

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

The Tin Church

by

Rosamund Haden (HDNROS001)

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Masters of Arts in Creative Writing.

English Department
Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town
2001

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

Signature

Signed by candidate

Date 29/6/2001

Synopsis

Human bones are discovered on the farm Hebron near Swaziland where two old women, Catherine and Maria, live. Their memories are stirred and disturbed by the discovery.

Two young girls weave a close bond of friendship on the farm. Their childhood promises made in the tin church on the hill above Hebron are to have lasting repercussions on the shape of their lives. The church becomes their haven where they know they can always find each other. When Catherine's parents split up, and Catherine is taken to England, Maria still goes to the church, for there she is close to Catherine, and can see visions of her far away.

Years pass, and managers come and go at Hebron. Maria still waits for Catherine's return. One day Tom and Isobel Fyncham arrive as the new owners and Maria is absorbed as the resident servant. She watches them. Where do they come from? Why did they come? Tom seems at home here; Isobel is ill at ease. Their relationship is stormy. Strangely, it is the portrait of Catherine in the sitting room at Hebron that seems to come between them. Isobel leaves with no explanation.

Catherine returns to Hebron, and to Maria. The echoes of her childhood still haunt her; however things can't be the same. Maria is no longer enough and Catherine and Tom start falling in love. But there is much between them besides Maria and Isobel. There are secrets that Catherine cannot fathom.

As Maria feels more isolated, she again finds solace at the tin church. She is not the only one who can sense the spirits there. A boy on a neighbouring farm has made the Tin church his refuge from his claustrophobic life at home. In the tin church he sees a picture of Catherine, and senses a world beyond him. He knows they will meet.

He watches the people from a distance, but it is only when Tom is away that he approaches Catherine and is drawn into their lives. He is the one who sees the event that shifts the patterns forever, causing Tom to leave the farm, and Catherine to go on a journey to find him, and to discover the truth.

The Tin Church

by

Rosamund Haden

University of Cape Town

For my family

University of Cape Town

*There is laughter
And footprints in the red dust that has settled on the
floorboards in the tin church
The sound of two pairs of feet running
Two summer dresses.*

University of Cape Town

Prologue

A child found the bones. She was on her way to buy sugar at the store at Hebron. She ran across the summer green of the veld, stopping to pick a cosmos flower for her mother. The storm broke as she reached the path that wound up through the koppies to the tin church that stood on the ridge, outlined against the sky. The clouds split open and heavy drops of rain pelted the ground as she scrambled up the granite boulders and between the euphorbias that stood like sentinels. She crouched under the silvery leaves of a cabbage tree but soon she was soaked and she went further in between the rocks, finding an opening like a tunnel in between two boulders. She squeezed her way through and out onto a flat piece of ground on the other side. It was here, in the red earth that had turned to mud, that she found the bones. She had seen the skulls of animals: baboons, cattle, sheep, even dogs lying bleached by the sun in the veld, but she recognised that this was different.

The skull was tilted back, staring at her. The water ran in through the eyes and the jaws that were upturned towards the sky as though it was drinking the rain. Somebody had dug it up along with other bones that must have belonged to arms and legs; there were long slash marks in the soil.

She turned and ran, scratching her legs on the thorn bushes, until she reached the church. Here she sat shivering until the drumming of her heart slowed down and then she took off again, sliding in the mud down the slope, past the river pool and along the path to the farm school.

A boy was running up and down the stoep putting down enamel basins to catch the water that poured through the leaking roof. The school teacher came out and found the girl crouched next to the door.

It only stopped raining the next day and by then the bones had gone. Somebody had taken them from the burial site.

*

After the rain, in the dusk, when the puddles had been dried up by the heat of the day, a warm gust of wind blew over the veld and up the road past the school and down the avenue of gum trees that led to the house at Hebron. It carried the news of the bones that the girl had found. Gathering speed, it blew up the stone steps and under the arched wooden door that had been brought all the way from Holland. It shot over the carpet and across the inside courtyard around which the house was built, circling the roses and the prickly pear tree and making a lizard run for cover.

Catherine was sitting in front of the window in her bedroom. She held a baby bird that she had rescued from the storm in her paper-thin hands. The rain had washed it out of its nest and she had found it struggling to lift itself from a puddle in the courtyard. She had mashed together some bread and milk and chewed it until it was soft. Now she held the bird up to her mouth so that it could peck the food. When it had fed, she put it in the cardboard box she had lined with newspaper. The wind blew the door open and the windows came unlatched and banged against their frames. She went to close the window before the glass shattered. As she fixed the latch, she looked up to the ridge and saw that the roof of the church had blown off and that there was a light burning inside.

Maria looked at the clock on the kitchen wall; it was upside down. She stood on a chair and turned it the right way round, wondering how long it had been that way and why she hadn't noticed. It had stopped anyway, but it didn't matter, as she knew the time from the colour of the sky. It was time to feed the animals. She took five old metal dishes from the shelf and arranged them in a line in the courtyard. Then she took a large urn and poured milk out into the dishes.

She called out into the dark. The cats came out of the shadows; their forms slunk along the walls. They swiped at each other, their eyes infected and leaking pus. Maria watched them as they wove around the dishes; she kicked at the ones that were fighting, to

separate them. Catherine came out of her room and crossed the courtyard, Maria couldn't see her face but she knew something was wrong. She went into the kitchen and took the chicken and vegetables out of the oven and carried them across to the sitting room. She couldn't remember when she had started eating there; just that there was a time before and after. Now it didn't matter any more. Sometimes she and Catherine would eat together in the kitchen with Gabriel who worked in the garden. She had known Catherine for over sixty-five years. They were born in the same year on the farm, Hebron.

"I'm going to bed" Catherine got up and walked over to fetch the paraffin lamp from the shelf. She stopped when Maria spoke.

"Did you see the light in the church?" Maria watched Catherine closely. It was true then, she could see it on Catherine's face. "One of the picannins at the school found a skull, below the church. It's gone now."

Catherine didn't answer immediately. She picked up the lamp and turned to leave the room. When she did speak she didn't look at Maria.

"Put some more wood in the stove, I don't want cold water." She closed the door behind her.

In her room she sat down in front of the mirror. White hair; blue eyes, one clouded by a cataract now. Her hair was soft. She would cut some to line the bird's nest. She ran her finger over the scar on her left cheek, where she had fallen from her horse into a thorn bush.

She wondered who had dug up the bones after all these years, and why.

*

Maria stacked the plates and took them through to the kitchen. She picked at the chicken carcass and washed the bits down with some cheap red wine Gabriel had left her. Then she went to her room; there was nothing left to do but sleep. Her bed was up on bricks, not because of the tokoloshe but because of the river that came at night now, threatening to wash her away, across to the other side. She didn't know if she had the strength to swim back anymore.

She woke up later. It was still dark and her mouth was dry. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders and went out into the dark. The sky had cleared and the moon was full. The slates were cold under her bare feet. She hurried down the passage past the boxes with the litters of kittens. Catherine's door was open - she was gone.

University of Cape Town

Part One

University of Cape Town

Katie

Catherine took a torch with her when she left the house. She put it in the bag she was carrying, along with a blanket. She wouldn't need the torch outside, as the moon was full and she could have found her way along the path with her eyes shut, but she didn't know what she would find at the church.

The path led down alongside the dirt road, between the gum trees to the farm school where it bent away from the road winding around the base of the koppies and down towards the river. Here it split into two. One branch led up the slope to the tin church. The other continued straight down to the water.

Catherine took the branch that led down to her river, and her pool. There was a breeze blowing up off the water. It rustled the reeds on the banks of the river. She had taken off her shoes and felt the earth under her feet. The path was narrow and the grasses, silver in the moonlight, brushed her legs as she walked. She remembered running down this path and diving into the water; now her body was thin and brittle with age. When she got to the water she spread her blanket out and sat down to rest. The river curved, forming a pool. On the far side the rocks rose steeply out of the water and at the top there was a clump of wattle trees. Behind these stood the church. The pool was full from the rains. Down below the pool, the river widened and curved through the land, fat and heavy as a python. Catherine knew every part of it that ran over the farm. She had swam, canoed and walked the length. In the dry winters when the grasses turned yellow, the river would be shallow and stagnant. In the summer it swelled with the rain and the banks baked under the sun and the grass was lush and green and dotted with flowers. She had swum here in thunderstorms watching the lightning strike the tops of the iron rocks on the hills behind the farm.

Now when she looked up from the river pool she could see the light burning in the church through the branches of the trees. There was a whisper in the wind, a warm breath; her father's voice.

*

“Can you see the rabbit in the moon, Katie?”

“Yes, I see it. And I can see the Southern Cross.”

“Clever girl.”

“Look at the moon in the water.”

I take a stone and throw it into the centre of the shining ball and watch the ripples.

“It's late.” Dad swings me up onto his shoulders. I put my hands on his head. He runs up the avenue and I shriek and cling on. He slows down when he gets to the gate. A truck rattles past, I see the headlights and the dust clouds around us. The only light on in the house is in the sitting room. We are the only ones awake. The boards in the passage creak under his boots. He swings me down onto my bed. My sister, Lilly, stirs in her sleep. She makes small whistling sounds. I can see her eyes moving under her eyelids. She is the baby, my games are too rough for her. She's too young to join in and she runs and hides behind Mum's skirts for protection and tells Mum that I pinched her and Mum slaps me.

Dad is fishing in his pockets for something. He is always taking things out of his pockets; a compass so that I can map the country, a bird on a spring that winds up and flies, marbles of all colours, African trade beads - I keep them all in a box under my bed. Tonight it is a parcel in brown wrapping paper. I tear at it, impatient to see inside.

It's a photograph in a silver frame; the one Mum took at the river. She used to take a lot of photographs; she even changed a room in the back of the house into a dark room where she developed the prints. She didn't take ordinary pictures though, not the ones you see in family albums anyway. She took them of rocks and beetles and animals' skulls that she found in the veld. Sometimes you couldn't tell what the pictures were of, only she knew. She doesn't take photographs anymore, she stopped when Lilly was born. This is the last photograph she took.

It's at the river. I remember Dad teasing her, kissing her as they stood in the water. Then he picked me up and walked into the middle where the rocks made white water and he sat down with me on his lap.

He is wearing khaki shorts and a white shirt, his hair is wet, so is mine. I am sitting on his lap, smiling – you can see the gap between my teeth. My face is dirty. I am wearing a tunic with peacocks embroidered along the neck.

There are peacocks behind the house, up the path where Maria lives. Her mum works in our house. Sometimes Maria feeds the peacocks, but she says at night they frighten her because they sound like babies who have lost their mums in the dark.

My legs are brown from the sun and my feet are bare. My arms are wrapped around Dad's neck. He is sitting on a rock in the river and the water is pouring over us. Our clothes are soaked but the sun is shining above our heads.

Mum waved at us, we smiled, she pressed the button.

“For me?” I run my finger over the picture frame, it's old. There are patterns in the silver. I sleep with the photograph. When I wake up I am still holding it.

The early morning cold blue light is filling the room. I climb out of the window and jump down into the yard. Maria is waiting by the gate. She has her enamel mug. Hers is blue and mine is red.

We run up to the koppies together. We have a house there in the rocks where we play plummy ladies. We set down our mugs and collect leaves and stones. “Would you like another cup of tea – with sugar and milk?”

I set out our table on the boulder. Two enamel mugs, twigs for spoons, stones for sugar lumps and the leaves are our plates. Then we invite the lizards to join us. There are two of them that have climbed up the rock face. They hold their bodies stiffly and lift their feet off the rock, one then the other, as if they were standing on a hot plate.

“Would you like sugar in your tea?” we ask them. They bob their heads up and down

“Yes,” they say, “yes, we would like sugar with our tea.”

We get tired of playing in the rocks and go further up the slope to the tin church. The door is open. We have been before; it's a good place to play. Maria is running ahead of me, she stops at the door and turns to me.

“Do you hear that?”

I run up beside her.

“What?”

Now I can hear it too. There is a woman in the church, singing. I know the words, so does Maria.

“Come on.” Maria takes my hand, but I pull her back.

“You can’t go inside.” We struggle in the dirt: When Maria pulls away from me the singing has stopped. When we get inside the church there is no one there.

*

Catherine looked up at the trees above the pool. In those trees she and Maria had made a tree house and had broken off branches to sweep the floor of the church. Underneath the canopy of leaves they had taken off their clothes and painted themselves with mud.

*

“What were you doing up there, Catherine? You’re covered in mud.” Mum takes the scrubbing brush to my skin to take the mud off. She looks worn out. “You knew we were going out to dinner. What do you think you were doing?”

I can’t tell her, I can’t tell anyone. It’s our secret. I can hear Maria’s screams. She is being beaten with a switch in the yard. The scrubbing brush is not so bad. I am squeezed into a dress I have outgrown, and bundled into the car with Lilly. Dad comes out of the house. He has shaved and put on his best shirt. He picks a cosmos flower and spins it round in his fingers as he crosses the driveway. When he gets to the car he reaches in and puts it in my hair.

“Can Maria come?” I ask.

“No.”

“Why not?”

No answer.

“Why not?” I try again, louder this time.

“Will you stop!” Mum turns round and silences me with her eyes. Then she turns back and stares straight out in front of her. Her face is still, like she’s gone away somewhere, like she’s not there.

Lilly sticks her tongue out at me and I pinch her to make her scream. I wind down the window and lean out to wave at Maria as we pass. She is sitting on the gate at the entrance to the driveway sucking a skinned prickly pear. I can see the blood on her legs where the stick cut her skin.

We arrive at the Coombe’s house and stand waiting in the dark hallway. The big grandfather clock is ticking. Mrs Coombe sweeps down on us, her skirt rustling. Lilly pinches me to get me back for the car. Mum’s hand slaps at us behind her back while she’s smiling at Mrs Coombe. Her face is all stretched. Dad bends his head and kisses Mrs Coombe’s hand. He looks at her and I feel something. I don’t know what it is, but it makes the room uneasy. “Don’t stare,” Mum whispers, and puts her warning hand on my shoulder. I shake it off.

We go through to the dining room. The servant stands in the corner of the room like a statue. Mrs Coombe’s skin is cool and china-smooth, like the shell of an egg. We say grace before we eat. Next time we come to dinner I will bring a teaspoon, and tap it against her skin to see what sound it makes.

Mrs Coombe reaches over and lifts the lid of the dish that is waiting in the middle of the table. I laugh out loud in terror and then cover my mouth as Mum frowns at me. I look at Dad for help. Then I look back at what sits there on the china. The huge red tongue has been pulled out by the roots. You can see the fine hairs on the skin.

“Carve, darling, why don’t you?” Mrs Coombe hands Mr Coombe the silver knife. She lifts her top lip and I see where she has got lipstick on her teeth in a pink stain.

Mr Coombe smiles across the table at Mum; with his wet fleshy lips he’s like a toad. When he reaches for Mum’s plate he tries to touch her fingers, and Mrs Coombe tinkles her dinner bell again. “More potatoes, more beans, darling?” her voice is high.

Mr Coombe slides the tongue onto my plate. I cover it with potatoes so that I can't see it.

"What are you doing?" Lilly hisses. The tongue isn't there now. There is nothing but more potato under my potato. I kick her under the table. She is eating her tongue; she is going to finish soon. I don't know what to do.

Then the Coombe's dog comes in and rubs its head against my leg under the table. I keep my eyes on Mrs Coombe's face as I slide the plate under the table and tip it up. The tongue slides into the dog's jaws. Snap, it's gone. It's all over. But Mrs Coombe has eyes that see everywhere. She was born like that.

Slowly she cuts another slice and puts it down on my plate. "There," she says and smiles. "You don't want to miss out on a nice slice of tongue, do you?"

Lilly is allowed to go with the grownups through to the sitting room. I am left forever to finish the tongue. I sit alone in the dark dining room. Then Mrs Coombe's servant comes out from the shadows in the corner. He comes closer. If I was Lilly, I would scream right now, but I want him to come close. I want to feel his skin. It looks warm. He reaches for my plate. I watch while he takes the tongue, opens his mouth wide, and slides it down his throat. Then he puts the plate back down in front of me, just in time. Mrs Coombe comes through from the living room. "Finished, have you?" She looks at my plate, and I nod.

Tomorrow I will come back and I'll bring my teaspoon and I will tap it against Mrs Coombe and watch all her yellow yolk run out. I remember how Mum once turned over her hard-boiled egg after she had eaten it and drew a face on the shell. I asked her if it was Mrs Coombe and she said no, but it looked just like her. Then she hit the egg over the head until it smashed. "Oh dear," she said, "an accident," and we laughed.

When we get home Mum sits on the edge of my bed and reads to us while Dad goes to check that he has locked the store up. Mum reads out of a fairy tale book from England. The pages are covered with fish-moth stains. The fish-moths have eaten away Blue

Beard's beard. Fish moths, moth fishes, swimming under water, coming up to breathe and eat Sleeping Beauty's toes.

She looks up from the book and stares out of the window into the dark. Then she stands up and pushes the sleeves of her dress up as if she is going to wash her hands. She raises the wooden window frame. Lilly screams; she is afraid the bats will fly in.

"Can you hear that?" she turns to us, her face is tired.

"What?"

"Your Dad's coming. I'm sure I can hear him." She has thin lips. When she bends to kiss me I can smell the rose scent on her.

"What? I can't hear anything."

She switches off the light.

*

Catherine spread her toes under the cool, dark water. It was a climb up to the church. The last time she had been up there was over a year ago, when one of her dogs had disappeared. She found it with its leg caught in a trap just below the church. She had taken off her shirt and bandaged the wound and then carried the dog up to the church. Sitting on the floor with the dog's head in her lap and its blood soaking her trousers, she cried. It came out like a cracked sob, as if she had forgotten how to cry, it had been so long. Then she felt something she hadn't for a long time - a brush against her skin, a sigh. Her troubled mood passed. When she stood up she had the strength to carry the dog back down the hill to Hebron.

Sometimes she would bring mangoes to eat at the pool. The yellow fruit stained her skin and made her fingers sticky, and she would dive into the pool to wash. If she opened her eyes under water she could see her skin, white, blue, brown. She secretly lived out the excitement of a quiet life. Then emerging out of the water, she would splay herself out on the rock surface and dry like lichen. The widow birds would keep her company, flying low over the water, dragging their heavy tails. Once a snake came down and drank from the

pool. One day she saw the wattle branches move above the pool. Someone was watching her.

Catherine closed her eyes; she pulled the blanket around her and lay down in the grass at the edge of the water. She could smell the earth and the sweat on the cattle that moved in the darkness nearby. Then she put her head against the ground. Very faintly she felt a vibration on the path. Two sets of feet, running, far off, but coming closer.

*

“Hurry up, Katie.”

Maria is ahead of me on the path. We have been swimming in the river. We aren't allowed, but we do it anyway. Maria nearly drowned the other day - I had to rescue her - it gave us a fright and we sat on the grass all wet and laughing. When we were dry Maria plaited my hair. Her fingers are fast and they click like needles. My hair is wet now; Mum will know where we've been - there's no time to dry it in the sun because she is calling us in to lunch. I can hear her calling my name.

I catch up with Maria and pull at her skirt. “Maria, guess what.”

“What?”

“I'm going to ride over to Mrs Coombe's after lunch. I'm going to see what she has in her room and tap a teaspoon against her skin. Will you come?”

“I can't, I've got to clean at home.”

“I'm going anyway.”

We run up the steps and into the kitchen. Mum is sitting at the table with Lilly waiting. “Where have you been?” She looks furious. I hardly ever see her smile these days. I want to make her laugh again. She dishes the food out for us and we wait. She keeps looking up at the clock on the wall. She's waiting for Dad to come home. Lilly starts to whine because she's hungry. It makes Mum tense.

“Why did the chicken cross the road?” I ask her.

“Not now, Katie!” she snaps.

"I'm hungry." Lilly takes her spoon and throws it to the floor. "Where's dad?"

"I don't know." Mum's voice sounds like it's going to break. Her lip is trembling. I can see she's biting it to stop from crying. I do that too.

We start to eat. We are finished and still no Dad. I stack the plates. My mom fiddles with her hair. It's dirty. She hasn't washed it for a week now.

"Do you want me to wash your hair?" I ask her. She starts to laugh, a funny sound.

"Why are you laughing?"

"It's nothing."

"Is it a joke?"

"No joke – you won't understand." She starts to pile the dishes in the sink.

"Tell me, I will." I stand on the kitchen chair so I am at the same height as her head.

"I will understand." I pull at her hand.

"Don't stand on that chair – I've told you not to. Go on. I can't stand..." she reaches down to slap me, but I dodge her hand. "Go and lie down before your lessons, and take Lilly with you."

After lunch we always lie down. Mum lies down a lot. Sometimes it's difficult for her to get up. We have lessons with her in the afternoon. We used to have Miss Bury from England, but she went back. She used to read us stories about a boy whose nails were long and hair was wild and a girl who played with matches and burnt all the children to death. At Christmas Miss Bury poured paraffin on the Christmas cake instead of brandy. She thought it would do just as well – just as well!

I drag Lilly with me down the passage to our room. She climbs up on to her bed. "Go to sleep." I make a face at her. I lie down and stare at the ceiling. I can't sleep. I wait until I hear that Mum has stopped moving next door. She is lying on her bed. Lilly is drooling onto her pillow. I tiptoe out of the room and walk down the passage to the kitchen. I open the drawer and take out a teaspoon and put it in my pocket. I am going to see what egg Mrs Coombe sounds like when she is tapped.

Maria has gone home to clean; her Mum is washing our clothes outside in the yard. I go down to the stables to saddle my horse. I notice that Dad's horse is gone. I ask Philemon if Dad is at the store.

"Baas is gone." He says.

I have never ridden so far. I am excited. I am on a quest like King Arthur and the knights into unknown territory. I have planned my route - down along the river that runs through the valley all the way along to the Coombe's farm. I will have to be careful when I get near the farmhouse and hide my horse in the trees and get inside the house without Mrs Coombe seeing me.

I stop to let my horse drink from the river. I am not thinking of what will happen to me when I get back home - I won't think of that.

When I get to the Coombes I tie up my horse in the trees. I can't see the Coombes car, but perhaps it is parked in the garage at the back. There is no-one in the yard. Perhaps they have all left, gone off somewhere and never coming back. I run across the yard. I stop when I come to the stoep. The dog lifts its head. I think it's going to bark. I hold my hand out to its nose and it sniffs me.

The front door is open. I walk inside. It's very still. I can hear someone moving in the kitchen and the sound of pots and pans banging. The bedroom is at the end of the passage. Mrs Coombe always keeps the door closed so you can't tell whether she's inside or not. All the way along the passage there are pictures of people staring down from the walls. Watching me. When I'm gone they will talk. What was she doing? Did you see her? Where was she going? They can't reach out of the pictures, otherwise they would grab me and pull at my hair and try to stop me.

I am outside her door now. My heart is beating fast. The handle has been polished. It shines in the dark. I wait. There is some movement coming from behind the door. Creaking of the bed. Someone is definitely in there. I turn to go back down the passage, I will have to come back later, but then I hear a noise. Mrs Coombe's voice. A cry. There it

is, again and again. I don't know what to do – I have to do something. She has to be rescued. Someone is hurting her. There is no-one else. I open the door.

There are two bodies on the bed fighting with each other. I see the back of a man's head and underneath Mrs Coombe's face squashed up against the pillow, all pink. Her hair has come out of the bun she wears. Long pieces stretch across the sheet. I never knew it was so long. They are naked. Their clothes are on the floor. Not tidily arranged but all in a confused jumble, except for a pair of large leather boots – I know those boots.

Mrs Coombe sees me. Her mouth opens. She is hitting the man on the back. She looks at me with wide eyes. He turns his head. "Katie!"

I turn and run. Away from the room. I don't know what to do or where to go. My world is different now. I can hear him shouting after me. "Katie – come back. I'm sorry! Katie!"

I run away from his voice. My horse is waiting for me under the trees. It is just the same. I climb on and gallop away across the veld away from the thing I don't know. I only stop when I get near the store. I hug my horse and wipe my snotty nose against its neck and whisper its name. Where do I go? Back home to Mum? Somewhere safe - the tin church? Will Maria come and find me there?

While I am hesitating, a car arrives. It's Mum. She pulls over in the dirt. I have never seen her driving before. I didn't know she could. She looks wild. "Where have you been? Where's your Dad?" She grinds the gears and doesn't wait for me to answer. She leaves in a cloud of dust. I know where she's going. I can't stop her. I want to run after her but she's gone. The car is a dot in the dirt.

I go up to the church and wait. Wait for Maria. Wait for Dad to find me. I curl up on the pew. Nobody comes. I'm getting hungry.

When I get home Mum and Dad are shouting; walking up and down the sitting room shouting. Lilly is sitting in the corner with a blanket pulled over her head. She's crying.

“Katie,” Dad lifts me up when I come into the room. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry!” Mum shouts, and tries to hit him. He puts me down, and follows her down the passage.

“Don’t do this.” I can hear him. “Not in front of them.” I go and sit with Lilly under the blanket. I feel cold now.

Mum comes back down the passage with a pile of her clothes. She goes out into the driveway. I run out to see what she’s doing. Maria’s mum is watching. Philemon is watching. She throws the clothes down. She has a mad look in her eyes. I have never seen her like this. She has been sleeping all this time and now she’s woken up. She goes to the cellar under the house and fetches a can of paraffin. Then she pours it over the clothes. She lights a match and throws it on the pile. It is like the burning bush in the Bible, only the flames are eating Mum’s clothes - licking them up.

Dad is running away from the house down towards the stables. I don’t know what he’s doing. Mum comes back into the house. I follow her into our room. She takes a suitcase down from the cupboard and starts to push our clothes into it. “What are you doing!” I shout at her.

“We’re leaving.”

“What about Dad?”

She mumbles something.

“I can’t hear what you’re saying!” I shout at her. I am scared now. “Don’t mumble, I can’t hear.” I am crying. “Miss Bury told us to pronounce our words clearly.” I try again but she doesn’t hear me. She’s crying now. Crying and yanking us around. My suitcase is full. There is no place for important things like my horse. And what will Maria do?

In the morning a car comes to collect us to take us to the train. Dad doesn’t stop us from getting in. Maria comes out. She stands and stares. It’s like she’s lost her voice. I think Dad is going to stop us from getting in the car, but he just stands and looks at us. I lean out of the window and watch him disappear.

*

Catherine pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders. She can still taste the salt water on her face. She had leant over the railings of the ship that had taken them to England. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't talk. She had lost everything.

She had been taken to a place where doors had shut as quickly as they opened and feet were encased in shoes. No canopy of trees rustling above her head. No crackling dry leaves and dust under her feet. No horse, no swimming, no prickly pears, no Maria, no dad. But she didn't forget. She didn't stop listening for the sound of the wind in the gum trees in the driveway at Hebron, the cicadas, her father's voice. She didn't know then that when she returned to Hebron she would find another man in her father's place.

University of Cape Town

Maria

Maria went out onto the stoep and looked out into the dark. The light was still on in the church. She had to follow Catherine; it wasn't safe for her out there alone. She set off, but her legs felt heavy, and by the time she reached the gate she had to lean against it to steady herself. Her head was dizzy and her breathing shallow. She fought to get air into her lungs.

The river was uncontained out here in the dark. It had no banks. It stretched wider than she could see, tossing her, pulling her down under to a place she had forgotten.

*

She is ten years old, sitting on the wall near the gate chewing on a mango that covers her face and hands with sticky yellow juice.

"Come on, we'll be late!" Katie is pulling at her legs and she jumps down onto the dirt road.

"Does your mother know you're coming with me?" she asks Katie.

"Don't be stupid, of course she doesn't."

"You'll get into trouble."

"I don't care. I want to see what you do in the church. I want you to show me." Katie is already half way down the road. Maria licks her hands and wipes her face with some leaves then runs to catch up.

The climb up to the church is steep, and it's hot. Maria needs to pee. She can't hold it in. It trickles down, warm and sticky, and her dress sticks to her legs. When they get inside the church they push up against each other in the pew. She can smell the urine and the sweat of her mother sitting next to her. There is singing - a warm breath of it heaving and swaying. She looks up above the altar and waits. And then the vision comes again - because she knows it's a vision now - she read about them in the Bible. Saints had them. She is Saint Maria.

There she is - her aunt who was run over on the road to town – hovering above the altar. Maria remembered how they had taken her dead body on the back of a truck to the mortuary where she was wrapped in white, a thin trickle of blood running from her lips, the spirit gone.

But there she is now floating above the priest. Where her face should be, there's a goat's head. The eyes are yellow with black slits. It is like the goat they slaughtered when her eldest brother got married. It stares at her as though it can see right through her. The goat at her brother's wedding had looked at her like that, pleading with her, but she hadn't stopped them from cutting its throat, how could she? The mouth opens. Her aunt is trying to tell her something, but only her lips are moving and a lonely bleating coming out.

"Do you see her?" she turns to Katie, but her friend shakes her head.

"No."

Maria looks again. Her aunt is gone. They sing from English hymnbooks in the church. Katie has taught her to read but she sings from heart.

"Praise God from where all blessings flow

Praise Him all creatures here below

Praise Him above Yee Heavenly Host

Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost... ghost, goat, ghost, goat...

Perhaps they had sung her aunt there.

They aren't old enough to go up for the communion yet, which is a pity as she likes wine, but the priest blesses them. Maria's brother keeps turning around in the pew to stare at Katie. Then he reaches out his hand and touches the hair on Katie's arms; he is still amazed at it. Maria slaps his hand and sticks out her tongue. Katie is hers. She is her white friend.

As they file out of the church Maria's mother stands back to let Katie go first. It is like she is a queen or something, the way they treat her, even though she is a child. Maria is

special too, because Katie is her friend, she belongs to her. The priest shakes Katie's hand and says he is sorry the sermon was so bad and that his English is so bad. Katie doesn't care. Maria pulls her by the hand. "Where are we going?"

"Into the trees."

They run away from the congregation who are filing out into the bright sunshine. Katie runs after her as she weaves her way between the trees. When she gets to the edge of the cliff, where it plunges down into the pool, she stops and they sit down. Katie picks up a stick and starts scratching in the soil. Maria knows her friend wants to tell her something but she doesn't know how. After a long time Katie looks up at her. Her face is serious. "Can you see me when I'm not there?" she asks Maria.

"Sometimes."

Maria takes some small rocks in her hand. She throws one over the edge of the cliff down into the pool below, then peers over to watch it land. She throws another in, and counts. "One, two, three. Let's jump in." she turns to Katie. But Katie still has that serious look on her face.

"If I get lost, will you know where I am? Will you find me?" she taps Maria on the legs with her stick. Maria picks up a stick and they start to fight with them.

"You won't get lost." Maria laughs, knocking Katie's stick out of her hand.

"But if I do?"

Katie is standing up. She looks down into the pool below. "Let's take off our clothes." She is unbuttoning her dress.

"And then?"

"Smear ourselves with mud at the pool."

"Like the boys?"

"Yes. Then we'll go inside the church."

"And do what?"

"We'll know when we get inside."

"So that you won't get lost."

*

But Katie had got lost. Maria had watched from the driveway as her friend was driven away. And Maria had tried to find her. When her friend had gone, the river had come to Maria carrying on it things – forgotten things; things whispered in the breeze off the water, things washed up and left glistening in her small hands.

The river was there wherever she went. Just below her, just above her. When she lay in the smoky hut and stared at the clay ceiling. When she chased chickens, when she was cleaning in the house at Hebron after Mr King had left. It was the river that brought Katie back to her.

When Mr King left the farm the congregation stopped worshipping in the tin church, because a new church had been built on the other side of the road from the school. Now the old women and men who worked on the farms didn't have to climb the steep slope in the heat.

One day Maria took the pictures of Katie that Mr King had left behind up to the tin church. It was all theirs now. She hung a picture of her friend on the wall and put their mugs beneath it on the floor, together with the picture book that Katie had used to teach her to read. Then she ran down among the trees to the edge of the cliff and looked over at the pool below.

There was a hole so big in her heart that if she stood at the edge and threw things down she couldn't hear them hit the bottom.

She ran back up the hill into the church and closed her eyes. She could hear Katie's laughter. It spun her head. If she reached out her hand she could feel her fingers pulling her. The water was rising; she felt dizzy. She could see her friend now.

Katie is standing on a beach. It is cold and the sky is gray. She has no clothes on and her skin looks blue. She starts to run towards the water but her mum comes running across the sand and grabs her. Katie tries to hit her. She is crying now. Maria calls out to her but Katie can't hear. Then she is gone.

Maria kneels down on the floor of the church and waits with her eyes closed but she can't see anything anymore. Her mother finds her curled up on the floor and takes her back home.

*

Maria grew into a skinny teenager. She watched managers come and go at Hebron. Some of them didn't see her at all, they moved past her. Some of them had wives who made her clean and polish. One of them gave her books to read. One of them tried to push her skirt up and stick his penis inside her, but she scratched his face. None of them lasted long.

And there were boys. Boys who followed her around like scrawny dogs. Boys who charged at her like bulls, boys who slunk around like the cats or fluffed out their feathers like the cockerels in the yard. She charged the boys a shilling to kiss her in the sitting room at Hebron, and more to take them into the church and show them her friend and read them to them from the picture book.

Whenever she could she would go up to the church and stand with her eyes shut, waiting. But she didn't see Katie again until she was sixteen.

It was the night of her brother's coming home party. He had been at mountain school; covered in clay like her and Katie. When he came down the mountain dressed in smart clothes he had become a man. They slaughtered a goat and there was dancing. It was the night that Maria met the man she loved. He wasn't like the other boys. He was quiet and interesting and when she teased him he just gave her a sweet smile. When he touched her she didn't push his hands away. She didn't have to scratch him or threaten him; he didn't try to force her.

She ran in the dark up to the church. She stood at the altar and waited. The water rose up her legs. It was warm this time, the sun was shining, the grey clouds had gone.

Katie is sitting in sand dunes in amongst tufts of grass, busy with something. A man is sitting next to her. He has a boyish face but he sits like an old man, hunched over a sketchbook. There is a dog, Katie's dog, lying on the sand with its head pressed up against her. She is stroking its head with one hand, in the other she has a paint brush.

Maria leans over her shoulder so that she can see what Katie is painting on the small canvas that rests on her lap. The young man looks up; he stares right through Maria. Then he looks back at the thing he is studying, something that he holds in his hand. An urchin thing. Maria has seen one like it at Hebron, in the book on Marine life – which is life of things in the sea.

There is paint on Katie's face where her brush has touched her skin and paint on her skirt and in her hair. The man leans across and wipes the paint off her skin with a handkerchief. Maria looks down at the canvas. There is the church – silver in the moonlight.

Maria touches her shoulder and Katie turns around.

Someone was calling Maria. The man with the sweet smile had followed her up to the church. He was standing in the entrance. As she walked towards him she felt something separating, pulling away as he drew her in.

They lay on a boulder under the stars until the sun came up. He was the man she loved, the man who made her bigger than she was. And he was the man who left.

He went back on the truck to the city, to the mines. He died there. They brought his body back and buried him in the graveyard behind the tin church.

The river brought him to Maria as she lay on the dusty floor in front of the pews. It brought him to her on a black current of water; He was floating, his legs were crushed.

She thought of what she and Katie had wished for that day in the church, all painted with mud.

For the first month she took him bread and beer and mushrooms from the veld, laying them down on his gravestone. She sat for hours with him, sleeping at night in the church. After a month she went back to Hebron and she stopped. She just stopped.

She spent the days sitting in the driveway on a blanket in the sun. Her sister started cleaning in the house. At night she would move her blanket onto the stoep and the next morning back into the driveway. She didn't talk to anyone.

It was fighting that brought her back. It stirred the edges of her stillness. People coming and going. Trucks rattling by on the dirt road. In the air a sudden tension, a sudden taking of sides, a splitting. British and Germans. The manager of the farm went off to fight in the desert in North Africa. He was a transport flyer. He brought things back to the house, strange things from far away, camel bags and silver coffee pots.

Then the Italians arrived. The prisoners of war. They came to work on the farm. They wouldn't let Maria alone to sit on her blanket. Every day one of them would sit down in front of her in the sand and sing to her in a funny language and tell her she was pretty. He would pinch her until she stood up and started to move around again. In all this time she hadn't seen Katie because she hadn't been to the church.

When eventually the Italians left because the war was over, Maria went to the church again.

Katie is sitting at a table with the man from the beach. There is a candle on the table and through the window Maria can see the lights of boats in the dark. The man hands Catherine something, a small box. He is smiling. She opens the box; there is a ring inside. It sparkles on the dark velvet. Maria knows what that means and she shouts but Katie is putting it on her finger, twisting it this way and that.

*

The river settled and Maria stirred. Her legs felt stiff as she lifted herself up, using the gate to steady herself. She had come out to look for Catherine. She started down the avenue and followed the path behind the school. Where the path split to go up to the church she bent down and ran her fingers over the earth. There were two sets of footprints. One was Catherine's, the other's was larger, a man's.

University of Cape Town

Hendrik

The sound of girl's voices penetrated Hendrik's sleep. His wife was fast asleep next to him; her breathing was even, in and out, in and out. A breeze blew the curtains and the light material shuddered in the moonlight. Out of the window the night world was bright. He surfaced through layers up until he was in his room again. From where he sat he could see across the land up to the ridge where the tin church stood.

After he had married they had moved to this house, his parent's house, the house where he had grown up. His mother had been sick and they had come to nurse her. She had died a year later and was buried next to his father in a small cemetery on their farm. Hendrik had chosen this room for their bedroom because he could see the church from here. If he couldn't sleep at night he could sit by the window, and the church would be there on the hill, waiting for him.

He got up, pulled on his trousers and shirt, and walked down the passage to his daughter's room. She was fast asleep: she lay on her back, her hair spread out on the pillow. He went out into the yard. The dogs moved from where they had been sleeping on the stoep and pressed themselves against his legs. He stroked their heads and they followed him across the yard to the vegetable garden. Under the full moon he imagined the plants shooting up towards the sky, the leaves unfurling, a quiet rustling of growth around him. A path led down the side of the garden, across the veld and up to church.

*

The first time he had walked this path, all the way to the church, he was ten years old. He hadn't meant to go that far. He had seen the church from his house. "What is it?" He had asked his father one day when they were in the yard fixing the fence. "It's a kaffir church," his father had told him, "They go up there to worship, not our God though. You aren't to go there." Hendrik didn't know why he had said this.

"Whose land is it on?"

"Mr King's land. It's on Hebron."

“Mr King who left?”

But his father had gone inside the house to fetch another pair of pliers, and his mother was calling him. She was sitting on the stoep; she had been there all morning. “Bring me a glass of water and my pills, my head is hurting me.” She eased herself in the chair. Every day she had a migraine and every day they heard about it. It sat on Hendrik’s chest like a heavy weight.

He was an only child. She had suffered in childbirth. He had heard her speaking of it to her friends when she didn’t know he was listening. She couldn’t go through that again.

He brought her the glass of water and pills. “You’re a good boy. You know that don’t you?” She took his hand and squeezed it. “Come and sit next to your mother. If I’m feeling better later I’ll bake a cake, would you like that?”

“I’d like that, Ma.”

“Your teacher tells me you’re doing well at school. Have you got any homework?”

“Ma, can I ride over to the Duke’s farm this afternoon?”

“Hendrik, it’s too far, you know it’s dangerous down by the river. I don’t want you riding down there. Anyway the ladies from the church are coming to tea. Wouldn’t it be nice to see them?”

“Can I go on the weekend?”

She hesitated. “Hendrik, they are English. They support the English.”

“But Ma.”

When the ladies came to tea in the afternoon he sat in the corner listening. They were talking about Hebron.

“That native girl just sits in the driveway all day. Nobody tells her to move. I can’t understand it. I would beat some sense into her.” Mrs De Vries leant across for another scone. Hendrik watched the flour stick to the fluff on her chin.

“She’s waiting for her friend to come back. Mr King’s daughter. The mother used to let her go with the natives, she ran wild. She even went up to the church. She used to worship with them, if you can call it worship.”

Something jumped inside Hendrik. This white girl had been up to the church – a girl his age. She had gone to the church.

“What happened to the girls?”

“Mother took them back to England. She never liked it here; she was born in England. They say she never came out of the house. Daughter discovered the father with another woman.”

Hendrik always wondered who *they* were, when the ladies talked *they* say this, *they* say that.

“What happened to the father?”

“He left the farm. *They* say he died in some bar down at the coast, drank himself to death or died of one of those tropical diseases.”

“And neither of them came back?”

The next day on the bus to school Hendrik sat with his head pressed up against the window. James Duke, his English friend, didn't take the bus anymore because the Afrikaans boys had tried to hang him by his tie. Hendrik had lifted him up and unhooked the tie so that he could breath again.

The bus was driving down the dirt road past the store. The boy next to him pulled at his shirtsleeve. “Look.” He was pointing out of the window. Two men were digging in the garden at Hebron. Their skin was dark brown in the sun. One of them had a monkey on his shoulder. A native girl was sitting in the driveway watching them.

“Italians!” The boys in the bus cheered and waved at them. “Prisoners of war.”

At school Hendrik went to the library. He took out an atlas and found Italy. He traced his finger over the desert in North Africa where the Italians were captured. After school he drove with his father down to the railway siding. The Italian man with the monkey was in the store buying food. He asked him what the monkey's name was.

“Toto,” the man told him. Hendrik's father took his hat off and nodded his head; they were on the same side he was saying. Hendrik didn't want to be on a side. They watched

the British convoys passing on their way up into the mountains. The boys threw stones at the trucks, the boys who tried to hang his friend. He joined in.

That night he packed a bag. He could hear his father snoring next door. He climbed out of his window and lowered himself down onto the ground. As he ran across the veld, he got lighter and lighter. His mother's voice became a faint echo. When he got to the koppies he lay down on a rock and stretched his arms out. It felt like he was swimming in the moonlight. Perhaps he wouldn't go back to the house. He could find a cave in the rocks and live off water from the river and plants, like Jesus in the wilderness.

The sky was a mass of stars. They were icy pinpricks in the blackness and below them was the black of the land and the pinpricks of lights from farmhouses. Perhaps he was upside down, which was heaven and which was earth?

He heard something rustling in the grasses nearby and sat up. A shiver ran across his skin, but it was only a hare, darting off into the rocks.

There was a rough path and he followed it up between the koppies. He was just underneath the church when he stopped, in the shadows. Someone was moving about outside, behind the church. His eyes became used to the dark and he saw that it was the native woman from Hebron. She was sitting on one of the graves with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, rocking gently back and forth. He thought she heard him, because she turned around and looked into the darkness. After a long time she got up and moved off.

He came out of his hiding place and stretched his legs that were stiff from crouching. He felt his way over the rocks up to the church. The door was open and he slid inside. Someone had left a candle burning. He saw the photograph on the wall and he knew it was her - the white girl from Hebron who had to leave to go back to England, who used to worship in the church with the natives. She was smiling at him; there was a gap between her teeth. It was just the head and shoulders in the photograph so he couldn't see how big

she was. Underneath the photograph, on the floor, he found the picture book. He opened it and shone his torch on the first page. A name was written in black ink.

Catherine

Now he knew who she was. When he met her he could call her by her name.

University of Cape Town

Part Two

University of Cape Town

The garden at Hebron was overgrown with weeds. Creepers had grown up the walls of the house and slates had tumbled off the roof. One of the palm trees that stood on either side of the front steps had been struck by lightning and the top had fallen off. The curtains in the house were shut to the outside world. It had been over a year since the last manager had left Hebron and six years since Maria had last seen Catherine in the church. The workers had gone to work on the neighbouring farms. Only Gabriel still grew vegetables in the garden up at the house. After the war Maria had moved into one of the rooms off the central courtyard. She kept the keys to the house around her neck on a piece of leather. As far as she was concerned the house was hers.

Every morning she woke up early, lit the stove in the kitchen, and made tea and porridge for herself and Gabriel. They would sit outside the kitchen on a bench in the sun. Gabriel would make sucking noises when he drank his tea; he did it on purpose to annoy her. After they had finished eating she would turn him out of the house and lock the kitchen door so that he couldn't spy on her. He had asked her again and again what she did all day in the house, but she wouldn't tell him.

When she was sure that he had taken his spade and gone off to work in the vegetable garden she would take a feather duster and unlock the door to the sitting room. It was a large, L-shaped room with a fireplace in the short arm of the L. A long mirror hung on the wall next to the front door. The center-piece of the room was a gramophone. Maria had pulled it away from the wall, out into the middle of the carpet. She would choose a record and place it on the turntable. She liked to wind the handle of the gramophone and watch the needle scratching the surface of the record, releasing the sound from the grooves. There were sounds hidden in the cracks. Over the years farm managers and their wives had left records and books behind. Maria liked to listen to Edmundo Ross' Latin American Big Band. It was music from another world that was hot and bright and full of laughter. When the record finished she would start to dust, flicking the duster lightly over the top of

the grand piano, along the bookshelves that lined the walls and over the ornaments. She would even dust herself in the mirror. Then she would put the duster down on the mantelpiece, sit on the floor in front of the bookshelf and start to read.

In the mornings in the quiet of the house she mapped out trails across continents, she read about the stars, the desert, sexual diseases, how to grow roses, varieties of poisonous snakes.

On the morning of the day that Mr Fyncham arrived at Hebron Maria pulled *The Return of the Native* from the bookshelf. In it she discovered a woman called Eustacia, who went out onto the land and stood with her back to the wind. She was lonely. She looked through a telescope in the dark, searching for someone. Maria left the book open on the floor and ran out into the sunshine in the courtyard. Something had echoed down through her skin and found her heart.

Gabriel found her there, huddled up against the wall. He told her that he'd been calling her for ten minutes and she hadn't answered. When she heard it was a cup of tea he wanted she told him to leave her alone and make it himself. Then she went into her room, took the old gray blanket off her bed and went out onto the driveway where she lay the blanket down under the peach tree and settled down to sleep.

At lunch she went back into the house to get the sheep's ribs and pap she had cooked the night before. She ate out in the sun. The meat was tasty and she mopped the gravy up with mielie-meal and licked it off her fingers. When she had stripped the ribs she lay down to sleep. It was when she closed her eyes that she became conscious of a noise out on the road.

A car was coming down the hill. The sound of the engine didn't fit any of the trucks and tractors she knew. It was smoother, it purred. There was jazz music playing on the car radio. The notes shimmered in the heat, rushing up and down, jumping this way and that – shattering the stillness, stirring up the dust that had fallen on the house and on her life.

The car skidded to a halt in front of the house. She smelt the oil and petrol in the heat off the engine. Never before had she seen such a big car or such a smart one. It was covered

in red dust, but the black paintwork gleamed through.

The first thing she saw of Mr Fyncham were his shoes. They were black and shiny like the car, not the shoes of a farmer but the shoes of someone from the city. He was wearing khaki trousers and a white shirt that was unbuttoned in the heat, showing his smooth chest the colour of honey. He was the most handsome white man Maria had ever seen and he had that look in his eye. He stared out past where he was to something in the distance. He was like one of those explorers she had seen photographs of in her books – men who discovered new lands and crossed them and left their wives at home for years to look after the children.

She knew when someone was hiding something, because she hid things too.

For a moment Maria thought the woman sitting in the car was Katie. That she had found this man somewhere out there and brought him back to Hebron. But the woman who got out of the car was nothing like her friend. This woman had hair that was black and glossy like a starling's feathers. It was brushed smooth and held back by a silver clasp. Catherine had never owned a brush; she had combed the knots out of her hair with her fingers. Sometimes she would twirl her hair and tie it with bits of string, other times Maria would plait it for her. They would sit in the sun playing with each other's hair or tickling each other's backs with grasses. Catherine's hair shone with copper and gold.

This woman's skin was olive and her eyes were dark, like sinkholes. Her full lips were painted bright red and she was wearing a pale green summer dress that was tight at the waist and stretched over her full breasts and the curve of her hips.

The man and woman stood and stared at the house. They didn't see Maria sitting in the shadow under the tree and she wondered if she had become invisible to others. "Well, what do you think?" the woman turned to the man. There was triumph in her voice, as though she'd won the house in a competition and was showing the man her prize. The way she spoke English was different to any accent Maria had heard around the farm. She didn't sound like anyone Maria knew or had met, but she had heard a voice like that before

somewhere, it was familiar.

“Is it how you thought?” The woman walked over to where the man stood and rested her fingers on his arm, stroking the skin lightly. “It’s all ours now.”

He shook his head. “Not mine, perhaps not really yours.”

“What do you mean? Oh, come on Tom. Now’s not the time to be doubting, not when we’ve come this far.”

He was still staring at the house. Maria looked at it too. She wondered what the houses were like where they came from, and she realised that she didn’t know whether this house was different from houses out there beyond the farms. It wasn’t like the other farmhouses in the district, but then the Kings hadn’t been like the other farmers either.

“It’s ours now. I’ve waited so long. It’s right Tom. We’ve heard nothing. There’s been nothing from England.” The woman bent down and slapped at a fly that had landed on her calf. “Of course there’s a lot of work, but there are servants, somewhere...” and then she looked around and saw Maria sitting under the tree.

They were staring at her and Maria wondered if her clothes were on back to front, she hadn’t bothered to look in the mirror that morning and Gabriel would have let her go out in the street naked, as a joke. She stood up. The man approached her, holding out his hand.

“Mr Fyncham.”

Maria nodded but stayed standing where she was, at some distance from him.

“This is my wife.”

The woman was looking at Maria warily as if she were a wild animal that might bite. “We’ve bought the farm. Are those the keys to the house?” Mr Fyncham pointed to the keys around her neck and then to the house in case she couldn’t understand him. Maria put her hand over them protectively.

“Tell her to help us with the suitcases.” The woman walked to the back of the car, opened the boot and waited. Mr Fyncham looked like he was going to say something but changed his mind and went to the boot and started to take the suitcases out.

“Let the girl do it.” She said impatiently “It’s too hot, and I’m filthy. I need a drink.”

She scabbled in her bag and pulled out a crumpled packet of cigarettes, shook one out and lit it. "What is she waiting for?" she said loudly staring at Maria.

Maria walked to the car and ran her fingers along the side, leaving a wavy trail in the dust. The man looked up from where he had the suitcases lined up on the ground. "Is there a boy who can wash the car?"

Maria nodded again. She didn't trust herself to speak. Gabriel must have gone off early to drink because he wasn't there when she turned to the garden. He would be mad that she had met them first.

The Fynchams had a lot of suitcases. They were all different sizes but all were made of dark green leather and they looked as if they cost a lot of money. The smallest one was the size of a shoebox, Maria wondered what anyone would carry in such a small suitcase. There was a box of bottles still in the boot and she started pulling them out one by one and reading the labels. Gin, tonic, wine, whisky... it was a long time since she had had a drink from a bottle. The Italians had given her cheap wine.

"What are you doing? Put those back." The woman snapped. She had come up behind her. She crushed out her cigarette butt with the heel of her black leather sandals. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" Maria ignored this, picked up two suitcases and walked towards the house. The man was following with more of the cases.

She stopped when she came to the front door, put the suitcases down and hesitated. This was the end of her world alone inside the house. But there was nothing she could do. She took the keys from around her neck and unlocked the door. Edmundo Ross and his big band vanished - they fled out the back along with the light and heat and colour of their world. The man and woman walked past her into the sitting room, keen to see what was now theirs.

Maria listened to the click - click of the woman's heels on the wooden floorboards as she walked down the passage flinging open doors, disturbing the dust, crushing the thin wings of the flying insects that had collected on the floor. *Trespassers will be prosecuted.* Maria had seen the sign on the gate of the next farm. She should have put one on the front door. *Trespassers will be strung up in the prickly pear tree* - because she felt they were trespassing. They didn't belong here. There had been nothing from Mr King.

She stood as still as she could in the corner by the fireplace. Her eyes were the only part of her that moved as they followed the man around the room. He opened the lid of the piano and ran his fingers over the keys. Then he saw the pile of books on the floor. There was no time to cross the room and pick them up; he was already bending down and picking up the book she had been reading.

"*Return of the Native*." He said the title out loud and then he looked up at Maria, puzzled. "Are you reading this?" She hesitated then shook her head. He didn't believe her, she could see that in his amused smile. "*Far from the Madding Crowd*... Have you read that?" It seemed to amuse him. He was looking straight at her and she looked straight back, unflinching.

"No." It came out hoarse and she coughed to clear her throat. "No. I haven't," she said more clearly.

"What's this then?" He held up another book to the light. "*Animal Husbandry*. Eclectic taste in books."

Eclectic, electric? Eclectic? - She searched for the word but couldn't find it; she would have to look it up.

He walked around the room examining things. He came close to her and she tried to lean backwards so that they wouldn't touch each other when he leant over to pick up a small wooden box next to her on the mantelpiece. For some reason she couldn't move her feet.

She watched as he blew the dust off the lid, opened the box and emptied the contents onto his hand. He had beautiful hands, not fleshy like Gabriel's or sweaty like the man at the railway siding.

The emerald beetle shimmered in the light from the window. He held it up. "All this in the middle of nowhere, who would have thought?"

Her eyebrows lifted and she swayed slightly with the effort of speaking. "Mr King? How is Mr King?"

He turned to face her, she couldn't read his expression, his face went still like a mask. "He's dead. Died a month ago, the bank auctioned the farm."

"I didn't know." She should have known.

Then Mr Fyncham looked up, above the mantelpiece and he saw the portrait of Katie. Maria had wondered when he would notice it. As he stood and stared at the quirky expression on the girl's face Maria had the feeling that he had seen her before.

"Who is this?" He turned to her. It was a direct question. She cleared her throat.

"That is Catherine. Mr King's daughter."

He leant closer to see the signature. "Mr King painted it himself. I didn't know he was an artist." Then he drew back to look at it from a distance. "She's lovely." He said it quietly.

He was standing there when his wife came back in to the room. "What are you staring at?" Her voice was laughing, but scornful. Her reaction to the painting was different; her mouth became a thin bitter line. She ran her fingers along the mantelpiece. "This place is filthy." He hadn't heard her, he was still looking at the picture as though he was trying to remember something.

"Oh stop staring. It's only a picture. She's not here you know. Anyway, I think is very amateur – in fact the whole house is in very bad taste, and so dirty. What's the girl been doing? Whatever it is it's not cleaning." She turned to Maria. "We want drinks. Two gin and tonic, is there ice?" she spoke loudly and slowly. "You have ice for drinks?"

"She speaks English. Probably better than you do." Mr Fyncham didn't face his wife when he spoke; he walked away from her across the room and took one of the suitcases through into the study.

"Well, don't just stand there, get drinks then."

"There are no ice trays." Maria's voice was coming back; it wasn't a whisper any more.

"Tea then, whatever." The woman slumped down in an armchair and pulled off her sandals. Her toenails were painted a deep crushed purple red, the colour of mulberries on the tree at the back of the house - deep red like thick blood. Katie and Maria had climbed the tree to pick the berries. Katie's skin was stained red. They had crept down the passage to where Lilly was playing with her toys. Katie had jumped out in front of her, froth on her lips, clutching her heart.

Help me.

Lilly had screamed. They had laughed.

Mrs Fyncham's pouty lips were the same crushed mulberry colour.

When Maria came back with the tea, Mr Fyncham was unpacking the suitcase. It was full of books and papers and lots of maps. So he was an explorer. She wanted to ask him where he had been. The woman complained that the tea tasted musty. "I want you to clean everything, properly, and take the suitcases down to the bedroom at the end of the passage on the left. It has the best view. Clean in there so that we can sleep. There's a cooler box in the car. We will have the food in it for supper."

In the evening they sat on the stoep. The woman flicked through a magazine. The man was reading a book on farming, with pictures of different breeds of cows and sheep. If he had asked her, Maria could have told him all of them, naming them, giving him the best regions for each breed, how to kill the pests that infested them, which were meat and which dairy or wool. She thought of asking him for a cigarette, but didn't risk it. He was intelligent, she could tell. But they might send her away from the house, and she couldn't survive that. She had to be careful.

She sat on the wall on the edge of the stoep watching them, waiting for them to finish eating so that she could take the plates away. They didn't speak to each other. The woman kept folding the corners of pages in the magazine. She would hold up a picture of curtains or bed linen for her husband to look at. He wasn't interested.

"I'm going to start in the sitting room and take that picture down. In fact all the pictures will come down."

He went on reading his book. Whether he chose to ignore her or didn't hear her, Maria wasn't sure. Mrs Fyncham tossed the magazine down and stood up. "You can go now." She told Maria. "We'll have coffee in the morning. Bring it to the bedroom."

When they were sleeping Maria walked around the house in the dark, touching the walls. She went to stand by the gramophone and turned the handle. There was no record on the turntable. Then she fetched a bag, emptied some books from the shelves and slid Edmundo Ross in behind them. "I'm going to the church" she told Katie. "I'll see you there." She said it as if they met there every night, as though if she said it lightly like this then there

would be no question about it.

She liked walking in the dark because she could slide into the shadows and watch as people passed walking home to their khayas. She liked knowing that she could see them but they couldn't see her. When she got to the church she would hide the books somewhere, so that she could go on reading. The new people couldn't stop her, it was her life. It was what made her different from Gabriel.

As though she had summoned him just by thinking about him, Gabriel was in front of her on the path. She could smell the beer on his breath, and his sweat. He grabbed her around the waist before she could run.

"Where are you going?" He asked her, "Are you running away?" His hands were rough. "Take me with you." He was teasing her.

"You'd better be sober in the morning. There's a new baas at Hebron and he asked where you were. He wants you at the house, first thing."

"When did he arrive?"

"Him and his wife - you were drinking. You missed everything."

He looked dazed. Maria could see what she had said making its way slowly into a thought in that great thick skull. Then he tried to grab her again. "Where are you going?"

But she pushed him away.

He was gone and she was out on the path again. Her body felt light, out in the veld, and she realised how heavy she had got in the house. It was like when she closed the doors to the gramophone and the sound was muffled, that's how she had been. But out here the doors were open and the sound was clear. She started to run. She was young and thin and pretty. There was a handsome man in the house. The sky was dotted with stars. There had been a big bang. She started humming a tune, bringing her voice back from the place it had been resting. When she reached the river she lay down to smell the earth and feel the grass against her skin. Then she crawled on her hands and knees for a few yards to see how the world looked from that angle - like a hare or a small buck. She laughed. It was no wonder they thought she was crazy. She got up and climbed the path to the church.

The door was propped open with a rock and the moonlight lit up a pathway across the floor to the wooden table that had been used as an altar. She lay down on the floor.

*

Hendrik ran across the veld and up through the koppies to the church. He was fit now. He could run all the way without stopping, like a long distance runner. When he got to the church he saw that someone had shut the door. He moved to the window and peered in. It was the black girl from Hebron. She was lying on the floor. Her eyes were closed. She looked dead but then he saw her hand move, just a slight flicker. He stood and watched her. He would have to wait until she had left before he could go inside.

The wind is blowing hard and the sky is dark. Maria doesn't know where she is but she can taste salt on her lips and water in the air. There are stones under her feet, round smooth ones. As she stands there she becomes aware of a flapping sound; something is caught in the wind. She moves slowly towards the noise. Now she can hear the sound of water on rocks below her. Katie is standing, leaning out into the wind that is holding her up. If it stops blowing so hard she will fall onto the rocks below. She has a suitcase next to her.

She is coming home. But there isn't room for all of them at Hebron.

Every morning for the next week Maria went out onto the stoep and stared down the drive, half expecting Katie to come walking down the avenue with her suitcase. But there was no sign of her.

Maria watched Mr Fyncham from a distance as he read his books on farming. Sometimes he would stay up until two or three in the morning reading or studying the maps in the study. His wife would try to get him to come to bed, calling to him, but he would ignore her, and she would make her unsteady way down the passage after drinking most of the evening away. Maria saw how Mr Fyncham could drink and still remain in control. You couldn't catch him out. Mrs Fyncham gave Maria orders. Mr Fyncham was the one who talked to her as if she was intelligent and teased her.

He wanted to know who had taught her to speak such perfect English, how she had got to be so clever, and why she didn't have a boyfriend.

On the first morning he had got the workers back with the promise of more money. He had paid Maria and she had gone down to the store and bought sugar, a large bag of it, and mielie-meal, to take to her mother's kraal.

Mr Fyncham would get up early every morning before his wife was up and she would make him coffee and then he would be out on the farm. He got the tractor working and fixed the pump and fenced off the fields. He would come home tired but triumphant.

There was something about him, a tautness, she saw it on his face and in the way he sprang up if the telephone rang, as if something was stretched tight inside him.

The phone calls came mostly at night. Mrs Fyncham would be by his side immediately after he had put the receiver down, wanting to know what had been said. When she spoke on the phone she shut the door so that Maria couldn't hear.

In the first week Mrs Fyncham took the car and went to town. She would come back late having spent the day shopping – there were new plates, knives, forks, glasses, linen for their bed and things for the bathroom. And always a box filled with bottles of drink:

whisky, gin, tonic... She would be all lit up when she came back from these trips and would talk about changing this and changing that and about a dress she had seen or a bag she must have.

One day she came back with a new record and they danced to it, she and Mr Fyncham, on the carpet. He was a good dancer. It was the only time Maria saw them touching. But Mrs Fyncham was difficult, perhaps he didn't want to get too close. Her moods changed so quickly and she would throw things across the room. Once she nearly hit him and he grabbed her wrist, tightly. Maria could see that it really hurt.

In the second week Mrs Fyncham lost interest in shopping. She started to stay in bed later and later until one day she hadn't got up by lunchtime. Mr Fyncham didn't come back for lunch that day. Maria put slices of cold meat onto a tray and made a salad. Mrs Fyncham normally oversaw lunch, making Maria wash every lettuce leaf and rearrange the tomatoes, but today Maria was alone in the kitchen. She watched the tiny slugs wriggling down the lettuce leaves as she arranged them in the salad bowl. Colours were important – she heard Mrs Fyncham's voice in her head, in that funny way she spoke English. You can't have it like this – her fingernails a different shade every day. Maria, change the colours, see, carrots first, orange then red, then green – she had seen it in a magazine.

Maria had seen her rubbing at the skin on the side of her index finger where she held the cigarettes, trying to get the yellow stain off. One day she rubbed so hard with a pumice stone that her finger bled. The next day she got a cigarette holder; they were old stains, she couldn't get them off. She smoked all the time. Her fingers were always moving, if they weren't lighting a cigarette, they were in and out of the many bottles on her dressing table. She was terrified of getting old - it was funny, Maria thought, because she was beautiful and young, beautiful in the way that the woman in the magazines were. But she would look in the mirror and frown and push her waist in and pinch the flesh on her arms.

Maria made a circle with tomatoes and stuck two radishes in the center. Between them she placed a carrot, poking upwards. It made her laugh.

After she had eaten her pap and meat in the kitchen she wiped the grease off her fingers

on her skirt, put a piece of netting over the food and took the tray down the passage, putting it down on the floor outside their bedroom so that she could knock on the door.

There was no answer and she knocked again. Then she opened the door.

Mrs Fyncham was sitting on the edge of the bed holding her stomach. She was bent double; her face was pale. She looked up as Maria came in. "Get out," she hissed through her teeth. Then she pushed Maria aside as she ran to the bathroom and wretched into the toilet. Her hair was wet from sweat. Maria moved forward to help her but she held out her arm to keep her away. "I said, keep out." There was a trickle of saliva running down her chin.

Maria took the tray back to the kitchen. She went out onto the stoep to call for Mr Fyncham, but Gabriel said he'd taken the car to go and look at trucks in town. He hadn't said when he'd be back.

Mrs Fyncham had locked the bedroom door when Maria went back down to help her. When she held her ear to the door she thought she could hear her deep breathing, as if she were asleep.

Later that afternoon the phone rang. It rang and rang and Mrs Fyncham didn't stir, so Maria picked up the receiver. She wasn't used to the telephone. There was a crackling on the line as if the person was very far away.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Katie?" she didn't know why she said it. Maybe because of the crackling, whoever was there was far away, with perhaps a sea in-between them. But the phone clicked and went dead. She put the receiver down. When she turned around she saw Mrs Fyncham standing in the bedroom doorway watching her. She had heard. There was make-up on her face, but she couldn't hide the dark rings under her eyes, and a stain where she had been crying.

"I'll bring you some tea." Maria turned to go. Mrs Fyncham took a step towards her.

"You've lived here all your life."

Maria nodded. It didn't feel safe. There was something pleading in her voice. Maria

wanted her to go back into her room. It felt like little hands grappling in the dark towards her and she wanted to brush them away. She didn't want to feel anything for this woman. She didn't belong here.

"How do you do it?" She was still standing there.

"Do what?"

Maria wondered if she should call the doctor. The woman wasn't making sense.

"Live here alone like this, don't you get lonely?" But she didn't wait for a reply, she went back into her room and shut the door.

When Maria took her tea later, she seemed to have recovered. She was flicking through a magazine. It was safe again.

When the sun was on its way down and the shadows were long in the driveway Maria stoked the fire for supper. She had the Menu stuck on the wall. Cooking didn't interest her. She had read somewhere that one should cook and love with abandon. She had looked up abandon in the dictionary. Forsake and desert. Not *dessert* but *desert*. It made her laugh. She would tell Katie when she came. There was another word there: to abandon yourself to passion. She knew passion. She had buried her passion behind the church.

She cut the rhubarb up and let it stew on the stove. Rhubarb and pineapple were poisonous together. They caused a chemical reaction. But there was no pineapple. She was making a pie for Mr Fyncham because he liked it.

When she went to close the windows in the sitting room so that the beetles wouldn't fly in she found Mrs Fyncham sitting in an armchair, the bottle of gin next to her on the floor. "We'll eat on the verandah. You can set the table out there."

The meal was cold, and still Mr Fyncham hadn't come home. Maria was sent to fetch Mrs Fyncham's cigarettes and another bottle of gin and the magazines. But the light on the stoep was too dim to read by. She got up and started pacing around the sitting room. She looked like the wild cat that Maria had found trapped down by her mother's kraal. It had

bitten its own tail off to escape the wire.

She was standing in front of the portrait of Katie when Mr Fyncham came back. Her tongue was like a knife, slicing the air. "Where were you? I was sick. Where were you?"

"Calm down." He put his hand out to touch her arm but she lashed out at him, hitting him across the face. He hit her back. She staggered. He put his arms out. This time she let him steady her. "You shouldn't be drinking."

"What else am I supposed to do here? There's nothing to do. You have the farming, you're out all day. It's OK for you."

"Sit down. Come and sit down. I'll get you some water."

"I don't want water."

"Will you go to the doctor now?"

She started to cry. She reached for the bottle. He flung it into the bin and it shattered.

"You can't drink."

"Don't tell me what to do." She was standing up. "Don't forget our agreement. That's why you're here."

"It was your idea. And now that I want it, that I know it's what I've always wanted. It's what I've never had."

"But you can't go out and leave me, that wasn't part of it."

"How am I supposed to make money off this place, by sitting drinking all day? Why don't you go back if you're so unhappy?"

"I won't leave you here alone." She was looking at the painting of Katie. "It's ugly. It's an ugly thing. I want it down. Maria."

Maria came out from where she had been watching them.

"Take the painting down, take it away."

Maria looked at Mr Fyncham.

"It's OK, Maria, you can go now. I can deal with this."

She had to leave them. She took a candle to her room.

The next morning Mr Fyncham had left before sunrise and Mrs Fyncham was up by nine, sitting on the stoep. She looked as though she had slept; she seemed quite cheerful. Maria thought they must have made up. When Maria went to fetch some more toast, she stopped

her.

“No, don’t go. Sit down here.” She pulled out a chair. “Mr Fyncham says I should go out more, on the farm, do things.” She laughed as though the idea was ridiculous. “He says I need to do some exercise. That it will take my mind off...” She stopped and looked at Maria. “Mr King had a daughter, didn’t he? The one in the picture.”

“He had two.”

“Catherine.” She said the name slowly.

“And Lilly, she was the younger.” Maria stepped carefully on loose pebbles. She felt the dark water underneath, the current pulling her.

“Did you play with them?” Her tone was light. She sounded as if she really wasn’t very interested, just making conversation.

“With Katie.”

“Where did you play?” Her voice was flat now.

“Up in the koppies, at the river.”

“Do you swim, did you swim in the river?”

“Katie taught me to swim.”

“Mr Fyncham says I should swim. I want you to take me to the place where you swam. You can take me there today.” She stood up and pulled her hair back off her face and tied it with a clip.

“It’s hot.”

“We can take hats. You can carry the umbrella down.”

Maria was loaded like a packhorse. Mrs Fyncham insisted on taking magazines, bottles of cold water, a picnic lunch, a chair. Gabriel laughed at Maria, hunched over under the weight. He tried to pinch her as she walked past. They had to stop every 100 yards for Mrs Fyncham to rest. She complained of the grass scratching her, but she wouldn’t turn back. Maria’s back was breaking by the time they got down to the pool.

After Mrs Fyncham had changed she made Maria show her a safe place to enter the pool. She swam with her head out of the water. Up and down, breast stroke. Maria sat on the bank, hot and wanting to jump in, but she couldn’t – not in the same water, Mrs Fyncham

wouldn't have it.

She had to arrange the fold-up chair in the shade when Mrs Fyncham came out, and pour her a drink. Mrs Fyncham was staring up at the ledge above the pool.

"Katie used to jump off there." Maria didn't know why she said it. She didn't want to talk about Katie to this woman.

"What, off that rock?" Mrs Fyncham sounded scornful. "I don't think so."

"She was brave. Her father used to watch her do it."

Mrs Fyncham looked up quickly.

"Do you ever hear from her, from Katie? Do you think she'll ever come back?"

Maria shook her head. "No, I haven't heard from her."

When everything was packed to go back to the house, Mrs Fyncham stood for a moment, staring at the ledge.

Hendrik watched them from the wattle trees. He sat down so that he wouldn't be seen. It was the first time he'd seen Mrs Fyncham, although everyone knew that they had moved to Hebron. His mother had had the women over for tea to discuss it.

"I've seen her in town, nose in the air. Too high and mighty to greet."

"I saw her in the chemist, buying every cream under the sun. They say she's foreign."

"I wonder how long they'll last."

"They've kept the mad native girl on. No more lazing around in the yard for her."

"They've bought it. Mr King's not coming back. Dead, died of drink. Lost everything."

"Well that's what comes of adultery."

"And the daughters?"

"No-one's heard. Could be dead for all we know."

"He's handsome, Mr Fyncham. But don't tell my husband I said so."

"I don't trust handsome men."

Maria went out into the courtyard that night. It was too hot to sleep. It was the time before the rains started. She lay down on her back listening to the night sounds, mapping out the star constellations. If she lay for long enough she could leave her body and float up into the warm night until she hovered above the house, high enough to see the roof of the church.

The next day Mrs Fyncham went swimming alone. She left Maria plucking a chicken in the kitchen. When she came back she looked pleased with a secret kind of pleasure.

At the end of the month Maria and the boys were paid. Mr Fyncham took them all to town to buy supplies. When they got back in the evening Mrs Fyncham had taken the car and gone.

Mr Fyncham said she'd gone to the doctor, but after a month she still hadn't returned and he had bought another car. He didn't tell Maria anything.

Mr Fyncham had her cook a special meal on payday at the end of the next month. He'd sold cattle and got a good price. He invited her to eat with him. After the meal, he asked her to fetch the chess set.

"Do you play?" He asked her.

She shook her head. She had read the moves in the chess book.

"I'll teach you."

She enjoyed chess, and she was good at it. He said she was a fast learner.

The next morning he had put the portrait of Katie back on the wall. Maria thought this meant something.

You think everything means something. She could hear Katie's voice. Everything is a sign. What does it mean then, the singing in the church?

It was the weekend – a month after Mrs Fyncham had left Hebron. Hendrik had invited his friend Dirk over to his parents' farm. They had spent the morning searching around the farmhouse and stables for a puff-adder that Hendrik's mother had seen in the bushes near the chicken hok. She wanted it taken far away from the house, or shot. Dead was better, she said. But Hendrik hated killing snakes. He would catch them and take them out into the veld. He liked to watch them slide away and hide themselves in the long grass, camouflaged in their surroundings.

After a couple of hours of searching, lifting bushes with their forked sticks and turning over rocks, they gave up and came into the house for lunch. The sun was searing down on the land. The girl had put out cold meats and salad but Hendrik's mother picked at her food. "Come on Ma, eat something." Hendrik passed her the plate with sliced ham but she wouldn't. She couldn't; she had no appetite. Her head felt heavy, she was dizzy and needed to lie down for a while. His father was away in town. He'd taken the truck to buy salt lick for the cattle.

Hendrik and Dirk lazed around for a couple of hours listening to the radio. They smoked cigarettes in his room. It was cool inside the house. Then they went to the stables and saddled up two horses. They were going to go down to the part of the river that ran through his parents' farm. The river was full because of the summer rains. Hendrik had made a raft out of ten-gallon drums "gogos", strapped together. They would see how far they could get down the river before it stormed; maybe all the way to the crossing. The sky was already clouding over.

Dirk rode ahead of Hendrik. He had taken his shotgun and slung it across his back and tightened the leather strap that held it against his back so that it wouldn't bounce when he galloped across the veld.

"In case I see something I want to shoot." He was trigger-happy. Hendrik hoped that he wouldn't. When Dirk reached the place where the path forked he stopped his horse. Hendrik caught up with Dirk. His horse was impatient to get to the water. Dirk was staring up at the ridge. His eyes were slits in the harsh sun. "Let's go up there to the

church,” he pulled on the reins, drawing his horse’s head up from the grass it had been chewing. Then he took the gun off his back and held it with the butt pressed into his shoulder. He stared down the barrel as though he was taking aim, pointing at the church. He pretended to pull the trigger. “Pow!” He lowered the gun. “They say the natives worship the devil up there in the kaffir church. They don’t believe in God. They pretend, singing the hymns and everything, but up there, there’s chicken’s blood on the altar. Our kitchen girl said she was walking back that way the other night when she saw a ghost coming out the church. It was white with blood around the mouth. It came running out of the church screaming.”

“And you believe her?” Hendrik pulled his horse’s head around and kicked it. “Come on. I’m hot. I want to get into the water.” But Dirk was still staring up at the church. “I’m going up there. We can swim in the pool on the other side.”

“But that’s on Hebron. We’d be trespassing.” Hendrik had to get Dirk down to the river, away from the church. He didn’t want him to go up there.

“Since when are you frightened of trespassing?” Dirk laughed. He kicked his horse into a canter, heading for the koppie. Hendrik followed him.

When they reached the wattle trees at the bottom Dirk got off his horse and tied it to a branch of a tree, then started scrambling up the rocks. He jumped from one to another. Hendrik was surprised at how agile he looked for someone so stocky. “Come on!” He shouted to Hendrik as he leapt from one boulder to the next, going higher and higher up towards the church. Hendrik got off his horse and tied it up to the next tree along that was in the shade. He moved Dirk’s horse too because soon the patch of shade would be gone and it would be sweltering in the sun. They could water them when they got to the river.

Dirk had taken off his shirt and was standing with his legs astride on the edge of one of the big granite boulders. He beat his chest and his voice echoed off the rocks. “Shaka Zulu!” He shouted. Then he took a handful of small stones that he had in his pocket and started hurling them up at the thunderclouds above him. They scattered, bouncing off the rocks down into the krantz below. Hendrik reached him.

“What are you doing – are you crazy?”

“You can’t talk. Crazy?” Dirk laughed. “You’re the one who’s crazy, Hendrik. You know what they say at school - *different*. That’s a polite way of saying fucking nuts.” Hendrik looked away.

“Different. That’s what De Beer said. Fucking nuts, I say.” Dirk laughed. “That’s why I like you.” He slapped Hendrik across the back. Then he hurled the last stone up and shouted up to the sky. “I’m going to make it rain, just you see.” He took his gun and aimed it up at the clouds.

“Stop!” Hendrik yanked the gun out of his hand. They tussled on the rocks. Hendrik was near the edge. The gun slid out of Hendrik’s hand down the rocks, and Dirk scrambled down after it. When they had retrieved it, they lay down on the rocks, exhausted by the heat and the exertion.

“When I leave school I’m going to go and fight the commies in Russia – like Sean fucking Connery. James Bond, shaken not stirred. I’m going to skin a bear and make one of those hats. Drink vodka and fuck those Russian women, like Sean fucking Connery. Will you come?”

But Hendrik wasn’t listening. He had sat up and was staring up at the church. Dirk sat up too. “What is it?”

Then he saw her too.

A woman was standing in the clearing in front of the church. Her back was towards them. She was wearing a yellow dress, the colour of evening primrose; it was blowing up around her legs. Hendrik stared at the pale skin of her thighs.

“Hey!” Dirk shouted and stood up. “Hey!” But the woman didn’t turn around. “What? Is she deaf or something? Hey what if it’s that ghost – I’m going up there.” He picked up the gun but Hendrik had his hand gripped around Dirk’s arm. His fingers cut into Dirk’s flesh. “Hey stop it.”

“No.”

“Let’s have some fun.”

Hendrik jerked Dirk around so that he faced him. “What’s wrong with you?” Dirk laughed nervously. Hendrik’s face was contorted. “I just want to go closer to see who it

is.”

“I know who it is.” Hendrik looked away. Dirk was staring at him, and he didn’t want his eyes to give him away or his voice. He looked back towards the farmhouse. “It’s Mrs Fyncham from Hebron.”

“I thought you said she was dark. I thought you said.”

“You weren’t listening. If we go up there we’ll be trespassing. Come on.” He pulled Dirk down the rocks. They stumbled and slid. There were cuts on their legs when they reached the bottom.

“What’s with this trespassing?”

But Hendrik was already on his horse.

“Hey wait for me.” Dirk shouted.

Hendrik turned back once, to see if Dirk was following him. He was catching up fast. Catherine was gone.

*

Maria stared into the pool as though she were expecting something to emerge out of the depths, something that would tell her where Mrs. Fyncham had gone and if she was coming back, because Mr Fyncham didn’t talk about her anymore. She had been watching him around the house and when she took him his lunch down at the stables where he was dipping the sheep. As the weeks went by and Mrs Fyncham still didn’t return a lightness grew about him. She realised that he didn’t want her to come back. When the telephone rang during the day he didn’t answer it. There had been calls at night that he had answered. Afterwards he had gone out into the dark. Sometimes he would only come back the next morning.

A shadow fell over the water as the clouds moved across the sky. The air was thick and hot and still; if she had a knife she would slice it apart. The fat black ants were crawling along the rock surface to the pip of the peach she had discarded. They ate the fleshy part quickly and efficiently. She watched them; it was too hot to move. How long did ants live? There was so much activity and then they died. Some people were like that, always busy. They didn’t look up and then they died and they had never seen the sky at night. They had

never mapped out the constellations or wondered what was up there.

It was going to storm. The sun was burning the back of her neck – soon she would be as black as those people further up in Africa in the jungle. She ran her hand over her skin. It was still smooth. She laughed at herself. Since Mr Fyncham had come to Hebron she had bought Vaseline with the money he had given her and every day rubbed it into her skin to make it smooth. Her small breasts were still firm, not like her sister who had three children by the time she was eighteen. Her sister's breasts hung like a dog's teats.

Maria had started looking at herself in the mirror again. She hadn't wanted to see herself in those years when Catherine was lost because it hadn't mattered what she looked like. Now she had got one of her sisters to braid her hair. The outside of her head was ordered in neat rows. It was a criss-cross of paths and hedges; just the inside remained a wilderness.

Her head was hot and dazed now and she bent down and plunged it under the water. It was refreshingly cool. When she shook the water off, a rustling sound at the far side of the pool made her turn. She heard someone shouting on the other side of the ridge - boys. She moved back into the bushes in case they came over and down to the pool. But it was silent again. She dangled her feet in the water. She would have to start back to the house soon to start cooking. The water under the surface was cold. There were insects skidding over the top, walking on water like Jesus in the Bible, only this wasn't classified as a miracle.

She wasn't quite sure when she became aware that she was being watched. It was some minutes after she felt the person's eyes on the top of her head that she lifted her head and looked up. A woman was standing on the ledge above the pool.

Jump, Maria, hold my hand.

I can't swim.

It doesn't matter. I'll help you. I'm counting to three. Come on.

Catherine's yellow dress billowed up like a parachute as she jumped. Maria saw how tall she was. She saw her slender legs, her flat stomach, the swell of her breasts and her wavy hair. She was falling through the air.

Then she hit the water and was underneath. Her skin was pale as though she hadn't been in the sun for years. Maria was drenched by the splash she made. The shock made her laugh. Catherine grabbed her ankle under the water and pulled her off the rock into the pool with her. It was all shocking. Shocking! Catherine surfaced. They could both stand. She brushed her hair back off her face.

"I could have drowned." Maria shrieked.

"But I knew you could swim. I knew it was you."

Their faces were close to each other. Catherine's brown eyes were sparkling with water. Maria looked at her face. Everything about it was fine, the high cheekbones, and her straight nose. She had the same skew smile and the gap between her teeth was still there, but narrower. It still gave her a cheeky look when she smiled. Although her face was animated there was something sad in her eyes.

Maria slipped on a stone and fell backwards into the water. Catherine held out her hand and pulled her towards the rock. They both clambered out. Maria didn't know what to say. What could she say?

"You're wet." It was the only thing she could think of.

"I suppose you think I'm mad." Catherine wrung the water out of her dress. "In this heat it should dry quickly. I wanted to see..." she looked up at the rock "I wanted to see if I could still do it. It's high isn't it? But then I haven't jumped off anything for a long time." She was feeling in her pocket.

"What are you looking for?" Maria asked her.

"Cigarettes. They'd be no good would they? All wet and shredded. It's a bad habit." She looked around. "I really need one." Then she laughed. "What I really need is a drink. I have cigarettes in the car."

"You have a car?"

"I parked it at the store. I couldn't go up to the house. Lilly said I was crazy to come back."

“Where is Lilly?”

“In England. She said what would I do when I got here?”

“Why don’t you lie on the rock - your dress will dry and you can put your head in the shade of the tree.” Maria could see Catherine’s skin was burning in the sun.

“Very sensible.” Catherine was teasing her now. “I don’t remember you being sensible.”

Maria looked down, embarrassed. “You gave me a fright in the pool.”

“Sorry.”

Catherine lay down on the rock with her face shaded by the leaves of a cabbage tree. Maria stared into the water. Catherine had come back. But Mrs Fyncham was out there and Tom was at the house. It wasn’t safe.

Catherine turned to Maria. “Someone put my photograph in the church. Was that you?” Maria nodded. “I did get lost, you see. But you didn’t forget me.”

They were silent for a while.

“How is your mother?” Maria remembered how mad Katie’s mum had been when they left.

“My mother died. She had cancer. Lilly isn’t married but she wants to be. My mother left me some money, and there was nothing to keep me there. Lilly said why come back if our father’s dead. She said...” Katie put on a funny voice. “Catherine he didn’t leave us anything. Nothing. He was a drunk.” She stared into the water. “All we have is a letter from someone who knew him, saying the bank had to auction the farm to pay his debts. Lilly said what do I want dragging all those memories up.”

“Does she speak like that?”

Catherine sat up.

“I just needed to see the house again. Who’s living there, anyway. Who bought it?” She was trying to sound offhand, like it didn’t matter, Maria could tell.

“Mr Fyncham. He’s the new owner.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s handsome. He’s learning how to farm.”

“Just learning?”

“He reads it up in books.” Maria stared at her feet as though they didn’t belong to her body.

“What about you?” Catherine was smiling, that infectious smile

“I read.” Maria had taken a stick and was drawing in the sand.

“And your mother?”

“My mother’s at home. My sisters are looking after her.”

“You don’t live there with them?”

Maria shook her head. “I stay at Hebron. I have a room off the courtyard.”

“And you didn’t marry?”

“No.”

“You never met anyone?”

“I met someone.” She looked up at the church. “He’s buried up there.”

“I’m sorry.”

Maria could see Catherine meant it. She was going to ask the same question in return, but Catherine stood up.

“My dress is nearly dry. Shall we go to my car? We can drive up to the house.”

Catherine winced as she stood on a rock on the path that led away from the river back to the road. She lifted her foot and examined it. “All soft and pale,” she said disparagingly. “I left my shoes in the car. I thought my feet were tougher than they are.”

When they got near the road Catherine stopped. Her face was serious and she looked at Maria as though she was trying to work something out. “Do you still see things?” she asked her.

Maria nodded.

“Did you see me?”

“Sometimes, once or twice.”

“It’s funny”- Catherine hesitated, then she shook her head as if to shake off the thought.

“Is this Mr Fyncham married?”

“His wife left him. She used to drink.”

“Like me.” Catherine smiled. Maria looked up. “I’m sober now. Watch.” Catherine hopped on one leg down the path in front of Maria. Maria laughed. “So she just left one day? Didn’t say where she was going, when she’d be back?”

“He doesn’t speak of her.”

“Perhaps he’s got her locked in the cellar.”

“No, I looked.”

Catherine laughed. “I wasn’t serious.”

They had reached the road and the school building. The school children crowded around Catherine’s car. They had written in the dust on the window: *I need kleen*. They wanted to touch Catherine’s skin. She held out her arm and they ran their fingers along the fine golden hairs. Maria shooed them away.

Catherine opened the car door and Maria sat down carefully on the leather seat as though it might break. It was the first time she had been in a car. When they went down to the store for supplies they went on the trucks or on the trailer behind the tractor.

The floor of the car was strewn with empty cool drink bottles, and cigarette packets. There was a map on the dashboard, and dust everywhere.

Catherine leant across and felt in the cubby-hole for her cigarettes. She handed them to Maria. “Won’t you light me one?”

That was the part that Maria had always loved. Lighting the cigarettes. It had made them feel so grown up.

“Springboks.” Maria laughed “Cowboy cigarettes.” She coughed.

“I got them at the railway siding.”

They had reached the gate and Catherine sped up as she rounded the corner into the driveway. Maria screamed, “You’ll kill us!” But she was laughing at the same time.

“Do you like my car?” Catherine had skidded to a halt in front of the house.

“Where did you get it?”

“In the city. I saw Mrs Coombe there. Do you remember her? I stayed with her.”

*

She was not the woman that Catherine had remembered. The cold, distant woman with the china skin who had stolen her father. This woman lived in a house in the suburbs. There was no noise in the streets, quiet had settled years ago. A man walked his terrier along the pavement. Two maids sat out on the grass verge talking. A woman in a driveway watched her husband watching the garden boy washing the car.

Mrs Coombe's house was dark inside and frousty. It smelled of cabbage and mothballs. But Mrs Coombe had a sweetness about her, a self-effacing tentativeness that Catherine had felt in the letters she had written them in England, asking for forgiveness, remembering their birthdays. She had lost contact with their father when he left Hebron and a year later she had moved to the city with her husband. She had got their address in England from a card that Mrs King had sent to her, asking her if they had had news of her husband. She had had none.

She had made a bed up for Catherine and turned down the cover. There was a jug of water with a rose in it on the bedside table.

Catherine had waited in the sitting room while Mrs Coombe arranged the tea. The room was full of knick-knacks: china dogs, vases, a serviette holder fashioned into a Spanish woman that held serviettes as her skirt. She walked around looking at the things that Mrs Coombe had collected over the years.

A framed collage on the wall caught her eye. It was made from postcards and covered with glass. It stood out in the room --it came from another place, another life somewhere in a tropical place with palm trees and turquoise sea and black fishermen. And in the centre was a fortress, an old crumbling building that had been grand once, with a palm tree growing in the ruins and steps leading down into the water. The cards had faded with age.

Mrs Coombe came in with the tea tray and saw Catherine looking at them. Catherine took a sugar biscuit in the shape of a heart from the tin. Mrs Coombe looked up at the postcards. "From a friend." She said and flushed. Then she looked up at Catherine. "I'm afraid my life hasn't been very exciting."

*

"Your cigarette." Maria put her hand out to catch the ash that was about to fall on

Catherine's dress.

Maria watched Catherine walk up the stairs at Hebron. At the top Catherine turned around and looked back at her. Then the door opened and Tom came out to meet her.

University of Cape Town

Her old room. Her old wooden bed with the loose slats and the bed board over them. Maria had given her a cotton sheet; it was too hot for blankets. Catherine could hear Tom moving in the next room, in her parent's bedroom. If he had felt uncomfortable about being in her house, he hadn't shown it. They had been polite over dinner; she needed to be in order to stay in the house. She wondered if he folded his clothes neatly or threw them off like she did, in piles around the room. He would fold them. Not precisely or obsessively, like Hesketh had, but functionally – putting things back where they had come from. Except her, she thought. He wouldn't want to put her back, not where she belonged anyway. It was his house. She was the visitor. That was clear. Did he miss his wife? Why had she left him? Had he loved her?

The paint was peeling off the walls and there were cobwebs in the corners where Maria's brush hadn't reached or she hadn't bothered to clean. There must have been other people in here, she thought, children perhaps. She had unpacked her suitcase but her clothes only filled one drawer. It was just for a couple of days, and then she would have to plan what to do next. She would have to move on. She couldn't stay - not if his wife was coming back.

"Your house is my house," He had said, so graciously. But then he had laughed at himself.

There was a piece of folded newspaper under the one foot of the chest of drawers, keeping it from rocking on the wooden floor. Someone had taken Lilly's bed out.

Lilly with her hands on her hips.

"Why do you want to go back? There's nothing there. It's not going to bring him back, you know. He's dead, Catherine."

"I know that. Don't you think..."

"He didn't come for us, Catherine. He didn't even write. Someone else had to tell us that he was dead. He drank himself to death. All they sent was his watch."

“Shut up, Lilly. Just shut up.” She could have hit her then, battered her head against the wall.

“Who are you going back to? Do you think if you wait there he’ll come back. He’s not coming back, he’s dead. Who are you hoping to find?”

“Maria’s there.”

“She’s a servant. It’s not the same. You’re not girls anymore. You’re grown up. People won’t understand there. Blacks are servants, they can’t be your friends.”

“Really, fancy that! I could have sworn.”

“Oh, don’t fool around, Catherine! Be serious for once. Why do you always have to make a joke of things that are serious?”

For protection. They had learnt that when they were little, she and Maria. You laughed for protection. You joked and things were not so bad.

“You don’t know how serious I am.”

“What are you going to do there? Well?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She was tired. “Just go away, Lilly.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No, have you?”

“Why do you have to drink so much? Why can’t you just have one glass? You think of no-one but yourself. What about Hesketh? How does he feel? We can’t always have what we want. We can’t have everything.” On and on like a stuck record.

“Why not?”

“Oh, come on.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? Who nursed mum when she was dying? Who mopped up her vomit? Not you, Lilly, you were too squeamish. There are no rules for how we should live.”

“Hesketh is good for you. Mother and I ...”

“Leave mum out of this. How do you know what’s good for me? You don’t even know what’s good for yourself.”

But Lilly wasn't listening. "We thought if you had children..."
"What? What did you think? That it would grow me up?"

"What do you want?"

I want what Mr Fyncham has. I want to stay here. I want to farm and paint and be in love.

She spread her fingers in the dark. Is that too much?

She got out of bed and pushed the window up and leant out. The sky was lit up with streaks of lightning and there was the rumble of thunder far away. She closed her eyes and smelled the rain coming. There would be a storm. She had waited so long for this. The clouds would slash open and the rain would hit the dry earth and release the acrid smell and she would breathe it in.

Where are you going, Catherine? It's late.

Out.

But it's raining

I need to get out of here.

You must calm down. Are you panicking?

What does it look like?

Tell me about it. (Hesketh's soothing suffocating voice.) Tell me what makes you panic, what are you feeling?

You - you, you, you make me panic. (But she can't say it, it sticks in her throat.)

It's OK, Catherine, I'm here for you.

She is running on the beach - the birds skitter across the sand in front of her. Their legs are a whirl of movement. She is trying to run out of herself.

Catherine has no control. She has no sense of what is appropriate to say and do and what is not... Lilly and Hesketh sipping tea. Sip, sip, swish it round their mouths,

swallow. It's getting worse. I don't know why she does these mad things. When she comes back she will be soaked you know.

Her mother had understood. She had wanted to feel the rain too. She had asked Catherine to open the window so that she could stick her arms out into the cold night and feel the water against her skin before she died.

Catherine remembered the word for rain in Maria's language. Other words too. They should all come back. It was meant to be like riding a bicycle. If she could remember the words she could stay. They floated in the air: dog, cat, horse, run, mother, swim, river, father. She said them under her breath. If she could say them she could stay. But she couldn't join them together, they were like the beetles flying in the dark, unconnected, buzzing around.

She got up. She would need another drink to make her sleep, and perhaps something stronger. Mr Fyncham had a bottle of whisky in the sitting room. There was a lamp on. It shed a circle of light on the carpet. Catherine took the whisky bottle out onto the stoep. There was a crash of thunder and the door banged shut. Catherine drank the whisky from the bottle. In the morning she would ask Tom if she could borrow a horse and go riding. She wanted to gallop over the grass, to feel the wind on her skin, the joy of it.

I'll toughen the skin on my feet. She remembered running with Maria on the burnt winter grass – testing themselves to see who was chicken.

She felt the anxiety lifting. The noises in her head had become like background static, like a radio. She listened to the thunder and to her heart beating and she closed her eyes and smelt the wild smell of plants in the garden and the scent of the lilies. She lay down on the wall of the stoep and watched the sky.

Maria. Look up there.

What?

There 's animals up there.

Bulls, cows, sheep.

What kind of sheep? Dorpers or merinos?

I don 't know.

Have they got big horns?

No.

Then they're dorpers. Are there chickens up there?

What?

Up there, are there chickens?

You're crazy?

Chickens in the sky. I think there 's a chicken man up there. He keeps a chicken under his arm and it lays the stars.

You're crazy.

The window to her parents' room was open and banging. It had started to rain and the things inside the room, near the window, would be getting soaked. Tom couldn't be in there or he would have shut the window. She wondered where he was.

She went down the steps and out onto the driveway and stood in the rain.

"Do you often stand in the rain?" He had come up behind her. She turned around, but she couldn't see his expression clearly in the dark.

"And do you often go out walking at night in a storm?"

He came closer.

"Is something wrong?" She could see his face now. He looked worried.

"No." he shook his head "I just couldn't sleep."

It was awkward for a moment.

"I'm going inside. I need something hot to drink. You're welcome to join me."

"You go ahead." She watched him run up the steps out of the rain.

She was getting cold too now.

When she got inside he had changed his clothes and made them some coffee. He brought her a towel. They sat out on the stoep together. The downpour had stopped as quickly as it had started and the sky was clearing. "If it's hot sometimes I sleep out here." He was watching her, and she looked away, up to the church. There was a light burning.

"Someone's up there, in the church."

"You've been there?" She turned to him.

"You sound surprised. It's on my land." He had taken a packet of cigarettes and lit one.

"Do you want one?"

She struggled to light the match. He leant across and cupped his hands around hers so that she could light it. "It must be strange for you, to come back and find someone else here in your house."

"Did you meet him? My father?" All she could see clearly was the glow of his cigarette.

"No." He shook his head. He threw the cigarette down and crushed it under his foot. He had only smoked half of it.

"Catherine, there's something..." He was standing now. She couldn't see his face. He changed his mind about what he was going to say. "I'm going to bed. I'm getting up early to go flying."

"You have a plane?"

"Is that not allowed?" He was teasing her now.

"Where is it? You don't keep it here?"

"There's a small landing strip outside town. Why don't you join me?"

"Did you fly in the war?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"All over. I'm leaving early." He picked up his glass and opened the door.

She stood up. "Does your wife fly?"

He turned to look at her. She had said the wrong thing. "No. Isobel never came flying."

"When is she coming back to finish the decorating?"

"She's not coming back. My wife and I have separated."

“So you own the farm. It was you who bought the farm, not her?”

“So many questions.”

Silence.

“I’m leaving early if you want to come. If you could switch the light off when you go to bed.”

There was something he wanted to tell her but couldn’t. She could sense it.

She was still standing on the stoep when she heard him closing the window. She must have stayed out there for an hour before she went inside to her room. She took off her nightgown and hung it over a chair to dry and then got into bed, pulling the sheet up around her. He must have still been awake because she could hear the floorboards creak once or twice. So he flew.

The house breathed at night, as though it had a life of its own. The wood expanded and contracted, the wind sighed down the passages. The rain drummed on the tin roof. She thought of Maria searching the cellar for a body. She thought of the light in the church. She had come home.

She let herself go down, further and further, breathing slower and deeper like a diver descending through the water to a place of stillness, breath and bubbles and colours, a film without sound.

Katie!

I’m coming.

Hurry. (Maria’s voice is urgent.) We’ll be late.

I’m coming. Wait. (She looks down.)

She is standing ankle deep in water. It is warm and the sun shines on her face. She feels light. Maria is running ahead of her across the sand. Maria stops and turns back, calling into the wind.

She tries to run after her but her legs are stuck. A cloud blocks the sun and it turns cold suddenly. Her legs are slowly sinking in the sand under the water; there is kelp wrapped

around her ankles. She can't hear Maria's voice anymore and when she looks up her friend is gone - there is someone else standing on the shore ahead of her -- she can't see clearly. But it's a girl, wearing a dress. She stands and stares.

University of Cape Town

Catherine was woken up by someone knocking on the door. By the time she had got out of bed they had left. Her head felt heavy, and it took her a while to realise where she was. She went to open the windows and let some air in. It was still very early; the sky was pale blue and the air was cool. The clouds had cleared from the night before. It was going to be a hot day.

There was a cup of tea waiting for her outside her door. She went through to the kitchen to find Maria and thank her for remembering how she liked her tea, with three sugars, but Maria wasn't up. Her door was closed and Catherine could hear her snoring.

She found Tom outside. He had the bonnet of his car open and was fiddling with something in the engine. She wondered whether to ask him about the tea but decided not to. Perhaps Maria had told him. He looked absorbed in what he was doing. When he did look up, she realised he had known all the time that she was standing there.

"So you're coming?"

"How long will it take?"

"You don't have to come."

She had annoyed him now. But what if Maria woke up and found them gone?

"You can leave her a note," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts.

"I know that."

"Of course you do."

She couldn't make out his tone. "I'll get my things." She put the cup down and went back into the house.

He called after her, "Bring something warm."

She wrote Maria a note and left it on the piano and went out to join Tom. He was still working on the car.

"Won't you get in and rev the engine?" He didn't look up. The inside of the car was clean and polished, not like hers. She looked in the cubby-hole, more maps.

“OK, rev her now,” he called. She put her foot down on the accelerator. “That’s enough. OK.” He closed the bonnet and came around to the driver’s side. “Hop over. We’re ready to go now.”

“You know a lot about cars.”

“Fair amount.”

They drove in silence up the hill. Only when they got to the tar road into town did he turn to look at her. “Did you sleep well?” He asked her.

“Yes, after all the whisky. You?”

“I don’t sleep well.” He said flatly.

She didn’t know why she had agreed to go flying. She had come to see Maria, to see the house. Now he would take her flying over the farm and she would love it and she would want to do it again and again. There was no going back. “You’re going to like this.” He had such a disarming smile.

“How do you know?” But she wasn’t angry with him. She opened the window and put her arm out and the wind blasted her hair back. “It’s further into town than I remembered.” She felt awkward suddenly. He seemed quite relaxed, oblivious to her, while he was driving. Then he turned to her again.

“You left your sister back in England?”

“I didn’t leave her.”

“But she’s still there with your mother.”

“My mother died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s why I came back. She left some money, there was nothing to keep me there.”

“No man?”

She didn’t answer. She could see he was smiling without looking at him. “You aren’t curious to know what happened to your father?”

“He died. That’s all. He’s not here.” She reached out and adjusted his side mirror.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have come back.”

“Do you like jazz?” He was finding a station on the radio. His fingers started to drum a rhythm out on the steering wheel.

“So, do you like jazz?”

“I like to dance.”

“I’ll have to take you dancing then.”

They were on the outskirts of town.

*

Maria woke up to a silent house. She had had a dream that worried her, it had woken her in the middle of the night, but now she couldn’t remember it. She had to get up and make Catherine breakfast.

They would sit out on the stoep, just the two of them. She would tell Catherine about the man she’d loved and how she’d buried him. Catherine would tell her what had happened to her in England, all the things Maria couldn’t see. She would tell her why she had that sadness in her heart, what she was going to do now, what she thought of Mr Fyncham. Mr Fyncham would be gone, he went flying early on Sundays. She thought of how she and Catherine had gone up to the church on Sundays – all the way up the hill in the heat in their best dresses, already dirty from playing in the dust.

She went out onto the driveway and bent down to pick up a hair clip that had fallen. Catherine must have dropped it when she arrived. The hens had made a nest in the bushes on the edge of the vegetable garden and she put her hand in and felt the eggs. They were still warm. She carried them in her skirt. She picked some spinach and some flowers, chrysanthemums, she loved the smell of them, and buried her face in their petals. Mrs Fyncham had gone. No more breakfast trays sent back to the kitchen because the eggs were cold. No more cleaning red lipstick off glasses.

She began to remember what she had dreamed. She had been chasing Katie down the path to the pool. There was movement in the reeds at the side of the water. Mrs Fyncham had been watching them as they ran down the path. Maria called to Katie to stop, but she hadn’t

heard. When she looked again at the reeds Mrs Fyncham had gone – she had been sucked down into the mud or lifted up into the air.

In the kitchen Maria cracked the eggs into the frying pan, then cut bread and put it in the grid to toast on the stove. Coffee, eggs, toast, juice. She had so much to tell Katie. About the boys she had kissed in the cellar and the Italian prisoners of war and the managers that came and went at Hebron. Of how it had been at Hebron without her friend. All these things she had buried, covered with a layer of red dust but she could still make out the shapes. Now she could blow the dust off and look at them again.

She put the breakfast things on a tray and took them out to the front stoep and set two places.

It was nine o'clock. Catherine had slept long enough. But when Maria knocked on the door there was no answer, and when she opened the door she found that Catherine had gone. They must have left together. Mr Fyncham had taken her flying.

Maria sat on the stoep and tried to eat breakfast, but she had lost her appetite.

For a while she sat staring down the driveway, then she went inside to wait. She watched the hands of the grandfather clock. The ticking slurred in her head. Images slid in and out.

*

Tom pulled into a garage to fill up with petrol. An elderly white man in an overall walked slowly over towards the car. Tom got out to greet him; Tom was a regular at the garage. He must have said something about Catherine because the man came around to her window and bent down to look in at her.

“Catherine King.” He held out his hand. “Mr King’s girl. Don’t you remember me?”

His hand was sweaty, and Catherine resisted the impulse to wipe her hand. “You used to come and get paraffin when I was down at the railway siding. You and your piccanin friend, always together.” He laughed. “I thought you were a boy the first time I saw you. You and that little piccanin. Let me look at you; so you’re come back.”

“I’m just visiting.” Catherine looked around for Tom, but he had gone to fetch a can of oil from inside the garage building.

“The last time I saw your father...” He scratched his head. “It was before the war. He drove out of here and never came back. Ag, it was a shame.” He shook his head.

Catherine remembered him. He was the man who had beaten one of his workers half to death for filling someone’s tank up with diesel instead of petrol.

“So how she’s running?” The man turned to Tom as he came back.

He ran his hand over the bonnet. “You can tell this car’s from the coast. You want to watch these spots of rust. Keep the car up here on the highveld, they’ll be no problem.”

Tom filled up a container in the boot with petrol.

Catherine turned around to look back as they drove away from the garage. The man was standing waving.

*

At lunchtime Maria left the house and started out for the river. When she got near the pool she heard the sound of the aeroplane above her and she squinted up at the giant insect. She was just a tiny pinpoint – an ant on the ground. She waved up at the sky and the plane turned and circled over the church.

*

Catherine looked down and saw the tin church from above. She saw, for the first time, that a large white cross was painted on the roof. Tom turned the plane and flew down over Hebron, and Catherine saw the small world of the farm. Now it had Tom in it, and it didn’t belong to her.

He was turning back, circling. She loved flying. She wanted to bring Maria up here. She wanted to learn to fly herself so that she didn’t need anyone to take her up.

What are you doing?

I’m watching the planes, Lilly.

She lies on her back in the dunes, in amongst the tufts of grass, watching the planes flying over.

Come inside, it’s not safe, the bombs.

I'd rather risk a bomb than be stuck inside with you, she thinks. The war's the best thing that's happened to me since I left Hebron. It's the best thing, she shouts into the wind.

How can you speak like that Catherine?

It's the truth. It makes me feel alive. I'm going to learn to fly. I want to be up there. I want to disappear.

She looked down again and this time saw two riders galloping across the veld. They circled the church once more. She looked down at the pool and saw a figure in the reeds. It was the first time Isobel's name had entered her head uninvited. She saw her, a dot by the water, trying to find her way back to Hebron. But then the figure moved out into the sunshine and she recognised the orange of Maria's skirt and the shadow passed.

When they got back to Hebron Tom went down to the stables and Catherine looked for Maria in the house. She wanted to tell her that Tom had said she could stay as long as she wanted. She could help in the farm school, teaching the children of the workers. She would learn to fly and take Maria up and show her the top of the church.

But Maria wasn't in the house.

Later, Tom took her into the room that her mother had used for lessons. It had been cleaned out of furniture, apart from a desk and shelves along the wall.

"You could paint in here. The light's good." He opened the windows.

"It still smells of bees." She bent down and smelled the wood of the shelves. "There's a hive under the floorboards."

"I'll have to get Maria to clean in here. She's useless at cleaning. She reads all day. She's read most of the books on the shelves."

"I taught her to read, you know. I taught her how to speak English like that too."

"So it's your fault."

"What?"

"That she can't fit in."

"What do you mean?"

“Just that.”

Catherine turned away from him.

“We used to have lessons in here.” She would ignore what he had said, it wasn’t true, what did he know. She ran her hand over the desk, collecting dust on her fingers.

“And what did you learn?”

She couldn’t tell from his voice if he was genuinely interested, or mocking her. “All kinds of things.” She turned back to look at him. “How to behave. What was acceptable and what wasn’t. How to tell the truth.”

“Sometimes it’s better not to know the truth.” He was serious now.

“I don’t think so, not in the end.”

There was too long a silence before he spoke and when he did it was abrupt. “The boys are waiting, I have to go. I’ll be back later.” He left the room.

She watched him from the window as he walked across the driveway. She thought he would turn and look back at the house to see if she was watching him. But he didn’t.

She traced her finger over the letters they had carved in the desk with a penknife.

Write your name, Maria.

I can’t write.

What do you mean? Everyone can write. Here, I’ll show you.

Not with a knife. Not on the table.

I’ll take the blame.

Now you try. Try with the chalk on the slate. Write: Maria loves Philemon. She wants to kiss him in the stable and have his babies.

No.

Go on, write it.

She got a bucket with water and a cloth from the kitchen and started to clean the room. She scrubbed the floor and polished – round and round - until the wood began to shine. He would want her to leave. When he came back he would make some excuse, tell her she couldn't stay.

But when he came back late in the afternoon, he was in a good mood. He was singing, jazz tunes from the radio. He had torn a piece of his shirt off and wrapped it around his hand. He'd caught it on some barbed wire when they were fencing. The blood was seeping through, and she asked him if he shouldn't have stitches. She offered to drive him into town. "It's not as bad as it looks. I've had worse. I used to fight for a living." He was joking, but it took her a second. "What I would like is a cigarette. I've run out."

She went to fetch her packet in the bedroom. When she came back he'd put a record on and was mixing drinks. "Here, cut the lemon." He handed her a chopping board. "I'll teach you how to make a Daiquiri."

"I suppose you worked in a bar too?" She teased.

"Worked in a bar, excavated for gold, charted unknown territories, wrestled with crocodiles." He laughed. He wasn't going to give anything away. He added the slices of lemon to the drinks, and ice.

"No umbrellas, I'm afraid."

"We'll pretend, shall we?"

"Looks like we'll be making our own dinner tonight. Can you cook?"

"Maria will come back before it's dark." But Catherine didn't feel so certain.

"You seem very sure. But then I forget that you've known each other for so long."

"People change."

"Have you changed?"

She smiled. "No, not really. I still think I want the same things."

"So what do you want?" He stirred his drink with his finger. He was flirting with her, she knew, and she was enjoying it. She couldn't help it. She looked away. He knew what she wanted – it was what he had.

When she looked at him she recognised his expression. She'd seen it on her father's face when she'd asked him if Maria could come and live in the house with them and he had said no and couldn't give her a reason.

"I'm starving." She stood up.

"That's easy." He laughed. "I'll whip up a beef stroganoff and meringues for pudding."

"A chef as well?"

Walking down the hill from the church, along the path to Hebron, in the evening light Maria sang to herself. A silly clapping song. —

Down by the bramble bushes

Down by the sea

Boom boom boom

True love for you my darling

True love for me

When we get married

We'll have a family

And we'll live happily.

Say say my playmate

Come play with me ...

She had never been to the sea. Katie had.

"Is she still so pretty?" Her mother had asked her. "What a beautiful girl. What lovely hair."

"White hair, Mama, you always say that. You think the woman in the store has nice hair, just because it's long and straight. It's always oily, you can fry an egg on it."

"But Katie has lovely hair."

"Yes."

“I used to brush it . You must bring her down to visit me. Promise me. Is she married? It’s time you got married. You’re going to be too old. Nobody will want you.”

She had her books. She had the ice at the south and north poles and the jungles in-between. But when she had tried to read that afternoon, in the quiet of the church all she could think of was Catherine and Tom. It was what she had wanted all these years, for Katie to come back, but now she felt lost. She couldn’t control what the river brought her. It didn’t only bring joy and laughter. It also brought pain and jealousy and fear. It might wash her away.

When she reached the gate to Hebron, Maria saw Catherine and Tom sitting on the stoep in a bubble of light, and she held back in the shadows. They were eating supper together. Tom went into the house, and Catherine stood up and moved to the edge of the stoep. She was looking up at the ridge. Maria knew that she was looking to see if there was a light burning in the church, if there was anyone up there in the dark.

“What are you going to paint? Now that you’ve got a room to paint in.” Tom had come back with coffee.

“I don’t know. The river. Maria, if she’ll sit still.”

“Maria told me that you play the piano.”

“What else did she tell you?”

The moon had come into view above the ridge.

What else did she tell you? Did she tell you what we did in the church? That we made a wish that we can’t take back?

But Tom didn’t answer. Maria had come onto the stoep.

“Well, look who’s here.”

“My mother was ill.”

“You don’t have to make excuses.” Catherine stood up. “There’s food in the kitchen, we left you some.”

Maria hesitated.

“Here, I’ll come with you. We’re finished anyway.” Catherine didn’t look at Tom.

“Is she really sick?” They were in the kitchen. Maria was dishing herself some meat and potatoes.

“She has TB. She’s had it for years. Sometimes she feels worse than others. She asked after you.”

“Will you take me down to see her? We’ll go together.”

“She’d like that.”

Catherine sat on the table. “I’m going to stay.”

“He asked you?”

“Yes.”

“What about...”

“They’re separated. Oh, I don’t care. I don’t want to know anything. It’s better not to know. No more questions. You only find out what you don’t want to know.” Catherine reached for the bottle of wine they had been drinking at supper. “Here, let’s have some, to celebrate.” She poured them each a glass. “I went flying. I’ll have to do things with him if I stay. You understand, don’t you? I’m going to learn to fly – I’ll take you up there with me as soon as I can. Did you know there’s a cross painted on the roof of the church?”

Maria shook her head.

“I saw you walking by the pool.”

“I saw you too. It sounded like an insect, the aeroplane.”

When Catherine went back onto the stoep Tom had gone to his room. But she did want to know more about him. She wondered what he did in there. Read? Looked at his maps? Wrote? He wasn’t going to tell her. She lay in bed, listening.

Christmas beetles. If you catch them you can make them sing by squeezing them.

It's so quiet in the house, it makes the outside noises loud. I can hear the mice in the ceiling playing football. Up and down they scurry. One goal, two goals. Dancing: one two cha, cha, cha. Do you like jazz? Do you want to learn to fly? What do you want?

My fingers are pale in the dark.

Mari, stop wriggling.

I can't help it. Mama doesn't know I'm here. She thinks I'm asleep in the pondok.

Why do you call it a pondok?

It is a pondok. There's no proper beds and no water in taps.

Lie still.

What if your mother comes to check on you in the night? Katie, did you hear me?

She won't. She takes pills to make her sleep. Tomorrow, let's go up to the church at night.

Why?

You know why.

I can't sleep.

Count sheep – it'll help you to fall asleep.

Dorpers or merinos?

Why do you always ask that? Does it matter, Maria?

What if they're going backwards? What if they start going so fast I can't keep track?

Sleep, sheep sleep sheep sheep sleep...

Catherine got up and walked to the sitting room. There was a new whisky bottle on the shelf. She wondered if he'd left it out for her, or for him later when he came back from wherever he went in the dark. She took it out onto the stoep. Maria was sitting on the wall reading with a torch.

Catherine looked over her shoulder. "The book is upside down."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Two insomniacs."

"Insomniacs?"

"People who can't sleep."

“Like zombies.”

“Do you want some whisky?” Catherine sat down next to her. “Do you miss him?”

“Who?”

“Your man who died.”

“It’s been a long time now. I’ve forgotten what it was like.”

“I came to look for some paper. I’m going to write to Lilly to tell her I’m still alive and tell Hesketh that I’m sorry.”

“Hesketh was your fiancée?”

“Yes. I used to call him the pencil man. He used to line his pencils up – all facing the same direction. He boiled his eggs for precisely four minutes in the morning and he put a blanket over his legs in the evening. He is the same age as me.”

“What happened to him?”

Maria looked at Catherine and she knew she was thinking about what they did in the church.

“Mr Fyncham has paper in his desk.” Maria closed her book.

Catherine went through to the study and turned on the light. She would tell Tom in the morning about the paper. She found his leather writing case and tore a couple of pages off the pad. There were compartments in the leather flap of the case and she started looking through them. She shouldn’t have. It always meant trouble when you looked at private things. You found what you didn’t want to. There was a photograph. She didn’t want to look at it because she thought it was sure to be of Isobel but she made herself. But it wasn’t of his wife. It wasn’t of anyone.

She stared at it.

It was so long ago, but she knew what it was, she was sure. She took it back out onto the stoep with her. Maria was lying on her back staring up at roof of the stoep. She sat up when she saw the photograph. “Look at this. Tell me what you think it is.”

Maria shone her torch on the picture. “It’s a rock with water.”

“Yes. But where is it?”

Maria studied the photograph again. Suddenly her face lit up and she looked up at Catherine. "It's the river pool. It's one of your mother's photographs."

"I found it in his writing case."

"He probably picked it up around the house. There are lots of things lying around. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to put it back."

University of Cape Town

It had been four weeks since Catherine King had returned to Hebron. Hendrik had crossed the days off on a calendar. Ten thunderstorms, ten visits to the tin church and still he hadn't met her. He had heard Mr Fyncham's aeroplane when he was out riding and he knew she was up there with him. One afternoon when he was at the church he had seen Catherine and the native girl swimming in the river pool and heard them laughing. That evening he walked as far as the gate at Hebron and saw Catherine and Tom playing chess on the stoep in the lamplight.

Two days later, on his way to the church at night, he had seen the native girl walking out alone in the veld, and when he had left the church he had seen her sitting, wrapped in a blanket on one of the graves. She was lonely, he could feel it because he was lonely too.

And inside the church there were sighs and stirrings and discontent. One evening he found the vase of flowers had been knocked over and the pages torn out of one of the hymn-books.

Hendrik's mother was calling him to bring another cup from the kitchen. She had gathered the women in the district together for tea and he had been called in to help because she couldn't cope. His father had gone into town.

Tea meant one thing. Gossip. And this time there was something to gossip about. He saw their heads leaning in towards each other over the coffee table, like people watching an accident. They were whispering.

"She's come back."

"Who?"

"Mr King's daughter."

"I saw her driving up to the house. I didn't know who it was then. Of course I do now. I thought she was lost and I asked her – are you lost, I said. No, she said. I'm going to Hebron. I introduced myself, I thought, it was the polite thing. Then she told me her name. Catherine King. I said not Mr King's daughter... and she said yes. And then you know

what she said.”

They leant in again. “What? What did she say?”

“She said, “I’ve come home.”

Nettie de Vries sunk back in her chair, triumphant.

“She didn’t know then - about Mr and Mrs Fyncham?”

“Mrs Fyncham’s left. I haven’t seen her for two months now. Just seen him in town once or twice. Handsome man, like you see in the films.”

“Too handsome.”

“I don’t trust handsome men.”

“Anyway, on that day when I first met her, when I came back down the road later, her car was still there but there was no sign of her.”

“Where did she go?”

“I think she was up at that native church. I hate to think what goes on up there. They say it’s bewitched.”

“She’s at the house now. Been living there. Moved in, like she’d never left.”

“She just came back out of nowhere.”

“But what about the wife? Mrs Fyncham?”

“He doesn’t look so upset, you know. It was very sudden.”

“I wouldn’t want to be there when the wife gets back.” Nettie snorted.

“If she gets back.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...”

There was a hush, but not for long.

“There’s just the native girl at the house. You’d think she was white if you heard her on the phone. It’s unnatural - like one of those ventriloquists at the circus.” Nettie reached for another scone.

Hendrik wanted to make them stop. They knew nothing about Catherine and here they were picking like vultures over a carcass, ripping the skin off. His chest felt tight.

“And Ina saw them down by the river... laughing.”

“Where has she been all this time, the King girl?”

“The mother took them away. Father was caught - adultery, with another woman.”

Hendrik watched their faces. They seemed blurred. He could feel their words making the air a dirty brown, fogging it up so that it became thick. He went to open the window and stood with his back to them so that he could see out across the grass and the rolling hills and up to the ridge. He tried to fill his lungs and shut out their voices.

“I was driving past the store yesterday. She was at the farm school at Hebron with the piccannins. She was barefoot. She’s trying to teach them something. It’s no use. Someone should tell her. It will only cause trouble and then she’ll be sorry. You can’t get too familiar; they’ll be in the house, next thing they’ve taken everything.”

“What’s that, Hendrik?” His mother looked up.

“I’ve got to go out.”

His mother took his arm as he passed. “But you haven’t had your tea. What’s the matter?” Her eyes followed him as he left the room. He could hear Nettie de Vries.

“He’s got so handsome. You must be proud of him.”

He went into the pantry and got a bottle of wine and a corkscrew and put them in his bag. Then he ran out into the yard and kept running, down the path towards the koppies. His feet drummed on the ground, he listened to his breathing, in and out. He felt the heat on his head and the sweat sticking to his body.

He hummed to get their voices out of his head. The earth was warm under his feet. When he reached the koppie he lay under a tree, opened the wine and poured it down his throat. Their voices began to fade. He lit a cigarette. The heaviness lifted.

He lay there and thought of Catherine. If he could just step through this clinging suffocating air into her world he felt sure he would be able to breathe freely.

He wasn’t sure when he became conscious of their voices. He didn’t sit up until they were quite close by, behind the rocks. Then he moved back under the tree into the

shadows. They had stopped behind a big boulder and he moved forward so that he could hear them. It was the closest he had been to her. Catherine laughed. Mr Fyncham must have said something funny.

Hendrik crept around the rock slowly, until he could see them, but they couldn't see him. They were sitting with their backs against the rocks, a little apart from each other. Her hair was wet. She picked a piece of grass and started chewing on it. Her skin was golden now from the sun, not pale like the day he had first seen her standing outside the church. And when he saw that she looked happy his heart ached.

Mr Fyncham was peeling a mango with his knife. He handed her a piece, held it up to her mouth, but he noticed how she took it with her fingers. She didn't want him touching her. "Tell me what things you like."

"What do you mean?" She was embarrassed, Hendrik could see. But she turned to Mr Fyncham and then she smiled and Hendrik saw the girl in the picture in the church.

"What things you like. It can't be that hard." He repeated. He was looking at her. She looked across the veld. "Come on."

"Why should I tell you? You never answer any of my questions, not directly."

"OK, I'll tell you what I like. I like being here. With you."

"And?"

"That's enough for me. And I like mangoes."

She laughed then; he saw her face break into a grin.

Hendrik would have asked her more questions. Small ones, big ones. He wanted to know all about her, he knew some of the answers already.

What's your favourite colour?

And what do you fear?

And what do you love?

He had seen her dancing in the veld, her arms outspread whirling round and round. He had seen her running through the grass and swimming and lying stretched out on a rock staring up at the clouds.

"I like flying too..." Mr Fyncham was looking up at Catherine now. She was standing over him, holding out her hand to pull him up.

"Why do you like flying so much?" She pulled him to his feet.

"Because I can forget everything when I'm up there."

"And what do you want to forget?"

"Don't you ever give up? What is it you want from me?"

"I'll race you to the top." She was already scrambling up the rocks. He was close behind her. Hendrik watched them until they disappeared from sight.

When he got back his mother was waiting on the stoep.

"Where have you been? I was so worried."

"I went for a walk."

"I have a migraine." She lowered herself into one of the chairs.

"I'll get you a drink of water."

In the kitchen a fly had got caught and was buzzing against the fly mesh. Hendrik opened the window and let it out.

"Hendrik?"

"Coming ma."

He handed her the glass and sat down next to her. She sipped at the water. "That's better." She smiled at him.

Hendrik had a photograph of his mother when she was twenty-four. It was stuck to the inside of his cupboard. She was young and smiling and pretty, in a summer dress.

Something had happened to her; he didn't know what. He remembered her chasing him through the long winter grass, making birdcalls, making him laugh.

"You're a good boy, Hendrik. I should say young man. Eighteen is so grown up." She patted his knee. "I don't know what I'd do without you. You won't go too far away next year, will you? You know you could stay on the farm, your father could use the help." She smiled at him. "But then you must decide. You must do what you want. I only want you

to be happy, you know.” Her voice trailed off.

“I’m going to be, Ma, soon.” He got up. “I’m tired now, I’m going to lie down.”

“I’m also tired. I’ve been very tired all day now.” She sighed.

Hendrik lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. He must have slept for hours. When he woke up it was dark, his father was snoring and his mother was moving around the house.

*

Catherine was painting.

Tom had touched her. She had stumbled on the rocks on the path up to the church and he had put his hands around her waist to steady her and held them there. She had felt his chest against her back. And then he’d let her go. He was in her head now. He’d got in there and now he wouldn’t leave and she didn’t want him to. She wanted him to touch her again. She squirted some black paint onto the palette. The sky should be darker and the moon brighter against the blue. She couldn’t get it right.

There was a movement, a creak on the floorboards. Catherine looked up. Maria was standing in the doorway. “What is it?” Catherine could see from her expression that something was wrong.

“I waited by the pool. You said you’d meet me there after lunch. That we’d go to my mother’s.”

“Oh God.” Catherine put her brush down and walked over to Maria. “I’m sorry. We went walking. Tom found me in the koppies. You should have called. We were there.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” Maria’s tone was subdued.

It annoyed Catherine. What was she supposed to do? She had been with Tom, and probably she had been neglecting Maria, but they weren’t ten. She couldn’t stop herself from being with Tom. She couldn’t go back now. And she had spent time with Maria; they had been swimming, they had spent whole afternoons together. “Why don’t you come and eat with us tonight?” She asked her. Maria was polishing the edge of the bookshelf with her skirt.

When Tom came back that night, his mood had changed. They ate in silence.

“You see,” said Tom after Maria had taken the dishes away. “She’s uncomfortable eating

with us.”

“She’s not. She’s making me feel guilty. I’ll do something to make it right.”

“Just like that?” His tone was cutting. “Is it that easy?”

“What’s got into you?” She stood up.

“Nothing. I’m just tired. I’m going to read.”

It was then that the phone started ringing. They both listened. It was the ring for Hebron, two shorts, one long. Catherine got up to answer it, but Tom stopped her, grabbing her wrist. “Leave it.”

“Why? It might be for me. It might be Lilly.”

“I’ll get it.”

She let him go. Whoever was on the other end must have hung up. She could hear him.

“Hello, hello, who is this?”

“Who was it?” she asked him when he came back.

“They rung off.”

“They didn’t say hello, there was nothing?”

“I said they rung off.” He was out of the house. She went out onto the stoep. But he was gone into the dark. Maria was standing behind her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“He’s gone off.”

“Is it Isobel?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes the phone rings late at night. He speaks to someone. It might be her.”

“He’s frightened she’ll come back. What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? Have a whisky or two or four. Will you join me?”

“Let’s listen to some music. I have a record.” Maria went off to fetch Edmundo Ross and his big band. She handed Catherine the record sleeve.

“I know this record. I used to dance to this, during the war. Here, I’ll show you how the steps go. The rumba, the samba.” Catherine took Maria around the waist. “I’ll be the man. Just follow me.”

Maria laughed as they stumbled over each other’s feet. Round and round. Maria’s head

felt dizzy. When they got to the end of the song, they collapsed onto the floor.

“Tom used to dance.” Maria filled their glasses again. Catherine sat up. She was frowning.

“With Isobel?”

They had been having such fun.

“Just once. *She* wanted to.” Maria added quickly. She didn’t want to spoil it now.

“What else did he do? Did he take her flying?”

“No.”

“There’s something, I don’t know what it is. Sometimes I think I know, but then I think I’m going crazy. Where does he go, when he goes out at night?”

“I don’t know.”

The record had come to an end and the needle was scratching. Maria lifted it off and put Edmundo Ross back in his cover. They sat together and the silence settled around them.

“Do you remember in the beginning, the first wish we made in the church?”

“It wasn’t frightening then, what we wished for.” Maria said carefully. Catherine looked at her.

“No, it wasn’t.” Catherine blew smoke rings, watching them lift in the air. “Do you remember how it started?”

Come on Katie.

Wait, I’m trying to find the torch.

What about the dogs?

They’re at the back. They won’t hear us. Not if we’re quiet.

Not if you giggle.

I won’t giggle. I’ll think of my dead aunt.

You see. There you go, giggling. Stop it. I’ll stuff a piece of cloth in your mouth.

You’ll kill me. Then you’ll be in trouble.

OK. Let’s synchronize watches.

I don’t have a watch.

If we run and walk we’ll get there faster without getting out of breath.

Scouts do that.

OK.

What if someone's up there?

They won't be.

(The church was beautiful in the moonlight. The door was open.)

She's not singing tonight.

She needs to sleep.

Now what?

Now we cut our fingers and mix our blood.

I bought a knife. —

A knife?

Come on.

It was a simple wish. No harm in that. A wish to be friends, always.

*

It was late. Catherine must have fallen asleep on the couch. When she woke up Maria had gone to bed. She had put a blanket over Catherine. Tom hadn't come back.

The avenue of gum trees was like a cathedral over Catherine's head. The leaves rustled. She ran down the dirt road, along the path to the pool.

Tom was sitting on a rock with his legs in the water. She saw the glow of his cigarette. She stood looking at him. Then she started to take off her clothes.

"Do you want to swim?" she asked. She was at the edge of the water. She saw him crush out his cigarette and stand up. Then she jumped in. He dived in and came up next to her. He took her head in his hands and kissed her. The feel of his tongue in her mouth shocked her for a second. He looked at her. Then he held her close against him. She thought he was crying but she wasn't sure; it could have been the water. She touched his cheek. "I've got something to show you."

“What is it?”

“Let’s get dressed – it’s up in the church.”

He followed her up the path to the church and inside. They stood in front of the photograph of herself. “You haven’t changed.” He smiled, “Not that much.”

“Will you kiss me here?”

“Why here? Is this a special place?” He was amused.

She couldn’t explain. “I just want you to.”

Afterwards they sat together on the floor. He held her in his arms. She shut her eyes.

—“What’s the matter?” He asked her.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Nothing.”

When they got back to the house he told her that he had to go away for a few days. There was something he needed to sort out. He could tell her everything when he got back; it was complicated. It was about Isobel, she felt sure.

“You’ll be here, won’t you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll miss you. Next time you can come along. Have you ever eaten prawns?”

“No.”

“There are so many things to show you. All the places I’ve been, I want to show you.”

“Will you sleep with me tonight?”

She hesitated.

“Just lie with me.”

She curled up next to him. There had been something in the church – something different. She couldn’t think what it was, only that she had felt alone – she had never felt alone there. Now she could feel him moving against her. Stirring. She wanted him inside her, but not yet. She moved away from him. Eventually they fell asleep.

Catherine is searching for Tom in the old quarter of a city by the sea. The air is humid and the vegetation is tropical. The city is crumbling. Houses that used to be grand, stand derelict. Plants grow wild in courtyards. Pools and fountains are empty of water. Leaves have collected on the cracked concrete. She is walking down a narrow cobbled street that leads down to the water. Her feet are bare. There is no-one out on the streets but when she looks up at the buildings she sees washing hanging from balconies and she can smell cooking.

At the bottom of street she comes across an old fortress. She has seen it somewhere before but she can't think where. It's familiar to her, like family. The walls are crumbling and palm trees grow in the centre square. The steps lead down into the turquoise sea. The tide is high. She knows this because the water covers the sand in front of the building and laps on the bottom steps. The water looks inviting. She could take off her dress and slide into it but she is searching for someone. For Tom.

She hears the sound of children laughing nearby, but she can't see them. Out on the ocean dhows are bobbing up and down. She looks down and sees that the roughness under her feet is because she is standing on a pile of fish scales. She turns down towards where the children are playing. There is a small square lined with pepper trees. A little black girl in a tattered dress is chasing a boy around; he has stolen the mango she was eating.

A group of women are standing around a stone slab, gutting fish. A man comes over with a bucket of fish and empties it onto the slab. The women laugh and shout at him in a language she doesn't understand. She walks up to them but they don't seem to see her.

She is in a house. It is cool inside off the street. There are tiles under her feet. In front of her a staircase leads up to the first floor. There is a long passage with rooms leading off it, and at the end a closed door in front of her. She wants to stop, to go back down the passage and run out into the light and heat of the street, but is compelled to keep on walking towards the closed door, and when she gets to it, open it.

There is a bed and two bodies, lying naked in each other's arms.

Tom looks up at her over his wife's shoulder. They both stare at her as if she is an intruder.

Maria was beside Catherine's bed, shaking her arm. "You were shouting in your sleep." Catherine sat up and covered her face with her hands.

"I had such a terrible dream." She looked around the room. "Where's Tom?" And then she remembered that he had gone away.

"What happened?" Maria sat down on the edge of the bed.

"He was with her, I found them together." Catherine got up and went to open the curtains and the windows. "I don't want to think about it. I'm going to go down to the pool. I need to clear my head."

Maria was looking at her expectantly.

"We kissed – that's all."

Maria stared out of the window; she didn't look at Catherine when she spoke. "Breakfast is on the stoep. Gabriel wants to know what to do in the garden today. Mr Fyncham told him to come up here this morning."

"Tell him I'll be out in ten minutes. Go on..."

*

Hendrik was lying in the grass watching the road into town. He could see the school bus coming closer. It stopped every morning where the road from Zevenfontein met the tar road and Dirk, Hendrik and Elise, the girl from Tweefontein, got on to go to school in town. Hendrik had been early. Dirk and Elise weren't at the meeting place when he got there, and instead of waiting at the side of the road he had ducked down into the ditch out of sight. He watched Dirk's father drop Dirk and Elise off.

People said Elise was simple, but Hendrik knew she was just different. He understood because he was different too. The boys teased her at school. They pulled her plaits and tried to goad her into speaking, when she didn't want to.

Now she sat on her school satchel and drew in the earth with a stick. Dirk lit up a cigarette. The bus stopped next to them. Elise got on and Dirk crushed out his cigarette.

He looked around, obviously wondering where Hendrik was, but the bus couldn't wait. Hendrik watched from his hiding place as it drove off.

He lay on his back at the side of the road for a long time after the bus had gone, watching the kestrels circling on the thermals overhead, round and round, soaring higher and higher, then plummeting to the earth. He knew how to fly, not up there in an aeroplane, but he had flown at night. Once he had woken up on the floor.

He watched the sun rising up in the sky. He was completely peaceful. He didn't need to go to school, not for what he wanted to do. He knew how to farm, he knew how to draw, and he knew that he was going to meet Catherine King. When the sun got too hot he got up and started to walk back across the veld. He took his shirt off and wrapped it around his head like a turban. His body was brown from the sun.

The church was still cool inside when he got there, but it was going to heat up quickly and then he would have to go down into the trees above the pool to keep cool.

*

Catherine floated in the water, looking up at the clouds, seeing faces in them and animals. The night before, in the dark, Tom had taken her in his arms in this pool and they had gone to the church. The city where she had looked for him seemed more real to her now. But when she closed her eyes she could feel his skin against her, and the thing inside him that was hidden, that she didn't understand. She remembered how he had held her in his arms as they had lain in his bed.

A bishop bird flew down low across the water. Its heavy tail fluttered as it hovered and then disappeared in the reeds. Catherine swam to the side and pulled herself up on the rocks. Her senses seemed sharper. She felt the colours. She could taste the sweetness on the air: the earth in the water and smell of the trees above her. She imagined when he came back the feel of him again, and that she would let herself fall backwards and he would catch her. She wanted to be in love, she would let it happen.

Hendrik watched Catherine from the trees - and then she looked up, and in that moment he lost his footing and slid down the bank, cutting his leg against a rock as he fell. He tried

to stand but his ankle had twisted and he winced. The skin had split open on his calf and he was bleeding badly.

Catherine was calling to him from the bank. She was drying herself with a towel. "Are you alright? Don't move. I'll come up. Just wait there."

He hadn't wanted to meet her like this. He had wanted them to meet in the church. "It's OK," he called and tried to drag himself up the bank, but she was already scrambling up the path to the church. He watched as she made her way between the trees. She had pulled on a dress but her feet were bare and there was grass in her hair. She squatted down beside him and looked at the cut.

"We can use your shirt to stop the bleeding. Tom had a cut like this and it wasn't as bad as..." She stopped. He had taken his shirt off and she wrapped it around his leg and tied it securely.

"It's not bad." He told her. But when he stood up he stumbled.

"Where are you from?" she asked him. And he told her how he had come walking from Zevenfontein, that he was on his way down to the river on the other side of the ridge - he hoped she didn't mind him passing across her land.

Maria had told Catherine about the boy who was strange, the boy who went to the church at night. "You can't walk like that. Put your arm around my neck. I'll help you back to Hebron. It's not too far. We can clean your cut then I can drive you home."

"I don't want to trouble you..."

"It's no trouble. I'm not busy. Tom...Here let me carry your bag."

He had forgotten about his bag. He carried it with him always. It had become part of him. It contained his sketchbook and pencils, matches and cigarettes and sometimes a bottle of paraffin wrapped in plastic bags for the lamp in the church. Catherine took it and slung it over her shoulder. Then she put her arm around his waist to support him. His right arm rested over her shoulders.

They made slow progress with him hopping beside her – stopping every few yards to rest. He was aware that he was sweating and that she would smell the sweat and it made him awkward. It was better when they had inched their way down the slope and reached the flat ground at the bottom. They rested there and she fetched him some water to drink.

Then they set out down the path. It seemed to take forever to reach the house. She asked him about his farm, what they farmed, and if he often went to the church.

When they got to Hebron Catherine called for Maria and went to look for her while Hendrik sat on the stoep. She came back alone. "If you come through to the bathroom I'll wash the cut with some antiseptic."

It was the first time Hendrik had been inside the house at Hebron. The house of sin – as his mother and friends described it. The nearest he had been was the gate, where he had stood and watched in the dark. He had heard the music and seen the curtains blowing in the breeze when all the windows were flung open on hot nights. He had watched them walking in and out from the stoep and heard the murmur of conversation. One night he had had to duck down into the shadows as Tom Fyncham walked past him down the road. On another occasion the native girl had been picking spinach in the garden in the dark and had stood up and looked straight at him.

The windows were open and a door led off the big room onto the courtyard at the back. He could smell flowers. Someone had picked roses and put them in a vase on the piano. A radio was playing in the kitchen. The chairs had cloths thrown over them – they looked like they came from foreign places. Leather cushions and a silver tray with a coffee pot. Against one wall someone had hung a long string of beads that the native women made on the farms.

When Catherine took Hendrik through to the courtyard he could see she had started painting a mural on one of the walls. The colours were vivid like the slash of a red bird in the white grass. A prickly pear tree grew in the centre of the courtyard, and euphorbia trees and roses in beds between the slates. He could smell the scent in the heat. It was still in the centre of the house, slow in the heat, just the buzzing of insects. The bathroom was cool. Catherine went to fetch a chair that he could sit on while she washed the cut. She filled a basin of water and he rested his foot in it. She didn't speak while she washed and cleaned his cut; she seemed absorbed in what she was doing. Then she dabbed it dry with a towel and wrapped a bandage around the wound. "You should put the shirt in water to soak, to get the blood out, when you get home." She stood up and looked at the job she'd

done. "I'll get you one of Tom's shirts."

"Don't worry, really."

"You can bring it back when you can." Catherine wondered what Maria would think of the strange boy being in the house. She would have probably left him to bleed or to find his own way home. She opened Tom's cupboard and started sorting through the shirts to find one suitable for the boy, one Tom wouldn't mind her using. He didn't have many clothes but those he did have were neatly folded. She found a suit hanging at the back of the cupboard that she had never seen him wear. She remembered Maria telling her about his shoes when she had first seen him step out of the car. They were city shoes, from somewhere else.

Hendrik took the shirt from Catherine. As he put it on he felt something round and hard in the pocket. He took it out and held it out to her. They both studied the white disc in his hand. Then she took it from him. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's a pansy shell." She seemed distracted, as though she had just remembered something. "You find them at the coast on the beach. I used to have one when I was a girl, I found it when we went on holiday." She held it out for him to look at.

"It's beautiful."

"We called them sea dollars."

"Underwater money." He laughed.

"I'll put it here." She placed it on the window ledge above the bath.

"So it can be near water." And then he wished he hadn't said that. He'd said so many stupid things.

"The shirt looks good on you, it's a bit big but..."

"I'll send it back as soon as I can. Won't Mr Fyncham mind? Please, I should ask him."

"He's not here. He's gone away for a few days." She was trying to wash the blood out of his shirt. Eventually she left it to soak. "How does your leg feel?"

He took a few limping steps.

"I'll get my car and take you home."

"It's OK."

"You can't walk. Really, I'd like to."

They drove in silence down the avenue and round the back-roads to the gate to his farm. He could see his father's truck outside the house. "I'll walk from here." He turned to her. She could see that he didn't want to be embarrassed, being brought home by a woman, he would have to explain.

"It was nice to meet you..." and she realised she didn't know his name.

"Hendrik."

"And you too, Miss King. I'll bring the shirt back." He shook her hand. "And thank you." She watched him limping back towards the farmhouse. A woman came out onto the driveway to meet him.

When she got back to the house the phone was ringing but by the time she reached it, it had stopped. It was Tom, she felt sure, he said he would call. She found Maria was in the kitchen slicing up rhubarb. "I hope you're not using pineapple with that." Catherine teased her. "They say it's deadly."

"Where did you find him?" Maria looked up at her.

"I didn't find him. He was up near the church. He cut his leg and I brought him here to bandage it, then I drove him home."

"He was watching you swimming in the river."

"I don't know. For all I know he was walking down to the ledge to go swimming. Does everything have to have a sinister meaning with you? I thought he was sweet."

"He left this behind." Maria walked across to the table and held up Hendrik's bag.

"Well, maybe you can drop it off when you go to your mother's place."

"Have you seen what's inside?"

"No –and I'm not going to look."

"There's a drawing book in there. You should see the drawings."

"What about them?"

"Look at them."

"No. I'm going to put it in the study and you can take it back tomorrow. I think you need to get out of the house. How about we go to a film in town after lunch?"

“I can’t go to the cinema with you. You always forget. They won’t let me in.”

“Well, then, we’ll buy a bottle of wine and we’ll go for a drive to the waterfall. And I’ll let you drive the car.”

It was just the two of them in the car. Maria drove along the dirt roads with the windows wide open and the wind rushing in and the dust flying up: first gear, second gear, third gear, fourth gear, heaven. Catherine opened the bottle of wine with a penknife and put on the radio. “Slow down, Maria, you’ll kill us.” Maria had learnt to drive remarkably fast, as though she had remembered something that had been forgotten. Up and up, onto the escarpment and the land fell away on either side down into valleys and the clouds got nearer and nearer.

In that bubble of sound and dust and light Maria could have stayed forever with Catherine. She could take a photograph of them together in the car on the road and live in it always. Just her and Catherine going places together. She wished it could always be like that.

That evening Catherine jumped up every time the phone rang but it was never the ring for Hebron. Maria watched her waiting for the call that didn’t come from Tom. She wondered what she could do to take her mind off him.

Eventually Catherine got up from where she had been trying to read and said she was going to bed. Later on her way back from the church Maria saw the light on in the study and she knew Catherine was in there looking through the boy’s sketches.

Catherine turned the pages of Hendrik’s sketchbook, slowly tracing her fingers across the scenes. She recognised everything that he had drawn because it was on her land: the cabbage trees, the rocks in the koppies where Maria and her had played, the river, the birds in the reeds. They were beautiful sketches, far better than anything she had ever done. Then, when she turned to the back of the book, she found more. These were sketches he had done separate from the rest.

He had drawn the church. It was an interior view of the altar and in the back the baptismal font and next to it a girl, standing, smiling at him. She was holding a cosmos

flower, twirling it around in her fingers. He must have seen the photograph of her because he had captured her so accurately. He had even drawn the peacocks embroidered on the hem of her dress and her bare feet.

On the next page was the river pool, and in it a woman swimming naked.

She found some paper and wrote Hendrik a note.

Dear Hendrik,

You forgot your bag.

She tore the paper up and started again.

If you would like me to help you with your sketching meet me at the river pool on Saturday.

She folded the letter up and slipped it inside the sketchbook and then put the book back in his bag. Maria could deliver it.

University of Cape Town

Mrs Skoltz found Hendrik's bag when she got back from the shops. Maria had left it on the table. Hendrik was out helping his father on the land. She took the sketchbook out, opened it and found the letter.

When Hendrik came home his mother could see excitement on his face. She had put the sketchbook back in the bag. He sat down on the stoep and put his leg up. "Is it better?" she asked. "This was here when I got in." She handed him the bag. He took it to his room. She waited for him to come back out and tell her, but when he did come out, he just went through to the kitchen and made himself some coffee. He sat down on the stoep to read a book. "Hendrik." She paused. "I didn't know you sketched." He looked up quickly. His face was angry. "It was on the table." She could see his face go white. "I thought you wouldn't mind."

"It was private, Ma." He got up and went to his room. She followed him down the passage but he closed the door on her. Half an hour later he went out.

*

Hendrik had the letter in his pocket, and his sketchbook. He rode and shouted into the wind. The further he rode away from the farm the lighter he felt until he began to laugh.

Miss King wanted to see him, she was going to teach him to draw and paint, he was going to meet her by the river pool. She wanted him. She had seen his sketches and she thought they were good. Nothing else mattered.

The church was quiet. He found a place on the floor and opened his sketchbook. Then he closed his eyes and held his pencil over the paper. He could feel their breath as they leaned closer over his shoulder and watched as he let the pencil move across the page.

*

"Katie." Catherine opened her eyes. Maria was standing next to her bed.

"You called for me in your sleep."

“How long have I been asleep?” Catherine sat up in bed. Her head felt heavy. “Has Tom come back? I thought I heard a car?”

“A man came from town to deliver paraffin.”

Catherine got out of bed. “What if she comes back?” she asked Maria.

“She’s not going to.”

“What if she does. If she comes back when he’s away. Or with him.”

“She won’t. She’s not coming back.”

“How do you know? Have you seen something? Have you?”

Maria shook her head. “I’ve made tea and there’s cake. Our favourite cake, on the stoep.”

Maria cut the cake into slices. She didn’t tell Catherine that she had seen Mrs Skoltz opening Hendrik’s sketchbook and watched the expression on her face when she read the letter. She didn’t tell Catherine about the phone call either. The one that came that morning, from far away. The crackling line. She had put it down in fright, before the person could say hello.

“Have you got scissors?” Catherine was looking down at the flower bed below the stoep.

“Only the sewing scissors.”

“Those will do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Cut off my hair.” Catherine looked up; there was a wicked smile on her face. Maria looked at her in horror. “You know people do that in traumas.” She had made Maria laugh.

When Maria came out an hour later to see what Catherine had done she found her standing in the middle of the bed of dahlias. She had cut off all the heads.

“I have always hated dahlias. It looks much better like this, doesn’t it?”

“You’re crazy.” But Maria was smiling. Mrs Fyncham had liked them so much.

“Well, did you like them?”

“What are you going to do with them?” Maria went down to join Catherine. She walked through the scattered heads, her feet black against the bright yellow and pink.

“I thought we’d drown them in the bath, just to make sure.” They sat down on the wall and looked at the flowers.

“I’ll take them home. My sister will love them.”

“We’ll go together, tonight.”

“We can go now.” Maria had started collecting the flowers in her skirt.

“I can’t go now. I said I’d meet the Afrikaans boy by the pool. I said I’d help him with his sketching.”

Maria watched as Catherine packed a bottle of wine. She couldn’t stop her. “I’m taking wine; it’s a picnic. I’m also taking cheese and bread. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Why not strawberries? That’s what they always eat in the books on picnics. They feed each other strawberries.”

“We haven’t got any strawberries.”

Maria watched as Catherine walked down to the stables. She didn’t offer to help carry the basket or the bag with Catherine’s sketching things. Catherine turned around at the gate. “You’ll call me if he comes back won’t you? You’ll come down to the pool and fetch me?”

She wanted to get to the pool before Hendrik. It was her river, he was the visitor. When she got to the pool she spread out the blanket and put the food out and the wine in the water to cool. Then she got out her sketching block and pencils. She wanted to be busy drawing when he arrived so that it would seem professional.

She laughed at herself. She was an artist; she was going to help him to sketch? She opened the bottle and poured herself some wine. The sun was baking down. She cursed herself for suggesting such a ridiculous time. There would be only a small patch of shade. He would have to squash up next to her on the blanket. She had brought Tom’s alarm clock so that she would know how long they had been sketching. It would be professional.

Hendrik went over the events of the afternoon again. He had changed his shirt four

times. He had packed his bag and unpacked it. His mother had stopped him when he reached the stoep. She had been sitting out there, quite still, staring blankly in front of her. He didn't know how long she had been there. "I'm worried, Hendrik."

"You musn't worry, Ma."

"How can I not worry? You mustn't go there Hendrik - to that church, to Hebron. I have a bad feeling about it. Things are going on over there that..."

"Ma."

"Promise me." She looked at his bag. "Where are you going with that?"

"I'm going to meet Dirk down at the river."

"Can I come too?" She stood up. "It's been so long since I went to the river. Remember how your father and us used to go down there. But you don't want your mother along with you now."

"It's not that ma." He was going to be late, he might miss Catherine. He had to get away from the house.

*

But when he got to the wattle trees and looked down at the pool she was there. She was lying on a blanket in her bathing costume. From the trees above the pool it looked as if she was sleeping. He couldn't see her face, just the back of her head. Her hair was spread out. He hurried down the path, and then approached her slowly, trying not to make a noise. He wondered whether to call her. He said her name under his breath, trying it out: "Catherine, Miss King." He didn't want to startle her. He moved closer until he was standing right by her. "Catherine?" He *had* frightened her. "It's OK." He put his hand out as he would to an animal that was frightened.

"Oh, it's you." She sat up. "I must have fallen asleep." She looked dazed. He sat quietly waiting for her to wake up. He poured her a cup of water. She leant back against the tree. He sat down on the edge of the blanket.

"It's hot," he said. It sounded so stupid. But she didn't seem to have heard. She got up and walked to the rocks at the edge of the pool.

"This will wake me up!" She turned and smiled at him. "Why don't you come in? It's so hot!"

“I’ll watch you.” Another silly thing he’d said. She would think that he had been spying on her. She jumped into the water.

“Come in.” She called to him. He had a towel in his bag. He tried to crouch behind the tree to take off his shorts with the towel tied around his waist. It was ridiculous. She was on the far side of the pool. She must be sitting on a submerged rock, because he could see her legs. He ran and dived in and grazed his arms against a rock. When he broke the surface she was swimming towards him. “You have to be careful. There are only certain places in the pool where you can dive. There are rocks underwater. Are you alright?” She was treading water next to him, in the deepest part of the pool.

“It’s just a graze.”

“You must be accident prone.” He didn’t understand. “You have a lot of accidents.”

“Only around you,” he thought, but he just nodded. He swam a bit so that she could get out and dry herself and change. Then he got out and wrapped a towel around himself.

“Here.” She handed him a glass of wine.

They talked about the weather, about farming. Then she asked him if he’d brought his sketchbook. He took it out. “Let me see the sketches again.” He handed her the book. She could see that he was nervous. She felt nervous too, but for a different reason. It was because she shouldn’t be doing this, because she liked him; she didn’t know why. She felt she could tell him anything. “Would you like one?” She offered him a cigarette. He took one and she lit it for him and their fingers touched. He coughed when he inhaled. “They’re very strong, I know.” She laughed.

He loved the sound of her voice, the way her face moved, her smile.

She looked at him. He was so unsuspecting. She lit her cigarette and concentrated on his sketches. “You’ve been up to the church often?”

He didn’t know whether it was a statement or a question. “Yes.” They both looked at the sketch he’d done of the church; the girl standing in the doorway. She didn’t ask who it was, perhaps she knew. “I saw you there.” She didn’t look up when he said this. “You’ve got the same smile.”

She looked at him. “I was ten when that picture was taken.”

“Did you play there in the church; because...” He hesitated.

“Because?” There was an edge to her voice.

“Nothing. I just wondered.”

Then she relaxed. He could feel it, an easing in the air. “When I was a girl I used to hide in the church. Sometimes Maria and I would go up there at night. We used to play up in those trees. One day we scrambled down to the ledge and dared each other to jump off into the pool.”

“And did you?”

“Yes. We learnt to swim in this pool.”

“I also learnt in this river, but further down, where it runs through our farm. By the bridge.”

“I know that place.”

“Have you got brothers and sisters?”

“No.”

“You’re all alone then.” He felt she was looking right through him. “I am too.” She laughed.

“I thought you had a sister?” He looked up and saw that she was frowning.

“We’re not close,” she said.

“Your father?”

“He’s dead.”

“I am sorry. He must have been very sad to leave this place.”

“Yes.” She turned the page in the sketchbook. There was the woman swimming in the river pool. Naked. “This is here?”

“Yes.” He had trespassed on her land.

“It’s a beautiful composition.” She paused “Who is it?” She was looking at him now, straight into his eyes and past into his heart. He looked away.

“It’s Mrs Fyncham.” He couldn’t tell her the truth. How could he tell her that he’d been watching her swimming and riding with Tom Fyncham. That it had made his heart ache. That when he had drawn the woman in the pool there was man in it too, but he had shaded him out.

“Did you know her? I should say, do you know her?” She tried to make it sound light.

“She used to come swimming here – I met her here once or twice.” He was getting out of his depth now.

“And she was naked?” She was teasing him now.

“She liked to swim like that.”

“And she didn’t mind you drawing her naked?” She saw him shift and she wanted to stop, because she liked him, but she couldn’t.

“Her husband – he asked me to paint her. He wanted a portrait of her.” Catherine didn’t say anything. When he looked at her, she had gone pale. “Are you alright?” It was such a mess now. He had made a mess of it.

“They came down here together?”

“Yes. They met here, after he’d finished work. They liked to swim.”

“She didn’t tell you why she left?”

He’d said the wrong thing. It was not entirely a lie – he had seen Mrs Fyncham at the pool but not with Tom. It had been late one night, soon before she left. She had stood on the ledge above the pool looking down into the dark water. There was a long silence. Hendrik struggled with what to say next. “You belong here. It’s where you are.” He hesitated. “It’s where I am too.”

Then he asked her to show him how to sketch, to cover his confusion. She suggested they start on the pool. She handed him a sheet. He pressed it against his sketchbook. It was good paper, not like his cheap book. He started to draw. “Relax,” she told him, and they both laughed. “Stop frowning.”

She got her paper out and looked at the pool. She saw different colours in the water and the reeds moving at the edge. Now when she looked at the water she saw Mrs Fyncham swimming. She watched as she dived and surfaced. Her black hair was sleek against her head. She was laughing, calling Tom. “Come in, why don’t you join me?”

Catherine looked at her paper and saw that she had drawn a figure in the water. She wiped it out, smudging it with the back of her hand. She started to draw again. The cliff rising out of the water, the bushes clumped at the top, the darkness of the rocks, the arms of the trees. She would replace her. She would draw them at the pool, Maria and her, two

figures playing in the shallows. Two little girls naked, bent over looking at pebbles under the water. Intent, absorbed, uncaring, happy.

They started to talk as they sketched. She told him about the places she'd gone as a child. The time passed quickly. She looked at his picture and suggested where he could lighten it and where he could shade more. It was so much better than hers; he should have been the one helping her. Then it was time to pack up. "Would you like to do this again? Do you think it helped?"

"Oh yes." His heart was singing.

"Shall we meet next Saturday then, here?" They separated where the path forked. He watched her walk away from him through the grass.

University of Cape Town

Maria noticed the change in Catherine when she came back from the river. The Afrikaans boy had told her something that she hadn't wanted to hear. Maria had warned her not to go. Catherine told Maria that she would meet her at her mother's khaya later, she just wanted to sit out on the stoep for a while and have a cigarette and a drink. She watched Maria as she walked off down the driveway. Maria turned back and waved from the gate. Catherine watched the colours changing as the light faded. She heard the sounds of the workers shouting in the distance and watched the black children running down the dirt road past the house. A peacock was calling from behind the house.

As it got dark, the fires stood out - orange pinpoints in the veld, beacons in a sea of darkness.

Tom was out there in the dark, getting closer, moving further away, bringing her in, shutting her out.

Maria was out there in the dark, waiting for her, singing a made-up song, memorising strange facts from books to make her laugh, sitting on her lover's grave, sitting alone by the water staring up at the aeroplane in the sky, watching the ants crawling on the red earth.

Hendrik was out there in the dark in the church, his pencil dancing across the pages, his heart singing.

Isobel was out there in the dark, swallowed up by some dark hole, trying to find her way back.

And the girls were up there in the dark, in the church, tracing circles in the dust, laughing their fears away, turning the dark into a pirate's ship, a wedding, a baptism, a flower in a vase, a wish.

The Swazi words were coming back to her now, slowly forming themselves into sentences. Some were too far away to hold on to. They were words she would need to talk to Maria's mother. Tom had been gone for ten days and he hadn't called. She was angry that she wanted him to call so badly, and angry that he hadn't. She wanted him to

come back. Maria was there, but she still felt lonely. She got a jersey and pulled it on over her dress and took a torch from the cupboard, then set out for Maria's mother's kraal.

Maria's mother's fingers work through her hair, click, click... She smells of menthol, she uses it for her chest. Her apron is faded, her knees stained with floor polish. I lean back against her big warm body.

"My naughty girls, she laughs. Where were you? Madam was looking for you. Calling everywhere." Her arms fold around me. I could fall asleep. I don't need sheep. I feel her chest, rising and falling, rising and falling. She straps Lilly on her back when she cleans in the house. "Where were you? She sent Philemon to look for you down at the store."

"We were hunting."

If the house burns down. If there's a big veld fire, like last winter.

A runaway fire. A fire that is running away, from what?

Be serious, Maria. If everyone is burnt, we'll have to find our own food.

We'll be hunter-gatherers.

I'll be the gatherer. I know what you can eat in the veld.

No you don't, Maria. You nearly killed us with that plant you made us eat. No, I'll hunt things with my stick.

Like what? What will you hunt?

Sheep.

You don't have to hunt for sheep. They are a domestic animal. Anyway what if you caught one? You'd have to kill it.

Why me?

Because you're the hunter. Could you kill something?

I don't know.

My mother kills chickens. She chops their heads off and they run around afterwards. She killed a goat, slit its neck with a knife. It was a rusty knife.

Don't tell me that. I don't want to hear about it.

You could try and kill something small. Like a mouse, when the cat brings it in and it's

still alive but it's dying. You could practise on that. Or a frog.

Yugh!

You could hit it with a rock. It's quick because it's unconscious then. You can't wait though. He who hesitates is lost.

What?

I read it in this book at the house.

You're crazy.

They laugh.

Two mangy dogs came tearing out of the dark barking as Catherine approached the kraal. They stood snarling at her until a man came out with a stick and chased them away. He took off his battered hat and nodded at her and she greeted him. Maria had come to the entrance of the hut.

The inside of the hut was smoky. There was a paraffin lamp burning and she could make out the shape of a child sitting on a steel bed in the corner. Other children crowded around her, touching her skirt, wanting to feel her hair. Maria's mother sat in the corner on a mat. She had shrunk with age. When Catherine got closer she could see that one eye was milky from cataracts. She held up her hand and Catherine took it and squatted down next to her.

"Maye ba bo, Katie, you've grown so beautiful. Let me look at you." She clicked her tongue. Then she told Maria to bring a chair, two chairs; they couldn't entertain a guest like this. Maria helped her mother up and she sunk down on the chair, the broken riempies sagging under her. Catherine recognised the chairs as old ones from Hebron. There were also a couple of old china pots that her mother had given Maria's mother because they were broken. They had been given pride of place in an old cabinet.

"Let me look at you," she said again and studied Catherine's face. "Maria can make some tea." She turned to Maria and spoke to her in Swazi. "Bring the proper cups out," she told her. "Katie, it's been such a long time. How's mummy?"

"She's dead, Mama. I told you." Maria was rummaging in a drawer. She brought out a

box - full of old tissue paper. Inside were china cups; they were old ones with chips from the house at Hebron. "I tell her all the time, but she forgets." Maria poured water into the cups and took an old tin with a picture of the King and Queen on it. There was one tea bag left and she squeezed it against the side of the cup and used it again in the next one. The tea was a milky colour – Maria had this one.

"I'm sorry, Katie." The old woman squeezed Catherine's hand. "Your mother was a kind somebody. She taught me English. But I'm forgetting everything." She laughed, waving her hands, and started coughing again. "It's hard now. I can't work. There's no money. The two eldest are on the mines. And Maria's so rude to men." Maria rolled her eyes. "Are you married? Baas Fyncham is handsome. I saw you down by the river with him yesterday. I went to look for mushrooms down there in the veld. He's a good man."

"You haven't met him, Mama."

"But I can tell."

"Mama, you didn't go out yesterday."

"It was yesterday. You weren't here. I'm not stupid. I went down to the pool. I saw Katie with him." She reached out and touched Catherine's hair. "But you changed your hair. I think it was long; it was different and the colour was dark."

"You're getting confused, Mama. She can't remember when things happened. That wasn't yesterday, Mama." Maria got up to fetch water from the bucket in the corner for her mother, who was coughing again. "She saw Mr and Mrs Fyncham once down by the river." Maria explained to Catherine.

"I know what I saw." Her mother was getting agitated now. "Why don't you use proper teapot. Not this old thing." She made Maria look for another teapot. She was getting tired. Catherine could see. And after tea Catherine said goodbye and promised to come again. Maria's mother She hobbled out into the yard. "My two naughty girls," she called after them. "All grown up." She waved them off into the dark.

*

They walked in silence for a while. Catherine led the way with the torch and Maria followed her. Catherine could hear Maria humming under her breath. That silly clapping song.

Down by the bramble bushes

Down by the sea

Boom Boom Boom...

“When I die I want you to check that I’m really dead before they put me in the coffin or they wheel me into that fire.”

Catherine turned around to look at Maria.

“I’m serious.” Maria said.

“But they’ll know you’re dead. You’ll stop breathing.”

“But to make sure. Sometimes they make mistakes. There are stories I’ve read about claw marks on coffins. You have to check for a pulse but you’ve got to wait a while because it might have slowed down. I read about a turtle that was caught in a net, its heart beat once every hour.”

“That’s a turtle. You read too much, Maria.”

“You can hold a glass up to my mouth to see if I’m breathing.”

“Why are we talking about this anyway?”

“Because I want to know that you’ll do that when I die.”

“You’re my age. You’re not going to die.”

“You never know. Think of my aunt, run over when she was crossing the road. There’s murder as well.”

“Why would anyone want to kill you?”

“But say they did, for some reason.”

“This is a stupid conversation to be having.”

“But will you? If you say yes, I’ll stop.”

“Yes, I’ll check to make sure you’re dead. But what if I die first?”

“Will you leave me your car?”

Catherine laughed. They had reached the school when she stopped in her tracks and Maria nearly bumped into her. “Who else will drive it?” Maria went on, but Catherine wasn’t listening, she was staring up the driveway to the house. It was lit up in the dark and

there was music playing. She began to run, leaving Maria standing in the road.

The door was open and Catherine went inside. She stopped when she saw what was on the armchair in the middle of the room. She stood and stared. Suddenly she couldn't hear the record playing or Maria calling or the dogs barking or Tom's voice. She could only see down a tunnel and at the end where a green jacket and a black handbag were so casually thrown down on a chair, as if the owner had returned from a day's shopping and gone to run the bath. She had made a terrible mistake.

University of Cape Town

Tom was standing in the doorway. He had walked in from the courtyard with just a towel wrapped around his waist – he must have been in the bath. “Catherine?” He sounded surprised. He came towards her. She was still staring at the chair. His tone was so offhand as if nothing had happened between them. She thought of the night at the river pool and the thing he hadn’t been able to tell her. She would have to leave now. She had made a horrible mistake. “Oh, you found them. I didn’t mean you too. It was to be a surprise.”

“A surprise?” She felt sick in her stomach.

“Obviously a bad one. You should have warned me you don’t like surprises.”

“Where is she?”

“Where is who?”

“Your wife.” She couldn’t say her name.

“It’s a present, Catherine. It’s just a present.”

“I thought.” And then he came forward and took her in his arms. “You didn’t call.” She hit her fist against his chest.

“I tried. I was cut off. You know the exchange. I did try.” He held her at arm’s length now and looked at her. “I missed you, you know.”

“I need a tissue.” Her nose was running now.

“So the jacket’s not your colour then?” He had made her smile. “You could try it on.”

It fitted perfectly. He must have asked Maria for measurements.

“Thank you. I just got a fright, that’s all.”

“I’ve been thinking about you all the way back in the car.” He started to sing, “Your lips, your smile, your sweet embrace.” He held her close and danced her round the room.

“Where’s Maria? I brought her something too.” He let go of her and walked over to his suitcase that lay opened by the door. Just then Maria appeared. She had a strange knack of doing this, almost on cue, Catherine thought. Tom handed her a litre bottle with liquid in it from his suitcase. “Sea water. Just what you asked for.” Maria grinned.

“Maria had known that Tom was going to the sea.” Catherine thought.

“God knows what she does with it.” Tom laughed. “I need something a bit stiffer. Won’t

you pour me some whisky and I'll get changed. I'm exhausted. I've been driving all day."

He seemed so happy to see her. Maria had disappeared with the bottle to her room.

When Tom came back she handed him a drink and they sat down. "So tell me what you've been doing. I saw your painting. It's very good."

"You like it? You don't think the water in the pool is wrong."

"No."

She looked at him. "I tried to get Maria to swim, but she told me she was cold. Did you get your business done?"

"Yes." He was stirring his ice with his finger. "Won't you play me something on the piano?"

"I went riding all the way along the river. Ptolomy has been eating too many oats. He nearly threw me off." She laughed.

"Play me something." He said again.

"I've forgotten. I never learnt things off by heart."

"It doesn't matter. Make it up as you go along. Play me to sleep." He closed his eyes.

So she sat down and lifted the lid of the piano. It had been so long. At first she played notes that were discordant, but he didn't move, didn't flinch. And then she forgot him, and she started to play.

"Katie, play for me." Her mother's voice. She's lying on her bed, all her strength is gone now. Her voice is a whisper. Her face is so gaunt. She wants to leave her body so badly now. "Play to me, you play so well, take me somewhere else. Come on Katie. Take me back there to the veld, to the river. Take me up in the koppies. Take me to the church."

Her fingers move on the keys and she feels something welling up inside. Something she's kept sealed. She's crying. And she knows her playing is something beautiful that she's showing him. She knows that there is nothing like it. She doesn't care that he's in the room. But she stops and closes the lid. She's shown him her secret now.

When she passes him to go and sit down he puts his hand behind her thighs and pulls her towards him. He stands up. "I want to kiss you." His mouth tastes of whisky. He is holding her and she leans against him. His body is warm.

"I'm tired." She moves away a little. "I'll see you in the morning."

In her room she takes all the clothes out of her drawers, refolds them and puts them back in. *My things*. She lines up her three pairs of shoes under the bed. *My shoes, my room, my house*.

She is running. Nobody can stop her. She'll run off the edge of the world and float up and up into the darkness. She is dancing inside. She is bodiless. She is ten, she is twenty five, she is eighty.

She climbs out of her window and runs out into the yard where she lies down in the dust and stretches her arms out. She wants the earth to suck her in. She wants to be part of the dust and the sky, but she isn't ready to be part of him. He can't catch her, nobody can.

Maria is lying beside her on the ground. Their fingers touch. They are spinning around and around, dizzy laughing and spinning. They are chasing each other up and down the hills over the veld, everything is laughter; they are spinning in it and making it spin.

Tom watches them from the window: two women, two girls. He can see that there is nobody else. "What do you want?" He remembers her voice. I want what is yours. I want to stay here, he thinks. He looks at their fingers touching in the dust. I want to tell you the truth.

Hendrik ran through the veld. He leapt over a branch that crossed the path and shouted into the sky. He spun around and did a flying leap; his bag bounced against his chest. She was going to love the sketches and when he could use colour there would be an explosion. He stopped and picked her some cosmos, five pink and five white. He knew that she liked them because when he had taken them to the church, he had heard delighted laughter.

The next time he'd been in the church the flowers had been joined by their stems to make a chain and there were small fingerprints in the dust.

Today he had his costume on underneath his shorts so that he could just leap into the water when she went swimming. He could jump from the ledge. He would show her how to do a back flip and he would ask her if he could draw her.

When he got to the pool she wasn't there yet, but he was early. He took out the bottle of wine and put it in the water to cool. Then he sat on the bank and drew a pattern in the earth and decorated it with pebbles. She was late. He took off his clothes and jumped in, diving down as deep as he could go; holding his breath for as long as he could. Then he got out of the water and lay on the rocks to dry. She had been held up. But she would be here, he knew. He wanted to be busy when she got there and he took out his pad and started to draw the water.

*

Catherine and Tom drove in silence. Halfway along the road a hare came flying out of the bushes in front of the car. There was no way Tom could have stopped; there was a car coming in the opposite direction. He would have killed them – so he hit the hare. Catherine looked back to see its back legs still flapping helplessly. Tom pulled over and they got out. She watched as he went over and wrung its neck. It was so quick. "Are you alright?" he took her hand. Closing it round her fingers. "There was nothing I could have done."

"I know, it was the best thing."

"Tom?" But he didn't seem to have heard her. They got back in the car.

“I’ve had the plane fixed. There was a problem with the free-play on the joystick. Willy took her up the other day. She’s perfect now. I’ll give you your first lesson in how to fly. In an aeroplane that is. I reckon you go flying all the time in that head of yours.” He stroked her cheek.

They flew for hours; further than they had been before, tracing the river down the valley and over the edge of the escarpment where the land fell away, into the opal hills that led down towards the coast.

Hendrik heard the aeroplane before he saw it. Catherine was up there with Tom, flying. She had forgotten. How could he have thought? Would she see him if she looked down? He stopped sketching, crumpled up the drawing and threw it into the water where it swirled round and was carried over the rocks and down the river. It would have been perfect but then Mr Fyncham had come back and messed it up. Hendrik took a handful of stones and threw them as hard as he could against the cliff on the other side of the pool. He had been so stupid, to let himself feel like this, to open his heart. He sat down, lit a cigarette and started to drink.

When he had finished the bottle he stumbled up the path from the pool. Maria passed him as he reached the church but he didn’t look up. She saw the tears streaking down his face.

On the way back to Hebron Catherine drove. She turned off the tar road, but instead of going down the hill to Hebron she drove along a dirt track that led to a waterfall on the edge of the escarpment. They had seen it from the air. Tom had never been there and she wanted to show him how spectacular it was. She drove as far as she could then they got out and walked. The water plummeted over the edge of flat rocks down into the krantz far below. They sat, dangling their legs over the edge. She could feel the spray as it blew back up. “There are leopards down there in caves.” She pointed at the steep sides of the krantz.

Tom had brought a bottle of wine from the car and he opened it. They sat swigging from

the bottle. She lay back on the rocks. He traced his finger over her calf. "Unhand me sir, for I am not a boy."

"What? You are crazy, aren't you?" His hand was warm on her skin.

"It's what the groom says to the dashing rake in those Georgette Heyer novels when she reveals that she is not actually a boy and that she desires him."

"I can't say I've read Georgette Heyer."

"Lilly can't get enough of them. It's her secret passion." Tom was unzipping her dress. He laid their clothes out on the rocks like a blanket. She felt the cold fine spray off the waterfall and the heat of the sun on her skin and then him inside her.

She stared at the clouds above her, drifting across the sky. Tom had fallen asleep and she had put his shirt over his head to stop his face from burning.

What happens when this ends? When there is nothing left to say?

"Will you take me with you?" He opened his eyes at the sound of her voice.

"What was that?" His voice was sleepy.

"When you go away again. Will you take me with you?" She traced a grass over his arm.

"I'll take you. I promise."

Hendrik stopped outside the door to the sitting room. His mother was sitting with Nettie de Vries and Ella. They were having coffee and biscuits. He stopped because of what Nettie was telling his mother. "He's gone. Tom Fyncham's gone."

"How do you know?"

"He was supposed to collect feed from the railway siding on Thursday but he didn't arrive, so Davel took the feed up to the house at Hebron. The native girl said he was gone."

"And I saw her on the road up to Hebron – the King girl. She was just walking, but it didn't look like she knew where she was going. I stopped and asked her if she was OK. She didn't even greet me."

"The native girl didn't tell Davel when he'd be back. She just watched as he offloaded the sacks of feed. Didn't help. Just stood there. And the King girl - she was standing behind her in the doorway – Davel says she didn't have shoes on. Her hair was all messy, like she hadn't brushed it for days."

Tom had left Catherine; he had left the farm. A spark ignited in his heart. She would need his help on the farm. He knew how to farm. He knew all there was to know. He would go there, perhaps not immediately but soon, to offer his help.

They ate supper early, as usual. Hendrik's mother asked him why he was so quiet. No reason, he told her. She didn't repeat the conversation she had had with Nettie and she didn't know that he had overheard them speaking. She wouldn't want him to know that Tom Fyncham had left Catherine alone at the house, but she must know that he would find out sooner or later, the way that news travelled. "How is Dirk?" She asked him.

"Fine."

Then his father discussed farm things with him and told him how he had had to deliver a calf while Hendrik was at school. It was a breech birth. He'd had to stick his arm into the cow and turn the calf around. The calf had lived. It had been a wonderful thing.

His mother's mood was light too. She suggested they go on a family holiday after Hendrik had finished his exams, to the sea. They hadn't been on a holiday together for so long. It would be a celebration.

Hendrik half listened as his mother described places she had visited in the past with his father when they had first been married and how they had met at a dance. And for the first time for a long time, he saw a look of genuine affection pass between his parents when his father reached over the table and took her hand. He would take Catherine a gift of some sort. They had a glass of wine after the meal and then Hendrik went to his room. He had a lot of work, he told them.

But he lay on his bed and stared out of the window, across the veld to the ridge. It was so beautiful out there in the dark. Whenever he lay on his bed, he wanted to be outside under the stars, up on those huge boulders that attracted the lightning. There was iron in those rocks. They looked as though they had been hurled from a height and shattered on impact with the earth, and rolled down the hill, finding their resting place. And then the plants had grown in and around them. Sometimes he wondered if there was a God up there, in the sky, and if he had thrown them in anger or if they had slipped from his hand, or if he'd tossed them joyfully, like dice and then watched as they had split open.

He had to go tonight. He couldn't lie in bed and wait, he would never sleep and it was a clear night. He put on a clean shirt and trousers and packed his bag with cigarettes, and half a bottle of whisky he kept in his cupboard. He would need it to steady his nerves. Then he opened the window and jumped down onto the driveway and was off into the dark.

He stopped only for a few minutes in the church to look at Catherine's picture and then again at the side of the road in the gum trees to have some whisky for courage before he made his way up the driveway to Hebron. This time he wouldn't lurk in the shadows watching the house, he would walk boldly up the stairs and knock on the door.

But he didn't have to knock. The door was open, as were the windows in the rooms at the front of the house, flung open to the warm night. Music was playing. He had come to

associate it with the house. It sounded gay and light. But when he got inside he could sense that something was wrong.

There was just a lamp on in the sitting room so it took him a while to make out a figure sitting in the armchair and the bottle next to the chair. Catherine didn't move when he crossed the carpet. The record came to an end and the needle scratched backwards and forwards. Hendrik went over and lifted the needle off, because Catherine wasn't going to. He approached her cautiously. She didn't seem surprised to see him; she was too drunk.

Her face looked smudged as though someone has taken a photo of her but it was out of focus, the muscles in her face had gone slack. Then he saw the cut on her forehead and that it was still bleeding. "It's OK." He put his hand out. She stood up slowly, holding onto the chair.

"No." she shook her head. "It's not OK." A look of annoyance passed across her face.

"Why are you here? Where is Maria? I must find her." She tried to walk towards the door and he held out a hand to steady her.

"You have a cut. You should put something on it." But she wasn't listening to him.

"Did you see her when you came?" They reached the door and she let go of his hand, walked unsteadily out onto the stoep and sat down on the wall. "We had a fight." She was not really talking to him, but to herself.

"Did she do that?" He pointed to the cut on her forehead. Again she looked at him, this time with something close to anger, as if to say, how could he think that. He felt out of his depth again with her. He didn't know what to do. He had never seen her like this.

"I fell and cut myself. But I'm not worried about that. Maria has gone."

"I'm sure she'll come back." He tried to sound reassuring.

"Do you think so?" She stood up and went back into the house, this time more steadily as though she had composed herself. "Do you want a drink?" She asked him, already pouring a glass. "I've been drinking all evening." Her voice sounded flat. She was tired. "Why don't you choose a record. Put it on. Maybe the music will get her to come back."

He went over and looked through the selection. He saw the jacket sleeve - Edmundo Ross' Big Band.

"Put on anything." She told him, when he hesitated. He sat next to her for a while, in

silence, until he could think of something to say that didn't sound stupid. "I waited for you by the pool. I brought the sketches."

She looked at him and for the first time that evening, he felt, registered that he was there, a separate person, in the room with her. "Oh God. I'm sorry." She was biting her lip "I've been forgetting everything. I'm sorry. That was unforgivable." She smiled. "Do you want to dance? Let's dance."

"I don't know how. I'm afraid I..."

"Don't be afraid. There's nothing to it. I'll show you."

And she did. Soon he was dancing with her out on the stoep and she was leaning against him. He had a good sense of rhythm, she told him. He just enjoyed holding her, the closeness of her. He could smell her hair and her skin. At the end of the song he didn't want to let her go. He felt he should do something, that she was expecting something, he should kiss her. But then she pulled away.

"Do you want me to go and look for her?" He asked her.

"She could be anywhere." She shook her head. "No, that would make it worse. We had a fight, you see. No, stay here with me. If you don't mind. I don't want to be alone."

He went to fetch her some water in the kitchen when she complained that her head hurt.

"Tom's gone away. He didn't take me with him." She said it bluntly; she was sobering up. "The phone rang and I answered it – I shouldn't have answered. It was her. I know it was. Now she knows I'm here."

"I'll stay here with you."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"I need to sleep now. You could sit out here."

But when she started along the passage she stumbled and he had to help her down to her room and onto her bed. He pulled the sheet up over her. "Will you stay until I fall asleep?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Thank you." She smiled at him and closed her eyes.

Maria opened the curtain and Catherine groaned and covered her face. Her mouth was dry, and her head was pounding. "What are you smiling at?" She sat up, annoyed at Maria. "Are you satisfied now? I was alone. I got drunk."

"Alone?"

"I don't remember. I smashed a vase. I don't remember."

"The boy was here."

"What boy?"

"Hendrik."

She remembered his face more like a vision than flesh and blood. And that she had felt safe. But she couldn't remember the details and she had a horrible feeling. "What did I do? Did I do anything?"

"I don't know. I wasn't here. I saw him leaving."

"When was that?"

"This morning."

"Why didn't you come inside?"

"I don't know. I fell asleep out there."

Catherine sat up in bed, but it made her head worse. "Won't you get me some painkillers? I'm sorry about the fight," she added. Maria brought her a glass of water and the pills. When Catherine had taken them she told her what she had seen. "It's in the studio. You'd better go and look."

"What is it?"

It was a sheet of paper, one of her sheets, and he'd pinned it up on the easel for her to look at. It was a charcoal sketch of her, lying naked on her bed. It was beautiful.

She stood in the shower and let the cold water shock her awake. The anger twisted itself into a knot in her stomach again, every time she thought of Tom leaving. She had fought with Maria. She couldn't remember how the argument began. It must have been about

Tom.

It had happened one day a week ago. She had been teaching. They were going to go into town to shop that afternoon. She had been finding it hard to concentrate at school. How could she teach multiplication when all she could think of was Tom, moving inside her. She kept remembering his face looking down at her and the feel of the spray from the waterfall. Three times four is lost. She had finished school late that day and she had run the last bit up to the house, hoping he wouldn't be too impatient because she still needed to change. But when she had got to the house she found that he had gone. There was a note. It was the last time. He was looking forward to flying with her soon. He was sorry. He would phone.

There had been a week and no phone calls before the argument. She had shouted at Maria. Why hadn't she come down to the school? She must have seen that Tom was going to leave. She must have seen a suitcase, or that he was packing the car. Maria had said in that voice she could put on that it hadn't been her business. She might as well have said 'madam' at the end. She too had a lover, but he was buried up at the church. Did Catherine think that she had never been in love?

The icy water shocked her back from some dazed place she'd been in for days. She towelled herself dry and pulled on a summer dress. Then she went to get coffee in the kitchen. Maria had squeezed orange juice. "I'm going to find him." She told her.

"But you don't know where he is."

"There must be something. I just have to look through his things." And she remembered the pansy shell. She started by looking in his desk but had no luck. She found only bills and invoices and maps.

She found the card after an hour of searching. It was in the pocket of an old jacket of Tom's that had been rammed to the back of the cupboard. There was an address of a hotel on the card and a sketch of a palm tree. It was enough to go on.

*

Catherine is driving down through the opal hills on her way to the coast. She has the postcard with the name of the hotel on the dashboard. She puts her foot down, the window is open and the hot air rushes in. She drives too fast around the bends, but then the road straightens out stretching out in a shimmering line to the horizon. The bush flashes past, the red rock face, the thorn trees, thorn trees, the air is humming. A bird of prey circles in the pewter sky. The mountains fold like wrinkled skin back into the earth.

She is descending a steep mountain pass. The land falls away on either side into gorges full of trees. A troupe of baboons sit on the side of the road scratching themselves in the sun. At the bottom, where the land opens up again, there is a tea room. She stops. The engine is hot from driving fast. Her hair is full of dust. She goes to the toilets and washes the dust off her face and hands. She looks in the mirror. Her face is golden from the sun.

Where are you Katie?

Outside she sits on a plastic chair under the trees. Everything is slow here, even breathing is slow. The waitress takes her time. She orders a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich and a coffee. She needs to keep awake. When the sandwich comes the cheese is too hot to eat. There is a column of ants moving in formation across the faded red and white plastic cloth on the table. She watches. The waitress comes over to ask if everything is OK. She is curious, so is the man at the next table.

The waitress asks her where she is going. Isn't she scared of travelling alone? What if she gets a puncture? She warns Catherine that there is a roadblock near the border. The police are looking for blacks - there's been trouble. There is an underground movement, communists, weapons. As she talks she looks down at the concrete slabs under her feet as if they are actually down there tunnelling away. The police found weapons being smuggled across the border – the man joins in. No, it isn't safe. How far is she going?

The waitress brings her another coffee. She thinks of Hebron. Cut off from this, from news, from the rest of the world, from how other people go on. She thinks of Maria's ghosts that live under the house, they have their own strange underground movement. She

thinks of Maria's love buried under the earth at the tin church and the grave next to him that Maria keeps clean for herself.

She gets out her map and starts to trace her route to the coast with a pencil. Inside the café she can hear the shrill voice of the waitress. She is shouting at a black woman who works in the kitchen. Catherine watches the scene inside the tearoom with a strange detachment. The black woman has knocked over a box of straws. "Now look what you've done. Pick them up!"

"Sorry madam." The woman bends down and starts to pick the straws up one by one and puts them back in the box. Catherine thinks of Maria.

She checks the oil and the water and fills up with petrol. Then she is driving again. The radio is playing rock and roll songs. Maria would like these. Maybe she can buy her some records at the coast.

She arrives at the border post and gets out of the car to have a cigarette. The man from the café comes over to ask if she is alright. He is also travelling down to the coast; he'll keep an eye out for her on the road.

An old black man walks up to them. He has been sitting with a woman on the ground under the tree watching them talking. His face is old and shrunken. He holds a rusty jam tin in his hand. There is a plant growing out of it. Around his arm hang strings of beads – they are strung-together seed pods, brown and orange and grey.

"Five bob." He holds out his arm, displaying the necklaces. "Choose one." The necklaces are threaded together with fishing line. "Magic beans," he says. He lifts the plant out of the tin and shows her the roots, a seed is forming in amongst the white threads, a small heart shape. He puts a necklace around Catherine's neck. She hands him five bob. Maria would have bargained him down, she would have robbed him blind.

"How does it look?" She turns to the man from the café but he has walked away, embarrassed.

The land is flat across the border. After an hour of driving she loses track of time. She is

in a trance - the road the sky, the sky the road, the road the sky. She puts her hand out of the window and opens her fingers. The radio station is picking up music from the coast now.

*

Maria scratched out squares in the dirt driveway at Hebron. She picked up a pebble, threw it, and jumped. It had been a long time since she had played Hopscotch. Two butterflies flew around her head as she jumped up and down the squares she had scratched. She looked up – it was a sign. Katie was wrong, there were signs, they were all around you if you cared to look. Her hair was a messy frizz – her braids had come out and she had lost her comb.

She was unravelling, casting herself out like fishing line on the river. Perhaps someone would reel her in - perhaps she would be so tangled they would give up and leave her to gather algae and moss in her hair and between her black fingers. Perhaps her love would reel her in from the other side - pull her slowly and surely across the water to join him, to lie together. To smell him on her skin again. To feel him.

One night, lying in the dark in the tin church, she had seen the golden lights. They had run through thin tubes from her toes and fingers through her body and out the top of her head. She had felt a wind rushing through her spine and she had grown a tail, her vertebra shooting down between her legs. She was running in a cheetah's body across the open plains, the golden grass under her feet. She was movement. A small hand on her forehead, a warm sweet breath in her ear, laughter. Back at the house at Hebron she had gone to look in the mirror in the bathroom. She had seen the cheetah's dark tear marks on her face - old eyes that saw from the beginning to the end.

She was bored with hopscotch now and she went to lie among the flowers in the garden. She breathed in the smell of honey and pulled up her dress to feel the warm air between her legs. She soaked in the sun like a lizard. Then she felt a stab of pain. Katie had been

there like her heartbeat. Now she was gone. She smelled something sweet in the hot air of the garden. Like orange blossom, but there were no orange trees. There was someone in the garden with her, she could feel them.

*

Catherine drives slowly along the beachfront. The road is lined with palm trees. The hotel is set back from the road. It is an old colonial building, faded now. There is a garden with palm trees that go down to the water's edge. An avocado tree overshadows the front stoep. An avocado pear has fallen from the low branches and lies split open on a wrought iron table underneath.

Maria would think that it was a sign - good or bad, depending on her mood. Catherine laughs. She carries the image of Maria with her.

There is a pond at one end of the stoep but there is no water in it, just dry leaves. A young couple are sitting out at one of the tables. A radio is playing somewhere inside. The lyrics are in Portuguese. She looks for Tom's car, but she can't see it anywhere. The couple greet her as she walks past. The reception desk is in the entrance hall. Behind the desk is an archway leading into a small sitting room. It is furnished in heavy materials. Whoever owns the hotel must live here, she thinks. There are photographs on the walls. There is a passage that leads through the hotel out into a sunny courtyard at the back filled with pot plants and small concrete statues. She can see a parrot sitting in a cage. She rings the bell on the desk.

A man comes through from the sitting room. He has a florid, soft face and a gold ring on his finger. She would say that he was in his forties. His skin is tanned, wrinkling on his chest from too much sun. He smells strongly of aftershave. "I'd like to book..."

"You're English." He seems delighted by this. "Single, or double?" His tone is confiding. "Single - do you have a room with a view of the sea?"

"I only have one at the back. It looks into the courtyard. It's quieter there though. Things can get a little rowdy, if you're not used to noise." He says it knowingly. "Just the one suitcase?" He has come around from behind the counter and picked up her suitcase. "Light! You're not staying long?" Then he claps his hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm

prying. It's human interest, isn't it? Life can get, well, never mind my problems. If you'll follow me."

He leads her upstairs. There are plants all the way along the passage, red lilies; it is like a green house. The corridor is open to the elements. She wonders what happens if it rains, because it must pour down here, hot tropical rain in sheets. Perhaps that is the musty smell. The carpets in the passage get wet and don't quite dry. There is an old tatty palm tree behind the building. He opens the door to the room. It is small and shabby but clean. He puts the suitcase down on the bed. "We serve breakfast from 8 until 9. Would you like coffee or tea?"

"Tea, thank you."

"I'm afraid we don't do dinner but I can recommend places to eat. I have some brochures downstairs. You might like to do a tour? I'm Malcolm, by the way." He hovers in the doorway. She is tired now and wonders why she came. "Did someone recommend us?" He's at the door. "It's just that it's a small establishment, and I wondered..."

"Yes, a friend. He's stayed here before." Catherine hesitates. "Do you own the hotel?"

"Oh, no. I just manage here. No, the owner lives downstairs – there's an apartment off the reception. Husband left her some time ago. She ..." but he decides not to say what he was about to, perhaps an indiscretion. "Well, let me not keep you, you must be tired." He closes the door softly behind him.

She lies down on the bed. She can hear the parrot scratching in the gravel at the bottom of its cage. She falls asleep.

*

Maria opened her eyes. The Afrikaans boy was standing a few feet away. She sat up and waited for him to speak. She enjoyed his awkwardness. It was her house now that Tom and Catherine were away and she wouldn't let him in. "You came to see Miss King." She said finally.

"Yes."

"She doesn't remember anything of last night."

“Is she here?”

“She’s gone down to the coast with Mr Fyncham.” She picked a flower and twirled it around in her fingers. “I’m going to join them – we are all going on holiday at the coast.”

“I came to collect something, from Miss King’s studio.” Hendrik waited.

“The house is locked. You can’t go in.”

“Do you know when she’ll be back?”

Maria shook her head. “It’s no use waiting. I won’t let you in.” He turned to go. “You should be careful,” she called after him.

*

When Catherine wakes up it is dark. She goes down to the reception and rings the bell; she waits but no-one comes. She can see the brochures lying on the coffee table through the archway in the sitting room. She goes to get one. There is something decayed and heavy about the room. It is full of heavy furniture in dark sombre colours. The windows are closed. Somebody has left their knitting out on an arm-chair. She sits down and starts leafing through one of the brochures. She finds a map of the city in it. There is a list of restaurants; someone has marked one in pen, on the beachfront, not far from the hotel.

It smells different down here. The sea, the foreignness, the heat. The tide is out. She takes off her shoes and walks along the beach. She passes an elderly couple walking their dog. The woman could have the man on a leash too, the way he trails after her. She looks at the man’s face. She looks at every man who passes but none resemble Tom. A young couple pass. The girl leans into the boy; he turns and kisses her.

A dog runs over and lifts its leg on a child’s sandcastle. The child screams, the dog runs on. A couple are lying on the sand. The dog is going to lift its leg on them. The owner turns away. Tom is here somewhere. She can see the lights of the restaurant ahead.

The air is humid, fruit bats fly in the trees on the verge of the beach. There are still fishermen in the water. They are pulling in their nets. The waiter at the door of the restaurant takes her coat and ushers her to the bar, where she orders a whisky. There is a window out onto the water. She watches the boats bobbing in the water as she drinks.

A woman comes into the restaurant, the waiter shows her to a table by the window. Her

hair is dark; she has red lipstick on. She's wearing a green dress that clings to her body. Catherine stares at her. She can turn around now, go back to the car and go back to Hebron. The waiter brings the woman a glass of wine, her table is set for two.

Catherine hears a voice behind her, a man ordering a drink. She feels the man standing close to her. She can't look round. But when she does it isn't Tom. The man joins the woman at the table.

There is still no-one at reception when Catherine gets back to the hotel. She lies awake for hours trying to go to sleep.

*

University of Cape Town

Maria lay on the floor in the sitting room. She had put on an old record and lit one of Catherine's cigarettes. The empty bottle of wine from the night before stood next to her. She spread her legs and arms out. She had seen a picture of a woman in a circus like this, she was strapped to a spinning wheel while a man threw knives at her as she spun around. The blades quivered millimeters from her skin.

It was late and she became cold and hungry lying there. She went through to the kitchen but when the soup she made was ready to eat she had lost her appetite.

Where are you, Katie?

She heard whispering in the courtyard – a girl's voice laughing. She tried to shut out the feeling creeping in.

She's gone now, Katie, it's safe, you can come back. We can go and swim. We can catch some fish in the river, further down. I'll show you how to cook them out on a fire. Please come back. I can hear the ghosts under the floorboards, their fingers are pushing up, I put some pebbles along the cracks today so that they can't see the sunlight. If they see the sunlight they might start to remember and then they'll want to push all the boards up and there will be no floor left in the house. They'll push the roof off too. I'll have to go and put stones in your room too.

That boy came here looking for you. I sent him away.

*

Catherine doesn't know what time it is. It takes her a while to realise where she is, and when she does she remembers how it had been like this the first morning at Hebron, after she had come back. The air is already hot here. She switches on the fan and watches the blades as they whir round and round. She is in a strange hotel at the coast, looking for Tom. Not in a dream now; she is really here.

There is already the sound of cooking going on downstairs, the clattering of dishes. She gets up and walks down the passage to the shared bathroom. Only a trickle of water comes out of the shower and what water does come out is a rusty colour. The mosquitos hover in clusters around the shower-head. She feels grimy and the shower doesn't help much. She will have to swim.

Malcolm meets her in the foyer. He is holding a small fan, like a flamenco dancer's, and is fanning himself. Someone, a woman, is shouting from a room nearby. "Sometimes I don't know why I live here, why I put up with her." He stops. "Did you have a pleasant evening? Where did you eat?" He ushers her out to a seat on the verandah. "Coffee or tea?" He clicks his fingers and a black waiter wearing a grubby fez appears to take her order. Malcolm has to dash, his employer is calling him again. There will be trouble if he ignores her for too long.

The young kissing couple at the next table keep looking at her, then speaking in low tones. They are disturbed by the fact that she is a single woman. Perhaps they are thinking she is having an affair and has come to meet someone here. Or perhaps they are discussing whether or not to invite her over to join them.

Malcolm is back. This time he sits down next to her. "You have plans for today? There's a ferry ride... or you'd like to swim?" Catherine takes a chance.

"I'm meeting someone," she offers.

"Of course you are. I knew... well that sorts that out." Malcolm is embarrassed. She is looking at him too directly perhaps. She fishes in her bag and brings out her cigarettes and offers him one. "I won't say no."

"Perhaps you know the person I am meeting," she says carefully. "He's stayed here before."

"Try me."

"His name is Tom Fyncham." She watches his face carefully. He hesitates before he answers and flicks the ash off his cigarette. Perhaps a loyalty to clients.

"I'm afraid I'm quite new here. He might have come before I took over as manager." He is smiling reassuringly now. Someone was calling him. "I'm so sorry I have to go. We

could have tea later. I'd love to chat. Hear news from the outside world –if you know what I mean. Why don't we meet here at four?"

It is impossible to find Tom here. She doesn't know where to start. She should go back to Hebron and wait. But she can't do that either. She looks at the brochure Malcolm has given her and decided to go to the beach and then take the ferry across to the island. It seems a long time until four o'clock.

The water is warm. She lies on her back and floats. This is where Tom is. Drinking in bars, eating in restaurants, walking along the beach, swimming in this sea.

Catherine stretches her arms out; the sun is burning her face and she dives under water. It's so quiet underneath. She has hired a snorkel and goggles and flippers from someone with a stall on the beach. He had offered to come with her but she had told him that she would be fine alone.

She dives down. Small fish dart between the coral, yellow and black and orange. She surfaces and blows the water out of her snorkel before she can breathe. It's getting too hot. She swims back to the shore and returns the snorkel and goggles. Then she changes into her dress and walks down across the beach to the ferry. It is filling up with passengers. You can take cars across to the other side. She sits in the front, away from the smell of the diesel engine.

The island comes closer. It looks green and lush with trees. She has no plan. She will just wander around. There are not many houses here. The roads are wide with big areas of green bush on the verges. A dog comes to a fence and barks at her. Some children are swimming in a pool, jumping in and out of the water.

At the end of a dirt road she stops in front of a wrought iron gate. There is a house that must have spectacular views across the bay. But it has been abandoned, or else badly neglected. The grass has grown long on the lawn, and the swimming pool is empty and cracked. She thinks of the postcard, and her dream. There are leaves floating in a puddle

of stagnant water at the bottom. A cat slinks past. There is a dead bird on the verge of the road and the ants are making a trail around it.

She feels a melancholy here and turns to go back past the children swimming. Too much time alone, she tells herself. They would both go mad, she and Maria. She needs to be in a bustle, around normal people with jobs – who took holidays by the sea. She heads back to the ferry and walks along the shore. She has to wait for the return trip, and she finds a bench to sit on.

A family are having a picnic. The children's voices remind her of teaching and she feels on safe ground again. They are building a sand-castle. They wave at her and she waves back. "Come see." They practise their English. She goes and admires the castle and helps them build a moat.

"You like it here?" The mother smiles. "On holiday?"

"Yes."

The ferry ride back passes quickly and she is early for meeting Malcolm but she orders a drink and sits outside. When she has finished she goes to reception and rings the bell, but there is no answer.

Everyone must still be having a siesta. The couple are kissing on the grass. They don't notice her at all. The room behind the reception area, where she has arranged to meet Malcolm, to hear whatever he has to tell her, is small and crowded with heavy furniture. It makes the air thicker, cloying. It reminds her of Mrs Coombe's house, only that was cool inside, this is hot although the fan is on. She feels strangely detached, she has all day.

If someone besides Malcolm comes in she will say that she came to read the brochures. There is a pile of them on the coffee table in the centre of the room. She opens one so that she won't be caught out. A woman's shawl hangs on the back of the chair she is sitting in. Directly in front of her on the wall is a calendar with the days ticked off on it. Somebody has been counting them. Underneath it, in a glass cabinet, is a statue of the Virgin Mary and some plastic flowers lying on the table. There is an English newspaper with the crossword half done. Catherine looks at the missing clues. It must be Malcolm who gets the paper. There is a door in the corner of the room which must lead to the rest of his

quarters, or whoever he shares them with. Or perhaps he doesn't stay here at all, just uses this lounge to entertain guests. She can hear someone moving around and the sound of footsteps beyond the door, but it doesn't open.

She picks up the paper again. She might as well try the missing clues while she waits. And it is then that she sees the photograph album, half-hidden under the paper and magazines.

She thinks afterwards that if she hadn't lifted the paper up again or if a certain magazine hadn't fallen to the floor, she would never have found the album and never have been tempted to look inside – and what she discovered might have remained hidden.

But she does open the album, keeping an eye on the door.

At first she doesn't recognise anything. There are old sepia snapshots of a man in military uniform standing very upright in front of a door, and a woman with a child on a beach. Then a picture of rocks at the side of a pool on the beach and of a sea-urchin. With a twist inside she thinks of her mother's prints. The rocks, the sky, the water.

When she turns the page she recognises what she is looking at. It is the fortress from her dream. There is the sea washing the steps and the palm tree in the centre. She has seen that postcard before, on Mrs Coombe's wall, encased in glass.

She looks around the room. The door is shut but she can still hear someone moving around. She looks out of the window to the sunshine, and beyond the garden, the sea. She can close the album and leave the hotel and drive home. But she turns the page – she knows what she will find as though she has been through this album before, many times.

There is her father standing on the beach. The tide is out, like last night. He is older than she remembers. His trousers are rolled up so that he doesn't get them wet. He's wearing a white shirt rolled up at the sleeves. He is walking away from the camera, holding the hand of a little girl. She is wearing a bathing costume with a frill around the waist. Her legs are thin, her hair is long, black and straight. Not her, not Katie.

Take my hand, I'll race you to the sea.

I want you to run Dad, run.

Don't fall.

Faster – run faster.

The door opens. Catherine doesn't have time to close the album. She looks up in confusion. "I was just..."

"It's OK." Malcolm leans over her shoulder "I've always wanted to look at them, but the boss doesn't like it." He takes the album from her and looks more closely. "She looks sweet, doesn't she?" but Catherine can't answer. "Are you alright? You look pale."

"I do feel dizzy."

"Too much sun – it's very strong. I'll get you some water." His tone is confiding. He has put the album back down on the table and is pouring her a glass of water from a bottle on the side table.

"Is this here?" She points to a photograph of a beach.

"Looks like it." He hands her the water.

"And this house?" She is pointing at the photograph next to it.

"I'm sorry, I don't know. My boss doesn't like me looking through her things, she caught me once."

It is the house on the island. But in this photograph the swimming pool is full and there is gardener mowing the lawn and chairs out at the front with a vase of roses and someone sitting with there head bent so that she can't see the face, only the top of her wide hat and her jet black hair.

The door opens and an elderly woman comes into the room. She has dark hair tied back in a bun. She stops when she sees Catherine and turns to Malcolm, for an explanation.

"Quem e esta senhora?" she asks him.

"A guest." He shouts.

"This is my boss." He rolls his eyes at Catherine. "She's going deaf."

The woman says something else in Portuguese.

“She’s looking at the album. The photographs.” Malcolm explains. The woman comes closer. She frowns.

“I was looking at the little girl on the beach. She’s pretty.” Catherine’s voice is wobbly, she tries to control it as she holds the album up so that the woman can see which picture she is talking of.

“My daughter, Isabel.” She snorts. “She’s no good. She hasn’t been to visit her mother for month now, look.” She points to a calendar on the wall where the days are crossed off. Then she looks at the album again. “And that man,” she points to Katie’s father. “He’s no good. He left me with nothing.”

Catherine turns the page – it is something to do in her confusion. And there she is. Katie. She is pulling a face, sticking her tongue behind the gap in her teeth. There is a dark blur at the edge of the photograph, where Maria had tried to stick her hand in front of Katie’s face.

“Who is this?” Catherine points to the image of her as a child.

“That girl,” the woman sighs. “That’s Katie – she’s dead.”

“What is it, Hendrik?” They were sitting at the table eating Sunday lunch. The maid cleared away their soup bowls. “You’ve been so distracted. Hasn’t he?” His mother turned to her husband, but he had opened the paper and was reading something. “The exams are coming up. Nettie says that Dirk has started studying every night.” She brushed some crumbs off the table into her hand. “Perhaps I should be doing more to help you. If there’s anything I can do, you will let me know?”

“Ma, it’s fine. I’m OK. Don’t worry.”

“I can’t help it.” She cut them each a slice of trifle. Hendrik wasn’t hungry. He’d lost his appetite. “Just a small piece.”

“Ma, I can’t.”

“What’s wrong? You haven’t been eating properly. And you need to. You need energy to study. Nettie says Dirk can’t get enough food.”

“Dirk’s greedy. He always was.”

“It’s healthy.” He watched as she poured the cream over the trifle and started to eat her pudding. His leg was tapping under the table. He couldn’t relax, it’s driving him crazy—this sitting around in the house waiting and the constant chatter.

She had finished her pudding. His father had been eating while he read the paper. It annoyed his mother so, she wanted them to be all together as a family at dinner times. To talk. But their family wasn’t like that. “Elise didn’t see you at school on Friday, or Thursday.” She was trying to make it sound light, because she knew how he hated what he called her prying. But it was concern. She wanted what was best for him.

Hendrik thought of Elise sitting in the back of the classroom staring out of the window to the vacant plots of land between the houses – just scrub growing, waiting for something to be built on it. Vacant is what the boys called Elise; Hendrik had told them to shut up several times. “Elise is always dreaming Ma. She doesn’t notice. You know that.”

“But she told Nettie.”

He moved the place mat around.

“Hendrik, we’re worried about you.” And now she looked directly at him and he could

see what anxiety he was causing her.

“Who is we?” he asked. Not his father. He was reading the sports pages now.

“Nettie and me. You haven’t been yourself.”

He knew where this was leading – that was the worst thing – he always knew what she was going to say and then she said it. By the silence and his mother’s concentration on picking the cherries out of her trifle, he thought that she had decided not to, but then she looked up and his heart sank. For a moment he had hoped. “You haven’t been over to Hebron, have you? You haven’t been painting at the house?”

“No, Ma.” He managed to control his voice.

“Because it’s not safe. Nettie’s girl saw that black girl from Hebron up in the trees by that native church.” She could see that he is interested now. “Evidently she was lying on the ground. Her legs were jerking and her arms, she was talking nonsense and there was spit, you know, foam at her mouth. It gave the girl such a fright. Nettie had to give her sweet tea to calm her down.”

“Epileptic fit.” His father looked up from the paper. He had been half listening. But this was something of interest, worth commenting on. “Cattle are getting fits too in that camp by the river. Might be something in the water.”

“Do you think it’s the water?” His mother was alarmed now that it touched on her world. “Do you think we should be boiling it?”

“It’s not in the water, Ma.”

“But she was moaning and speaking in some different language, the girl told Nettie. There was something very wrong.”

“You have to put a stick in their mouths or they swallow their tongues.” His father turned folded the paper up and reached for the coffee pot.

Hendrik stood up and started to stack the pudding bowls. He had to leave the room. “The girl can do that. I know you’ve got work to do.”

“I’m going out, Ma.”

“But I thought tomorrow was the first exam?”

“Let him go. It’s Sunday.” His father winked at Hendrik, he was on his side. It was

unexpected.

“Will you be back for supper?” Hendrik didn’t answer.

*

There is a chain around the gate. Catherine looks across the overgrown lawn to the house. An upstairs window is open.

She had been the last passenger to board the ferry, people had stared at her as she steadied herself against the rail. Somebody had asked if she was sick, if they could help and she had told them that it was the smell of the diesel. Someone had offered her a Coca Cola. Earlier, when she fled the hotel, she had been sick, she had retched in the bushes and Malcolm had come out after her. He had suggested that she lie down but she had said then that she had been feeling dizzy all day – and he had latched on to this, nothing else could warrant such a dramatic reaction to a few old photographs. She had told him that what she needed was to get some fresh air and that a walk on the beach would clear her head and he had let her go. As soon as he was out of sight she had started to run. As if she could physically run away from it. Then she had seen the ferry about to leave.

I’ve got some unfinished business. It will all be finished soon. Do you like prawns? I want to take you all the places I’ve been. I’ve got some business. You must watch these rust spots, rust is the death of cars. My wife and I have separated. You must be Catherine King. How do you know? There’s a painting inside. I’ll show you. You left your sister in England. I’ll take you flying. What do you like? Tell me the things you like. Three sugars in your tea. Don’t answer the telephone. Leave it. Why so many questions?

There is no bell to ring at the gate and there are spikes on top. It will be difficult to climb over. She pulls the chain, the padlock is on the inside. To her surprise it slides open under her fingers. The gate opens when she pushes against it and she is inside standing on the overgrown driveway. Nothing happens, no dogs to scare her off, no shouts from the house. On the driveway up to the house she passes the pool. When she gets close to it, she can see that the pattern on the tiles that line the edge are of peacocks. Someone’s hat has

fallen in and faded in the sun. There is a prickly pear tree in the bushes behind the house and bamboo growing in a riot and bougainvillea that has gone mad. The curtains are half open in the downstairs windows and she looks in. There is a large room with high ceilings, it must be the sitting room but there are dust covers over the furniture, for painting, or moving, in or out?

She knocks on the door – but Tom doesn't answer it, nobody does. There was water in the swimming pool once, and parties and noise and laughter and Isobel and Tom and perhaps her father, their father.

It is a big house and he might not have heard, if they were at the back, or upstairs. The door isn't locked and she only hesitates for a moment before going inside and shutting it after her. The entrance hall is empty, the air is cool inside because of the tiles on the floor and the thickness of the walls. There are a few boxes, lying unopened and a brush and pan. A shutter bangs at the back but no-one comes. She climbs the stairs that lead up from the hallway, listening for footsteps. There is a corridor with rooms leading off it.

I'm going to Mrs Coombe's house. I'm going to see what's in her room.

What if she's there?

Then I won't go in of course. Stupid.

What will you do if she comes when you're in the room?

I'll hide. I'll say I got lost.

Lost?

Alright. I'll think of something.

What if he's there? Mr Coombe?

I'll say I've brought a message from my mother – a thank you card – for the dinner.

Have you got one?

No. It doesn't matter. I won't get caught. Do you dare me?

Only if you bring something back. To prove that you've been there.

Like what?

Creams or something, or jewellery.

There is a single bed in the first room. It too has a dust cover over it. Apart from that the room is empty. From the window Catherine can see the back garden that leads down to the sea. A small dingy is bobbing up and down on its moorings at the end of a jetty. There is garden furniture under a wild fig tree, overlooking the sea. But leaves have covered it too, and wild figs that have fallen and rotted. Tick birds are pecking at the fruit. With binoculars, from here, someone would be able to see the beach on the other side of the bay. They could even see the outline of the hotel. They would have been able to see her walking on the beach and swimming or retching into the bushes and the ferry, carrying passengers back and forth. Tom, perhaps, standing at the window watching her going into the hotel, knowing that she might discover the truth that he hasn't been able to tell her out of fear.

The stillness in the house makes it difficult for Catherine to move for fear of making a noise. She walks down the passage looking into the rooms. Three of them haven't been used - they are empty. But someone has been into the bathroom. A towel has been dropped on the floor and there is a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush and a comb. She picks up the towel, walks to the end of the passage and opens the door.

Tom's things are folded on the bed. She recognises his shirts and trousers lying next to a map that is spread out. The bed hasn't been made, not properly, the sheet has just been pulled up over the pillow, there are no blankets, but you didn't need them. The mosquito net is tied in a knot above the bed. There is a small desk in front of the window, with some papers, as if someone had emptied a bag.

She folds the towel she has carried from the bathroom and places it on the table by the window. Then she picks the shirt up off the bed and starts to fold it and refold it. It is no use. She lies down on the bed. She can smell his smell on the pillow. She lies there for a long time listening for footsteps, or the sound of a door opening, unable to move.

What would you do if someone came in the house to kill you?

They won't, that's stupid Maria

But what if they did?

I'd climb out of the window. I'd hide up a tree. People are stupid, they run in the open and then get caught, I'd climb up a tree and watch and wait till they were gone.

What would you do?

The same.

Someone is in the house now, she can hear them moving about downstairs, a woman, by the sound of the footsteps – Isobel. He had come to meet her here. It didn't really matter now. When she can hear the footsteps in the passage Catherine gets up and puts the papers that were on the desk into her bag. And then she goes out to meet her.

The woman holds her hand over her mouth in fright when she sees Catherine. They stand and stare at each other.

She is black and she is wearing a maid's apron. She's come to clean. "I was looking for Mr Fyncham." Catherine explains, trying to sound as calm as she can. The woman seems relieved.

"Engleesh" she shakes her head. "Mr Fyncham no here."

"Mrs Fyncham, Isobel?"

She shakes her head again. "Mr and Mees Fyncham no here."

"Do you know where they've gone?"

"No. Clean." She says and holds up the broom.

The woman follows Catherine down the stairs. At the door she stops. "Car?" The woman is wondering how she has got there.

"I walked." Catherine explains. "From the ferry. Are they coming back?" But the woman doesn't understand.

Catherine is halfway down the drive when the woman calls after her. She turns around and walks back. The woman taps her chest and says. "Evangelina."

"Catherine. Catherine King."

“King. Yes.” Her face lights up. She nods her head as if now she understands. “Santa Maria.” The woman is searching for a word, she shakes her head “Santa Maria.” She says the name over again.

“Mr King is at Santa Maria?”

The woman smiles and nods. “Sim, sim. Santa Maria.” Then she bends down and draws a cross in the earth with her finger.

“Mr King is buried at Santa Maria?”

“Sim, Santa Maria” the woman nods, happy to be understood.

“Onde es...Santa Maria?” Catherine can’t remember the words. But the woman just repeats the name.

On the ferry Catherine looks through the papers. There is nothing, just a few bills, old receipts. Someone has taken an ink pen and written Paid and Unpaid across some of them. She has seen the writing before at Hebron on slips of paper. It was Isobel’s. And now she knows where she saw it before she arrived at Hebron and why it seemed so familiar. It was the handwriting on the letter that had come, from a “friend”, telling them of her father’s death, sending condolences, telling them of the farm being sold to pay his debts. Had she thought that it would stop Catherine from coming back to the place that she had left?

When they get off the ferry Catherine turns to the man next to her.

“Do you speak English?”

“Um pouco – a little.” He smiles, his eyes light up.

“Santa Maria?”

“Ah. You go up this street. Turn left.”

“Left at the stop sign?”

“Yes.”

“Is it far?”

“Not far. I show you.”

They pass a stall selling fruit and vegetables. When they reach a small cobbled square the

man stops and points.

“There,” he says, triumphantly. “Church of Santa Maria.”

*

Hendrik went inside the church. Maria was asleep on the floor at the front. It was silent inside. Not even a sigh. When he went closer he saw the earth on her dress, the muddy marks and the bits of earth on the floor, in a line from the door. She must have dragged herself across the floor. He squatted down beside her. He could see her eyes moving under her eyelids. She looked drugged. He had seen animals coming around after they had been shot with tranquilisers, the way they tried to move. He took his sketchbook out of his bag and fanned her face. He had brought water too, if she needed it. Slowly her eyes opened and she began to focus. She tried to say something but he couldn't make sense of it. Then she turned to look over her shoulder. “Katie, where are you?”

He took her wrist, feeling for her pulse. They had done first aid at school, he remembered this. Her heart was beating, if slowly. He shook her. Her eyes closed again, but she was struggling to open them. He could see a slit of white. He took his water bottle out and wet her lips with his fingers. He helped her to sit up against the corrugated iron wall.

“Where's Katie?” She asked him, and tried to stand up.

“You need to rest.” She closed her eyes and didn't struggle again. He studied her face. He had never looked at her like this, she had always been so aggressive with him. Now that she wasn't cursing him, or warning him, he saw how pretty she was, how smooth her skin was, and the shape of her eyes. She took his hand.

“How long have I been here?”

He shook his head.

“I slept?” She looked confused.

“You had a fit.” He handed her the water so that she could drink again. “You should see the doctor. Mr Fyncham must take you into town to the clinic.”

She was shaking her head. "I don't need a doctor."

"Has it happened before?"

Then she started to cry. It was so unexpected, Hendrik didn't know what to do. He searched in his pockets for a tissue. He had a piece with charcoal stains on it. He handed it to her. "It will be OK." He put his fingers gingerly on her shoulder. But she seemed not to notice him.

"I have to go now." She got up. "I have to get back to Hebron in case they come home."

Determinedly Maria crossed the camp, taking the short cut up to the house. Gabriel shouted at her from the stable, but she ignored him, or didn't hear him. The house was just as she had left it. She went inside and made herself a boiled egg. She needed to eat. She would be no use if she fainted. After lunch she took a blanket out into the yard. It was what she had done before.

She sat down with her legs out in front of her in the shade of the peach tree and waited. It was hot and she must have dozed off. When she woke up she heard noises in the driveway. She heard the jazz tune playing and smelt the heat off the engine as a car drew to a halt outside the house.

The church is cool and dark inside. Catherine waits by the thick, carved wooden door until her eyes adjust and she can make out the interior. There are stained glass windows. The altar has embroidered cloth spread over it. In one corner there is a confessional and at the front, at the side of the altar, there is a table with candles burning on it. An old woman is kneeling in the front pew praying. Catherine looks for Tom. Why would he be in here? The maid had said that *they* had gone. The numbness is wearing off now. *Mr and Mrs Fyncham have gone*. Gone where? To Hebron? And she sees Isobel sitting next to Tom, holding his hand under the table and talking to her father who has walked on the beach with her.

Played in the sea. Carried her on his shoulders. Shown her the rabbit in the moon?

Her dad had sat down and drunk whisky with Tom. They had laughed about something together – some shared joke. He had shown him where his farm was on the map. The farm he still owned. Isobel had leant over and touched Tom's arm. "We can go there. We can farm – you'd like that, wouldn't you?" and then she'd turned to her father, Katie's father, and he'd told them about the river and the store and the church on the ridge – all the places to see. He'd told Tom that he could make money there. He'd told Tom about his family who had left. What had he told him about his daughter Katie? Had he left her the farm? Had he known she would come back?

Catherine walks to the front of the church and sits down in the pew on the other side of the aisle from the woman. As she looks up at the altar she thinks of Maria's vision, but there is nothing up there that she can see. Nothing that can help her. She has never prayed inside a church. What they did in the tin church was not praying. They had sung the songs with the congregation and closed their eyes when they knelt and their lips had moved. "Whispering nothings," that's what Maria called it. As long as your lips are moving they think you're praying.

What if they can read lips?

But they can't tell you because that means they had their eyes open and weren't praying either.

Very clever.

Maria is pleased.

The old woman gets up, makes the sign of the cross and leaves the church. Nobody comes in for a while and then a woman and her daughter come in and pray then go to the front to light a candle.

Maria. We need sand.

For what?

To stand the candles in.

What about earth from the river – it's like clay.

I suppose.

They scoop it into a bucket and fight over who is going to carry it up the hill.

Now what?

We need to put it in something.

The baptismal font.

It's like chocolate pudding in a big bowl. Pity it doesn't taste like chocolate.

Where are the candles?

Under the altar, in a box.

Won't the priest see?

We can clear up afterwards.

OK. Now we've got to stick the candles in the mud.

They push them down until they stand without falling.

Now what?

Now we both light one.

You've got to make a wish when you light your candle. Say a prayer.

You ask for something?

Yes.

Do we ask for the same thing?

Yes.

Like for a boyfriend?

We don't want boyfriends. Katie's tone is stern.

Maria frowns.

Like a book to read then? She tries again.

We have books.

You have books.

Catherine looks at her.

You can have my books.

Your mother won't let me. She'll think I stole them.

No. We must wish for something that we can see if it comes true. We need proof.

Like a miracle. Like the sea coming apart? And the burning bush.

Yes.

We can wish that tonight the church will light up in the dark.

Tonight.

Maria lights a match. The flame burns down towards her fingers.

See how long you can let it burn without blowing it out.

Why?

I dare you.

They stand there burning matches down, singeing their fingers. And then they remember what they are supposed to be doing and they light the candles. One each.

Later at Hebron, when the stars are out, Katie jumps out of the window and runs out onto the driveway. Maria is there too, waiting.

The church is blazing in the dark. It's their miracle.

Catherine gets up and moves to the small door at the side of the church which leads out into the graveyard at the back. There are lots of tombstones. It will take her a long time to search for her father's grave. Some of the stones are very old – it won't be among these. Some of the graves have got beautiful flowers on them, lilies and roses, and someone has come and cut the grass around them. Catherine thinks of Maria putting tobacco and bread on her lover's grave. She had seen her sitting there in the dark on his tombstone. Maria thought she didn't know.

At the far side of the graveyard is a row of graves that look more recent and she crosses between the stones to read the names on these tombstones. She can't find her father's name. A man is digging a new grave but he can't understand her when she asks who it is for.

She goes down the rows again. She can feel the panic rising now and she reads off the names and dates. Born, died, born died, 1896 – 1939, 1900 – 1930, 1940 – 1945 – a child. Perhaps she has the wrong church. She is feeling dizzy and there is no-one she can talk to who knows anything. The dates spin through her head.

Catherine's legs are stiff from driving and she is dusty and sweaty. She pulls off the road onto the veld, on the hill above the farm. There is a track through the grass to an outcrop of rocks. She climbs up the rocks and sits. The roof at Hebron is visible from here as it lies between the trees and the church. The sun is setting and long shadows fall across the land. It is lonely up here. She watches the woman making their way along the dirt road with sacks of wood on their heads, their hips swaying with the movement. Some of the women have babies tied to their backs with blankets, arm against their backs, the rhythm rocking them to sleep. Children run ahead laughing or arguing. They are going back to make a fire and cook supper and go to sleep under a blanket in the smoke. She rubs her arms and stays out until she is cold. Then she gets up and walks back to the car.

There are two cars in the driveway at Hebron. One is Tom's. He has come separately from Isobel then. There will be a fight and then she will leave. And Maria can come with her if she wants to. They can go to the coast. They can go inland, or to the city. She walks slowly up the stairs, stopping on the stoep before she opens the door.

Books have been hurled to the floor along with ornaments; two vases have been smashed and one of the windows onto the courtyard is cracked. Records lie in a heap next to the gramophone. Someone has taken her clothes and strewn them across the carpet.

There is violence in the room.

Stop it.

Why should I? Tell me why I should. How could you?

Not in front of the children.

It's a bit late for that.

We can sort this out.

No we can't. We can't bloody well sort this out.

The vase crashes to the floor. A piece catches her father on his face. There is blood.

Lilly is whimpering.

Shut up Lilly. Katie screams.

They turn and look at her.

Katie, it's not your fault. I'm sorry.

Do you think that makes it alright, saying you're sorry?

Yes mom, yes it does.

I'm taking them with me.

You can't do that.

Yes, I can. You won't stop me.

Have you asked them? Go on, ask them.

Do you want to go with me, or do you want to stay here with your father?

They stare at her. Lilly starts to cry again. It's not fair. That isn't fair to ask them.

Katie runs out of the room, onto the stoep and stares out into the dark.

Shut up! She shouts. Just shut up all of you.

“Maria!” Catherine walks around the house looking in all the rooms. She sees where her cupboard drawer has been yanked open. There are clothes across the floor. She goes out into the courtyard. The slates are still warm from the hot stillness of the day.

Catherine, tell me what you like, and don't say mangoes. You're beautiful, you know that, don't you.

In the dusk the colours on the walls are soft, her brush is still lying next to a can of paint where she has been painting the mural. The prickly pears are nearly ripe enough to eat. One or two have fallen onto the slates.

You know, up here I can forget everything.

What do you want to forget?

You can't catch me out. Why all the questions?

“Maria!” Catherine stands outside her door and calls, but she isn't there. The house is silent. She tries Maria's door but it is locked. She didn't even know that there were keys to the doors in the house. In the kitchen she finds a half chopped onion on the chopping

board. Something is burning in a pot on the stove. She takes a cloth and moves the pot.

If there's trouble we'll meet in the church. I'll wait for you there. Whoever gets there first must wait.

It's beginning to get dark as she reaches the school building. Some of the children are still working in the garden behind the school. They run up to greet her. "Where you been?" they ask her. "Where you going?"

She calls them by their Swazi names and it makes them laugh. She tells them to go home, it's going to rain, it's too late for them to be out. "Go on, shoo." She chases them, and they shriek with laughter.

"Where you going?" They ask her again.

"Up to the church"

"Is too far, you'll get lost."

"I know the way."

"One and one is two. Two and two is four," they shout after her.

Let's sing a song.

Why?

For courage. That way we won't be scared in the dark.

Are you scared?

No.

I am.

OK. I am a bit. But nothing is different from the day. It's just that someone has switched the light off.

But people can do things in the dark without you seeing them.

But we know this path.

Yes. We must have been a hundred times.

A hundred trillion, billion times.

What's that sound?

Just a cow.

Let's go back.

We can't. Not now.

We'll sing a song.

Down by the bramble bushes

Down by the sea

Come on, sing!

Boom boom boom

True love for you, my darling

True love for me

When we get married...

I can't see in the dark. What are we going to do up there, anyway?

We've got to see what is up there at night.

The light?

Yes.

But that was a miracle.

I know, but it...

What?

It might not have been one.

What do you mean?

At the fork in the path Catherine stops. She listens. There is a rustling in the grasses, of a small night creature, and the distant rumble of thunder, a frog down by the pool, the wind in the reeds and another sound.

*

Maria sits on the grave behind the church and hugs her knees to her chest. She watches the lightning streak across the sky like blue electric snakes and thinks of Catherine. She wants her to come home – and not come home - at the same time. She doesn't want her to see what happened in the house and what is happening in the pool. She will keep it a secret from Katie, she has to. This time it will be her secret only, not to be shared or spoken about. It will be her secret, buried under stones, the grass growing over it until even the place where it was buried is forgotten deep inside her, under the rocks. It will crumble to dust and one day the river will wash the dust away and it will be lost forever.

You can't tell anyone what we saw.

But I didn't see. Katie, I didn't see, you wouldn't let me look through the window and when we went inside the church it was too late. What did you see?

Nothing. It's a secret.

You're lying. Of course you saw something, otherwise you'd have given me a leg up so I could see.

We made a wish to be friends.

So?

Friends tell each other their secrets.

They wouldn't be secrets then.

But we have secrets. Anyway you said you'd always tell me.

I've changed my mind.

You can't just change your mind.

Look, it's raining cats and dogs.

I hope they can swim like us, not drown.

I wonder what drowning is like.

It doesn't hurt.

How do you know, Maria?

Let's slide down on our bums in the mud.

We can wash our dresses in the pool.

Maria knew what drowning was like. She counted the time between the thunder and the lightning. The storm was far away, it wouldn't come this way. She had thought she was drowning the afternoon that the Afrikaans boy had found her in the church. She couldn't remember how she had got there, only that she had fallen in amongst the trees. But she remembered what she had seen.

Coffins floating on the rivers of rain that washed down from the church, through the trees and over the edge, down into the pool. Her dead aunt whooping as she rode her coffin between the trees. She was holding a pair of reins as if her coffin were a horse. Her clothes were tatters and she had a hungry look in her eyes. Not far behind came another coffin. A little girl's coffin. There were white lilies in the girl's hair as she floated inside the wooden box, lilies and weeds. Behind her bobbing and swirling in the water was a goat. Its stomach was bloated and it stared at her with yellow glassy eyes.

A whole carnival was riding down from the church. She searched through the water for Katie. She called her but she couldn't hear because the singing was too loud. Then she saw another face appear from under the water and two hands, scrabbling to hold onto a log that was floating past. It was a woman. Her hair was wet and sticking to her scalp. Her white hands were clawing the air. Maria watched as she went under. She didn't try to help her.

Maria gets up and goes inside the church. She will wait here for Catherine.

The sobbing sounds so strangely similar to laughter. Catherine can see Tom's shoulders moving up and down from where she stands. She is hidden from view, a few yards from the pool. He is bent over the woman's body, holding her head in his hands but she isn't moving.

*

Hendrik watches from between the trees above the pool. He watches as Tom lifts Isobel in his arms and carries her to a place where the bushes come to the muddy side of the pool. He lays her down here. Hendrik sees what he's trying to do – he's trying to conceal

the body, but she will be found like that. And now he's standing up and he looks up towards the church and Hendrik presses himself against the tree and tries to merge into the darkness. He watches Mr Fyncham as he turns and walks away from the pool back down the path.

Hendrik had known that Tom had come back because his mother had seen his car in town that afternoon. He had heard his mother on the phone to Nettie.

"He's come back. She's back too – his wife. I saw him in town."

"There will be trouble. It's just like we said."

"There's always trouble."

"She was driving really fast. She went through two stop streets without stopping. She could have killed someone."

"I drove past the house today. Well, I couldn't go in, could I? Hendrik was at school. He's in his room studying. I don't want him to know. You know how he's been... it's too unsettling. He doesn't need any distractions so close to his exams."

When Hendrik had reached the trees above the pool he had seen them – Mr and Mrs Fyncham.

He didn't have much time to do what he had to, because Mr Fyncham would be back, he felt certain. He had felt calm like this when he had watched Catherine sleeping, and when he had had to shoot the cow that had broken its back.

All that mattered now was that Catherine must not find Isobel's body near her pool. Not now when things were nearly right. She wouldn't want to come here anymore. She would leave the farm.

The water in the pool is flowing fast because of the rains and the blood has already been washed away down stream. He will have to bury her, and to do that he needs something to dig with, a pick or a spade. He walks up through the trees and goes around the back of the church to the graveyard. There must be something up here, he thinks, someone clears the graves. He starts to search.

Isobel's skin is pale in the moonlight and her hair is sticking to her skull. Catherine looks down at her. Isobel – she says her name. She wants to put her hand against the woman's face but she can't. Her eyes are shut – Tom must have shut them. *What happened here?* On one side of her head there is a gash and the blood has congealed around it matting the hair together. She should be covered, not left with this summer dress wet and clinging to her body. All Catherine can think of is that she must be cold, that she needs to be warm. But there isn't a blanket to put over her. Perhaps Tom has gone for a blanket. But she is dead.

Tom hadn't seen her as he had passed her on his way back to the house. To do what? To get help? To leave? To call the police?

There's only one place she can go. She has to find Maria. She picks some grasses and lays them next to Isobel's head. It's the only thing she can think of to do. She leaves her and starts walking up the path to the church.

She opens the door to the church and goes inside.

University of Cape Town

Maria is sitting with her back to the door and a blanket wrapped around her. Catherine wonders how long she has been waiting in the church. She stands at the back and watches her. Maria doesn't turn around. Perhaps she is asleep sitting up; perhaps she is in the middle of some vast roaring ocean. The moonlight is flooding the church – it is a pool of silvery grey light, shimmering on the wood. The pews are rocking on the water.

Don't go into the church.

Why not?

Not yet. We must look through the windows first to see who's there.

To see the light.

Yes.

I need to pee. (Maria squats on the ground.)

So pee.

What if it's scary?

It won't be scary.

What if it's the priest?

He's asleep in bed.

How do you know?

What if it's a criminal, hiding out and he's got a knife and he's waiting for us?

The window's too high to look in. They made them high so that children can't look in.

Give me a leg up.

What about me?

You can go afterwards.

Maria helps her up so that she can see through the window.

There is a paraffin lamp on the altar.

Katie catches her breath.

There is something spread out on the floor and stuck to the walls. Small squares. Someone is sitting on the floor in the middle of the squares. She has her back to the window. Her hair reaches halfway down her back. She is singing – a faint sound.

She tells Maria to keep holding her up, just a second, two seconds more. They are not squares, they are pictures – photographs. Of the rocks, the river, the sky, the sea, shells, insects. Her mother has stuck them on the walls and spread them out around her on the floor in the church. When she turns for an instant and looks up towards the window Katie can see the tears on her face.

She lets go and falls onto the ground on top of Maria.

What is it? Who is it? Maria gets up and tries to jump to see in the window.

Nobody.

But I can hear them singing.

Nobody's in there.

Why are you crying? What's the light then?

It must be a miracle.

Why are you crying?

No reason. Because...just because. She gets up and starts to run back down the path.

Wait for me – Maria calls after her.

She catches Katie by the pool.

I didn't get a chance to see. I'm going back. She makes as if to run back up the hill.

Katie stops her.

No.

Why not?

Don't go up there.

Why can't you tell me what you saw?

It's a secret. My secret.

Catherine walks across the floor to where Maria is sitting. Maria turns at the sound of her feet. "I thought you wouldn't come. I thought you'd got lost or something had

happened at the coast.”

“Maria, she’s dead.”

Maria traces her finger in the dust. She didn’t say anything.

“What are we going to do? I saw him, he was holding her. Her head was smashed.”

“Did he see you?” she turns to Catherine.

“He didn’t see me. He went back to the house. It was an accident.”

“What if it wasn’t?”

“It was.”

“How do you know?”

Catherine doesn’t answer the question. “How long have you been in here? Didn’t you see anything, or hear anything?” she asks Maria. But she shakes her head. “What are we going to do?”

“Nothing. We must stay here.”

“We didn’t have anything to do with it. Maria, we didn’t.”

“I was at the house when they got back. She went mad, taking your clothes out, throwing them on the floor. He tried to stop her. She was looking for you. She knew you had come home.”

Catherine sits down next to Maria with her back against the altar. It’s dark outside now. They will just have to wait. “I found that hotel, the one on the card. I stayed there.” She picks up one of the old hymn books that has been left forgotten under the front pew and starts to page through it – something to do with her hands, she doesn’t have cigarettes and she can’t smoke in the church anyway. “I found a photograph album in the hotel. There were pictures of Isobel and my father on the beach, just like...”

“There’s something...”

“What is it?” Catherine looks at Maria, she can’t see the expression on her face in the dark. “What?”

“I saw her.”

“Isobel?”

Maria nods.

“I know, she was at the house.”

“No, I saw her when I saw you. When you were in England and I came to the church and the river came. I didn’t know then who it was, but then I worked it out.”

“What was she doing?”

“She was just standing on the beach. She was a little girl. Just standing staring at me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you might leave the farm.”

“Why didn’t Tom tell me?”

“Perhaps he had nowhere to go. Like us. Perhaps he loves you. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you stay at the farm?” Maria starts to draw a pattern in the dust on the floor.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you call a man with a spade in his head... Dug.”

“It’s not funny, Maria.” But Catherine laughs, and she and Maria can’t stop. “Shut up.” Catherine slaps Maria’s legs.

“It could have been an accident.” Maria puts the blanket out on the floor and they lie down side by side. “Are you afraid of him?”

“No.” Catherine shakes her head.

“At least you won’t be worried that she’s going to come back all the time. We can stay in the house.”

“What if the police come?”

“They won’t. Who’s going to tell them? Not me.”

“She looked so cold, Maria. I wanted to cover her up. What if he’s at the house when we go back there?”

“He won’t be.”

“What if I want him to be?”

They have painted mud on their bodies at the pool. It has dried and is making their skins feel tight. They run up to the church carrying their dresses.

It’s midday. They drop their dresses at the door.

Have you got a pin? Katie asks.

Why do we need a pin?

To make our fingers bleed of course. Or a knife.

Do we have to cut ourselves?

Yes. To make it work. It's like the initiates. They do things like this at mountain school.

In some places the girls go too.

Here, I've got a knife. Put your finger out.

No.

OK. I'll do mine first.

Ow! Doesn't it hurt?

Not much.

I'll do yours now.

No, I'll do my own.

Katie watches as Maria scratches her skin.

You have to go deeper. Here.

Ouch!

OK. Now we mix the blood.

And then?

We say something to keep us together.

What?

They laugh, scared at what they have done and said. Then they run out into the sunshine.

“Mr Fyncham’s gone for good this time.”

“His wife must have gone too.”

“They must have gone together.”

“I haven’t seen either of them.”

“There must have been a fight. I wonder what happened at the house.”

“Well, she’s still there – the King girl and that native girl.”

“He chose his wife after all. They all do you know. They have affairs but they won’t leave the wife.” Nettie smoothed the table-cloth and patted at the edge of her mouth with a napkin. “Davel heard her at the store – enquiring about cattle prices. She wants to sell some of the stock. She hasn’t got any money.”

Hendrik had read the same sentence ten times. He was sitting on the stoep but the window to the side and behind him was open and he could hear their conversation as clearly as if he had been sitting with them round the table. He shut his book. “Has Hendrik heard anything?” It was Nettie.

“No.” He imagined his mother shaking her head. He knew what she was about to say.

“He’s been very stressed lately.”

“It’s the exams. Elise has been nervous too.”

“I keep telling him to take some of my nerve tonic.”

There is an unusual silence between them at the table. Then Nettie got up. Hendrik could hear her chair scraping on the floor. She walked to the window. He could hear her breathing – she struggled to fill her lungs because of her asthma. “You know that storm the other night.” She had turned to look at his mother. “Well, Mrs Venter told me that the rain caused a mud slide. All the earth on the slope above their house just washed down – it came as high as the windows – destroyed the flower beds. She says the house is filthy. She says she can’t cope anymore. Her husband doesn’t lift a finger to help.”

It had been a week now and Hendrik hadn’t been back to check that the stones that he

had put over the place he had buried Mrs Fyncham hadn't rolled off or the body hadn't been exposed by the rain. When he thought about it, he was shocked by what he has done. He remembered how her head had bounced on the rocks when he had dragged her up the hill and how he had had to sling her over his shoulder like a bag of meal. How he had told himself that she was just a dead thing, like the plants or rocks, the spirit had gone. She was just bones and blood and fat and skin. He had had to burn his shirt because it was stained with blood.

At school he couldn't concentrate on his work. Every time the door of the classroom opened, something jumped inside him. One morning a police car pulled up in front of the school. Hendrik watched out of the window as the policemen got out and walked to the front of the building. It would only be a matter of time before they were in the headmaster's office and he sent someone for him. He waited but nothing happened. The bell for break rang and everyone ran out into the quad, into the sun. He stayed sitting in his desk in the classroom. He had to wait another week, he kept telling himself, before he could go to Hebron to offer to help Catherine.

He had seen Catherine crossing the street in town, collecting supplies, but she hadn't seen him and he hadn't called out to her. She hadn't been back to the pool but the weather was changing and the grass would start to turn colour soon. They had had the last storm of the summer. Perhaps the water in the pool was too cold for her now. The nights were getting colder and in a few months they would need to light fires in the evening.

His father had seen Catherine down at the store buying feed. If she was going to sell stock, did she know which ones to sell? Hendrik could help her. Someone should tell her that she should be moving the cattle to the winter camp – perhaps the boys on the farm would see to it.

She was working all day out in the veld. They were mending fences on Hebron. He had seen her out riding when it was getting dark. It was as if she didn't want to go back to the house. One night he walked past the house and saw her sitting outside on the stoep as she

had done with Tom, drinking whisky, smoking a cigarette. She was tired. He could sense it.

Nettie was leaving. His mother had come out onto the stoep to wave her off. They watched as she got into her car and ground the gears. "She's such a terrible driver." His mother laughed as she watched her friend nearly reverse into the wall. Nettie waved gaily out of the window and took off in a cloud of dust. "How are you?" his mother turned to him.

"I'm fine, Ma. Don't worry."

He couldn't remember now how deep he had dug the grave. Perhaps he should have taken her ring off, but that would have been wrong too. It was just that after some time, if something happened, if someone found her, and identified her. He had heard stories of wild animals uncovering bones in graveyards as they searched for prey.

"Hendrik, Nettie says Elise is also having trouble with her nerves. She bought some of that tonic for her. If you..."

"Ma, I don't need tonic."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back for supper. I'll see if I can find some mushrooms in the veld for you." He didn't wait for an answer, he was off down the path. It was good to be running again, he could feel the blood pumping around his body and his tension easing.

He found the stones as he had left them, on top of the grave; nothing had been disturbed. The sun was shining directly on the boulders, warming them. He took his shirt off so that he could feel it on his back. He loved that feeling of the cold gusts of wind and then the warmth on his skin when the wind passed as he sat on the ledge dangling his feet over the edge. He lit a cigarette and pulled the smoke into his lungs. This was better than his mother's nerve tonic. "Have you got a cigarette? I've run out." He remembered her voice and how their fingers had touched when he had lit the cigarette for her, that afternoon by

the river pool. He saw her face as she surfaced from under the water, her hair wet and her eyes sparkling. "Why don't you come in?" The laughter in her voice. "You must open your eyes underneath and see the colours. I'm going to try and paint them. I learnt to swim here in this pool with Maria. We've been right down this river to the cutting."

He started arranging the stones on the grave. There should be something to make it different from the holes they dug and covered when they had to slaughter sick cattle. And if no human saw it, then God would see it from up there. He formed the stones into a cross. It was going to be alright. Time would pass and he would go to Hebron. He might take her a gift, a painting of underneath the water in the pool – of what it looked like when dived under and opened his eyes.

He sat for a while longer on the ledge whittling at a piece of wood with his knife, then he made his way back through the rocks.

*

Maria found Catherine at the pool wading knee high in water. She had taken off her skirt and was bent over, feeling in the mud and reeds along the edge for something. She pulled up a rock, washed the mud off and held it up to the light, then dropped it back in the water and started again. After a while she stopped, turned around and saw Maria. "How long have you been there?" she asked her.

"I didn't want to disturb you. What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. I just think there must be something here that will tell us the truth about what happened."

"You're not sure now. I'll help you."

"No. I don't need help. I just need some time." She had stepped out of the water and was searching along under the bushes.

"I came to tell you that I'd made supper."

"It doesn't make sense." Catherine hadn't heard Maria.

"I made supper." She tried again.

"I'll be up just now."

“It’s getting dark.”

“You go ahead I’ll be there in half an hour. I just need to think.” Catherine sat down with her head in her hands.

Maria didn’t want to leave her there, but there was no choice. If she didn’t leave, Catherine would shout at her. She had been shouting a lot since that night in the church when they had lain waiting for it to get light, and then made their way down to the pool to find the body gone and Tom gone too. Maria had tried to distract Catherine. But when she had told Catherine “Everything will be OK.” she had felt guilty because it was what her own mother had told her when the man she had loved had died and she has spent all those days on his grave. She had thrown stones at her mother and screamed at her to leave her alone. She could have crushed her mother’s head at that moment.

Catherine came back from the river, having found nothing. Maria took her a cup of tea out on the stoep, but Catherine didn’t drink it. She just sat and stared out at the gum trees, not seeing anything. “Let’s put some music on.” Maria suggested.

“I don’t feel like music.” Catherine shivered.

“You can’t sit there every night like that.”

“Why not?”

“It will get too cold soon.” That would normally have made Catherine laugh, but she didn’t even smile. “Music might be fun. We can dance.” Maria tried again. “Tomorrow we can go driving up along to the waterfall. I can drive.”

Catherine asked Maria to fetch her cigarettes. Maria got herself a book to read at the same time but she couldn’t concentrate. “We could go on holiday.” She looked up.

“We don’t have any money.” Catherine was tapping out a stacatto, agitated rhythm with her fingers on the wall. “I went out to the airfield today. His plane is gone.”

“He could have sold it.”

Catherine frowned at her. “He wouldn’t do that. He loves that plane. No, he came back to get it. He came back and he didn’t come here.”

“He doesn’t know what you’ll do, now that you know the truth. He’s frightened.”

“Don’t defend him, Maria.”

“I’m not.” Maria paused. “What would you do – if he came back?”

“I don’t know.” Catherine got up and walked the length of the stoep. “I don’t know. I just miss him, that’s all.” She crushed her cigarette out.

Maria looked down at her book; Catherine was standing over her. “He didn’t tell me the truth. He did a bad thing.” She took the book out of Maria’s hand and threw it into the dark.

“Why did you do that? I was trying to help.”

“Don’t give me that.”

“We could go driving.” If they went driving up to the waterfall and she could drive, first gear second gear third gear... take off. It was like flying.

“I was looking for a rock in the pool. A rock with blood on it. Where is it?” Catherine lit another cigarette. “Why doesn’t he come back?”

“Shall I run you a bath?” Maria stood up.

“I don’t want a bath. Stop being so concerned. It doesn’t suit you.” Maria left Catherine sitting on the stoep. There was nothing more she could say.

Hendrik takes the painting from underneath the alter where he hides it when he leaves the church. He has been working on it for a week now. He stands it on the easel he has brought with him from home. Then he turns up the paraffin flame so that he can see what he's doing. There are small marks on the paint and he runs his finger over them. He likes to think that they are small fingerprints, but they might have been caused by mice running over the wet paint in the dark. He mixes his paints and starts to put the finishing touches to the canvas. He paints over the scratch marks, but leaves one. By the time Catherine gets to the church he will be finished. She is coming to the church to meet him; he wrote her a note and left it at Hebron.

He is happy with the painting. She looks beautiful. Her skin shimmers with silver in the water on the canvas. She isn't cold, even though she is naked on the canvas. She's smiling at him. She likes it under water in the pool. Her hair spreads out around her face. It's a clear, silent underwater world with no pain, no trouble, just a quiet breath, in and out - the small bubbles rise from her lips. It is like the veld, sparkling after the rain has washed the dust away. He is finished now. He stands back and looks at the painting then he scratches his name at the bottom.

Catherine is excited and nervous as she takes the path up to the church. This is what she has been waiting for, some clue as to what happened that night and now he has asked her to meet him because... *I have something to show you...* he had written.

He has found something. He must have. And it is quite likely. He is always walking in the koppies and up at the church. He had been watching her that day at the pool and Maria has seen him in the veld. He could have been up there that night. He could have seen something. She had told Maria where she was going. Maria had warned her not to.

"He's in love with you," she had said.

"That's nonsense," Catherine had retorted. "Sometimes your head is so full of nonsense." But she hadn't felt so sure.

Hendrik is sitting on one of the pews. He gets up when Catherine comes in and comes forward towards her so that he can see her face. He has never felt so nervous and calm at the same time. She looks so lovely. She's wearing her yellow dress, the one she wore the first day she arrived when she stood outside the church.

"What is it?" She smiles at him and he can see that she's nervous. "What have you found?" He wasn't expecting this. He had said he wanted to show her something. She must think... And now he could see why she looked nervous and excited, she thought... "You haven't found anything?" Her voice is tense, she must have seen the disappointment on his face.

He shakes his head. "No. I ..."

"Then why did you ask me to come here?" She is angry now. It is going wrong. It was too soon. He should have waited. "You said you wanted to show me something."

"Yes." He hesitates, but he can't think of anything that won't sound ridiculous. He has to show her the painting. There is no other explanation, and she is waiting. He moves slowly, as though his feet are in sinking sand, to fetch the paraffin lamp off the altar. She has seen the easel now, in the shadows. She is walking towards it. He holds the lamp up so that she can see, but he looks out of the window not at her. He doesn't want to see her face when she sees it. The moonlight is playing in the trees. He wants to be outside.

"This painting isn't of me." She is speaking. He can't look at her. He concentrates on the branches, he thinks they are moving gently. He is trying not to panic. "I didn't give you permission to paint this." Her voice is cold. "Look at me."

But he can't.

"This isn't me. You haven't seen me..." He hears something break in her voice and his eyes flicker to her face. "You can't come here. This church is on my land. I don't want you here. This is not your place." She stands there in front of him and he can't look at her. There is nothing he can say.

Catherine turns and runs out of the church.

If you run fast enough can you run out of your body?

Why would you want to do that?

What if you want to disappear.

You mean die?

No.

I don't understand.

What if you want to just disappear. Into the rocks and the water and the sky and the earth – into laughter.

Why?

Then you can be here always. You don't have to leave.

This is my pool, my church, my land.

*

Hendrik arrives at home but he doesn't remember how he got there. His mother has set a place for him at the table. The food is getting cold. They have been waiting for him. "You look pale. What's wrong?" she asks him. He shakes his head. He feels like he is not himself. That he is acting in a play as he sits and slices the meat on his plate. "Hendrik, you're ill."

"No."

"You fuss too much." His father helps himself to more potatoes.

"I'm his mother."

"If you go on like that he'll leave us."

"You wouldn't do that. Hendrik?"

He can't eat anymore. He gets up and excuses himself. "I'm just tired."

He walks out of the house down to the stables. It doesn't matter if they see him leaving, there is no need to hide. He finds a can of petrol and a rope, there are matches in his pocket.

As he walks across the veld he feels the wind on his face. A strange peace fills his heart. His senses have become so fine, like a needle in the grooves of one of those records at Hebron, releasing the sound and the joy. It is beautiful - the veld in the evening light, the sounds of the night creatures stirring.

At the koppies he climbs up one of the boulders and finds a place to lie. It doesn't matter what the time is. He doesn't have to get back for anything. Out here, above him, there is a thin moon rising and in the sea of darkness the lights of the farms and kraals in the veld are like the stars above his head. Is he upside down? Which is heaven, which is earth?

There is no hurry. He can hear the singing and he imagines her standing in front of the painting. Her thin legs are like twigs under her dress with the peacocks embroidered around the hem and her hair is electric in the candlelight. She is laughing as she slides her bracelets up and down her arm.

*

Maria sees the glow from the church as she is walking back across the veld from her mother's kraal. She doesn't run because at first she thinks it is a light and she knows that the Afrikaans boy goes up there at night. Catherine is in her thoughts as she walks. The bucket with samp and beans from her mother bounces against her legs. When they are sitting out on the stoep together at Hebron she will tell Catherine of her plan for them to make money. She will heat the samp and beans for their supper. There is another thought that tries to make her listen to it, a thought about what she has told and what she has kept secret but she pushes it back into the corners of her head, hoping it will lose itself there.

When she breathes in the night air she can smell the smoke now. She has reached the base of the koppie and looking up, she sees that the smoke is coming from the church. There is a fire. She pulls the blanket around her and starts to run. When she reaches the church her chest is heaving. If there was time she would go down to the river pool and soak her blanket in the water but there isn't. Instead she shouts out in the dark in case one of the boys is walking home and will hear her and help. A pall of smoke hits her as she

pushed the door open.

After it is over she can't remember what she saw first, the painting and the hymn books and the altar on fire, or Hendrik.

She covers her mouth and nose with the blanket, runs to the front of the church and pulls the altar table over and climbs on top so that she can reach Hendrik. He is so heavy to lift.

He is hanging from the central beam but he is alive, she knows he is. She has seen dead bodies before. And then Gabriel is in the doorway, somehow he heard her call and he is beside her untying the rope and they lift Hendrik down and lay him on the floor.

Maria breathes air into his lungs, she has read how to do this in the book on first aid and soon he splutters and is breathing. She sits with his head in her lap and sends Gabriel to Hebron to tell Catherine. "Tell her to bring the car to the store, then come back up to help carry him down. We need to go to the hospital." She tells him to hurry. "Go." She snaps at him. "What are you waiting for?"

The boy's eyes are opening. She doesn't know if he can hear her. She strokes his head and whispers to him. "Why did you do such a stupid thing? There was no need. You should tell her the truth."

On the way to hospital Maria sits with him in the back as Catherine drives. She has never driven so fast. Maria is not allowed into the white part of the hospital. She waits on the stoep while a nurse fetches a stretcher. Catherine goes inside to give the staff his details so that they can call his parents. There is nothing more they can do.

I think I must write this letter to you. There are things you should know that I couldn't tell you.

Hendrik crumples the paper up and takes another sheet from the pad. He is running out of paper. The red mark on his neck is beginning to fade now but he hasn't been back to school since the hospital. His mother is distraught; she blames Catherine and the native girl. He has escaped the house and gone to sit in the stables up on top of a hay bale. All he wants is some peace to write this letter. Outside the stable his father starts up the tractor. He is going to the railway siding to fetch mielie-meal. There is a story that his mother and father are telling their friends and the teachers at school – it is that someone tried to strangle Hendrik in the native church – and everyone believes them because it's a native church, and it confirms all the rumours they would like to believe. His mother can't forgive Catherine King for what she has done to her son. She tells Nettie the truth, she is the only one, and Nettie tells her to be thankful the native girl found him in time and that they did take him to the hospital, but his mother just shakes her head. She won't hear it.

I came up to the church. I go there often. I like to be there.

Hendrik stares out of the door of the stables. He can see his horse down in the camp but he hasn't gone riding for weeks now. It hasn't rained either for weeks. Winter is on its way; the colours are changing in the veld.

Most times I go to the church at night, in the dark. But that day I went in the afternoon.

That day his father had sent him to get the horses in. There was going to be a storm and they were running wild in the field, galloping up and down – as though they were affected by the electricity in the air. It had taken him a long time to even get near them so that he could put a rope around their necks and quieten them down, to take them inside. Slowly they let him get closer and he had put his hand on his horses' neck and breathed into her

skin. He loved the smell of them.

“I’m going to tell her about the children in the church,” he had told his horse. ‘I’m going to paint her something too. She’ll know that we’re meant to be together. Mr Fyncham can’t see them. Only me. There are two girls. I can hear them. I heard them long before I met her. I knew who she was.”

His mother was standing on the stoep when he came up to the house from the stables. She asked him to get the paraffin from the shed.

When I left the house I thought it would storm soon.

He ran most of the way. He wanted go swimming in the pool. He wanted to be in the water when the lightning struck on the koppies. He was happy.

It was still light when I got to the church. I started to paint. I wanted to finish the painting of you and then go for a swim.

In the church he had felt them behind him. They were watching. He could feel their breath.

What is it? They whisper. He can feel them moving around the painting.

Maybe it’s upside down.

Maybe you’re upside down.

Maybe the church is upside down.

They laugh.

He had heard the rumbling of thunder from the church but it was still far away. The sun was dropping in the sky when he went outside and the whole veld was bathed in a luminous light. All the colours were merged into an electric green and gold.

I went down between the trees. I was going to jump off the ledge into the pool. Like you do.

But he had stopped when the ledge came into view because someone was standing on the rocks overlooking the pool.

Someone had got there before me. It was Mrs Fyncham.

She had been standing on the rock with her back to him staring down into the pool and he had known then that something was wrong. She was wearing a dress, she wasn't in a bathing suit to go swimming. Perhaps she was watching someone in the pool. But he couldn't see anyone and she was silent; she didn't call out to them or answer them.

I never drew her. The sketch in my sketchbook was of you. I was embarrassed to tell you because of what you would think of me. I didn't think Mrs Fyncham was going to jump.

But then she had moved forward on the ledge and closed her eyes, swaying slightly, and he had known what she was going to do. She was trying to be brave enough to jump. He had done the same thing. He had heard Catherine's voice. "Come on, jump. Jump out, otherwise you'll slip. You have to jump out. You have to not think. Don't think."

She stood there for a long time.

I should have told her to jump out. I should have stopped her.

Catherine sits down. She doesn't want to read on because she knows what is going to happen.

Look at me, Dad.

Come on Katie. Don't be a chicken. Jump.

I can't.

Of course you can.

Jump out.

One, two...

She's in the water.

He's holding her in his arms, swinging her high.

You're a brave girl. I've got a brave daughter.

I'm not a chicken am I?

No, you're not a chicken.

Maria thinks there are chickens in the sky. She's crazy isn't she?

Catherine goes on reading. She can't stop now, although she knows how it ends.

As she stepped forward she turned around and looked up towards the church as though she heard something, as though someone had called her. That's when she slipped and fell and her head smashed against the rock.

I was going to run down when Mr Fyncham came. He tried to breathe air into her lungs but she must have been dead already. He went back down the path, I think he was going to get help but I couldn't be sure.

I didn't want you to see Mrs Fyncham in your pool. I thought you would leave the farm. I was scared you would leave. I hope you understand why I had to bury her. You couldn't know. You couldn't leave – you belong here.

He had written at the bottom in small print.

I love you

Hendrik.

Catherine folded the letter up. Maria had come out onto the stoep with the bowl of potatoes she was peeling. She sat on the step, waiting for Catherine to say something.

“Did you know what happened that evening? Did you tell Hendrik to write this letter to me?” Catherine knew the answer. She just wanted Maria to say it. “Why? Why didn’t you tell me? What were you thinking?”

Maria put the bowl down on the stoep and the knife beside it. She wiped her hands on her skirt and looked down to where Gabriel was working in the vegetable garden. “I don’t know. I thought it could be as it was.”

“It can’t. You know that. I’ve tried. I just can’t. I’m too lonely without him.” Maria got up and went through to the kitchen. “Where are you going?” Catherine called after her.

But she didn’t answer. She was trying to find a ripe pear in amongst the ones she had picked in the garden to put in the cardboard box for Catherine. It was a picnic. “For your journey.” She told Catherine as she handed her the box “I packed some food so you wouldn’t be hungry.”

She watched Catherine drive away and then she got her blanket and took it out under the peach tree where she sat for a long time staring out down the road. She felt like that girl, Eustacia, in the book – watching through her telescope in the dark.

*

It is early evening when Catherine parks the car under the trees in the square. She is hot and thirsty and walks across the square to where a man is selling cold drinks. The smell of the sea is strong from here. People are out walking on the streets after the heat of the day. She finds a bench and sits down to drink her coca-cola. Couples stroll hand in hand. A priest passes her on his way to the church. A group of young schoolgirls giggle as they try and eat their ice-lollies before they melt and drip on to their white shirts.

There is music playing from a bar across the road and a group of black women are standing teasing a man. They laugh. He strikes a match against his shoe and lights his cigarette with it – this makes them laugh and tease him more.

People look at her as they walk past. She looks dishevelled. Her hair is wild from driving with the window wide open and her face is grimy with dust. She is insanely happy because she is going to find Tom. They can go somewhere, they don't have to go back to the farm, not immediately. Perhaps they can stay at the coast for a while.

The drink is cold and very fizzy; she can feel the bubbles in her nose. A car parks in an empty bay on the opposite side of the street and a woman gets out. She is carrying a gift, a fruit basket wrapped in cellophane; she has put on her best dress and shoes. Another car parks behind hers and a family get out. They too are carrying a gift.

Across the square the clock strikes six o'clock. Catherine thinks they must be going to the church but they start to walk in the opposite direction. They disappear behind some trees and she gets up and walks across the road to see where they are going.

The hospital is an old colonial building with a flight of stairs leading up to a vast wooden door, it must be visiting hour because there is a long line of people.

There is a red cross painted above the door and the words written in black paint. "Hospital da Santa Maria".

She stands there watching them going in. Such a small thing – a cross drawn on the

ground. A mistake. Then she gets up and crosses the street. There is a crowd of people at the hospital reception and she has to wait.

“Mr King.” She has to spell it out.

The receptionist looks through her records.

“No. No Mr King. Sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

The woman turns around and calls to her colleague. “One minute.” She waits. The colleague reappears with one of the nurses. “This woman wants to know about a Mr King.”

The nurse smiles. “There was a Mr King here – a few months ago.” She speaks slowly and in broken English. “I am sorry, he died. Are you a friend?”

“I’m his daughter.”

“Katie?”

She nods.

“He talked about you a lot. He say I make him think of you, my face.” She looks down, embarrassed now. They stand awkwardly. Catherine doesn’t know what to say. “He’s bury in the church, across the square. No...” the nurse smiles, remembering something. “Not buried. He didn’t want to be in a coffin. He say sometime people put you in when you no really dead. I tell him it is not true.”

“Across the square?”

“Yes, but it is mass now. You can go in the morning. The man will tell you where your father’s ashes are in the church.” She hesitates and Catherine turns to go but the nurse touches her arm. “Your father wanted to see you again. You were his special one.” She says.

She walks back out into the dusk and starts to walk down the streets. She should really find somewhere to sleep because she is exhausted now but she doesn’t want to be inside.

A little girl is chasing a boy down the street. He has stolen something of hers and she is running shouting after him. Catherine follows her. The streets have got narrower. The girl turns a corner. There is a small square and pepper trees. A slab for gutting fish. Catherine

knows where she is now.

The boy turns around and pulls a face at the girl who is out of breath, bent over with her hands on her knees. She stands up and shouts and starts to chase him again.

The street is cobbled. It leads down to the water. Fishermen are tying a boat up to a small jetty and taking the fish out of the boat. She doesn't know if she can find her way back now. But it doesn't matter. She takes off her sandals. The air is warm and full of all those different smells.

The walls of the fortress are lit by the moon that is full and hanging like a huge ball over the bay. It's high tide and the water covers the bottom steps of the crumbling building. And there is the palm tree from the postcard, from her dream, where it should be in the central square. It's warm and she feels like swimming.

She climbs up the steps and walks along. The girl has caught up with the boy. They are walking along one of the high walls above her. Catherine sees that there is a small beach on the other side of the fortress. She finds her way down. Nobody will notice if she takes off her clothes and goes for a swim.

There is phosphorescence on the water and it sparkles on her skin as she swims out. She looks across at the island and follows the lights from the ferry down along to the point where there his house stands over looking the bay - it is all lit up in the dark.

“She’s gone to be with him.”

“It’s the best thing really – that she’s left the farm. She’s caused enough trouble.”

“She’ll be back though.”

“Yes, when she realises that he’ll never leave his wife.”

“He’ll sell the farm. The wife won’t want to come back here.”

“They never belonged.”

Nettie spread out the colour samples on the table. She was painting her house and couldn’t decide on the white with a hint of pink or white with a hint of yellow. “It depends on the light of course - in the room. The man in the shop said that if there’s pink in the room it will pick up on it and make a nice glow.”

“You’ve got those embroidered cushions from the fete.” Hendrik’s mother looked at her own sitting room. “Maybe I should paint in here. It’s so dark. What do you think?” Nettie looks around the room.

“Yes it could do with something bright.”

“I’ve been thinking of getting rid of the furniture.”

“What, do you mean all of it?”

“No – these heavy chairs. They’re so gloomy. At least that’s what Hendrik says, and I agree with him. I hadn’t noticed how old and frayed they were getting.”

“How is Hendrik?”

“He’s recovering.”

They are silent.

“Has he been back up to the church?”

“No.” His mother said quickly. “Do you know I wish the whole place had burnt down. I can’t help it. It’s not a church, you know. Not really. A church is where people gather to worship God. Churches are built to the glory of God.” But she didn’t say it with great conviction. “Nettie?”

“What is it?” Nettie looked up from the paint samples.

“When was the last time you went down to the river?”

“Oh, goodness.”

“Let’s go to the river. Let’s take a picnic. Hendrik built a raft down there with Dirk, you know. We could...” Nettie started to laugh. “Don’t laugh. I’ve been all the way down to the cutting. When we were first married we had a canoe. I rowed all the way down. Marius just lay there and watched me. He said...” She looked out of the window. “He said you’ve got the most beautiful smile, that’s what he said.”

Hendrik watched them setting off across the veld with their baskets and their hats. Nettie had borrowed one from his father and it was slightly too small for her head, and perched on top. “If we aren’t back by six come and look for us, Hendrik.” His mother laughed. “We’re going to row down the river. I’m going to show Nettie. Do you remember when we all went down?”

He felt light watching them laughing together like that as they walked away from him. He felt a joy creeping in to his heart for another reason too. Catherine had come back. Although he hadn’t seen her, he had seen her car in town that day.

It was six o’clock and his mother and Nettie hadn’t come back, but he told himself that it was likely that they had gone to Nettie’s house for tea. He would wander down to the river to look anyway. It was a beautiful afternoon.

He was at the foot of the koppies when he heard the aeroplane and looked up. It was circling the church and he stood watching as it climbed and fell and turned.

*

Maria stood and squinted up into the sky. She was standing in the graveyard outside the church waiting for Catherine to throw the ashes. She wouldn’t be able to see the ashes falling but she would imagine them floating down in the blue and she would shout something into the sky, she wasn’t sure what though.

From the aeroplane Catherine could see Maria standing and waving. “Turn the plane,”

she shouted to Tom.

Maria had told her stories of ashes. If you threw them in the wrong wind, they could blow back onto you. Her mother had got the ashes of her third cousin once removed in her mouth. It was horrible, horrible. They had laughed.

“And in her hair. I know someone who ate their...”

“Shut up, Maria.”

And then she threw the ashes and watched as they were taken by the wind. They would come down to rest, on the rocks and trees and in the river. Perhaps some would even fall on the roof of the church.

Hendrik watched as the plane turned one last time and then flew off down over the krantz. He became aware of someone standing behind him. She must have come up quietly; someone who was used to walking silently across the veld. He could feel her a few feet behind him.

“I wish I could fly,” she said. “Sometimes I think I can.” He turned around. “What’s in your bag?” she asked him.

“Nothing”

“Can I have a look?”

He took out the sketchbook. He didn’t care any more who saw his sketches. He was going to leave them in the church. He handed it to her.

She squatted down on the ground and opened the book carefully.

When she saw the children in the church she looked up at him and her face was radiant.

Epilogue

“There you are.” Maria finds Catherine lying by the river pool. She is wrapped in a blanket and Maria takes her hands, that are icy cold, and rubs them to warm them up. “You shouldn’t be doing this. You’re freezing.”

“Speak for yourself.” Catherine sits up. “I was on my way to the church. There was a light on.”

“I know, I saw it from the house.”

“Will you come with me?” Catherine leans against Maria as she stands up. Her legs are stiff.

“I won’t let you go alone.” Maria looks up at the trees above the pool. The shadows look like figures dancing between the tree trunks in the moonlight.

“What’s that?” Catherine has seen the hockey stick that Maria has dropped on the ground and reaches to pick it up.

“It’s for protection.”

“Well, I feel much safer now.” Catherine says wryly.

“We can’t run so fast anymore.” Maria is indignant as she takes the stick from Catherine.

“No, I suppose you’re right. Well, shall we go?” Catherine leads the way slowly up the path. They have to stop to rest half way up, then again near the top. “Do you remember how we used to laugh at the gogos walking so slowly up this hill?” Catherine’s chest feels raw. “I don’t feel old - I feel that I could still run up here, and still jump off the ledge into the pool.”

“And kill yourself?”

“Do you remember how we thought the light in the church was a miracle?” They are standing in the doorway of the church now looking in at the paraffin lamp burning on the altar.

“You never told me what it was you saw in there.” Maria looks at Catherine, but Catherine’s not going to tell her, even now. It will always be a secret. Sometimes you need a secret. “You go in – I’ll be out here.” She turns to the graveyard.

The church is empty. He hasn't waited then. The painting is hanging on the wall where her picture used to be. They took it down because the smoke had damaged it. But here is something in its place. Something beautiful.

Catherine goes to fetch the paraffin lamp from the altar and holds it up in front of the painting.

He has painted the church half in shadow, half in light, and two girls standing in front of the altar. They have on their summer dresses, one orange, one pale yellow. They look luminous as if they are lit up from the inside. Their hair is wild and the air is electric around them. She can hear them laughing.

You'll never catch us. Nobody will. We'll always be separate.

Catherine finds Maria standing in the middle of the graveyard staring at a cleared patch of ground in front of her. "This is what the Afrikaans boy was doing up here." Maria turns to her. She still calls Hendrik a boy. Catherine bends down to look what is written with small white stones on the earth.

Isobel.

"He moved her bones."

"It's good. They weren't in a good place." Maria shakes her head. "She was lonely there." Catherine spreads Maria's blanket next to the grave and sits down.

"I'm so tired," she says. "Let's rest here a while before we go back." They lie down next to each other for warmth and look up at the night sky.

"Just a quick nap." Maria shifts, she hasn't got enough padding now and her bones hurt her.

Can you see the rabbit in the moon?

*

The sun is up and the girl who found the bones is climbing up the path to the church. She has come to look at the place where she found the bones once more. Just to make sure of what she really saw that day. She scrambles through the opening in the rocks and squats down on the ground. The earth has been smoothed over and she is wondering if she really saw anything on this ledge above the valley when she hears the laughter.

Two girls are running past the rocks and down the hill from the church. The little black girl is chasing – the white girl is not far ahead. Their feet are bare and their dresses are dirty from playing.

Suddenly they stop – they have heard something. Someone is calling them and they look back up at the church. Another girl is standing in the doorway waving.

“Wait for me.” She calls and starts to run down the hill after them. Her black hair streams behind her in the wind.

*

The End

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Geoffrey Haresnape, for his guidance and help with this work. Angela Briggs and Dorothy Dyer for their encouragement and advice. My special thanks go to my family and friends for their love and support.

I would also like to acknowledge the Baird Foundation for their financial support.

University of Cape Town