maybe my rock was angled slightly downwards towards my head – I did a bit of philosophy. You’ll be interested in this. I said to myself: maybe there isn’t even a *me*.’ Bernstein swishes a hand across his chest to efface himself. ‘Maybe there are just *feelings*. No single person, no me, just a bunch of images and sensations. The idea was very relaxing. If there was no me, then that kind of took the pressure off. So I lay back and went to sleep.’

He takes a pause to go at his second toasted cheese and tomato sandwich. The plate, oiled with fronds of cheese, gets a careful wipe with the last bit of his sandwich to finish it all off. ‘Delicious. So what now? A milkshake?’ And he beckons the waitress over. ‘Can I please have an extra large vanilla?’

‘We don’t make extra large, but I’ll see what I can do,’ says the waitress.

‘That’s all I can ask.’ He smiles at her departing buttocks as she navigates her way around the tables. ‘Nice waitress. Anyway, I was snuggled into my sleeping bag, resting my head on my T-shirt – a warm sleeping bag is really cosy when you’re bare-chested – and I slept magnificently. There’s nothing like it, under the stars with the sound of the sea, as close to nature as you can get.’

‘I woke up with a shock. My back was icy, and I felt a freezing ripple pass over me. I sat up, my heart going *doof-doof-doof*.’ He slaps his chest. ‘A wave of black freezing water slapped into me, this time at the level of my chest, and some spray hit my face. I tried to stand up, but I was still in my sleeping bag, and I fell. I bashed my knees on the rock as I went down, and my nose and throat were full of salty water. My sleeping bag was sopping, I had to get out of it. I was on my hands and knees, stuck in this sodden sack. At first I couldn’t get the zip down, and I thought for a moment that I’d die there. With a frantic wrench I pulled down that zip – God only knows how, since force has never helped me with a zip before or since – and now I was in my underwear, and getting the hell off the rocks and onto the sandy shore. I’d left my sleeping bag in the water – I panicked – and my shirt-pillow was gone, and I couldn’t see my pants, which I’d laid out next to me the night before. So there I was, on the freezing shore. I had nearly two hundred rand in my shoe, but I’d left my shoes next to the bag, and the water was now completely covering the rocks.’

Kristof is resting his cheek in his hand. ‘Barefoot and penniless – I could have predicted that.’

‘But I’ll tell you a funny thing. While I was walking along the road towards town, absolutely freezing, I started laughing. I couldn’t believe things were so terrible, and I kept expecting to be saved. Maybe I thought mom and dad, you know, would come by in their Valiant or something. Beep-beep! Get in, son.’

‘Walking along the road towards town in my undies, I saw an old lighthouse, a high round tower with a two-storied house adjoining it. I’d noticed it earlier, coming from the opposite direction. Then the lighthouse and the adjoining home looked disused – unpainted, the path towards them overgrown. Now, late at night, I saw a light in a window on the ground floor of the small house. I walked over some cold sand and scrubby plants, scratching my wet feet

and shins on the rough brush. The door had a heavy brass knocker, and I knocked several times. My hands were so cold that the metal felt warm. There was no reply. I knocked again, and a woman answered – broad and strong-looking, in early middle age. She looked at me without saying a word.

‘I told her what had happened, shivering as I got the words out. After I’d finished, for a second she held my eyes, wondering if she could trust me. Come in,’ she said, thank God, and turned to admit me. A deep, foreign voice, a bit harsh. The room I entered was small. It had plenty of sturdy old furniture, and I saw a radio on a coffee table. There was a wooden flight of steps.

‘“I have some men’s clothes here,” said the woman. “Upstairs.’ And then she turned to look at me. Now she was wondering: *Will he be waiting for me, when I come back downstairs, maybe holding a knife?*

‘“You can trust me,” I said. I don’t like to leave things unspoken. She nodded and left me in the lounge, with its sturdy chairs and sofas. I held my two hands above a reading lamp next to a sofa, and they looked spectral. “Flesh,” I murmured to myself as my hands warmed up. There was a book open on the sofa; one of those old cloth-bound hard-covered books. In the centre of its soft front cover was a title in Gothic letters. So: German. I was wrecked on the coast near Namibia, standing in the middle of the night in my underwear as I waited for clothes from the German keeper of a dilapidated lighthouse. Oh, that mood of freedom and adventure! Do you know it? When you’re young, and you come to see that your parents were wrong. There was no place in my upbringing for such an event, and yet here it was. The world was large after all.

‘Then she was back, coming down the steps. In one arm was a towel, and in the other a neatly folded batch of clothes. I must have presented a pitiful and comic sight, still trembling

in my red underpants. I smiled at her, and the act of smiling set me shivering again. I then held my upper arms with each hand. It's strange, feeling your own icy flesh as if it's a lump of blubber. I had never been so deeply cold.

“Take a seat, please,” she said. “I will make coffee. You can dry and get dressed.” She kept her back turned while I was changing into the clothes. They were too tight and too short for me, but I wasn't feeling choosy. The coffee was delicious, very sweet, and I sat facing this woman in my tight clothing, sipping, and feeling peculiar and elated. My hair was damp, but drying rapidly, since the room was warm; there was a barred oil heater sitting on the floor.

“You've had a bad time,” said this woman. She smiled and waited. She was wearing a sweater – this was someone who understood insulation. A night on the Northern Cape coast is chilly, even in summer, I can tell you. She told me that I could sleep on the couch. I fell into the sort of black swooning sleep that comes to a half-drowned seventeen year old, and the next morning I awoke to bright sunlight: she had opened the front door of the house, and the rising sun was hitting me.’

Kristof smiles. ‘What, my friend?’ says Bernstein.

‘What you said about sunlight reminded me of a philosophical quote. Something George Berkeley wrote.’

‘You see? You don't need to read any philosophy. Just hang around with me, and sooner or later I'll say the same thing. What did he write?’

Kristof tilts his head back, thinks for a moment. “When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see”.’

‘Deep. But what does that mean?’

‘That your senses aren’t under your control. If your eyes are open and there’s light, you’re going to see, whether you like it or not.’

‘Huh, that’s obvious.’ Bernstein ruminates for a moment: ‘And actually wrong. People *do* choose whether to see or not. Some people walk around their whole lives, eyes wide open, and they don’t see a damn thing. It’s like they’ve decided life will be nicer if they don’t look too closely.’

‘You’re a philosopher yourself, Bernstein.’

Bernstein is delighted. He drums a quick tattoo on his knees. ‘You’re messing with me.’

‘I am messing with you. Now carry on with your story. I can tell you’re dying to.’

‘If you insist. After that interval of philosophy, we return to the regular transmission. So: there I was, waking up in this woman’s house the morning after my near-drowning.

‘“Well,” she said, possibly amused but not showing it, sitting on the couch opposite mine. “What are you going to do now?” She was sipping coffee. There was a ginger long-haired cat, which I hadn’t noticed the night before; it was on the couch next to her, its eyes closed, as silent and still as a stuffed cushion.

‘I found myself telling her about my need to cleanse myself. What a naïve and spoiled young guy I was. I had no understanding of this woman’s life, but as I spoke I expected her to be fascinated by me. There was no good reason for her to hear me out, but she was an excellent listener, and sat motionless, just watching, as I talked.

‘“Sounds like you were quite stupid to come here with nothing,” she said.

‘“I had nearly two hundred rand in my shoe,” I replied. She laughed.

‘“My name’s Johanna. You can stay for a few days if you like.”

‘“I will of course be glad to pay you,” I said. “Totally.’ But she said that she lived very cheaply, it was pleasant to have company, and that there were some odd jobs I could do to earn my keep.’

Here Bernstein pauses to watch the arrival of his milkshake in a tall glass with handles on either side and a reinforced base. ‘Now that’s what I call a large vanilla!’

‘For you we go the extra mile,’ says the waitress, collecting the empty plates.

‘If only more people were like you!’ Bernstein drinks up the shake noisily, gripping the glass by its handles. ‘Oh, heaven. That’s the easiest way to feel like a child, having a milkshake. So anyway: that first day Johanna spent mostly upstairs, coming down for coffee or snacks. I went into town to get some biscuits and things for us, using her money of course, and in the evening she came downstairs, she sat on the couch opposite me, removed her sandals – old, battered, but clean; she took care of her belongings – tucked her feet under her, and told me that she was an artist. Seascapes, landscapes, some portraits, which she sent to a gallery in Kimberley. Made enough to keep her going. Johanna had come from Germany years before, one of those Germans who come on a backpacking visit and never go back. She married and settled in the Northern Cape with a fisherman husband. One afternoon he left the shore on his fishing boat, and he didn’t return after that. She looked for him, this guy Thomas, but he was gone. She was deeply sad, weighed down, when she spoke about him. He was a solid man, and the two of them had lived together in this old lighthouse. His father and grandfather had been the lighthouse keepers.’

‘Bernstein,’ Kristof says. ‘This story of yours. Does it end at some point, or will it continue for the full twenty years, until I’ve been updated in total detail?’

He snorts. ‘Okay, so the bottom line is that I stayed there. After a few months of wandering around the area, I started up this outreach group, teaching English to local poor

kids – I finally did this correspondence course in education, so you're not the only one with a piece of paper – and then it kind of grew until I had a whole programme. It covered a lot of the Northern Cape, where for some of these kids there's pretty much *no* education, and it was sponsored by a big company that wanted to look good. I got a small salary. It was exhausting. I loved it.'

'Sometimes I ask myself – how could I have stayed so long when I meant to go just for a bit, then to return to the new South Africa? After my outreach group got going, it was easy; the momentum just carried me along. But until then, what kept me there was Johanna. In high school, girls seemed to find me a bit alarming. So sex was a revelation to me.' Bernstein shakes his head in awe. 'When Johanna first took my hand one evening, after the second week, and led me up the steps to her unmade bed, nothing I had ever imagined could be possibly as intimate as that. She took off her sweater and jeans, and sank onto me, sitting on me while I lay on her fragrant sheets, the smell of paint and turps around us. I couldn't *believe* that she was entrusting her broad body to me; that I was allowed to hold and stroke her. In that worn bra she was so fantastically gorgeous. And she rose and sank on me, rose and sank, and I *could not believe* the sensation, the heat that I had never felt before, or that this pleasure was allowed, and was mutual. It happened most evenings, after she'd finished working. I never stopped marvelling at the miracle of it, this secret centre of our day, and wondering why anyone would want to spend time doing anything else. We tried various other positions, but the one in which she rose and sank was her favourite. Mine too. If there had been some option for me to do that forever, a tiny loop in time, I would gladly have entered it. Her large breasts were a joy to me, and I held them – and so the time passed. If you ask me now, what were you doing at the end of nineteen ninety, the year of liberation – you know? – the year when you wanted to return, purified, to help build the new South Africa, I would say:

I was pinned to the bed, pinned like a butterfly, by a German woman in the Northern Cape who rose and sank, rose and sank on me every night.’ Bernstein sighs. ‘You should have been there.’

‘Thank heavens I wasn’t.’

‘We were happy together, I think. But Johanna had to go home to Germany, her mother had sickened. And these long distance things,’ he shrugs, ‘they’re hard to make work, aren’t they? For six months she took care of her mother, and we spoke on the phone every evening, but one night she told me she was with a man. An old friend, her age. She’d decided to stay. Strung me along for a while – I was devastated. So I stayed, and got totally into my outreach programme. Then a few years after she left I finally got tired of all that outreach, and kow-towing to the corporate sponsors. And now I’m back, ready for something new! Sitting here with you, it’s like old times, with your sarky remarks and these fine fat waitresses. So what’s happening with you? How’s your life? Found anyone special yourself?’ This giant octopus, half-rising the chair, reaches over the table to clutch at Kristof’s hand.

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Then we can double date! We’ll be like a pair of teenagers again, but this time more skilled – and dangerous.’ Bernstein begins to sing in a romantic French voice, making up nonsense words as he goes.

Eight

He is seventeen in his final year of school. It is a *clever* school, prestigious far beyond the Stellenbosch region, and takes special pride in its maths and science results. Yet even the brightest people in the place are idiots. He has heard one of them, a girl who excels at biology and netball, speaking soberly to the red-haired fellow with white skin who runs the school's religious society. 'Of course we have to stay alert to the devil's temptations; he's always watching for an opportunity to take us,' she says, and the red-haired boy nods sagely and judiciously draws out his '*Ja*'.

The Prince of Darkness is a hot conversation topic: even the police, taking some time off from their business in the townships – activities never discussed at the school, which keeps itself out of politics – come one Friday afternoon to share their concerns about Satanism among teenagers. Their views are supported with slides of evidence, candles and red graffiti in abandoned buildings, which they show to a mass of uniformed cross-legged teenagers facing the overhead projector screen. At the end of the presentation, after the screen goes white, Kris raises his hand to ask whether devil worship is actually illegal. 'Why?' asks the Detective Sergeant standing next to the projector, still holding the final transparency sheet. 'Do you want to worship him yourself?'

In this atmosphere of cleverness and inanity, of being good at science and believing in the devil while ignoring the regime, Kris exerts no more effort at school than necessary. The school pays little attention to literature, teaching only the minimum requirements: his class has been studying a book of short stories, each story didactic enough to demonstrate a moral principle and vindicate the pupils' belief that literature is pointlessly flabby, a turgid way to express simple truths. Kris, together with his only friend, the gangly misfit Bernstein, reacts

by reading, savagely. He never quite finds the right book, the one that will envelop and satisfy him totally, but sometimes there are passages to be copied into his black notepad. His restlessness expresses itself physically; on some nights he lies with his legs twitching, unable to sleep.

Halfway through the year, Kris starts to take the train into Cape Town on Saturday mornings. He wanders the city centre; surely these streets are a gateway into a richer world. Sometimes he observes the exhibits at the National Gallery, amazingly avant-garde in relation to the rest of his experience. Clearly these paintings and sculptures express discontent, but further than that they are opaque in their significance. The artworks do not say precisely what it is they object to, or what they prescribe instead. In the entrance hall he walks around three mutant creatures of plaster, sitting together on a bench, but despite his fierce attention no one recognises him as a lover of art; the man behind the cash register looks off into space.

Clearly life is elsewhere. He begins to take trips around Cape Town, making journeys from the hub of the central station. Though he finds himself travelling quite long distances around the city, he does not uncover anything really special; he is still gliding on the surface.

One day he takes a trip to Muizenberg. The seaside resort is seedy, rundown, and he strolls along the beach at the edge of the water, a book in one hand, picking little snails out of the wet sand with his toes and watching them burrow into the soil again. The beach seems empty; the sky is covered in dark clouds, and the wind is strong. From a distance he sees the approach of a tall man carrying a long stick. On the otherwise deserted beach, with its lowering skies, the sight of him is almost mystical.

‘Good morning,’ says the man when he finally arrives. Kris nods.

‘Winkling them out, huh?’ the man remarks. He pokes his stick into the sand.

Kris is not used to being spoken to during his wanderings.

'I don't mind if you do,' says the man. 'Neither do they.'

Together they bring up little snails for a while. One has to wait until a wave has just passed over the sand. Otherwise it is too cruel to dig them up; they just lie on the thick dry sand, unable to turn themselves downwards. To reorient themselves and burrow down again, they require sand as soft as chocolate milkshake.

'How's the book?' the man asks, nodding at the copy of *Lions and Shadows*, recently acquired at a charity bookshop and now in Kris's left hand.

'Pretty good.'

He laughs. 'Don't be simple with me!'

Kris looks up sharply. This man is tall, taller than Kris, and broad. He wears a red- and black checked shirt with long black trousers, and goes barefoot. Probably he is about forty five, an age balanced between strength and experience. He carries with him a sense of watchful amusement.

'Alright then.' Kris gathers his thoughts. 'A strange, beautiful memoir. It makes me long for a delicate world I've never known, Cambridge in the nineteen twenties...'

'Do you think that world ever existed?'

Kris is silent. It seems an excellent question, tricky and deep, and he has no experience in dealing with this sort of thing. In the world of school, hard problems require calculation, but this question seems to call for something else. The man is smiling at him, in no apparent hurry to ease the silence, and so he gropes at a response. 'It wasn't the world itself, but Isherwood's way of looking at it.'

'Why do you think it's so appealing, his way of seeing that world? Isn't it just neurotic, a twisting of reality into fantastic shapes?'

This man's questions are as sudden as blows with a stick, making Kris's blood run warm and fast. They discuss Isherwood for a while, and the man recommends *Goodbye to Berlin*, then *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*, and finally a visit to the city itself before the wall has been entirely removed. They stand a long time on the beach, the snails forgotten; then the man puts out his hand. 'Daniel Vane.' He pronounces his first name in the Afrikaans way, with a long *a*, like the sound made when opening one's mouth for the doctor. Kris is a connoisseur of voices, since he seeks always to mould his own into something accentless, the pure sound of an educated being, waiting to be coloured by something of worth.

'Kristof Zoetman. Kris.'

'Tell me, Kris, are you still at school?'

'Yes.'

'I've got a proposition for you. Hang on – don't worry, I'm not a pervert. Why don't you come to tea with me and my wife? Come, it's freezing. I'll take you to our place and you can warm up.'

Together they walk to the parking lot, and then off they go in his white bakkie towards Kalk Bay, where they stop on the side of the main road facing the harbour. There is a building with a name above the entrance, burnt into a thick plank of yellowwood: *Bobbejaan Books*. As Kris enters the shop, a customer, sipping coffee and leafing through a volume, looks up at him from the table where he is sitting. The place is spacious; between the shelves of bright books are carpets and tables, places to ruminate. There are several customers, but it seems there is no one in attendance. Then a woman enters the shop from a back room. She is tall, nearly Kris's height, and she turns to Daniel, who says, 'This is Kris,' and pats him on the shoulder. The woman gives him a welcoming smile and comes over to shake hands. 'I'm Catherine. It's good to meet you.' She is somewhat younger than Daniel, in her mid-thirties.

Catherine, like her husband, has an over-precise voice, the sound of a native Afrikaans speaker whose English is excellent. Her timbre is low: perhaps she is a smoker.

‘Delighted to meet you,’ says Kris.

When he leaves Bobbejaan Books at the end of the day, he has his first job. Over coffee and then a glass of brandy, Daniel and Catherine have quizzed him on his knowledge of books (wide but spotty) and his ambitions (deep but vague). They need help on Saturdays; the shop is packed, and they cannot manage it alone. They require someone who is energetic, personable and willing to accept a small salary.

‘So are you personable?’ Daniel says.

‘It depends on the person.’

‘At least he’s honest,’ says Catherine. ‘And bright. Anyone can see that.’

‘Then you can have the job,’ says Daniel.

Kris, alight with caffeine after three hot coffees, says, ‘But I didn’t tell you I wanted it.’

‘You do want it. Well done.’

Now Kris takes the Saturday train not as a traveller but as a bookshop assistant. He sits, unsmiling, reading throughout the journey. *Bookshop assistant*. Daniel and Catherine – the Vanes – are paying attention to his education. He has wasted his first seventeen years, they have made it clear; there is a lifetime of catching up to do, and books are recommended to him every Saturday. Daniel presses great thick works on him: Dostoyevsky, Melville.

Catherine offers him slender, romantic volumes – Czech poets in translation, the memoirs of White Russian exiles. Kris reads what he has been given during the week, turning the pages under his school desk, increasingly disregarding the work assigned to him. On the weekends he returns them to the shop for more. Slowly the Vanes are filling Kris up.

One weekend Daniel invites Kris to a dinner party the next week, to be held after work; afterwards, he can sleep on a couch in the bookshop. That Saturday, Kris stays in the shop after closing time at six o'clock. In the bathroom he washes and changes into a smart white shirt and black trousers, and then he waits at a table, reading Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, until the other two guests arrive. Together they go upstairs to the Vanes' large apartment, which has a view of the fishing harbour and the sea. Apart from Daniel, Catherine and Kris, there is a couple, around fifty years old: Michaelis, the man who supplies the Vanes with cartons of second-hand books from England – a tough-looking, alert fellow, like a seaman – and Lydia, who smokes continually, wears her red hair cropped, and makes humorous remarks in a dry manner.

Michaelis tells stories from his youth in Rhodesia. 'After leaving school I worked at children's parties,' he said. 'Clowning. It didn't really take off for me until one day my father arrived at my flat in his Morris Minor. He said, "I've got a side act for you," and opened the back door. Sitting there was a black dwarf, nicely dressed in a suit with a briefcase on his lap. I did brilliantly after that. The kids loved him.'

'Have you noticed,' asks Lydia over the main course, a roast lamb, pink in the centre, 'that to some people, smiling seems quite unnatural?'

'For example?' says Daniel.

'Well, I don't know. Look at Kris here. So stern, implacable. Women will want to melt that stern reserve, I can tell you that. Are you as implacable as you seem?'

'Even more so,' says Kris. There is laughter.

The five of them have drunk four bottles of red wine between them, though the main course is not yet over. Until tonight, Kris has never had more than a glass.

'You should relax a bit,' says Lydia. 'You're holding it in.'

‘If I let it out, what will you do with it?’ says Kris, and Catherine claps her hands. She is dressed in a simple black dress, highlighting the perfect whiteness of her skin.

‘A toast!’ says Kris, who has consumed four glasses. He rises, and says, in almost a comical British accent – ‘I have never had such a good time. And that is thanks to all of you.’ He looks about at their expectant faces; he sways on the cusp of manhood. ‘Goodbye to my old school, my old town. Goodbye to ignorance and stupidity! I am going to *fly*.’ The table dissolves into laughter. Kris flips his hand up, misses slightly, and a bit of wine sloshes into his eye. ‘Ow.’

‘In your eye!’ says Michaelis.

‘Do you know,’ says Catherine, looking out the window as the laughter subsides. ‘It’s nearly full moon now, isn’t it?’

Michaelis asks, ‘Is it getting bigger or smaller?’ More laughter, which Catherine ignores. ‘Waxing – and the moonlight on the water is so lovely. Really, it’s a comfort that no matter how one’s life gets, how grim, how old and sick, there’s always the light on the sea to look at.’ Kris is watching her, her pale face looking outwards at the glittering sea.

Then Catherine goes to the record player, her heels clacking on the wooden floor, selects a record from a pile and puts it on. It is Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. She looks around a moment, her serious expression daring anyone to object, to smile at the corniness of the choice. Then she removes her shoes and extends her hand to Daniel, who stands, bows to her and then accepts her hand. With her husband, Catherine dances slowly around the room.

Michaelis and Lydia nod at each other, walk to the floor and take each other’s hands. Kris, at the centre of the table, watches them and drinks another glass of wine. Catherine, as she takes a turn around the room, flicks a switch. The chandelier goes out, and the room is illuminated by the moon. Swish, swish goes Catherine’s dress as it touches the floor, now that

she is barefoot. The pale concentrating faces of the dancers are visible by the light of the yellow moon, which looks close enough to touch. Kris watches, and does not stand up; he observes the dancers tracing themselves over the dark floor.

‘You’ll need to come Sundays too,’ Catherine tells Kris the next Saturday morning as they unpack books in the back room. ‘The shop is expanding.’

‘Expanding? Why?’ Kris associates the term with his father, who works at the Building Society and speaks of *expansion* with reverence when discussing the plans of his employers.

‘Well,’ Catherine says as she picks up a small box and slits it open with a breadknife, ‘Maybe people are drawn here by our handsome assistant.’ She is not facing Kris as she says it; he sees her neat dark blue jeans and checked work shirt, perhaps one of Daniel’s, as she bends to rearrange the books about to be mailed off to an expatriate in Switzerland. She turns towards him. ‘You’re blushing.’ She reaches out an arm, a cool soft arm to touch the side of his face.

‘Not at all.’

‘But you are.’ Catherine looks at him, quizzically, smiling a little. ‘You are. What’s wrong with that? It’s entirely natural.’ Kris begins to turn, but the cool hand holds him back. Catherine’s pale fingers end in red nails; he steals looks at them during the day. Now she is holding his arm, and her nails are digging lightly into his flesh, leaving little half-moon indents.

‘I think we should have a chat,’ Catherine says. ‘Sit. It’s okay.’ Kris seats himself on a cardboard box before her. She leans against the boxes behind her, her legs braced on the ground, hips tilted. ‘You give a good impression of a young man who knows where he’s

going,' she says. 'Someone who's experienced in the world. And in some ways you are. But I think I can see through you.'

Kris swallows, then says, coolly, 'What do you mean?'

At this Catherine looks at him a few seconds. The silence in the room expands until there is only the smell of cardboard boxes and of her light scent, a heartbeat away from not being a scent at all.

She raises her right hand and waggles her index finger towards him. White, red. *Come here*. He stands up, walks two steps towards her. She straightens, and they are facing each other, very close. Catherine takes both her hands in his and places them on either side of her hips. 'There. Hold me low. The woman holds the man higher.' Catherine's hips are firm, shockingly warm beneath her sweater. 'You like that?' she asks. 'I can tell you do.' And she puts her arms slowly around him so that she is almost encircling him. The palms of her hand are flat on his back. 'You're trembling. Here we go. I'm going to kiss you.' She leans forward and presses her lips on his. Then her tongue is in his mouth. It is a shock, electric. He jumps slightly but she is holding him close. With an intensity that sets him throbbing, she sucks at his tongue, and the root of it aches. Then she withdraws, and is smiling at him. Her lipstick is smudged; he is aware of its taste on her lips.

'Oh God.' Her hands are *lacquered*, he thinks to himself. The word makes him frantic.

'There's something you need,' says Catherine, 'You just don't know it yet.'

'What?' Kris's voice is low and unsteady, as if he has just woken up.

She puts a vertical finger to his mouth. 'All in good time, young man. You'll get what's coming to you. Look into my eyes.' He does as she says, into her green eyes outlined with black liner, and slowly her hand moves over his shirt and onto his trousers. All the blood is pooling, he is going to burst or die. He looks down.

‘At me!’ His eyes return to her. Her lips are pursed in concentration and amusement; she will not stop, and she will not release him either.

‘Please,’ he says.

‘Please what?’

At this moment there is a sound behind Kris, of a door opening, and he takes a step back.

Daniel sticks his head around the door. ‘Chop chop,’ he says to both of them. ‘Customers out front.’

University of Cape Town

Nine

In the pale winter light of early afternoon, Kristof walks along the university avenue, returning from an administrative meeting. As he reaches the Humanities building, he stretches out his arm and runs his fingers along the creepers that cover the wall. The thin branches hold the structure in a lifeless grip.

He carries on past Humanities to the adjacent complex. There on the steps is Maria, with students clustered around her. A young man is asking her a question that involves emphatic hand gestures. Before she can reply, a woman in a wheelchair supplies a response. The students are ambitious, ready to contest one another; Maria offers an occasional comment that sets them off again. She is wearing a black turtleneck, and the tips of her short blonde hair brush across the dark wool.

Kristof waits for her outside the circle, watching as she reduces her participation until she is mostly nodding or shaking her head. Finally the students have had their fill, and they thank her in mingled baritone and soprano, and then walk away down the avenue, arguing with one another. Only one student remains, on the cusp of womanhood, probably an undergraduate. She says a few final words to Maria, shakes her hands and thanks her with adolescent intensity, and then off she goes. Maria folds up the sheaf of notes she has been holding and slips it into the bag over her shoulder.

‘Clearly you’re a hit.’

She looks up, smiles. ‘Hello.’

‘I saw you were giving a lecture today; there were posters up on campus. I wanted to come, but was busy in an admin meeting.’

She looks pleased, and tries to hide it with a brisk nod. ‘Sometimes the psychology academics like to bring in private practitioners. I come for a few lectures every year, mostly on adolescent developmental psychology.’

‘You specialise in adolescents? No wonder you handled the philosophers so well.’

She laughs a little. ‘I wouldn’t say I specialise, but I *do* enjoy the age group. So sceptical of adult society, and yet, in their own way, such conformists themselves. It’s funny, because adolescents think they’re real mavericks. But the true eccentrics, the ones who really perceive and respond to the world in their own way, are the elderly, those closest to death. I suppose they have nothing to lose.’

‘You wouldn’t say that if you’d ever met my parents. I don’t think either of them ever had an original thought in their heads. Listen,’ he tightens his grip on his briefcase, as he takes the plunge. ‘Why don’t we get out of this awful cold, and get a cup of tea?’

Maria’s lower lip is chapped; perhaps she has been biting it. It seems she is about to say something negative – *thank you; I really should return to work* – but then she stops. ‘Alright.’

‘Just to seal in some warmth. Let’s go to my office.’ They walk back to the entrance hall of the Humanities building. Above the elevator is a scene of Nelson Mandela – young, beefy, bearded – standing at the window of his prison cell, its bars being bent outwards by a crowd of joyous figures: workers in caps and headcloths, educators in mortarboards. A woman wearing a bright red dress holds up a sign: ‘Don’t dominate, educate’.

‘Some students painted that in the mid-eighties,’ says Kristof as they walk to the lift.

‘Striking.’

‘Hard to live with, though. Usually I keep my eyes on the lift.’

Maria deflects her face slightly. Maybe she regards his criticism as disrespectful to Mandela. They enter the lift, the slight awkwardness between them increased by the silence in which they ascend.

The quiet is broken by Maria. 'I see there's no button for the Philosophy Department.'

'It's on the seventh floor.'

'But the lift only goes to the sixth.'

'That's right.' They emerge on the sixth floor, into the Department of Religion. Kristof leads Maria along a passage filled with academics, chatting as they hold little plates with cream cheese and salmon bagels. 'It's a conference on spirituality,' says Kristof. 'You need to push through them a bit.' They reach a flight of steps. Maria takes it without hurry or effort. Even climbing the stairs, this woman has a notable air of self-possession.

The Philosophy Department is quiet after the hubbub of Religion. As they walk along its main passage they pass a single student, a young man literally weighed down by his satchel of books. Spaced regularly along the corridor are a set of beautiful posters—a photograph of lustrous cogs turning against one another, an etching of a Gothic cathedral, an artist's impression of the Big Bang. All the doors are shut. 'Saskia put these posters up,' says Kristof as they pass them. 'She thought they'd brighten up the department. She got them from a second-hand shop in Long Street soon after she arrived in the city.' He smiles. 'When I met her, she told me her first impression of the city centre, with Table Mountain behind it. The scene put her in mind of a family photo: in front, a host of parents and aunts and babies. Behind this crowd, the great moronic cousin, ugly and sullen with a flat-topped haircut, stuck at the back and glowering over them all.'

'I like that. Any news of her?'

Kristof shakes his head. 'Sometimes I hear Luke on the phone to her parents in the Netherlands. I think they speak quite regularly. Her mother has been here three times already.'

They reach an office door at the end of the corridor, with Kristof's name printed on a mounted rectangle of white plastic. 'Take a seat,' he says as they enter. Maria stands for a few seconds first, looking around. The desk, in the centre of the room, is mahogany. The walls and ceiling are painted white: not cream, but a fierce white that displays the floaters and after-images on one's retina. Hanging against a wall is an abstract painting, smooth thick layers of blue like the depths of a swimming pool. The rest of the room consists of bookshelves. Here too a colour scheme has been chosen. One shelf consists of Greek volumes from the Loeb Classical Library, all with green dust jackets. Another shelf contains yellow hard-backed mathematics books published by Springer Verlag. Only the third bookshelf includes volumes of all shades, and in this room it catches the eye as the boldest provocation. There are no windows, but the air conditioning keeps the air temperate and flowing.

'Tea?' asks Kristof. He switches on a kettle. The room fills with the soft white noise of boiling water. Maria seems to relax a little; as she sits at his desk, her posture loses its stiffness, though it is still erect. He places a cup of tea on the table before her, and goes to sit behind his desk, opening a drawer to take out a glass jar.

'Rusk?'

'Thank you, no.'

'You're missing something. They're good on a cold day.' He takes two for himself, sits down opposite Maria and dips one in the tea.

She smiles. 'I see you're a dunker.'

‘Why not? I like things that are beautiful or delicious. To flood a rusk with hot tea gives you both.’

‘You’ve obviously set up a work environment that suits you very well.’

‘Just inside here. Outside this office, I have no influence.’

‘That’s hard to believe.’ Maria sips at her tea. Then she reaches her hand into the jar and takes a rusk for herself. Long fingers, no nail polish.

‘I wonder if I could ask you something,’ she says.

‘Of course.’

‘I’m glad you bumped into me. I’ve actually been meaning to contact you.’

‘Oh?’

‘There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. In your area of expertise, I think. To be frank, though, I wasn’t sure it was appropriate to contact you.’

‘Why not?’

‘There was that session we had.’

‘Well, I admire your professionalism. But I’m not really your patient, am I? The department – mainly Luke, really – was asking for some advice. I don’t think you’re breaking any standards by speaking to me.’

‘Yes, I think I agree. I’d probably have contacted you anyway.’

‘All the better to see you sooner.’

Maria puts down her rusk, thatches her fingers together and looks ahead, apparently focusing on the shelf of yellow mathematics books. Kristof waits for her to speak, showing no impatience.

‘In my consulting room, you asked who painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and I said it was my mother. What I didn’t say is that she died nine months ago – suicide. Recently I found a disc of her music. When I played it, I thought of you.’

He inclines his head slightly, watching her gravely.

‘It was what you brought to our session. *Rothko Chapel*.’

Kristof is motionless.

‘And I’m wondering what it means.’

‘Are you asking,’ he says carefully, ‘what sort of person would listen to it?’

‘I suppose so. I’m clutching at straws. But, candidly, I’m looking for a message of some kind from her; perhaps a farewell. Her departure was so sudden.’

Kristof leans back a little in his chair. ‘I was going to say that anyone would listen to it, because it’s great music. But that’s a glib answer. You want to know what in her soul might have resonated with it.’

Maria nods.

‘The piece seems to me to express the aftermath of a calamity. Like shards spinning through space after a great explosion.’ He makes an arc of his arm, as if they are both surrounded by these tragic fragments. ‘The composer understood that horrors create an endless echo. Once, in the fifties, he went to Berlin. He was asked there why he didn’t spend more time in Germany, given that he had so many fans there. He stopped, pointed downwards, and said: *Can’t you hear them? They’re screaming beneath the streets.*’ Kristof emphasises this last sentence, putting on a nasal Brooklyn voice. ‘Maybe your mother appreciated this sense of loss, of remnants still present. For what reason I can’t say. Why we love what we do is often murky.’

As she listens, Maria is holding one hand with another, perhaps trying to warm it.

‘Have I forgotten to put on the heating? Hang on.’

Bending to turn the knob of an old-fashioned radiator, Kristof adds: ‘I think you would appreciate *Rothko Chapel* if you spent more time with it. Calamities, fragments – it’s your everyday work. People’s responses to dealing with the harshness of the world, the blows they receive.’

‘I do often work with people who are trying to put themselves back together.’

‘Most of us are like that, I suppose. We try to behave as though we’re in one piece, but really we’re a quilt of rags. As I get older, I find the pretence of a unified self increasingly absurd.’

Maria is nodding. ‘I absolutely agree.’

‘Of course philosophers are no exception. I do think it would be a good thing if the department saw you again. I wonder if we will?’ He muses. ‘It’s up to Luke, of course.’

‘Why Luke?’

‘Well, he’s the prime mover behind this attempt at psychological healing. As the head of department, but not only as that.’

It appears that Maria’s interest is pricked, but that she cannot bring herself to ask further; her professional habits lead her away from it.

Kristof looks down, nods almost to himself, looks at her. ‘In case we do see you again, it might be helpful for you to understand something important about Saskia’s chief mourner in the department.’ He swipes at his shirt, khaki today, as if to remove something that has settled on it.

‘When Saskia arrived, Luke had been in the department for a year. He arrived here after some years in America; he’s a very social person, unlike some of us, and I think he believed he would mould the department into something more coherent. I remember at our first

meeting, he said that he respected our individualism, but that we should try unity to see what it could offer. He was excited about a big joint project, all of us pulling together to devise ethical principles for a multicultural South Africa in a globalised world. It didn't work out, and Luke grew visibly demoralised.'

Maria is listening closely, it seems, sensing something coming.

'He managed to get a heap of funding for the department to research his project, but very few of us actually worked on what was assigned to us, and people just carried on with their own interests, in more abstract fields – metaphysics, that kind of thing. It was an embarrassment for him; he had to give back most of the money. The university was irritated.'

Maria empathises with Luke; she nods sadly.

'He'd also managed to upset some members of the department with his continual urgings and what they saw as his naïve enthusiasm. So he didn't have many allies.'

'Were you among them?'

'Yes, of course. I think it's admirable what Luke was trying to do. My research is in the philosophy of art, but I was willing to go along with this group project. Anyway, as the scheme collapsed, Luke and Saskia became closer than colleagues.'

Maria looks at him.

'I don't say this lightly. I just think you should know about it. Luke once consulted me about it. He was drawn by Saskia's sheer energy, her vibrant presence – but he's married. He was terribly guilty, and he knew that he loved his wife, even though he'd lost sight of it for a while. A kind of madness, he called it.'

'Yes,' Maria nods. 'It's something I've seen before, as you can imagine.'

'I can. Do you find that people sometimes return to what they had?'

'Yes – but some of them get lost along the way.'

‘Well, that’s what happened with Luke. He got lost.’

‘Really?’

‘And in that state, completely without bearings, he sought my views.’

‘Which were?’

‘End it.’

‘That’s it?’

‘End it. He loved his wife; she loved him; they had two children together, both under ten, which is probably the most important thing in the whole affair. He needed to give it up. That’s a sign of maturity. You’d expect philosophers to have it, but they frequently don’t. Heaven knows, I often lack it myself.’

‘You sound like you might make a good psychologist.’

Kristof waves his hands vaguely. ‘Of course not. I don’t have the astuteness. Others are cleverer, more sensitive. All I have, really, is knowledge of my own ignorance.’

‘As I said – a good psychologist.’

‘That’s not psychology. It’s Socrates. He would quiz people, genuinely puzzled, really wanting just to understand, and expose all sorts of gaps in their understanding.’

‘I don’t know much about what it’s like, being a philosopher.’

‘Officially or unofficially? Officially: to be a philosopher is to enter into an extended debate on the deepest issues of human existence. Progress is slow; we gradually sharpen the questions and refine the possible answers. Unofficially: being a philosopher is like fighting for space in a cage stuffed with very wily pit bulls.’

She laughs. ‘Come on, you’re no pit bull.’

He gives a comical shrug. ‘Another rusk?’

Maria cups her hands towards him, wriggling her fingers. ‘Why not.’

Kristof busies himself stirring a second cup of tea. Not looking at her, he says, 'I hope you don't mind my saying, it's cosy here with you.'

Ten

After tea with Kristof, she gets home and picks up a phone message on the machine. ‘I’ve cracked the code,’ says a male voice. Zac, the computer guy. ‘Take a guess.’

There’s a pause on the tape. He is giving her time to reply, as if they’re having a conversation.

‘I don’t know, Zac,’ she says out loud, ironically. ‘Why don’t you tell me?’ Maria is standing in the kitchen, buttering a piece of toast. Her appetite, not large, has kicked in now that her nausea, thank God, has subsided. Eating has never much interested Maria. Even now she repeats her favourite pregnancy snack, buttered toast with salty Marmite, rather than bothering with anything more complicated.

‘Circle – that’s her word,’ says the voice on the machine. ‘I didn’t have to sweat too hard to find *that* one, just ran a password cracker on it. Tell your mom to use something better next time, not straight out of the dictionary. You can pick up the machine when you’re ready.’ She hears the *click* of the phone, leaving the bizarre sensation, lasting only a few seconds, that Claudia is still alive.

In the car, driving home from the university, she had listened to Rothko Chapel, which left her feeling excitable. The passion of the piece, as Kristof described it to her earlier – the fracturing, the aftermath of a great calamity – was surprisingly energising. Perhaps the second trimester of her pregnancy also inclines her towards vigour: the baby is firmly lodged and steadily growing. Earlier this week she visited the obstetrician, who, after smearing her stomach with gel and scanning her uterus, stared at the gently undulating foetus, pronouncing it female. She was pleased to hear that. (Maria also asked him, tentatively, if it was okay to have an occasional glass of wine now that she was fourteen weeks in. He chuckled, as if she

were joking, and told her that according to a new study, as little as one unit of drink could affect the foetus. Life is fragile, she had thought, even when protected, encased in the womb.)

She glances at her cellphone, past seven already, to see that there's a missed call from Lionel. When she calls him back, he doesn't answer the phone. She takes a sip from her weak gin and tonic before trying, futilely, his number again.

The following day, Friday, she immediately spots Zac, sitting on the steps outside the CATS building smoking with a small clutch of students. A sharp wind blows up Kloof Street; one of the girls wears her jersey facing forward, like a straitjacket, covering her chest but not her back. 'Hey' – Zac rises quickly, throwing his cigarette butt to the pavement – 'good timing, just finished my smoke.'

She follows him back inside and up three flights of stairs, around a corner and up a further staircase to the top of the building.

'Welcome to my castle.' He holds the door open for her.

How often has he used that line? The tiny attic room is windowless and chilly. A desk takes up most of the floor space, and is covered with the innards of computers, the casings heaped like a pile of cocoons in the corner of the room. 'It's icy in your castle,' she tells him.

'That's the way these guys like it.' He reaches for an intact computer on his right. 'Here's your little one.' Claudia's machine, discreetly shut. 'Can I say something, Maria?' He pauses. 'I probably shouldn't.'

She keeps quiet, knowing from experience that silence will make him go on.

'People protect their information for a reason. I'm not saying you shouldn't look, but –'

'I know that.'

‘Anyway, I just wanted to say it.’ *I’m telling you this for your own good*, his expression says.

She tries to be more gracious. ‘I hear what you’re saying, Zac, and I’m sure you’re right. Life ain’t simple, though,’ she says, shrugging.

‘Yeah – I guess you’re right.’ Her platitude appears to have soothed him. Zac hands her the machine, and she descends the staircases at a clip, a thin slick of sweat coating her palms. Maria cannot wait until she gets home to see the contents of Claudia’s machine; she needs to know right away. Thankfully the BioCafe is empty, bar a student in the corner with a book propped up on his table, a volume on ethical problems in documentary-making. He glances up gratefully when she enters, clearly looking for any excuse to be interrupted. Sitting as far as possible from him, she powers up the computer. When prompted, she enters the word ‘Circle’. Incredibly, the screen comes to life: tiny yellow geckos in the shape of a C appear on a blue background. Claudia’s desktop, uncluttered and efficient, provides an entirely misleading impression of her mother, leading Maria to believe her mother used her machine less than she claimed. There is one folder, labeled ‘work’, and two documents – ‘CM1’ and ‘CM2’ – on the desktop. She doesn’t bother with the work folder, assuming it contains birth charts or future predictions for Claudia’s clients. She opens CM1, forcing herself to take deep, slow breaths.

Thank you, dear colleagues, for inviting me to talk to the Circle of Mystics. At our meetings I have the delightful sense of being among intimates, and it’s a joy to be asked to address you all again. I have a tremendous amount to say; in fact I have the feeling that I could speak forever, but I will avoid the temptation! So you have this promise: my speech tonight will not be eternal.

I've been asked to talk about fate. I don't know quite why; maybe my habitual facial expression, which an elderly member of the Circle once described as like a Greek prophetess imparting terrible news, seems to be proof that I know everyone's destiny! Of course that is nonsense. My gifts are limited; at best, I see through tiny chinks in the wall.

When I reflect on fate, I am reminded of my childhood. I had a truly lovely view of the night sky from my window in Sutherland. No wonder my eyes are habitually cast upward. Unfortunately my mother and I moved from that city of night light to Cape Town in my adolescence, after the separation of course. But during those early years, I lay at night in bed watching the stars, often going up to my room early to avoid the strife between my parents, who would argue endlessly, my mother raging about my father's tireless, remorseless philandering. In those days I knew nothing about the stars or their significance in our lives. What I did, as I looked up through my high bedroom window, was to imagine long, bright chains between the heavenly bodies. If just one of them moved, I thought, then so did they all, setting up a pure, faint tinkling throughout the night sky. As my parents shrieked at each other downstairs, I felt that if any of the celestial elements really shook, it would set in motion a great concussion that would jar everything out of its place. The stars would plummet to earth; the earth would be covered in cold white shards. As above, so below, as the ancient mystics tell us.

I thought so long about the chains between the stars, drawing them again and again in my mind, that when I looked around my bedroom I saw the same long fetters, hanging among the furniture, going downstairs to the sitting room where my parents were chipping away

at each other, linking every object to one another, even the fat, cancerous family dog Martha. Not too loud, I wanted to shout downstairs, not too loud or the chains will break and we'll all fall.

When a baby is born, I believe that the entire firmament stands quietly for her, all in harmony, quietly willing the concord to continue. For a few of us, a happy and contented life unfolds, of love and friendship, fulfilling work, peace. But that is rare. Almost always some star begins to oscillate, the heavens are shaken, and the stars shatter against the earth. Every one of us here today, I think, has suffered from at least one great wrench of this sort. It is written on your faces, that wrench. When the smoke lifts from the rubble, our fate is settled.

You know me, my dear friends (and those of you with whom I've fought, you know me even better!) – I am not one for endless abstraction. I am balanced halfway between heaven and earth, and so let me be earthy for a while and tell you about my wrench, the event that settled my fate.

This is a story I have kept close to me for years; I have told one friend, a man with whom I share a long history, but apart from that I have been silent. Not even my daughter knows it, for reasons you will come to see. In the Circle of Mystics we can reveal our secrets, but let me remind you that our circle is round and complete, and nothing leaves it.

I was sixteen years old, a troubled girl, and my mother sent me to boarding school for the final year of high school. I will not talk about my school, a distinguished and nasty

Capetonian girls' institution about which I have many bitter memories. But it is important to my story that the headmistress, having observed one day that the paint was peeling in her study and waiting room, brought in the renovators. By that stage of my career, the headmistress and I had reached an understanding – at the end of each school day I would sit in her waiting room for two hours to do my homework, after which she would check that I had done it – so I had much opportunity to study the painters as they worked. They were two brothers, a taciturn older man and a young fellow with a sunny, open face. It was absorbing to watch these two; each of them seemed to reveal something about the other. The older brother's grim face seemed to render the younger man's cheeriness a little sinister. I was, of course, soon smitten with the young brother, who was called Roberto. He had a friendly, boyish gap between his front teeth. We talked to each other while he painted his section of the waiting room – I in my prissy school uniform, perched in a velvet chair, and he in a white overall, the floor around him covered in newspaper. In the last half hour before presenting my work to the headmistress, I would do my homework as he painted, both of us working in frantic and humorous silence.

There is a large gap. Then, further down:

I will get back to it. I will fill in the space before the talk. To the Circle I owe honesty, and I shall express what I recall. To go on. Afterwards, in his car, on the way back to the school, he wasn't unpleasant but sort of distant, and I wasn't saying anything but just crying quietly. I thought about that good cow that gave its skin for this man's upholstery, and I stroked its hide with my fingers. To keep myself in one piece, and not fall apart, I

imagined the kind-hearted cow helping me, taking care of me in this car as I was driven back.

Maria has come to the end of the document. As if on cue a young man, a student wearing a black peak cap facing backwards, leans over to ask if she is okay.

‘Do you need a glass of water?’ he wants to know. ‘You look a bit faint.’

He glances at her belly. A girl, no more than twenty, watches him in admiration and places her hand on his hairy wrist. Maria shakes her head and shuts her eyes; for an instant there is relief, a curtain on the world. The BioCafe is busier, students have entered unnoticed by her, and the noise is loud: a rapper belting the chorus *Suck it Up Like a Dump Truck*, punctuated by a man’s raucous laugh, part of the soundtrack, making it difficult for her to think with any clarity.

‘You sure? You’re very pale,’ says the young man, not to be dissuaded from his good deed. ‘Here. I’ll get you something to drink.’ He scrapes back his chair and thankfully disappears.

She knows she must open the next document, CM2, before her nerve deserts her. Her good Samaritan – quick on his feet – returns cradling a paper cup filled to the brim with iced water, and she mumbles her thanks.

It now becomes necessary, my dearest friends and colleagues of the Circle to talk about my sexuality. I am an intensely sensual person. What is my profession but to touch people, to tenderly probe? And – I must confess to you all tonight – I must confess that sometimes, in the privacy of my sessions, I have had the desire to reach out my arm and to stroke the body of some client of mine, some troubled seeker after truth who has come to me. When

this need comes, it is an effort to push it down, and merely to touch – as I feel I am permitted to do – an elbow, or an arm on departure, something kind and reassuring rather than fierce and smouldering, a communication of the fire that burns in me.

A few times, I need to add, with men whose souls are graceful and lovely, I want to propose that we rise together and let the cards fall, I want to take their hands and lead them to my bed – but I do not, I have not done that. The years go by, and one finds after a time that the desire to enact these things is reduced to the realm of fantasy. But the urge, when it comes, and it still does despite my age, has the force of a great beast in the night.

Of course, over the years I have had many offers from men – members of this Circle too, as you know! – and have taken some. For the sex I have had, I am grateful, but there has been no one to whom I was unendurably sad to say goodbye; each of them was enough. My essence was not pierced by any of my lovers, and I sense that what they resented was that they were not filling me. We speak of men's fear of commitment, but we forget that a man wants his woman to be nourished by him; he must, to some large extent, make her content, or he feels useless, like a bee without nutritious substance, no jelly for its queen.

What was wrong with the men I knew? Here I must be cautious, since of course some of you fine fellows are here tonight. I found that they were not entirely to my liking, or (perhaps more often) they thought me eccentric, or too devoted to my work to pay them enough attention. And yet that was not the deepest matter. The real problem was that they were not my soulmate, my heart's ease, not the one with whom I felt an intimate and unbreakable bond – and none of you can be offended by that.

My endless flailing, my failure to find succour, has caused pain over the years, not only to a few men but also to my daughter. She has tried, my only child, to be closer to me, but it is a communion of souls that I have craved, and I have feared and come to believe that it would be impossible for me...

The document ends there. Maria leans back in her chair, stunned. Her mother has been more open with these people, this *Circle*, than she ever was with her own daughter. And what exactly happened that night in the car? She drinks the remainder of the water, swallowing deeply, the coldness snaking from her throat to her belly. Maria does not wish to pry open a life that is intentionally shut – but this is her mother, after all. And she has a *right*, more than anyone, to know Claudia's story.

As the shock abates, envy takes its place – the easy intimacy her mother apparently shared with her Circle. A distressing thought, or maybe it is the residue of first trimester pregnancy hormones, but she knows with a terrible certainty that she will vomit. She runs from the cafeteria, leaving Claudia's computer open on the table. There is barely time to lock the bathroom door before she's crouching at the toilet bowl, vomiting water and fiery stomach acid, humiliated that the sound of her sickness is audible to others.

Eleven

The Circle of Mystics has a website. A quiet page, in black and white – except for the emblem in the corner: a severed hand pinned to a blue shield, a knife through the palm. Maria knows the image: it is from Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In her consulting room, while reflecting on a patient after a session – or even when the patient is still present – she has often looked at her mother's painted copy. The severed hand appears in the right-hand panel of the triptych, that comic and nightmarish scene of hell.

On the website are details of the Circle's next public meeting. It is an introduction to the rules of the universe, to take place a week into July, at an address in the city centre. There is a contact number, which Maria calls immediately. After a long wait she is about to put down when a man answers.

'Tversky.'

For an absurd moment she thinks he's asking her whether she's thirsty. Then she asks, 'Is that your name?' *How rude that sounds.* 'Sorry,' she adds, 'I just didn't catch it.'

'Yes.'

'Hello then, Mr Tversky. I'm Maria Petros, daughter of Claudia Petros. I think you may have known my mother?' The line goes quiet. Maria settles herself into the silence, a medium with which she is comfortable. She counts to five, slowly, to herself, wondering if he's still there.

'Yes.' Another throat clearing, brusque. 'How can I be of assistance?'

'Have I caught you at a bad time? I can phone again later.'

'No, now is fine.' Disregarding his unfriendly manner, Maria plunges on. 'Good. I'd like to speak to you about my mother, Claudia – she was part of the Circle of Mystics – you must

know that, of course.’ She takes a deep breath. ‘There’s a matter...perhaps you can throw some light on it. I’d be most grateful.’

His response is quick. ‘I’m not sure I can be of much help, or *any* help. I’m sorry, Miss Petros. If you’ll excuse me – .’

‘Wait – you’re aware she’s passed away?’

‘Yes.’

‘A tragic death, her body on the mountain for three days and nights before they found her.’ Silence. Maria waits. ‘I’m only asking for a few minutes of your time. Please, Mr Tversky, I’m sure Claudia wouldn’t want you to turn me away.’

She hears rapid clicks, the tip of his tongue against the roof of his mouth; he’s thinking.

‘Alright.’

‘Can we meet in person? It’s too complicated a matter to talk about on the phone. I won’t stay long, I promise.’

‘I suppose so. Don’t get your hopes up. There’s not much I can say about Claudia. But you can come tomorrow evening if you like.’

After they hang up, Maria realises the ambiguity of his last remark. Not much that he knows, or not much that he cares to tell her? Tomorrow evening she will have to be at her most alert: she may need to glean as much as possible from minimal evidence.

Table Mountain lights up gold with the last shards of the setting sun as Maria drives past Kirstenbosch towards Bishopscourt. Tversky has given her directions to Strelitzia Mansions, his residence. Above the botanical gardens, she turns sharply to her left and carries on rising before turning once more. She has the impression that she’s climbing into the clouds as her car strains upwards. The houses here each take up at least half a block, and are fronted by

long curving driveways and high walls with electronic fences, keeping the residents from being seen.

Strelizia Mansions comes up sharply on her left, almost at the top of the road, forcing her to take the turn at speed. Next door there is an empty gravel plot with a sign – ‘*Private Property*’ – staking the ground. A candy-striped boom obstructs further progress down the driveway; below, the house sprawls in glass and concrete, the light catching the aluminum windows. With its spare design the place isn’t welcoming, though a residence like this would suit someone like Kristof: there is something about its neat proportions, its angularity, that would appeal to a man who colour codes his books. On her right is a concrete box; a guard, stern faced, slides a blue-tinted window to the side.

‘Can I help you?’ he asks. He speaks English with a French accent; Maria guesses he comes from the Congo. Despite the chilliness of the early evening, he wears a short-sleeved uniform with a name tag on the collar: *Sharkie*.

‘I’m here to visit Mr Tversky. We have an appointment – Maria Petros.’

He turns his back to talk on the phone before raising the boom for Maria. She takes the driveway at a crawl; the sheerness of the descent makes her feel like she’s falling forward. Standing at the bottom, on an oval of paved brick, are two men locked in an embrace. As she draws closer she notices that the older shorter man is rubbing the back of the other one. The gesture appears soothing, small taps interspersed with rubs, appropriate for comforting a young child with a grievance. The men break away when they hear the car behind them, and turn towards her. The older man – Tversky, she guesses – keeps his arms poised in the air a fraction before he draws them slowly inwards, like a bird lowering its wings after a landing. Maria stops the car and gets out, the two men watching her impassively.

‘Mr Tversky?’ She holds out a hand as she approaches, offering her handshake first to the man she takes to be him. He pumps her hand briskly in return, a firm warmth to his touch. He is dressed entirely in white: white tracksuit pants tied at the front with a drawstring, a white cotton shirt with a zigzag pattern embroidered around the neckline. His feet are tanned and bare, despite the brisk coldness of the day. Deep lines map his face in competing directions, giving the appearance of wisdom. Easily in his sixties, yet full of vigour.

‘If you’ll give me a moment, Miss Petros.’

‘Maria – please.’ She smiles, turning her head to incorporate the taller man in her open friendliness. In response, he nods his head curtly, grave faced, though no introductions are offered. Maria takes a few steps away, then half turns her back, bristling somewhat at the obvious rudeness. She forces herself to take deep breaths, all the while trying, unsuccessfully, to hear what the men are discussing in their solemn murmurings to one another. In front of her is a triple-arched garage, open, and inside she sees three black motorbikes but no cars. She assumes they belong to Tversky, that he travels with them frequently outdoors, which would account for his bronzed skin. She senses that he is a fearless man.

The two men speak urgently to one another for a couple of minutes, the time inching past. Eventually she hears the man thanking Tversky repeatedly, and she turns around to see him walking slowly up the driveway. His posture is stooped, defeated. Tversky calls up to him: ‘If the Circle is with you, you’ll find a way.’ The man raises a hand in acknowledgement, and carries on past Sharkie, who proffers a smart two-fingered salute in farewell.

Tversky rotates his gaze to Maria. *Dealing with you*, his expression says, *is not how I want to spend my time right now.*

‘I’m sorry,’ – Maria steps up to him – ‘to bother you like this, but it’s very important to me, and I’m much indebted to you.’

He nods, his expression moderating slightly. 'Let's talk inside.' She follows him through the large double glass doors into the house, turning immediately to climb a steep spiral staircase – and there, hanging against the wall on the first landing, is Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Like Claudia's copy, Tversky's is incomplete; in the place of the very image of evil – the demonic bird – is a patch of unpainted canvas. 'That's amazing,' says Maria. 'My mother's copy has just the same empty space.'

Tversky turns to look at her. 'It's a reminder to members of the Circle. We are almost overwhelmed by evil. *Almost* – but not quite. For each life there is a small clear area. How we fill it in is up to us.' He turns back, and they continue the ascent.

The room they enter is stark and mostly transparent, like a glass cube suspended in the air: in front of her, to the left and right, are double volume floor to ceiling windows. The front frame features Table Mountain, grayish black in the darkening light.

'Wow,' – Maria walks towards the glass as though the mountain exerts a magnetic pull – 'that's incredible.'

Tversky nods briskly, acknowledging the excellence of the view.

The furnishings are sparse: two low-slung grey couches in the centre, and a table, an oval of shining glass, close to the ground. On the surface is a large coffee table book entitled *Nerve*, its cover showing a stock trader in front of his computer monitors, his sleeves rolled up, his mouth taut. There is also a telescope angled towards the mountain, and a bar fridge in the corner of the room. To her right, out the window, is the empty plot of land where she turned her car around. 'I hope no one builds next door,' she says, trying again for small talk. To her left and below are other houses, small, seemingly empty, from her nest-like vantage point.

‘No one will, because I own that property,’ he says. ‘I bought it as soon as it became available, years back.’

Maria wonders how he can be as comfortable in the immaterial world as he appears to be in the material one. ‘Can I?’ She touches the end of the telescope.

‘Okay.’

She presses her eye to the lens, making her hover above a couple as they emerge – their Border Collie loping ahead – from the dense trees of Newlands forest to the rocky mountain face above.

‘Powerful.’

‘It is.’ He takes a step towards her. ‘My favourite toy – makes the invisible visible. And the stars, at night I look at the stars.’ She notices him lifting his wrist, glancing at his watch, not disguising the gesture. Though, so far, she has found him brusque, verging on rude, Maria senses the need to approach her subject obliquely. Impolite people often demand great sensitivity from others.

‘Perhaps you can tell me about the Circle of Mystics, Mr Tversky,’ she says.

‘Please, call me Tversky, no standing on ceremony.’ Tversky folds his arms in front of his chest and rocks on the balls of his bare feet. ‘We’re an old organization, founded in 1893. Let me think...what else? Our members are dedicated to mutual understanding and help in a hard world – I suppose you could say that.’ Maria thinks about the man she saw upon her arrival, being comforted by Tversky. ‘What would you like to know?’ He looks at her, a challenge in the stare.

‘Well,’ – Maria bites her bottom lip in thought – ‘what do you believe in? My mother barely mentioned the Circle, yet she –’

‘Your mother had great psychic capacity – draining, for her. You know what it’s like to have a capacity like that? Probably not. It left her little energy for others. Perhaps she struggled to give in the way some people would have liked.’

She struggled to give at all, Maria wants to tell him, but holds herself back.

‘But the Circle, you want to know what we believe?’ Tversky turns his head, glancing towards the mountain, starkly outlined in the rapidly approaching night sky. ‘*These things*,’ – He leans forwards to touch the telescope, the glass of the window – ‘you can see them, right? But there are other forces, difficult to see, outside of our conscious awareness.’

‘Spirits?’ She’s careful to keep her expression as neutral as possible.

‘Call them that if you will.’

‘And –’

He shrugs, as though the implications of his world view are obvious. ‘I believe, Maria, that there are dark forces at work. I believe that evil pretends to be good. That the universe is harsh and unforgiving. *Ah*,’ – he peers at her – ‘I can see by your expression that you don’t know what I’m talking about.’ He sighs. ‘Do you want to sit down? You are very different from your mother.’ *And worse off for it*, he appears to imply.

She moves across the room to the couch, noticing only now that against the far wall, hanging against the face brick, is a large unframed canvas of a heavily pregnant girl, naked, on the cusp of womanhood, somewhere between fifteen and seventeen. Braided hair, black as night, falls over her shoulder in a thick rope and curls beneath a breast. The girl, one hand modestly covering her genitals, the other resting lightly on the bulge of her large belly, is standing in a cavern of ice, sunlight splintering through an opening. Though she looks directly, brazenly even, towards Maria, her expression is aloof, as though her mind is

elsewhere. Her skin is bluish white in the strange light. An arresting picture, as mesmerising to Maria as the mountain she has just viewed.

‘You’re admiring my ice maiden?’

‘Yes, I *do* like her. Who painted her?’

‘I did. There are some flaws.’ He walks over to the painting, which is almost the size of him. ‘The ankle, for example, is too thick if one considers the dimensions of the rest of her body. Look at her limbs.’ He raises his hand to stroke the air above one of the girl’s slender white legs. ‘They’re slim, and don’t require the support of an ankle of this width. The proportions are all wrong; over the years I’ve found it annoying. One should rather take the time to get a task completed correctly than do a slovenly job, quickly executed.’ He turns from the painting to look at her. ‘Wouldn’t you say?’

‘Definitely.’ Talking about the painting appears to have relaxed this odd man.

‘Now what is it that you want to know about your mother?’ Tversky walks back to sit opposite her.

‘Where to begin?’ Maria places her hands calmly in her lap, one overlapping the other. ‘The truth is that after my mother’s terrible accident, classified a suicide, as I’m sure you know, I began to look for a farewell note from her. Some kind of explanation. I know my mother suffered from depression, interspersed with manic periods, but she would have said goodbye to me. I just know that.’

She sees Tversky is about to interrupt, and she holds up her hand to stop him. ‘I understand,’ she says, ‘that my mother, you as well, perhaps even the Circle of Mystics, saw it differently. However, as a psychologist I understand my mother’s illness from that perspective. To go on: I have found no farewell note, nothing – but other documents have come to light, concerning your Circle of Mystics. One document troubles me deeply, and

there is information there that I think I deserve, as Claudia's daughter, to know about. I've found out that my mother knew, when she was at school, a young man named Roberto and this, I think, though I of course can't be certain, has relevance –'

'What makes you think I have such information?' His face is smooth and unreadable.

'I've seen part of Claudia's speech to the Circle of Mystics. I know she mentioned this Roberto to your group.'

'You shouldn't have seen that speech, even a short section. That communication was intended for the inner Circle, only them.'

'But I did.'

'Nothing leaves the inner Circle. It is the first law.' His face betrays no emotion, yet his tone is furious. Maria finds the disjuncture unnerving.

'I have a right to know about my own mother.'

'The Circle does not talk about *rights*.'

They stare at each other; she's not frightened to stand up to this belligerent man. 'I would like to know my mother's history,' she says simply.

'That I can't tell you. I informed you on the phone, remember.' Tversky opens his eyes wide as though admonishing a small child. 'You do *remember*, don't you?'

'I have no problems with my memory, Mr Tversky.'

She gets up to leave. What more can be achieved here? He knows something but will not tell her – both of them, him and Claudia, with their cults and their Circle of Mystics, their ways of keeping her excluded. She glances once more at the painting in front of her, such a magnetic portrait of a young girl standing in a cavern of ice. It briefly crosses her mind that should she leave now, Sharkie might not open the boom for her without Tversky's permission. *Let him try*, she thinks.

‘Wait,’ says Tversky. ‘Why don’t you try a séance? We hold them once a month at Fireflies, a restaurant in Green Point. They’re open to the public, a service the Circle provides to society, and we get a good turnout, a very good turnout. You could ask your mother the question directly – perhaps she needs to tell you in her own words.’

He’s as crazy as Claudia. ‘I should ask my *dead mother* about her adolescent trauma?’

‘I know it sounds strange to your ears, but the dead do sometimes make their way through, somehow or other. Granted it doesn’t occur that often and a lot of the time people believe they are communicating with the dead when, unfortunately, they are only communicating with their own wishes. But,’ he lifts his shoulders in a shrug, ‘there is nothing to lose, and a lot to gain.’

‘In pandering to nonsense, I have a lot to lose.’ She knows she’s losing control, that she shouldn’t antagonise him, but she’s unable to stop herself. She feels furious, a hot righteous anger.

Tversky looks up at her, smiling. It’s the first genuine smile she’s seen from him. ‘You have some of your mother’s fire in you. I thought you didn’t, but I see that you do.’

‘Really! How well *exactly* did you know my mother, Mr Tversky?’

She might have missed the gesture – a quick turn of the head, a flicker of the eyes – if she wasn’t watching him carefully. Tversky swivels his gaze, briefly, towards his cave woman. She’s surprised at herself for taking so long to work it out. Of course, his beautiful ice goddess, or whatever he called her, is none other than Claudia. And that swollen belly – does this painting depict *Maria herself*, growing inside the womb?

She slings her handbag over her shoulder. Beneath her fury there is panic at what he knows, and is not telling her. What place did this man have in Claudia’s life? Glancing back as she leaves the room, she sees Tversky facing his painting, his hand once more stroking the

air above the misshapen ankle of his ice maiden. Then down the staircase she goes, past *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, with its blank patch of canvas where the demonic bird should be.

Twelve

On Sunday evening Maria sits morosely with a mug of tea in the lounge. She is disappointed with herself: her behaviour yesterday with Tversky was that of a child throwing a tantrum.

Not only embarrassing, storming out of the man's house like that, high minded and trembling, but nothing gained –no insight into Claudia's past, or her Circle of Mystics speech – from her pointless eruption. *I of all people, she thinks, should know how to rein in my emotions.*

Maria places her feet on a foot stool and sinks back into the half-circle of plump cushions. She finds her swelling ankles impressive, another outward sign of her growing pregnancy. As she is about to take another sip of the hot sweet tea, the doorbell rings, overly long, insistent. Someone is astounded that the entry to her house is barred. She sighs and gets to her feet.

'Who is it?' Maria unbolts the front door, leaving the chain in place and peers outwards through the crack into the gloom of dusk, the air damp from drizzle. *Lionel.* 'Open up,' he says, slipping his hand around the door. 'Hurry, Maria, I'm getting wet. Let me in.'

She shuts the door, slides the chain to the side and opens the door wide. He enters and kisses her on the lips, his hand against the back of her head, drawing her in. His face is cool and wet from the outside air. She follows him down the corridor and back to the lounge, a half-eaten packet of peanuts in his hand which he extends backwards as he walks: 'Want some?'

'I left three messages on your phone,' she says to his back. Actually she has phoned many more times than that, but has put down on hearing his voice message.

'I know, I'm sorry – it's been a nightmare. There's this thing with the DA –'

‘What thing?’ She is pleased to see him, and likes the feeling of normality, his brusque air, after their fraught encounter in Kalk Bay. She considers mentioning her visit to Tversky but decides against it. Lionel wouldn’t understand. The past happened to someone else, he often tells her. She pretends not to, but she finds his view refreshing.

‘Those fuckers up in Gauteng don’t know what they’re doing. The DA had this rally in Bloemfontein and those stupid *poeses* in the local ANC went to disrupt it’ – Lionel sighs, and tosses the remainder of the nuts into his mouth, an oily peanut odour permeating the air – ‘booing when the speaker talks, throwing chairs around. One of them hit this woman’s mouth, cut it open, and now the DA’s milking it. We would too. But those fools in Bloem are making it worse, saying the DA got what they deserved, went into areas they don’t know. It’s prolonging the whole fucking mess in the papers. Anyway – ’ He half turns. ‘What does a man have to do to get a drink in this place?’

‘Go to the kitchen for a start.’

She returns to the lounge to finish her tea. He joins her a moment later, holding a double whiskey with ice, the glass sweating moisture. Taking a seat beside her, he swallows deeply, leaning back with a sigh. She shakes her head in response to his offer of a sip; despite her desire, no alcohol has entered her system for a good few days.

‘God, I needed that.’ Another swallow, before saying: ‘Are we good?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know, after that crazy stunt at Kalk Bay.’ He puts the glass down, the ice clinking lightly against the sides from the impact. ‘Are we good?’ he repeats.

She recalls her feeling of exhaustion from that encounter. But it seems that during his absence of a few days her weariness has been overlaid with need for him. ‘I guess we’re good.’ She both likes and is frustrated by Lionel’s simplicity: his lack of analysis, his

constant moving forward. It is partly a relief after the hours she spends with her patients rehashing minutiae from the past. It leaves her sceptical, though: how can a man so versed in the political realm, able to move the crowds with his speeches, pretend not to understand interpersonal dynamics? She suspects that Lionel *chooses* to simplify the psychology taking place between the two of them. And, if she is honest, so does she.

‘Good,’ he takes her hand, stroking the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. He moves his fingers up her hand to her wrist, encircling it, lightly rubbing his thumb against her skin. She senses his coiled up energy, work possibly, or even a residue of violence, though he is loath to admit it after their Kalk Bay outing. Lionel removes his hand from her wrist. ‘Have you booked for New York yet?’

‘Oh yes.’ Maria is looking forward to the trip, a self psychology conference where Anna White, one of her most admired psychotherapists, will be speaking about the relationship between attachment and neurology. And the break in a month’s time will be good for her; she hasn’t left Cape Town since Claudia’s death.

‘I’ll miss you,’ he says, reaching under her skirt to stroke her thigh. ‘Come on – don’t tease me. Take off your clothes.’ She is not surprised. Evenings with Lionel, when their relationship is on, have often followed a pattern: his unexpected arrival, some inconsequential chatter, then sex. So now it is starting up again – but what it means, or where it’s heading, is unclear. Tonight the path towards sex has been quicker than in the past, and she imagines it’s a way for Lionel to distract himself from the complications at work, or to cement their couple status, at least in his mind. She’s about to start unbuttoning her shirt when his cell phone rings. He groans, answering.

‘No,’ he says, and then increasingly louder, ‘no, no – fuck that. They’ve got to get it right. The story must be the *same*, here and there – ’ He stands, pacing the length of the lounge.

Maria's left knee is aching, a button of pain below the knee cap, an old running injury, which has worsened since the pregnancy. She stretches out her leg and massages the sore spot with her fingers. While Lionel grows increasingly agitated, she thinks about Anton. What does she remember of him? Despite his DNA replicating in her body these past months, she's hardly thought about him. It's as if he never existed, and in a way he never did. She almost imagined him into being. Almost.

Maria's head reached to Anton's shoulders, except when he held her against the wall and then they were the same height. She draws a blank when she tries to recall the colour of his eyes, mostly he kept them shut – she too; if she opened them she felt dizzy, unable to judge her distance from him. The only illumination came from a street light a fair distance down the alley. His hair was a lustrous black, his skin a smooth olive, his chin, strong and square, a cowboy's chin from an old movie. He had her pinned against the wall, her skirt hitched to her hips. Beneath her thighs, his hands formed a seat while against her back she felt the rough concrete of the wall as he rammed into her, his legs trembling from the effort.

All day she had felt the pain of this month's ovulation, sharp and demanding above her pubic bone (how many more eggs was she carrying?). Her relationship with Lionel, even if he was able to impregnate her, and she didn't think so, was finally over. She could have chosen a more conventional way, a sperm bank for example, to fall pregnant, something less primal. But Maria was still furious with Lionel for his stream of infidelities, and this was a way for her to send him a message, even one he would never receive, that she too was desirable to others.

A woman in heat can mate easily enough. On Wednesday night at Noah's Ark, off Long Street, a small queue was trailing from the front door, not the squirming mass that collected

outside on a Friday or Saturday night. Like bouncers, two giraffes made from wood stood proudly on either side of the entrance, purple feather boas tied tight around their speckled necks. Maria took hope from the giraffe's perky expression, though probably the alcohol, almost three quarters of a bottle of wine drunk by herself in a restaurant a few doors down, accounted for her buoyancy. In reality, she'd been drinking on and off all day, slowly shedding her skin, inhabiting another. Not even admitting to herself that this was her intention, to fuck, to fall pregnant, until she was heavily inebriated.

Up close the boy looked younger, closer to eighteen, than the original early twenties Maria had pegged him for. 'How old are you?' she asked after they'd met at the bar, standing side-by-side with her hip skimming his. He leaned towards her as he spoke.

'Twenty one.' A heartbeat of a pause. Could he guess her age? She had done her best – a sequined sleeveless top, too short mini skirt, silver gladiator sandals – but age reveals its markers deviously. Thinking this, she placed her hands on her lap under the bar counter. She was even wearing make up tonight, which she had applied with a shaky hand in front of the mirror: thick black mascara, weighty on her eyelashes, forming clumps, slick glossed lips in red, cherry flavoured and sticky as semen. To want a child that badly can ache like a limb has been chopped off. Under such circumstances nothing is too ludicrous or too much effort.

Afterwards she stood up, pulling her skirt straight, running her hands over the cotton fabric to remove imaginary creases. She felt his wetness trickling between her legs, and hoped she had remembered to pack tissues. He stood by her side, still breathing heavily, and lent with his back against the wall.

'You know what?' he said.

'What?'

'I'm not actually twenty one.'

‘What are you *actually*?’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Really, you look much more mature than your years.’ Maria imagined him smiling into the darkness.

‘How old are *you*?’ He squeezed her hand.

‘Twenty eight,’ she lied. ‘Now you can say you’ve been with an older woman. Am I your first?’

‘You mean sex? There have been other girls but not the full blown...you know – ’

‘Good for you, your first fuck.’ Maria felt his hand flinch at her coarseness but she needed to do it, make him understand the nature of the encounter. No one is more romantic than a teenager; already she knew she would cast her shadow over his future erotic experiences. They walked back inside, still hand in hand, though all Maria wanted to do was go home, a headache tugging at her temples. Inside, a harsh techno beat and a blue grid of light on the dance floor created a barrier, for which she was grateful, between them.

‘Will I see you again?’ He was shouting in her ear; his free hand cupped around his mouth. ‘I would really like that.’ She shook her head, better a brutal message than an ambivalent one.

‘There won’t be a next time.’

‘Wait,’ he held her upper arm tight and led her to the bar. On a serviette, with a pen borrowed from the barman, he wrote his name, Anton Nortje, and number in shaky block letters. ‘Here, please, take it. Phone me, if you change your mind.’

Outside the queue for entry into the club had grown longer. Two men approached her from the opposite direction, both in shorts and open-necked shirts: ‘Hello darling,’ one of them said, drawing level, as though sensing her earlier availability, the possibility that another

window of opportunity might open for him. She gave a curt nod, still battling to believe the last half hour had taken place. From the front of the club the alley was invisible – Anton had known of its existence (out the back, down a sudden turn into a side street), and for a moment she wondered if she had imagined the entire event into being. This is how people feel, she told herself, when they've had a shock; events don't seem real to them.

Two weeks later she took the test, two pink lines appearing almost immediately – and she phoned Lionel, inviting him over. They hadn't seen each other since their break-up. In triumph, for she could create life, she fucked him – forgiving him a little as she did so. Or was it because she wanted a man to act as father for her unborn child? Maria did not think too deeply about it; instead she placed herself astride him, her knees either side of his hips. As he arched upwards trying to enter her deeply she moved away, each time. In frustration, he placed his hands on her hips and held her down, so that it was impossible for her to carry on teasing him.

By the time Lionel is off the phone she's finished her tea. He slips his hand beneath her shirt to cup her expanding belly, his palm cool against her warm skin. Maria moves his hand away, not wanting with him a reminder of the new life swelling beneath.

'Cold,' she tells him.

Lionel leans forwards to kiss her, and as his tongue meets hers, she feels her attraction to him almost instantly, like a chemical bond.

'Come on. Take your clothes off,' he whispers into her ear. 'I thought I told you to do that already.'

She does as he says. A moment of discomfort before her veins swell with blood in response to his touch.

‘Lie down.’

She lies on her back on the sofa while he kneels at her side, still fully clothed. Maria reaches down to unbutton his jeans, but he brushes her hand away, shakes his head. Instead he threads his fingers through hers and pushes her hand above her head. He squeezes her fingers too hard; her shoulder aches from her arm being raised at an odd angle. Does he know he’s hurting her? She feels relief when he lets go her hand to slip his palm between her legs.

‘Open them. Wider.’

He must feel she’s ready, because he drops his hand to unzip his pants, not bothering to remove any further items of clothing. Coarsely, he spits, applying a few brief strokes to his penis before straddling her. Lionel’s clothes are rough, the denim of his jeans rubbing harshly against the bare skin of her inner thighs. Afterwards he fetches a blanket from her room, covering them both, and snaking his body around her. His socked foot is threaded between her two bare feet. She shifts onto her back and watches his eyes close and then flutter open as he fights sleep. Finally he drops off, and Maria gets up for coffee, not bothering to dress. She is in the kitchen pouring boiling water from the kettle into her mug when the doorbell rings again. Off she goes to her bedroom to pull on a jersey and a pair of tracksuit pants before hurrying to the front door.

‘Who is it?’

Once more she leaves the chain in place but unbolts the front door to peer into the darkness. The rain is driving down furiously, droplets landing on her cheek from the strength of the slanting wind.

‘Is it you, Maria?’ A low voice, a man pushing his face towards the crack in the door. Tversky. She unbolts and opens up. He’s standing beneath the front door’s overhang. The trip has drenched him. His white shirt, similar in design to the one he was wearing yesterday,

sticks to the contours of his body like a second skin. Raindrops slide from his nose. Over his bald head he wears a white woollen cap which he takes off, wrings, two hands moving in opposite directions, as the water streams from it.

‘Thank God I found you.’

‘Do you want to come in?’ *How will she introduce him to Lionel?*

‘No,’ – Tversky’s tone is as sharp as she remembers it. ‘After you left my house yesterday, things felt strange. Claudia’s presence started to dissipate.’ He pats his chest, producing a *thwap* from the wetness of his shirt. ‘It’s difficult for me to put it into words that you will understand –.’ She waits, her old psychologist trick. ‘I sense Claudia needs me to tell you something.’ He is shivering, though doing his best to stop the reflex.

‘Tell me what?’

He glances at his watch: ‘I don’t have the time now. The Circle has business for me to attend to. Tomorrow you must come to my house – any time – I will be waiting for you.’

Tversky turns to go. ‘Can I give you a lift home?’ she asks reluctantly.

‘I have my motorbike.’

‘You’ll be very cold,’ she tells him, ‘and what about the wind?’

He calls to her over his shoulder, as he hurries away: ‘When one must, one can.’ She hears the motorbike roaring to life as she shuts the front door, placing the silver chain forcefully in its groove, and turning the key twice. At least for tonight, she doesn’t want any more unexpected arrivals.

Thirteen

‘That was delicious,’ says Nomsa.

‘I’m glad.’

‘I don’t think I could even *find* that place again.’

‘Then you’ll have to keep going there with me.’

They are walking along the Sea Point promenade, their way lit by streetlamps. To the left, over the concrete barrier, they can hear the low choppy waves hitting the rocks. At their right, the strip of field in front of the busy Beach Road is entirely dark. Though it is ten at night, the cold is endurable and the air refreshing. Kristof breathes deeply to take in the salty mist.

‘How did you know about that restaurant?’ Nomsa’s long sleeved grey dress is understated, its neckline high and unrevealing, but her silver high heeled shoes glitter in the lamplight.

‘I just know.’

‘Why don’t they advertise? Don’t they want people to find out about it?’

‘Not just anyone.’ They have just eaten at Juice, a restaurant in Sea Point that seeks no publicity. Juice is in a short side street, really an alleyway, behind an unlabelled door. It has a superb chef.

‘You seem so comfortable,’ says Nomsa. ‘You move around the city very easily, almost like it’s yours.’

‘It *is* mine – yours too. You’re also comfortable. Confident.’

‘You know what? That’s what I aim to be. But I don’t always manage it.’

‘You’ve fooled me.’

She laughs, and they bump lightly against each other as they walk.

‘You’re bad, though.’

‘*Bad? Me?*’

‘I told you I was trying to be a vegetarian. When you asked me out, I told you that. But every single thing on that menu was meat.’

‘And what did you think?’

‘Of my ostrich?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perfect.’

Together they walk for a while.

‘It feels quite natural being here with you.’ Nomsa has had two glasses of wine at dinner.

‘And I’m really happy to have bumped into you.’

‘When I saw you again in the street, I thought well, that’s it. There’s no choice. I’ll have to go out with this guy.’

‘Fate.’

She hits him lightly.

‘Actually, I don’t think an opportunity comes just once,’ Kristof says. ‘I think it comes again and again until you finally realise that you need to take it.’

‘You know, my boyfriend called me as I was about to leave this evening.’

‘Oh?’

‘I said I was going to a movie, alone. I’m not sure if he believed me.’

‘I’m sorry to have put you through that.’

‘That’s okay.’ She sighs. ‘It’s not like things have been going so well with us anyway.’

‘Does he appreciate what he has in you?’

Nomsa smiles. ‘Well, he says he loves me and all. But sometimes we just don’t seem to get each other.’

‘No genuine communication?’

‘He’s in finance too. A different firm from me. I mean, he and I can chat about that. But his real focus is on getting richer and richer. That’s not enough for me.’

‘I know exactly what you mean.’ Far out to sea, a cargo ship lies at anchor, its owners presumably unwilling to pay the docking fee at the Cape Town harbour. The ship is brightly lit, as if to celebrate its stacks of huge grey crates.

Nomsa stops, leans forwards over the concrete barrier. Kristof joins her, and the two of them look out over the black sea. ‘I’m going to leave that life. Start a production company. Make films that mean something.’

‘Sounds great.’

‘For example, did you notice the woman who passed us when we were walking from the car to the restaurant? Walking fast, talking loudly on her cellphone, wearing that smart business suit, going on about the stock market, saying how this and that company had gone up or down today? But I listened in. I’d never *heard* of the companies she was talking about – she was just making them up, inventing names and figures as she talked into her phone. Who *is* this person? There’s a story there. There are millions of stories in this country, and they need to be told.’

‘Amazing. Yes – to be told astutely and with kindness. And that’s a rare combination.’

‘Definitely.’

‘Which is why it’s such a good idea for *you* to do it.’

Nomsa sighs, smiles, and they walk on.

‘Hey, shall we go into the maze?’

‘What maze?’

‘There’s a wonderful labyrinth, just in that field. Let’s try it!’

‘I’m wearing my heels. I’m not sure I should be running around in the dark.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Come on!’

They head over to the maze, a huge overgrown rectangle of bush. In front of the entrance is a high metal gate, chained shut. Nomsa looks at Kristof. ‘We’re not going to pay *any* attention to that.’ He lifts himself up by his arms, and then he is on top of the gate, which shakes slightly until he steadies himself. ‘I’ll hold you.’ He reaches down to hold Nomsa’s forearms. As she hangs by her hands, kicking, her heels unable to gain purchase on the vertical bars, he lifts her up, smoothly, and then she too is crouching next to him on top, held in his arms.

‘We’re going to jump over,’ he says. ‘As you hit the ground, bend your knees to absorb the impact. Two. Three,’ and they’re down, thud, into the darkness. ‘We need to move quickly, people might be watching.’ They turn right into a gap in the hedge, then left, and now there is hardly any visibility. There are points of light from a street lamp behind them, but Nomsa is walking almost blindly, gripping Kristof’s arm as he impels them forward.

‘Where are we now?’ she asks.

‘You’ll trip in those heels.’

She bends, fiddles with one shoe and then another. As she straightens up, both shoes in her right hand, she finds herself in Kristof’s arms, his long straight body pressing on hers. Their lips meet, and they kiss. She cannot see him, but surely she can feel his need for her. For half a minute they stand there, and he lightly strokes the back of her neck, his fingers running over the thin gold chain she is wearing.

‘More,’ she says when he pulls away.

‘We have to get to the fairy table,’ says Kristof. ‘It’s in the middle of the maze.’

‘Let’s just stay here.’

‘No naughtiness now,’ and he lightly slaps her on the bottom so that she squeaks. ‘On we go. You’ll like the fairy table.’

They venture onwards. It seems that Nomsa is getting her night eyes: she moves with a little more certainty, even overtaking him at one point to lead them through a gap. ‘Come on, slowbones!’ She takes his hand. ‘There it is!’

Something is glowing a dull white through the dark bush, reflecting the light of the moon. It is unclear how to reach it. They follow a curve of bush, but there seems to be no entrance. They go around twice; a single bird cheeps in the darkness; there is no way in. The mood has turned dreamlike, round they go – and then Kristof says ‘There’. The gap is narrow, at an angle, and they slide their way through. Then they are inside a chamber, a hemisphere walled with bush, entirely surrounded by branches except for a gap at the very centre of the leafy ceiling, open to the sky, which lets in a little light. In the middle of the chamber is the fairy table. ‘It’s beautiful,’ says Nomsa, stroking the wood. And indeed, it is kept in smoothest condition, with an inner glow like white chocolate, and just slightly grainy to the touch.

Kristof, just behind Nomsa, lightly strokes her back, his hand moving down the grey dress following the muscled groove, and she shivers and begins to turn around. ‘Don’t,’ he says. ‘Put your hands on the table, and bend over.’ With a fine touch he raises her dress, letting its edges tickle her thighs as he hitches it above her waist. He holds one hand up, keeping her dress high while his left hand follows the outer edges of her panties. She groans. There is no one to hear her but Kristof; though this maze is not far from the lights, restaurants and occasional walkers on the Beach Road, the hedge has completely isolated them. Kristof slips down Nomsa’s panties, all the way to her ankles, and has her lift her legs, one by one, to take

them off. He inhales the fragrance of her, from her panties and the night sky, the marine engulfing scent, and slips a hand down between her thighs. It is wet, silky, a marshy area for fantasy, and here he plays while she writhes and makes soft high sounds. 'Be quiet,' he murmurs again. 'I must have you now.'

'Yes.'

'I have to. I can't resist. I have to be inside you.' He slides three fingers between her labia and she calls out; his fingers emerge slick, and he unbuttons his jeans and anoints himself with her fluid. He spits on his hand, adds more. Then he spreads her buttocks, wide, and she staggers slightly, caught off guard, needing to support herself with both hands against the pale table. As the tip of his penis enters her anus, she jolts upwards, but he is holding her. He places his right hand, wet with juice and spit, over her mouth. 'Just relax. Trust me.' With his left hand he fondles her breasts from behind, still with the tip of his penis inside her.

'This will hurt a bit, but you won't believe how good it is. Just relax.'

Nomsa opens her mouth, and he moves his hand away so that she can speak. 'I've never.'

'Shh, shh.' Kristof places his hand back firmly over her mouth, dips further inside her, while she makes a fierce noise through his fingers.

'Wait it out, wait it out.' He holds her, doesn't proceed. 'Relax into it. Trust me. I'm inside you now.' She is silent, her heavy breasts in his hand; he can feel her heart beating fast.

'Okay,' he says quietly, and he begins to move inside her, sliding in her hot insides, taking his pleasure so that she trembles and raises her head, tries to leave but cannot, gripped inside and out. He comes, shoots a force into her that seems to have no end, and he stays inside her afterwards as she cries, smoothing away her tears with his hand.

Fourteen

When Maria reverses out of her driveway, the road is dark, the streetlamps unlit. There is light ahead; it appears that only the houses in her street are disconnected from the electricity grid. The blackness of the night causes the two shapes striding towards her, one half the size of the other, to appear threatening. As they draw nearer she sees that the approaching couple is a single unit, a mother holding the hand of a young girl.

She has tried to phone Tversky a number of times today to check if he'll be available tonight, but there has been no response. On the last occasion, Maria let the phone ring so long, remembering the size of his house, that the rhythmic beep of the dial tone remained in her auditory memory after replacing the receiver. She drives past Kirstenbosch, her car toiling upwards towards Tversky's nest in the sky, with the mountain a dark hulk on her right. This time she's ready for the sharp turn into his driveway.

Sharkie is out his guard box, leaning against the wall. He recognises Maria immediately, giving her a floppy two-fingered salute while raising the boom for her to drive though. There is no sign of Tversky, the driveway silent and empty, the house shrouded in darkness. *Why would Sharkie let me drive though if Tversky were out?* she thinks. The slam of her car door is sharp, like the clap of hands, in the silence.

The front door has no bell. She raises her knuckles to knock, her heart jumping in her chest – vigorous gestures, she has found, are a way to keep anxiety at bay – when the door is flung open and Tversky, barefoot, stands in the entrance.

'You're here – finally.' No greeting, no comment about her unexpected arrival. He appears, as usual, belligerent. She wonders if that is his habitual stance towards the world. If so, does he feel under almost constant attack?

She walks behind him, sensing that he's tense by the stiffness of his back and neck, his silence. The stress, she assumes, originates from what he is about to tell her, and this causes her own anxiety to increase. Inside the glass room with the magnificent view of the mountain, the air carries a smoky scent from the fire crackling in the corner. Orange and robust, a flower in full bloom. The painting of Claudia, she notices, has been removed. Perhaps Tversky is setting his boundaries: you can know some things about Claudia, but not others. It must be difficult for him, she thinks, striking a balance between opening up to Maria and keeping Claudia's secrets to himself. When she sits down she sees in front of her a transparent glass statuette of a Buddha. Inside, a shiny red stone floats in transparent gel at bellybutton level. 'This wasn't here before,' she says to Tversky's back, as he thrusts at the fire with a metal poker. Logs fall with a hiss.

'New model in from China, I've got a crate coming in tomorrow. You like it?'

'You're getting a crate of these things?'

'Yes,' – Tversky turns to her, still holding the poker in his hand– 'I sell this stuff. Very lucrative.'

'From selling Buddhas?' *No way*, she thinks, *maybe statuettes filled with drugs*. She picks up the Buddha, made from cheap light plastic, before turning the ludicrous thing upside down. The red stone belly button dips gently towards the head of the creature.

'You'd be surprised at how popular they are, not only the statuettes.' He comes to sit opposite her. 'There's a vast market for this new age paraphernalia: tarot cards, crystals, aura products, astral travel packs, energy cards, spirit software, you name it and I sell it.' She can hear the amusement in his voice. He stretches out his arm: 'A list as long as people's yearnings. I've even made a promotional video, if you're interested.'

She shakes her head, amused by the idea of a video featuring all these products. ‘But I thought you were...’ – how to put this delicately– ‘inclined towards a mystical outlook, yet you speak as if you don’t value your new age products.’

‘Absolutely right.’ His expression is serious. ‘I don’t. Some of us in the Circle don’t relate to these bits of new age junk – though not all of us, mind you.’

It is a good sign, thinks Maria, that he is opening up about the Circle. She nods to encourage him to continue. After a moment he does. ‘Our view of the universe is somewhat –’ He puffs out his cheeks. Tversky, like Maria earlier, is picking his words with care. ‘Our view is somewhat more primitive, perhaps. The universe, we believe, is a violent and chaotic place. No pink crystal is going to tame those forces out there.’

Like the unconscious, she thinks.

‘But Claudia liked her tarot cards. Maybe even her pink crystal.’

‘You’re right, she did. But your mother was in a class of her own. Her psychic capacities were greater than most. She could work wonders, even with junk. Perhaps the early calamity – anyway, I rabbit on. Let me get you something to drink. Coffee? Wine?’

She shakes her head: ‘Tea is fine, if you’ve got.’

Tversky disappears down the spiral staircase, not holding the hand rail, nimble and sure-footed. Maria’s legs are crossed, her face angled towards the fire’s warmth. She runs a hand through her short hair, imagining, in a moment of vanity, that the firelight suits her elegant high cheekbones, her full lips. Her cellphone beeps an incoming SMS. From Zac: he *must* speak to her, *urgently*. There is no follow-up message, and she wonders what it’s about. Maria is dialling Zac’s number when Tversky appears suddenly at the top of the stairs, quiet on his bare feet. He holds a tray with a bright yellow teapot, the colour of ripe lemons, and

two pale yellow teacups. A familiar teapot: she remembers that Claudia had an identical one, and she wonders if they bought them together. She puts down the phone.

‘I thought you might like a cup,’ he says, sitting cross legged on the floor, opposite her.

‘Carrying is thirsty work,’ he glances at her belly. ‘May I touch?’

Supposedly people are always requesting a chance to stroke a pregnant woman’s belly, but no one has ever asked Maria. She wants to say no, but feels it would be rude, dismissive, and in revenge, he might be reticent with his information. Also, she’s taken aback by his change of attitude, his sudden display of friendliness.

‘Okay.’

He gets up and takes a seat next to her; places his hands beneath her shirt, two palms either side of her belly. She is surprised by the intimacy of the gesture, the feel of his fingers on her naked skin. His hands are cold, and she wants to shrink from them, but after a moment they take on the warmth of her skin.

‘How many weeks?’

‘Sixteen.’

Maria watches the top of his hands rising and falling to the rhythm of her breathing. To her surprise she finds the sensation calming. She leans back against the sofa. Tversky spreads his fingers slightly to encompass more of her pregnant belly.

‘Why did Claudia do it?’

‘I don’t know.’ His gaze is intense, his eyes pinned to hers. ‘The world was difficult for her.’ He removes his hands from her belly.

‘I know that. I didn’t see much of my mother in the last few weeks – only once, for a brief tarot card reading. Would you say she was severely depressed?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

Maria waits, but Tversky only shakes his head, unwilling to go on. Is there something he is not telling her? She tries again, a more direct approach: 'Were you her lover?'

'Not during that period.'

'What period then?'

He ignores the question: 'Our tea should have brewed by now. Will you pour while I fetch something? Black for me.' He is a businessman, she thinks, and likes to keep his cards close to his chest, but she feels frustrated. She wants to take him by the shoulders and give them a good shake. *Tell me what you know*, she'd ask.

This time he returns quickly. She has barely finished pouring equal measures of the strong black brew into the two cups when he is back, holding a square white envelope containing a disc. On a wooden table at the back of the room is a DVD player.

'A video of Claudia's speech to the Circle,' Tversky explains, as he places the disc in the machine. 'I'm the cameraman for the Circle – photos, videos. It's all meant to be entirely confidential. I'm breaking the Circle by showing this to you.' He does not look at her when speaking; clearly his actions are causing him discomfort. 'It goes without saying that you'll keep it to yourself?'

'Of course.'

'You've read part of the speech already, but the rest will be new.' Tversky presses play, and almost immediately Claudia is there, standing behind a lectern covered in red velvet, head bowed. She raises her face to the camera: Her eyes are wide and staring, starkly underlined with eye liner; her hair is long and black, hanging straight around her face. Although Maria cannot see the audience, she senses their quiet focus. Claudia begins to speak directly into the camera, slowly and deliberately, not glancing downwards at the notes in

front of her; clearly she knows her speech well. She reaches her description of meeting the handsome painter in the headmistress' waiting room, and then continues:

On the third and final day of painting Roberto asked me out that Friday night, and I said yes, he could pick me up at the school entrance. I had no idea how I would leave the premises. The next evening, applying myself to the problem with an intensity I was not accustomed to, I shinnied up a metal pillar onto the roof of the greenhouse, leaped a foot from there to the top of the thick stone school wall, and waited for Roberto. When he arrived in his green Beetle, he seemed to find my elevated presence entirely natural, not worth remarking on. He stood against the stone surface as I stepped off the wall onto his shoulders and climbed down him, as if he were a tree trunk.

I knew, and still know, nothing about cars, but I was well aware of the ancient provenance of his own. The light brown upholstery smelt organic, like a comfortable old cow. We were off to the Alhambra to watch a movie, a musical. He had made some effort to dress nicely, and had Brylcreemed his curly black hair. As for me, I had put on my blue dress, a present from my father; this was the first time it had left the bottom of my suitcase since my arrival at boarding school. I had also spent two hours in making myself up with great care in order to maximize my allure. I imagine that I applied the eyeshadow and lipstick with a heavy hand.

There is laughter from the unseen audience. 'Clearly nothing has changed,' Claudia adds, causing further amusement.

What do I recall about the Alhambra? We sat on the balcony, in the Upper Circle, and engaged in a silent series of negotiations. First, a few minutes in, I let him take my hand; some time later he was stroking my arm; and then, in the darkness beneath the starry ceiling, he placed a hand on my breast. I was rather inexperienced – in fact, had not yet gone beyond this point in my dealings with boys – and was not willing, aged sixteen, to go further than this. So I fought him off, silently, for the remaining half an hour as he attempted to slide his way downwards.

And what do I remember of the ride home? That is trickier. In the sadder events of my life, memory has blessedly intervened to obscure some things, so I do not see everything clearly. On the way back, Roberto took an odd turn and drove along the mountain road below the cable station, and then stopped. I needed to get back – I was becoming anxious about someone missing me at school – and was not really interested in the kissing session that began. Roberto's glamour, without the dangerous proximity to the headmistress' office, was much diminished, and I had intuited that he was in fact a bit dull. After I repeatedly said that it was time for me to get back, I began to get nervous, since he didn't seem to be listening to me at all. And then I decided simply to sit in the car with my arms folded and to wait him out until he realized that there was nothing more to be gained from me, and that I may as well be dropped at the school. Except that it didn't work like that.

What he did was

Now Claudia breaks her steady gaze from the camera, glancing downwards. She looks up again and draws in a breath; her lips part to speak.

What he did was

Again she stops. There is a long pause. An arm intrudes into the shot; someone from the audience is passing her a glass of water. She shakes her head, and the arm withdraws. This decisive action of refusing the offered glass seems to propel her back to the present, making it possible for her to make eye contact again with the camera.

Dear friends, you can fill in the details yourself. Some horrors are best left unsaid. Now to go on. Afterwards, in his car, on the way back to the school, he wasn't unpleasant but sort of distant, and I wasn't saying anything but just crying quietly. I thought about that good cow that gave its skin for this man's car, and I stroked its hide with my fingers. So as to keep myself in one piece, so as not to fall apart, I imagined the kind-hearted cow helping me, taking care of me as in this car it guided me back.

As we approached the school, I said into the silence: 'Why.' Roberto replied, 'What?' and I repeated myself. After laughing a bit to indicate that he was confused by my question, he asked me what I thought of the movie. When I was silent, he tried to persuade me that I had no cause for anger, that nothing untoward had happened. But I have never been one to ignore that thick cold treacle of my heart. And so even though he spoke to me all the way back, explaining that he had a very nice time and I had been good to him, and then, when that did not work, saying that my going in the car with him was proof that I had been expecting just that, and that I was a tease if I decided at the last moment to change my mind, and finally that he hoped we would see each other again soon, all I did was to sit there, wrapped in my coat, waiting for him to finish and for the car to stop. There was no

need to listen to him now at all; I was hearing the creak of my own bones, like a ship on an utterly white foggy night.

I have worn grooves in my mind, going over that again and again, and now I know everything about it: the feel of his tongue in my mouth, like some great eel or slimy thing, so shockingly different from his boyish appearance; the harsh fingers, clawed and strong, and finally, most awful of all, that grunting: of a thing satisfied with its lot, its strains rewarded with a final satisfaction. And throughout, holding me as if I were a piece of meat, as if my soul meant nothing. The cow, the dear cow, was treated that way in the slaughterhouse.

I have tried to protect my daughter from this, dear colleagues and friends of the Circle. When Maria was small, I said that the fairies had visited me with a little girl, when she was older I said that her father had died soon after her birth, and when she was an adult I told her it was just a fling. It was a fling of sorts; something was flung from me, my innocence, a life in which I thought that the world was fundamentally good. Since then I have sought allies, protection and succour in the face of this sad and desperate world. Yet my customary melancholy shines like the moon through dark cloth. It has been hard for her.

Once more Claudia looks down. She is speaking to the lectern, more softly.

Get a grip, Claudia. Get a grip on yourself. What does it matter, your mood? You are sucking up the light in this world, you're a black hole, you've depressed yourself, and no

one likes a depressed person. Live with the appearance of cheer, Claudia, for the sake of everyone else. Stay as you are, don't fall, or you will send a fatal ripple through the tinkling multitude.

The screen blacks out. Maria turns to Tversky, but he must have slipped out at some point during the speech. She wishes he were there with her, because then she would have more control, greater discipline, and would not now be weeping.

University of Cape Town

Fifteen

In the common room of the Philosophy Department – furnished with a set of brown vinyl chairs and an expanse of blue carpeted floor, like a dojo for intellectuals – are three philosophers in a semi-circle, facing an empty seat. They have come to take part in an academic tribunal: an undergraduate is appealing against his failure in a course, and his case will now be heard. At the centre of the trio sits Joan Castle, the head of today's enquiry, who is wearing a muumuu of black-and-white squares. To her left is Cyrus Jackson; at her right is Kristof. It is six minutes past noon, according to the clock that hangs above the door of the common room door, but the student has not yet appeared.

'How long are we required to wait,' says Joan.

Cyrus does not reply. Resting against his knee, on top of his charcoal trousers, is an article in the *Journal of Analysis*, which contains a Californian philosopher's reply to a piece he has published on the Knowability Paradox. Cyrus' face is impassive, giving no indication of his feelings, but he has been writing in the margin of his fellow thinker's rebuttal for five minutes, his arm moving smoothly back and forth. He would have made an excellent businessman – organised, efficient, relentless. This afternoon his shoes are especially bright; he or some proxy must have shone them with care.

Kristof's cellphone vibrates, and he checks it. A text from Nomsa. She has been sending them since the event in the maze on Sunday: four days of text messages. This latest one is composed entirely in capital letters. He deletes the message without reading it, and switches off the phone.

'Have you heard anything about the police investigation?' asks Joan, turning to Kristof. 'It's been a while since I've had an update.'

‘What’s the point calling the police?’ says Cyrus, not looking up from his notes. ‘What are they going to say? That there’s still no news?’

‘Luke phones them often,’ Kristof says. ‘He’s keeping on top of the case; he talks about it all the time.’ At this there is a silence, and none of the three quite looks at any of the others. ‘How’s he doing, do you think?’ asks Joan.

‘As you’d expect,’ Kristof says. ‘Trying to recover. He’s arranging a new project, a collaborative effort with a few other local universities, something to do with internet ethics.’ Once more there is a silence; the group’s opinion of internet ethics needs not be made explicit.

‘Wasn’t Luke meant to be here too?’ Cyrus asks.

‘For the roasting,’ Joan adds.

Kristof glances at his watch. ‘Usually he’s very punctual.’

Philosophers are frequently garrulous, not from a desire for human connection but because they are eager to persuade others of their views. Yet now the group is silent, each thinker following a chain of ideas that is invisible to the rest.

There is a knock at the door. ‘Come in,’ says Joan firmly. A head extends itself slowly around the door, like a tortoise. ‘Am I too late?’

‘You are late, yes,’ Joan says, her loud, flat delivery alarming the student even further, so that his head retreats a little. ‘But come in.’

The young man enters. He is carrying a navy blue satchel – ‘Mechanical Engineering Class of 2010’ – and when he sits down, does not relinquish it, but holds it in front of him as a shield. ‘Newman, I think you know who we are,’ says Joan. ‘Dr Jackson, Dr Zoetman, this is Newman Tshabalala.’

‘Hello,’ says Newman, jerking his head left and right, attempting to greet all the philosophers at once.

‘Would you like to begin?’

‘Alright,’ says the student. ‘I failed a course I took last semester, called Logic and Knowledge.’

‘Yes, you got forty two percent,’ says Joan. ‘Not high enough to pass.’

‘I would like to appeal this failure.’

‘On what grounds?’

Here Newman seems to be stuck; he smiles a little at her, as if to ask: *Must I put this into words?* But then his smile disappears altogether. He says, ‘So.’ From his bag he removes a pink booklet, his examination script.

‘In logic I did very well,’ he says, tapping the booklet. He opens it up, and for a moment the philosophers catch sight of two pages covered with symbols, and feel well disposed towards him. ‘I found logic easy. Well, not easy, but I studied hard. It’s amenable to hard work and careful thought. I like logic. I learned a lot from it.’

‘Congratulations,’ says Cyrus. ‘According to our records, you received eighty four percent for that component of the exam. That’s excellent. There’s not much space for improvement there.’

‘There is some space,’ says Newman eagerly. ‘In fact, I’ve continued to work extremely hard on that, and I went to the library straight after the exam to learn more. For example, I’ve been studying Gödel’s theorems of incompleteness.’

Cyrus is watching, nodding slightly. Joan breaks the mood with a sharp remark. ‘The concern in the exam was your other component, Newman: Knowledge.’

Newman continues smiling. ‘Yes, I saw that.’

‘The Knowledge component was the real issue, because we gave you zero for it.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, what’s your objection to that evaluation?’

Newman shifts in his chair. He says, ‘It’s a bit awkward to talk about.’

‘Unfortunately, you’ll have to try.’

‘Alright, but I would like to put on the record that I’d prefer not to discuss the issue. It’s a bit private.’

‘Mr Tshabalala,’ says Kristof quietly. ‘We understand that this isn’t easy for you, but it’s important that we get to hear you. Apart from the formal requirement that you air your views, we’re interested in the disparity between your performances in the Logic and Knowledge components of the exam. We’re curious people, philosophers, and we’d like to hear what happened.’

The young man nods. ‘Alright, Doctor Zoetman. As I said, the logic part of the course went very well. Logic was like swimming through cold fresh water. But that isn’t really philosophy, I suppose. It’s more like maths. I was really looking forward to the Knowledge part of the course. I thought, that’s where the *real* philosophy will be.’

Kristof is watching Newman, with a serious expression, and Newman is looking right back at him, ignoring the others.

‘I’m an engineering student, as you know. I study engineering not just for the bursary, but because I want to know how the world works, you know?’

‘Of course,’ says Kristof. ‘That’s what philosophy is for, in a very general way.’

‘I felt that too, which is why I took a philosophy course as my elective.’

‘We know,’ says Joan. ‘Now, let’s get to what you wrote in the exam.’

‘Absolutely,’ says Newman. ‘So I went to these lectures, given by Dr Bezuidenhout, very clever man, and he told us about these theories of what knowledge is and how we acquire it. I didn’t really believe any of them, as I told him. It was a stretch for me to say that, of course, because Dr Bezuidenhout is obviously an exceptionally learned person, but what could I do? I sat there not believing any of it. While Dr Bezuidenhout went on about the advantages and disadvantages of this or that theory, I was thinking it was all untrue.’

‘Well, that can be a healthy impulse in philosophy,’ says Cyrus.

‘Newman, we don’t have very long.’ It is Joan. ‘Here’s what I’d like you to do: please read what you wrote in the Knowledge section of your exam. After you have done so, you may feel free to make any comments in defence of your claim that you deserved a higher mark.’

‘Good,’ says Newman. ‘Here it is then.’ He clears his throat and opens the second examination booklet. ‘“My dear examiners,”’ he begins. He raises his head. ‘I understand that it was unprofessional of me, to use that term. I should have just launched into my essay, like a judge handing down a sentence. I know that.’

‘“My dear examiners. I have, in the past few months, listened to some extraordinary lectures which sought to prove what I think to be impossible, viz. that by means of our senses we can acquire knowledge. Our senses are always fooling us. Even dipping a stick in a glass of water makes it look bent! It seems to me that the only way really to *know* the world is not to entrust oneself to the human senses, which do a shoddy and misleading job, but instead to consider another method of acquiring knowledge. I am speaking of a kind of mystical insight.”’

Cyrus shifts in his chair. Joan is looking blankly at the wall above Newman’s head. Only Kristof’s expression is sympathetic.

‘ “Hence, in the past few weeks, as my exam approached, I have taken an altogether different route from the norm. Instead of reading” – excuse me, this is rude, but I had to be honest – “the feeble attempts by philosophers to defend the obviously unreliable senses as a source of knowledge, I tried something different.’ Newman clears his throat.

‘ “During the week before the philosophy exam, in my small residence room” – which I used to share with a Zimbabwean who seems to have moved out recently; anyway, I don’t see him anymore, which made this easier – “I sat quietly on my bed, the summer sounds of birds outside my window, and the faint hum of traffic on the highway beneath the rugby field. I wasn’t ‘zoned out’, though: I was in a state of utmost concentration. What I wanted was to acquire something *utterly reliable* to communicate in this philosophy paper. My engineering exams were over, and I could focus completely on my task. So I closed my eyes, stayed motionless (except for a slight swaying caused by my heartbeat) and tried to get at something important.

‘ “My mind kept wandering. Instead of groping towards philosophical truths, I thought of actual philosophers, including of course Dr Zeilmaker, who was a light to the department, and such an inspiring lecturer for me earlier in the year. I thought with sadness of her disappearance, and wondered if she would ever be seen again. I thought of the evil that may have befallen her, and how terrible it was that some people do dreadful things to others. Then I tried to bring my thoughts back to deeper matters.

‘ “Two days passed in this way, full of distractions. Apart from eating, sleeping and other necessities, I did nothing but sit with my eyes closed, trying to attain some important insight. Several times people knocked at my door, calling me, but I stuck to my place on the bed. Now and then I stretched or changed my posture, but apart from that, I was inwardly focused. However, my mind seemed to contain nothing but distractions, and I was getting nowhere.

‘ “On the evening of the second day, as I thought once more of Dr Zeilmaker, it came to me with the force of a missile that I had entirely misunderstood the situation. Dr Zeilmaker cannot have been subjected to evil. *There is no evil*. I could feel a great and benign, even humorous, presence, presiding over the whole universe. This presence was communicating with me, almost dropping me a wink. And then I knew that there is only good, working through infinitely various channels. The world is suffused with goodness, and any manifestation, no matter how inexplicable, works towards the furtherance of this good. That is my philosophical insight. It was hard won, and I feel it with complete conviction. I thank you.” ’

There is a silence in the room. ‘Gert Bezuidenhout has not written anything in explanation of the mark he awarded,’ says Joan to Kristof and Cyrus. ‘I suppose he thought it was unnecessary.’

‘Newman,’ says Cyrus, ‘I’m quite surprised at this, after your performance in Logic. Surely you know that this has no merit whatever. Joan, what did Gert give it again?’

‘Zero.’

‘That sounds right. There’s nothing redeeming there at all.’

Joan says: ‘I think we’ll just have to uphold Gert’s mark, and give Newman the strange result of a commendation for Logic and a zero for Knowledge. Well, more peculiar things have happened.’

‘Newman,’ says Kristof, ‘do you still feel the way you described in your answer?’

‘It’s faded now,’ says Newman, ‘but that was the impression I had at the time of the exam, certainly. You have to remember, I’d spent days meditating, and had kept sleep and food to a minimum in order to maintain focus, so it was a vision that was achieved under optimal circumstances. I had, so to speak, cleared the pathways.’

‘Do you think it’s possible that your lack of sleep and food misled you in some way?’

Newman shakes his head. ‘It was a clear and distinct perception. As a student of philosophy, I can’t sneeze at clarity and distinctness.’

Kristof looks down for a moment at the blue carpet, and then back at Newman. ‘You have a passion for certainty, I understand. Many philosophers do; that’s often why we go into the subject. When we can’t find it, we content ourselves with next-best things. I do admire the fierceness of your attempt to find something transcendent and beyond doubt. But may I put something to you? Doing philosophy, whatever other benefits it has, should help us to grow up. It’s attractive, the attempt to discern some ultimate source of reality, accessible by some mystical pathway, even beyond reasoning – but it’s also naïve, and once this is recognised it becomes unfitting for a person moving towards maturity. “When I became a man, I put away childish things” – as you might have read in Corinthians. If we want to make progress in fundamental questions, the best that any of us can do is humbly to sift through what has been said by thoughtful people on the matter, and then propose a reasoned position. That means carefully thinking about views and criticising them in a scholarly way. We can’t give you any credit for this response, despite the passion for truth that lies behind it.’

Newman seems to find this response stimulating. He has opened his mouth to reply when Luke Sullivan bursts into the room. ‘Don’t let me disturb you please. Am I missing something? Of course I am, I shouldn’t be here. Or maybe I should.’ He sits heavily. ‘Please, please go on.’

Joan says, ‘We were finished now, Luke. We’re out of time. That’s the end. Newman, we hope that was helpful. You can go now.’

Newman, his eyes large and bright, stands up. To Kristof he bows slightly, perhaps a gesture of respect to a strong opponent. To everyone in the room he says, 'It's alright. Everything is good,' and then he is out the door.

'Luke,' says Kristof. 'What's wrong?'

'She's gone. I can't believe it, she's not with us. Or her body, that's there, it was found. Has been found. In the dunes at Strandfontein.'

'Dear Lord,' says Joan.

'They took a DNA sample and it's her. Signs of violence, they wouldn't say more.'

The philosophers are quiet.

'Who killed her?' Luke goes on. 'What monster killed her? We've got to find that person.'

'Luke,' says Kristof. He stands up, places a hand on the head of department's shoulder.

'We have to do it. That monster will be found.'

Sixteen

For the first hour of each Saturday morning shift, Kris holds the fort without the Vanes. Catherine takes her time upstairs, and Daniel runs on the hill behind the shop. Once, coming late to work, Kris pauses to watch him at his exercise: Daniel shouts as he runs towards the top of the hill, the straps of his backpack filled with wet beach sand, cutting into his naked torso. Then he sprints along the spine of the hill, runs back, then down the path, up again, down again. Each Saturday morning Daniel returns to the shop around nine-thirty, streaming with sweat, gasping, laughing at his own exhaustion. The scent of his salty perspiration is strong, the straps of his backpack soaked. Daniel strides over to the staircase and takes it three steps at a time, grunting at each leap. When he returns fifteen minutes later, his shirt fresh, shoes shined, black hair wet and combed, he leans on the counter and asks Kris his news.

Daniel appears amused by Kris, seems to like him. The boy explains the goings-on at his school in Stellenbosch, the cringing, supplicating attitude towards God, canings meted out in the name of justice, comradeship between the boys who are hit and the teachers who hit – and Daniel shakes his head and laughs. ‘Idiotic,’ he says of the repressive world Kris leaves behind on the train early each Saturday morning. Daniel has a robust cheeriness: he says that he wants to help Kris, to get him *going*. ‘I came from a family like yours,’ he says. ‘Nice, you know, but not much going on. You have to break out. Read some good literature. You know what, you should also look at things that aren’t good for your morals necessarily. Go to the section on battles, you’ll find Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*. About his time as a soldier. Glorifies war.’

All this is bracing, invigorating. The centre of Kris's life is not Daniel, however, but his wife Catherine. He thinks, hourly, of what she did in the store room, how her hands moved on him as she looked into his eyes. She comes down the steps each Saturday morning at about ten o'clock, and makes as if nothing has happened between them. When Kris is alone with her, his heart beats audibly in his chest.

One morning, a few weeks after the incident in the storage room, she and Kris are once again stacking books. Catherine is standing on the ladder, her long white dress touching the rungs. He continues stacking, listening so intently and long to the sound of books being inserted into spaces that he begins stacking numbly, as if he cannot even feel his own body. He is a machine, he is straining at his pants, he is drained and sick of this. It is exhausting to be this way, and it would perhaps be better not to stay here any longer, to find a job elsewhere.

'What's wrong?' Catherine asks him from her ladder, looking down. 'You can't stop. There's a lot to do – we need to keep going.' Her pale face, her red lips – he is feverish, and this is enough. 'I must,' he murmurs. 'I have to.' She watches from her ladder. Her bare feet are pressed on its aluminium metal rungs. She has painted her toenails red, and her feet are white; she is seldom in the sun. He lays an ill hand on the rung. 'What is it?' she asks more sharply.

'I need you,' he says simply.

'You're desperate.' She says it as a statement.

'I'm desperate.'

She steps down the ladder, one rung at a time, still watching him. 'You know, I'm much older than you.'

'I don't care. I like it.'

‘You *should* like it. What I mean is, I know more than you. You’re a child, really. I can decide what to do with you.’

‘You can do anything.’

She smiles. ‘Then kneel.’

He gets to his knees, looking at her bare feet on the bottom rung of the ladder, her glossy red nails, her ankles caressed by the dress. His heart can surely be heard in the whole room.

‘Tell me who’s in charge,’ she says softly.

‘You,’ he says, and reaches out a hand.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she says. ‘We can’t do that. I’m married, you know.’

He looks up at her.

‘Like a dog,’ she says sweetly. ‘We should keep you on a collar. Feed you from a bowl in the sunny kitchen. You’d like that. I would too. I’d hit you with a strap if you got stropopy.’

It is very still in the room, piles of books topped with the sun’s rays, and the dust from the newly unpacked books threatens to choke him.

‘Dogs have a strong sense of smell,’ she says. ‘Do you have a strong sense of smell? Alright,’ she says quietly, almost to herself, ‘You can have a treat. So then, close your eyes.’ He does so immediately. He hears rustling, rustling – then quiet. ‘Open your eyes now,’ and he does. He is looking up at her, her look so kind, so soft. ‘Come on,’ she says, and raises her dress just a little, still standing. ‘You can go under here. Don’t touch!’

On his hands and knees he goes under the white dress, and enters a claustrophobic heaven of soft wrinkled material. His cheek touches one of her shins – bone hard – and he hears her say, sharply, ‘Don’t *touch*.’ She widens her stance, and he sees her legs in shadow, twin columns about him, leading into a shadowed cleft. He raises his head towards the cleft, so that he is still on his hands and knees in this fragrant tent, his face twisted upwards, almost

touching the darkest part. 'There we are,' he hears. 'Do you like that?' The odour is shocking, musky, he does not know how much is her and how much her perfume – perhaps she has put some scent on the insides of her thighs – and his nose drinks it up, he breathes deeply of it, a trickle of sweat torments his forehead.

'That's enough. You can get out now,' and he crawls out of the white tent and into the warm dusty air. 'Why don't you sit on the ladder,' says Catherine. He sees now that she is holding her panties. 'You look like you need to calm down.' And he does, he sits down on the rung, and watches her putting on her panties, raising one leg at a time, and smoothing down her dress. Then she crouches to face him, her eyes level with his. 'You're a sweet boy,' she says. 'I could definitely get to like you.'

He finds in himself, somewhere, the strength to say, 'Let me be with you.'

'My goodness!' she laughs. 'Seventeen. What will you be like when you're twenty one? Well, you can't be with me. My *husband* is with me. What are you going to do about him?'

Once more the words come from some source that he has never drawn on before: 'He doesn't have to know.'

Catherine looks deeply into his eyes. 'Isn't it a coincidence?' she asks him playfully. 'Green eyes. Snap. Maybe we do belong together after all.' She smiles at him. 'But I'm going to make something very clear. I take my marriage seriously. You know that? It's silly of you even to think that we could do something behind Daniel's back. I love my husband.' Her eyes, sparkling, are also quite serious. 'I could never betray him.' The word is a shock, a cold blast on Kris. Surely what they are speaking of, something so pungent and exquisite, is nothing like *betrayal*. 'Even if I did want to,' she goes on, 'it would be a terrible idea. Imagine what he'd do if he found out? Daniel is a big man, he's strong. If he caught us doing

this, you'd be finished.' She sits down on a crate, crosses her legs, looks at him playfully.

'Alright, Kris. One kiss. Would you like a kiss?'

'I'd love it.'

'Come here,' and she crooks her finger at him. He comes over. He is an inch taller than her, but she controls him easily, putting her arms around his neck. 'That's right. I hold you there. And you hold my hips, yes. That's good.' Her white face is close to his, raised towards him, and she presses her lips to his. Her mouth opens, and he feels her tongue inside his lips. He feels that he is drowning, it is too much, he cannot go on like this – and then her mouth is off him, and she is standing back. 'Alright, that's enough,' she says, smiling. Her lipstick is smudged. 'Better carry on unpacking. I have other things to do.' And she leaves.

Kris goes off to the bathroom. He feels so swollen, full, but he cannot do anything about it. Standing at the toilet, he finds that he cannot urinate; he is blocked, his urethra expecting something else.

Seventeen

Maria stares at her face and naked body in the bathroom mirror above the basin. Her eyes – round, staring, an intensity of gaze making her patients believe she sees their thoughts – are definitely an inheritance from her mother. Her mouth – sensuous, she has always liked it – with its generous lips, wider than Claudia’s, must have come directly from her mother’s rapist. Her breasts no longer fit her otherwise slim proportions. Powerful blue veins map their surface, indicating that their function will soon change. But her arms are still slender, long from her shoulder to the tips of her elegant fingers – arms like those of a painter, she thinks, useful for reaching tricky spots.

She saw Claudia’s video two days ago. Afterwards, switching off the tape, Tversky said in his matter-of-fact way that Maria was the child of that forced union. All of yesterday she felt numb and sealed off from the world. Last night though, she became drunk. Only two glasses of wine, but her tolerance levels have dropped with the pregnancy. She drank them quickly in the dark in the lounge, sitting on her couch, her ankles crossed neatly in front of her. Maria experienced the effects of the alcohol almost immediately, the draining of tension, the pleasant slowing of her thoughts. She fell asleep downstairs and woke this morning to a dull headache and a sharp anger. A group of strangers know her dreadful origins, yet Claudia did not share this information with her own daughter. To be the product of such a union makes her cheeks burn with shame.

Later that morning she’s sitting on the floor with five-year-old Sam, her youngest patient. Sam is building with wooden planks. When she asks him what it is, he tells her that it’s a Bungaria. Then he asks her a question solemnly in turn: ‘What is a Bungaria?’

‘I’m not sure.’

He carries on building, the structure thinning out near the top, and beginning to teeter. Since telling her about Claudia’s history, Tversky has been kind in his abrupt way. He has called her twice, each time coming straight to the point – how is she holding up? Fine, she tells him. Of course this is not true, but quite how she is not fine, is unclear. Certainly her life proceeds in its regular fashion, and so perhaps she is wrong, and she is quite fine after all.

Bring your mind back to Sam, she tells herself, and why it is that he screams and clutches at his mother’s skirt every day when she takes him to school. The reason is probably straightforward: the boy refuses to leave his mother’s side since his father’s death from a voracious cancer. Sam, plausibly, worries that if he’s away at school, his mother might also fade away alarmingly. The tower, emphasising Maria’s injunction to pay more attention, teeters before toppling over. The wooden planks clatter against the floorboards, while Sam holds out his palms helplessly to try to stop their descent.

‘No air at the top,’ – Sam picks up one of the planks, placing it on top of his head like a small balancing beam – ‘that’s why it fall down.’

‘No air?’ Maria shakes her head. ‘It must have been difficult to breathe up there.’

Sam nods his head seriously in response, his mouth a grim line. He starts to build another tower, breathing heavily with concentration. *It is important to him, she thinks, that the tower stays erect.* She watches as he builds the base wide.

‘Strong like a lion,’ he says, still building, not looking at her.

‘Very strong.’

Unbidden, though she attempts to resist, the memory flashes into her mind, images spooling forward. Maria is six. Outside, the rain falls in sheets, the sky dark and low. Inside, the electric lights are off, the room gloomy. Her nose, the palms of her hand are pressed

against the cool glass of the window, from where she can see part of the road; her eyes ache from holding them wide open, not blinking, in case she misses her mother's return. She bends slightly backwards to draw squiggles like long snakes in the condensation made from her breathing. Each foot kicks twice against the other, her own ritual to bring her mother home quicker.

Ouripa is in the maid's room out back, resting. Usually in the afternoon while Ouripa rests, her mother visits her 'special friends'. She imagines that they are the same 'friends' who visit at night, men and women in equal number, the women in long dresses with chunky knitted scarves knotted around their necks. Their conversation is soft, muted, whispers in hushed voices. Should she enter the lounge, something she knows to do only in an emergency, the talking will cease like a switch has been turned off, and all heads will swivel in her direction.

Soon the maid will come inside and start cooking supper. Maria will sit on the counter as Ouripa chops and fries, and they'll discuss the adverts – pointing out their favourite washing machine, vacuum cleaner, fridge; always they reach agreement – from today's newspaper for their dream house. Today, Maria knows, is different, because she has seen the white envelope on the mantelpiece. Many times already she has rubbed the edge of her thumb against the stiff paper. She has sounded out, slowly, letter by letter, the name in her mother's black pen on the front: *Ou – ri – pa*, who has not yet seen the letter due to her afternoon rest. Maria senses that the letter is important and devastating; she knows it from the paper, its white stiffness.

She hears Ouripa entering the kitchen, the gush of water from the cold tap, but, instead of running to her, she fetches the letter, light, almost like holding air, and takes it to her lookout point at the window. She slips a fingernail under the gummed down envelope flap, working

it open with her finger. The paper tears, but she continues. Inside, on Basildon Bond paper, out of bounds for drawing, is a single page covered in her mother's uphill cursive. Maria goes to sit on the carpet, her legs sticking out in front of her, and tries to read the first sentence. The words are long, the letters strangely shaped. She knows, instinctively, that asking Ouripa to read her mother's words out loud is a bad idea.

Sounding out one letter at a time, the first sentence transforms slowly from shapes to words: *Dear Ouripa, I apologise, Maria reads, in advance for what I'm about to say, but please understand that I am stuck and have no one else to turn to.* The words make no sense to Maria. *Stuck*, she thinks, *where? If I know where, I can tell Ouripa to make her unstuck.* She ploughs on, working her way through each word of the second sentence. *I know you and Maria are very close – and that you will look after her when I'm gone (you are a more dutiful woman than I am). But it is time for me to depart, to go from where I am to a different place, the next world.* She doesn't understand what she is reading, though she knows that her mother has left her, disappeared forever to somewhere else.

Maria is a conscientious child, much praised at school for neatness, so she manoeuvres the letter back into the envelope and returns it to the mantelpiece propped against a batch of other letters, just as she found it. She goes back to sit cross legged on the floor, head bent. A ball inflates inside her chest, making it difficult to breathe. Soon, she's convinced, she'll burst. She tastes salt in her mouth, from snot, from tears. Then, suddenly, that most familiar noise – she holds her breath: the black gates opening, the slow grind of the electric motor. A car engine cuts, hurried footstep, a key turning in a lock. Claudia is home, standing in the gloom of the entrance hall.

Maria watches, unseen, as her mother goes straight to the mantelpiece, finds the letter and takes it. She does not appear to notice that someone has tampered with it. *Now*, thinks Maria,

she's going to crumple it up, chuck it away. There is water on her mother's cheeks, from the rain perhaps, though Maria senses the return to this dark cold house is to blame. But Claudia doesn't crumple the letter. Instead she slips it into her inside jacket pocket – pristine, reusable.

A few weeks later her mother doesn't rise from her bed, and two weeks after that, Maria wakes to find Claudia gone. *In hospital*, Ouripa tells her. *Your mother is not well.* It's the first of Claudia's many depressions. Maria has always felt that these depressions were related to her in some way, and also that her mother's refusal to confide in her was not simply from the desire to protect her daughter; there was something aggressive in it. She realises now that no matter how much she suppressed it, her mother must have resented, even hated her. It didn't help for Maria, at school, to get good marks, to be a dutiful daughter. The problem was not her character, but her very existence. She was the child of a nightmare.

Sam's sharp intake of breath alerts Maria that his strengthened tower is again in free fall. This time he is less mature about the collapse, and immediately starts to cry. He picks up a small plank, hurling it across the room, where it *plinks* on landing. The sound is almost an affront, small and inconsequential, rather than a grand noise to reflect a huge emotion. Maria is aware of his impotence, his helplessness, as she leans across to touch his back. She hardly ever touches her patients, but, today with Sam, she responds differently; it crosses her mind that she is responding to her memory of herself, not to Sam's predicament. The little boy shifts backwards into her palm, so that she feels beneath his shirt the bony ridges of his shoulder blades.

Sam's mother arrives a few minutes late, flustered and red faced. Her son has been playing with the two Labradors since the end of his session. Maria checks her cellphone after she has

said goodbye at the door. There is another missed call from Zac. When she calls him back, he answers on the first ring.

‘Hey. You’re tough to get hold of,’ he says. ‘Everything alright?’

‘Ja, fine. Busy few days. You said someone’s been asking for me.’

‘Yep, he’s actually a student here, a first year. Anton Nortje. He saw you coming in with your machine, and he’s been pestering me for your name and number,’ Zac snorts delightedly. ‘Go gentle with him, Maria. He’s probably a virgin.’

Zac waits for an answering laugh. Maria leans against the wall, already she is chastising herself. *What did you think – that he wouldn’t find you? But what bad luck that he should be a student at CATS.*

‘Did you tell him who I was?’

‘Sure, he’s a mate of mine. He says he met you at Noah’s Ark at the beginning of the year. I didn’t know you hung out there. He was a bit shy to call, so I thought I’d break the ice.’

‘I don’t want to see this guy.’

‘Alright, hold your horses, man. I did think he was a bit young for you, I must say, but I thought maybe it’s like a cougar thing – ’

‘Zac, I’ve got to go.’

There is nothing she can do about Anton. If he ever works up the nerve to approach her, she’ll deny the baby is his. She thinks about Lionel, feeling uneasy: she needs to tell him – soon – that he isn’t the father of her child. *Why, she thinks, am I so unwilling to do this?* Because he’ll leave her? Or is it something else – the simple fact that her baby would benefit from having a father?

A ring at the doorbell, another patient. She lets him in and sits in her armchair, facing him, cool and composed, as though she never leaves her therapy room. It is a fiction patients rely upon.

That night Lionel comes by, and Maria submits to him: it is a relief for her to no longer be in control. She is made to kneel naked, her knees on the floor, her hands clasped together on the bed in front of her. She can feel the wooden floorboards, a discomforting pressure, forcing a shift of her weight forward onto her hands. A soft scarf, a blindfold, is knotted tightly around her eyes. Because she cannot see, her hearing has become acute: he is behind her, a little to her right. Lionel's step, barefooted, is light; her ears strain to pick up his movements. Part of the ritual, she knows, is to befuddle her senses.

She feels his hand between her legs, his fingers slipping inside her. She moves against them, trying to build a rhythm before he abruptly stops. Brings his hand to her mouth. Without thinking, she flicks her tongue between his fingers, like a cat licking its own body clean.

Lionel moves away and she hears the flare of a match, the acrid smell of burn. And again. Four candles, one in each corner of the room, she imagines. A pause, a sound hard to identify, perhaps a hand fumbling against clothing, and then the unmistakable swish of a belt swung free. She swallows, waits.

He trails the belt down her back, the metal buckle cold against her skin. She knows he plans to use it; even if she wanted to, she wouldn't know how to tell him to stop. He draws the belt away and for a moment she is alone again, unbearably alone. The sound hits her first, the loud slap of leather against skin. The belt strikes her lower back, curving around the

contours of her body like a second skin, cleaving between her legs, more shocking than painful. Lionel's hand strokes the tender path of the belt's channel.

He shifts her body into a new position so that he, not the bed, is in front of her. His penis is hard and hot in her mouth, slickly salty at the tip. The speed is languid at first – he is taking his time – but soon his pace builds, becoming fierce. His hand at the back of her skull presses her in closer. Maria holds his thigh with one hand, the other hand between her legs. The climax for both of them comes quickly. Afterwards, in bed, in what was Claudia's bedroom, they lie on their backs staring at the ceiling.

'You liked it – didn't you?' Lionel sounds tentative. He stretches out an arm for her to use as a pillow. 'I won't do it if you don't like it.'

The game has gone further tonight than in the past. She's not sure what to say: partly she *did* enjoy it, her mind mercifully blank as she obeyed him. Also, she feels it was a punishment of sorts, for allowing him to believe he was the father of her child, and that she deserved it. But she is left angry towards him. 'I could have told you to stop,' she tells him. *I must take responsibility for allowing him to do what he did*, she thinks.

The next morning Lionel is up early, whistling: 'I'm going to have evil thoughts all day,' he says, as he sits on the bed tying his shoe laces, 'after last night.' *He feels closer to me*, she thinks, *and I feel further from him*.

'We should talk' – *I'm not carrying your baby* – 'about what's going on between us.'

'Sure,' Lionel bends to pick up his jacket from the floor, swings it over a shoulder. 'We can talk. See you tonight, babes.'

She goes to the bathroom. Her life is a mess; her mother, mired in ambivalence for her own child, unable to transcend her biological origin and accept her wholly, seems to be at the

centre of Maria's problems. She picks up one of Claudia's ceramic frogs, beloved by her mother, from the shelf above the toilet – and lets it drop to the floor. It clatters against the tiles, breaking into shards. Maria grabs the biggest frog of the lot, one in the shape of a money box, a narrow slit on its curved back, and smashes it to the ground. The noise is louder, unlocking her rage. She sweeps her arm across the shelf of frogs, sending them tumbling to their fate. As she steps forward, there is a sharp prick of pain beneath her foot. Bleeding. She wipes the blood off with a finger dipped in saliva before walking around the mess to go and shower.

Afterwards, she goes back to the bathroom with a dustbin and pan to clean up the broken frogs. Lying amidst the pieces of the biggest one, the money box frog, she notices a folded-up wad of blue paper. She opens it– the paper is fine and thin– and she instantly recognises Claudia's handwriting, those upward sloping sentences. She sits cross legged on the floor, her cleaning forgotten, her heart thudding fast and light, and begins to read.

My dearest Kristof, it begins.

It's late, past midnight. I'm lying in bed looking at the night sky as I write to you. The stars, visible out the window, are bright tonight. They make me think of you: how we have found each other, two points of light in the night.

My poor Maria, she came around yesterday – in an instant I could see she was sad, weighed down by her lover, that toad Lionel. He is the kind of man who wants what he can't get, and when he finally has it in his hand, he no longer desires it. Fool, he.

I did a reading for my daughter while she was here; to her peril, she does not believe. Instead, she spent our time instructing – no, coercing!– me to go see a psychiatrist. How out of rhythm we are; how little she understands of the world beyond what she senses. She believes that a pinch of one chemical, a splash of another will make everything better. Souls are more complex than that.

No matter. This letter is not about Maria – though she has lost her way, poor child – it is about you and me. It's about an epiphany I had this morning in the most unlikely of places, the most barren of spaces – a shopping centre. I like to serve sweet chai tea, and my client Mariolijn was coming later, her chart quite fascinating –

But why do they make shopping centres such hellish places? There I was in the bowels of the beast trying to get out, my shopping finished, when I took a wrong turn. Down another windowless passage I went, then a ramp, and into an underground parking lot. At the entrance a man offered to carry my bag, but I held up my hand and shook my head. Was he offering to transport my belongings across this great plain of soot to hell itself? The parking garage was even more dark and depressing than usual – many of the fluorescent lights had packed up, and the space was awfully claustrophobic. As I walked, a tin of coconut milk, buried in my green shopping bag, bumped repeatedly against my thigh with each step. I had the feeling I was on a long journey - Bump, step, step. Bump, step, step. I was sure there would be a staircase or a lift which would bring me back up to the land of the living, so I said to myself: go, Claudia, carry on walking through the belly of the beast...

Finally I found myself at the opposite end from where I had entered, and still no escape to the world beyond was possible. In the corner was a concrete block into which some horrendous human being had stuffed a poor pot plant. To treat life with such disrespect! How must this fern, leaves yellowing and cracking on the edges, find anything to sustain itself in this godforsaken place? I made my way over while rustling around in my bag for my water bottle. No more than a teaspoon of liquid there, but I sprinkled it over the plant in a wide arc where it sank into the soil, the plant perking up almost immediately. How little we need in this world –but how much less even than that are we given. I sat down in the exhaust-filled air (how exhausted I was too!), struck by the suffering in this world. Perhaps in the next world too, though I have my doubts, believing it a far better place, free from the forces that thwart us here repeatedly. I thought about you as I surveyed my hell in miniature, about what you told me last week during tea at Montebello.

Do you remember? Of course you do. The sun low angled, touching your hair, making it shine, with its lustrous fingers. And you, holding hand to forehead, to shield your eyes from the glare. Like a cat that day, you were, your conversation springing lightly from one topic to another. You tease me so: your half stories, your infinite knowledge.

I have tactics too; I know, for example, when to hold my tongue. Remember: I flicked open a small compact mirror I keep in my handbag and busied myself with my lipstick. Some men would look away, embarrassed at this intimacy, but you understood. It's a traditional game for a woman to adorn while a man observes – and you played your part, your chin resting in your hand, your eyes travelling my face.

Remember, you told me a little about the Vanes, though you kept the details sketchy. But you're not the only one who has escaped, Kristof, I thought, as I sat with my back to the straggly pot plant, my presence bringing it a new lease on life. I too have run. Oh, how I've run!

My escape happened a long time ago when I was still very young, before the calamity that changed my life. I remember that it was a good deal past midnight, the sky packed with stars – could that be true? Scores of stars in the night sky at a boarding school in the city? – and my chest burning, a tight painful stitch splitting my middle.

My first night at this demon school and no one had said a word to me all day. Not even Esme, tall, with glasses that left ugly red blotches on the top of her nose, who was appointed to 'show the new girl how things are done around her'. The silent treatment was a ritual of the school – imported, perhaps, from British boarding school stories. For at least a month, no one spoke to new girls. If I spoke, my words produced no effect, even if directed at a specific girl. During this terrible month of loneliness the idea came to me that I had conjured up this outlandish world, that all of it – the wooden desks, the prissy teachers, the emerald green of the fields beneath the blue mountain – was a creation of mine. If that were true, then all I needed to do was walk out the gates to make it disappear. In those days, naïve as I was, I believed one's own head was easy to escape – not knowing, of course, that that is the hardest place to flee.

One night, after dinner, I broke free from that school, barefoot, dressed in gym shorts and a T-shirt. The South Easter was shunting cold blasts through the city, but I didn't notice. I

found my way home, at night, through darkened zones of the city, sections lit with neon, a good five kilometres. I ran the whole way. These days I have no sense of direction at all. I used it all up in one go, like a firecracker blazing through the sky, the sum total of its energy consumed in a gargantuan effort of light and power. As I ran, all the while, I looked up: glittering and unreachable, the stars pointed the way from one street to the next. The universe channeling its energy, the Circle would have said. Every woman in labour knows about such a channeling: the universe pulling back before exploding with magnificent force.

My mother let me spend the night in my old bed, my flat pillow clutched to my chest as I fell into a dreamless sleep. The next morning she insisted that boarding school was ultimately the best, 'for both of us'. I was after all 'no longer a child', now sixteen years old. I was sure it was a punishment for my father finally walking out on her.

We have both escaped, you and I. There is a word for you: you are my basileus, my king. That is how the Ancients Greeks referred to rulers – but of course you know that.

Oh, I hope I'm brave enough to send you this letter.

Yours eternally –

Claudia

Eighteen

Straight after reading the letter, Maria dials the university and is put through to Philosophy. 'It's not a lecturing morning for him,' says the secretary. 'He's probably at Merriman's – it's his spot.'

The café is in a quiet street of old, genteel houses, walking distance from the university. When Maria gets there fifteen minutes later, she spots Kristof at a table on the pavement outside. Maria parks on the opposite side of the street. After she has locked the car, she turns to see that he is watching her. He waves as she crosses the street towards him.

Maria reaches the table and says, 'May I join?' Kristof leans over and pulls out a chair for her. It is breakfast time, and he is eating a fried egg. He has cut around it, leaving only a gleaming yellow hemisphere.

Sitting, she notices a scene on the front page of the newspaper. A chalky man is standing at a desk; behind him, a school of little yellow fish weaves between waving fronds of kelp. 'An artist has arranged a series of sculptures under the sea,' Kristof remarks mildly. 'May I offer you breakfast?'

A waitress is nearby; she places a menu before Maria. Her attitude seems hostile – she does not speak, and puts the menu down firmly – but Maria realises that the aggression may be in her own mind.

Kristof is looking at her, waiting, his expression indicating pleasant acceptance of whatever is to come. He is never surprised, she thinks; maybe that's what it is to be sophisticated. She says, 'You seem so relaxed.'

'It's an act,' he says, and folds up the newspaper. There is a half-full bowl of chillies next to Kristof's plate, minuscule red and green slices. As Maria watches, he forks some onto the

egg yolk and bisects the remainder of the egg, placing half of it in his mouth. She imagines the burning capsicum and the soothing yolk. His chin is perfectly clean-shaven, unusual in men, and he is wearing his olive-green shirt, the sleeves rolled neatly above his elbows. Kristof finishes his spiced egg and smiles, clearly happy to see her. ‘This *is* a lovely coincidence,’ he says. ‘How have you been?’ He has the air of very much wanting to hear what she has to say; this is his charm. She thinks, not for the first time, what a good psychologist he would have made.

‘It isn’t a coincidence,’ she says. ‘I was looking for you. I won’t have any food, thanks’ – the menu is still on the table in front of her – ‘but I’d like to talk.’

His face changes; he is sober, fully engaged.

‘Kristof,’ she says. ‘Look at this and tell me what it is.’ It is possible that Claudia’s letter was meant for someone else, another Kristof, but Maria *feels* – sickening though it is – that her mother was writing to this man. She passes the piece of folded paper across the table, and watches him take it without hesitation.

He reads with great speed and without expression, and when finishes, he does not glance at it again. He folds it up, looks at her and says, ‘Yes. She was writing to me.’

Maria has expected this, but she still feels the shock. ‘And?’

‘So,’ he says. He is thinking, and he weighs his fork with the gravity of an Egyptian god testing a soul. ‘What would you like to know?’ Seeing her expression, he says, ‘You’re right – stupid question. I should ask: where shall I begin?’

‘What was there between the two of you?’

‘Not what you might think.’ He closes his eyes briefly to collect himself. ‘Alright. Let me try to explain this as honestly as possible.’ Maria is watching him very closely. ‘You know that philosophy is abstract, at least my kind of philosophy. About a year ago I decided to start

taking mountain walks, as a kind of antidote to my work. Soil, rock, fresh air – the opposite of philosophy, and I thought it would do me good. One Sunday morning I woke up early, drove to the bottom of Newlands forest, and began walking up towards the contour path. It was about six thirty in the morning, and I hadn't seen anyone since coming from the car park. I could hear only the cracking of sticks beneath my feet, the birds, my breathing, and the drone of traffic far below. Between the fresh nature around me and the distant cheerful hum of cars, I was in a fine mood. When I got up to the contour path I didn't pause, but turned to walk along it in the direction of the city bowl. I rounded the first corner, and saw a woman standing and looking out on the city. It's a steep part of the path, but she was at the very edge. She stood tall and proud, or at least seeming so.' Kristof gestures towards the waitress, asks her for an ashtray and a pack of cigarettes from the counter at the back, and then goes on.

'I passed by. It isn't my habit to disturb people who are engrossed in reflection; why impose myself on them? But I admired something about her, a fierce pride and melancholy that I thought I sensed in her. As I was nearly out of earshot, she spoke.'

Kristof sighs. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this before. I'm good at keeping secrets, I respect them, and your mother asked me not to speak about our – whatever it was, our relationship. I know she was a private person.'

Maria is usually patient, a product of long training in watching her clients beat about the bush, but now she wants to know *what happened*, and Kristof senses it.

'Alright,' he says. 'As I was walking away from her on that mountain path, I heard her say, *Like a bird on a wire*. I turned around and found that she was still facing outwards, towards the humming city. Then she turned too, and I saw that she had strikingly black hair, long and straight, framing her face. For a moment the two of us looked at each other, and it

was disconcerting to me, because she was entirely unmoving. She looked almost sculpted, an ancient spirit of the mountain encountered on the path.

‘The brightness and silence of the early morning contributed to my sense that everything was motionless, a static picture of me and this Greek prophetess.’ Kristof smiles. ‘I’ve wanted to tell you how the two of you differ: obviously you’re both women of powerful emotion, but you’ve been educated, milled, while she is – was – uncontained. Anyway, after she spoke I wondered what she meant. Bird on a wire: was the city the bird? Was *she* the bird? I didn’t know what to say, and so I stood for a few seconds, with her still watching me, and then I awkwardly turned and left. Of course, as she must have intended, I couldn’t get the scene from my mind.’

Kristof opens the packet of cigarettes that the waitress has brought him. ‘Do you smoke? No, I didn’t think so. Neither do I really.’ He lights up, takes a deep drag. Then he crushes the cigarette into the ashtray. ‘Anyway: I went back to the forest the next week. I was intrigued; from our brief encounter I imagined that she was half unbalanced, and half – I don’t know what. Plugged in, switched on. And these two halves seemed connected. As if a truly intense connection to reality actually *precludes* complete mental health; this appealed to me. And then, when I encountered her again the next Sunday morning, looking out from the contour path onto the city, I asked her who she was. ‘Claudia,’ she said, smiling suddenly, as if now she had hooked me in. For a few minutes we walked together along the path. I found her conversation disorienting. For example: she said, at one point, “You look like a climber. In a past life you must have been a mountaineer.” We said goodbye, and then met again the next week. And then again, so that it became a regular few minutes on a weekend morning. Each time we exchanged a little more. She loved the fact that I was a philosopher, but never asked me precisely what this involved. I think she just enjoyed the label. Heaven knows what she

thought I actually did. She sometimes alluded to occult matters, crazy things, perhaps thinking that I would be sympathetic. I never felt inclined to disabuse her.

‘After a few months, at the end of our walks together, she would occasionally pass me little notes. They were more intimate than the conversations we had. ‘Your eyes are the colour of the forest,’ said one of them. I can’t deny I was flattered. “This connection of ours,” she wrote to me once. “Promise me, this is confidential, ours alone. I will not have it sullied.” When she gave me that note, she stared at me with those kohl-lined eyes, asked me to read the note there and then, and insisted that I agree to her request. It was a promise I kept, until now.

‘I was quite reticent with her for some time, as one should be with people who pry for one’s secrets. But, maybe in an effort to unlock me, she began telling me more about herself.’ Kristof looks away from Maria, focusing apparently on the bushes at the other side of the road. ‘When she vanished, when I found that she had passed away, I was devastated. She was an extraordinary and vivid woman, and those mountain walks made a strong impression on me. Once, we even had tea at this café afterwards – and yes, *I* gave her that CD of *Rothko Chapel*. She considered me a kind of lover, I think, in a purely spiritual sense. I wanted to tell you, after I met you at that group session, about my link to her, but I found that I just couldn’t do it. I did feel that my meeting you was significant, a fateful encounter, and that I *ought* to tell you about my connection with your mother. I even had a strong sense that you were a kind of successor to her. That sounds crazy, I know, but I did tell you I was going to be honest. I wanted to open up to you – but my promise to her was holding me fast. And I need to tell you something else. When Luke sent around a suggested list of therapists provided by the Human Resources Department, I saw your name and said that I’d heard you were an excellent psychologist. It was true – *I had* heard so. Your mother told me.’

Maria has been listening with the sense that her life is being reoriented as Kristof speaks. She is furious— not at Kristof, though he has deceived her, but at Claudia. All along, Claudia has been there, draping herself over everything, even finding this man first. And Kristof is right, Claudia continues exerting her influence, even after her death. She sighs heavily – it seems that she cannot have any clear space for herself.

‘Maria,’ says Kristof. ‘I wanted to say something about all this. It’s true that in this last message – perhaps she was planning to give it to me, maybe she decided it was too intense to be handed over – she wrote to me with the language of a lover. And I can’t deny that she intrigued me, in a way excited me. But that doesn’t mean that my relation to you –’ and here he stretches out his hand towards her, touches her forearm lightly – has anything to do with her.’

Of course it does, Maria thinks; everything is connected. But these words of Kristof seem sincere, and perhaps this man – a philosopher, a strong thinker – can indeed see Maria free of Claudia’s associations, and as her own person.

‘You’ve been quiet,’ says Kristof. ‘May I ask you what you’ve been feeling while I’ve been speaking?’

‘It’s hard to know. My mother, as you know, was a powerful woman.’

Kristof is nodding, giving her the chance to speak. He takes a sip of his coffee, not crowding her with his eyes, looking away.

Maria has noticed that his clothes are sharp and clean, freshly pressed. She enjoys the smell of the fresh coffee next to him, even of his cigarette. And for a moment she wonders whether the world might really be this simple; whether this strange and troubling connection to her mother is no more than Kristof says it is, and can be put aside. Abruptly she asks, ‘Were you with my mother that day?’

‘No. I was working on an article. I remember it was due the following day. The next morning, over breakfast, I read about her in the paper.’

She orders a coffee of her own, and Kristof gives her a small smile, touches her arm. ‘I have some news too,’ he says then. ‘Some very sad news, I have to say, about Saskia. I was going to contact you. You may have seen it already in the paper?’

She looks at him; she is wrung out; there is nothing more to say this morning, surely. But then there is an explosion of air behind her. She turns to find a tall gangling man beaming at her and Kristof as he strides towards them. He has shouted out Kristof’s name, is waving, seems delighted by their presence; he is calling the waiter for a chair, but then changes his mind, waves off the waiter, and scoots around to find one of his own, placing it firmly between her and Kristof, almost screwing it to the ground. He sits down, says ‘Ah!’ and looks at both of them in turn, beaming. ‘I went to the Philosophy Department to say hello, and they said you’d be here! Not alone, I see, Dr Zoetman.’

‘Maria,’ says Kristof. ‘may I introduce you to Ari Bernstein. He’s an old friend of mine.’

‘A pleasure,’ says Kristof’s friend.

‘Nice to meet you, Ari.’

‘Call him Bernstein,’ says Kristof. ‘It helps to keep him under control.’

‘So,’ says Bernstein. ‘What’s happening with you all?’ He looks around, beaming. Bernstein is wearing a thin windbreaker that covers his long body like a surfboard cover. He thatches his hands together, then opens them. He clears his throat happily, waiting for a response.

‘I hope I’m not interrupting anything,’ he says. There is a silence.

‘I should probably go,’ says Maria, and begins to stand. ‘I’ll speak to you later,’ she nods to Kristof. But Bernstein will not have it. He is standing, anxious, holding Maria’s arm, he

cannot let himself break up the party. ‘Sorry, I see this was a private chat. I did want to say, though, and I hope you won’t take this amiss, because it’s meant only as sincere praise, that you have strong arms.’

Maria does not know quite what to do; it would be undignified to struggle with Bernstein, so she stands still. Finally his hand withdraws. ‘Can I ask you,’ Bernstein says, ‘do you do any sports?’

Maria shakes her head, smiles. She was a netball player in high school. Nowadays, she sometimes goes for long, loping runs, more meditations than sessions of exercise – but even these have tailed off as her pregnancy advances.

‘What a pity! It makes no sense, with your arms. Look at those biceps – long, lean, powerful.’

‘Bernstein,’ says Kristof.

‘It’s a compliment! You know, some people are good at a certain sport, just naturally, because of the way they’re built or temperament. For example, I was brilliant at judo. As a child I was always leaving the house in my judo gi, on my way to a competition, or coming back bruised all over, you know? My sensei told me once, I was a natural strangler.’ He raises his arms and simulates throttling himself. ‘Though as a teenager I realised that all this throwing and choking wasn’t my style at all. Rowing was my sport. Cutting through water, English elegance: classy. More my kind of thing. So that’s what I did through high school, Maria, and after a very long lay-up I’m back in Cape Town, rowing again. Actually coaching rowing. Maybe I should give you my card. I think you’d be great. We go out on Marina da Gama.’ He takes off his backpack and begins rummaging about in it; the card cannot be found. ‘Hang on!’ – he tries another zip, then a side pocket, running his long hand up and

down the aperture. 'I've run out. So I suggest you go online and look me up. I teach beginners at a club: Da Gama Canoe Champs.'

'That does sound interesting,' says Maria. She does in fact feel a pull of interest at the thought of stretching her body, travelling across a lake.

'Brilliant,' says Bernstein. 'One thing – if you do come, dress quite simply, shorts and shirt, nothing fiddly, no jewellery or what have you, no wedding rings.' He inspects her hands for wedding rings.

'Goodbye, Kristof. Ari, good to have met you.'

'Let's meet again soon.'

When she gets into her car, Maria sees Bernstein laughing about something with the waitress. Kristof is sitting at the table, holding his cup of coffee with both hands, not drinking but looking into the distance.

Nineteen

That night she enters the house, and knows immediately that something is wrong. Though her home is in darkness, Lionel's Pajero is ramping the pavement. Maria stands in the entrance hall, aware of her reluctance to unhook her handbag from her shoulder, set it to the ground.

She is home later than usual, around seven, having presented an evening lecture to the Masters students. Next week is the final lecture, and then she's flying to New York for her self psychology conference.

Whenever she is at the university, she thinks of Kristof. During the lecture – on acting out during adolescence – she'd felt herself catching her breath, like she was inhaling too rapidly, consuming too much air. Her overly sensitive students had transformed her excitable energy into an extra-engaged concentration with the material, a constant questioning of the points she raised. She struggled to pull herself free from them at the end of their allotted time.

Now that she's home, she feels low, the silent foreboding of the house exacerbating her mood. She flicks on the lights in the entrance hall in an effort to inject some energy into herself.

'You're home.' The voice, toneless, comes from the lounge. She goes to him reluctantly, switching on the lights as she enters the room.

'Switch them off.' Maria ignores the instruction. Lionel is sitting in the armchair, looking out at the garden. Their reflections can be seen against the black glass of the sliding door. He speaks to the image of Maria, not bothering to turn to face her.

'Busy day?' she asks him.

In his hand Lionel holds a whiskey glass, raising it to his lips to take another sip. 'Get me another.'

‘You’re very bossy this evening.’ She is careful to inject a light-heartedness into her tone. ‘That’s two commands in less than a minute.’

‘Come sit on my lap,’ he says, turning finally to face her. ‘That will make it three.’

Because an outright refusal will spark a fight, and if she sits on his lap perhaps the tension will abate, she does as he says. She sits with her back to him, her legs straddling his. As she lowers herself onto his thighs, he rucks up her short black skirt so that her panties nestle against the fabric of his trousers. He threads his arms around her middle, his hands meeting and interlocking at her belly.

‘Tell me about Anton,’ he whispers in her ear.

‘Who? What’re you talking about?’ She knows she must lie – how could he have found this out? Lionel unlocks one of his hands and slips his fingers into her panties. He begins to fondle her.

‘*Stop it.* I’m not in the mood.’ She pushes his hands away and stands up, pulling her skirt down.

‘Not in the mood for what?’ His tone is innocent.

‘For your cross questioning, for your touching me like that.’

‘I’m not in the mood for lies, Maria.’ He leans forward to grab her wrist.

She moves away from him. ‘*Stop it.*’

‘What are you hiding?’ He’s watching her carefully, his hands in his lap again, his posture taut. Maria remembers what he told her: that where he grew up, in his family, you learnt to fight from a young age. Grievances were physical, he’d said. Not abstract discussion points. Your enemies were everywhere.

‘We have to talk about the baby.’ Maria tells him. ‘It’s not yours.’

He gets up and walks to the sliding door, placing the side of his hand on his forehead to look through the glass, as though he's searching for something in the dark garden. She thinks he's going to hit the glass, perhaps shatter it – that coiled up energy needs a release – but he doesn't. His posture, she notices, has become less tight, more defeated. Because of this, she goes over to him and puts her hand on the small of his back. 'I'm sorry, the child is not yours.'

He reaches behind and shoves her hand away: 'Leave me alone.' She watches the glass fogging around his mouth as he speaks.

She feels a spark of resentment. 'How many times did I ask you to go for the tests, Lionel, when we were together? *Fifty?*' Her eyes are wide and unblinking, like Claudia's, when her mother was worked up. 'Each time you had an excuse – that you were stressed, not eating properly. *My body,*' she rests a hand on her belly, 'my apparatus does what it's meant to.'

As soon as she's spoken the words, she wants to take them back. *Stupid*, she thinks, *to say such things to a man hurt and enraged.*

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean –'

'That's why you fucked Anton?' She has to strain to hear him, his head still bowed against the sliding door. 'Tell me, Maria, was it when we were together?'

'No.'

'I'll let you know something – that man's got the hots for you. He left six messages while you were out about how he can't forget that night. So, why don't you tell me the details?'

'I don't want to.'

'Tell me,' he turns to her. Before she can move away he's placed his hands either side of her neck, pushing her head forward towards him.

'You're hurting me – stop it.'

‘Tell me about that night.’

‘What do you want to know? We met at a club, we had sex. What’s there to say...’

‘You had sex with a man you just met in a nightclub? What’s wrong with you? Was this after Claudia died – is that why you did it?’

He’s always externalising blame, she thinks. But Lionel is giving her an escape, though she doesn’t take it. Perhaps if he hadn’t been squeezing her neck she may have. She feels a fury rising within her, as she struggles to free herself from his grasp. ‘That’s not why I did it. I fucked him because *you* fucked a million women while you were supposedly being faithful to me. And I fucked him because I wanted a baby and *you couldn’t* –’

His hands drop to his sides and he blinks. When she looks into his eyes something has changed: shutters have come down. A blind rage she may have understood, but she sees a cold white anger and, from this state, almost a lack of feeling, he hits her.

Lionel is a powerful man, squat, dense. He swings his body backwards, gathering his strength in a fist at the shoulder before the spring of his bunched-up muscles uncoils. She turns away, desperate to escape this force heading her way, but she is too slow. Her hands move instinctively to cover her belly. He makes contact with the back of her shoulder, the strength of the blow pushing her forward to her knees. For an instant there is no pain, only white silence, and then an explosion in her shoulder, as she squeezes her eyes shut and hears herself scream from a distance away.

Some seconds later – in her pain, she cannot tell – the front door slams. Next to her is his empty whisky glass, the sharp smell of the liquor awakening an urge which Maria is in no state to resist.

Getting to her feet is an ordeal: she does it slowly, careful to place no weight on her shoulder or even her arm, which is hanging loosely, as though the limb is boneless. She

forces herself to walk to the kitchen, where, one handed, she pours herself a tumbler of whisky. The first sip burns a reassuring trail to her stomach. After that, the alcohol slips down easily; she feels its effects almost immediately, the pain in her shoulder receding. She is halfway through her second glass when the doorbell rings.

It could be Lionel. Possibly he has come back to apologise. Isn't that how domestic violence – the term too clinical for what has happened to her – works? She has read somewhere, she remembers, that this kind of violence increases when a woman is pregnant, perhaps an unconscious realisation from the man that he has lost the battle for her primary affections. The doorbell rings a second time, more insistent.

As she walks to the door she notices that already her step is unsteady: she is no longer used to hard liquor. Then she hears a voice – not Lionel's, though familiar, yet she cannot place it. She hears it as safe and welcoming. 'It's me, Maria.' Still she cannot name the speaker; her head is foggy and empty. She opens the door a crack.

'Who is it?'

'Kristof.'

For a moment, insanely, she believes it is Lionel who has taken on Kristof's voice. Then she looks through the crack.

'Can I come in? I was in the area and I thought I'd drop this off for you.' He holds up a book. 'I hope you don't mind.'

Inside, he hands her the book: *What Does It All Mean?* 'An introduction to philosophy. I was thinking about you after our talk this morning – I thought you might find this fun.' Her whisky glass in one hand, she holds out the other for the slim volume, wincing in agony as she's reminded of the pain.

‘What’s wrong?’ He puts the book down on the side table and takes a step towards her, his arms extending, though not making contact. His expression is worried. ‘You’re in pain, aren’t you? What can I do to help? What luck I chose tonight to come around.’ Afterwards she wonders about that – the excellent timing of it all.

She shakes her head, taking the last sip of her drink. He reaches for her glass: ‘Here, let me get you another. Sit down.’

He is back quickly; perhaps he has been here before, she thinks. They sit in the dark lounge. Chicken the dog lies at Kristof’s feet, exposing a soft belly to be rubbed by his foot. Because he is a good listener – not saying much, only a few encouraging words to continue – she unburdens herself, all of it: the pregnancy, Lionel, even her mother’s rape. The brutality of the past is a subject he appears to understand well. Her baby, her daughter – for the first time she tells someone that she’s expecting a girl – gives her life its meaning, Maria says. If it were not for the baby, she doesn’t know what she would do. Her work is not enough. Finally, here is a chance to break the pattern of her own life and bring up a child who is loved and wanted.

Claudia’s death, she tells him, the suicide, has been very hard for her. She has been searching for a farewell note from her mother, some kind of explanation, but has instead come across some disturbing documents. And recently there have also been the dreams. He leans towards her. ‘What dreams?’ When they come, she explains, and they haven’t occurred for a couple of weeks now, a fiery orange wall parts midway like a curtain so that Claudia stands before her. Then, nothing more happens, as though neither of them is able to breach the channel between the living and the dead. Her words surprise her, because of course there can be no such channel. He nods as she speaks, not interrupting, allowing her thoughts free passage.

She can see why Claudia was drawn to this man. He is a kind of guardian angel. There are people, her mother used to say, part of this world, part of another, who are put on earth to look out for us. For the first time Maria accepts, without fighting, Claudia's words.

Twenty

That mystical engineering student, Newman Tshabalala, has slipped a note under the door of Kristof's office. It is written in thick black pen on lined paper.

Dr Zoetman, I detect in you a kindred spirit. You may not agree with me about spirituality, but at least you appreciate the impulse. I'll be attending a remarkable meeting tonight, and you should come too. An introduction to the laws of the universe! By the Circle of Mystics – you may have seen their notice tacked to the board in the Humanities Building. When I saw it, I knew I had to go. Dr Zoetman, don't ignore this invitation just because it comes from a failed student of philosophy. Maybe I'm no good at philosophy, at least of a narrow sort, but I do keep my mind open. I would value your presence. What does John Stuart Mill say? That opposition is good for us? I agree, I agree. Please come. With best wishes from New Man T.

Newman has attached a notice that gives an address just off Long Street.

Kristof shakes his head. But perhaps it is worthwhile going. There is something refreshing in the naïvety of mysticism, and a visit might be entertaining. Also, Claudia mentioned the Circle of Mystics often, and he is curious. Finally, he has no arrangement yet with Maria tonight; she is consulting with two clients who attend in the evening, after work. Since the Lionel episode last week, he has been seeing her daily, for a cup of coffee, even a dinner at Juice. It will be good to take a break tonight. So far, he has restrained himself; the relationship with Maria is entirely platonic. He senses she needs time to recover from Lionel's violence before allowing another man physical entry. Kristof will bide his time; he is

good at that. Take that night a week before: he'd driven over to visit her on a whim, and had seen Lionel's Pajero parked outside. He'd sat for an hour in the dark street. Eventually he'd been rewarded when that prehistoric amphibian had hurried out her house, looking neither left nor right, before zooming away in his ugly jeep.

That evening he arrives a little late for the meeting. He enters a hall, a decommissioned old Dutch Reformed Church now used during the day by an organisation for helping the indigent. There is quite a good turnout; thirty people or so are waiting for the speaker. The audience is not quite the collection of misfits that Kristof has imagined. Most of them are neatly dressed, some unmistakably professional, men with ties and shirts in bland colours, women in smart business suits. Perhaps they are drawn by the notion of laws, of clear and concise rules, efficient ways to run their lives. The sun is setting outside, and the bright light shines in. The curtains are not drawn; presumably the dazzling effect before the meeting is intentional. On the stage, behind the empty podium, a banner has been unfurled. Kristof recognises the picture painted on it: it is a severed hand affixed to a shield with a knife, a detail from Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

A baby starts crying in the audience. Who would take a baby to something like this? Perhaps someone stupid or zealous enough to believe that knowledge of the laws of the universe will be acquired by osmosis. And indeed, when a man strides onto the stage, the woman turns the child in her arms towards him, as though wanting the wisdom to be absorbed into her child. Strangely, the baby does quieten down, no longer needing to fidget, instead staring at the speaker, who is dressed in a white shirt and shorts, despite the season. He is in his sixties, short, vigorous and unsmiling. Powerfully built, especially his chest and arms, as if he used to be a wrestler. He clears his throat, and from a button on the podium he

lowers the lights. There is a quiet of expectation. The noise of traffic from outside seems to increase, as if to compensate for it.

‘Don’t worry about the traffic,’ says the man abruptly. ‘That’s part of the world too.’ There is a buzz of amusement, which he ignores. ‘My name is Avram Tversky. I’m here this evening as a representative of the Circle of Mystics to discuss the laws of the universe with you. That’s not because I’m unusually wise. It’s just that we take turns, and tonight was mine.’ The audience laughs again. This man’s gruff style is going down well.

‘Who here,’ says Avram Tversky, ‘knows the laws of the universe already? Is there anyone who has all this stuff sorted out?’

There is a nervous titter. People look down, anxious not to meet Tversky’s gaze in case they are called upon so say something. Then there is a commotion towards the front; someone has raised his hand firmly. Of course: Newman. He is not a tall young man, and Kristof has failed to notice him until now. Newman’s arm is swaying slightly, perhaps to the rhythm of his heart.

‘Oh yes?’ says Tversky. He is wearing sandals; his legs, tanned and well-furred, are close to the waving Newman in the first row.

‘I know that everything is ultimately good,’ says Newman. ‘It’s all for the good, even if things appear otherwise.’

‘Oh yes?’ says Tversky again. ‘And if you were struck by lightning now, leaving you crippled and unable to earn a living?’

‘Good. It was meant to be.’

‘And if you were torn apart by lions, so that your last conscious experience was of being eaten alive?’

‘Good.’

‘Maybe you can come up after the lecture. I have some trinkets I’d like to sell you. Remember, if you buy from me, it’s all for the good.’ Laughter from the crowd. ‘Let’s get serious,’ says Tversky. ‘I admire your optimism, young man, but come on now. Some things are bad. A lot of things are terrible. Life is full of misery and suffering, and then, as a final reward – we die.’

It is now clear to Kristof why the audience is well-heeled. Uplifting bromides for the workers are clearly not the business of the Circle; cynical truths will bring in the middle classes.

‘I’m not here to persuade you of that, though. In fact, I’m not trying to persuade you of anything. I’ll just tell you what the Circle of Mystics believes. If you like our beliefs, you might be able to join us, once we’ve gotten to know you. Here’s what we think.’

Tversky is interrupted from the floor. Two grim-looking young women, demonstrators, have stood up towards the back of the hall; they are brandishing a banner, written in red, that says ‘Satanic cult’. Christians, presumably, trying to save souls. Tversky looks at them with interest.

‘The two of you represent a Satanic cult?’ he says. ‘Welcome. But please try not to do any evil to anyone here. Thank you.’ The women shake their banner awkwardly and then sit. Their cause has been dampened by Tversky’s mockery and the amusement of the audience.

‘Alright, the comedy section of the evening is over,’ says Tversky. ‘Here we go’ – and he presses a button on the podium, causing a screen to descend behind him, obscuring the severed hand.

The screen is blank; then a sentence appears:

Trust in the world and you will be destroyed.

‘Nowadays,’ Tversky says, ‘there are people who think that if we just let ourselves fall into this great universe of wonder, nothing bad can occur. Everything happens for a reason, and the universe has a grand plan for us. Patent nonsense. You have to watch out all the time, or you’ll be betrayed, used, crushed. Next – ’ and he clicks his remote control again. A second line materialises beneath the first.

Evil masquerades as good.

‘You might ask,’ says Tversky, ‘who it is that you ought to suspect. Well, beware of those with smiley faces and kind words. People hide bad intentions behind pleasant manners. Actually, you’ve got to watch out for those who go on about how they’re concerned about you, they want to help you, they *cherish* you.’ The audience rustles, squirms. Tversky is a showman. ‘Why is it that we’re always reading about the corruption of the politicians and the religious leaders, those characters who love putting their hands on their hearts, pressing their lips together to show how they care, crying and telling us about their devotion to goodness and moral rectitude? Because they’re lying *bullshitters*.’ A gust of laughter now. A woman with a loud brassy cackle keeps shrieking from the back of the hall. Tversky gives the impression of telling it like it is, and everyone is relishing the spectacle. ‘Finally – finally – please keep quiet for a minute, I didn’t call any of *you* lying bullshitters, unless of course you’re politicians or religious leaders – I have this to say.’ A third line appears on the screen:

You have a small space.

‘Many things are out of our control, and most of the time we’re virtually surrounded; anyone who thinks their freedom is limitless hasn’t paid attention to all the ways in which other people and the physical world impinge on us. But always, *always*, there is something that is under your control. Has anyone here ever been in prison?’

There is silence from the audience, a few furtive glances between neighbours at the thought of someone admitting something like that. Then a middle-aged man in a suit puts up his hand, and says quietly, 'I have.'

'Thank you, sir. And were you completely and utterly powerless; did you have no space of your own?'

The man thinks for a while; he gives off an air of repose. 'Very little.'

'When you were inside, did you make any decisions, and act on them?'

The man pauses again. 'I did.'

'I won't ask you what they were. But could you have done differently? Did you reach a fork in the road, and choose one path over another you might have taken?'

'Yes.' People are surreptitiously watching the man, wondering what this choice might have been, whether it involved violence, or perhaps sex.

'Thank you.' Tversky looks around the audience. 'Your choices are limited, and often you're hemmed in. But sometimes you can influence the world a little. And even when nothing you do matters to anyone else, you can still choose your attitude, and how you're going to behave. If there are choices to be made even in prison, there are choices everywhere. Even giving up, even lethargy, is a kind of choice.' Tversky seems powerfully to believe in his own words; he is nodding as he stands there. Then he takes a deep breath and goes on.

'You might ask what is mystical about all this. Why are we a circle of mystics? We're a circle because we help one another. In this world you need all the help you can get. As for mysticism, we all believe in it, though not all of us have the gift. Some members of the Circle – definitely not me, I'm a businessman – can sense the forces at work in the world. Most of these forces are bad, causing pain and suffering. Some of them, a very few, are good. And some members can even contact the souls of the departed – as you'll find out if you attend

one of our monthly séances, which are open to the public. Actually, I feel like a fool telling you about spiritual forces, since I'm not in contact with such things myself. But there are, and have been, some remarkable people in the Circle, and when they speak of spiritual powers, of a struggle to defeat the small forces of goodness, I believe them. That's the pattern of the world – boiling with horrors, and now and then a glint of light.'

This is enough for Kristof. It is interesting, sociologically, to see this kind of thing, and the man has put on an enjoyable show, but without Claudia it is not quite enough to keep him interested. He stands up to go. Tversky notices him immediately, as if a string has gone taut between them; this man is completely alert. Looking at Kristof, he opens his mouth as if to speak, but then apparently decides against it. The hall is silent while Kristof turns and departs.

Twenty one

Lionel, thinks Maria, while standing in the shower, *has been my worst relationship ever*.

Naturally, he has been very much on her mind the past few days. Quick and adept at understanding others, Maria is often slow with herself. But thus far she has remained firm, her aching shoulder strengthening her resolve: each of his many messages, at least five a day, have remained unanswered. Sometimes, when leaving a message, he doesn't even talk, just clears his throat as though he's about to say something momentous. She has spoken to him directly only once. About a week back, right after the incident, she was expecting a call from one of her patients, and picked up the phone. Lionel.

'Just tell me,' he'd asked her, 'if there's someone else. Anton? You seeing him now?'

'It's none of your business.'

'I know you're seeing someone else. If you tell me, I'll leave you alone.'

'Not Anton. I'm seeing a man called Kristof,' she'd told him. Although her tone was reasonable, she revealed the information to wound him.

'Who is that? Also a guy you picked up and fucked at a club? You're making a habit of it, Maria.'

'Screw you Lionel. He's a philosophy lecturer. A civilized man.' She'd put the phone down then, with the awareness that she never wanted to see him again. It was time to call a stop to her series of disastrous relationships. Before Lionel was Jeremy.

Morose Jeremy, endlessly attempting to emerge from his black hole with anti-depressants, weekly therapy and long swims in the sea. That relationship ended badly. One day Maria came home to find that he had packed his clothes, his books, even his kitchen pots, into a neat tower of brown boxes in the middle of the lounge. He had the good grace to appear sheepish,

his eyes hardly meeting hers, when he sat her down that night to say he was leaving on a freight ship for Mozambique first thing tomorrow morning. Yes, he'd told her, in answer to her first question, he'd been planning it for ages but the timing had never felt right to mention his departure. It was just something he needed to do – a chance to find out who, during the years of struggle against his demon, he had become. *An unreliable asshole*, she told him.

She shouldn't have been surprised when a few months later he sent an offer of marriage, on a postcard with a lighthouse – *I've seen the light: marry me* – accompanied by a ticket to Kenya. She'd torn it up on the spot, tired of a long history of ambivalent attachments and men who fell in love with her almost instantly, only to fall out of love just as quickly. *I'm on top of the pedestal*, she often thought when a relationship began, *and it's a long way down*. Also, by this time she'd met Lionel, confident, energetic, no hint of depression. And now it seems there is Kristof. Maria is aware that she has moved quickly from Lionel to Kristof, with almost no break between them, but this is sometimes how it happens. You can't schedule a romantic attachment, she tells herself.

She finishes her shower, bending to dry carefully between each toe of her raised foot, when an idea comes to her. This time she will not enter blindly into another relationship, destined for the same patterns to repeat themselves; instead she will approach the burgeoning relationship with Kristof – for isn't that what it is? – with the reasonableness she shows in other aspects of her life.

Twisting her head to see the back of her shoulder in the mirror, she pats her bruise, transformed to musty yellow, the most obvious reminder of her relationship failures. Then she faces the mirror straight on and looks at the thickness of her once slim thighs, her rounded hips that have always been narrow: both the consequence of an abundance of female hormones. She is taking on a sturdier shape, one more suitable for carrying a heavy weight.

She decides to call Ari Bernstein and arrange to go canoeing with him. Not only will vigorous exercise be good for her, but she will have the chance to find out more about Kristof. She will question this friend of his carefully, listen astutely.

Two days later her plan seems less than enticing. When she left her house there were clouds, nothing more. Now, from inside her car in the parking lot behind the clubhouse, she watches the sudden tracks of rain down the windscreen. Also, the sky is already darkening at just before five. It seems that the canoeists need no light to power their boats through the water. Spirit in the Sky is playing on the radio (*Goin' on up to the spirit in the sky / That's where I'm gonna go when I die*), while she taps her fingers against the armrest of the door. The song ends and, with a sigh, she switches off the radio and opens the car door, emerging with a yellow umbrella in her hand.

As she nears the vlei, her feet squelch into the muddy soil of the embankment, against which the water, murky and brown, laps. Further out, the vlei is choppy from the cold blasts of wind. The drizzle hardens into rain, pummeling the water into circles. The air carries a salty, mineral quality which is not unpleasant. *Am I crazy*, she thinks, *or have I been let down so often before that I have to look out for myself?* And then: *If I don't, who else will?*

A red Golf draws up next to Maria's car, and a tall man with long spidery limbs emerges. Bernstein. He arches his back for a quick stretch, his hands on his hips, backwards and forwards, before reaching inside the vehicle to retrieve a blue peaked cap, which he places on his head with a pat. This, it seems, is sufficient protection against the elements. He's dressed in bright yellow shorts and a string vest. His arms and legs, lean and muscular, are surprisingly tanned for this time of year.

Striding over to her, he shouts a greeting. 'Hey, Maria, I thought you might chicken out. I'm pleased you came.'

She'd called him yesterday to set up this introductory lesson. He had appeared delighted to hear from her.

'I'm wondering if I should have.' She glances up at the sky.

'It's a fine day for a paddle.'

'In this weather?'

'Absolutely. But you've already turned against it, haven't you? I can see it in your face.'

'My *face*?' She's enjoying teasing this tall amiable man.

He puts on a look of such exaggerated horror, supposedly a mimicry of her features, that she laughs. 'You've decided that only a complete idiot, say somebody like myself, would go paddling in weather like this. That's true. I *am* a complete idiot. But I know something that you don't. Once you're on the water, you won't notice the weather. Or not that much. The wind's a little bumpy' – he licks a finger, sticks it in the air – 'bloody North Wester, so we'll get it in our faces going out, but that's better, 'cause it'll be behind us on the way in. You'll warm up soon enough, then the rain – if it's still raining then – will be a blessing.'

'You seem to know a lot.'

'I know a lot about a little,' he corrects her. 'We can go in the double canoe, so you won't have to do too much – you'll enjoy it, I promise.'

'Okay.' She finds herself agreeing, his easygoing friendliness pushing her towards acquiescence. 'I'm pregnant, almost five months. Is that a problem?'

'Only if it's mine.' He laughs appreciatively at his joke. 'Sorry – we had a woman here last year who paddled until the middle of her eighth month. I was worried she was going to

give birth in the canoe, and I'd have to extract the thing or something. You can have a life jacket, if you like, and you've got a wetsuit, hey?'

She nods. 'Plus you'll wear one of these –' He turns suddenly and lopes back to the car. The parking lot is filling up, at least ten cars parked haphazardly, people stepping out into the rain (no umbrellas, she notices). One man is walking with a canoe on his head, his arms raised to hold it in place, his cranium partially covered by the boat. Most people are wearing shorts and t-shirts, tossing out hearty greetings to one another: it appears to be a cheerful group, and she imagines she wouldn't fit in very well. Ari returns holding what looks like a raincoat, in luminous green, and a paddle.

'Splash cover to keep you dry. You should go and get changed, come let me show you where.'

Stepping out the changing room, Maria realises that night has fallen. The rain shower has stopped, and the moon sits low and plump above the horizon, a pale white disc between the clouds. It is a beautiful, crisp evening, and she feels pleasantly excited about her impending adventure. Ari is waiting for her at the water's edge. She walks down a rutted concrete ramp into the brown water, icy and cold despite its shallowness.

'You need booties – you want me to get you some?'

'No, don't worry – I'll warm up soon.'

'That you will.'

Ari is bent over, a hand either side of the bobbing canoe to keep it still.

'Just swing your legs over, lower yourself slowly.'

She does as he says, while trying to ignore the wobble her actions precipitate. Still in shorts and a t-shirt, barefooted, he is smooth and graceful, and despite his height the canoe hardly bucks. He pushes off with the paddle, heading into the black waters of the vlei. She

watches his shoulder muscles bunch and release as he dips and slides the paddle through the water with long strokes.

‘Feel free to join me at some point,’ he shouts over his shoulder.

She smacks the paddle into the water, causing the boat to tip immediately, alarmingly, to the right. Ari sets up a quick one-two motion with his paddle before they’re stable again. This happens a few times before she settles into the rhythm he’s created. It helps that he says ‘dip, pull’ every few minutes, or ‘one, two’ in an ironic drillmaster voice to keep them in tandem. She’s surprised at the ease of moving in unison. About ten minutes pass like this, with an easy comfortable silence between them, before she starts to feel pain in her injured shoulder.

‘Can I take a break?’

‘Sure.’ Ari continues, his paddle cutting the water cleanly as they glide along. They’re travelling the length of the vlei, the lit club house on their right, everywhere else in darkness.

‘How long have you been canoeing?’

‘Since I was a kid. My dad would take me on Sunday afternoons while my mother played bridge.’

‘And Kristof? Would he ever come with?’ *That was easy enough*, she thinks. *Ari is so chatty he won’t even notice.* ‘Did you even know him then?’

Ari barks a laugh to indicate the craziness of such an idea. ‘*Kris?* That guy, *never*. You know we’ve been friends for ages, since primary school, but we never did that kind of stuff together.’

‘Why? What did you do?’

‘We used to talk.’ He stops, letting his paddle rest like hers on his knees. The water laps against the side of the canoe as it bobs in the water. Now and then a bigger wave slaps the

side of the boat like a hand emerging from the watery depths. Ari wants to speak; Maria can tell by the way he sighs; how his hand runs up and down the length of the silver paddle.

‘Kris is a bit different, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. At our primary school, where for most of us the biggest concern was getting all the gravel out our knees after playground rugby Kris was in a class of his own. One time – what were we? ten, eleven, don’t remember – our maths teacher brought up the topic of infinity. Tell me about the grains of sand in the world, he said. Finite or infinite? *Infinite!* we all shouted, except Kris. *Finite*, he said, in his small piping voice.’ Ari mimics the sound of the young Kristof, comical and squeaky. ‘I remember the kids all groaning at him, and the teacher, a rugged hulk of a man, cackling away. *Come-on-boy, how many grains of sand are there in the world? You think you can count them all?* This only brought forth more volleys of laughter and groans from the class. No, sir, said Kris, I can’t count them, nor can I count the brain cells in your head, but both, let me assure you, are *finite.*’

Maria smiles. She likes this portrayal of the brave young Kristof standing his ground.

‘What happened to him?’

‘God, I don’t remember. Beatings I’m sure, always beatings, it was that kind of place. Less civilised than our high school, at least on the surface.’

Without thinking, she asks, ‘Was Kristof ever violent at school?’

‘No way. He never needed fists, he could destroy you with his mouth.’

‘I guess you must be one of his oldest friends?’ *A reliable informant.*

‘I’ve known him since we were kids, but we lost contact after matric. I went to the Northern Cape – fell in love, she fell out of love, that kind of thing. And you know how guys are, hardly the best communicators – but we’ve picked up again where we left off. Kris was

doing weekend work in a bookshop when I went up North, and then he was planning to study philosophy. He'd got a job with the Vanes – lucky bugger.'

'Who're they?'

'The Vanes?' Ari sighs. 'They were something else. They owned a bookshop. And were everything we hadn't experienced growing up: clever, sophisticated, undeniably sexy. God, *she* was sexy. I remember the first time I saw her, blonde hair curtaining her face, and those lips, a bright gash of red, like a wound. I know that sounds awful but it wasn't. Somehow it was very alluring, like she was wide open. Anyway, they took to Kris. I was considerably less interesting to them. I only met them a few times, and she hardly spoke to me.'

Ari starts paddling again, slowly, nothing like the speed they had before. Soon they're in water clogged with seaweed, and the paddle keeps catching.

'Stupid to land in this part of the bloody vlei. My mind is elsewhere. Let's go that way' – he points ahead, slightly to the right – 'there's less of this gunk.'

'Sure.'

Ari strains forward in his seat as he rows, Maria trying to match his pace. With such proximity between them she can smell the fresh sweat coming from his body, strong, not unpleasant. She hears the rhythmic *splish splish* of a paddle slicing water behind them, and a moment later, a man in a red Santa Claus hat appears and overtakes them.

'Is that the best you can do, Bear Man?' he shouts in their direction.

'*Bear Man?*'

'Bernstein – Berenstein Bears. Stupid, but it's caught on here.'

'Race you back, Bear Man – bar's open.'

'Fuck you, Clive, how can I beat you with a total novice?'

'The one in the back? She looks strong.'

Ari half turns. 'You want to sprint across the vlei? Against this *asshole*,' he says this louder, in the man's direction, then to her. 'He did well at the Berg, but we can take him down.'

'Alright, but I'm not going to be much of an asset.'

'Don't know about that, Maria.' He half turns and she sees the flash of his teeth in the moonlight. Then, as though strands of their previous conversation remain in his head, he adds: 'Maybe those Vanes weren't so great. You know, I think Kris had a kind of breakdown soon after I left for the Northern Cape. My mother sent me a letter. No one knew what happened, though he stopped working for them afterwards. I guess working at a bookshop is tougher than people think! Sometimes you think you're missing out on a great thing when actually you're not. You know what I'm saying?' Ari's leaning forward now, positioning the canoe near Clive's. He's clearly not expecting any answer to his question.

Maria dips the paddle. Perhaps too fast—she is shaken by the report of the breakdown – or maybe it hits a rock, some obstacle beneath the surface which she hasn't seen, but the canoe sways. Though Ari tries to steady it, a rapid double execution of the paddle, there's no time. The shock of falling is worse than she expected. The water is freezing; she sinks downwards into the iciness, her eyes shut.

Ari reaches a big strong hand into the water and fishes her out. He helps her back into the canoe. She is distressed, in shock, rather than hurt. 'That's what we call a baptism,' he says, patting her shoulder. 'Now you're a reborn canoeist.'

Afterwards, as they paddle back to land, she replays the fall in her mind, feeling the water closing over her head. She imagines herself continuing to sink, with hardly a ripple left on the surface.

Over the next two weeks, during which Kristof takes things slowly – just as well, she is dealing with many clients in crisis – Maria thinks intermittently of Ari Bernstein’s revelation about his friend’s breakdown. The more she dwells on it, the less worried she becomes that he might still be unstable. Late adolescence, straddling childhood and adulthood, is a fraught time – and some upheaval, even a temporary collapse, is not uncommon. Perhaps, also, Kristof’s slow pace in moving the relationship forward adds to her feeling of comfort with him. They do see each other often, but usually briefly – and mostly they chat on the phone. She has not yet invited him to stay the night, and in fact they have done no more than kiss on arrival and departure. This is a man who seems to know his mind, and to be in no hurry.

Then, one Saturday, Kristof calls. ‘Let’s have a picnic at Kirstenbosch today.’

‘I’d love to! I really ought to work though.’

‘Probably. And I should be doing research.’

‘Anyway, what can we do at Kirstenbosch on a day like this?’ The morning is cool, and the grey clouds outside the window are covering the mountain in a blanket.

‘I’m sure we’ll think of something.’

Her tread is light as she enters the garden; the washed-out pale ground and the dark grey sky seem to have altered the gravitational force, so that the sky is heavy and the ground weighs nothing. She is almost gliding. There are two German tourists in the cafe, looking miserable – this cold day and cultivated garden are not the true South Africa they were promised – and no Kristof. It is not like him to be late, she thinks; he is always on time. Then she sees him standing among the carved statues of a curio shop. There is a series of tall, thin men, painted in colonial style, not made in South Africa but somewhere up north, and in the gap between two statues stands Kristof. He is as straight as they, with his arms rigidly at his sides; he wears his usual outfit of a pressed white shirt and trousers, and he has contrived to

look like the sculptures, with a peculiar blank expression on his face. Then his eyes relax into a smile as he catches her eye; she sees the laugh lines in his face. This joke is part of his sophistication too, this ability to meld into his surroundings so that he becomes one with them. She is moving downhill now, towards the curio shop, and as the shadows of the clouds pass quickly over the red brick path, she feels almost that she might fly. At the bottom, where he is standing, smiling, she impulsively gives him a tight hug.

He takes her hand. They walk off together, not down to where the families sit, but higher to where the green lawns of the botanical gardens shade into the mountain itself. Kristof has over his shoulder a backpack.

They reach a lawn that she cannot remember seeing before, at some distance from the paths. Kristof and Maria look up at the sky at the same time. Their hands unlink as the first drops of rain touch them; he points to a nearby grove, a tightly-packed group of trees covered in strong heavy leaves, and they walk towards it. They pass through a gap between the branches to enter a dark, hollowed-out clearing. The foliage is so thick that they do not feel the soft drizzle, but only hear it above their heads. In a storm this place too would be soaked, but for now they are dry. It is cool and dark under the white noise of the rain.

Kristof opens his pack: at the top is a tartan mohair blanket, thick, folded several times. He lays it out on the ground, and it covers almost the whole surface area of this intimate space, its edges curling up the sides of the bush, a few leaves pushing over the top of it. Then he takes out a tubby bottle of dessert wine and two slim wine glasses. Maria holds up a hand, shakes her head.

‘Come on – just a taste. It’s delicious, from a vineyard in Constantia. More like grape juice, really.’ He pours a small quantity, and she takes the glass, sipping slowly.

‘It *is* delicious.’

Lastly, he roots around in his backpack to haul out an old-fashioned round tin depicting Edinburgh Castle. He levers it open. The tin is crammed with pale slabs of shortbread. Their sweet, buttery scent fills the small space.

‘Perfect. I love shortbread.’

‘There’s more where that came from, if you like.’ His back is turned away as he says this, but Maria notes the slight lowering of his tone.

‘I would like more,’ she says.

He turns.

‘Why are you sitting so far away?’ says Maria.

He bends forward, and then he is kissing her face, her neck, engulfing her.

After a time, he draws back, and softly says: ‘Lie down.’ It is almost a command. The hard ground beneath her back is cushioned by the layers of blanket. Then he has raised her dress, and is at the triangle between her legs, kissing as if he were born to do nothing else. She lets her head fall back, closes her eyes; she cannot continue as she is, she is about to break. Kristof is merciless as she writhes; she moves left, right, he will not stop, she senses the onrushing force. ‘Yes, there!’ she cries, and in her climax she continues to feel his kisses as the rain patters heedlessly in the leaves above them.

Twenty two

Out of the blue, Kristof receives a Monday morning phone call at the office from Lionel.

‘You don’t know me, Dr Zoetman, at least not personally.’

‘I’ve seen you in the papers, though.’

‘Good to hear. If you’re able to make some time, I’d like to speak to you. It’s about Maria Petros.’

‘Oh yes?’ Kristof says politely, tapping his pen on the desk. After their trip to Kirstenbosch, he and Maria spent much of the weekend making love. As he anticipated, she is less composed in the bedroom. To break through that calm exterior is intensely satisfying.

‘I’m an old friend of hers, perhaps you know. I’m told that you’ve recently gotten involved with her. There’s something about Maria that I should discuss with you.’

‘What is that?’

‘It’s difficult to discuss over the phone. Perhaps we can meet – are you free today?’

‘I’m busy this morning and afternoon,’ says Kristof. ‘But maybe you’d like to join me on a walk. At midday I usually go into the forest above the university. We can speak as we stroll.’

Lionel arrives in his Pajero a few minutes after noon, meeting Kristof at an agreed spot just outside the Humanities Building. ‘So,’ says Kristof as they leave the campus and begin walking up a steep hill, past a labouring Beetle packed with students, ‘what can I do for you?’

‘I thought it was only fair – to you, I mean – that I tell you something important about Maria. It’s not apparent when you first meet her.’

They pass the university kindergarten. A clump of children are standing next to the wire fence, their fingers sticking through the gaps. Lionel is beginning to pant. He is wearing a

suit and tie, which makes him an exception at the university. A few of the students glance at him as they pass by; his face is well known.

‘If you don’t know about Maria’s addiction,’ says Lionel, ‘you might find yourself, as I did, in over your head.’

‘Her addiction?’

Lionel sighs.

Now they are at the highest parking lot of the university. From here one can walk along a dirt path into the forest. In fact, Kristof has not been truthful to Lionel: he doesn’t walk here at lunch. It is not a safe place, except on weekends when there are plenty of hikers. But the route will keep Lionel off balance, unsettled; a forest is not this man’s habitat.

Lionel rolls up his sleeves, loosens his tie. ‘I’m sure you’ve usually seen her at her best. Generous, kind, thoughtful – that’s Maria as she truly is.’

Kristof nods.

‘But have you ever noticed that she’s sometimes a bit different? Not serene, but subdued? Not calm, but confused?’

Kristof is silent.

‘I’ll give it to you straight, because she won’t tell you – she’s completely in denial. You might have read in the papers about the battle I had with coke some time back. I got through it with the help of the AA. That’s where I met Maria. She was a fellow addict – an alcoholic.’

‘What?’

‘I know, it sounds crazy. I can’t say I’m surprised she hasn’t told you – addicts are brilliant at keeping their substance abuse under wraps, at least for a while. Now and then you’ll see her drinking, nothing much. But I guarantee you, when you’re not around, she will

drink more than you can imagine. And it *will* start to affect your life. Even her pregnancy hasn't slowed her down – what kind of woman drinks while carrying new life?'

Kristof is listening carefully.

'Wait until you've had a phone call from her, all slurred, and you find that she can't even get to the door when you arrive. You have to climb in through a window, and put her to bed. It's like being involved with a child or an old woman. When she finally wakes up, she can't wait until you've gone so that she can start up again.'

'I knew Maria *worked* with addicts, but this –'

'You'd think she'd never allow herself to get like this, right? *Physician, heal thyself*, as they say. But she's far gone. She's given up the AA. I've tried so long to get her to accept treatment, but she's in total denial. My advice to you: ask yourself whether you want to be hitched to a seriously ill woman who *will not* accept help.'

Even otherwise highly intelligent people, in the aftermath of a failed relationship, will do desperate and stupid things. What is the idea behind this ridiculous story? He is aware that Maria enjoys a drink, but there are no signs that she is out of control, and Lionel's tone – earnest, almost pleading – is that of a liar. Certainly, this mad tale indicates how desperate Lionel is not to lose Maria. Presumably he hopes to scare Kristof off or at least sow doubt in his mind. Perhaps Lionel even hopes that Kristof will report this discussion to Maria: it will irritate her, get under her skin, remind her that Lionel is still there.

'This is very upsetting to hear,' says Kristof. 'I can't imagine how hard it must be for her. Not easy for you either.'

Passing through a damp and mossy path, shielded from the sun by high trees, they come to a clearing. In front of them lie the stone foundations of a building. Only a short section of

thick wall remains, weeds growing from cracks in the ancient cement. The rest of the structure is gone.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Kristof asks.

‘No.’

‘Take a look.’

Lionel goes inside the ruin. A few stones remain where once there was paving. There is a sense of unease, of being an intruder here.

‘This is the house of the Master Woodcutter,’ says Kristof. ‘There’s another building nearby, a guardhouse for a few soldiers of the Dutch East India Company. Brave men, or desperate; the forest wasn’t the benign and leafy thing it is now. Wild beasts, renegades, escaped slaves.’

‘I would have been one of those, I guess,’ says Lionel, his politician’s instincts sharp.

‘So much the worse for you, then. The old Cape was nothing to be nostalgic about. For example, do you know what the East India Company used to do with homosexual lovers?’

‘What?’

‘Chained them together and threw them into Table Bay.’ It does people good to be reminded that Cape Town is not merely the gateway to Africa, the tavern of the seas, the nation’s centre of fun and the gay capital of the continent, but also a city built on a terrified and cruel little outpost, its foundations marinated in centuries of violent death.

Kristof senses, rather than sees, the approach of a group. He turns: three of them, two tall men – one skinny, one broad – flanking a squat fellow who looks as if he has been compacted with some heavy machinery to bring his brain closer to his viscera. The two tall men are dressed in T-shirts and long pants; the short man has a blue shirt and trousers, like the uniform of the Forest Service, but with no insignia. His eyes are thin slits; his cheeks are

smooth; his face has no expression, like something that still requires animation from its maker.

‘Hello, captain,’ he says to Kristof.

‘Hello,’ says Lionel, emerging from the ruin.

‘Beautiful day,’ remarks the short man.

‘Oh yes,’ Lionel says.

‘Look at the sky the Lord has painted for us,’ the man adds, pointing a finger upwards.

Lionel raises his eyes to the sky. ‘It’s beautiful, alright.’

‘That’s a nice suit.’

‘Thank you very much.’

‘Nice suit for a nice walk.’

Lionel doesn’t say anything.

On either side of the short man, his companions are standing silent, watching, not relaxing or looking about like people in the forest usually do.

‘Well,’ says Lionel, turning to Kristof with a brusque tone. ‘It’s time for us to go back, I suppose.’ And he turns back to the stubby man, and says, ‘Goodbye.’ The tone is nicely judged: not unfriendly but final.

No one follows Kristof and Lionel as they pass between the men and walk down together. Lionel is breathing rather heavily, though they are both walking downhill, and he is sweating. His attitude to this situation is clear: there is nothing to look at, nothing to worry about. Keep moving, that is the theme, move on, and the nothing-to-think-about will not happen. And then, as if in a dream, with a falling sound they hear footsteps striking, the sound of runners. Kristof stops, and watches Lionel plummeting down the hill. How Lionel feels can be imagined: there is an area in his back, an oval in the tender middle, that seems composed of

air, as if a bullet has already entered it and exited the other side. His arms are flailing, moving without control, as his heart beats fast, painfully, and cold sweat coats his face. Kristof turns around to face his pursuers. Running from them is futile.

For a moment the forest is quiet but for a bird cheeping moronically in a nearby tree. In seconds the tall skinny man comes around a bend, notes Kristof's presence and then runs past him to get to Lionel. He doesn't touch Lionel, but jogs alongside him, as if they are all in this together, until Lionel stops. The tall man is not tired at all; he waits, looking up the slope for his two comrades.

'Here,' says Lionel.

The man looks back blankly at him. 'Hey?' he asks.

'Take my wallet,' Lionel adds, but the direction of the man's look has wandered again, back up the hill.

'I'm giving it to you,' he continues, putting his hand in his pocket. The man doesn't even look back at him.

It is then that the two confederates arrive. They stop when they get to Kristof. The tall beefy one is limping; he has presumably sprained an ankle, but is making no fuss. The squat man is as impassive-looking as before. 'Yissus,' he calls down to Lionel. 'Why did you run away?'

The tall skinny man accompanies Lionel up the hill to stand beside Kristof.

Lionel is in a bad state. His tie, his white shirt are wrinkled. He looks like a boy who is losing a playground fight, and knows it. 'Wat wil julle?' he asks.

'Oh,' the squat man says, 'Now we not even talking English anymore.' He does not show even the hint of a smile. 'You were keen to get away now, né? Just in the middle of a talk.' He adds mildly, 'You weren't so nice to me.'

Lionel says: 'I'm well known in politics. If you let us go, I'll make it worth your while. And if you don't, I'm sorry to say there'll be trouble for you.'

'So you in politics,' says the squat man. 'You got a lot of friends? In the police?'

Lionel straightens up a bit, his sweaty shirt appearing to lengthen slightly, and says 'I do'.

'So if you talk to them about this, it's not so good for me.'

At this moment Lionel leaps like a palpitating heart from the circle of men and tries once more to run for cover. The hard yellow ground absorbs his thumping, labouring steps as he makes for the bush. The tall beefy man strides quickly over and takes hold of Lionel's left hand, twisting it behind his back. Lionel, Kristof can see, just wants to flee, leaving his arm behind, but he is stuck.

The short man shakes his head, viewing Lionel. Then he turns to Kristof. 'Check this one's pockets,' he says to his tall skinny companion, who sticks a rude hand in each of his pockets and emerges with nothing.

'Empty,' says the squat one. 'Pockets just for show, like a girl.' He looks at his tall broad companion for appreciation. 'You like to look like a girl?'

Kristof stands silent, watching him, waiting to see which way this will turn, and to react. Epictetus the Stoic, when a tyrant threatened him, saying that he could cut off his head, replied: Well, did I ever say that I had a special sort of head that *couldn't* be cut off? Serenity, serenity.

'Green eyes, like a girl,' says the stubby one. 'But you don't talk. Like the best kind of girl.' His companions laugh, two tractor engines chugging away.

'I have nothing to say to you,' says Kristof. The squat one looks at him closely, seems to want to respond, but apparently decides that there are richer pickings than Kristof. He turns to Lionel, apparently his special project. Lionel's pockets are checked – as he stands there, he

resembles an old clapped-out horse being groomed by the stableman – and the tall strong man finds a wallet, a cell phone and keys. The squashed man throws the keys, with a great heave, into the bush in the direction in which Lionel tried to run. The wallet is inspected, a wad of money is removed, and then a picture is drawn out.

‘You a lucky guy,’ says the squat man, inspecting it. It is of Maria in the sunlight, leaning on a wall with her hand above her eyes to protect them from the glare. ‘Nice girlfriend, friends with the police, everything.’ And he gives a nod to the tall, broad man, who takes out – with his customary absence of affect – a knife. It looks rather small, like something one would use for a household chore.

Lionel looks at the broad man – he does not look at the knife at all – and says: ‘I have a child.’

‘What’s his name?’ asks the squat one.

‘I’m going to have a child, I mean,’ says Lionel.

At this point Kristof sees a group of walkers appear from over the rise. It is a set of seniors out for a mountain hike, sturdy men and women in shorts with stout sticks and weathered, cheerful faces. The squat man does not need to look at them; he hears the marching from behind him and quietly says ‘Come,’ to his companions, who disappear with him into the bush. Kristof sees them for a few seconds, shapes among the trees, and then gone.

‘Let’s go back,’ he says to Lionel. Their return to the campus is nearly wordless, and Lionel follows Kristof to his office to phone one of his aides and have him bring a spare set of car keys. Then he leaves to wait at the Pajero, averting his eyes from Kristof as he says goodbye.

Twenty three

‘Isn’t this gorgeous?’ says Catherine. She is holding up an old print, one of a batch just arrived in the shop after the death of some collector. Kris takes a look: a muscular man in a ragged loincloth, his leg chained to a ring in a stone wall, is holding a piece of bread. He squats in a dark corner of some ancient city – in the distance people are passing, in togas – and behind him is his shelter, a small alcove of stone. ‘*Cave canem*’ says an inscription on the wall: beware of the dog. The print is rendered with an obsessive level of detail: the muscles, the weathered wall. Catherine sighs. ‘That’s what you are to me. My pet. You’re still not trained properly, though.’ For a month now she has been teasing him each Saturday – making him get on his knees in front of her, sometimes kissing him – just one kiss — but there has been no return to the day in which he was invited to go between her legs and bathe himself in her fragrance. He produces a clear and stickyish liquid during her long sessions of torment; sometimes his trousers are wet, and Catherine chides him for it. Ejaculating in her presence is out of the question; once he murmurs his need for release, and she slaps him through the face. Not hard – Daniel is usually nearby, and often they must conduct this exquisite courtship in whispers – but enough to sting a little, and bring tears to his eyes.

‘You’d *better* not ask me that. I don’t want to hear about your disgusting desires again. If you want to rub yourself like an animal in your own room, you can do that. Here I expect better. Behave.’ Sometimes Kris spends the entire day with his erection, which seems to have a life of its own – throbbing, pulsing, aching. He touches it lightly, tenderly, in the bathroom during brief breaks, but knows he is not allowed to do more; he nurses it as if he has been wounded.

When he gets home, after his long train journey, he goes straight to his room, ignoring his parents (his mother: ‘How was your job today?’, his father: ‘Do they like you? Are you going

to get a raise?’), lies on his bed, spits on his hand, unzips himself and takes hold. He feels the presence of Catherine, her scorn, her scoldings, and in his agony a thick rope of semen comes shooting through him, all the way from the base of his scrotum. He is achingly full, then achingly empty.

Afterwards Kris lies on the bed, his chest sticky, immersed in self-disgust. He is an intellectual; he will not be used by a woman exploiting the accident of her good looks. He vows never to go back again: he is too good for this. As his body recovers, he imagines how he will declare his disgust for Catherine Vane. He will stand up to her, and she will succumb, *she* will go on her knees, pleading with him. Then he will demean her as she has done to him – or perhaps he will raise her up. Maybe Catherine has never known a love between equals. He imagines living with her, in a flat crammed with books, a clear view of the sea. In the evenings they could read silently, at times recounting passages out loud – a pithy observation, a comical view of the world – to each other, and when night fell, the bed would groan with the passion of their lovemaking.

One Saturday, long after the shop has closed, he is staying late on the pretext of a stock count. Daniel has gone out on some errand, and Catherine is tormenting him in the store room; the darkness through the windows is exciting, and they have at least half an hour to themselves. Then Daniel enters the room. He must have returned quietly, tiptoed through the shop towards the stockroom. There is not much to see: Catherine is sitting on a crate, one leg crossed over the other, her legs bare as a treat for Kris, those maddening red nails on display, and he is on his knees, facing her. Perhaps this could be interpreted in a number of ways – for instance, that she is taking a break while he unpacks a crate. But that is to underestimate Daniel’s acuity. He is nobody’s fool, and he stands at the door taking it in. ‘What are you

doing with my wife?’ asks Daniel, and to this chilling question there is no reply; Kris swallows, perhaps audibly.

Daniel comes up to Kris, crouches, grabs his neck with both hands and rises with him. The blood is constricting in Kris’s skull; he feels a pain that is almost pleasure, and he is light-headed.

‘It’s a blood choke,’ Daniel says. ‘You can still breathe, but there’s no blood going to your head. Not long and then you’ll be unconscious.’ A few seconds later he lets go, and Kris staggers slightly, hearing a pulse in his head.

‘You haven’t been staying late to help clean the shop. You’ve been busy with something else.’ Kris is sitting now on the crate, his head low to regain full consciousness, and Daniel kicks the crate, lightly, so that Kris must hold it on the edges in order to keep his balance.

‘Am I right?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Am I right?’

‘There’s nothing happening.’

Daniel’s blow lands on the side of Kris’s face and impels him off the crate and onto the floor. He says to Catherine, ‘Get the tape.’

Kris’s cheek is on the cold floor. Daniel’s boot, in the middle of his back, keeps him down. ‘Enough,’ says Kris, but Daniel is speaking to Catherine. ‘Put the tape around his wrists.’

She winds the tape around Kris’s wrists – it is broad, the brown masking tape for sealing cardboard boxes. ‘Keep going,’ says Daniel. Then: ‘Stop. I’ll pick him up.’

‘There’s no need,’ says Kris. ‘I’ll walk. I’ll go now. I won’t come back.’

But Daniel puts his hands under him, and raises him so that Kris's waist is resting on his left shoulder, his head dangling, touching the back of Daniel's belt. Kris's view, as they exit the storeroom, is of the bookshop floor – and then of a lurching flight of steps as they go upwards. 'You come too,' says Daniel, turning his head; Kris hears Catherine's footsteps.

At the top of the stairs Daniel turns left, a direction in which Kris has never been, towards the bedroom. The door is ajar, and Daniel turns slightly to open it with his right hand, goes in, and dumps Kris on a chair. The chair faces the bed, which is covered by a white duvet. On the side table of the bed is a red lamp, its bulb glowing through a beaded shade, the base depicting an archer on a chariot. 'Take off your clothes and lie on your back,' says Daniel to Catherine, who silently complies. Watching her small breasts and curved body, her bowed head, Kris feels tears coming to his eyes.

'Do you like that?' says Daniel to Kris. 'Answer me.'

'He's never seen me like this,' says Catherine. Daniel ignores her. He walks up to Kris and hits him across the face, a blow that takes him out of the chair to the ground. Kris tries to rise, but his bound hands make it too difficult. Daniel kicks his ribs, and he rolls a little across the floor. The bigger man moves with Kris, kicking – his ribs, thighs, stomach. When it stops Kris lies on the carpet, pain blooming over his body. 'Up you go again,' says Daniel, returning him to his place on the chair. By now he is a topography of pain, here more, there less.

Daniel, next to him, begins removing his clothes. He faces Kris so that he can be fully seen; he has slabs of muscle for pectorals, presumably the result of his sprints up and down the hill with a backpack. When Daniel is naked, he turns and walks towards Catherine, who has not moved. The muscles bulge on his back as he stands in front of her on the bed. She raises her legs and spreads them a little. Wordlessly he gets on top of her, and Kris watches

her pale tender feet rise up, awry, above the darker skin of his legs and buttocks. Then he makes a quick, hard movement and Catherine cries out. He is motionless for a while, then withdraws and once more rams himself into her. Kris tries to stand up as Daniel continues his slow, brutal assault. He is sore all over, but manages to rise. Daniel turns his head, sees him, gets off Catherine and goes up to Kris. 'Are you trying to help her?' he asks. 'Gallant.' He pushes Kris onto the bed, where he lies on his stomach. 'Get up and hold his shoulders,' says Daniel to his wife. She sits up. 'That's it, take his shoulders tightly in your hands,' says Daniel, and her scented hands grip each of his shoulders. Kris, on the bed, on his stomach, feels his pants being jerked down, and he wriggles, but he is weakened by the beating. He can smell her perfume, and her womanly odour, mixed with – with Daniel himself. He cannot tell which scent is whose. His underpants are taken off, and his shirt. Then Daniel tells Catherine to get dressed, and puts on his own clothes. He takes Kris off the bed, puts a blanket around his shoulders and says 'Walk.' They go down the stairs, leave the front door, and in the cool night air all three of them cross the road to the fisherman's pier. Daniel is holding Kris as if he is supporting him, and just behind them is Catherine.

There are a few figures in the distance, a couple going off to a restaurant, a few kids trudging alone the pavement, but no one pays attention to the three walkers. None of them are speaking, and perhaps it looks, if anything, as if Daniel is helping a hobo along. They arrive at the stone pier and walk all the way to the end. Kris thinks of manoeuvres – he could whirl around, kick, run – but Daniel's hand presses him onwards, and all he can do is move at a constant rate. He tries by telepathy to will Catherine to run – she will flee, Daniel will let go of Kris and turn away, Kris will commit some act of violence to save himself and Catherine. But she keeps walking too, just behind them.

They reach the very end of the pier. A cold wind is blowing from the sea towards them. In silence Daniel removes the blanket, and Kris is standing naked on the edge. He turns away from the glittering black water and faces Daniel. Now the Vanes are next to each other.

‘Catherine,’ says Kris.

‘Yes?’ she is surprisingly calm.

He reaches out a hand towards her, and she smiles. ‘You should see your expression – it’s priceless,’ she says. With a resolute step forward, she raises her arm and pushes her hand into his chest. He feels her sharp nails digging into him, and her shove sends him off the edge into the black water below.

For a few seconds he is submerged, surrounded by icy bubbles. As he rises in a swirl he kicks for the rubber tyres lashed to the sides of the pier. His hands are bound behind him, but while he kicks he frantically pulls them apart, creating a tiny space between them. The pain is terrible. Pull, twist, his shoulders burn and his skin is *tearing* – and then he has parted his hands and, unable to look at what gore has bloomed on his fiery wrists, he is swimming for the tyres, their upper halves protruding above the surface of the water. He clammers onto one of them, stands up, his legs shaking uncontrollably, and uses the final strength in his arms to pull himself up on to the pier, legs kicking against the stone wall. Far ahead are the Vanes, their backs to him. They are walking home, holding hands, an easy intimacy between them. Catherine is singing as she walks, a sweet clear voice. She never turns.

Twenty four

When Tversky comes to visit Maria she is asleep, sitting up, her feet resting on a small wooden footstall. She is almost fully dressed; only her boots are off. On her lap are her session notes; the pen has fallen between the sofa cushions. When the doorbell rings she startles awake, opening her eyes to look around, as though the person wanting entry is with her already.

She goes to the door, first peering through the window to check it isn't Lionel, before unchaining the bolt. Tversky raises a hand in greeting, and from the darkness of the day, she guesses the time to be about seven. Under one arm is a very large rectangular cardboard box.

Inside, he places the box carefully on the floor while greeting Maria. As usual, he's wearing white tracksuit pants – how many pairs does he own? – and over his white cotton shirt, a black leather biker's jacket. The collar stands up, but despite his years, the look suits him – an ageing pirate.

'Something for the baby,' he says, glancing at the box.

'For the baby?' She is confused: did they have an arrangement? Certainly she does not remember anything, nor have they spoken since about a week back, when he called once more to see how she was doing.

'Where are you going to put it?' he asks.

'What?'

'The *baby*.' His tone is exasperated. 'What room, or is the baby going to sleep with you? Where are you now, in Claudia's room?'

She reaches her hand forward and touches the sleeve of his leather jacket, her fingers resting there a moment. 'You need to slow down. Why are you here? What have you brought

and why?’ Her tone, slightly frantic, and the way she’s asking too many questions, only adds to the confusion of the situation, she realises. She tries to speak slowly: ‘Let’s start with why you’re here.’

‘I’m here to help.’ *Are you simple?* says his expression. ‘You’re about to have a baby, Maria.’

‘Yes, I know that, but,’ – how can she put the point sensitively, that, really, he has nothing to do with her unborn child? – ‘you needn’t worry about it.’

‘I’m not worried, but I must help you get things ready for this child. A crib’ – he kicks lightly at the cardboard box – ‘is the first thing we’ll need.’

She is intrigued, touched even by the ‘we’. *It’s true*, she thinks, *nothing is ready for this child, and there is nobody to help me.*

‘Claudia told me your situation, and she’s not here, in person, to be with you.’ *When*, she thinks, *did my mother speak to you? You talk about her as if it were this morning.*

‘So she sent you as her stand-in?’ She hears the sarcasm in her voice and knows that what she has said is wounding, belittling for him; immediately she wants to take the words back. Keen to make amends, she tells him that they can assemble the crib in Claudia’s room, where she sleeps. Makes sense, he tells her – a young thing should be with the mother in the weeks following its ejection into the world.

Maria notices he is hesitant when crossing the threshold of her mother’s old room but, perhaps because there is not much of Claudia’s stuff still there, his tentativeness abates once he is inside. He moves quickly to the window to open it. ‘I need fresh air when I work,’ he says, ‘and some water, if that’s possible.’

‘Of course.’ When she returns Tversky sits on the floor, the instruction pamphlet to his right. The various parts of the crib are neatly stacked on either side of him, more or less in

order of size, like mini towers. For the next hour – she pops in every few minutes but he seems neither to notice her presence nor her absence; certainly he makes no effort to engage with her when she stands in the doorway – he works methodically through the tasks required to assemble the crib. He is good with his hands: neat, calm, systematic. When he finally calls her, Maria arrives from her study, where she’s been reading articles to prepare for the upcoming conference in New York.

The crib is beautiful: powder blue with tiny yellow geckos etched and painted into the wood – he must have had it custom made. *The geckos are a way, she thinks, for Tversky to keep Claudia close to the baby.* He has placed the infant’s bed in the corner. ‘The most protected space in the room,’ he tells her, ‘furthest from the doorway.’

‘It’s a lovely crib, I don’t know how to thank you.’ She means what she says; behind her eyes she feels a prickling, so taken aback is she by the gift, or perhaps the reminder of Claudia. Tversky appears to expect nothing in return; this she finds most surprising, being accustomed to the transactional quality of almost all relationships. She offers him a drink, but he turns her down, glancing at his watch. ‘There’s a meeting tonight. The Circle.’

As she opens the door for his departure, she asks impulsively, ‘How is it going with your Buddha statuettes?’

He nods: ‘Good – more of a demand than I thought. There’s a Korean karaoke bar in town,’ – a pause – ‘maybe more a brothel, and they ordered a good shipment.’

‘Why?’

He shrugs, perplexed – but Maria intuits that he is someone who apportions his mental resources efficiently, and that for him this question is not worth thinking about. ‘I nearly forgot.’ Tversky pats his pockets.. ‘Where are your dogs?’ Maria whistles, and Chicken and

Egg enter from the kitchen. Each dog receives a large biscuit shaped like a bone. ‘Sometimes one is rewarded for doing very little,’ he says, as he’s leaving.

Certainly the crib has made the baby’s presence more tangible, forcing her finally to book an appointment with her obstetrician. She has been delaying this, and should have done it after that encounter, two weeks back, with Lionel. Could her fall from the blow to her shoulder have damaged the baby? Maria is almost too scared to investigate.

A few days later, on the afternoon of her departure to New York, Tversky returns. This time the gift is different: a small crate of soft toys, and a stack of yellow and green playsuits for newborns. He gently puts the box in the entrance hall.

‘I don’t know where you want it,’ he says.

‘I’ll pack it away’ – Maria doesn’t bother acting surprised – ‘thank you.’

‘There’s a lot more to get: sterilisers, bottles, changing mats.’ She wants to ask him how he knows this much about setting up a nursery, but assumes he won’t share the information with her. She guesses, and it’s only a hunch, that he did this for Claudia when her mother was pregnant. Why had her mother given so little in return – warranting her depiction as an ice maiden – to this solicitous and kind man?

‘I need to go soon,’ she says – she has an hour before the airport shuttle comes – ‘but what about a quick cup of coffee?’

He sits cross-legged on the floor opposite her. ‘Where are you going?’

‘New York.’

His brow furrows.

‘I’m going to a conference on neurology and attachment theory.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The links between the unconscious mind and biology, how your early experiences of attachment shape your brain.’

‘Have you got somewhere to stay in New York?’

‘I’ve booked a budget hotel in Midtown.’

‘Have you paid?’

‘Only the deposit.’

‘Then cancel it, don’t stay there – it’ll be soulless. There’s no one in my flat, it’s small, one bedroom, in a stylish area. Relatively quiet by New York standards.’

‘You keep offering me things.’

‘Nonsense. It’ll help me if you stay there – give the place a bit of an airing. It’s a fashionable part of the city, much better than touristy Midtown.’

‘A friend of mine is joining me. He’s got some leave coming up, and plans to come a day after I arrive. Would that be a problem?’

There is a pause. ‘Of course not. Who is he?’

‘A philosopher at the university. Kristof Zoetman.’

Tversky looks down, raises his mug for a final gulp of coffee. ‘Okay.’ He gets to his feet, ready to leave. ‘Have you been to New York before?’ he asks as she opens the front door for him.

‘Never.’

‘It will change your life,’ he says, walking down the garden path towards the gate.

Twenty five

Three Hasidic Jews are praying to the rising sun. In their black fedora hats and long coats they sway, lost to the world and out of place. For an instant when she jolts awake, the aircraft coming to life with electric light, the raising of shutters, Maria believes them part of the nightmare from which she has just awoken. She glances at her watch, midday in South Africa, though she has no idea of the hour at her current location somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean. They have landed and taken off from Dakar; Africa is behind them – how far, she couldn't say.

Out the portholes to the right the sun is an orange ball on the horizon. Perhaps she is lightly feverish – her lower back and chest are moist with sweat, her head is pounding –and this could be the reason for her frightening dream: Claudia in free fall from a stone tower. Maria forces herself up to squeeze past a mother holding a sleeping child against her chest, and makes her way to the bathroom.

The Hasids are praying in a space at the front of the aisle, behind the toilet. One of the men strokes his long white beard as he communes with his maker, caught in his own internal rhythm. Maria's impulse is towards anger. Why are they here? They belong to a different era, one of archaic rituals, not flying machines in the sky. And because of the height of their hats, their constant rocking and mumbling, they are taking up too much space in the frustrating confines of the airplane, forcing her to perch on the armrest of a passenger while she waits for one of the cubicles to become free.

Eventually a young woman smelling of roses, coral pink lipstick freshly applied, emerges. After splashing her face with cold water and emptying her bladder, Maria's anger begins to abate. Back in her seat, she is more rational. Recalling her dream she realises that her anger

towards Claudia is subsiding – how difficult it is to be angry when she has a chance now at happiness. So her mother had secrets – who wouldn't keep rape from a child? And the goodbye she has been seeking since her mother's death, perhaps it has been there all along: the last tarot card reading, her mother's unusual solicitousness, might have been Claudia's attempt to say farewell. The nightmare she has just had, she understands, is an attempt by her unconscious to accept her mother's failures, her great fall, for of course her mother was never whole. Her involvement with the Circle of Mystics was more than enough proof of that. Though – she accepts this thought reluctantly – the Circle, in the absence of psychiatric medication, was probably what sustained Claudia.

Maria's one hand touches her belly, reassuringly round, while she thinks about New York; Kristof will be joining her tomorrow. They have spoken little about the pregnancy – it is too early for that kind of discussion – but he has been solicitous, showing a tender regard for the new life to come.

Behind her in the galley there is the rattle of breakfast trays. The three Hasids troop silently, in single file, back to their seats at the front of the plane, apparently oblivious of the many eyes following their backs. The steady rhythmic bumping of the airplane threading its way through the currents above the ocean is peaceful, and though she fights against the tug of her unconscious, preferring to remain awake, she feels herself dropping back into a dream.

This time Claudia is face downwards at the base of the tower, her fall complete. She is struggling to get up, raising herself slowly onto her elbows, clearly in great pain. Maria tries to run forward to help her mother, but her legs are frozen. She must stay where she is and observe. Slowly her mother manages to get to her feet before raising an arm, palm outstretched towards her daughter. Her mouth opens wide, oval shaped, straining to speak.

Someone is shaking her shoulder. Her mother? Has the hand made its way out the dream to touch her? In front of her is the air hostess, a tray balanced on the palm of each hand. Which would she like? She points to the tray nearest her, unaware of the contents of either. Her hands are shaking so badly that it is difficult to open the silver foil of the hot meal.

By the time the plane has landed, and she's standing waiting for her baggage to emerge on the carousel, she feels steadier. The long queue in the arrivals hall has settled her nerves. Things proceed smoothly and efficiently: everything is clearly marked or, if not signposted, there is an attendant at hand to give an articulate and curt explanation of the correct protocol. She gets the impression of great busyness – nobody likes to look idle here. Once she has loaded her suitcase onto the trolley, she makes her way to a cab rank, from where, less than five minutes later, JFK recedes into the background.

It is cold inside the taxi. The sudden change of temperature – a hot day, at least thirty degrees, with a bright blue sky – makes Maria feel protected, cocooned from the outside world. She shrugs herself into a light cardigan and settles against the plastic leather of the seats. In front of her, against the back of the driver's seat, is a computer screen, displaying a map of their route, accompanied by a commentary of current specials in the surrounding retail outlets.

She is tapping the glass partition separating her from the driver to ask him to turn the volume down when her cellphone rings. Kristof.

'I'm behind you,' he says.

'What – ' She turns in her seat, glancing out the back window.

'A continent behind,' he clarifies, as though able to witness her actions. 'I'm at Joburg airport watching the planes take off.' He pauses, 'I miss you.'

‘I miss you too.’

‘Twenty six more hours.’

An appropriate response is expected, she knows, but she struggles with the idealisation, the inevitable disappointment, required of romantic talk. Her profession, after all, involves stripping away distortions to uncover a more realistic version of reality.

The taxi crawls along, the traffic heavy at this time of morning, probably always dense and fume-laden in this packed city. They’re about to enter a tunnel, and across the river, she sees Manhattan in the distance. The view of towering skyscrapers pressed against the skylight is overly familiar, clichéd, as if she’s the star of her own movie. This sense, coupled with her lack of sleep from the long journey, creates the impression that she has moved out of her body, and is looking down upon herself travelling into Manhattan. *Claudia would call it a mystical experience*, she thinks.

The taxi enters the tunnel separating Queens from Manhattan, the traffic still bumper to bumper, the fumes causing the cars to travel with their windows tightly shut, sealed from the external environment, like bubbles in a stream of water. The tunnel is long, and by the time they exit the other side into bright sunshine, she has almost fallen asleep again. In this drowsy state, moving from the semi-darkness of the tunnel into the clear light of a summer’s day in the city, she experiences a feeling of such pure joy, such euphoria, that she is shocked. Maria cannot remember when last she felt like this – that everything was good. I am falling in love, she realises.

As her neurotransmitters fire their chemical chains, depleting in the process, the euphoria begins to abate. She feels herself returning to a state of generalised well being, and is content to plan the next couple of days. Today is Thursday, Kristof will be joining her tomorrow and

the conference starts only on Monday. The entire weekend is theirs: to explore Manhattan, to explore each other.

The Chelsea area, she notices, puts itself on display: cafes spilling onto pavements, art in the windows, firm tanned flesh, male and female, on exhibit. She pays the cabdriver and enters the air-conditioned lobby of Tversky's apartment building: a contemporary and spare space, face brick walls, abstract paintings in primary colours, and a couple of straight backed red sofas looking out onto the road. Ahead she sees the lifts and an engraved metal sign indicating a gym to the right.

Tversky's flat is at the far end of an icy passage, the carpet thick to muffle sound. From behind one of the closed doors she hears the muted sound of a game show on television. The flat itself is small, and like the lobby, ultra modern, with a small bedroom almost filled by a double bed. Opening the window brings a volley of noise, banging and the high pitched drone of machinery, but with the window shut, the flat returns to silence. She unpacks quickly into the limited cupboard space and goes to have a shower. As she's getting dressed, she hears a light tapping on the door. Surprised, because she's not expecting anyone, nor does she even know anyone in Manhattan – could it a neighbour? – she wriggles quickly into her jeans and a pale yellow t-shirt, not bothering with her sandals.

She opens the door, but no one is there – could she have imagined the knocking? Her eyes feel dry, stripped of moisture, and there is a light stinging inside her head from exhaustion. Glancing down, she sees a package covered in shiny silver paper. Inside is a book, the title in square black letter: **Id-ling: Psychology anecdotes and jokes**. Her eye falls to the bottom of a random page.

Late one night, an old man is on his hands and knees under a lamppost, scrabbling for something on the pavement. A young fellow passes by and asks what he's searching for. His keys, says the old man. So the young fellow joins him. After a long search, he asks whether the old man recalls more precisely where he dropped the keys.

'Over there,' says the man, pointing into the darkness.

'But why aren't we looking *there*?' asks the passer-by.

The old man replies, 'The light is better here.'

She flips to the front of the book, where a message is written in pencil.

For Maria,

This is just the beginning!

Your Kristof

She is smiling, glancing to the left and right to see who has dropped off the package. The corridor is empty. More on impulse than careful thought she slips on her sandals before walking back the way she came towards the lobby.

And there he is, sitting on one of the red couches. How did he get here so quickly? Has he been here all this time? He stands and opens his arms to embrace her. She goes to him immediately – there is no time to ask questions – and he wraps his powerful arms around her, holding her close.

Twenty six

Some people become voluble as they enter a foreign city, trying to merge with their new surroundings, but Kristof passes lightly into New York. In the plane he has made no new friends, and at the airport he answers the officials briefly and efficiently, swiftly collects his single suitcase and takes a cab to the apartment building where Maria will be staying.

Once there, he opens his case and removes a package, pays the doorman to have it placed at the door of her apartment, and then waits in the lobby, watching the locals walk by. This section of New York seems filled with men and women just out of college, a great dormitory party in the city.

When Maria enters the building, she doesn't see him at all. She moves purposefully to the lift as he watches her from his couch. The doorman gives him a thumbs-up sign from behind his post, enjoying this romantic ambush. A few minutes after Maria has gone up to the apartment, a red light appears above the lift door again. There is a quiet *ting*, and the door opens. Kristof sits facing the open lift, his arm nonchalantly across the back of the couch, smiling as Maria rushes towards him.

'Are you glad to see me?' he asks after they hug, standing, an embrace that takes in the arc of her pregnancy. In his arms Maria cocks her head a little, as if seeking a better angle into his eyes. 'Overjoyed,' she says. Usually so self-contained, she is losing herself in pleasure.

'Come on,' he says, taking her hand.

'Where are you taking me?' She smiles at him, squeezes his hand.

'That's for me to know.' Out they go into the sunshine. In fact there is no destination in mind; what is important is that Maria learns to follow him.

Kristof does not take her hand, but touches her lightly on the arm to indicate left or right; he is following a subterranean pull he senses among the pedestrians. After a long period of walking, they pass into a square surrounded by tall buildings. It is a small park, covered in scrubby tough grass. Ten inflated blue pezzi balls are laid out evenly across the space, each with someone perched on it. Facing the line of people on their balls, a man in his fifties, lean, white-haired and gleaming with sweat, is clapping to music from a pair of black loudspeakers erected in the park. It seems to be an outdoor gym class. Five of the balls are occupied by a group of graduates, young women in long black gowns and mortarboards. ‘Yeah – yeah – yeah...’ calls out the instructor, keeping them all in time. One large, soft young woman loses her place on the ball and slips to the ground, her mortarboard rolling off. She giggles, covers her mouth, looks over at her friends in the audience. But the beat goes on, and she gets onto the ball again. She is mouthing the words to the workout music over the loudspeakers. The gym instructor is now swivelling his hips, and his class are right with him. They seem so willing, more self-assured than their South African counterparts, feeling the beat in themselves without shame. ‘You wanna be good, you wanna be strong,’ he urges them on. Every few minutes, someone gets off and another person emerges from the watching crowd. One participant seems permanently fixed in the line, her powerful fists rhythmically striking the air: it is a bespectacled middle-aged bodybuilder, her dark skin bisected by a pink tank top, silken muscled arms glistening, fixed smile on her face, riding her endorphins. Perhaps she has been planted among the participants, a fake amateur enthusiast.

Kristof starts clapping to the music, but Maria remains quiet, not moving her arms. He bounces on his feet, looks towards her and smiles. ‘Let’s go for it.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me! Come on.’ He has taken her hand, and is running with her onto the grass, where two freshly vacated balls are standing. The crowd cheers; they sense a reluctance overcome, and this gets them going, one of their cultural triggers. ‘Do it!’ they yell to Maria and Kristof as the two of them station themselves on their balls.

They begin their exercises, following the hyperactive instructor. Kristof watches Maria covertly as they stretch. She begins slowly, with the movements of an injured ballerina warming up, but within a minute the hectic beat of the music has captured her, she begins rising, falling – and her face grows a little pink. For five minutes Maria appears to be in a high, pure place; her limbs move smoothly, her body, freighted by the baby, seems nonetheless to offer an unusual pliancy. Perhaps the onlookers regard the two of them fondly, the expectant mother and proud father. This notion generates a surge of power in Kristof’s movements.

‘Get into your rocket!’ says the slender man. ‘Let’s go for stretch stretch stretch...’ Everyone is standing up now, trying to reach the stars – and then the music stops, and they stand frozen to receive the cheers and screams of the audience. The gym instructor goes down the row, hugging everyone. When he reaches Maria, he gives her stomach an enthusiastic pat and says, ‘That’s quite a dancer you have there!’

Half an hour later, Kristof and Maria are sitting on the subway train on their way to Little China. They have just stopped at a station, and Maria is drinking in the scene before her: a lovely creature of unclear gender, in a string vest and very tight black shorts, is sitting, legs crossed, and being spoken to by someone on the subway platform. ‘Hoo-wee!’ shouts the voice from outside the carriage. The beautiful person bristles, her long legs recrossing. ‘Gimme a slice of that, baby!’ the voice goes on.

The lovely creature rises; the fine and careful makeup on her face, the meticulously brushed long auburn hair. She is very tall, towering over a middle-aged Hispanic man who is standing next to her and gripping a metal support pole. She opens her carefully lipsticked mouth, puts her hands on her hips. 'Girlfriend,' she says through the window to whoever is outside. There is a pause. The subway riders are paying no attention to this drama, but Maria is staring, entranced. 'Girlfriend,' says the creature again, aware that she has an audience. 'You've got the *wrong* bitch!' She glares at the person outside, and then sits down, once more elegantly crossing her legs, shaking her head.

'I like her,' murmurs Maria.

To Kristof it is no surprise that Maria is enthralled. This piece of theatre must remind her of her upbringing, life with Claudia Petros being like a non-stop production of performance art. Maria has reacted by attempting to embrace the opposite manner: self-possession. But she is still attracted to the style of her mother.

Kristof does not lack insight. He understands why he was drawn to Claudia, and why he now finds himself attached to Maria, despite their differences. Claudia was a woman of intensity, of electrifying display, while her daughter tries to be contained, to keep control. In each of them there is something of Catherine Vane, that theatrical and self-assured woman who lurks at the root of Kristof's soul.

Now the subway is thundering along again, and for a moment Claudia's presence is palpable, watching with her almond eyes as Kristof travels through the darkness. The daughter, present in the flesh next to him; the mother's ghost travelling with him. He is engulfed in these physical and spiritual presences.

After a time Kristof can no longer sense Claudia's presence in the subway. He has only his memories. He recalls his final mountain walk with her, early one Sunday morning, on the day

of her death. They were strolling close together, almost brushing against each other, until they found themselves at last on the lip of the cliff that marked the highest point of their walk. Claudia walked suddenly to the very edge, and then turned back to him.

‘I have a gift for you,’ she said. ‘It’s the largest thing I can offer.’ She closed her eyes and slowly raised her arms until they were perpendicular to her body, like a woman on a cross. ‘I can no longer keep it from you. I’m handing it over, the power of life and death over me. It’s yours.’ At that moment she was awe-inspiring and beautiful. Kristof drew out his hand and touched her face. He stroked down her cheek, touched, for the first time, the curtain of long black hair on the side of her face.

‘Yes,’ she said, and his hand moved lower, curved down her neck. Her eyes were still closed. ‘That’s right, that’s true,’ she said, beginning to smile.

The subway carriage stops. Kristof and Maria get out and begin walking through a collection of roadside stalls where Chinese people are standing silently, selling products of the sea – large fish, their mouths agape – packed in ice. The pavements are covered with half-molten lumps of ice, some of them bloody. They pass along narrow streets, coming upon steps leading downwards into basements with signs, at their entrances, advertising foot massage. After a time they arrive at a large basketball court, whose dramatic quality – basketball players on one end, aged Chinese men and women on another, sitting at tables segregated by sex, playing mahjong – compels them to enter.

Kristof stands while Maria cradles a toy predatory creature she has brought in a shop on the way to the basketball court, a stuffed tiger with a mane, looking not quite right but nonetheless fearsome with its hazel eyes.

He takes a seat on the grass next to the basketball court. Boys, slender in their muscle vests, are competing to pump the ball into the net. There is a tussle; one of them takes the ball and begins bouncing it down the court in his direction.

The mind can be led, by the jolt of an unaccustomed appearance, to certain scenes from memory. And here it is, from four months ago, at the time when Saskia was thinking of ending it with Luke. Kristof was her confidante, and she would sometimes pop into his room at the end of the day, rest her running shoes on his desk, and tell him of her difficulties with Luke, his torment over the betrayal of his wife, her uncertainty about whether it should continue. Kristof would sit, open his cabinet, and pour each of them a glass of red wine.

‘He’s a wonderful man,’ said Saskia one evening in his office. She was sprawled backwards, in one of his chairs, her ankles resting on the desk in front of her.

‘He is.’

‘But this can’t go on, it really can’t. I didn’t come here to break up a marriage.’

‘Or to play the role of a concubine.’

‘Well, that part’s not so bad.’ Saskia sat back in the chair, downed half her glass in a gulp. This was a night when usually she would have gone straight home, but she had found Kristof’s light on, and gone to his office for commiseration.

‘I tell you what,’ says Kristof. ‘I’ll play you Beethoven’s *hammerklavier*. It’s a truly medicinal sonata.’

‘A medicinal sonata?’

‘Yes. Is there anything else wrong with you, apart from melancholy? Beethoven will cure it.’

‘You’re a romantic.’

‘I am absolutely practical. Hang on a bit, I’ll just find it.’

Kristof bent over his cabinet, rifled through his CD collection. Beethoven, symphonies, concerti – piano sonatas. He was about to straighten up when he heard Saskia saying, lightly, ‘I should have fallen in love with you.’ He stood and turned around. She added, ‘Your taste in music is better.’

At midday, Kristof and Maria return to the flat. She is tired, and goes up to the room for a nap. He feels no fatigue, and leaves the building again –and as he departs, he encounters Avram Tversky approaching the front door. In the New York summer light, Tversky’s white shirt and shorts are a beacon. He gives Kristof a broad smile. ‘Dr Zoetman? Excellent to meet you at last.’ He pumps Kristof’s hand vigorously. ‘Actually, I think we’ve met before, or at least seen each other, but I’m not sure I quite remember where.’

‘An introductory meeting of the Circle of Mystics.’

‘*That’s* it,’ says Tversky, nodding. ‘I know it’s a bit of a surprise, but I had to come to the city for business and I thought I’d come by. I was going to leave a note, but now I’ve run into you’ – *what fine luck*, says his expression – ‘so tell me, how’s the flat – comfortable?’

‘Oh yes. Thanks so much for the use of it. And what brings you to the city?’

‘Business. America is an important export market for me. In recent years more people here have been wanting statues of Asian Gods. Maybe they sense the need to placate them. I’ll be here just for today, and then I’ll travel to other American cities – a web of visits, ending in California! Tell me, is Maria nearby?’

‘Actually she’s inside, sleeping.’

‘Of course. Pregnancy will drain a woman. Excellent idea to rest as much as one can. I was wondering if you might pass on a request to her. It’s silly, because I saw her not long ago, but I find myself thinking very often of her welfare. She may have told you that I’ve

been almost a father towards her lately. I knew her mother for many years, as a fellow member of the Circle, and when a man is without children of his own, he appreciates someone in his life who can take that role. So I wondered whether Maria might care to meet me this evening, just for a short dinner before I leave for the rest of my trip.'

Tversky seems embarrassed. He is clearly a proud man, and asking Kristof for this favour – because really it is *Kristof* he is asking, the man whom Maria is with – can't be easy.

'I think she would be delighted. She always speaks fondly of you.'

'I'm not getting in the way of any plans?'

'We'll be going out tonight, but it can certainly wait until after your dinner.'

'You're very kind. I look forward to getting to know you better also. Would you perhaps like to come along tonight?'

'Thanks, but I'll just get in the way. I should stay in the apartment anyway; I have an article to write. When you're back in Cape Town, we'll certainly invite you for dinner. I look forward to hearing more about your business, and the Circle.'

Tversky waves a hand. 'My business is simple: buy low, sell high. The rest is detail. As for the Circle, I'll gladly discuss its outlook some time. Anyway, it would be an honour to be invited for dinner. Meanwhile, regarding tonight, could you ask Maria if she'd be able to meet me at a restaurant near here, two blocks up: Obsidian – black shining tiles outside. If there is a problem, she can call me. She's got my cell number.'

'Of course. As soon as she wakes up.'

'Many thanks.' Tversky nods his head a few times as though preparing his body for movement. 'Enjoy the rest of your trip.' He pats Kristof's shoulder. 'Until Cape Town, yes?' And he is off, stalking down the street in his sandals.

Twenty seven

When she wakes from her nap it is still bright outside, and from her bed she watches Kristof. He lies on the couch, listening to music through his earphones. Though his eyes are closed, he opens them almost immediately to meet hers. *He is quick at sensing changes*, she thinks.

‘Sleep well?’

‘Very – what time is it?’

‘Almost four, I didn’t want to wake you. You’ve been out for about three hours.’

‘You should have woken me.’

‘Maria,’ he smiles, as he gets up to go to her, ‘you need your sleep, you’re jet lagged. And pregnant. Can I get you some tea?’

‘I’d love some.’

He goes to the galley kitchen, returning a few minutes later to sit next to her on the bed.

‘Careful – use the handle. It’s boiling.’ He passes her the mug.

‘So – ’ She sits up in bed cautiously, aware that excess movement will cause the hot water to scald her. ‘Any plans for this evening? Remember, I’ve got to buy that Anna White book this afternoon to read before the conference starts. I couldn’t get it in Cape Town.’

‘I have many plans for tonight, all of which involve you. But after you get your book, you’ll have to sing for your supper. A visitor came around while you were sleeping. Avram Tversky.’

‘Tversky in New York?’ This is a pleasant surprise; she’s just seen him in Cape Town.

‘What’s he doing here – come to bring more stuff for the baby?’

Kristof laughs, and then explains.

‘What will you do while I’m gone?’ she asks.

‘I’m sure I’ll find some way to amuse myself. Afterwards, I’d like us to go to Central Park – a late night stroll, just the two of us.’

‘What time does the park close?’

He shrugs. ‘Does it close at all? And if it does, don’t worry about it. I’m good at getting into locked places. I’ll just lift you over a fence or something, I’m a strong guy.’ He flexes his arm muscles in parody of a body builder. ‘Here, feel.’

She reaches over for a cursory pat of the hard bicep: ‘Very nice.’

‘Come here,’ he takes her hand, reeling her in by the arm until her upper body is in his embrace. His touch, she has noticed, is always warm. ‘It’s a lovely evening for a walk in the park. There’ll be lights in the distance, but, if we can find a quiet spot, we’ll feel like we have the city to ourselves.’

‘Sounds good,’ she says. In his arms she feels safe.

Still embracing her, talking into her hair, he continues: ‘I can’t tell you how much I’ve been looking forward to these days together, showing you more of this place.’

‘Me too, but I must get going if I’m going to buy that book and get to the restaurant on time tonight.’ She swings her legs from the bed to the floor.

Outside, on her way to Strand bookshop, she passes an open air market from which people are emerging holding roasted mielies, slick with butter. The smell of the burnt corn awakes an intense hunger and she buys one for a dollar, eating it hot, burning the inside of her mouth in her greed. She finds the bookshop with ease; in this part of the city, designed as a grid, she feels none of the faint panic of wandering around in a foreign place. The shop hums in the early hours of the evening: people are keen to make a purchase before nightfall. Anna White’s latest, *The Neurobiology and Psychology of Trauma: Why we hate ourselves when*

bad things happen to us, is out only in hard cover, but she decides to splurge and buy it anyway. At the checkout counter, on impulse, she also purchases a postcard with a sketch of the Statue of Liberty, her great mouth open to reveal a sharky grin. Below the picture are the lines: 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I'm **hungry!**' A silly postcard, but she's already counted out the change before she has time to reconsider. Perhaps she will mail it to Ari Bernstein. He can put it up in his clubhouse: it's the sort of thing the canoeists would enjoy.

She is buying a slice of pizza in a small restaurant, its seats arranged at a counter facing the street – the roasted mielie was not enough to satisfy her appetite – when, looking out the window, she sees her mother crossing the street, coming towards her. Claudia's hair is black and sleek, reaching to her waist, as it did when Maria was a child. She is dressed in a lemon yellow dress and flat leather sandals, a Greek goddess in flow. Maria looks down at the counter and takes a deep breath, and of course, when she glances up again, the apparition is gone.

It's a common thing, she thinks, *to see the dead amongst the living – a kind of day dream really*. Yet this is the first time since her mother's death that it has happened. The dream of Claudia, like the one she had on the plane, returned again during her nap. Her dead mother is more a presence in her daughter's life than she ever was when she lived. Certainly Claudia appears eager to say something each time she appears, her mouth opening wide. Maria understands these dreams as an unconscious wish that Claudia had been more open with her. Surely this is an attempt, conjured up by Maria's unconscious, to have her mother confess the origin of her daughter's birth, a truth that she should have revealed rather than hidden.

Still, despite her understanding, seeing Claudia like a ghost in the daylight unsettles Maria. Grief rises in her, a powerful tide. The most she can do is to transform the great tow of

sadness into a discreet cry. She covers her face with her hands and leans with her elbows against the counter, largely obscured from the other customers. To calm down, she tells herself that in Manhattan, no one will notice such odd behaviour.

Maria is not correct. There's a light tap on her shoulder. Behind her stands a man in a white apron, clearly the chef. He beckons for her to follow him through a door into the kitchen. Because she feels vulnerable, she obeys with little thought. Inside the windowless kitchen it is stiflingly hot from the large pizza ovens, and suffused with the aroma of dough cooking. The man gestures for her to sit on a wooden stool, one of two at a small table. He has the dark, oily skin of a person who originates from a more consistently warm climate, somewhere in the Mediterranean, Turkey perhaps. The dome of his bald head gleams with light perspiration in the humidity of the kitchen.

He holds up his palm, the universal sign to wait, before leaving the kitchen. In a few moments he is back, carrying a box of tissues, which he places in front of her. He opens a cupboard and takes out a glass, fills it with water from the tap and brings it over. The initial shock of seeing her mother – rather, she corrects herself, *imagining* that she did – has passed, but has left in its wake a heavy sadness. Maria is uncomfortable with grand displays of her own emotion, and she tries, in this small kitchen, to turn her back on this kind man for some privacy. He has gone back to making pizza, rolling the dough with his sleeves turned up above his elbow. Around the time of Claudia's funeral she wept once or twice, but then her grief, at least its outward expression, dried up and she hasn't cried since. Now, oddly, she feels both closer and further away from her mother, sensing that the recent tears have created more distance between them. *Let's hope it makes the dreams go away*, she thinks.

After a while she gets up to leave. There is an awkward moment when she says goodbye, and the pizza chef reaches out to touch her belly; clearly he cannot speak English. His gesture

is telling her something: that whatever her grief, and he can have no idea of its origin, she will have to push it aside to care for the new life inside her. Outside, the air is blood warm, though the sky has whitened. It looks like it might rain, and she hurries to get back to the apartment.

Kristof is waiting for her when she returns. On the counter is a bottle of wine for her dinner with Tversky, a typically thoughtful gesture.

‘You were gone for ages.’

‘I browsed for a while – sorry.’ Maria doesn’t mention the interlude in the take-away café. Now is not the time to talk about Claudia. Tonight, after her dinner with Tversky, she will tell him her experiences as they walk in Central Park. She knows he will listen carefully.

‘At least you’re here now.’ He pauses: ‘I had this mad idea that you wouldn’t return. That you’d be swallowed up by the crowded New York streets.’

‘Why would you think that?’

‘I don’t know... anyway,’ he picks up the bottle of wine, ‘shouldn’t you go now? You can be assured that even if the meal is dull, we still have the park to enjoy afterwards.’

Twenty eight

Maria is a few minutes late when she walks past the affluent queue outside Obsidian to reach the door. She tries to ignore the hostility behind her as she says to the hostess, glamorous in a short black mini and high heels, 'Booking for Avram Tversky, please. Is he inside, or should I wait?'

'Mm-hm,' says the hostess on a rising intonation, ticking off something on her clipboard before leading Maria towards a far corner of the dark interior. Obsidian, with its high ceilings and hanging chandeliers, is filled with the clamour of conversation. In the centre, on view to diners, is the kitchen. Maria threads her way through the packed tables, moving past the kitchen din of coffee machines and blenders towards the periphery. In a corner of the room, an oasis from the noise, Tversky scrapes back his chair to stand and greet her. Already there is an open bottle of wine on the table.

'I've started without you,' he says as she puts down her own bottle. 'Apologies. It's been a tiring day. And,' he considers, 'there's still a special excitement at being in a foreign city, even though it's been a long time since I've gone to a place that's new to me. Sit, sit.' At the small circular table, Maria takes the chair opposite his. She looks at a third vacant seat to her left, halfway between them. 'I've always liked having an empty chair at a table,' says Tversky. 'To absent friends!' Each of them holding a glass of the Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon he has selected, they make the toast.

Maria feels a surge of fondness for this gruff, kind man. Tversky asks about her pregnancy, whether there have been any difficulties, and she shakes her head. He orders a jug of iced water for the table. 'The body temperature soars; must be so uncomfortable.'

A waitress appears; she holds no menus. 'Welcome to Obsidian. So' – dramatically she looks at each of them in turn – 'where would you like to go this evening?'

'Have you got a menu,' says Tversky.

'We don't work that way, sir. It's about what culinary regions you want to explore tonight.'

'I'll get a vegetable lasagne,' he says.

Maria orders a Greek salad. The waitress retreats to take their order to the kitchen.

Tversky apologises for the pretentiousness of this place; it has come highly recommended from a business colleague, otherwise he would not have brought her here.

But the portions, surprisingly, are large and arrive quickly.

'Interesting,' he says, holding up his fork, displaying on it a dark green vegetable. 'I've never had one of these. I don't even know what it's called.'

She inspects the vegetable, shrugs. Tversky laughs. 'Always new things to see, I suppose. Well, at least the basic patterns keep repeating themselves. That's a comfort as I get older; I've more or less grasped the fundamentals, even if the details are different.'

Maria touches Tversky's arm and says, 'You speak as if you're ancient. But you're not. Look at the way you kept bringing those things for the baby. You strode in, carrying it all. It's been such a help to me.'

When he finishes his lasagne and Maria puts down her fork, half of her salad eaten, Tversky places both his hands on the table, palms on the surface, gazes downwards and sighs. Then he looks up again, apparently willing himself to face her directly. 'I confess, I'm not here tonight just because I want to see how you're doing. I have something very important to tell you.'

Maria tries out a smile, thinking he is being mock-serious, but he maintains his sober expression. 'What is it?' she says with a tinge of concern.

'About Kristof.'

This is a surprise. She waits for more. What does Tversky have to do with Kristof?

'I didn't realise you'd been seeing him until you mentioned he would be staying with you here,' he goes on. 'But I've had concerns about him for a while.'

'What are you talking about?'

Tversky sighs again. 'Not long before Claudia died, she mentioned to me that she'd been walking regularly with a young man, a philosopher. She didn't say who it was.'

'It was Kristof.'

'You knew?' says Tversky, looking surprised.

Maria feels a wave of relief, as though Kristof has passed some kind of test. 'He told me. Not initially, because he feared it might poison our relationship. An understandable fear, I think. But he was forthright when we did discuss it. I know my mother was very fond of him. I found the situation disconcerting at first – I don't anymore.'

Tversky is watching her closely.

'Is that all that's been concerning you?' She is fiddling with the white cloth serviette, folding it into a square and then smoothing it out again. 'I know it seems strange, but things aren't always straightforward. And Claudia, as you know, had a wide range of friends.'

She can see that he's considering his next words carefully. Then he says, 'Are you sure you trust this person?'

'Of course I trust Kristof,' she responds immediately.

'Do you know anything that could raise concerns that he's devious? Or maybe unstable?'

Maria wants to ignore this unpleasant question, but her mind does not always do her bidding. *Unstable*: the breakdown that Bernstein alluded to. A long time ago – but still, a severe trauma can reverberate throughout a life. And she doesn't even know what brought it on. Kristof has never mentioned it to her, but then she has never asked.

Tversky, she can see, notes her uncertainty. Then he says, 'There's also the matter of Kristof's colleague Saskia Zeilmaker. Do you know about her?'

'Of course I know she disappeared. And her body's recently been found – Kristof mentioned that to me, and it was in the papers.'

'She was murdered. That was on the news too; the body showed signs of a terrible assault. So: Kristof strolls with Claudia, and Claudia dies under strange circumstances. He works with Dr Zeilmaker, and she too dies – killed. Don't tell me you haven't given this any thought.'

When she discovered Claudia's letter to Kristof, Maria *had* wondered, wildly, whether he had been with her on that last morning. But as she got to know him, such concerns faded. And the news of Saskia Zeilmaker's murder had simply made her feel sad for Kristof that his colleague's life had ended in this way.

Tversky continues: '*Do* you trust this man?' He reaches for her hand, takes it in his. 'I can see I've shocked you. Perhaps I find it easier to face these things. It's from my years in the Circle, I suppose; I don't expect much good from the world.'

Maria is silent. Kristof cannot be what Tversky is insinuating.

'This is hard for me to tell you, I realise it's devastating, but I need to do my duty.' He is still holding her hand. 'I've been in touch with the police captain – the Circle has a wide membership. What happened on the morning Claudia died? That's the crucial question.'

Tversky reaches into his pocket, brings out a picture. 'Very recently the Rondebosch police

received a brief video, taken in Newlands forest, dating from the day of Claudia's death. It was posted anonymously. The police captain can only speculate who sent it: maybe a visitor to the forest took some footage last September, recently came upon the news of Claudia's death, and thought this might be relevant. Whoever sent it, you need to take a look.'

Tversky hands over the picture, a still image from the video. Two people walking together, nearly touching. A woman with long black hair, gesturing with one hand towards something in the distance, and a man, taller, his hair cropped, listening intently.

'The police very quickly identified this man as your friend Kristof. They already knew him from another context: they spoke with him after Saskia Zeilmaker disappeared. In fact, when I saw the video, I recognised him myself – he attended a recent introductory meeting I held for the Circle of Mystics, though I didn't know his name then. Now look at the bottom corner. This image was taken at six forty five in the morning on 20 September 2009. She died, according to the police pathologists, at around seven. So why hasn't Kristof told you he was with her just before her death? Why has he not troubled to inform you – or, for that matter, the police – of that little fact? Do you think the poor fellow is concerned that it might look suspicious?' Tversky can no longer hide his agitation under a calm manner. He breathes deeply for a few seconds.

A part of her does not believe what he is saying. It is hard to meet his gaze, and she drops her eyes to the table. She needs time to think. The restaurant is now in full swing, all the tables full, and the doors and windows have been thrown open in an attempt to alleviate the closeness of the room. Tversky is speaking again, as though from far away. It takes her a while to focus on him.

'When I found out about this video, I thought: let the police do their job with Kristof Zoetman, I'm not getting involved. But that was before I knew he had anything to do with

you. After you told me you were with this man, I saw I had to act. You can't stay with him a moment longer; God knows what he's been planning for you. My priority is to protect you. I've failed once to protect a woman who meant a lot to me. I swear I won't fail again.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'That I contact the concierge at my building right now, and ask him to have Dr Zoetman and his belongings removed from the apartment. His suitcase, and the man himself, will be escorted out immediately. He'll also be informed that he is wanted for questioning, and should return to make himself available to the South African police – or risk being contacted by American officials first.'

'I don't know,' says Maria. 'I should talk to him first, find out the truth.' But she is tentative.

'Don't you *see*, Maria? Zoetman is very clever and very violent – is this a combination you feel comfortable with? I know that you're an astute psychologist and you deal with unstable people all the time, but anyone would agree this is different. I believe he has murdered two women. This is not the occasion for a heart-to-heart between you and him. Please, let him speak to the police. They can decide whether he's innocent or otherwise. For now, you shouldn't put yourself in his path.'

There is a long silence. Maria's eye is drawn to the diners next to her. A man's fingers are drumming the table as his female companion tells a long story. She ought to go back to the apartment and talk to Kristof. Tverksy's account might well be a dreadful misunderstanding. She has thought all along that her mother committed suicide – and the person Tversky is describing is nothing like the man with whom she has been falling in love. 'I don't know,' she says eventually. She wishes the man's fingers would stop drumming so she could think clearly.

‘Maria, *please* -’ But Tversky is cut off by the waitress hovering next to them.

‘What are your feelings about the last course?’ the waitress asks them. ‘Remember, dessert doesn’t have to be sweet.’

Maria scrapes back her chair, needing air. ‘I must leave,’ she announces.

Tversky stands to hold her upper arm, but she shakes him off. It is all too much. ‘I’ll call you in a bit. I need to be alone now,’ she says.

Outside, she wanders the streets. It’s a warm Manhattan night filled with men and women returning from work, friends on their way to bars, young lovers, all of them astoundingly and preposterously ignorant of what Tversky has just been saying. They feel unreal, planted there like stage props.

She passes the apartment building. He must be waiting for her upstairs, ready for their stroll in the park. She keeps going, to the end of the block and across a road, so that she finds herself on the western shore of the island. It is quieter here, with a slight breeze blowing off the water. A jogger crosses her path, his face contorted with effort. Over a grassy strip, along a short jetty, and in this over-crowded city she is suddenly alone, hearing the lap of the water against the wooden pier.

Looking into the dark Hudson River triggers a memory of that first therapy session, and the blue gecko that went missing afterwards. *Devious*, she thinks. She has never discussed it with Kristof – has never thought to do so – but surely it was he who took that gecko from her shelf and put it in the bathroom. Why would he want to do that? It was, in retrospect, a very peculiar joke, coming from a stranger. Or perhaps right from the start, he was telling her something: that he was at liberty to take from her as he liked, to play with her, barely bothering to hide his game of power. If so, it was not a joke, but a *sneer*.

Kristof is lying on the bed of the apartment, listening to *Rothko Chapel* and thinking of love. It is the final eerie melody, the violin, so sad and so distant. When a woman announces her love for you, that is the most beautiful moment. With Claudia the declaration on the mountain was a cry of fierce devotion, echoing in him still. Saskia, though she was with someone else, said – and she was not really joking – that she wished to love him instead. Even in his short time together with Nomsa, he felt her fascination for him, a man so much more intriguing than her boyfriend. And in Maria he senses the devotion growing in her wounded and mistrustful heart, her increasing willingness to abandon herself utterly to him. Human relations are like music; under their infinite variety lie the fundamental themes – of desire, of loss. Through the last bars of music he hears an intrusion, an urgent thumping. Someone is at the door.

Twenty nine

Three days after the episode in the restaurant, Tversky is in a lift, rising with Maria to the top of Rockefeller Centre. A touristy experience, but he has convinced her that a first trip to New York ought to include it. It is the usual slick American production; the ceiling of the lift is illuminated with pulsating lights, impelling them to look upwards as they ascend. They are assured by an electronic voice that the highest floors sway slightly in the wind. Then the lift arrives in a foyer. 'Welcome to the Top of the Rock!' the voice concludes. The foot traffic is minutely choreographed by the many employees dressed in black, and after a few minutes it is their turn. They are led to the outside viewing area. Around its edges is a thick wall of transparent Perspex, presumably to stop jumpers.

From one side of the platform they view the great commercial district of the city, thrumming with business competitors, winners and losers, predators and prey. In the opposite direction is the lush green rectangle of Central Park, entirely hemmed in by tall buildings. The Rockefeller Centre is not the highest building in Manhattan, but it towers above most of the surrounding skyscrapers. *If it weren't for the crowds, it would be peaceful here*, thinks Tversky. He lifts his face to the sun: the sky is blue, the air very hot. The warmth on his tanned skin brings him pleasure.

They have not heard from Zoetman. Since his removal from the building three nights ago, he has not tried to contact Maria. Also, according to the police, there is no record of a re-entry into South Africa. Tversky wonders where he is hiding. Zoetman clearly likes to be in charge – certainly he takes pleasure from relationships in which he can dominate – yet it seems that when real pressure is placed on him, he flees. He tries so hard to be the master, but

deep down he is the dog. Even if he does speak to the police and manage to convince them of his innocence, Maria will not look at him again as a lover.

When he was warning Maria about Zoetman, Tversky was obliged, in order to drive home his point, to omit a feature of the Saskia Zeilmaker case. In fact, according to his police captain, a gang is suspected of her murder. The men have not yet been found, and the investigation remains confidential so as not to alert the criminals. There is an identikit on the three fellows, one squat, two tall. Tversky saw the frightening pictures when visiting the captain. The police believe that Saskia Zeilmaker was abducted by these men in Newlands forest, their habitual haunt, and raped either there or on the way to Strandfontein; later she was killed, and her body dumped in the dunes. This is their *modus operandi*. She must have strongly resisted, or tried to escape, judging from the coroner's report. This gang is wanted for various crimes; tourists and hikers are easy pickings.

'The city is overwhelming,' says Maria. 'Thank you for staying for a while to keep me company.'

'No problem; my business meetings can wait. And I do need to make sure you're safe.'

She gives him a smile, and they continue their observation of the island spread out before them.

'Cape Town seems so small by comparison,' she says.

'No space is small if you attend closely to it.'

Maria gives a comic sigh. 'More wisdom from the Circle of Mystics.' She is, thank heavens, temperamentally different from her mother. Claudia fought him all those years, refused to commit herself to him as a young woman or even in middle-age – though his ice maiden did share his bed, on and off, for years, and took his money when it suited her. She was, she claimed, a free spirit who had not yet found her soulmate. But Maria does not have

her mother's rage for independence. Whatever she may think, she is impelled towards strong men, those who can protect as well as cherish her.

'How's the baby feeling, at such an altitude?' Tversky asks.

'Peaceful.'

Tversky is pleased that the nursery is almost ready; time will pass quickly when they return to Cape Town, and before Maria realises, the baby will be here. But the path to this point has been hard.

On that final morning, after Kristof had left Claudia on the mountain, after he had said goodbye and she had continued standing on the edge, her back to the precipice, enjoying the melodrama of the moment, the connection she had made to this young man, and the promise of future intimacies, Tversky emerged from where he had been watching and filming at a discreet distance. As he came quietly towards her, Claudia's eyes were still closed. 'Why not me?' he said, when he was standing just in front of her, the video camera in his hand.

Her eyes sprung open. 'You've been following me!'

'Why. Not. Me.'

'Why not you? Because you don't want to be with me, you want to *have* me. I'm an ornament to you, I don't love you, and I *never will!*'

'You will never do *anything* again,' said Tversky calmly. With his free hand he pushed her from behind, a hard sharp movement. As she went over the edge her mouth opened wide, but there was no time even to scream.

It seemed ill-advised, when Maria came to him months later, wanting to find out about her mother, to have anything to do with her. But afterwards he reflected that cowardice is never one's ally. He should make himself available to Claudia's daughter, and then – with some

manoeuvring, and with the forces on his side – he might have a second chance, the opportunity to make the daughter his own. He began slowly to win her trust, but when he discovered that Zoetman had become involved with her, he had to act swiftly: an anonymous package to the police, then a flight to New York.

Already the lift has disgorged another group of tourists, who are streaming outside to look at the grand city. The crowd pushes in from behind; Maria and Tversky, their turn over, must soon go. Impulsively she puts her arm around his waist as he stands, inspecting the skyscrapers. ‘The view is so clear from here,’ Maria says. Together, looking towards the horizon, they stand on top of the great Manhattan tower, midway between the earth and the stars.