Lila & Other Stories

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KNXBON001

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

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Abstract

A survivor of the Chimoio bombings, conducted by the Rhodesian Security Forces against the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) headquarters in Mozambique, attempts to send a dog to the moon. After seven years of failing to conceive a couple gives birth to a baby plagued by an infinite hunger. A teenage girl recalls the day her father took her to the execution of The Colonel: the arm-wrestling champion of the 153rd State...

The departure point for most of the stories in this collection is my own upbringing in Harare, Zimbabwe, in the 1990s and early 2000s. Given the country's repressive political history, I've been asking myself the question: in what new ways can we write about oppressive states? What new metaphors, vocabularies can we come up and how can we capture, in writing, the many forms of violence they deploy against their citizens? And more crucially, how do we depict the way ordinary citizens find ways, sometimes bizarre, of resisting this onslaught of violence from the state? *Lila & Other Stories* is a small attempt to create something meaningful out of a history I and many others are still grappling with.

The following stories have been previously published during the course of my studies in slightly different form:

'Lila' in *Hair: Weaving & Unpicking Stories of Identity*. Edited by Joanne Hitchens & Karina M Szczurek, Tattoo Press, Cape Town, (p. 219 – 230), 2019.

'Murder in Clovelly' in *Safe House: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*. Edited by Ellah Wakatama Allfrey, Dundurn Press, Toronto, (p.151 – 173), 2016.

'Self-Portrait' in *Moving On and other Zimbabwean Stories*. Edited by Jane Morris, amaBooks, Bulawayo, (p.127 – 135), 2017.

'The Museum of Lost Objects' in Simphiwe Ndzube's exhibition catalogue, *Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas*. Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, (p.5 – 8), 2019.

'Spaceman' in *Redemption Song and Other Stories: The Caine Prize for African Writing 2018*. New Internationalist, United Kingdom, (p.155 -165), 2018.

'At your Requiem' in *Incredible Journey: Stories that will move you.* Edited by Joanne Hitchens, Burnet Media, Cape Town, (p.150 – 159), 2015.

Lila & Other Stories

'You have lived through something, and that notion of being a survivor will always remind you that your life is now clustered in some quantum way around one single moment in time, one particular episode in history, that defines everything fundamental about you from that time onwards.' - Lina Mounzer, 'The Meaning of Being Numerous.'[1]

Q 7
THE MURDER TRILOGY
(i) Exit Wound 10
(ii) Lila 16
(iii) Murder in Clovelly: A True Crime Story 24
We Killed the President 36
Blow Up Your Life 37
B-Grade 45
Hunger 50
Self-Portrait 55
Museum of Lost Objects 62
At Your Requiem 65
Disappearing Parts 72
House Girl 75
Scene from a Hanging 82
Uncle Habakkuk 83
Spaceman 89

Q.

El Presidente is dead when you wake. *Breaking news*. On TV, behind a pair of talking heads, loops a grainy montage. You count the years: 21 February 1924 – 6 September 2019 = ninety-five. The measure of those years is truncated into sixty seconds. You straighten your back & square shoulders, something clutching at your chest, though the footage on screen is, even now, as familiar to you as the scenes from your own childhood – years ago, when you still lived there.

You are catapulted back in time to El Presidente's adolescent years, in the north-eastern district, among the Jesuits. Here he is now, pictured in his high school khakis, leaning against a doorway, squinting into the tall grasses, mouth twisted & embittered; marked, in your mind, with a seriousness beyond his age. You flash-forward to the mid-fifties, his rise through the ranks of the worker's movement. Here now in a safari suit & dark sunglasses, loud hailer in hand, addressing a sea of dark skinned men in blue overalls & canary yellow helmets. Next stop: 11 October '66. The start of the People's War against her majesty's army, The Red Guard. "Liberation Hero," "Dictatorship," "Coup D'état". One of the pale talking heads strings those words together, tracing the outlines of a story that sits tight as a bark-skin on your chest.

In all the years you've lived here – seven in Dresden, six now in Oslo – you have not told anyone about where you are from or why you left. Not without telling lies. You couldn't risk it. You came close once with Jemima. You loved her because she, too, had known what it means to lose a country. "Did I ever tell you about my father?" you said in the last letter you wrote her. "Why he cut off his ears with a razor blade & stored them inside a Ziploc bag? We had a single state-owned television channel & one radio station. Every 15 minutes the Dept. of Patriotic History would broadcast an archival insert from the People's War. Grainy footage of peasant soldiers standing straight-backed before a firing squad. Seconds later shredded by Kalashnikovs. Bombs darkening the opulent blue sky of the countryside before the fiery yellow of an inferno filled the screen. The war had been over twenty years, but it repeated in an endless loop like a scratched record. Before he cut off his ears & later gouged out his eyeballs, my father said: There must be some mistake. You must stage an escape. This is nowhere & it is forever."

& for years now you have been willing yourself to forget that nowhere place - unremembering names, faces, & languages that once moved as freely as fish in water in your mouth. You relinquished the name handed down three generations of womenfolk in your family. Shortening it, at first, into a single syllable & now, the aluminium name tag clipped onto the white blouse you wear to work at the Comfort Hotel in Youngstorget is engraved with a single letter, Q. This way, as the years passed, the past started to decline & it ceased to haunt you. Some days, you felt as weightless as the gulls wheedling over the Akerselva.

Still, there have been moments when the past sought you out. Last autumn: poised to cross the street in Møllergata, the long ago smell of Ingram's Camphor Cream rose up your nostrils. So strong it stopped your breath. Turning to look back you saw Godelieve, your best friend from primary school, the daughter of an opposition union leader. *Impossible,* you said, *this must be a ghost.* But there Godelieve stood, so close you could brush her nose with your mittened hand. You turned to look in the other direction, for a witness, someone to corroborate the existence of the girl standing before you. But no one came. The traffic light changed from red to green & soon after, Godelieve vanished. The rest of that afternoon you carried with you the long-ago sadness, of the burnt down house at the edge of Winston Street. The blackened bones they fished out of the debris after quelling the fire's rage.

Then last night, the past visited you again. You turned on the television, an aubergine in the palm of your hand & there behind the glass were the streets of the capital. The roads leading to the houses of parliament & to El Presidente's official residence had been barricaded with razor wire. Tanks, soldiers emptied out onto the streets. A burst of gunfire had been heard coming from the El Presidente's residence, the small man with a bullet proof vest & a microphone said. *The situation here is very tense at the moment. Very tense.*

Something about seeing your country on screen undid you. You slipped through a trapdoor & felt yourself falling. Falling. You remembered the quality of the light in the capital that day they came for your father. A dissident poet. You remembered how your mother implored you to run, run as fast as you could. Everything you had tried to unremember comes flooding back. The story you have been running away from has caught up with you. Here and now you no longer have nowhere to hide.

THE MURDER TRILOGY

EXIT WOUND

She remembered the driver. A short, dark-skinned man in an indigo-blue shirt rolled up at the sleeve. A uniformed soldier had waved them through the checkpoint a mile and half outside Hartley. The driver turned the ignition key and switched on the headlights. "Whatever else happens to us," Agnes heard the driver say, nodding a sullen face at the young man, standing feet wide apart on the side of the road. A rifle fitted with a bayonet slung over his shoulder. "We are war people."

"Agnes"

"Agnes?"

The upward lilt of the case worker's voice reeled Agnes back to the present.

"What do you do with them?" Agnes said, sitting-up, straight-backed. "The war stories."

They sat across from each other in a small office, at Hatfield Clinic & Maternity Centre, a round table between them. On the table, a cut-glass vase of plastic sunflowers and a roll of toilet paper.

"Well," Beth said, pushing a lock of hair to one side, "I read. Poetry. My father," Beth said, "read to me as a child. He wrote, too, but he unfortunately never published."

They met twice a month, at noon, every second Friday.

Since the Independence Day celebrations in April, a host of donor-funded groups and organisations had descended on the country like an attack of locusts. Beth was a tall red-haired American, middle forties, with a small, oval face. She'd arrived before the general elections in February as a volunteer for Daughters of Jael, a Christian not-for-profit intent on rehabilitating female survivors of the war.

"Today is the 14th," Beth said.

Agnes took a deep, slow breath and exhaled.

"I know" Agnes said, gazing out at the view beyond the dirty window, at two starlings swooping down on a Jacaranda tree in the yard.

"Exactly a year," Beth said.

Agnes had countenanced to these meetings out of a sense of duty to her next-door neighbour, a bright smiling Baptist minister whose parish had ties to Daughters of Jael. But she had been wary of Beth from the onset and dismayed, too, by the entire enterprise. The endless talk about victims and survivors that filled the air. It sounded as if your hurts were no longer yours to keep. The nation was entitled to gorge itself on your sorrows.

Beth's personal disposition didn't help matters, either. She smiled too easily, Agnes thought, and everything to Beth seemed to run along a straight line. There was the old country and here was the new. How could someone with a view of the world that cohered so neatly

comprehend the disorder and confusion Agnes felt herself enmeshed in? And yet, her many ambivalences notwithstanding, Agnes began confiding in the other woman.

"I am a bad mother," Agnes had said one Friday, grey and overcast, in the middle of winter. "Or at least I haven't been a very good one."

Her sole surviving daughter, Sibongile, was now permanently resident at Ingutsheni. A psychiatric facility far away in Bulawayo. Another daughter, Sithabile, had died from SIDS in the summer of '59. A death that had led to Agnes being questioned by the police before an autopsy eventually cleared her of wrongdoing. Mluleki, the son she lived with in Evergreen Road – in a one-storey house hedged with bougainvillea – had grievances of his own stemming from childhood which he'd never aired. His resentments nevertheless hovered over their every interaction: a dark cloud heavy with rain.

Despite the deepening connection, Agnes had said very little to Beth about what had transpired at the old farmhouse last August. The little she'd said was that her husband, Simon, a high school English teacher, had been abducted. He was still missing and presumed dead.

"And the letters?" Beth asked, reclining into the hard chair.

Agnes had addressed a dozen letters to the office of the Prime Minister asking that he investigate the disappearances during the war.

"Mluleki says I should stop stirring up trouble," Agnes said. "*The Prime Minister*, he says, *has a lot on his plate as it is. Building new schools, houses, resettling the peasants. Why should he be bothered with yesterday's news?*"

"It's nonsense, of course. It's all nonsense," Agnes said after a short while. "The only reason he wants me to stop is because he's worried about losing his job at the ministry."

"Why would he…"

"Because he's worried, they'll find out about Simon!" Agnes said, surprised to find herself shouting at Beth. She lowered her voice: "There were rumours that he was a sell-out. A traitor. People here don't forgive traitors."

Following the meeting with Beth, Agnes lingered in the waiting room: humid and thrumming with the hubbub of voices. A handful of months ago, this facility would have been reserved for whites only and barred to people like her, but now it bustled with mothers of every hue and their infant children. Here and there, sudden bursts of laughter rose up from the benches.

A ceiling fan with a faulty motor, emitting a grinding noise, did nothing to dispel the day's heat.

Agnes stepped outside and stood for a moment in the shade provided by the flat-top awning. A gaggle of high school girls in striped blue and white uniforms, crossed the parking lot, walking in the direction of Kilwinning shops.

Agnes had started on the walk home when a hand grabbed hold of her wrist. She turned to look. Agnes' skin tingled and her eyes widened when she saw who it was. The homeless woman who spent the day wandering in the surrounds of the clinic, searching the municipal dustbins for leftovers. A mangy dog trailing behind her.

The woman was an ex-combatant, Agnes assumed, one of the many who'd returned from the war too damaged for peacetime.

Agnes attempted to wrestle her arm free, but the woman held on tighter, determined not to let her go.

"I have been sent by those from long ago," the woman said in Shona. She spoke in a theatrically loud voice, as if addressing a crowd or someone out of earshot, drawing the attention of passer-by.

"They are waiting for you, Agnes," the woman said.

The mothers in the clinic craned their necks to look at the commotion building up outside the entrance. Agnes sensed their eyes watching them as she stood facing the woman, who stood at least a head taller. She wore a long black coat and workman's boots, and her hands were covered in a pair of black gloves.

"They are waiting for you," the woman said again as she let go of Agnes' hand.

Agnes let her hand fall to the side, and she stood there, dazed, as the woman and her dog crossed the parking lot and vanished down Fern Road.

The series of skirmishes between Mluleki and his wife, Primrose, had escalated into an all-out civil war which had gutted their marriage. Primrose vacated the house on Evergreen Road, a month after Agnes' arrival, and she'd also taken the girls, Dorcas, and Clementine.

The dissolution of her son's marriage, strained things further between Agnes and Mluleki. They hardly saw one another now. On weekdays, Mluleki would return home long after Agnes had gone to bed only for her to be startled awake by the sound of the Peugeot's engine idling in the driveway. Or the jangle of keys as Mluleki attempted to open the front door. And on weekends, if he wasn't out drinking at the Ambassador Hotel, Mluleki walked around the house packed tight like a landmine.

The following morning Agnes sat in kitchen quartering a tomato. She asked herself how, given the poor state of their relationship, she might break the subject of a return to the old

farmhouse in Musengezi – a two-hour drive southwest of the capital. Mluleki bristled even at the mention of the place.

Agnes hadn't been back there since the night she'd fled a year ago. Even after the ceasefire had been declared in December, and it was relatively safe to go back - there were Commonwealth observers everywhere you looked - the thought of returning made Agnes weary. She'd be up to the task in a week, or two Agnes had once said to her daughter-in-law. But then a week or two had stretched out into a year.

In the distance, Agnes heard a dog barking. Then the gardener, Zacharias, a tall, soft-spoken man Mluleki had agreed to keep in his employ as a condition for buying the property, stooped under the back door and entered the kitchen.

"Um," Zacharias stammered "Pa-pa-pane munhu pagedhi."

"Who is it?" Agnes said.

But before Zacharias could respond, the dog came trotting up the back steps into the kitchen, followed by the woman Agnes had encountered outside the clinic.

***

Late winter, August 1979. The trouble began with Margaret Thatcher.

That afternoon, the UK's new prime minister was set to open The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, and expectations ran high that Britain would cede to play its part in the resolution of the crisis in Rhodesia. Only an end to the war would bring stability to the region.

Mr. Chairman, fellow heads of Government, Mr. Secretary-General it is an honour to speak at this opening session. Agnes listened intently to the shortwave radio in the kitchen as the prime minister's calm, authoritative voice rose through clouds of static. *It is a pleasure, Mr. President, to meet here in Zambia under your chairmanship[ii].*

The growl of a car's engine turned Agnes' attention away from the special radio broadcast. She went and stood by the window. The car rumbled down dirt track and came to a stop next to a grove of lemon trees.

Father Mahony, a slight Irish man in his early sixties, jumped out of the driver's seat. He left the engine running and ran towards the kitchen. Agnes collided with him at the door.

"What's the mat…" Agnes said before Father Mahony stopped her mid-sentence. "The neighbour's boy", he said, swallowing a lungful of air. "Come. Now."

They raced back towards the car. In the backseat of the Rover, the neighbour's boy, Oneday, lay with his head on Simon's lap. Eyes closed. Even without having to roll up the sleeve of his army fatigues to check for a pulse, Agnes knew the boy was dead.

"What happened?" Agnes asked.

Both men remained silent.

Agnes stretched her arm across the backseat and held the boy's jaw in her hand. She turned his head to the side so she could appraise the ligature marks on his neck. Just a boy, she thought, not old enough even to grow a beard.

"What happened?" Agnes asked again. This time she looked directly into Simon's eyes.

"Unlucky," Simon said, "unlucky and on the wrong side."

Like everyone else in the farming district, Agnes knew about Oneday's luck. The boy had been one of Simon's form three pupils that March, in '77, when he ran away from home to join up with the guerrillas fighting against the Rhodesian army. But he'd never made it to the camps across the border in Mozambique. The man who had recruited Oneday turned out to have been a Security Branch operative. Oneday was tortured by the Security Branch and held captive for a fortnight before he joined the Rhodesian ground forces. It was either that or be buried in an unmarked grave somewhere. Still, a young black man wearing the enemy's uniform would be marked for death.

"He had come home last night to visit Neville," Simon said, easing himself out of the backseat. "One of the neighbour's, one of us, must have sold him out."

"And Neville?" Agnes asked.

"Right here," Father Mahony said, pressing two fingers against his temple. "And they hung his boy outside the front gate."

A warning.

"We couldn't just leave him," Father Mahony said after a short while. "Not like that."

Agnes gazed into Simon's eyes. She could tell from the way he looked back at her that he'd read her mind. It was a reckless thing for Father Mahony and Simon to have done and there would be consequences. *Mwana wenyoka inyoka*, the guerrillas liked to remind everyone. *The son of a snake is a snake.* They'd hung Oneday out like that to see who else would come for him. To flush out the remaining snakes hidden in the grass.

"What do you think will happen when they..."

"Stop it!" Simon said. "How many years have we depended on each other, lived side by side through this horrible war? These are our neighbours."

"We'll have to go back for Neville," Simon said. "He deserves a good burial."

"Later," Father Mahony warned. "Not now. When it gets dark."

"What about Oneday?" Agnes said. "Where will you keep the body?"

"The church," Father Mahony said. "We can keep him there so long."

Agnes stood to the side as Simon and Father Mahony worked to fit Oneday's body into the back of the Rover, covering it under a blue tarpaulin.

The church wasn't far but there were no back routes, only a straight gravel road cutting through vast tracts of farmland. It wouldn't be long before the guerrillas sounded the alarm and started on the hunt for whoever had taken down the body.

"Wait," Agnes said remembering the firearm Simon kept hidden under their mattress, a Smith & Wesson handgun. "I'll be right back."

Agnes had gone down on her knees to retrieve the pistol when she heard a burst of gunfire in the distance. Followed moments later an angry chorus of men's voices.

They are here, Agnes thought, and she hid herself under the bed.

The voices edged closer. A darkness gathering.

Later, when Agnes emerged from her hiding place, she was greeted by the smell of burning flesh. The guerrillas had poured diesel and set fire to Oneday's body. Killing him a second time. Simon and Father Mahony were nowhere in sight. The car had also vanished. Agnes thought about running back to the house and filling a bucket with water, but in that moment something deep inside her snapped and she crumpled to the ground.

***

A fortnight later, the woman who still hadn't revealed her name, led Agnes and scores of other families from the farming district to a clearing in the woodland behind the high school where Simon used to teach. The tenor of the woman's voice deepened out there and it sounded otherworldly. The woman paced around in a circle, stopping wherever the ghostly voices she was conversing with told her to stop. Once she'd stopped at a spot; the woman would call out a name then she'd summon the family members present to come forward. "This is my grave," she would say, and the young men hired to dig would get to work. Excavating skulls and bones.

It was sunset when Agnes heard Simon's name. Mluleki had refused to come so Agnes stood alone, in the ochre sunset, at the edge of her husband's grave. Surrounded by the bones of the dead, twenty-one in all, which had been laid out on the ground. Nearly all of them had been shot through the skull. Agnes felt the woman's rough hand on her jaw.

"You survived," the woman said. "Do not forget to remember."

For the first time in over a year, Agnes wept. A gust of wind rustled the dead leaves on the ground. Someone, a neighbour perhaps, pulled Agnes into an embrace. The men started probing the ground with their shovels. By nightfall, Simon would briefly be returned to her. She would have his bones.

LILA

My closest friend was Lila. A girl everyone said looked like a boy. Her hair wasn't styled into elaborately patterned braids, like the other girls in our street. She had short hair, shorn close to the scalp.

We lived in Chatterton. Our houses were next to each other, in a cul-de-sac named Addison. At the end of the street, the asphalt yielded to acres of veld. A footpath winding through giant eucalyptuses and blue gums led to Sacred Heart Primary School. Even now, I see Lila running ahead of me through the tall grasses on the last day of autumn. Her plaid uniform rippling in the breeze. Panting, hands on knees, I look up, see the wheeling gulls.

—Come, she says.

But I cann bm t. Legs, chest, everything is on fire. A feeling I recognise now as envy tightens my heart valves. I am being outrun by a girl. No matter how hard I try, I know I'll never catch her. True. I never will.

I am thirty-six years old. I live alone in a bachelor apartment in Cape Town, a city as far away from Addison Road as life would take me. I have never been married, nor have I had to endure the precarious love for one's own children. It is a terrible thing, I think, to watch children grow and yet be completely powerless over their fate. To have no say in whether they live or die. I could tell you that not a day goes by when I don't think of Lila, or her father's narrowed eyes searching the undergrowth at nightfall, but that would not be true. Not entirely. I was nine that winter. And yet, some days it feels like only yesterday that we went shouting into the woods with our cupped hands. Darkness filtering through the trees as her name filled the air.

—Why do you never talk about it? S. asks.

This was many years ago when S. was a postdoctoral fellow in my department and, later, also my lover. His eyes were the colour of the sea and his blond dreadlocks ran down the length of his shoulders. The men at the construction site next to the building where I lived back then whistled every time he walked past. He looked like a girl and, I suppose, they saw something scandalous in that.

—You should tell someone, he says, holding my chin in his soft hands.

I turn and look away at the shaft of light slanting against the bedroom wall. Say nothing in return.

It's like a dark fairy tale. Four children raced into the woods at sunset. Three made it home...

This is how I remember it.

We lived in a country of men. Men scarred by war. Haunted by the things they had seen and done out on the battlefields. They'd lost something of themselves wading through rivers and marshlands in the countryside, backs saddled with Kalashnikovs.

Our neighbourhood – a collection of Cape Dutch houses, which by the mid-eighties were in decline – had been desegregated after Independence. Whenever we ran into one of our neighbours – out on errand, say, or returning home from work – we were taught to ask first after the men and, only then, after the women.

The women did women's work. They cooked and cleaned, dressed the children, or worked behind the cash register at the shops.

—I am not a girl, Lila said to us repeatedly. Brows gathered into deep furrows.

Lila belonged to the world of boys. She was one of us.

We were the Four Musketeers of Addison Road: Tatenda, Hubert, Lila and I. There had been five of us when we first entered the wrought-iron gates outside Sacred Heart Primary in 1988. In the spring of that year, Tatenda's twin, Tafadwa, suddenly had trouble remembering all our names and faces. Late one afternoon the twins' father, Israel, sat facing my Uncle Levi in our kitchen. Strewn across the grey tabletop were the results of an MRI scan. The doctors had found lesions in Tafadwa's brain. Tiny bright dots luminous against the grey matter.

—Oh, don't worry, Uncle Levi says, fogging up his spectacles before giving them a wipe with the corner of his shirt.

—You think so? Israel tilts his head and squints, leaning back into the chair.

—You'll see. These doctors know what they are doing.

Tafadwa died that October. On a day it rained hard all afternoon and late into the evening. The ground was still wet and muddy on the morning of the wake. I wore a polka-dot bowtie. We sang 'Sweet Hour of Prayer', shoulders hunched against the chill in the air, as the men lowered the coffin into the ground. We left Tafadwa under a raised mass of red earth next to his mother's gravestone. The four of us were bound by something indissoluble after that. Death does that. Binds you to people, I mean.

On the last Friday of term, during morning recess, the four of us sat on a patch of grass behind the bicycle sheds. The voices of the other children rose and fell from the playgrounds below, but our attention was trained on Tatenda. He had been telling us about the soldiers in gas masks and the column of tanks we'd seen crossing the desert on the eight o'clock news bulletin. Black smoke rising from the burning oil fields.

—George Bush is bombing, Tatenda says, his voice rising in octaves, enthralled by the scenes of chaos and destruction. America is bombing the devil!

The bell sounded. In the rush to get to the auditorium, the four of us were briefly parted. I caught sight of Lila's yellow rucksack, slung over her shoulders, swinging from side to side as she pulled ahead of the crowd.

Lila was the fastest runner in our age group, and I didn't know it yet, but it would be the last time I would see her like this. Running at full stride. In those moments, she belonged only to herself.

The school had converted the hall into a makeshift movie theatre. The groundskeeper, Mongezi, dressed in a pair of blue overalls that pulled and sagged in places, had used long pieces of black fabric and a staple gun to block out the sunlight. Humming the melody to 'Morning Has Broken', he'd climbed up and down a six-step ladder. Then later, while we sat on the hardwood, Mongezi operated the reel-to-reel projector stationed at the back, shushing us every time our voices got loud and reached him.

The yellow rucksack was the only item of Lila's we found in the woods in the evening that Friday.

—Here, one of the policemen calls out, his voice bellowing like a trombone. The men stand in a semicircle, breathing in the cold night air, peering down at a yellow satchel. Turned inside out, emptied.

I work as a researcher at the university's medical campus. My research area is in drug-resistant tuberculosis. I spend hours in solitude, looking at X-rays or down a microscope. Reading and writing journal articles. The work is satisfying. Complex and full of mystery, so that I am able to forget myself.

But, in my twenties, there were times when the familiar yearning for sex, for human contact to fill the empty hours between work, sometimes overwhelmed me. I created an alias and joined chatrooms and online dating sites. Inevitably, this led to a string of doomed relationships that would never grow into anything tangible. Desire makes fools of us.

I joined Facebook after things had ended with S and he'd flown back to Madagascar. A teaching post had opened up at his alma mater, Université d'Antananarivo. Hardly a week later, I received a friend request from Tatenda. In his profile picture, he was dressed in a white suit, one size too small, standing before a congregation of worshippers. I deleted my Facebook page that evening and shut down my laptop.

Lila's father used to walk with the fingers of his left hand gripping a metal cane. He'd been hit by the shrapnel from a bomb blast as a teenager during the war. He made his living as a radiographer

at the state hospital in the city. He always wore grey trousers, held up by a pair of suspenders, and a white lab coat, blotched with black ink on the breast pocket.

On that fateful afternoon, I rose from a nap to find Lila's father and Uncle Levi standing over me like two prison guards. A sight so out of place I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or awake.

—Have you seen my daughter? The voice is gruff, impatient.

What is Uncle Levi doing at home at this time?

—Where's Lila?

Dazed, unable to think clearly, it takes me a while to respond. Where's Lila? I don't know, I mean to say, slowly rising to my feet. But before the words can leave my mouth Lila's father slaps me across the face with the back of his hand.

—Wake up! I asked you a question.

Lila's father has his hand raised. Poised to strike again. But Uncle Levi quickly steps in, acting as a barricade between the two of us.

—Easy, easy, Uncle Levi intones, shepherding Lila's father out of my room and into the kitchen. We'll find her. You'll see.

The slap burns slowly under the skin on my cheek. My face is hot. Eyes cloud with tears but, even so, I'm determined not to cry.

In the kitchen, Lila's father stands in the centre leaning against the cane, barking out instructions like a drill sergeant. Telephone calls are made. Hubert and Tatenda are quickly summoned, and they arrive trailing behind their parents like shadows.

—What was she doing playing with boys anyway? someone says.

Despite our middle-class standing, in character, Chatterton was like any other high-density suburb caught in an infinite swirl of rumour, petty feuds and jealousies. There was something scandalous in a girl who had a bald head and dressed like a boy and only had boys for friends. It would all come to a bad end.

The three of us – Hubert, Tatenda and I – sit with hands on our knees, staring down at the floor, our intakes of breath shallow. Three condemned men before a judge and a cloud of witnesses.

—After you left school, tell me again, what happened? Start from the beginning, Lila's father says. Interrogating us for answers.

The room goes quiet. Outside, in the distance, you can hear the burble of doves and the low grumbling of a haulage truck. Lila's father taps his cane on the vinyl floor. Tap. Tap. Tap. Hubert breaks the silence.

—It was Tatenda's idea, he says. Speaking without looking up.

—Oh, Lila's father says.

I glance up to look at him. His jaw tightens, then slackens, a motion that puts me in mind of the story I'd heard once from Uncle Levi. How, during the war, Lila's father had once passed the night lying in a donga, playing dead, after his entire regiment had been shot down.

—It was Tatenda's idea to see who would get home first, Hubert says.

—I went along Chiremba Road. I didn't see anything, I say. The words come tumbling out of me, like water gushing from a burst pipe.

—Me too, Hubert says. Tatenda… he continues, lowering his head again to the floor. Tatenda and Lila went through the woods, he says, out of breath, as if a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

—Where is she? Lila's father says, tapping his cane on the floor.

—I don't know, Tatenda answers, a catch in his throat.

—You don't know? You don't know?

—I don't…

—What do you mean you don't know? Get up. You'll tell me the truth. One way or the other I'll find out where she is.

Tatenda says nothing.

—C'mon. I said get up!

It's been nearly thirty years. And yet, some nights, I hear a boy screaming, fists banging against a locked door.

Love, grief, makes animals of men.

Saturday. The following morning, I heard Lila's name crackling through clouds of static. The dial on the transistor radio that sat on a shelf in our kitchen was permanently set to a talk radio channel.

'The search for a missing nine-year-old Sacred Heart Primary School girl resumes this morning. Lila Mhlanga disappeared yesterday afternoon. She was last seen leaving the school premises. Constable Shiriyapenga has called on members of the public with knowledge of the girl's whereabouts to dial 04 572 457 or to report to the nearest police station.'

Our street thrummed with the hubbub of raised voices as the search resumed at daylight. As I've already said, our neighbourhood was one you could call tightly knit and so, when news spread of Lila's disappearance, it galvanised everyone. The Presbyterian Church, down Henderson Road, printed a set of flyers free of charge and one of the teachers at Sacred Heart undertook to phone a relative of hers, high up in the police force. With so many willing hands and feet, the search area expanded until it encompassed the adjoining neighbourhoods: Braeside, Queensdale, Chadcombe and Epworth, the shantytown to the south of us.

Uncle Levi had given me strict orders not to leave home.

—It's bad enough as it is that one child is missing.

Despite Uncle Levi's concern, I went over to Tatenda's house. I found Israel sitting in a wicker chair on the veranda, his scrawny legs sticking out of a bright yellow bathrobe smudged with stains, a half-jack of Chateau brandy resting on the coffee table next to him.

—Good morning, I say, bowing my head as we had been taught.

Israel looks at me with reddish eyes, his face twisted into a frown. He leans over the coffee table, plucks the half-jack and empties whatever is left over in the bottle into his cut crystal brandy glass.

—Is Tatenda…

Israel nods, bringing the glass up to his lips.

Stepping into Tatenda's room, I'm reminded of the scent of embalming fluid that filled the house after the women had washed Tafadwa's body. The curtains are drawn, and the room is dark. Tatenda is lying on the bed, face down, naked. In the dim light I see the ridges on his back where the blows from the cane landed.

—I don't know… Is all Tatenda manages to say before his voice cracks. Muffling the sound of his cry with a pillow.

Sunday. I was sure it had all been a scene from a dream: the telephone ringing, then left dangling by its cord, voices briefly loud in the night, footsteps drumming against the floor, the jangle of keys, the front door opening, then slamming shut.

—Sit down, Uncle Levi says as I walk into the kitchen.

Uncle Levi sits with his elbows resting on the table, hands cradled around a coffee mug.

—Lila.

Uncle Levi nods.

Lila survived, barely. She had been found by a passer-by in the shrubs along a disused rail track in Cranborne. A seventeen-year-old boy who resided in the area had stopped to light a cigarette on his way home. There are no streetlamps in either direction there. Stopping to search his pockets for a box of matches, he'd heard a sound. A rustle in the foliage followed by a short cry. He'd edged closer. In the moonlit dark, he'd made out a hand, crossed with ligature marks on the wrist. He'd shrunk back, scanning the distance before edging closer again. This time he'd set his eyes on the rest of the body, bruised, and badly burnt. The teenager had run to call for help.

Within the hour, the area was cordoned off and the tracks swarmed with police and sniffer dogs. The teenager had told a constable present at the scene that Lila had tried to say something before losing consciousness. She had called out a name, or the beginning of a name: *Mo*—

Two letters that set-in motion the events that followed.

—It's Mongezi, Lila's father says, in response to what the constable has just told him.

He repeats the name over the phone several times that night.

—Mongezi, are you sure?

—Yes, the caretaker.

Like Lila, Mongezi was different. He'd been marked out as a stranger because he spoke a different language to us. He was light skinned as much as we were dark. Barely twenty, Mongezi had fled from the pogroms in the south of the country, driving clench-jawed through the night in a Peugeot 403.

Mongezi would have kept on driving, but the Peugeot's engine coughed and heaved before it gave up right outside Sacred Heart Primary. Mongezi had taken it as a sign and offered to cut the grass and to help with odd jobs on the property in exchange for half the allotted salary and room and board.

The Peugeot had spent six years parked under a mango tree the night when they came for him. That night, Mongezi heard the chorus of raised voices calling out to him. Voices he recognised as filled with the violence of men.

Monday. We drove to visit Lila in the morning. The hospital had put her in a room down a long passage on the ninth floor where children weren't allowed to enter. Uncle Levi squeezed my shoulder before he disappeared down the narrow hallway. I sat on a metal bench in the waiting room, looking up at a documentary on whales in the Mediterranean Sea, lulled by the soft-grained monotone of the voice-over and shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor as visitors came and went.

—Is she dying? I ask Uncle Levi when he walks out. I imagine Lila entangled, breathing through a web of tubes.

He looks at me with a melancholy gaze, shakes his head.

A week passed, then a fortnight.

The police asked around for a couple days about Mongezi but there was no information forthcoming. The outbuilding he stayed in had burnt down in the night with him inside it.

Like Tafadzwa, Lila never made it out of the hospital alive. The funeral was on a day enveloped in fog. The residents of Chatterton all came out to bid farewell to the girl who looked like a boy.

A marquee had been set out in the yard. The chaplain from the Presbyterian Church on Henderson Road read a passage from the book of Lamentations. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. The sermon was interrupted midway by the mechanical roar of a lawnmower. We craned our necks to locate the source of the noise.

It was Lila's father. He stood with the lawnmower at his feet looking at our faces and at the white carnations on the casket. His collarbones rose and fell, and he shook his head from side to side.

I thought I had put it all behind me. But a part of me has remained in the veld, among the tall grasses and the whispering trees. I see Lila running ahead of me. Sparrows wheeling across the pristine blue sky above us.

—Come, she says.

Come.

MURDER IN CLOVELLY: A TRUE CRIME STORY[1]

There are things photographs of missing persons can't tell you. The proportions of their bodies for one, or how they walk, whether or not they have a limp – the details people remember. They belong to that genre of official photographs – the headshot used for an ID, say, or a driver's license – which privilege function over form. But the information they convey is almost always incomplete.

For a few years now I've carried a manila folder with a photograph of Rosemary Theron, a thirty-nine-year-old clown and stilt walker who went missing in early March 2013. In the black-and-white headshot, which circulated in a few of the local papers during the seven months of her disappearance, she's wearing an Eskimo hat and a tight smile. You get no sense of how small she was, yet it is the thing everyone close to her remembers. "She was tiny, man, like this," one policeman said to me. It was a description I heard said many times. Standing at 1.45m tall, Rosemary Theron was, as one friend said, "a pretty little pixie woman."

Rosemary, or Rosie to her wide circle of friends and acquaintances, vanished on the 7th of March. It was a Thursday, late summer in Cape Town, and she was last seen getting into a silver Mercedes driven by an unidentified white male with long blonde hair. She wore blue jeans, brown boots, and a brown synthetic leather waistcoat lined with fur. According to the missing person's report filed at Fish Hoek police station a few days later, she went out to meet friends for drinks at around 7 o'clock that evening and never returned.

"I think she's left us," her eldest daughter, Phoenix Jess Racing Cloud, is said to have told the police during the early days of the investigation into her disappearance. Phoenix said her mother had done that sort of thing before. When she was five-years old, Rosemary had left her with her father – the couple had split up by this point – and went to live in Chile. When Rosemary came back months later, she was pregnant with her second child.

In the months before her disappearance, Rosemary and Phoenix weren't on good terms. The tension in their relationship had been caused by the arrival of Phoenix's boyfriend, Kyle Maspero; a lanky seventeen-year-old high school dropout with short-cropped brown hair and tattoos running down the length of his left arm.

Something about him didn't seem right. He'd been in and out of different schools and each time he was forced to leave because of some disciplinary violation, usually drug related. Once, when he was in Grade 8 at Knysna High School, he was expelled after he tested positive for dagga and tik. Another time, while attending Weltevreden Park Primary School in Johannesburg – he'd been sent there as punishment for his part in starting a fire at a neighbour's house – he was served with

[1] Inspired by Norman Mailer's non-fiction novel, *The Executioner's Song*

eleven formal disciplinary charge sheets. The school had sent him to a child psychiatrist and a family therapist, to no avail.

By all accounts Rosemary didn't get on with Kyle. She had asked Phoenix many times to break off the relationship but her daughter had refused. Phoenix would later say it was because she was "deeply in love with him". She and Kyle met in 2010 in Knysna, a sparsely populated town approximately 500km from Cape Town, where she lived with her father, Ivan, during the school term. Phoenix and Kyle started seeing each other in 2012 and as with many intense teenage romances, it seemed like some cosmic force had pulled them together.

They had both had troubled childhoods. Kyle, the last of three children, had virtually been abandoned by his father since birth. His father was a violent alcoholic, and he was physically and emotionally abusive towards Kyle's mother and his older siblings. After he was born the relationship between his parents deteriorated even further. Twice his mother tried to commit suicide. His father accused her of lying about Kyle's paternity. He didn't believe the boy was his son and remained cold and emotionally distant towards him. After his parent's divorce – which came within a year of his birth – Kyle maintained minimal contact with his father. His mother died suddenly when he was seven years old and by the time things were getting serious with Phoenix, he had already been through a couple of foster homes and was displaying obvious behavioural problems.

Phoenix similarly felt neglected as a child. She was born at the back of a caravan and for the first three years of her life, the family travelled across the country in a horse-drawn cart. This was in the mid to late nineties, a time of relative optimism and ease. Her parents identified themselves as hippies and made a living selling puppets. They took psychedelic drugs and went to trance parties. When Rosemary came back from Chile, she took Phoenix to go and live with her at Transformation farm, a hippie colony in Knysna. And like Phoenix, Rosemary's second child, a boy, was also born at the back of a caravan.

Early in 2013 Phoenix found out she was pregnant, but she decided to abort the baby. By this time, she and Kyle were living together in Rosemary's rented house in Clovelly – a seaside suburb overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and roughly an hour's train ride from Cape Town. This new domestic arrangement, however, didn't sit well with any of them. Fights with Rosemary were constant. Kyle would later claim that it was because Rosemary had "objected that I took to cleaning her house". The relationship soon reached its lowest when Rosemary kicked them out of the house days before she vanished. Stranded with no place to go, Phoenix and Kyle decided to camp out on the mountains which rim the Cape Peninsula. Rosemary only allowed them back in after they were robbed on their way to work one morning.

Phoenix and Kyle worked as surfing instructors for a middle-aged couple who run one of the surfing schools by the beach front in Muizenberg. Edward and Liz had known Phoenix since she was "about 15 or 16 years old." They called her by her second name, Jess, and they remember her as "sweet," "loveable," and "a compassionate little girl." She worked with them during the school holidays when she came down from Knysna. "She helped giving lessons, and she enjoyed it. She was good with people," Edward said.

Sometime in 2012, after Phoenix had matriculated from high school, Edward and Liz got a phone call from her enquiring about job prospects. "She said she wanted to move to Cape Town but would only be allowed to do so if she had work for her and her boyfriend," Liz said. "And that's when we were told about Kyle."

Though they had never met Kyle, Edward and Liz agreed to give him a job. But when Phoenix showed up with Kyle, she wasn't the same person they had known. She had always been reserved but this time she appeared "submissive and quiet". Liz also had her reservations about Kyle. "There was just … a feeling. He didn't do anything to trigger it; there was just something about him."

"Prior to knowing Kyle," Edward said, "she was super friendly and open, happy. It was obvious that she had issues, but they didn't appear to be worse than any other teenager's." Despite their reservations, Edward and Liz resolved not to intervene and were content to let the young couple be. "At work they didn't do much. If we had a customer, they would take them out [to the water]. But otherwise, they would just hang out at the beach. They were always together, you'd see them there on the beach, looking a little lonely," Liz said.

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The exact chronology of what happened on the morning of Rosemary's disappearance is still in dispute. In Kyle's version of events, he and Phoenix got up at 9 o'clock that morning and smoked dagga in bed. He then smoked tik in the bathroom before making coffee for the two of them. Rosemary stayed in bed until mid-morning when she was woken by the clutter of plates as Kyle was cleaning the kitchen. She scolded him for making noise and the two got into an argument when he told her, a grown woman "should not sleep so late".

According to Phoenix they left for work that morning and they walked back home at around noon to make lunch. They found Rosemary sitting with Julan, an old friend of hers from Kommetjie, a neighbourhood close by. Rosemary and Julan had met at a trance festival in Rustler's Valley in the Free State in 1997 and both of them had lived at Transformation farm in 2000.

Rosemary's second child had, a few years earlier, been sent to live with his father in Chile and she'd since had a baby girl, Willow. That afternoon another argument ensued after she asked Phoenix to look after her baby sister because she had to get to a casting. Phoenix resented her

mother for having neglected her as child and harboured some painful memories. She had been sexually abused by a family friend when she was six, and again a few years later when they were living in the garage of someone's house in Muizenberg.

Phoenix had accused Rosemary many times of displaying the same level of neglect with her baby sister. The girl was eight years old, and she still hadn't been to school. Her cognitive development lagged behind girls her age and she hardly had any social skills. "She growled and acted like a monkey," Phoenix would later say.

Rosemary said she couldn't afford to send Willow to school. Phoenix was familiar with her mother's excuses and her recurring troubles with money. In the early 2000s, when the family was down-and-out, living in an abandoned school bus, she kept having to change schools. In Grade Three she attended Observatory Primary School, but Rosemary pulled her out because she was behind on payments. Later that year, Phoenix completed her Grade Three at a school in Tyger Valley but again she had to stop going because Rosemary couldn't afford the fees.

It was about this time that Rosemary fell pregnant with Willow. The day she came back from the hospital, Phoenix said, Rosemary handed her the baby and went straight to sleep. The following year Phoenix started using the Clonrad home-schooling system to teach herself and in-between she managed babysitting duties. Washing and changing Willow's nappies and giving her bottles at night.

All that accumulation of emotion boiled over that afternoon. It was only after Julan intervened that peace was restored. Phoenix and Kyle agreed to babysit and Julan drove Rosemary to the Fish Hoek train station down the road. That would be the last time Julan ever saw Rosemary alive. Seven months later, on the 3rd of October, when Kyle and Phoenix appeared at Simon's Town Magistrates Court as accused number two and three respectively in the murder of Rosemary Theron, Julan would play back the events of that afternoon. In a letter she addressed to Rosemary before her funeral she wrote: *Over and over in my mind I think of ways I could have stopped that happening. So you would be alive and my friend Racy* [Phoenix] *would be free to surf and lead her life, saving up for college.*

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Late in March 2013, Chris Clark, a British freelance travel journalist living in Cape Town, received a knock on his front door. Standing in the doorway was Detective Chris Cloete, a heavyset man with fleshy cheeks and a thin moustache.

As a junior in the South African Police Service (SAPS), back in the early Nineties, Detective Cloete had been part of the task force assembled to apprehend the 'Station Strangler', Norman Azval Simons, the rapist and serial killer who murdered young boys and buried them in shallow sandy graves. He had been pulled into the search for Rosemary after the initial investigation had failed to

yield any concrete leads. The story the police had to go on was that she was last seen getting into a silver Mercedes driven by an unidentified white male. Hours of scouring CCTV footage of cars that matched that description had led Detective Cloete to Chris' front door.

Detective Cloete showed him a black-and-white photograph of Rosemary with the words, 'Missing March 7th, 2013,' scrawled underneath with a blue ball-point pen and he asked if Chris knew her. "Yes," Chris said, though he had met her only once before, in December 2012. Someone had talked to him and his girlfriend into giving Rosemary a ride back home after a performing job in Claremont. With her small frame perched in the backseat, Rosemary had cut a forlorn figure that night. She looked out of the side window and in-between long silences talked about her passion for being a clown.

"But how do I come into all of this?" Chris asked. At this point Detective Cloete pulled out a photograph of him driving a Mercedes with a Rosemary lookalike sitting in the passenger's seat. The car was a rental and Detective Cloete had traced it to Chris's address in Lakeside. The grainy photograph had been captured on CCTV, minutes after Rosemary is said to have been last seen leaving her house.

But in the days that followed the cloud of suspicion around Chris lifted after statements accounting for his whereabouts were supplied by his father, his girlfriend, and a mutual friend of Rosemary's. It was, however, one of several dead ends the investigation into Rosemary's disappearance would come up against before any kind of breakthrough.

The investigation itself had got off to a slow start. Phoenix and Kyle had hesitated about going to the police. "It was me who took the kids to the police station originally," Julan said. "They wanted to put it off." She had come looking for Rosemary two days later, on Saturday the 9th of March. She was leaving soon for Afrika Burn and Rosemary had promised to paint a banner for her but Julan hadn't heard from her. None or her other friends had seen or heard from Rosemary either and her phone went straight to voicemail. Phoenix and Kyle told Julan that they had last seen Rosemary on Thursday.

Edward and Liz said they didn't know Rosemary was missing until much later. Even though Phoenix didn't say anything to them, they do remember getting a feeling that something was wrong when she and Kyle "absolutely devoured a piece of bread" in the shop. "There was only about half a loaf, and we saw the way they ate, and that's when we realised there's definitely a problem," Liz said. Phoenix later told them that Rosemary had vanished.

"Mom does this to me," Phoenix said.

"And we said, 'Look, she left you with no money, she's not answering her cell phone. This is not a common scenario.'"

Despite the pressure from Edward and Liz to report the matter to the police, Phoenix remained obstinate about her decision. "I don't want any trouble for my mom," she said.

As the days wore on Julan eventually succeeded in getting Phoenix and Kyle to file a missing persons' report at Fish Hoek police station. The details contained in that report – the story about the silver Mercedes and the man with long blonde hair – would lay the groundwork for count two in the matter between the State and Phoenix Racing Cloud Theron: attempting to defeat the course of justice.

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Clovelly has a population of less than six hundred inhabitants, and it falls under the jurisdiction of Fish Hoek Police Station, the large suburb next to it. In the language of the former apartheid times, both are white areas – affluent and with spacious housing. According to census data from 2011, 88 percent of Clovelly's residents are white, and the majority of households have an average monthly income falling between a low of R12 800.00 and a high of R25 600.00.

Bordering Fish Hoek and Clovelly is Ocean View, a coloured township, where four out of five residents have not finished high school and nearly a third of the population is unemployed. To complete the picture, also close by is Masiphumelele, a black township with approximately 8000 residents housed in shacks. In an article published in the *Business Day*, writer and academic Jonny Steinberg says, "an astounding three-quarters of those aged between twenty and twenty-four [in Masiphumelele] are unemployed. Of those who do work, most earn between R400 and R800 a month. One in two will still not have work at the age of thirty."

The problem with reading statistics is that sometimes they can cloud situations instead of shedding light. Disembarking from the 0131 train at Fish Hoek station, one cold morning in June, I got an inkling of what it might mean for such disparate communities to live side by side. Fish Hoek has the subdued, lethargic feel of a holiday town; the kind of place where no one is in any great hurry. The business owners and the pensioners who fill the coffee shops and restaurants dotted along the beachfront and the main road are white and the labour force – the shop attendants, waiters, cleaners, et cetera – is made up almost exclusively of people who are not.

South Africa's apartheid past is not only written into its geography, but it is also embedded in the distribution of life chances – how one lives and how one dies. It's true to say that the distribution of violence remains split along racial lines. In 2012, for instance, SAPS recorded a total of 15 609 murders across the country, which evens out to 43 a day. In the same period, 607 877 other cases of violent crime – assault, rape, robbery, and attempted murder – were reported to the SAPS. Those numbers are high by any measure. But a closer inspection of the homicide statistics tells you more about where violence is clustered. Half of the murders in 2012 occurred in only 13 per cent of the police precincts located in under resourced and overcrowded urban neighbourhoods.

An overwhelming number of the casualties are young black men under the age of thirty and most have not finished secondary school.

This explains the disturbing undercurrent which coursed through the media coverage of the murder of Rosemary Theron. The intense media interest was in part because all the protagonists were white. The question that went undeclared, but could nonetheless be discerned by reading between the lines, is how could these things happen to white people? The reams of press coverage that followed after Phoenix and Kyle were arrested and charged with Rosemary's murder were devoted to answering that question and it seemed as if it was Rosemary's unorthodox lifestyle which was on trial.

Even though I caught the case after the wave of media interest had long subsided, the people closest to Rosemary, neighbours, and friends, still felt aggrieved at how she had been portrayed. They felt Rosemary – and by extension, they themselves – had been harshly judged. Consequently, they erected a wall of silence and barricaded themselves in. As one member of the Clovelly community phrased it, they "wouldn't agree to be part of anything sensationalist." To find my way around the silence, I talked to a number of officials who were involved in the case – police officers, attorneys, court clerks, etc. – and consulted a considerable trail of paperwork.

That morning I had come to visit Detective Cloete at the Fish Hoek police station, a rambling face-brick building along the main road. He wore short-sleeved shirt and black trousers. We sat in his second-floor office, furnished with just the basics – a desk, telephone, chairs, and a metal filing cabinet housing several case files. By leaning across from Detective Cloete's window, you can see the outer edge of the house Rosemary rented in Clovelly. He had kept an eye on Phoenix and Kyle during the seven months of Rosemary's disappearance.

Cloete believed the story about the man in the silver Mercedes, and he had followed up a dozen leads, all of which led to a dead end. From the background check he had run on Rosemary; he could tell that her life had been unstable. Rosemary had been in a few abusive relationships in the past and on more than one occasion had ended at the police station, filing a charge. "She was one of those people, you know, a hippie," he said.

It's a description I heard many times in news reports and by those close to her who were willing to talk. "Rosemary, she seemed like … a free spirit. I don't want to be rude, but like a hippie, an out there kind of person," one hairdresser said. Janine, a shop assistant with short blond hair and square rimmed glasses, said the same thing. "My impression was, oh no this poor girl, her mom's gone missing, who's probably into drugs. That was my impression. Her mom was eccentric – barefoot, dreadlocks, so when she went missing people didn't think too much of it."

Detective Cloete said he empathised with Phoenix. Once, when they were going over the facts of the case in his office, she broke down and cried. At the time he thought it was because she

was taking considerable strain, with her mom gone and having to look after her baby sister. Despite everything, however, she was diligent in her duties. She met with welfare officials and took Willow to school every day and washed her clothes. She also helped with her homework. "It was like they [Phoenix and Kyle] were the parents to that little girl. Even the way they spoke to her. I remember I was in Shoprite and I heard her say to her, "You can pick whatever you want for supper this evening," Janine said. "The mother seemed like the flaky one."

Parallel to the police investigation, the search for Rosemary galvanized a large number of her friends and acquaintances. They also raised money for the upkeep of her children. "When we heard she had gone missing, we were a bit unsure," said Felicity, a shop manager in Fish Hoek, who was close to Rosemary. "We were almost suspicious to see why or what had happened. We tried to get some psychics in to see where she was and they couldn't give us answers, although two said she was no longer with us."

They considered all the possible leads, no matter how outlandish. That maybe she'd had a serious head injury and she was checked into a hospital anonymously. Or maybe that she'd had a nervous breakdown and was locked in an institution somewhere. Or that maybe she had been kidnapped and was being held against her will. All these avenues of inquiry led nowhere. Rosemary had taken none of her belongings and the evidence at hand, such as her bank account remaining idle since the time of her disappearance, pointed to one logical conclusion. That she was no longer alive.

Out of all of Rosemary's friends committed to finding her, Richard Kraak appears to have been the most devoted. He and Rosemary had met each other in the early nineties, and they had remained close friends for more than twenty years. Detective Cloete said if it wasn't for his persistence – he phoned constantly to check up on the progress of the investigation – the mystery of Rosemary's disappearance might not have been solved.

I spoke to Richard three times over the phone and each time he rebuffed my request for an interview. During the seven months of Rosemary's disappearance, and for a brief while after Phoenix and Kyle were arrested, Richard was generous with the press. Naïvely so, perhaps.

In her classic text, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm says there is something "morally indefensible" at the heart of journalism. The journalist, Malcolm says, is a "kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse." Richard would not be so quick to disagree. He had felt betrayed by most journalists and how they gleefully portrayed Rosemary's life as rudderless and self-destructive.

There is, however, something heartbreakingly sad about reading his extensive Facebook updates from that year.

Initially, there is an upshot of optimism, a belief that Rosemary will soon be found.

Rosemary's friends are the most wonderful people in the world and launched an extensive search for her that covered the southern peninsula. Several private cars full of her friends and family went out and physically searched the southern peninsula and spread posters of her and visited old haunts like Redhill, Scarborough, Glencairne, Clovelly, Fish Hoek. Kommetje Cape Town. People on horseback were organized to specially look for her. Bike riders were asked what they saw around Silvermine dam and other remote places where they go every day, people walking their dogs were asked etc. etc.

Later that month, as the investigation keeps turning up blind alleys, optimism gives way to anger.

ROSEMARY THERON UPDATE: the friends and family of Rosie are still making an effort to get more info about how Rosie could just vanish. THE MOST IMPORTANT LEAD WE HAVE HAS NOT BEEN EXPLAINED. ROSIE WAS PICKED UP ON THURS EVE/night BY A BLONDE MAN IN A FANCY SILVERISH CAR. IT COULD BE A MERC. FANCY MIGHT MEAN SPORTY. THE CAR COULD BE MOST LIKELY A MERC NO OLDER THAN 10yrs. AFTER 20000 plus shares of rosemary missing person information AND HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF THEIR FRIENDS SEEING IT ON THEIR NEWS FEEDS HOW IS IT THAT NO ONE HAS COME FORWARD WITH INFORMATION CONCERNING THAT OCCASION/PERSON.

Then in August, after five months of desperately searching for Rosemary, despair sets in.

I am still tired so this will be brief. A trail of leads is still being followed by the police and privately. In other words every effort is still being made to find her. Leads have not run dry. I thank everyone that has generously helped to find rosemary. I would like to remind you here that I have played a central role because I was thrust into it, and duty bound as a friend to make an effort to find rosemary. A circle of hearts needs to be defined so that I can take my place in the circle and not be close to the centre anymore.

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Despite the intense activity swirling around them, Phoenix and Kyle maintained a veneer of calm. Four months after Rosemary's disappearance, they moved from Clovelly to Gordon's Bay, a harbour town nearly 60 kilometres away. They rented a small flat on the same property where Godfrey Scheepers, a friend of theirs, lived. Shortly after completing the move Phoenix posted the following message:

'Hey mom! We have moved to a beautiful new home that is so fancy Willow is blown away everyday! She has her own swimming pool and her school is epic. We talk about you every day and pray for you wherever you are, don't worry about us we are happy and strong. You'll be happy to know that Willow cleans her room everyday on her own accord (she even says please and thank you) and her teachers think she is the loveliest girl in the world. We love you.'

In September 2013, seven months after Rosemary went missing and it seemed as if the mystery of her disappearance would never be solved, twenty-year-old Godfrey Scheepers, accused number one, walked into a police station, and said she had been murdered and he knew where to find the body.

In the sworn statement he gave to the police, Godfrey said Phoenix and Kyle had murdered Rosemary and buried the body in the backyard of the house in Clovelly. Then, when they moved to Gordon's Bay, he had helped Kyle to dig up Rosemary's decomposed body which they dumped in an open veld near the intersection of Baden Powell Drive and Strandfontein Road. Rosemary's body lay there for another two months before Godfrey came forward after falling out with Kyle.

The next day, one of the newspaper headlines read: "Missing Woman Found: Murder."

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As writers – to quote Joan Didion – we're inclined to "look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five." We turn over the details of a murder, searching for hidden clues and the wider meanings it might yield about the society we live in. But browsing through the *Cape Argus* the day after Phoenix had been sentenced to twenty years in jail, somehow the sermon – the social or moral lesson – seemed to elude me.

Judge Robert Henney, who presided over the case at the Western Cape High Court, said: "This is a very serious offence – the planned and premeditated murder of her mother. The sentence agreed upon is, in my view, just. This case is where she killed someone ... her mother, and it will haunt her for the rest of her life."

Murder arouses incomprehension. The first question everyone asks is why? As an explanation, Phoenix's attorneys told the Cape High Court that "the accused was neglected by the deceased virtually since birth."

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When Rosemary had come back from Chile she met and married a man named Darren and they moved into a house in Knysna following the stay at Transformation fare. But the relationship was turbulent from the start and fights were constant. Once, Rosemary called the police on Darren and had him arrested because he was physically abusive. They separated for a short while but got back together again, this time in Cape Town.

Phoenix said they drifted from place to place and Rosemary's on-and-off relationship with Darren finally disintegrated after he developed a tik habit. The fighting and arguing got so bad that one time they got thrown out of the cramped flat they were renting in Table View. It was around this time that Phoenix says she was sexually abused a second time by her maternal grandmother's boyfriend during a family visit. She was nine years old when it happened.

When she was twelve, Rosemary sent Phoenix to live with her father. She commuted between Knysna – where she was being home schooled by her father – and Cape Town. She re-entered formal schooling again when she was sixteen. Her father sent her to Knysna High School and according to various reports; she excelled at art and English. She also became the editor of the school newspaper.

She'd also started drinking and experimenting with dagga. She said she smoked joints laced with mandrax – a sedative which was banned in 1977 but remains one of the most widely used drugs in Cape Town. Phoenix also said that every time she travelled back to Cape Town, she would go to trance parties with her mother. Sometimes they would drink and use recreational drugs together. Janine said sometimes the "Mom looked more high than the kids."

It was close to this time that Phoenix met Kyle and she said she "fell deeply in love with him." Kyle had been using tik for a while by then. When they moved to Rosemary's place in Clovelly, they found the house in a mess. Dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen and clothes strewn across the floor. Phoenix said it was obvious that her mother was on something.

In her version of events, that afternoon on the 7th of March, after the fight with Rosemary, is when Kyle came up with a plan to kill her. At first, Kyle claimed he couldn't remember anything about that day because of his excessive drug use. The weekend before the murder, he said he felt ill and couldn't sleep and he had lost his appetite. The only lucid memory is days after, of him standing in a hole with a sheet lying next to him. The court sent him for psychiatric assessment at Valkenberg Hospital and it was found that he "does not suffer from a psychiatric disorder. His memory loss for the days preceding and including the period of alleged offence was not due to any psychiatric or pathological cause." He later admitted that he did say to Phoenix that "it would be better if Rosemary wasn't around".

According to Phoenix, after Rosemary left to go to her casting, Kyle was angry. He said he was going to hogtie her when she came back. "We'll have to run away from everyone for the rest of our lives if we do that," Phoenix said. To which Kyle said they would at least have each other and they could take Willow with them.

In the guilty plea bargain she signed; Phoenix claimed Kyle had said he was going to kill Rosemary, but he couldn't do it alone. He needed help. The plan they came up with is that Phoenix would distract her mother and Kyle would come up from behind and strangle Rosemary. In the evening they put Willow to bed and Kyle got the rope, duct tape and black plastic bags.

When Rosemary came back that evening, she was in a good mood because of a man she'd met. Phoenix walked up to her and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry for fighting with you earlier," she said to her mother. As planned, Kyle came up from behind and strangled Rosemary. He strangled

her for four minutes. When he finally let go of the rope Rosemary "emitted a huge sigh" before she lost consciousness.

It was Phoenix who cleaned up her mother's blood, which had dripped from her ears as she died. They covered her body in a blanket and black bags and moved the body to the backyard. The backyard was littered with garbage and they hid the body under a tarpaulin. Two days later, they moved the body again. This time they dug a hole in the ground and buried her.

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The trauma caused by Rosemary's disappearance and the discovery of her body nearly destroyed the Theron family. Two weeks after her memorial service Rosemary's sister, Angelique, hanged herself. Rosemary's mother also sank into a severe depression and is now permanently institutionalised. Willow had to undergo therapeutic counselling and is now living with foster parents in Knysna.

Judge President John Hlophe, who handed down Kyle's sentence at the Western Cape High Court in December 2015, described Rosemary's murder as a "brutal killing" and sentenced Kyle to the same prison term as Phoenix: 18 years imprisonment with five years suspended on condition that he not be found guilty of a similar offence to the one he has been convicted for. The sentence would have been 20 years in prison, but the judge reasoned that Kyle had already spent two years under house arrest.

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The tragedy of Rosemary Theron first caught my interest when I saw a photograph of Phoenix standing in the dock at the Western Cape High Court. In the photograph, she's wearing a beige hoodie and she looks lost and completely alone; a lone survivor washed ashore after a shipwreck. I wanted to find out more about the world she had come from. To find, as Didion says, the social or moral lesson.

The penultimate paragraph in the letter Julan wrote to Rosemary reads: *I am so sad Rosie, so sad to lose you as a friend and so sad to have you murdered this way and with your beautiful girl helping to kill you. I feel so much sadness and pain; I don't know when it will go away.* Maybe there is nothing more that needs to be said than that.

WE KILLED THE PRESIDENT

I cannot think of the dictatorship in my homeland without hearing the marching band. The brass marching band that accompanied El Presidente wherever he went inside our little republic. Arriving at mass on Sundays, say, or at the house of a concubine at midnight. Those brass instruments drowned out the toll of the church bell, the urchins playing hopscotch or some such in the street & the sensuous moans of lovers. Even in our dreams, a tuba or trombone groaned in E major. Of course, there were other sounds, too. The hiss of a tear gas canister. A truncheon landing on the small backs of children. Boot soles marching up & down on the asphalt. But it was the band that inspired our rebellion against El Presidente. We were driven mad by that eternal brassy noise. A hundred thousand swans fell out of the sky: mired in so much misery they drank themselves to death. Our little republic was in a state of perturbation. It was the giraffes who plotted our mutiny. The giraffes visited all the children in their dreams & told each of us to kill El Presidente. The next morning, at sunrise, we hid in the trenches by the roadside. The instruction of the giraffes chiming inside our heads: *Kill El Presidente! Kill El Presidente! Kill El Presidente!* We were armed with whatever we could find: a pair of shears, a cracked vase, an old arch-lever file, wheelbarrows & shovels. We crouched by the roadside, an army of child assassins, as the sun rose over our heads. Waiting for the brass marching band to begin.

BLOW UP YOUR LIFE

1.

I feel the glass lenses of the cameras staring at me, cold and evaluating. A bright whirl of disco lights illuminates the stage. I can't see the studio audience, but they are out there. In the dark, on the edge of their seats. Is Ru watching? Even if I am only a stranger to him, I hope not. I hope not a single person I know is watching. But of course, they all are. Shame is what drives the ratings.

But I guess this is better than another eight years of work jail. Sorry, I mean, "Debt Restitution Centre." The DRC I was dispatched to is on a small island here in the North. I should consider myself lucky. That's what the warden told me. Sorry, I mean "section 18 team manager." I'm not supposed to call her the warden.

And the other forty people who work on the telemarketing floor of Pterodactyl Enterprises ™ are not "prisoners," either, they are my "colleagues." We should consider ourselves lucky to be able to make ourselves useful to society after what we've done.

We are not literally chained at the ankle to our desks. Not really. It's just that every day in the on the island is routine. At 5.30 am, we wake up to Olivier Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time.' Classical music, Pterodactyl's guidelines state, is good for our cognitive rehabilitation. Then we're let out of the holding cells, sorry, "executive debtor accommodation," on the third floor and we head down to the dining room. We're fed a bowl of oats and a poached egg, before clocking into the ten-hour shift making phone calls, endless phone calls. We're in the high-end luxury department. We sell endangered species. There are tycoons out there for whom owning the last of a given species – speckled piranha, say, or a white rhino – is a worthwhile pursuit.

We are paying off our debt to society, we are told. There are other people in debt restitution living in terrible conditions, who have worse jobs, who fall into their beds at the end of the workday, lifeless as corpses. Where you end up working in the DRC is based on a variety of factors: age and gender, your education, work history. I only qualified for telemarketing.

I have eight years left on the island. Eight years before my debt is cleared, I mean.

It's why I'm here, even though I find the idea of the show repulsive.

The theme song, a poppy jingle, starts up. The disco lights swirl dramatically across the stage and the host, Jakob März, or Mr. *März,* comes striding out from the wings. He's an ex-wrestler, a WWE champ turned B-grade reality TV magnate. He is slick in a white suit, no tie, cleanly shaved head. The audience, hundreds of them, rise to their feet.

The idea of the show is that all these rich people – clapping, cheering – and millions more watching from home, get to decide what happens to us. Our lives are literally in their

hands, or fingertips. They get to vote on whether we remain indentured or get another chance at life, debt-free.

Mr. März waits for the applause to settle, a few seconds, probably, but it feels like a lifetime. I don't want to be here. But I don't want to go back to the DRC, either.

"Welcome to another edition of the show where we explore real lives, real screw-ups, real consequences! Mistakes were made. Was it bad luck or bad judgement? We're here to find out! Stick around. I'm your host, Mr. März, and this is… Blow Up Your Life!"

2.

"Hello, contestant 818!"

"Hi," I say, feeling queasy already, like a thousand cockroaches are crawling under my skin.

"Do you know why you're here, Evelyn?" Mr. März asks.

The question is rhetorical. He knows the answer. Everyone does.

My debt to society.

I'd never paid much attention to the news, you know. Still, it was hard not to miss all the talk about a 'global economic crisis', 'financial meltdown,' 'unsecured lending.' Words I'd never properly grasped. But from the panicked talking heads that filled our screens those days, I understood that people like me were the problem. We were to blame. The world and its complex financial systems floated on a bubble of cheap credit. It was good for a time until, well, like all bubbles it burst. We had amassed too much debt that we couldn't pay back. Homes had to be foreclosed and cars repossessed. Companies shut doors. The centre could no longer hold and all that.

Jeff Green, an internet entrepreneur and the world's first trillionaire, emerged as one of the biggest proponents of collateralised debt. He exerted considerable political influence in both hemispheres. Governments searching for a way out of the crisis were swayed by his unorthodox ideas. Green's proposition was a simple one, you know. To allow the world's wealthiest individuals and corporations to buy up a person's debt at 10c on the dollar in cash. This way, the banks and other financial institutions could recoup some of the money they had lost. In turn, debtors would automatically be obliged to work for said company or individual until their debt had been cleared.

The UN General Assembly and then later, the Security Council, ratified Bill 70225 without so much as a lone dissenting voice rising to defend the indebted masses. Cowards. The Bill meant we were no longer autonomous individuals, but the property of shareholders, a corporate entity, or some rich person. There were clashes with the police and army out on the

streets in Tehran, Christchurch, Bamako, everywhere really. But the resistance was quashed with drones and tear gas in a matter of weeks.

But that is not the answer Mr. März wants to hear. He wants me to cut myself open so people can pick through the bloody entrails of my life. Autopsy as entertainment.

"Do you believe you're a good person, Evelyn?"

"I'm not an outstanding human being," I say. "I'm full of mistakes. My life could have branched out into different directions..."

"It could have if only you hadn't blown it up! Let's dig in to where it all went bad. Let's go back to the beginning, where it all started."

"Do you remember this?"

Mr. *März* pulls up a picture of me in my striped, blue school uniform.

I flinch. Remembering the graffiti on the back of a toilet door in a dingy bar somewhere. I was eighteen and running away from my life and the bars all looked like replicas of one another. *"Sooner or later, everyone wonders, but where is the schoolgirl who used to be me?* [iii]"

3.

Mr. März is paid to do this. To pry open even the scars we have hidden from ourselves.

"Do you remember this girl?" Mr März prods again.

Men like Mr. März are like sharks. Hunters of prey. They can smell blood from a distance.

"I used to love birds," I say, "back when we lived in the South. Sparrows, swans, pigeons, Egyptian geese, Orange-breasted Sunbirds. I envied their freedom; to be able to fly away from everything. Maybe I would have become an ornithologist if..."

"But you got yourself into a mess, didn't you? You were irresponsible. Poor judgement."

I feel Mr März circling, ready to sink his teeth into me. The crowd laughs, encouraging him to do his worst.

"Do you want to tell us about that?"

Never. But I don't have a choice. Not if I want my debt cleared.

"I don't know," I say, my eyes beginning to water.

"Go on," Mr März says, "go on."

He wants me to lay open my shame for all them to judge. That is the point of the show. The appeal of its crassness.

"Where did it all go wrong?"

I close my eyes against the lights. The memory...

...I was sixteen and the seasons were out of joint that year. It should have been early winter, but It was summer still. The sky a cloudless blue, the day I climbed up the stairwell to Mr. Arendse's apartment. "So good of you to come," Mr. Arendse said when he opened the door. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. "Did anyone see you come in?" Mr. Arendse asked, once I stood inside the hallway of the apartment, gazing down at the tiles. "Good, good," Mr. Arendse said when I shook my head. He glanced outside and shut the door behind me.

But I don't say this out loud and Mr. *März* raises the stakes.

"You had sex with your teacher," he says.

A murmur ripples through the studio audience.

"I.." My voice cracks.

"And you didn't use protection," Mr. *März* says, displaying a frowned face to the audience.

"I was sixteen and he was thirty-seven. I didn't think..."

"This is how you blow up your lives! You don't think!" Mr. *März* bellows. "You chose a bad man and he upped and left you."

It's true. He did.

"Don't ever call me again," Mr. Arendse said and cut the call. Hardly a week later, he vanished, and I never heard from him again. He cleared out his apartment in and stopped turning up for his classes at St. Mary's.

I was an awkward teenager, shy, reclusive and my braces made me angsty around the other girls. Mr. Arendse, our English teacher, latched onto my insecurities. A bad man chose me, I want to say in my defence. *A bad man chose me.* But I know that is not what the wrestler wants to hear.

This is the part in the show when the contestant either breaks down or hurls themselves at Mr. *März.* Arms swinging wildly. That's what gets the ratings. But I will not give them that.

Instead, I nod at Mr *März* and swivel my chair to face the audience. Their eyes ogling at me like they see something barbarous.

4.

"Well then, let's talk about your mother," Mr *März* says. "What did she think when you told her?"

Something aches at my heart centre. Ma.

"I was going to tell her that day. But..."

"Go on."

"One day stretched out into two weeks. I slept terribly."

"You were ashamed."

My eyes are all glassy again at the thought of Ma.

I had the same recurring nightmare, that fortnight. Of being stranded at sea in a small boat, rowing against the current. It's nightfall and I can't make out any sort of landmass or a lighthouse in the distance. I would wake in the dead of night, arms flailing. Gasping for air.

"And when you told her?"

"She… she could hardly look at me."

"I clean people's kitchens," Ma said, a faint tremor in her voice. I see her now, tired and weary at the end of the day. "Cook, clean...I did all that, so you my child, could have something I never had: a chance at a different life."

We had never been friends, or confidants, in the way some mothers and daughters are. But she had always been there; a distant star hovering over my life. But the pregnancy changed all that. We drifted apart and it would take years, many years, before we found our way back to each other again.

"And then what happened?"

"My...um...My life was still ahead of me. I gave the baby up."

The studio resounds with a chorus of boos and jeers.

It was a boy. I took one look at him and wished him a long and happy life. Afterwards, I closed my eyes and asked the nurses to take him away.

"Do you want to look at him now?"

A toddler's scrunched up face beams on screen. Something clutches at my chest. Is it Ru? I don't know. It could be anyone. It's all so long ago now.

The crowd boos and hisses.

"You know," Mr. *März* says, "you could have signed up for a government grant. You could have raised him yourself."

Mr. *März*'s piety singes my nerves.

"I did right by him," I say. "I did the right thing."

I don't know what name his adoptive parents gave him, but I started calling him Ru. In my own private language, the name stands for forgiveness. It mattered to me then, I guess. The thought that I could one day be forgiven.

"And...?"

"I tried to forget. To put it all behind me. I crossed oceans, running. I ran until I couldn't run anymore."

"What were you running from?"

"Myself, mostly."

"And how did that work out for you Evelyn?"

I shake my head.

"It worked for a time and then it didn't."

You can't outrun your own shadow. The shame and guilt trailed me wherever I went. So, I stopped running. I had to if I wanted to go on living.

5.

On screen now is my mid-term report card from the summer I dropped out. An even spread of 'B's and 'C's. The school principal, Mrs. Peters, had said I couldn't continue with my studies. Outlining the reasons why through a series of hackneyed phrases: "standards to uphold," "setting an example," etc., and of course, she ended, appropriately enough, by saying: "good luck with your future endeavours."

"Look how promising your life was. You could have been anything, Evelyn. Anything. And what did you do?"

"I worked illegally as a shop attendant."

On screen, the mid-term report card segues to a wide-angle shot of the mini mart in Old Town here in the North. It's brightly lit isles and kitschy interior. And there behind the cash register is Abdul. "Please, please" he'd always say, "Abdul. No mister." The audience probably thinks I slept with him, too. That I didn't learn. But they are wrong about that.

Abdul was in his middle forties. He'd migrated to the North as a teenager, having fled from a territory in the South overrun by militias and warlords. I suppose because he understood the hardships endured by dark-skinned immigrants in the North, he didn't mind hiring undocumented workers. He paid our wages under the table and treated us all like family.

I stocked shelves and swept floors but those were some of the happiest times of my life. I had never learned how to build enduring friendships or understood what it meant to be part of a community. But something welled up inside me at the mini mart. I came to think of the community that had orbited around it as members of an extended family. Despite our different circumstances we were all connected.

Over the years, I observed lives truncate (divorce, death, retrenchment, etc) or expand to accommodate a spouse, pets, job promotions, children. And we stood with each other during all of it. The ebb and flow of fortune.

"You should have planned better for your future Evelyn. Gone back to school. Put money aside. If you had, you would have been sitting over there," Mr. *März* says, pointing at the audience and at the ascending row of seats.

"Should the audience vote to give you a second chance?" Mr. *März* asks. "What guarantee do they have that you won't blow up your life again this time?"

This is the part in the show where I am supposed to act contrite. Show remorse for all my bad choices if I want another chance at being a person again.

"No," I say. "Of course not. I made mistakes."

But there is also such a thing as malice. Like Abul's Citroën being tampered with by bad men who hated him for hiring immigrants like us. The Citroën skidded off the asphalt and into the river that runs through Old Town.

Abul's son, Abdulrahim, inherited the business. The mini mart wasn't the same after that and gradually, the bonds we'd formed with each other started to fray.

The day before Ma phoned to say that she was sick and needed my help, Abdulrahim called a staff meeting to say the shop would be shutting its doors because we weren't making enough profit.

I didn't stay for the rest of the meeting. I got my things and never went back there again.

6.

"Let's talk about your mother again, Evelyn," Mr. *März* says.

There is a close-up of Ma on screen. Her hair covered in a headscarf.

"Would you do it all again?" Mr. *März* asks. "Make the same choice?"

I steady my voice. We are getting to the place where the path beneath me crumpled.

Ma had been diagnosed with Myelodysplastic syndrome. Cancer in the blood that had metastasized into acute myeloid leukemia. The hospitals here in the North are better equipped and I'd arranged for Ma fly over. Neither of us had any medical insurance but I had to make a choice. Let Ma fall into her grave or incur what would turn out to be eleven years' worth of debt in high interest loans. In other words, to exchange her life for mine.

"Your mother will be dead within a year," the hospital health finance manager had outlined the facts coldly. "Given the prohibitive cost of treatment, our advice is euthanasia."

The hospital overlooked a small park, and I went and stood by the windowsill. Observing a flock of geese walking towards the pond. Then a short while later, one of the patients, adjusting to his new prosthetics, shuffling by with a physio.

I couldn't let Ma go. Not yet.

"No," I say to Mr. *März*. "I have been rehabilitated. I will not blow up my life again this time."

The audience breaks out into applause as my eyes well up at the memory of leaving the crematorium with my mother's ashes.

7.

"This is the part in the show where you, the audience, get to vote," Mr. *März* says. "Mistakes were made. Was it bad luck or bad judgement? You, the audience, get to decide."

I close my eyes.

I lean back into the chair remembering the time I received my debtor's notice. Two men knocked on my door at sunrise. Dressed in bottle-green fatigues. They took off their visored hats and asked to come inside.

"Ma'am", one of them said, handing me a letter he'd pulled from his breast pocket. The letter listed my new employee-identity number at the top left corner - GES-00-11-09-14-27 - and my debt to the hospital. The letter informed me that I would no longer be a person, in a manner of speaking. All decisions concerning my person would henceforth be the sole responsibility of Pterodactyl Enterprises ™. And that the ferry to one of the subsidiary branches would be leaving at midday. I had four hours to pack what I needed.

I thought about taking Ma's ashes, but then I changed my mind. Ma had been poor all her life. "I clean people's kitchens," she'd said to me all those years ago. She deserved better. I went outside and scattered her ashes everywhere, beneath the trees and on the grass. A part of her, I thought, would root into the soil and she would forever have a place in this world.

Afterwards, I packed a set of clothes into a scuffed brown suitcase and waited for the men to return.

"Are you ready?" the men asked me when they returned.

"The votes have come in," Mr. *März* says, rising to his feet.

"Are you ready to hear the results Evelyn," he says, walking towards me.

You can feel it against your skin. Like sunshine. The anticipation of the audience.

"Yes," I say, peeling my eyes open. "Yes, I am."

B GRADE

The J.

The boys were fourteen when they met in the J that November in '99. The J is the name they gave to the Juvenile Detention Centre in Norton, forty-kilometres east of the capital. They each had trodden similar paths to get there. Tatenda had slashed a lanky, tough-talking teenager across the face with a razor blade and Chenzira - everyone called him Chucks - had swung a right at Mr. Barnes, the chemistry teacher at St. Georges. The blow connected with Mr. Barnes' jaw and caused him to sway on his feet. Chucks' classmates gasped but Chucks himself, lacking the good sense to back down, followed up with an uppercut that flattened Mr. Barnes on the concrete.

Chucks liked to say the J was just a side street away from the worst place in the world. The boys, three hundred in total, were housed in a large dormitory that stank of body odour and faecal matter. Cockroaches, big as your palm, lunged across the concrete from sunup to sundown. Who knew how the cockroaches got so big when hunger gnawed at everybody's stomach? The boys were fed breakfast at 10am and the day's last meal at 3pm: sadza and boiled cabbage swirling in what looked like dirty water.

But the worst about the J wasn't the skid-marked toilets that made your stomach churn, it was the head warden, Ronald 'the Terrible.' A former policeman whose best ideas about conflict resolution had been torn out of the pages of the Old Testament.

If the boys got rowdy, Ronald knocked their shaved heads together. And if you looked at him funny, a quick sideways glance, say, or the downward curl of lips as his large frame dawdled past, he stood you up against the wall and punched you in the kidneys. Or he would squeeze your testicles until your eyes popped. But Ronald administered the worst of his punishments out of sight, in a small windowless storage room on the ground floor.

Chucks and Tatenda had never been to the abattoir, as the boys called it, but there was an endless swirl of rumour about what went on down there. Somebody had said Ronald kept a collection of sjamboks strong enough to rip open the back of any man, dead or alive. The boys who returned from abattoir hardly said a word. How could they? Everyone could see that those boys were on the edge of some place dark. Even the toughest, boys who grew up in abusive foster homes or on the street, returned with a hollowness in their eyes. But they were the lucky ones. A few of the juvenile detainees were never heard from again.

Luckily, Chucks and Tatenda were the offspring of long serving cabinet ministers who were known to be this close with the president. In real and practical terms, they were the president's nephews. Once word got out about that, the boys were treated differently. Even though being treated differently wasn't what they desired.

They ate the same terrible food as everyone else and slept under the same dirty blankets, but they were inoculated from the brutality of the J. The boys were accorded diplomatic immunity. None of the wardens smacked them across the face because, you know, that's how things were done

in the J. And none of the lifers - boys who'd been in the J for so long that even they had lost count - ever demanded a blow job from either Chucks or Tatenda. In the end, the similarity of their circumstances is what drew them together. Birds of a feather and what not...

"This is me, yo"

Chucks and Tatenda still had another month to go in the J but their fathers being who they were...everyone knows how the story goes. A phone call here, a phone call there and the boys were let out a week before Christmas. Waiting outside the gates of the J on a hot December morning, the boys pounded fists and promised to keep in touch. Word is bond, Chucks said, strolling towards an E-class Mercedes with government plates.

Like soldiers newly returned from the battle front, Chucks and Tatenda found it hard adjusting to life in the suburbs. They were now so used to walking around barefoot on cold concrete that even something as small as stepping on carpet unsettled them. Some part of their inner circuitry needed to be wired back to the J. Its rough smells and the knowledge of what men can do to each other. Their home lives, disconcertingly similar - moneyed, suburban, and presided over by philandering alcoholic fathers - now seemed endlessly hollow.

Each of the boys had a crew. A gang of followers ensnared by the aura of violence that radiated around each of them. These were private school kids who loved playing at being American gangsters. They'd all grown up watching B Grade American television and the interior lives had been moulded by it. They spoke in twangy American accents and dressed like Crips or Bloods. Or best say it like this: they strutted around dressed how they imagined gangsters in the American ghettos would dress. Velour tracksuit pants and Timberland boots. Doo Rags and gold chains and earrings.

Chuck had spent time with boys from the ghetto and there was nothing pretty about. They didn't wear cologne or underwear by Calvin Klein. The J had given him clarity. Chucks saw his crew for what they really were: a bunch of rich kids who would never the kind of deprivation that entails not possessing underwear.

And so early on Christmas Day Chucks rung up Tatenda. "This is me, yo," Chucks said over the telephone and two hours later, he sat reclined on a long white leather couch at Tatenda's house, watching *Reservoir Dogs* on a gigantic television screen.

Sitting together like this brought back memories of the J. How they'd shared things with each other that they hadn't told anyone else. Tatenda had confided in Chucks that his father had a thing for high school girls, and he'd lost count of just how many of them he's seen riding around in the passenger seat of his father's Mercedes. And how thinking about that, and his Ma, made him

feel like someone had placed a scalding hot iron on his chest. Chucks, in turn, told Tatenda about his father's temper and the one time he'd nearly choked his mother to death with an electrical cord.

Once the movie ended and the credits rolled on screen, Tatenda turned to face Chucks and said, "mutha fucka, do you want a drink?"

Chucks nodded.

Tatenda got up from the couch and disappeared down the passage. He walked back a short while later holding a 750ml bottle of vodka and two green tumblers which he set down on a cherry wood coffee table. Tatenda raised the vodka bottle to the sky and the liquid shimmered when it caught the sunlight spilling in from the windows. Me and you, he said to Chucks, we've seen things. We've done time together. That makes us brothers, you know, family. At that, Tatenda leaned over the coffee table and poured each of them three caps-full with no ice.

Chucks let drink swirl in his hand and then drank it all in one swig. The vodka burned his throat and he suddenly felt light-headed, like a balloon filling up with helium. "Yo man," he called out to Tatenda. "I'm floating." The boys each seemed to get a good laugh out of that. They poured themselves more drinks and laughed some more until nightfall.

Later, when it was dark out, the boys decided they wanted to be in a place where they could see some girls. It's Christmas after all, one of them said. They settled on Archipelago. An underground club on Second Street that filled wall to wall with underage drinkers during school holidays.

Tatenda said they could use one of his father's cars parked in the garage to get there. A 70s merc that had been re-upholstered and fitted with leather seats. "I didn't know you could drive," Chucks said, buckling his seatbelt. "I just don't have a licence to prove it," Tatenda said, passing what remained of the vodka to Chucks before pressing the key into ignition.

A full moon sat among the twinkling stars and as the boys drove down empty street, windows down. Mobb Deep's 'Shook Ones' pulsing through the speakers.

Reservoir Dogs

Slow down, Chucks said. The boys were nearing the CBD and Tatenda, pressing a foot down on the accelerator, had run through a red light.

Neither of the boys noticed the man until it was too late. The collision sent the Merc spinning in widening circles across the asphalt. The vodka bottle slipped from Chucks' grasp and tumbled onto the floor and once the car had come to stop, the boys were too rattled to move. They sat there, silent and still, breathing in shallow breaths.

When the boys stepped out of the vehicle, still trembling, they saw the man lying on the loose gravel by the side of the road. It had been a scorching hot day, but he wore a purple raincoat,

buttoned down to the knees, and gumboots. The man - short, grey-haired - stared back at them in the moonlight, his rheumy eyes not blinking. There was no blood anywhere, but you could tell he had been hurt and hurt badly. The boys crouched down to the gravel and tried to rouse him, but the man lay there, looking up at them.

"Fuuuck!" Tatenda said, pacing up and down the street. "Let's get out of here. We have to get out of here."

Chucks grabbed his friend by the shirt front and told him to get a grip on himself and to, "shut the fuck up." It was the first time in their friendship that they didn't agree on something.

"We need to get help," Chucks said. "Go get the police or something."

"Fuuuck no," Tatenda said emphatically. "There'll lock us up again and who knows for how long this time?"

"We don't have a choice," Chucks said. His voice softening. Pleading almost.

"You can go back but I'm not ready to go back," Tatenda said.

"Then what now?" Chucks said, letting go of Tatenda's shirt.

"The reservoir," Tatenda said.

"I was baptised there as a kid," Chucks said. "I know the place."

Afterwards, the boys stood silently by the water's edge and the water's wrinkled surface glistened in the moonlight.

"There's no turning back now," Tatenda said.

"Word is bond," Chucks said.

Panic at the Disco

Hi kids! Do you like violence? Wanna see me stick nine-inch nails through each one of my eyelids?[iv] It was close to midnight and Eminem's nasal voice reverberated through the speakers. The boys stood shoulder to shoulder in a darkened corner, ogling at the girls on the dancefloor, their supple bodies twisting and twirling in a wash of crimson light.

Later, Chucks stood in a short queue by the bar, tapping his feet in rhythm to D'Angelo. They'd reached that point in the night when the dj starts spinning slow, sultry R'n'B jams and the couples on the dancefloor start feeling each other up.

Chucks had edged closer to the bar when Tatenda ran out of the bathroom screaming, crashing into people, and spilling their drinks.

"What's going on with you?" Chucks said.

Tatenda looked at him with eyes that wouldn't sit still. Skin glazed in sweat.

Tatenda leaned closer and whispered into Chuck's ear: "I saw him, I saw him."

What Tatenda meant by this is that he'd seen a reflection of the man with the raincoat in the bathroom mirror. The man, short and stoutly built, just stood there, and stared at him with those rheumy eyes.

"Stop tripping," Chucks said.

"Let's get out of here," Tatenda said.

Moments later the boys squeezed into the car which they'd parked in front of Bakers Inn on Second Street.

"It's true," Tatenda said, reversing out of the parking space. "I saw him."

Chucks cracked open the side window when they drove past the scene of the accident but Tatenda kept looking straight ahead.

The boys were caught up in the weather of their own thoughts that they didn't notice the man in the backseat, in a raincoat, drenched with water. It was only after he spoke - *thou hast slain thy brethren of thy father's house* - did they turn their heads.

Everyone knows how the story goes from here. Chucks and Tatenda screamed their lungs out. The man leads the boys down to the reservoir where they drowned early that morning. Two days later, a dozen police cars and a white mortuary van would be sent down to retrieve the bodies of three dead. Three deaths but the third would quickly be forgotten. (Even here, he doesn't have a name). And for a time, all the newspapers would talk about were the president's nephews. Chucks and Tatenda. Their photographs were all over. And for a time, the boys were a big as movie stars.

HUNGER

ACT I

And so you see Father, my wife and I are not bad people. We did not set out to break the Tenth Commandment. But the years we couldn't conceive, seven in all from the day we married, filled us with envy and made us wicked. We gazed at our neighbours and their children, phlegm gathering in our throats. Even the sight of the street urchins, in their frayed garments and bare feet, dirtied our hearts with bitterness. Bitterness that in turn leaked into our home, into our marital bed. We had only this irrepressible hunger for a child as our companion and we made love with neither tenderness nor desire and afterwards, we turned our backs to each other, feigning sleep, while between us lay this vast archipelago of unspoken words. And it would have gone on this way, the years unspooling into decades and decades of unremitting misery had the Good Lord not granted us a mercy. Last October K., my wife, missed her period and not long after her lemon-sized breasts swelled until they were as large as cantaloupes, brimming with baby's milk, and she developed an appetite for strange meats – boiled geckos, fried chameleons and bats, stewed centipedes, skinned cockroaches. A weaker man would have rebelled, gathered his belongings, and left but not I, Father. Not me. Those days I spent cutting open cobras and bats were truly some of the happiest under this [*points to the ceiling*], our God's everlasting sun, moon, and sky. But I shall not dwell on those months except to say that for the first time in years K. and I had smiles on our faces. We were as happy as a conquered country on the eve of independence. Our dream was within reach, and on the last day of winter, a son was born to us, there at the maternity hospital on Mazowe Street, but it was a long and tortuous birth. Three days and three nights I stood at my wife's right-hand side until she gave birth. But seconds after our son was born, a broody silence, laden with questions that were not being asked, spread over us like a dark cloud. My wife's hand, slicked with sweat, suddenly felt cold. As cold as a fish washed up on the riverbank. The baby didn't make a sound. He lay inert in the midwife's arms as a streak of lightning splintered the night sky...Did I mention that it was night Father? Well, it was night, and the power cut and for a minute or so before the generator made its mechanical noises and the row of fluorescents flickered and the many machines whirred to life, an eternity when we were steeped in a darkness so deep you could barely make out the fingers on your own hand, the boy let out a sound unlike anything I'd heard before or since, something between a growl and a scream, say, like a wounded animal, maddened at finding itself caught in a trap. It was not a graceful sound, let me tell you Father, but it released the bitterness that for seven years had made us so mean-spirited. The boy hushed when the power came back on

and the fluorescents began emitting a bright, almost heavenly, glow. The midwife looked askance at the baby, at his fish scale like skin, webbed hands, and feet, and shivered slightly when she caught sight of his eyes. They were solid black, as if someone had planted two large marbles into his sockets. Then, of course, there was the smell. It was horrible Father. Horrible. Imagine the scent of rotten eggs carried along in a November breeze. The midwife handed the baby to K. "Congratulations," she said, in a voice like a child's, barely audible above the thundering rain. But as you know Father, babies can single out an uncharitable heart. Did Christ himself not say come unto me, earnest in your hearts like children? But I digress. The boy started making the same animal noises as before. The midwife shrank back and nearly toppled over as she did so. Sensing the unease spreading in the maternity ward, I fell to my knees and cried out: "People of the country! There is nothing to be frightened. Rejoice and be glad for the Lord has blessed us with a son. We shall call him Gabriel. For the years of barrenness are no more. We have been led out of the wilderness." Soon as the words left my mouth and as I made the sign of the cross, I heard K. scream and quickly rose to my feet. She lay there writhing in pain, blood pooling on her chest. "My darling," I said and then looked down at Gabriel. His lips and cheeks were stained with blood. He had torn off her nipple...Do you smoke Padre? ...What should I have done [*exhaling*], bludgeon his head with a stone? Of course not. I cradled the boy in my arms and wiped the blood off his face. You won't believe what happened next, Father? I wouldn't, either, if I hadn't been there to witness it all unfold, to see for myself like a fly on the nose as the old saying in this country goes. I'd picked up an orange from the fruit basket - a paternal gesture, after all I'd just become a father - and handed it to my son to keep him occupied while the nurses attended to K. But Gabriel opened his mouth and tore into the orange, peel, and flesh, with his small sharp incisors, and ate it all without once pausing for breath. I'm telling you Father; it was like watching a villager overpower a hippopotamus with his bare hands. Such awe-inspiring exertion of will and power. Before any of the stunned faces could say anything, the generator coughed and wheezed, and we were once again plunged into that eternal darkness. Nobody said anything. We listened to the downpour splashing against the roof, to the beating of our fearful hearts, and Gabriel's loud exhalations, followed thereafter by a strange groaning sound. A strange groaning sound that my wife and I would soon come to know very well as the sound of our son's hunger.

ACT II

Some tea, father? ...Oh, he's just gone to the shop. He'll be right back...Sugar?... My husband is an only child and if I had my chance over again, I would not marry an only child. I don't think. Before we had Gabriel, my mother-in-law, Lynette, would visit us each November and she would sit there where you're sitting now. A fierce woman. Broad shouldered with a goitre in her neck.

She would just sit there, like so, her face bunched up in places. Eyes shining with contempt…Who, me? I was indifferent to it. It was inconvenient, more than anything else, that Lynette loathed me. The resentment ate at her more than it did me. You could tell from the expression on her face. You would have thought she'd caught her husband whoring in her marital bed. You see it was my fault and mine alone that we couldn't conceive. Most mothers are like that. Irrationally loyal to their sons. 'Why has God forsaken you?' Lynette would lament. 'Sarah was a pensioner when the almighty gave her a child but you, God has forsaken'...You couldn't reason with Lynette, most times, but when she got like that, forget it, and honestly Father, where, nowadays, have you seen a pregnant hundred-year-old? It would be a sight to behold…More tea? ...Since we have this time alone, I may as well ask: in the Gospels, we read about the birth of our Lord through the eyes of the apostles, Matthew, and Luke; why is it that Mary is not permitted to tell her own story? I've often wondered about that. Childbirth, it seems to me, is a woman's story. What do men know about birth? But I digress. Where was I? Yes. The prophets. As the months spun out into years without children, at Lynette's insistence, we sought out prophets in the city to anoint my head with oil and to lay hands on my stomach. You see Father, my womb had become communal property. It belonged equally to Lynette as it did to me and for that matter…*um*…everything is alright Father. Sorry about that. I just thought I heard something…And this city has no shortage of schizophrenics masquerading as holy men and predictably, their prayers yielded nothing. If only Lynette would have listened, I would have told her not to waste what little money she had on another madman prattling on about the Immaculate Conception at this point in the 20th century. But Lynette's desire for a grandchild was like a fire burning in her bones. It was impossible to convince her otherwise. But why was it so abhorrent that I could not have children? Why? Of course, I never asked that question of my mother-in-law, but I at least tried to see things from her perspective...Forgive our trespasses Father but can I offer you a cigarette? It's a dirty habit, I know, I know, but I can't help it...Anyway, in the end I was led to my salvation, my salvation as a woman as it were, in the eyes of my mother-in-law, by the shoemaker's wife, Mai Maria. The shoemaker's wife had listened to the rumours the neighbours circulated about me and my husband – for a while, you must know, we were treated like lepers – and she took pity on us. Mai Maria showed up here on our doorstep, as the good book promises our Lord will return, like a thief in the night. Mai Maria spoke in hushed tones, craning her neck to look over her shoulder. She told us about a man in a shantytown not far from here. A medium who communicates with the world of the dead and this man, Mai Maria said, had the power to grant us a child. And for this gift of knowledge, Mai Maria wanted nothing in return. Only that we never speak again of our encounter. Mai Maria vanished into the night, leaving us alone to ponder the choice at hand. But the truth is we had no choice in the matter. And so, early the next morning, my husband and I left to seek out this man.

We walked past thousands of tin houses, ducking under clotheslines flapping in the wind, our mouths covered against the smell rising from the burst sewerage everywhere, until at last we arrived in front of the dwelling Mai Maria had described to us that night. A red hut with a thatched roof, set on a clearing at the edge of the shanty town. A dog with black and tan markings on its fur, chained to a tree, spit falling down the side of its mouth, barked at us as we walked along the footpath. A voice rose up from inside the hut while we stood outside, uncertain if we should knock or not. "I know who you are and why you have come." November, as you well know Father is one of the hottest months, but it suddenly felt cold. I looked at my husband, to discern if he'd had a change of heart. We'd come too far now, we both understood that. My husband pushed the door open, and we sat on the floor polished with cow dung. I avoided looking directly at the medium, who sat in the middle, naked. "If the harvest asks for rain", he said. "What then can we ask in exchange for a life?" My husband and I had talked about this long into the night after Mai Maria had left. I pulled out a photograph of my mother-in-law and placed it on the floor. My husband and I looked at each other and we both nodded. So be it, Father. So be it, we said. The medium left the hut and returned a short while later carrying a milky concoction in a two litre Coca Cola bottle. My husband and I both drank from the bottle. The liquid tasted bitter and I nearly wretched but afterwards, a serenity I hadn't felt in seven years began to flow through my veins. "Prepare the barns, it will soon be time to harvest," the medium said to us in parting. Sure enough, that October I fell pregnant with Gabriel and I was in the grip of an insatiable hunger. I ate spiders and made soup from chameleons and beetles. I pulled geckos from trees and tore into their flesh. I couldn't help it. I was ravenous. The following month, when my mother-in-law came to visit us, she was as thin as a maize stalk. So gaunt and frail. Life, you see, had begun to ebb out of her and into my belly. One life given in exchange for another.

ACT III

There is more to this story, Father [*the husband places a hand on K's shoulder*]. Our biggest problem, which had been revealed to us in the maternity ward, was with Gabriel's hunger. How to live with it. For a time, it was like a riddle we couldn't solve. The more he ate, the more insatiable his hunger became. We fed him everything we had: bread, spinach, potatoes, raw pumpkins, beetroot, chicken livers, but still his hunger cried out for more. He tore down doors demanding that we feed him. That terrible groaning of his kept us awake at night, turning and tossing in our beds. We loaned money from banks and our employers, so we could buy more food but there was never enough. To stave off bankruptcy we reverted to hunting down snakes and geckos. We stoned down owls, larks, and all manner of birds in the sky. We set traps for stray cats and dogs. We smashed their heads and shattered their jaws and stuffed their carcasses into hessian sacks. But that was not the extent

of our wickedness Father, if you can call it that. As the months went on, we lured street urchins here to our house with the promise of thick slices of bread and a warm place to sleep. But there was no such thing. We would chain the children to each other like slaves and afterwards, we duct taped their mouths and crushed their little ankles and kneecaps with a hammer; making it impossible for them to even dream of an escape. We offered their bodies to Gabriel as Christ offered his to his disciples. What I'm trying to tell you, Father, is that we were in the grip of a fever, and in that delirium, no act of violence was above the love we felt for our Gabriel. Our only sin is that we wished to be good parents, and to be good parents we had to satisfy his hunger…That sound? Oh, don't worry Father. I used to ask myself the same question. I lay awake those first nights, thinking: what is this thing we have given birth to, this hunger that cannot be satisfied?

My husband neglected to mention that Gabriel can walk…Sit down. Sit down Father. Where do you think you're going? ...It will soon be over...

SELF-PORTRAIT

I.

Life, as I understand it now, is an attempt to right some quarrels with our parents. My father is dead – heart attack, many years ago now – and buried on a small patch of land in Masvingo and yet we haven't ceased fighting.

II.

How to begin. I am an apprentice writer and suppose that like all beginning writers my stories are thinly disguised confessions. I am tempted to disguise the grievances I have towards my father in a semi-autobiographical short story, say, with neatly organised dialogue, exposition, and scenes. To achieve, I think, the right measure of distance.

And so, yesterday I made a start:

> February 1997[2]. A miserably hot summer evening. Here I am. Backstage on opening night. Dressed in a salmon-pink nightdress, revealing a pair of stringy arms and scrawny legs. I've been cast as Linda, Willy Loman's loyal wife, in my high school's production of *Death of a Salesman*. Hubert – or perhaps I should call him my husband? – stands a breath away from me. Our hands brush in the semidarkness. Something pulses between us. My skin tingles.
>
> The curtains part. A solid bar of yellow light falls upon the stage. Act 1. Scene 1. Enter stage left. *Willy!* I shout in a ridiculous high-pitched voice. *Is that you?* Laughter ripples through the auditorium. Through the corner of my eye, I spot my father, in his army fatigues. Seated with my mother in the middle of the third row. Brows knitted together.

III.

Families like ours, neither bad nor good, just imperfect, are held together not so much by secrets but silences. What afflicts me now is a desire to lay out the facts, to hold everything up to the light.

IV.

[2] The year is significant for two reasons. In real-life I started high school that year, at Prince Edward, and that summer, coincidentally, Canaan Sodindo Banana, the country's first president, was arrested on charges of sodomy. At my school, it was commonplace to refer to young boys like myself, thought to be too effeminate, as 'Sodindo.

My mother, religious to the point of mania, died shortly after my father. The name Bongani ('give thanks') had been her idea. I was born six weeks early, at Mbuya Nehanda Maternity Hospital, in October '85. When she saw me in the neonatal ward, sealed inside an incubator, the story goes, she had a vision of the prophet Daniel walking through King Nebuchadnezzar's furnace with the Angel of the Lord. Then she heard Daniel say, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.

V.

We lived in a three-bedroomed house on a narrow expanse of street, shaded with gum trees, in a neighbourhood east of the capital. I had a standard upbringing for an only child – periods of sustained boredom and idleness alleviated by watching cartoons on ZBC.

My parents were what you might call straightforward – in the Zimbabwean sense of the word. By that I mean they were old fashioned, not the kind of people that will surprise you any. My father was a mid-ranking military officer, stationed at the Cranborne Barracks, and my mother worked as a senior administrator at Cairns Foods.

On Sundays, we drove my father's green Opel Astra to the church out in Masa Park. The Latter-Day Apostles of Christ the Redeemer. On occasion, my father ministered to the congregation.

When I think of those Sundays – I no longer go to church – I see my father standing behind the pulpit. Dressed in a navy-blue suit, a stern look measured in his eyes. Mimicking the hand gestures of our second president. How he raises a clenched fist for emphasis. And it's always the same sermon. The one where he gives an etymology of the word deacon. He says, deacon, from the Greek, *diakonos*, which means to serve.

VI.

"You're working on your thesis again," Tongai says, lighting a cigarette. Plumes of smoke curl up into the sunset. "I can tell. You're less tense when you're writing."

We're sitting outside Cocoa Wah Wah, a sidewalk café in Rondebosch. Tongai is one of a handful of Zimbabwean friends I have here. We met in the winter, some years ago now, in a bar on Trill Road, Tagore's; a bohemian hangout which swarmed with beautiful faces and had that musty old furniture smell. It was a Friday night, and the band was playing a cover of Mingus' 'Gunslinging Bird', when Tongai walked in, dressed in a black coat with tails and a red woollen scarf draped over his shoulders.

He stood almost a head taller than everyone in that tiny bar and he had what I think of as a traveller's face: earnest and alert. I watched him take off his scarf, folding it over the upturned palm of his left hand, and our eyes met, and he smiled. A crooked, sideways kind of smile.

"What story are you working on now?" Tongai says, "are you going to tell me what it's about?"

"Remember in House of Hunger, how Marechera tells the story of how his father died three times? Three times. And the story is different each time. When I was younger, I was obsessed with searching out the real story, the facts, and now, not so much."

VII.

I met Gladmore Chipangura in the winter of 1996, when the Van De Ruits, an elderly white couple with no children, moved out of Elmore Street. The rambling white house they lived in was taken over by the Chipanguras; a family with two sons, both tall as flagpoles, and Gladmore, the youngest of the pair, was my age.

We grew closer as friends after he was transferred to Widdecombe Primary School at the start of the second term and placed in my class, 6 Red. The other kids in the class thought he was funny looking – Gladmore's face was sprinkled generously with pimples and he had comically large ears – and children being what they are, unable to hide their cruelty, stayed away from him.

VIII.

"What are you doing?" I said.

I'd walked over to Gladmore's desk during break-time, when it was only the two of us remaining in the classroom. The wooden desks were arranged in neat rows, facing the blackboard. Gladmore's desk was closer to the front, in the middle of the second row. He sat with his back hunched over an A4 piece of paper.

"Nothing," he said, sticking out his tongue and moving to cover the piece of paper with his right arm.

"Wait, wait!" he said, when I pulled at the paper and it threatened to tear. "I'll show you...only if you promise not to tell anyone."

I stood motionless, held in a trance by what was on the paper. Outside, I could hear the clamour of voices and the faint hum of a lawn mower.

"Saw it in a movie," Gladmore said. The drawing, you could tell, was the work of someone skilled. The suppleness of the woman's breasts, the tautness of the man's muscles, the overall balance of light and shade.

(In the dream I had that night, in which I woke up feeling ashamed, crying, the man was crouched over the woman's mid-section, his hands cupped over her breasts.)

IX.

This afternoon, deciding to stretch my legs, I ventured out to a second-hand bookshop in Observatory. Browsing the shelves, I read about a South American writer – I forget his name now – who had dedicated his debut collection of stories to his best friend, Eduardo: "with all my love." A decade later, when the book was reissued by a big North American publisher, he declined all requests to write a foreword.

Instead, he asked only if could change the dedication. "To Eduardo," he wrote, "with all my hate." I can understand that, how easily feelings can shift from love to hate. Or how close love is to hate.

X.

We had a housekeeper, Miriam – thin, high cheekbones, braided hair, and always wore black tennis shoes – who worked three days a week. And so Tuesday and Thursday afternoons I spent unsupervised, watching cartoons on the television set in the living room, though my parents expected me to be studying.

One afternoon, after we'd walked the winding stretch of road from Widdecombe, I asked Gladmore if we could watch the movie with the drawings. "My brother said, I can't show it to anyone." We argued back and forth – we were in Elmore Street now – until Gladmore relented. I waited outside the spiked black gate to our house as Gladmore ran to go and retrieve the VHS tape from its hiding place.

XI.

I don't recall now, the film's narrative thread. That whole afternoon is condensed into a state of feeling – of heat rising, skin tingling, shallow intakes of breath, desire in the extreme – brought on by seeing bodies on the cathode screen in various stages of undress. I don't remember, too, what transpired before we found ourselves rolling around on the frayed carpet.

Now imagine a mother walking into the living room, animated by all kinds of ungodly sounds, to find her eleven-year-old son, still in his school khakis, kissing the neighbour's pimply-faced boy.

XII.

We never saw each other again. Gladmore was packed off to a boarding school somewhere and his parents moved from Elmore Street a year later. With the passage of years, life took on its own rhythm and I had forgotten about Gladmore until that winter night, many years later, when I met Tongai.

XIII.

"Brrr. It's cold," Tongai said, warming his cupped hands with his breath. "What are you drinking?"

"Wine."

"Hmm. I need something stronger," he said, reaching into the pocket of his coat to pull out a clump of creased bank notes, and a key ring with a fluffy tiger. The rims of his fingernails, I saw, as he flattened the bank notes on the mahogany-coloured counter, were caked with paint.

Just as I thought to ask him where he was from, the bar ruptured into applause when the trumpeter, face glazed with sweat, reached the end of his solo.

"So," I said, moments later when it quietened down, "where you from?"

"That's a political question," he said. Laughing. A rising from the belly kind of laughter that shook his broad shoulders.

"No, no, no," I said, surprised by the tinge of panic in my voice. "I mean, you sound like you're from Zim. You look like someone I used to know. That's all."

We were sitting almost a metre apart now, on the cushioned bar stools, and Tongai turned to look at me, his face coming into focus in the dim crimson light. I hadn't noticed until now, but his eyes were a different colour, brown and solid black, skewing the symmetry of his face.

"Listen," he said, reaching for my arm. "Can you hear that?"

"Coltrane?"

"Yeah, yeah. Pay attention. The mood… the different strokes… the textures. It's like... a painting."

He had his eyes closed now. As the band played on, he shifted his hand from my arm and slipped it underneath my shirt, reaching for the small of my back. I sipped the half-empty wine glass and listened to myself swallow.

Tongai stood up. Drained his drink.

"Follow me," he said.

I obeyed his instruction, following behind his solid mass threading through the press of bodies. He waited for me to enter the bathroom and he cast a wide glance across the bar before bolting the wooden door.

He lowered his head and kissed me. A soft kiss. So, gentle I almost wept with desire.

XIV.

Here then, is what truly happened. In the summer of 1997, the year Canaan Sodindo Banana was arrested on charges of sodomy, and he appeared nightly on the 8 o'clock News surrounded by a phalanx of reporters and bodyguards, I was cast in the school's production of *Twelfth Night*. And much to the disappointment of my father – sending me to an all-boys boarding school was meant as a remedy, a solution to a problem we would not speak about – I played Viola, a woman pretending to be a man

Every time I appeared on stage, on opening night, a soft chorus rose up from the back of the auditorium where the other boarding schoolboys were seated: *Sodindo, Sodindo, Sodindo!* (And for this they would be roundly castigated at the next assembly by the headmaster, Mr. Barnes, for behaving like a bunch of savages.)

By the time I delivered my favourite lines –

Viola: *We men may say more, swear more, but indeed Our shows are more than will, for still we prove Much in our vows, but little in our love.*

Orsino: *But died thy sister of her love, my boy?*

Viola: *I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers too – and yet I know not.*

my father had left the auditorium. I wept uncontrollably on stage looking at the two empty seats.

I have never been on stage since.

XV.

The buzzer to my first-floor apartment emits a loud whine. Let me in, Tongai says over the intercom. "I brought lentils and wine, but that goes without saying."

The latch on the gate unhinges. I hear Tongai's footsteps rushing up a flight of stairs. He is dressed in black denims and combat boots stained with paint.

"Is the story finished? I thought you might like something to eat...lentil curry."

XVI.

I still remember the first time Tongai, and I slept together. Back then, he lived in a two-bedroom semi just across from the train station in Observatory and his room – cluttered with canvasses, paints, sketch pads, a stack of vinyls and a black record player stashed in the corner – had a sky view. He was still studying to be a painter at the arts campus on Orange Street and I was a third-year BA English with dreams of becoming a writer.

I liked to read before sex and that winter we read from some of the writers in my Contemporary Fiction Syllabus. Alice Munro ('Royal Beatings'), Harold Brodkey ('Innocence'), Jhumpa Lahiri ('A Temporary Matter'), David Bezmozgis, ('Natasha'), Junot Díaz ('How To Date A Brown Girl (black girl, white girl, or halfie)').

That afternoon, I read Stacy Hardy's 'My Black Lover'. Both of us were naked, the room bathed in winter-grey sunlight, and Tongai had his arms around me, his chin kneading the muscles on my shoulder. Afterwards, when we lay on our backs with our legs entangled, I remember thinking how what we shared felt real and beautiful and everlasting.

XVII.

"I'm just going to warm this up," Tongai says, kissing me on the forehead. "You finish up. I won't disturb."

"Don't worry, I'm nearly finished."

"Finally," he says, feigning exasperation. "Then you can tell me what it's all about."

XVIII.

My one-bedroom apartment faces the main street in Rosebank. Outside, the sky is nearly black, and, in the distance, I can hear the sound of the last train leaving the station.

MUSEUM OF LOST OBJECTS

Monday

7.45am. Low winter sun. Ash grey sky. Birds high (*sparrows?*).

Observatory Station. Take the train. Doors swing wide. Sit in the dim, overcrowded third-class carriage. The train rattles & sways. We travel across neighbourhoods erected atop graveyards & silences of history. "& on the third day, the son of man" – a preacher man pulls out a handkerchief. Wipes brow beaded with sweat. I lean back & think of the dream I had last night. Oliver Tambo on the radio. A low baritone crackling through clouds of static. "Comrades," he said, "today I wish to talk with you dreams." Sitting in the dark of my left pocket is a shoe with a pink bow crossbar. Something a ballerina would wear.

11 September 2011

Once, I lived up there, in that other city. In a body twice this size. With hands & feet. Bone & cartilage. You could count the years of my youth with your fingers & toes. I had such a beautiful face & strong limbs. Who would have said that death was so near?

Call it Saturday night. Blood moon. Crimson sky.

Say I'm on my way to meet Floretta. When voices echo down the street.

"Give me your phone motherfucker! Gimme!"

A yellow-handled butcher knife is plunged into my entrails. One-two. One-two. Knees buckle. Arms flailing, I crumple onto the sidewalk.

As I lay dying my senses are heightened. (Sound) Screams, car horns, tyres screeching on the asphalt. (Sight) Black birds (*ravens?*). The orange glow of streetlamps & headlights. UV light from a dozen cell phone screens, dazzling like a constellation of stars. (Sound II) Shorty after, a siren comes wailing down Mill Street as I listen to the slow percussion of a dying heart: *bambuf, bambuf, bamb-*

I come to in the backseat of a white Corolla. *Eh brother* – the driver calls. I gaze up at the rear-view mirror & our eyes meet. The skin on the driver's face is bruised & burnt. I can see bone. Skull. "Brother," he says again, "where to?"

I have just met with violence & feel compelled to unburden myself to this stranger. "It happened just like that," I say. Telling my story over & over again through a mouth full of blood.

"Brother", the driver says, "were you here in 2008? Do you remember the xenophobia?"

I nod.

"I am from Somalia. My family sold everything to open a shop in Dunoon. I lost everything in one day," my brother. He raises a bone-white finger to the sky. "Do you know what the police said? The police said we can save you or we can save the shop, but we cannot save both. In that case, I said, then let me perish."

The driver falls silent. Stares out the side window. At the desolate stretch of veld & the night full of stars.

"You're lucky," he says after a short while. Switching on the radio and adjusting the dial. "They only took your phone."

The baby in the Dunes

I dreamt about the baby in the dunes last night. Not a real baby, only the foetus, floating in a jar filled with water. & as always in the dream I'm certain. Edging back & forth in the white light like a chameleon. Until I press my ear against the cold, wet surface of the glass & I hear a heartbeat. *Bambuf, bambuf, bamb-*

Last New Year's Eve a passer-by found a girl (8) lying in the sand dunes next to the overpass on the R300. What happened? The usual story of violence up there. How it flares without warning & claims everything you love. The dead girl's Ma, said to the assembled television crews who had swarmed the scene shortly after, that when she'd sent her baby girl out into the world earlier that evening to buy a candle, she had forgotten what this world did to daughters'. How sometimes they were returned to you in a body without light.

Sifting through the sand dunes afterwards, I found a ribbon. A red ribbon. I held it in my cupped hands, dusted off the pebbles & placed it in my pocket. A memento for the Museum of Lost Objects. So much has been lost up there. People, histories, graves. & so much has been forgotten.

Monday

7.50am.

Kezia & her mother would have disembarked at this stop. Salt River Station. Kezia was the only one in the world up there who could see me on the train. A ghost in blood-stained clothes travelling in the third-class carriage.

I trace the contours of her shoe in my pocket, remembering how her feet barely touched the ground & how she giggled each time I pulled faces at her. I'd known that it would come to a bad

end but the not-not people cannot intervene in the affairs of the living. But the signs were all there. How her Ma was always hiding bruises.

I won't tell you how K. died. What is there to be gained from that? Besides, you'd have read about it in one of the papers up there. & it would have struck you as just another story.

"Eh brother, why are you collecting all of these objects?" Abdul, the taxi driver asked me the other day.

"I am gathering evidence brother," I said. "One day I'll get to ask God the question. What's happening to we?"

AT YOUR REQUIEM

Where does it begin, the story of how you came to lie here in your dark blue suit?

Everyone thought we were twins. Your mother dressed us in matching clothes. The only difference is mine were red and yours were blue. We had the same broad shoulders and we looked alike, down to our jaw lines and dark brown eyes. "No, we're just cousins," you'd have to explain. Once, you said to Miss Saunders, the Sunday school teacher at Heathfield Christian Church, "He's not my twin. Christopher's mother is dead. Aunt Julia is *my* mother."

I'm at your requiem, and your rebuttal – "Aunt Julia is *my* mother" – burns through my mind. The story of what happened between us – you, Aunt Julia, and me – at the house on St Patrick's Road, stuck to everything in our lives like shattered glass. Now that you're dead, I'm the only one left with all these unspeakable things. Broken bits of the past, jagged pieces biting into me.

I rewind time to conjure you back to life.

The paramedics open the doors of the ambulance and wheel you out on a stretcher, your body covered in a white sheet. They walk you back to the jacaranda tree where we found you, your feet a metre off the ground. They leave your body dangling in the wind and drive out of New Haven Drug & Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre. Tears dry from our eyes as we file back to our beds and our sobs and screams suck back into our bodies.

Your vertebra snaps back into position and life returns, flooding back into your arteries. You open your eyes and reach for the knot around your neck and untie it. You climb down and make your way to the blue house. You enter through the kitchen and place the nylon rope where you found it in the first place, in the garage, next to the pile of old magazines.

The hours pass and the purple, ochre and orange hues of daybreak darken into night. I loosen the grip of my arm around your neck. And the sound of my careless words – "You've always been a weak son-of-a-bitch, a mommy's boy, Abraham! I don't fucking care if you go and kill yourself" – fade, like fog scorched by the heat of the sun.

And there you stand, whole, restored.

I'm sitting at the Methodist Church in Green Market Square with your sponsor, Dirk, and the rest of the folks from New Haven. You'd been clean for 13 months in the picture they have of you up there. It's the one of you standing at the pier in Kalk Bay. The sky is clear and blue, and seagulls fly overhead. That was four years ago.

Our faces still looked similar except for the scar above my left eye. Do you remember how that happened? We were seven that year and Miss Saunders had given me a prize, a set of

watercolours and crayons, for reciting the beatitudes correctly. I still remember saying the words. "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God."

At the end of the service Aunt Julia walked around with me, my hand nestled in hers, like a small bird. "Look at what this clever son of mine did! Show them your prize, Christopher," she said as we threaded through the congregation. You followed behind us, silent, a mistreated dog being yanked on a leash.

We drove back to the house on St Patrick's with me riding in the front passenger seat of Aunt Julia's Mercedes. "Abraham," she said looking back, "you should be more like Christopher instead of watching those silly cartoons all day." You said nothing. Aunt Julia rubbed her hand on my thigh and let it linger, until its warmth started to burn. When we got home, she kissed me on the lips before we went out back to play.

You picked up a sharp jagged stone from the ground and turned to me and said, 'I have an idea. Let's play a game we've never played before.'

"What kind of game?" I asked.

"You go stand over there." You pointed to the mango tree overlooking the vegetable garden. It was early summer, and the garden shone a bright green. "I'll throw the stone like they do in American football. You catch it and then throw it back?"

There was something in the tone of your voice that I couldn't quite register.

"Stupid game," I said, but you threw the stone anyway.

I remember vignettes of what happened after you give me instructions. The jagged stone zigzagging towards me at a terrifying speed. Blood everywhere: on my face, on my hands, on my clothes. I let out a scream and Aunt Julia comes running like a rhinoceros, her heavy feet pounding the dry grass. I hear shouting, sobs, before everything goes blank.

I came back from Vincent Pallotti hospital a day or two later, with nine stitches and a bandage strapped over my head. We slept in the same room then, our beds almost nudging, because you were afraid of the dark. Sometimes I think that's all you ever wanted – someone to watch over you.

That evening, at around midnight, Aunt Julia came into our room.

"Christopher," she said, "come and sleep in mommy's bed." The glare of the bulb stung my eyes, but I could still make out Aunt Julia. The braided hair which ran down the length of her shoulders; her almond brown skin and her thin face, features sharply defined like those of a wooden chess piece.

"But ma –"

"Quiet, Abraham!" she said.

"– I want to come too."

"I don't want to hear a sound from you."

I suppose that's when it all began. Something inside you broke that night. And maybe I lost something too.

***

"Days like this remind me of what a terrible thing addiction is," Dirk says in his sing-song preacher's voice. The church is half empty and none of our family is here.

When Aunt Julia passed, we sold the house on St Patrick's and split the money. Nobody would have anything to do with us after that. Uncles we hadn't seen in years called to tell us we were selfish bastards; a pair of rich kids who looked down on everyone in the family just because we'd gone to white schools. "You caused her heart attack!" "If it wasn't for you..." We didn't listen to a word they said. We wanted to bury the past and everything that came with it.

One night, Aunt Julia was naked when I got under the duvet. It was winter. I remember the percussion of raindrops splashing against the tiled roof. She held me close, tight, my head pinned against her breasts. I pushed her away, or tried to, but she held firm. She unbuttoned my pyjamas. I lay there, limp, my eyes wide open. I felt her bony fingers, cold against my chest, circling lines around my ribcage. "My beautiful boy," she whispered, as she kissed my belly button. "You're my little husband. Who's my little husband? You're my little husband."

"Don't you love me, Christopher?" she said. A hot steady stream of tears started from my eyes. "Oh, I'm not good enough for you. Is that it, you don't think I'm pretty?"

Years later, when you and I were having one of those spiteful fights of ours, you asked me, "How do you think I feel knowing that my mother loved you more than me?"

"I got by on the programme by repeating the serenity prayer," Dirk says, his eyes panning across the room. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can't change and the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. I've been clean nine years and I can't tell you how many times I've said that prayer. Most of the time it works but there are days like this when it has no meaning."

***

That summer, Aunt Julia kept summoning me to her room even after the scar above my eye had healed. Even now I can't find the words to truly speak of what happened and my memories are corroded with shame. But I recall how you retreated into yourself. You became quiet and sullen.

Do you remember when we were at St George's Grammar and you started crying in class? Ms Davies had to sit with you in the staff room until you dried your eyes and calmed down. She'd asked you to read your composition in front of the whole class because she liked it. She was fond of you too, I guess, but not the way Aunt Julia liked me.

"Class, shh, shh, quiet please," Ms Davies said. She was heavyset, bespectacled, with short ash-blonde curls. "For your homework I asked you to write about your family. Our Abraham has written the most wonderful story and I've asked him to share it with us this morning."

Someone at the back – maybe it was me, I forget – muttered something and the rest of the class laughed. You must have been nervous. The way your legs shook, trembled, as you walked to the front.

"My family lives in a big house in Rosebank. There are three us: my mother, my father and me. My cousin Christopher lives with us because his mother died."

"You liar!" I pushed back my chair, stood up. "Your father went to start a new family. He doesn't want you, Abraham.' I hurled the words across the room: 'Your father doesn't want you!'"

I remember the heavy silence which fell over the class. Even Ms Davies didn't know what to do. She looked at me and blinked. You tried to say something, but the words remained folded under your tongue.

You never forgave me for that, did you? You found every excuse not to speak to me. I'd usurped your mother's love and you resented me for it. No, I think the word is hate. You hated me for it.

We fought with each other, day and night almost, like the terriers from number 15 across the road from us. I'd run to Aunt Julia, every time, because she always took my side. She would come charging down the stairs and before you could say a word, she would stop you with her words. "Why do you always have to be a problem?" Once she slapped you across the face. "What's wrong with you?" she'd yell. "I send you to expensive schools! Buy you nice clothes! What's the use? Tell me, what's the use of spending so much money on someone like you? You're just like your father."

The beating and the screaming grew worse. I remember Aunt Julia in a frenzy – your father this, your father that – and then she would sink into a state of remorse. As if someone else, not her, had done what she'd done.

Even in his absence your father was every bit a part of our lives. Whatever happened between them in the past seeped into the present, and as we grew older, you became a reminder of the man she hated, and maybe she loved; loved and hated in equal measure. The tall, dark, childhood sweetheart who wrote her love letters, pages long. The same man who once cracked three of her ribs and had affairs with two of her close friends.

"The first time I met Abraham…" Bandile says, his voice cracking. It strikes me that I've never seen him without his hat. He's hardly thirty but he's almost bald. He starts over. "The first time I met Abraham he said living has never been easy. Like most of us who've been using for a long time, he was fragile. He had those eyes of someone who'd lost something. But he was kind. He once told me that when his mother passed on and there was no-one to water the garden, it hurt

him to see it die. Pained him physically. So, he nurtured it, watered the flowers and vegetables until everything sprung back to life. 'Maybe that's all we need,' he said, 'a little looking after.'"

Bandile's eyes dart this way and that, as he says this, until he fixes them on me. I squint and look away. Outside, the traders on the cobblestoned streets go about their business like it's any other day.

What else? We rarely spoke about what happened between us – between you, Aunt Julia and me – at the old house on St Patrick's. Your mother had turned us against each other by the time she died. We had finished school then, and were taking our first steps towards manhood, when her heart stopped.

We made a silent pact to stay out of each other's way after we got rid of the house. That didn't take much doing. You were off on your own, scoring and getting high, picking up odd jobs in sleepy towns up along the West Coast. I stayed behind in Cape Town and tried to make something of my life. I got started on a business major, but I used to get so drunk I'd lose track of the days. I wouldn't show up on campus for weeks on end. When I think back to that time, I have this picture in my head, of me walking down Long Street at 4am or some crazy hour, melancholy in the amber glow of the streetlights, making promises to get sober.

Do you remember when you'd been clean for six months and you came back to find me? I'd been on a bender, drinking for three days straight, and it was the first time in our adult lives that I'd seen your eyes so clear. We talked.

"I *wanted* your mother to love me," I told you. I never understood what it did to me. That's why I drank. A part of me thinks I wanted to make myself ugly. You sought comfort in drugs. You said you liked how it made you feel. Using made the world a friendlier place. It was the only time you never felt ugly or unwanted.

"I can never love anyone, Abraham," I said. "That's why I'm like this." I lit a cigarette and watched the blue flame envelop the tiny flat.

"Don't you get it, it wasn't your fault," you said. "She was sick. She was my mom. All that stuff that happened with her, my father… It wasn't your fault."

I threw a punch at you, staggered, and fell to the floor. You held me like you used to when we were kids.

"You can't go around hating yourself and everybody else."

"Of all the people in the world, why did it have to be me?"

"Stop feeling fucking sorry for yourself, Christopher. Get up and do something with your life. How do you think I feel? All those nights I watched you get up and go to her room?"

"What can a junkie teach me?" I said, pushing away from your embrace. "Huh? You come in here acting like Jesus, all Hallelujah and forgiveness and everything, and dragging up the past.

All I know is the bitch is dead and thank God for that. No more schools with fucking Latin mottos, no more talk about how beautiful I am. No more of that shit. I know that she was your mother but I'm fucking glad she's dead."

You got your things and left.

For years I didn't see you, until we ran into each other at New Haven.

***

"Christopher and I were born two months apart and everyone thought we were twins. We always wore matching outfits when we were younger. The only difference is mine were red and his were blue," I say. This is my goodbye.

I see the sadness reflected in the faces looking back at me. But I can't tell them everything. Maybe the truth isn't always such a good thing. Maybe some things are better left unsaid. Look what happened when I told you the truth about how Aunt Julia died?

I was jealous of what you had when I came to New Haven. You had found peace of mind with all these folks around you. It's like back when we were kids after my mom died. I wanted your mother's attention. I wanted her to love me more than you.

I told you I'd gone to see her at the house on St Patrick's. "I want money, Aunt Julia," I demanded.

We were sitting in the kitchen. A glimmer of sunshine crept through the windows.

"You always want something, don't you, you're no good, like your father…" I wondered if she thought she was talking to you, Abraham. Mid-sentence, she slumped in her chair. She couldn't breathe. I knew she was sick, maybe dying, but I just sat there. I didn't call an ambulance. I watched her gasp. She clutched her chest with her hands, those same hands that always felt so cold against my bare skin. Our eyes met and I looked at her and I watched as she died.

"She was my mother, Christopher, you selfish fuck," you said before you punched me in the face. I hit you back and you collapsed onto the wooden floor. I spat on you. "You were a real mommy's boy, Abraham. I don't fucking care. Go! Go kill yourself."

"She was my mother, Christopher, don't you get that?" you said. "She was my mother."

That was the last time I ever spoke to you.

"We had a difficult childhood, Abraham and I, and we weren't always on the best of terms," I say, my voice splintering. "But through all of it, I guess he was my brother. He is my brother."

***

Some wounds cut too deep to heal, Abraham. That promise *that God will raise us to such a height that we may glimpse the men we aspire to be, and his grace, like the heat of the sun, will burn away the men we have become*[vi], was all child's play.

I'm sitting by the jacaranda tree where the story of your life ends. I can't rewind time and bring you back. What happened between us – between you, Aunt Julia and me – at the house on St Patrick's Road, burned through our lives like mountain fire in a high wind. There's nothing left. Everything is ravaged.

DISAPPEARING PARTS

We fell under the spell of the Prophet during the seven months of Pa's illness. A sickness that had lodged itself somewhere in the blood & each day it disappeared some small part of my father: a strand of hair, a set of molars, kneecaps. Soon, Ma said, there'll be nothing left.

Each day we took an inventory of Pa's body parts. Weighing feet & hands, counting the coiled chest hairs & forcing his mouth open so we could see what remained of his teeth. (I was eight that summer & would squeeze my eyes shut when Ma checked Pa's genitals.)

This was in 1986. A year before the signing of the Unity Accord that ended the genocide in our country. A time when whole villages in the southern parts of the republic were razed to the ground. Bodies riddled with bullet holes were disappeared; thrown down abandoned mine shafts by the 5th Brigade infantry. How many dead? Even now, years later, I cannot say. It's a story I know only in part. Our country's official record does not list the disappeared. The disappeared are disappeared from history.

Pa had been discharged from the Defence Force that year when he woke one morning in April to find that he'd lost his thumbs. Seven years my father had worked for the army as a cook & now he couldn't hold a knife. Of course, this meant we could no longer stay in the army's new housing development in Chatterton & so we rented a room at the back of Bass John's - the last of the Rhodesians in Salisbury Lane. A brandy-swigging army man himself - special-forces regiment - who made no secret that he'd fought the terrs & munts before Independence in 1980. "The blacks are in over their heads. This country was better when the whites..."

The room came furnished with a single frame steel bed, primus stove & a small transistor radio with red casing. The previous tenant, Bass John's houseboy, had papered over the interior walls with action shots of football players. Diego Maradona pirouetting past the English defence at the 1986 World Cup. The magnificent Soviet goalkeeper, Rinat Dasaev, leaping across the goal posts.

The Prophet's early morning sermons were broadcast on Radio 4. Even now, I can hear his gravelly baritone – "Good morning sons & daughters of Abraham" - how it floated above us promising miracles & life everlasting.

The Prophet, like our president, was named after the archangel, Gabriel & his hour-long show was divided into three twenty-minute segments. In the last segment, the Prophet read out prayer requests & testimonies from believers whose circumstances had been changed by what he called "the mighty prayer of the faithful." Mothers told of sons whose limbs had been severed by bombs & limpet mines during the liberation war waking up to find their body parts restored.

Miracles abounded. "Rejoice & again I say rejoice," the Prophet said, "for ye shall be healed by the hands of the almighty."

Over the course of that winter, in 86, Pa's disappearing illness demanded more from us than we could give. Listening to the words of the Prophet, as life ebbed away from Pa, Ma & I started to believe in miracles. The resignation we had stored up in our bodies, from all those months of searching for answers, began to lift & our feet no longer felt so heavy on the ground.

We had spent Pa's severance package consulting with faith healers & doctors; all of whom had averted their gaze, from our desperate faces. They told us that there was nothing that could be done for the disappearing. To say nothing of the disappeared. But the Prophet had restored our faith that part by part, we could piece Pa back to life.

In November, Pa began to suffer from hallucinations. (It can drive you mad, I suppose, to see your own death approaching part by part.) Ma decided then that it was time we wrote to the Prophet. Ma had never been much of a talker & the letter showed. It was brief, no more than half a page, & in it, Ma wrote about Pa's disappearing parts. By then he'd lost one arm, an ear lobe, & all his toes.

Days, then weeks went by with no response, but we refused to stand idle. We anointed Pa's oil & prayed for his body parts to be restored. Since I'm writing this all down now, years later, I'll tell you that we were at our lowest. Pa screamed constantly, imagining a cluster of giant spiders dangling from the ceiling. Ma & I took turns washing him repeatedly throughout the day because of his diarrhoea. By then you could hold all of him in your cupped hands.

It was Christmas Eve when the Prophet finally answered our letter. I remember the sunrise that morning: ochre light spilling into the servant's quarters. I gazed out the window. Bass John's red Fiat, which skulked out in the yard, windows browning, seemed to sparkle in the morning light.

"...A letter from Salisbury Lane..."

Ma stood at the foot of the bed; her hands clasped in prayer. Pa's relentless screaming ceased & you could see the calm washing over the one eye he had left. He, too, was hanging onto the words of the Prophet.

Christmas Eve, 1986.

The Prophet read a passage from Ezekiel 37. "The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'"

Afterwards, the Prophet, his voice rising over the static, asked us to join hands in prayer. Ma took my hand in hers & for the first time in months, we glimpsed a smile on my father's face.

Since this is a story, in part, about grief, what I'm trying to tell you is that some griefs are never resolved. You keep returning to them over & over. It's like an unfinished sen-

HOUSE GIRL

How does it feel to be you
watching and waiting –

Mongane Wally Serote, 'When the Lights Go Out[viii]'

Afterwards, we moved an old mattress into the dining room. Our house girl, Mai Tariro, had coughed out blood and Granny said no way she could go on sleeping in the servant's quarters outside – a small wooden house with a cracked window and no electricity or running water.

This was in 2000, and we were all over the news that year. Vast tracts of farmlands were being seized by bands of militias across the country and they had shot a white man dead. More bloodshed looked set to follow and in anticipation, dozens of foreign correspondents had camped out at the Meikles.

I was eighteen; an English and religious studies major at a university in the Midlands, and I'd caught a Greyhound back to Harare on Good Friday. And that Monday, after we'd re-arranged all the furniture in the dining room and Maman had swept the floors, Uncle Fidel and I walked Mai Tariro up to the main house.

Later that afternoon, Mai Tariro, said that she was just a house girl. "I don't want to be anyone's burden," she said. She sat upright, encircled by the last of the day's light, seeping in through the gauze curtains. I'd handed her a cup of black tea with lemon and ginger, and the enamel cup sat cradled in the palm of her hands.

"It's not a good thing to be a burden," she said, her voice hoarse and weary.

Our last house girl, Mildred, entangled our family in a neighbourhood scandal involving a married man: an out of work geologist with an autistic stepson. Maman had called Mildred a whore when the news leaked out.

"It's not a difficult thing to find a whore," Maman said. "If a whore is all I wanted, I could have easily just gone to the Avenues."

The week ended with Mildred, misty-eyed, carting all her belongings into the backseat of a Mazda 323 driven a man in a hi-vis vest and blue overalls.

In the days after, Maman put word out that we were looking for a new house girl. "A God-fearing house girl" is how she put it. Mai Tariro, a referral from one of Maman's colleagues at the School Examinations Council, arrived at our house from a small village in Masvingo that winter. Tall, thin, with a shaved head and high cheekbones. She wore a yellow jersey and a maroon dress she'd measured out and sewn with her own hand.

Later, I found out that Mai Tariro was only thirty-three, but you could have sworn that she looked forty or more.

From the outset, Mai Tariro and I didn't talk much, not that we had much to talk about to begin with. I was in my final year at boarding school and studying for my A-Level exams. Whenever I'd return home on a weekend pass or at the end of term, say, I passed the time going over my study notes. My mind see-sawing between Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and a dense novella about township life during the Rhodesia years, while she busied herself with a myriad of household chores.

There were, however, a few occasions when Mai Tariro broke out of the master-and-servant parts we'd been assigned. "I never finished school," she said one morning; pausing to gaze up from varnishing the long wooden table in the dining room. "I don't want the same thing to happen to Tariro," she said. "She must study hard and get a good job."

"I'm sure she will," I said.

I didn't know what else to add so I said, "Tariro can be anything she wants to be."

Mai Tariro looked at me for a brief moment, then lowered her eyelids and went back to work.

That evening, after we'd read a passage from Isaiah 43 and said our prayers, I was tasked with keeping watch over Mai Tariro through the night. Maman and Uncle Fidel had to go to work the next morning and although Granny had worked as a nurse during the war, she was eighty-six now and hard of hearing. In no condition, in other words, to be attending to night duty.

I stretched myself out on the sofa and wished the night away watching old episodes of *Sanford and Son* and *Frasier* on VHS. I could hear Mai Tariro coughing in the next room; the illness in her lungs rising above the canned laughter.

At dawn, I opened the door a crack: Mai Tariro lay sleeping in the hollow of the mattress. I tip-toed into the room and reached for the tin can Granny had placed next to the bed for Mai Tariro to spit out the phlegm gathering in her throat. I inhaled deeply then held the can at a distance, between my thumb and index finger, and made my way out.

At noon Granny woke me up and said to call the ambulance. Mai Tariro's condition had deteriorated somewhat in the short time that I'd been asleep. She had started throwing up and she sat shivering with her back pressed against the wall.

I picked up the receiver and called the emergency number. It took a long time before someone answered. I'd nearly put the phone down when I heard a voice crackling through the static: "Hello. Hello?" I gave the woman at the other end of the line my name and our address and explained the nature of our emergency.

"No," I said, "she doesn't have medical aid."

"In that case," the dispatcher said, "who is going to be responsible for payment?"

"She's our house girl," I said, then proceeded to give her Maman's details, including a telephone number for her workplace.

I had changed into a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a striped blue-and-white t-shirt by the time Granny, and I heard a siren wailing down Nirvana Road.

"That must be them," Granny said.

One of the paramedics – a large man named Gideon – wanted to know how many boys had been in my sixth form class at school. We were on our way now to the government hospital in town. I'd left Granny conversing with the neighbours who'd been drawn to our house by the ambulance.

"How many would you say?"

"Hmm. Maybe sixty."

"Young man," Gideon said, "how much do you want to bet that half of you will be dead before you turn thirty?"

"We're wasting our time running after the living," Gideon said, casting a glance down at Mai Tariro; hooked up to an oxygen mask and an IV drip. "We should be making coffins."

"Don't believe me, look," he said, drawing the blanket up to the kneecaps of Mai Tariro's legs. He tapped her shin bones with the ballpoint pen which had been clipped to his shirt.

"See? How thin she is? Three months and she'll be in the ground."

I simply nodded at Gideon.

"I'm telling you," Gideon said, a grin on his face. "We should start making coffins."

Mai Tariro disappeared with two attendants down a long enfilade of rooms. I took the elevator to the canteen on the third floor. The Formica table and chairs, and the strong scent of cleaning fluid wafting through the air, put me in mind of pre-school. There was one other person seated in the canteen. A man in a dark suit but his face was obscured by the broadsheet newspaper stretched out in his hands. Running beneath the red masthead of the *Herald* was a photograph of a white man in khaki shorts and a torn shirt. Blood pouring down his face from a head wound.

The man must have sensed my gaze. He shifted in his seat and lowered the paper. "Varungu vakazvipengera," he said, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. "As long its blacks killing each other no one from the so-called international community cares. But kill one white person, I'm telling you, just one white person and you'll be in deep, deep shit…"

He got up and left, leaving the paper on the table.

I must have fallen asleep. When I opened my eyes, the canteen was bathed in a yellow light. Some cartoon was playing on the TV mounted to the wall.

I headed back to the general ward.

The nurses at the front desk informed me that Mai Tariro had been quarantined in the pulmonary unit on the fifth floor.

I walked up the concrete staircase. The number of desperate faces crisscrossing the isles had eased by the time I reached the landing and pressed the buzzer to the access-controlled entrance. The nurse who let me in had one hand cradled around a beige telephone receiver and the other twirled round a silver necklace.

"One mi-nu-te," she said, mouthing the words as I approached the visitor's desk. "We're so understaffed," the nurse said as soon as she got off the phone.

I told the nurse that that I'd come to check on Mai Tariro and she reached behind the counter and handed me a white surgical mask.

"Here," she said, "put this on. She's in E.17."

Mai Tariro's room was at the far-end of a narrow corridor. Her right arm was still wired up to an IV drip and she was sleeping, inhaling, and exhaling in loud raspy breaths through an oxygen mask.

I went and sat by the windowsill, craning my neck to gaze down at the street below. It was now 5pm: rush hour. I sat there listening to the low rumbling of trucks and the blare of car horns, observing the steady stream of people walking along the pavement; homeward bound after a day's work. After what seemed an inordinately long time, I turned to look up at the quickly darkening sky.

In a little while there came a gentle, evenly paced knock at the door. A broad-shouldered woman in a white coat and black-rimmed spectacles with thick lenses called me to come over. I crossed the length of the room and closed the door behind me, and we stood facing each other in the corridor.

The woman introduced herself as Dr Mutengwa.

"Come," she said, "let's go and sit in my office."

The office overlooked the visitor's parking lot. On the large mahogany desk sat a grey computer and two plastic letter trays fitted with the signs IN and OUT.

"We ran some tests," Dr Mutengwa said, peeling open a manila folder.

A rebel army had invaded Mai Tariro's body and soon she would be on the side of the vanquished. The documents Dr Mutengwa pulled out of her folder – an X-Ray film showing a pair of lungs ravaged with holes, the findings of various other tests scrawled on unlined paper – charted the advancement of the rebel soldiers. Marking the annexed territory, pillaged villages, and towns.

"We advise patients all the time," Dr Mutengwa said, "that they should come to us sooner rather than later." She pushed the folder to the side. "There is nothing we can do. We'll keep her overnight, but she'll be discharged tomorrow morning. In the meantime, here," Dr Mutengwa said,

tearing off a page along the perforated edge or a prescription pad. "Take this down to the pharmacy on the second floor."

I hadn't smoked a cigarette since my seventeenth birthday. But as soon as I left the pharmacy, pushing past a couple huddled over a child with a bleeding nose, I felt my chest tightening with that old craving.

I pressed a note into the hands of one of the street vendors outside, drew three cigarettes from a box of Everest and asked for a match. I lit one cigarette after the other, crushing the butts on the asphalt, before hailing a combi.

It was late when I arrived back home. All the neighbourhood shops had closed and music from the jukebox at Anita's, a tavern down the street, carried in the breeze. Granny had gone to bed but Maman and Uncle Fidel had stayed up waiting for my report from the hospital.

"I don't understand these villagers," Maman said afterwards. "Do they want her to die here?"

Uncle Fidel let out a long sigh and shook his head.

Maman explained that she'd spent the morning on a long-distance phone call with Mai Tariro's grandfather – the family's patriarch – trying to arrange for her departure. But the old man's voice had risen sharply at any suggestion of his involvement. Mai Tariro had defied him by going off to the city, the old man said, and, as far as it mattered, her travel plans were no concern of his. Dead or alive, Mai Tariro would have to find her own way back, the old man said, slamming the phone down in Maman's ear just to make sure she understood.

Maman sank back into the sofa and let her arms fall to the side.

"She has a half-sister out in Ruwa," Maman said after a short while.

But the sister had sounded non-committal over the phone. She'd said to Maman that she couldn't in good faith promise anything but she would try shifting her plans around so she could come over the following day.

Uncle Fidel's closest friend, Griza, a mechanic and used car salesman, had set up shop in the backyard of his mother-in-law's house, two doors down from ours. An arrangement that had put so much strain on their relationship Griza had stopped calling his mother-in-law by name. In conversation with Uncle Fidel he referred to her as That Woman.

We didn't own a car as neither Maman nor Uncle Fidel could drive. So early the next morning Uncle Fidel asked Griza about driving Granny and I to the hospital. Griza had agreed and he showed up a short while later driving a white Nissan Sentra with missing hubcaps.

"Young man," Griza said, as the car idled then pulled out of our driveway, the bobble head dog nodding as we turned into Chiremba Road, "If Jesus came back today, I will not be on the list of the 144 000. There's an X next to my name after last night."

One of Griza's nephews had returned from fighting in the DRC and the two of them had stayed up at Anita's, passing around quarts of Black Label until after closing time.

Griza's nephews had returned from fighting in the DRC and the two of them had stayed up at Anita's, passing around quarts of pilsner until closing time.

"That nephew of mine lost three fingers," Griza said, opening and clutching the palm as his left hand on the steering wheel, as if he needed reassurance that his own fingers were still intact.

"He can't sleep without drinking," Griza said. "And believe me that boy drinks like he owes the devil something."

Griza leaned back into his seat and let out a whistle through his teeth.

I rolled down the side window and felt the warm air grating on my arm.

Now that Mai Tariro's illness had been given a name, life seemed to leak out of her. She'd been discharged and we found her sitting alone on a metal bench along the corridor on the fifth floor.

Granny let go of Griza's arm and sat down on the bench next to Mai Tariro. She took Mai Tariro's hand in hers and held it with the same tenderness she'd once held mine when I was younger.

"We've heard," is all Granny said in Shona.

Mai Tariro looked up, at Griza and me leaning against the wall, her eyes like tadpoles in a pool of muddy water. "Tariro," she said, then drew a sharp breath before the sickness in her lungs started up again.

Later that Thursday, a woman arrived at our house, carrying a packet of mini frosted doughnuts from Bakers Inn, and asking after Mai Tariro. She wore a sleeveless dress which flared down at the knee, a string of plastic pearls, and a floppy sun hat with flowers that she never took off even as she sat across from Granny and me inside our living room.

She introduced herself as Mai Tariro's half-sister, Rutendo, and admitted that she'd been taken aback by Maman's phone call.

"Is she not your sister?" Granny asked.

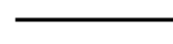
In a manner of speaking, yes, they were, Rutendo said, but Mai Tariro was an illegitimate child. The offspring from an affair her father had had many years ago while working at a gold mine in what was then Fort Victoria. And not a word had passed between her and Mai Tariro in the five years since they'd buried their father.

"She didn't even tell me that she is working as a house girl here in Harare," Rutendo said. "And if it wasn't for my mother who said I must come, I wouldn't be here. So, where is she? I only have fifteen minutes. I must pick my daughter up from crèche."

I led Rutendo into the next room. Mai Tariro stirred under the blanket when she heard our footsteps. Mai Tariro's head rose from the pillow, and she smiled weakly, before the rattle in her chest pushed her back down again.

Rutendo laughed. A deep laugh that welled up from the belly, heaving her body back and forth. She steadied herself on the chair next to Mai Tariro's bed.

"Look at yourself," I heard Rutendo say before I left the room. "Just look at yourself..."



In the dead of night, while they all slept, Mai Tariro called my name.

I pushed the door to the dining room open and hit the light switch. Mai Tariro flinched at the sudden flood of light.

She sat hugging her knees close to her chest, staring into the distance.

"I'm not a bad person," she said.

"I've only ever been with two men in life. My first husband, Tariro's father, used to throw punches at me like he was fighting a man. But it was me, me who looked after him when he had no one else. My second husband used to bring other women home. It didn't matter if I was there or not. But I looked after him, too, when living became a luxury."

Mai Tariro stopped to gather breath in her lungs.

"Tariro," she said, her voice quivering.

"Don't forget" – that's all Mai Tariro could say before she broke out into another coughing fit.

In the morning, I thought to myself, Griza and Uncle Fidel would make the four-hundred-kilometre drive to Mai Tariro's home district, and Maman would begin the search for a new house girl. The cycle would begin again. But that was all the future. In the meantime, I sat there listening to all the noises Mai Tariro made. Even afterwards, when the cough subsided and I dimmed the light, and the room went dark, I just sat there. Waiting.

SCENE FROM A HANGING

It was the afternoon my father took me to Gallows Hill to bid farewell to the arm-wrestling champion of the 153rd State. At the hour of his execution, The Colonel stood proud before us, dressed in his signature attire – a battle helmet, gold tights and black combat boots with no laces. When the priest asked if he had any last words, The Colonel looked up, eyes squinting into the midday sun, & cleared his throat. A hush fell over us. Then, the Colonel began to sing:

> *The world's smallest guitar is playing my favourite song*[viii].

At the sound of his voice, we tipped our heads to the sky, & began singing in unison.

> *The world's smallest guitar is playing my favourite song.*

Afterwards, the priest asked if we may bow our heads to pray. I stared ahead, at the hangman's tortoise-coloured sandals, as all around me heads were lowered down to the earth. The priest made the sign of the cross & asked the Lord for mercy as the hangman fixed the rope around The Colonel's neck. "Brother, can you imagine doing this shit job?" I heard the hangman say, taking a drag from the cigarette dangling from his lips. "I actually wanted to be a salesman."

Moments before he slipped through the hangman's trap door, The Colonel performed one final act. He raised his right arm to the crowd, a salute, & began a slow marching drill on the spot. The way The Colonel moved his feet…What beauty!...We have always loved men in uniform. It was then when we resolved that we would not let him die. We resumed singing again & when the trap door fell open The Colonel floated up to the sky on the power of our voices. We would keep him alive that way. Even if it meant singing the same song for days, months, years. Our voices would continue to ring out. Not another person would die because we chose to fall silent.

UNCLE HABAKKUK

Early in the spring of 1998, our government sent a third of the army, 11 000 troops, to fight in the Congo War. A frenzy of bloodletting that sucked in soldiers and mercenaries from across the region: Angola, Uganda, Rwanda, Namibia, Chad, Sudan, Burundi. My father, Ezekiel, said these were telling signs of the End Times. It had been written by the prophets: 'nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.' Our world had reached the apex of its sinfulness and would soon be struck down by a great fire or swept up in a flood like the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh.

I was fourteen years old, and my sister Molleen was three years younger. Too young, I'm saying, to comprehend just how catastrophic the government's decision would turn out to be. My father, the GM of National Railways, had built a life for us that, for a time, seemed strong enough to withstand the shocks of a corrupt and erratic presidency. We lived in a rambling two-storey house next door to a former beauty queen rumoured to be sleeping with the Finance Minister.

We were well-to-do, I'm saying, but none of it had come easy for my father. His own father - the first black psychiatrist in the country - had been shot dead in '78, two years before Independence, and his mother died from cancer of the colon soon in '81. In real and practical terms, these deaths meant that my father, the eldest of ten children, had to look after the rest of his younger siblings. A duty he accepted without complaint. My mother will tell you that my father hardly spent a cent on himself and he waited until all his siblings had graduated from either the polytechnic or university in town before raising kids of his own.

My father took great pride in the fact that we were a family of graduates. Firmly established among the black middle class. It's something his own father, the psychiatrist whose portrait hung in our living room, would have been proud of. Everything had gone to plan for my father, in relation to his siblings, with the exception of the youngest, Uncle Habakkuk. Tall, sparely built, with a glint of sadness in his eyes, Uncle Habakkuk figured in my father's stories as an example of what awaited Molleen and I if we didn't study hard or pay attention in school.

My father, who read the bible from start to finish every year, often called his brother a sluggard. An Old Testament epithet from the book of Proverbs and my father's harshest indictment.

Uncle Habakkuk was the only one in our family to have flunked out of his O-Levels. Before Uncle Habakkuk joined the army - a last ditch attempt to knock his life into shape - he'd held down a succession of low-paying jobs. One time, Uncle Habakkuk worked as a delivery man for Greaves & Keegans, one of the oldest advertising firms in the city. But the job ended when the company's bright red delivery van was stolen while Uncle Habakkuk was out smoking a joint

during his lunch break. In my father's stories, this had been the one fatal flaw in Uncle Habakkuk's character: an inability to rationally appraise each decision.

The one and only time my father went against his better judgement and intervened in Uncle Habakkuk's working life, things had ended badly for the both of them. My father had convinced a church friend of his to take on Uncle Habakkuk as a plumber. But then, while replacing a water geyser, Uncle Habakkuk and his workmate decided to get drunk. The pious Jehovah's Witness, whose house this was, returned to find the pair flat on their backs inside the ceiling.

This is all to explain why my parents' faces were stamped with unpleasantness on those occasions Uncle Habakkuk visited our house. The frequency of the visits was of course determined by how well things were in Uncle Habakkuk's life. If things were going well then Uncle Habakkuk would have no need to visit. He would only reappear again at our doorstep once things were at low ebb.

Those visits, I remember, followed a familiar pattern. Uncle Habakkuk would begin by inquiring about all sorts of things, the weather, politics, childhood friends, etc. A tactic that resembled Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope, buying his time, and reserving the best punches for the last round. And in this instance, that meant presenting my father with a small request for money.

To his credit, my father listened to these stories without once saying to Uncle Habakkuk, let's get it over with. Just tell me how much you want. My father went along with the charade: tilting his head in places, leaning closer, nodding in agreement, making the right noises. But when it came time to speak, my father would throw punches of his own. Uncle Habakkuk had no choice but to sit still and endure my father's lecture on personal responsibility and how it was incumbent upon us as good Christians to build a life by the sweat of one's brow. But my father would, in the end, reach for his wallet and give Uncle Habakkuk what he'd asked for.

Love, I suppose, is one of those things that is hard to understand. Uncle Habakkuk grated on my father's nerves, sure, but I have no doubt that he loved him in his own way.

For my part, I looked forward to Uncle Habakkuk's visits. The world didn't feel so fraught around him. So tight and heavy. My father had cultivated within us an apocalyptic conscience with his endless talk of the End Times. And it is a difficult thing to walk around saddled with the knowledge that the world you so love, and the people in it, could be washed away in a moment.

That Saturday in August, my father sat reading the *Financial Gazette* and didn't bother getting up when Uncle Habakkuk entered our living room. Neither did my mother. Suppose they had braced themselves for another tall tale. And Uncle Habakkuk presented them with a story alright, it just wasn't the one they had in mind. Uncle Habakkuk looked over at my father and announced proudly: "I am going to war brother. Your little brother is going to war."

"What is this nonsense you're telling me?" my father said, wrinkling his nose the way he always did whenever anyone in his company had said something disagreeable.

My father reached for the remote control, which had slipped down the side of the couch, and switched off the television.

"What do you know about war?" My father asked. "You were only a child, this height, when Baba died."

Uncle Habakkuk said to my father that he and his plumbing friend, Lucas, had joined the army because they'd heard that your salary would be paid in US dollars if you were deployed to the Congo.

"Imagine how much money we'll have in a year, brother? We'll be millionaires! Next time, I'll be the one giving *you* money. Ha-ha."

I don't have to tell you that my father didn't laugh along with his idiot little brother. Here he was rushing off to fight in a war he had no business fighting in. Risking life and limb and all for what? A childish dream that he and his plumbing friend would emerge on the other side of it all unscathed, with millions in their pocket. When the two of them couldn't manage a task as simple as replacing a geyser.

"We are leaving tomorrow," Uncle Habakkuk said, "and I thought I should come and tell you in person. Brother to brother."

My father said nothing. He crossed his legs and resumed reading the *Financial Gazette* and for a while, we just sat there, entombed in my father's silence. That is until my mother stepped in to rescue us. She instructed me to take Uncle Habakkuk's rucksack up to my room.

"You might as well spend the night," my mother said to Uncle Habakkuk.

***

My mother had prepared rice and beef stew but supper that night was a grim affair. My father was never one to sulk, but he refused to speak, and we had to be rescued again from his silence. This time a power cut came to our aid. We ate by candlelight and afterwards, my mother asked Molleen and I to clear the plates.

Later, when my parents and Molleen had gone to bed, Uncle Habakkuk suggested that we go out to the tavern down the road. This was his last night after all.

I was fourteen, as I've already said, and had never been let out of the house after dark without parental supervision. Besides, my father abhorred drunkards and drinking places.

So I said to Uncle Habakkuk, "My father says we should not keep company with sinners. I Corinthians 5 v. 11."

In the dark, Uncle Habakkuk's silhouette shook with laughter and he asked me to repeat what I had said. I did and he laughed some more.

Uncle Habakkuk still wanted us to go and, in the end, I didn't put up much of a fight. But there was a problem. My parents kept all the house keys with them in their bedroom. So, we had to jump out of the bathroom window; leaving it open for our return. The plan would only work if neither of them got into the bathroom in the middle of the night.

I don't know why it came to me but once we started walking down the street, I turned to Uncle Habakkuk and asked him why he wasn't married. Uncle Habakkuk was only twenty-four, but in my mind then, he appeared to be a great deal older and his not being married registered as deviant.

"Little one," he said, putting a hand over my shoulder. "Time will do its work. Whatever will find you will find you. Even death will have its chance."

The name of the tavern, The Rose and Crown, didn't fit the establishment bequeathed to it: an assortment of white plastic chairs sat on by weary faces. Men in hi-vis vests and blue overalls passing around quarts of Carling Black Label. Matshikos' 'Let's take the world and turn it over to the other side' pulsed from the speakers and two women dressed in hot pants danced together by the pool table.

Uncle Habakkuk ordered a half jack of Chateau Brandy and two Cokes and we sat by the corner - adrift from the rest of the crowd. He cracked one of the Cokes open with his teeth and asked me to drink it to about half-way so he could pour the brandy in.

I had never tasted alcohol before but when Uncle Habakkuk passed me the Coke bottle, now mixed with brandy, I didn't argue. It tasted bitter and for some reason I didn't want to admit that to Uncle Habakkuk.

'Do you know the nursery rhyme?' Uncle Habakkuk said after a while, "Little Jack horner/sat in a corner/drinking Castle draught. /He licked his lips/and took one sip/and said, 'What a good boy I am!"

Uncle Habakkuk chuckled at his own joke but when I looked at him, you could spy a deep sadness sitting on his face with a bright smile.

Just then, an old acquaintance of Uncle Habakkuk's spotted us in the corner, and he strolled across to come and join us. I was buzzed by then and my head felt like an overloaded washing machine.

Uncle Habakkuk's friend's name was Dani. He held a cigarette and a beer in one hand and in the other, a plastic bag with a goat's head. You could see its teeth sticking out.

And so we were three.

"After you're done here," he said to Uncle Habakkuk, "let's go to my house. I have more brandy and you tell me, what could be better than more brandy."

Uncle Habakkuk turned to me and said, "See, little one, what did I tell you? What will find you will find you."

As we got up to from our chairs, I asked Dani what he planned to do with the goat's head.

"It's for my wife," Dani said. "She just loves goats."

Outside, the sky was completely black, and the street was deserted. Dani lived two neighbourhoods away, in Queensdale, and we had to walk all the way up to Chiremba Road to get a cab. The driver was asleep; his slender frame slouched over the steering wheel, when Dani and Uncle Habakkuk knocked on his side window. The driver cracked the window open and regarded the three of us warily before deciding that we weren't the mugging type. I don't recall how much the fare was, but Dani hopped in the front passenger seat and placed the goat's head on his lap. The car smelled of old socks, so Uncle Habakkuk and I pulled open both windows in the back to let in some air.

Ten minutes later we were outside Dani's house.

"The gate makes too much noise," Dani said, "and my wife doesn't like noise. Oh, she doesn't like noise."

Dani lobbed the goat's head over the fence, and we skipped over. It was close to midnight and you couldn't see too far ahead of you. I kept my eyes trained on the white plastic bag in Dani's hand.

"Shhh, listen," Dani said to Uncle Habakkuk and I once we were standing outside the house proper. "Here, hold the goat," he said to Uncle Habakkuk, "I'll be going in through the window, and I'll open the front door for you." Sure enough, Dani unlocked the door and pushed it open and we tiptoed inside. Dani switched on the kitchen light and turned on the gas stove. "We need to make some greens with this," Dani said. 'My wife will love this.'

Just then, Dani's wife stormed into the kitchen holding a sjambok and accompanied by a large man whom you could tell had zero appreciation for nonsense.

"Oh Dani," his wife said, "Is this what you've decided to do? Bring strangers to my house in the middle of the night. And look at you, you're drunk."

"Who says I've been drinking?" Dani said. "I just wanted to give you this," he said, taking the goat's head out of the plastic bag. Dani's ex-wife's husband stepped forward and smacked the goat out of Dani's hands and it fell to the floor. Dani wasn't too pleased with that.

"Little one," Uncle Habakkuk said to me, "it's time to go." We ran out of the front door and kept running long after we'd scaled the fence. We ran until we could feel the fire burning in our chests. Uncle Habakkuk didn't die in the Congo but he came back from the war diminished.

Even here, at the end of the story, I don't want to think of him that way. Instead, I see two foolish man-boys running and laughing in the middle of the night – running like the whole world is ours.

SPACEMAN

1. The Russian

12.10am.

We're looking for The Russian.

—The Black Russian.

That's Alderman who's talking.

Alderman and his boy were going to send the dog to the moon. Suppose that's how it all started. It must have been three weeks ago now, I guess. Alderman had mailed his Dream Book to the office of the Prime Minister, c/o the Permanent Secretary, Prof J_ M_. Within a day or two a reporter from the *Herald* had rung him up. Come knocking at his front door with a muzungu photographer. Sure enough, the following morning, there was our Alderman on the front page, in a black tailcoat blazer and a pair of white gloves. Looking into the distance, with those vacant, unnerving eyes you sometimes find in the born again. EPWORTH MAN DREAMS OF SPACE, the headline read. Beneath it: a sketch of the dog, Pumba, in an astronaut's helmet, gliding across a starlit midnight sky.

Naturally, everyone thought the hens in Alderman's head had been set free from their enclosure and were running wild, but not me. *No siree.* I believed in Alderman. I guess a part of me needed to. Which is why I have my foot on the accelerator of this old Renault. The needle on the speedometer rounding the dial at 120. Hightailing it to Dee-Dee's Deluxe Restaurant, Bar & Tavern. A joint The Russian has been known to crawl out of most mornings.

—Here!

—Here?

Alderman nods.

—Yes, here.

Here is a dark alleyway. A thin strip of gravel wedged between a scrapyard and a dumpsite. I step on the brakes, turn the steering wheel. The old Renault skids across the tarmac, lurching to the right before coming to a stop. The dog yelps, then lets out a long, drawn-out whimper. *A song before dying.* Alderman hears it, too. Makes him shudder. Both of us glance up at the rearview mirror, past the tangle of furry dice. It's like a scene from *The Deer Hunter*, back there. Alderman's boy, Archford, bare-chested and bloodied, has his shirt and tiny arms wrapped around Pumba's stomach to staunch the bleeding. Alderman reaches over, to muss the dog's ears.

—This way.

Alderman steps out of the car and I follow. The sulphurous smell of rotting fruit, old urine, etc, clogs the alleyway. Dee-Dee's is no more than a constellation of white chairs and shiny faces, out in the open air. A foosball table and a jukebox. At the centre of this small universe, thickly felted with drunken voices, is a large man in a Father Christmas outfit. Cartwheeling arms and wobbling knees to what I think is Congolese music. A cigarette dangling from his lips.

It's September 1, today. First day of spring.

—There, I see him, Alderman says. The Russian is on all fours, next to the foosball table.

—You know, scientifically, this is the best posture for human beings.

He doesn't once look up from our feet.

—The whole system... the digestive system, urinary tract, even the blood circulates better when you're like this, you see? I've written to the Ministry of Health... perhaps we can look into the creation of parks...

The Russian tries to haul himself up from the concrete. Staggers in a drunken waltz, *one-two-three*, then tips over.

Alderman and I help him to his feet and make our way to the car.

—But what can I do for you, brothers?

In '65, when the war broke out, The Russian, then only a boy of 19, had been shipped off to Moscow to study medicine. The years had passed by in a whirl, surviving one grim winter only to start preparing for the next. Then came April 1980. Independence. It had been snowing that morning, during his hourly rounds, when he saw the new Prime Minister on a muted television, hazed with static. He stood there, following the movement of his thin lips (what did he say?). Observing the glint of the Prime Minister's gold bifocals each time his face filled the screen. He had felt a pang of something, not sure what, when the new flag was hoisted.

Two years after that in '83, The Russian had walked out of his life in Moscow. Got on a flight back, still in his grey hospital slacks and a stethoscope round his neck. The first thing he'd done after he'd landed was ask a taxi driver where he could get a drink to warm the skeleton. The question had led him to Dee-Dee's...

The Russian whistles through his teeth when he sees Pumba, shivering now.

—OK. Tie me up.

Alderman and I look at each other.

—What?

—The roof. Open air is the only known cure for drunkenness. The Good Lord himself said so to Abraham.

We follow The Russian's orders. Tie him to the roof of the old Renault. Threading rope through the side windows. Knotting hands and feet.

—Ready?

Alderman waves The Russian a thumbs-up signal.

—Go!

I untangle the furry dice. Inhale. Ease the key into the ignition and start the engine.

2. Heart of Glass

The dominee had driven the two-hour stretch from the Eastern Highlands after he'd heard the news about Margret. Her decision to emigrate to Durham. A sad little place south of Newcastle. But she had family there. Allen. A cousin she had been fond of when they were both little and with whom she'd recently reconnected.

The gardener, Khumbulani, opened the gate for the green Mercedes. Out of the station wagon spilled the dominee himself, an impish man, one leg shorter than the other, his wife, Clarissa, 22 years his junior, cloaked in an air of unhappiness, and their twin boys, Donald and Derrick. The boys, large as seals, had set off running in the direction of the jacaranda tree, scattering the flock of pigeons.

—Goeie môre, the dominee said, tipping the wide brim of his hat. Then offering an outstretched hand in greeting.

Clarissa, a head taller, skin sickly pale, hovered behind her husband. Lips pressed into a tight smile. *Like a sparrow*, is what I thought, *a sparrow fluttering in a cage.*

—Please, come in.

Rosemary, our housekeeper, laid out a pot of Tanganda tea and biscuits on a coffee table on the veranda. We sat in a half-moon, Clarissa and I flanking Margret and the dominee. We talked about the boys' schooling, the dominee's one and only visit to London, Margret's upcoming departure, the trouble with the dissidents in the south of the country. Everything, you could say, except the heart of the matter.

—Ag, meisie, the dominee said. Loosening the collar of his shirt and sitting upright.

—He was a good farmer, your boy. Cared for his animals and crops. Never did anything to anyone. Nix.

Nix. The dominee's voice rises and the word rings in our ears like a judgment. Closed and final. The dominee lifts the teacup and saucer. Slurps whatever is left.

—It's the kaffirs.

Rosemary walked in at that moment. If she felt anything, I couldn't tell. Her face, as she set about clearing the table, was as impenetrable as a block of ice.

—Yes, Father, Margret said, fixing a stare at Rosemary, bent towards the table. Then craning her neck to look at me.

—It's the Kaffirs.

I look at Clarissa, her hair severely tied back in a bun. Our eyes meet, she holds my gaze, then turns away.

The ensuing silence is broken by the twins. Barrelling down the passageway like a two-man platoon in the direction of their mother.

—Ma!

—Ma!

—We killed a shongololo.

The dominee lifts the hat from his knee and waves it through the air.

—Quiet, boys, it's time to pray.

It's time to pray. We hold hands and bow our heads.

Margret flew to Heathrow the following Tuesday. Every marriage has a threshold, I guess. Past a certain point it breaks apart, splinters. Margret and I had reached ours this July, on a day like any other. Three shots had been discharged from a Makarov pistol at our son Bryan's farm in the Eastern Highlands. In the aftermath, the bodies of two women, barefoot, middle-aged, had been found near the gate. Backs lying flat on the red earth. And a third, our son's, had been discovered by the dominee, slouched on a bloodied sofa. Blondie's 'Heart of Glass' playing on the gramophone. Ag nee, the dominee had said over the telephone. A foiled robbery. Finish and klaar. The boy had nothing to answer for. Nix.

3. Sister, Sister

The Russian yells the directions down from the roof. We go zigzagging down a thin web of streets. Right into Chiremba Road, left into Stoneleigh, left again onto Agnes Wilson Drive. We're moving about as fast as the Prime Minister's motorcade, the rush of cold air pulling at our faces, when the Renault cuts out. Ambles along a gently sloping hill then stops. I twist the ignition key. Not even a sound. Or a flicker of light on the dashboard.

—Again, Alderman says. Nothing.

—It's the engine, I say, my hand knocking the furry dice sideways. We look up at the rearview mirror. The way Archford's face is all bunched up, it's like someone tossed away his birthday cake with its candles lit and stomped on it.

—Don't cry, Alderman says, but it's too late. Archford has his lower lip curled. A rain cloud about to break. And, sure enough, it's not long before the boy is inconsolable. His body heaves back and forth, Pumba still gripped tight around his arms. Alderman steps out of the car and hops into the back seat. Puts his arm around the boy's shoulders. I can't help it, my own eyes begin to water.

—Brat'ya. Brothers? I think I lost a shoe.

—Doctor, can we hotfoot it? I say, leaning back against the headrest.

—The dog will die.

—Too far?

—We won't make it.

It's 12.52am. I get up from my seat. Unlatch the hinged metal canopy covering the engine. It's eerily silent. *The silence before death.* Alderman and his boy, The Russian, too; everyone has eyes squinted in my direction. The collective weight of our desperation is too great and I'm not sure what it is I'm supposed to be looking for. Radiator. Transmission. Battery. A/C compressor. All pieces of a jigsaw I have no idea how to join. Just then, as I think we're done for, in the distance, the whirling glow of police lights. Beaming in our direction like a spaceship.

Two female police officers disembark, shining torches at the Renault, the upturned bonnet. Both are tall and thin, like middle-distance runners.

—Good evening, fellow servants of our Lord.

The police officers hesitate, brows furrowed, unsure where the voice is coming from. They take off their peaked caps and look in my direction.

Up there. I gesture with my right hand.

The torches light up on The Russian's perfectly round face, his thick, horn-rimmed glasses.

—Why is this man on the roof?

—You are contravening the Road Traffic Act.

—I can explain, Alderman says, stepping out of the backseat. He tells the two officers – sisters it turns out, Brenda and Bridget – about the rocket launch. How the makeshift aircraft, the *SS Maria*, had exploded. Detonating all our dreams into tiny sparks without so much as leaving the ground. How the dog had been seriously wounded in the aftermath. The mad rush to find The Russian and now, here we are, running out of time.

—OK, first let's untie him.

—Then we move the dog.

Brenda and Bridget speak one after the other. We work in a calm, steady rhythm under their instruction. Archford and the dog – drifting in and out of consciousness now – go in the front seat of the patrol car, with Brenda stationed behind the wheel. The rest of us crowd in the back, after pushing the Renault to the shoulder of the street.

—Ready?

Brenda asks. We nod in unison. At that, the siren begins to wail.

4. War Stories

Sunday. I had nowhere to go. Without Margret the house felt hollow. I drove around aimlessly. Spying at pigeons perched on telephone wires and bare-limbed trees. Stopped once outside the Anglican boarding school we'd sent Bryan off to in '64, and stood there, under the low winter sun leached of light, looking at the vine-covered buildings. *Did you know that he was capable of killing?* Even as a boy, before he'd rushed off to join the army, the question had been there all along. Its faint ring like a church bell in the distance. *Of course, of course, some part of you always knows.*

The war is in everything here. Like water on paper, how it alters its shape. The creases and folds will always carry the memory of it.

In the aftermath, scores of white families abandoned houses and headed south, to Pretoria. I had driven into a quiet street in one of these neighbourhoods, formerly reserved for muzungus, when I saw them, sitting on a stoep. Dressed like store mannequins. Waistcoats and bowties. Pumba, too, had a bowtie tied round his neck.

I stopped the car. Rolled down the side window.

—Alderman? I said, squinting. I recognised him from the story in the *Herald*.

— Yes, sir. We have been waiting for you.

Alderman stood up, smiling. Arms stretched wide as he walked towards the car.

—Me? You must be mistaken.

—In my dream, I saw this exact car and registration number. What I couldn't see was the driver.

—What dream?

—And you are right on time. 10 o'clock.

Alderman reached over and opened the passenger door. Whistling to the boy and the dog as he got in.

—Where to?

—This way, Alderman said.

We got to talking during the drive to wherever he was leading us to. Alderman had grown up in Mutare, on a small patch of land in the countryside. In '77, he and his wife, Maria, who at 20 was a year older than he was, and Archford, barely a month old, had crossed the border into Mozambique. After walking six days, sleeping out in the veld, they'd made it to the camps in Chimoio. Fingers grimed with dirt from having to scavenge the earth for whatever food they might find.

—We had just asked for water when we looked up to see the first planes from the Rhodesian Air Force.

'Operation Dingo' Bryan said is what they had called it. The entire air force had been dispatched across the border. Darkening the sky above the camps like massing clouds. In two days,

10,000 bombs rained down from the sky. In the aftermath, Maria was among the dead. The boy blind in one eye.

— Can you imagine the noise? It was everywhere. The helicopters. The bombs. BAMB! BAMB! BAMB!

In the years that followed, Maria returned to Alderman in dreams. Not as a vision of burning flesh, dancing through a crowded camp, as he had last seen her. She had regained her skin. Her long legs and dimpled smile. When the boy was sick, Maria told him which roots to dig up. Some nights, they talked about small things. The squishy texture of toothpaste, the taste of roast groundnuts, *Chemtengure*, the nightly Radio 4 drama. Then, without warning, the ghost of Maria vanished. Gone.

The dreams that came to Alderman now were about space travel. God, he'd said, had given him instructions on how to build the rocket. Using black plastic bags, discarded car parts, cardboard, tin and foil, Alderman had worked feverishly on the *SS Maria*. Then one morning Pumba had appeared on his doorstep, wearing a space helmet.

—This is the place, Alderman said. We'd driven some distance, to a small clearing in Epworth. A patch of grass with the faded markings of a football field. On either side, stood goalposts with no netting.

—The *SS Maria* will take off from here, at midnight, on August 31.

All of us, the dog too, tipped our heads to the sky, following Alderman's gaze, to another universe.

5. Another Universe

1.45am.

—Thou shalt not tire!

Rejuvenated, The Russian pushes the passenger door open. Rushes in the direction of his doctor's rooms. A modest brick house with a zinc roof shaped into a series of parallel ridges and grooves. A light flickers. The Russian returns in a white coat, a stethoscope around his neck. Flashes a torchlight at the front seat. Places a hand on the dog's chest. Feeling for a heartbeat.

—We don't have much time! he calls out.

—Brenda, Bridget. Toropit'sya. Hurry. Follow me.

The two women alight from the patrol car. Trail behind The Russian, walking silently and in step with each other, like mimes. They return pushing a gurney. Both now have on a surgical mask, hairnet, and white gloves. Gently, they lift the dog from Archford's hands, and place it on the stretcher. The boy swallows hard and looks the other way.

—Brothers, pray the good Lord sends his yellow birds to guide us, The Russian yells through the window.

After the initial burst of activity, it soon quietens. Archford starts to snore. Alderman and I step out of the car. We sit on the ground, our backs leaning against the passenger doors, Alderman's shoulders pressed against mine.

Without intending to, my body drifts off to sleep. My last thought before that happens, is how maybe the papers got it all wrong. That maybe Alderman's dream isn't a dream at all but a prayer…

5am.

We're woken by the sound of a dog barking and The Russian's loud laughter.

—Brothers, sisters, vodka. The best medicine for the heart.

Vodka in hand, Brenda, Bridget and I, The Russian too, we all gather to watch the dog take its first steps, a thick gauze bandage taped round its stomach.

Alderman taps Archford on the shoulder. Whispers something in his ear before father and son embrace.

We stand like that for a moment, under the ochre sunrise. Watching the dog, spinning in circles, chasing after its tail. Our hearts beating together.

References:

[i] Lina Mounzer, 'The Meaning of Being Numerous,' in *Warscapes.com.* March 19, 2012 http://www.warscapes.com/literature/meaning-being-numerous-0

[ii] The lines in italics are taken from former United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech at the Commonwealth Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, on 1 August 1979. The full transcript is available at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104126

[iii] The line in italics is taken from Joan Didion's essay, 'Goodbye to All That,' in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, First Edition, 2008).

[iv] The lines in italics are lyrics from the song 'My Name is' by the American rapper, Eminem. The song appears on his second studio album, *The Slim Shady LP*. Writers: Marshall Mathers, Andre Young, Labi Siffre. Produced by Dr. Dre. Aftermath/Interscope Records, 1999.

[v] The line – 'she had forgotten what this world did to daughters' – is adapted and reworked from the opening passage of Lesley Nneka Arimah's short story, 'Light.' The story appears in Arimah's collection, *What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (p.55 – 64). Riverhead, USA, 2017.

[vi] The line in italics is taken from Jim Shephard's short story, 'Classic Scenes of Farewell'. The story appears in issue 27 (p.19 – 52) of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Edited by Dave Eggers, May 2008.

[vii] Mongane Wally Serote, 'When the Lights Go Out', in *Behold Mama, Flowers*. Publisher: AD Jonker, Johannesburg, South Africa (1978). The poem is available at: https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/15598/auto/0/0/Mongane-Wally-Serote/WHEN-LIGHTS-GO-OUT/en/tile

[viii] Lyrics from an unrecorded song by the South African band, The Brother Moves On (personal communication).