Bin Collection Day

and Other Stressful Events

A dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Masters of Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town

by

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Declaration

1. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and to pretend that it is one's own.
2. This dissertation is my own work.
3. This dissertation has not previously been submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree.

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Abstract

Elizabeth is six when the ANC wins the first democratic elections in South Africa. While most of the country celebrates freedom, the only difference she notices is the growing intensity of her fears. Fear remains a faithful companion to Elizabeth as she grows up. She fears the rubbish trucks in her childhood, the Valentine's Dance in high school, and the remote possibility of passing out in a gutter somewhere in her first year of university.

The short stories in this collection feature a similar (and often contradictory) version of the protagonist, from Elizabeth's childhood in eastern Johannesburg to her early adult years in an uptight Cape Town neighbourhood. Each story deals with a dilemma unique to each life stage and should be read in isolation. But its neighbours in the collection reveal the recurring tensions that influence an identity. In Elizabeth's case, these include the role of her religion, her repressed racism, and the bizarre benefits of gross inequality. All of these contribute to her urge, as a white girl in post-apartheid South Africa, to peer across from her and check if she should be somewhere, or someone, else.

Contents

1993–1994

St Elizabeth of Edenvale

1.

Ruth and I are playing in the front garden when someone rings our doorbell. I look to the gate to see a black lady watching me. She's one of the tallest women I've seen – I have to tilt my head into the sunlight to find her face. Our eyes meet for a second before I turn away. I tell Ruth to stay there, then I run inside to call my mom.

My mom picks up Ruth on her way to the gate and hoists her onto her hip. I stay in our lounge and peer over the windowsill to watch them talk. My mom's back is straight and her shoulders look stiff, despite her many nods. When my dad comes home that evening, they talk in low voices in the kitchen.

The tall lady comes back the next day. This time my mom lets her in, then leads her up the driveway past the house and along the path to the washing line enclosure in the backyard. A child is with her, keeping close to her skirt. After they leave, my mom tells me the lady's name is Primrose. She has a husband, Josiah, who paints walls. The child's name is Warona. She is two – the same age as Ruth. They will live here on the property.

I am confused by the arrangement. We already have Doreen, who comes to clean once a week. But my mom wants to return to teaching fulltime and, in exchange for the room in the washing line enclosure, Primrose will look after Ruth who is still too small for school.

"It wouldn't be right not to let them stay," my mom explains, "We don't use that back room and they don't have anywhere else to go."

2.

I love Mondays because it's the day Doreen comes. She never says much, but she lets me and my older brother Rory take turns to sit on the couches while she moves them across the lounge to vacuum. I have a feeling that she waits until I come home from nursery school to vacuum, because she knows how much I love the ride.

But I hate Mondays if I come home to see the bins are still out, which means the rubbish men haven't arrived yet. I have nightmares about them all the time, which makes it

hard to tell what's real and what's happened in my sleep. When I hear the trucks, someone tells me to close all the windows and to hide under the windowsill and not move in case the men see me. Then I hear them shouting and whistling above the engines and I see smoke and wolves and angry faces. The only person outside when they come is Doreen. I can't tell what she says to them, but the way she talks sounds like she knows them. This both comforts and scares me, because I can't tell whose side she's on.

There are other things I'm afraid of, like the large strip of veldt on the outskirts of my neighbourhood. I close my eyes when we drive past it, especially when there are birds resting on the pylons and they could get electrocuted. The pylons look the same as the ones on the hills of Germiston, that ugly suburb where we used to live.

At night while I wait for myself to sleep, sometimes I hear the wail of a motorbike on the highway near our house. The sound travels through my body, shrinking my insides. And I'm also afraid of Primrose, who has a loud voice and a hard face.

She arrives in a bakkie on the weekend. She and Warona are in the passenger seat with a driver. Josiah is on the back, holding down a three-quarter mattress and other pieces of furniture. He and the driver cart their things up and down the path to the washing line enclosure, while Primrose yells in Zulu after them. I watch from the kitchen stoep and look inside to my mom to see if she's disturbed. But she's wearing the usual expression she has when she's washing dishes – eyes down, a tug at her lips – which makes it hard to tell.

On Monday while I'm eating breakfast before school, I see Josiah passing our kitchen window to go paint walls. I look out the back door to the washing line enclosure and see Primrose. Her long arms are turning over soil with a shovel.

"Mom!" I call, "She's digging up our garden."

My mom walks over to the window above the sink. She looks out for a few long seconds, following the rhythm of Primrose's digging.

"It's okay, Elizabeth," she says when she finally turns back. "She asked if she could plant some vegetables. There's nothing growing in there anyway."

Doreen arrives just as I'm leaving for school. While I wait for my mom to open the garage, I watch her as she walks up the garden path to the washing line enclosure to change in the outside toilet. I feel a sense of dread.

3.

We live in Dunvegan, a nice suburb in Edenvale, Johannesburg. We moved from Germiston a year ago, where my parents were renting. Most of what I remember from the Germiston house are the thorns in the garden and the black toilet seat.

The first night we moved into this house, Rory and I ran through the empty rooms to look at the pressed ceilings. They were one of the first things my mom had shown us – how each room's was different and looked like icing on the tiers of a wedding cake.

"Eric, don't you think it's everything we've prayed for and more?" I heard her tell my dad as I ran back to where they were standing in the dining room.

My parents thought Dunvegan was too expensive and only viewed this house by chance. But my mom immediately knew this house was meant for us when she saw the toilet, because of St Thérèse.

St Thérèse is my mom's favourite saint. She died when she was very young, but she was made a saint because she had lived a very holy life even when she was a child. She had loved roses and asked God for them to fall from heaven when she died.

"And apparently that's what happened," my mom confirmed when she first told me this story, "which is why she's called 'The Little Flower'."

Roses are also my mom's favourite flower – they come to her as signs from God. Once she started crying when she saw roses in the waiting room for the dentist, but she wouldn't tell me why. The toilet in this house has wallpaper with roses on them, a sign that somehow my parents could afford to buy it. Now, since we own this house, she got the gardener to plant a rosebush in the front garden.

On Sundays when we go to mass, I can pick out who St Thérèse is in the stained-glass windows – she has a small, shiny face and she's holding a crucifix covered in roses. I also know her from my saints' book for children, which I look at during mass. We aren't allowed to bring other picture books or toys – if we get bored, we can only distract ourselves with something related to God.

I love the saint book. I skip past the pictures of the male saints, which are boring. Most of them are bald and wear brown cloaks and write at desks with skulls on them. But the female saints are all interesting and beautiful. St Cecelia, the saint of music, plays a giant harp. St Joan of Arc is dressed in armour and rides a horse. St Philomena, who died because she didn't want to get married, wears a crown of flowers.

One Sunday after mass, I wander to the front garden. I've been spending more time there with the hope of finding fairy dust, sometimes mistaken for the silver trail from a snail on the brickwork. I pause by the rosebush and think about St Thérèse who died so young. My mom once told me it's possible for anyone to become a saint. I only half believe her – no one still wears floor-length dresses tied with a golden cord at the waist, and I can't picture women in jeans and tekkies in a saint book. But as I run my finger over one of the thorns and press it until I feel a faint pain, I wonder if I can rise to the challenge. I could start from today. But the thought immediately makes me feel tired. The only person who might be able to become a saint is my mom. She never does anything wrong, never says anything bad about anyone, and only gets angry at me and Rory when it's very clear that we are being poor versions of ourselves. She also loves going to mass, something I can't imagine I'll ever enjoy.

4.

My mom starts teaching at the primary school across the road from us. I'm jealous because Rory is in Grade 1 there and gets to see her whenever he wants to. Now my dad takes me to nursery school every day instead.

One Monday I feel sick, so my mom lets me stay at home. She asks Primrose if she can keep an eye on me while she looks after Ruth, but I hang around Doreen instead. I watch her while she dusts around the TV in the lounge, and then follow her through the bedrooms. I lie on the beds once she tidies them, careful not to crease the covers she has smoothed over. As she leaves the last bedroom without a word, I look up at the pressed ceilings and wonder if she loves me. Maybe my mom would know.

Primrose has brought her radio and Warona into the house. She's washing dishes in the kitchen while Ruth and Warona eat apple wedges at the table. I follow Doreen in, hoping she'll tell Primrose to switch the radio off. They start talking in Zulu and I look between them to try and read the expressions on their faces. From the loudness of their voices, it's difficult to tell if they're arguing or making friends with each other.

Two weeks later, Doreen leaves us. When I ask my mom why, she says that Primrose had started to do the housework while minding Ruth, so it's no longer necessary for Doreen to come on Mondays.

I feel helpless. Now Primrose takes over the house. Her radio is always on while my mom is out. She washes the dishes with a force that scares me. And on the days the rubbish men come, I go to my room and shut the door and pray until the street is quiet again.

My mom also starts leaving me and Rory at home after school while she does the shopping or visits friends. Rory doesn't seem to mind. While we wait for the children's TV shows to start, he throws a tennis ball at the lounge wall over and over and tries to catch it like Jonty Rhodes.

One afternoon I get bored of watching him, so I go looking for Ruth. She's not in the house so I walk up to the washing line enclosure. I look at the vegetables in Primrose's garden and spot a new pumpkin and gem squashes peeking from the earth. A few days ago, Primrose gave my mom an armful of Swiss chard and sandy carrots.

"What a treat!" she had said, "Look, Elizabeth – these have come straight from our vegetable patch."

Once I've surveyed the new crops, I edge myself to the doorway of Primrose's room. I see Ruth on the floor with Warona. Both are eating a white mixture from a pot on a paraffin stove. Primrose waves me in, but I idle outside. I don't like the smell of what they are eating and the room is dark. I can just make out a three-quarter bed propped on some bricks.

When my mom comes home, I tell her about the white mixture that Primrose was feeding my sister. She says it's probably mielie pap. She doesn't seem to mind that Ruth ate it or that she spends time in that dark room, away from the house. I also ask why there are bricks under Primrose's bed and she tells me that black people believe in the tokoloshe, a little man that visits in their sleep.

"Is he real?" I ask.

"Of course not," she replies. "Primrose is superstitious. But we believe in God and only he is real. There's no such thing as little men or black magic or any other things that Primrose believes in."

I feel relieved about this, but also feel sorry for Primrose – an adult who is scared of make-believe things.

5.

My mom has won a competition. She has a lucky streak – when she was 13, she won a bicycle in her school raffle, which she gave to her younger brother. Now she's won a

makeover from House of Scissors hair salon, which ran a competition through Edenvale's community newspaper.

"What will you do?" I ask her on the morning of her appointment while she's plaiting my hair for school. My mom has plaited hers too – it's thick and brown and comes to below her armpits.

"I'm not sure," she says. "I might get the hairdresser's advice. I've never dyed my hair before or cut it short. How would you feel if I did that?"

I tell her I wouldn't mind, but actually I'm not sure. I don't know how my mom would look with short hair.

That afternoon, Primrose stays in the house until my dad comes home from work. Rory and I watch TV until it's dark and we forget to switch on the lights. We finally hear my mom's car in the driveway. We run to the kitchen to see a blonde lady opening the security gate. I recognise her by her laugh as she sees our expressions. It looks like someone has coloured in her eyebrows with a thick Koki and I can't see any of the freckles on her nose. Her whole face looks even, like a beach when the waves leave it. Ruth starts crying and hides her face in my dad's arms.

"It's me, Ruthie," my mom sings. "Don't worry, I promise you'll get used to it."

The next week, my mom fetches the newspaper from the front gate and shows me the spread of all the makeover winners. Her picture is the only one in colour and bigger than the rest, because the change is the most radical of them all. Her head is cocked in a way that makes it look like she has a secret. The rose pendant she always wears – a wedding gift from my granny – looks out of place against her chest. Beneath the picture is a smaller one of "before": my mom with her long brown hair and peaceful smile. I don't like how the newspaper makes it look like my mom was plain before she won the competition. My mom just laughs when I tell her. She cuts out the article and puts it in our photo album.

6.

Ruth and Warona are becoming best friends. They always seem to be together and enjoy doing the same things: pretending our dog Rocky is their horse, playing with the pots under the sink, and putting their fingers in the plug points. I hear Primrose over the sound of the vacuum threatening to smack them when they near an empty socket.

It bothers me how much time Warona spends in the house. One afternoon I find her and Ruth on the kitchen stoep playing with the security gate. They take turns fitting their feet between its bars so that they can gently ride on its hinges. On one of Warona's turns, I pull the gate closed. I hold it fast from inside the kitchen, where Ruth stands too. Warona looks down at her hands, intent on making the gate open. My fingers quickly grow tired so I let go, smiling, and let her come back in.

Primrose also starts staying longer in the house. My mom shows her how to make white sauce from flour and butter, her famous spaghetti bolognaise (the secret is chutney), and meatloaf, my dad's favourite. Most evenings Primrose stays in the kitchen up until my dad comes home, almost when it's dark.

The first night Primrose cooks without my mom watching her, my mom fetches the Pyrex dish that's been waiting in the oven. She brings it to the dining room and we watch while my mom takes off the foil, as if it's a magic trick. It's macaroni cheese. I eat a few bites before putting down my spoon.

"It tastes different," I tell my mom.

"Nonsense," my dad says, "It tastes exactly the same."

He makes me finish my plate.

7.

We'll go to our holiday house in Transkei for Christmas. One afternoon my mom leaves us with Primrose to go shopping for the trip. Usually we'd come with her because Rory and I get to choose two snacks each (one healthy, one sweet) to eat in the car. But she doesn't respond when I ask why I can't join. When she returns, I expect her to enter with armfuls of packets from Pick n Pay, but she's carrying a single bag from Foschini instead, which she takes straight to her room. I go looking later while she's on the phone and find a light blue bikini inside – the first one I think my mom owns.

This year, my mom has the idea for Primrose to look after Rocky while we're away so he doesn't have to stay in the kennels. I hear her speaking about it with my dad on the way to mass.

"I asked her if she could," she says, "but she wants to go back to Natal. Maybe she'll stay if we pay her something for it."

“We’re already giving her a big bonus,” my dad replies. But he must agree to it, because the day before we leave my mom carries Rocky’s dog food and bowls to the washing line enclosure.

When we return from the Transkei there’s a funny sweet smell in the house. My mom opens all the windows and begins to unpack.

“What’s this?” she asks. She takes a large, see-through bag from the freezer and peers at the contents. “Eric, did you buy these?”

I follow her to the lounge, where my dad has switched on the TV. Rory and I watch as my dad takes the bag from her.

“Gross,” Rory says, “are those real chicken heads?”

My dad gives it back to my mom.

“She shouldn’t have stayed in the house,” he says. “You should talk to her.”

My mom continues to look at the bag. I notice the hooded eyes and little beaks – how the mouths are turned down but still look like they’re smiling. She nods, but doesn’t say anything else as she walks back to the kitchen.

That night she strips all the beds and puts on fresh linen. Primrose does three loads of washing the next day.

8.

This year Ruth will start nursery school. I think that maybe Primrose will leave now because she’ll no longer need to look after Ruth in the mornings. But the first day of school arrives, and she and Warona appear in the kitchen like always.

Before we leave, the family goes to the lounge for photos. Warona watches us by the door and I see her looking at Ruth’s brown suitcase, which is covered with animal stickers from the Weetbix boxes.

“Warona,” my mom calls when she sees her. “Come stand next to Ruth.”

Warona shakes her head, but joins when my mom keeps pressing.

“Put your arms around each other’s shoulders,” she says, and takes a picture.

When we’re finished, Warona follows us to the kitchen door and watches me, my dad, and Ruth get into the car.

“Woza, Warona,” I hear Primrose shouting from the kitchen. My dad reverses the car and as he gets out to close the garage door, my mom joins Warona on the stoep. She’s holding

another brown suitcase – from the cricket stickers on the front, I realise it's Rory's old one. Primrose has come out too. I watch her as Warona accepts the case from my mom. Her face looks like she's swallowed a spoon of antibiotics.

After school, I find my mom in the garden looking at the rosebush, her mouth turned down in concentration. Ever since she won the competition, she draws around her lips with a pencil every morning, which makes her look more serious than I think she is inside.

"What are you looking for?" I ask, craning up to see the thorn she's inspecting.

"Nothing," my mom replies, "just thinking."

I can hear Primrose vacuuming from inside, and her shouting in Zulu above it. I can't tell if Warona's done something to upset her or if she's just talking normally. I look up at my mom and notice that she's heard the yelling too.

"I'm going to give Warona some of your old picture books," she says. "How about we go to your room together and see what other things you'd like to give her? You've grown out of your dolls."

"But they're Ruth's now," I say.

"Ruth has lots of toys at school, Elizabeth," my mom replies.

I picture my dolls in Primrose's dark room, abandoned under the bed where the tokoloshe could take them.

But my mom doesn't make me give my dolls to Warona. Instead, Warona starts spending even more time inside with our things. One afternoon I come to the kitchen from playing outside to find Warona at the table, paging through a book of farm animals. My mom bends over her, her rose pendant dangling in the air between them. She names each animal for Warona to repeat.

Primrose is defrosting the fridge and is using towels to mop the water that has pooled on the floor around it.

"Stay there, Elizabeth," she warns. "The floors are wet."

I look to my mom.

"What do you want?" she asks when she feels my eyes on her.

I shrug and go back outside, banging the security gate behind me.

9.

The first time my mom bakes bread is on the night before the elections. I come to the kitchen before bedtime to see two flat loaves cooling on the rack. Apparently it's not safe to go out tonight, and my mom didn't get to buy bread from the café in time.

"This was much harder than baking a cake," she laughs.

She cuts and butters a stumpy crust and sends me to give it to my dad.

The next day we stay home from school. The TV is on the whole time, showing the same scenes of people standing in lines. My dad won't even let us change the channel when it's time for the children's shows.

Early the next morning Primrose comes to the kitchen door, where my mom immediately hands her the newspaper. I see flames in her eyes and her forehead crinkling as she yells, then she runs back down the path to her family. My mom turns to me with her peaceful smile and explains that Primrose's party has won. Primrose's joy is confusing. Since she and my mom have voted for different people, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel.

The days start getting cold and it's harder to wake up. On the way to school I watch the strip of veldt become yellower and my skin feels itchy looking at it.

Tristan, a boy in my class, starts crying while we're listening to a story about a rescue dog. When my teacher asks what's wrong, we learn that he has to leave his puppy in South Africa because his parents are wanting to immigrate. She asks him where they'll go, and he says to Australia. Then she calls the maid to take him to the kitchen for a cup of juice.

I can't fall asleep at nap time because I'm thinking about never seeing Rocky again. I also cry at the idea, but softly enough for the teacher not to notice, and then I realise how cruel Tristan's parents must be.

I ask my mom what immigrate means at supper.

"It's to move to another country," she says.

"Forever," Rory adds.

"You can't come back?"

"I suppose you could, if you wanted to."

"Why would Tristan's parents want to move to Australia?"

"It has a similar climate to South Africa," my mom says, "and a similar way of life, apparently."

She looks over to my dad. He's not listening to the conversation because he's picking apart a piece of meatloaf on his plate. Then he lifts his fork up to my mom, so she leans over to look at it. She frowns and takes it from him, then wipes it on her serviette. Rory and I crane forward and I see a black frizzled hair. It reminds me of the hairs I once saw on my mom's private part while she was dressing. I was shocked by how dark they were.

"I can't eat this," my dad says.

I push my plate away too.

After that night Primrose stops cooking for us, so she leaves in the afternoons once she's finished the ironing. One afternoon she looks for Warona, who's in the lounge with us. She and Ruth are sitting on either side of my mom on the couch, who's reading them a Munch Bunch book. I'm at the coffee table colouring in.

"Woza, Warona," Primrose says, but Warona doesn't hear her because she's focused on the carrot on the page, who's fretting about what to wear for a party.

"She can stay," my mom says, "it'll be good for her to listen to these stories too."

But Primrose strides over and grabs Warona by the shoulder, who jumps.

"I don't want her talking like a white child," she says, and Warona follows her out.

10.

These days when the rubbish men come, I'm sure that Primrose is staying outside longer talking to them. I wish I knew what they're saying – it's unfair that black people have a secret language that only they understand.

There are also more black people walking in our road in the early evenings. The other night a man's car was stolen when he was turning into his driveway. Apparently some men jumped out the bushes and showed him a gun. Now if we're coming home and my mom sees men in the street, she'll drive a lap around our block until they're gone.

"Just to be safe," she says in a normal voice, which makes me curious rather than afraid. But I think that maybe those men could be the rubbish men in disguise, and if I could understand what Primrose says to them I could find out if we might be in danger.

One morning after she's plaited my and Ruth's hair, my mom turns back to her dresser to finish getting ready for school.

"That's strange," she says, peering into her jewellery box, "I can't find my rose pendant."

She takes out the other pieces of jewellery one by one, then looks through the dresser drawer.

"You weren't playing with it, Elizabeth?"

I pretend not to hear her question and look busy fixing my hair bobble instead. When I peer up again, I see her fingers jerk as she puts everything back in the box. My dad calls me and Ruth to come to the car. My mom strides out her bedroom, and we follow her down the passage out the kitchen.

"We're late, you two," my dad says.

The car's already out the garage and he straps us in before we can say goodbye to my mom. But she's walking down the path to the washing line enclosure and doesn't seem to notice.

On Saturday a bakkie turns into our driveway. It takes a few hoots to get our attention because we're not expecting anyone, especially not an old Toyota with a black man driving it. It's just me and my mom in the lounge – my dad and Rory are at soccer practice and Ruth is playing with Warona in the washing line enclosure. My mom gets up from her marking and goes outside to the gate to see what he wants.

I watch from the windowsill – my mom leaning forward to understand the man, and then Josiah joining her at the gate, who touches her shoulder. I see two large canvas bags that he must have carried with him, which are now waiting on the side of the driveway. He guides my mom to stand by the rosebush so that he can open the gate for the bakkie to drive in.

Finally she comes inside.

"Where's Primrose?" I ask.

"She's leaving," she says. "She didn't tell me."

I follow my mom through the kitchen to the washing line enclosure – I know she'll try and make her stay. But Josiah is already carrying the three-quarter mattress down the path, the driver following with the beat-up frame. As they pass her, my mom stops. Primrose is doubled over her vegetable patch, a black bag next to her. Her elbows are high and jerking as she rips the heads of each vegetable from the soil.

2002

Edenvale, 2nd Greatest Suburb After Orange Grove

1.

The last day of holidays, my parents make me and Ruth come with them to lunch at their family friends.

"Who are these people," I complain, as we drive west out of Edenvale. We've just dropped Rory off at Kyle's house, and I'm annoyed that he's managed to weasel his way out of the engagement.

"Dad's university friends," my mom says, "in Orange Grove. You played with their daughter when you were tiny."

Orange Grove – I have dim memories of a backyard full of braai smoke and a girl whose hair was so long it touched her bum. I don't think I wanted to play with her because she seemed rough.

"The people who had no furniture?"

"Of course they had furniture."

"Voluntary poverty," my dad says. "They have fewer things to show solidarity."

"They were part of The Struggle," my mom adds.

"Very much so. Both Hugh and Anna were detained for a time."

"Were you?" Ruth asks from the back.

"Detained?" my dad laughs. "No, I wasn't that brave."

"But you went with Hugh to that illegal film the one time," my mom says.

My dad smiles as the memory comes back to him. I see him nodding slowly in the rearview mirror.

My mom stretches over to rub his ear, "Your dad was quite radical back in the day."

We turn at the sign to Orange Grove and drive along a street canopied by helicopter trees. A breeze pulls the pods from them and they drift to join the others that have collected in the gutters. The street is wider than those of my suburb in Edenvale, and it feels draughtier. Once we arrive at the house, I realise that we haven't had to go through a boom with a guard house to reach it.

The front door is open and Anna comes out. She rocks my parents back and forth in a hug. Then she shepherds us inside, where I'm curious to see how good my memory is – if I'm correct to recall a lounge of plastic garden chairs, where a girl was drawing on a cardboard box. But now a rug covers a shiny wooden floor and the wall is lined with bookcases. Our shoes make nice echoey sounds as we walk through the house to the back patio. On the way I pass a giant painting of a black man in blue overalls, feeling a pull to touch the paint that has dried in clumps.

Outside there's a pool. At its far end, three teenagers are stretched out on a blanket.

"Romi," Anna calls. A girl gets up and slowly wraps a towel around her. She walks across the grass and joins Anna on the patio. I don't meet her eyes, instead follow the water trickling from her long plait into the crease of her armpit.

"Romi, you and Elizabeth played like hooligans the last time you saw each other," Anna turns to my mom, "Do you remember how they tore across this yard?"

"That must've been ten years ago already," my mom smiles, her eyes roving over the backyard – the terracotta tiles, the cream sun loungers along the poolside. "I don't remember you having a pool the last time we were here."

"It's only a few years old. We installed it when Hugh's foundation won that grant."

Then they talk about how old we are – Romi is going into Grade 10 and I'm starting high school tomorrow.

"How exciting," Anna says, looking between us, as if this information should make us instant friends.

They make their way to the kitchen where Hugh is cooking. We're left on the patio, the Kreepy Krauly ticking in the background.

"You can come join us," Romi finally says.

Ruth looks at me, uncertain whether she's invited too. I give her a noncommittal shrug. I'd prefer if she followed the adults to the kitchen, because her joining lumps me in the same 'child' category as her.

I make out Romi's friends as we approach – a girl with frizzy curls and an Indian boy in a pair of shweshwe swim shorts. He's talking at her with his two fingers raised, which reminds me of Jesus on the free blessing cards at the back of church. The girl looks up at us and makes some space on the blanket.

"You're piercing my ear, Atif," Romi says, wincing at the boy as she sits down. "We're not at provincial champs, can you take it down a notch?"

“I’m explaining to her that it’s a genocide,” Atif says. “Do you know how many South Africans he’s killed so far?”

“Who, Mbeki?” Romi asks. “You can’t say he’s *killed* people. He’s just scared the drugs are toxic.”

That sets him off again. I sit down and fold my legs, watching as Romi takes an olive from a bowl in the middle of the blanket. She raises her hand a few times, which Atif waves away, until she rolls her eyes and spits the olive pip on the grass. There are still some drops of water on his shoulders from swimming. He’s wearing a pair of thick rimmed glasses which makes him look like a nerdy type, but he has a six pack. Rory claims to have one too, but Atif’s muscles look more defined. My best friend Melody showed me a picture of an R&B singer who had ‘sex lines’ and I think Atif might have them too – I can just see the tops of two grooves above his swim shorts.

I lift my eyes, surprised at myself. I re-focus on what he’s saying, and wonder if he’s really referring to our president Mbeki or if there’s another Mbeki, because he seems to be describing a pretty evil person. Finally Romi and the frizzy girl get to speak, and I watch him as he listens to them, taking a deep breath as if to re-regulate himself. Besides figuring out that they’re talking about AIDS, I’m not following anything they’re saying: acronyms like TAC and ARV and government people that I’ve never heard of.

“Anyway,” Romi says, after Atif launches another response, “I think Atif’s proven that he’s getting debating colours again this year. Can we talk about something else now?”

Atif leans back, looking exhausted but pleased. I pull at a clump of grass, painfully aware that I haven’t said anything yet.

Romi turns to me, “Where are you starting high school?”

“Holy Rosary,” I answer. As I say it, I notice how stupid it sounds – a school named after a necklace, which its students are all supposed to agree is holy.

Romi nods but her face looks blank, “I suppose I wouldn’t know any schools in Benoni.”

“You’re from Benoni!” Atif turns to me, “You know Crazy Monkey on MTV? Legends! *Gleaming the cube, man, gleaming the cube*.”

I laugh with him, my chest growing tight at his attention. I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“We’re from Edenvale,” Ruth says, looking at me.

“Well, they’re pretty close,” I say. I yank a long yellow grass root, wishing Ruth would get the message and go sit with the adults.

2.

At lunch, Hugh brings out a large pointed dish with steam coming from the top. He explains that it's a tagine, which he learnt to make on a cooking course in Morocco. My dad laughs and asks Hugh what his old self would think.

"Hugh lived off tomato and onion mix in our student days," he tells us. "He was as skinny as a Biafran."

After lunch, Romi and her friends head to her room. I'm unsure whether I'm invited, but I follow them because I'm not sure what else to do. Ruth gets up too, and almost bumps into me as the frizzy girl suddenly stops in the passage.

"Don't tell me this is a real Penny Siopis, Romes," she says, pointing to a painting hanging between two doors.

I look over her shoulder to see what she's so impressed by. It's a tiny picture of half a paw paw.

"Yup," Romi says, "she's a friend of my mom."

The frizzy girl looks impressed. "She should come speak at art club."

Romi shrugs. "That's not a bad idea. I'm still trying to get William to come. We've got one of his too."

"You mean William *Kentridge*?" The frizzy girl sucks her cheeks in, her eyes wide.

Romi laughs and we follow her to the lounge, where our gazes gravitate towards a large charcoal drawing above the fireplace. The frizzy girl approaches it in the same way we proceed to the altar for communion at school. We wait behind her, giving her space to absorb it. As I look at the picture, I notice a low buzz at the base of my skull. It's the same feeling I would get when I was young and we drove past the patch of veldt near our house – of something being wrong, of knowing something bad has happened.

I find myself walking closer. The scene looks so familiar – the mine dumps, the tangled grass, the pylons that dot the barren landscape. Something jumps inside me – that I've recognised a feeling in this stranger's picture that I thought only I had ever understood.

"William really loves his mine dumps," Romi says. "Remember that film of his that Mrs Stevenson made us watch – pylons and mine dumps, pretty much."

"But it's not about the mine dumps, obviously," Atif says, his one arm on his waist and the light glinting off his glasses as he moves closer to where I'm standing.

“It’s so visceral,” I say, hardly recognising my voice. The moment after I speak, I panic that I’ve used the wrong word. But Atif nods and turns to me. My chest tightens in the same way it did when he laughed with me on the blanket by the pool.

“Exactly,” he says, looking into my eyes. “If you stand and really look at it, you can feel how violent it is – the mine dumps stand for capitalism and exploitation, white complicity.”

“Or simply apartheid, Atif,” Romi says, shaking her head. “My mom says that’s what it’s about. She’s written heaps on his paintings.”

“Of course it’s about apartheid,” frizzy girl says, “William Kentridge was part of The Struggle.”

“I *know* that,” Romi sighs, adjusting her towel round her hips. “That’s how he’s friends with my parents, remember?”

She turns and we follow her out.

In Romi’s room, frizzy girl takes the bed and Atif settles himself on the floor. I’d tried to overtake Ruth in the passage so that I could sit next to him, but she hadn’t got the message and I have to sit near the door instead. Romi starts changing into a patterned jumpsuit under her towel. I’m disappointed to find out that they’re going to watch a local film at an art cinema in Rosebank, and I secretly wish that they’ll invite me to join.

“That’s a Stoned Cherrie creation,” Atif says, once Romi’s tied the jumpsuit’s halter around her neck.

“How’d you know?” she asks.

“I’m big into them – it’s a female, black-owned business.”

He hits his chest lightly with his fist and then forms a peace sign. He does this quietly, his eyes downturned, which makes it feel like a genuine tribute to the designer rather than to look cool. But as he looks up, he sees me looking at him and he smiles. My whole body tightens. I involuntarily pull my gaze away to a poster on Romi’s wall, which is advertising a play at the Market Theatre. It looks like it was pulled off one of the lamp posts on the side of the road.

“Where do you find Stoned Cherrie?” frizzy girl asks.

“The Space in Rosebank,” Atif says.

“Love that place. If we leave now, we can browse before the movie,” Romi says. “I’ll go ask my dad.”

3.

A Sunday blues sets in once they leave. Ruth and I find ourselves on the patio with the adults eating a mango dessert that Hugh has prepared. A thunderstorm has rolled in. I watch fat raindrops making circles in the pool.

On the way home I ask my parents what TAC stands for.

"Treatment Action Campaign," my dad says. "They're putting pressure on the government to try make the AIDS drugs cheaper."

We cross the N3. I try to spy any mine dumps in the distance, wondering how they'll make me feel after seeing that drawing in Romi's lounge. I try to recall how Atif described it – something about violence and white compliance – and I wish I understood what he meant.

"Is Mbeki a good president?" I ask.

"He's a very bright guy, that's for sure," my dad says, "and we also need to be realistic – those drugs cost a fortune."

The *Welcome to Edenvale verwelkom U* sign appears. The road leading into it passes a petrol station with a tower of flats stacked on top of it, most curtainless with their windows hanging open to cool off from the storm. We drive past the dried-up fountain that once heralded the town's centre, and the smoke shop that's replaced the Milky Lane. I notice that it's now advertising knives and pellet guns too. I think back to the leafier streets of Orange Grove. If I grew up there instead, maybe I'd also know the names of famous artists and discuss current affairs and buy clothes from cool stores in Rosebank. Instead, I'm consigned to a backwater town whose main road no one shops in anymore.

We stop at Kyle's house. Rory gets in the car and Ruth starts singing Ms Jackson into his ear.

"Elizabeth, won't you sit between them," my mom says as Rory retaliates by clamping Ruth's thigh until she screams. I unclip my seatbelt and climb over Ruth, who scrambles to the window seat.

Then we pass Holy Rosary convent, where tomorrow I'll hop one building over to the high school. The last time I was there was the night of my primary school farewell, where the boys from St Benedicts were invited to attend. I'd decided to cut my hair in a bob for the occasion. The hairdresser had asked if I was sure, and I said yes because I wanted to feel like a different person. By the time the evening arrived my hair had fluffed itself into the shape of a mushroom. The only boy who asked me to slow dance that evening was Calvin Burger. He was short enough for me to peer over his head to see Melody giggling at me behind him. I

didn't say anything to Calvin Burger. For every other slow dance I went to hide in the bathroom.

"Did I have to go to Holy Rosary for high school?" I ask.

"I thought you wanted to," my mom says.

"It's one of the best schools in Johannesburg," my dad adds.

"Romi and her friends have never even heard of it. I think I would have been happier in a co-ed school."

"Holy Rosary sucks," Rory says.

"Don't use that word," my mom says to him, "that's a sacred object."

She turns to me. "There's research that shows that girls do better in single sex schools. They don't have to be self-conscious about their achievements and there's nothing to distract them."

"And they don't know how to have a normal conversation with boys," I reply.

"Well you're lucky you have an older brother with many friends."

"Oooooh, Kyle," Ruth croons.

"Ew, please," I say.

We approach the guard hut to our suburb. My mom's theory is entirely untrue, I think, as my dad hoots to get the guard's attention. My only conversations with Kyle have been muffled grunts if we pass each other in the passage between Rory's room and the backyard. I don't even know if Rory and his friends have normal conversations with one another, the most I've heard is shouts while playing FIFA. Atif, on the other hand, is different from any boy I've met. I summon him to my mind – his thick glasses and passionate hand gestures – as the guard ambles out the hut and lifts the boom to allow us in.

4.

I feel a change in me after that afternoon in Orange Grove. On the first day of high school the matrics make us stand in a line on the field and throw flour and water balloons at our backs. My classmates squeal around me but I remain stoic, letting my mind travel beyond the fence to a school somewhere outside Edenvale, where Atif is probably telling his friends about all the cool films he watched or things he read over the holidays.

I find it difficult to concentrate for most of the first week. One afternoon while I'm supposed to be memorising the school song, I dial up to the internet on my parents' computer to research William Kentridge. I gasp when I discover more drawings like the one in Romi's

lounge. In one of them, JOHANNESBURG is written in charcoal across a similar landscape of mine dumps and veldt. It's strange to see the letters of my city on a piece of art. I feel proud, and then guilty for feeling proud, because Atif was right that the pictures are violent – I find write ups from art critics as far as London and Chicago who explain hidden messages like 'national trauma' and 'class wars' and 'capitalist greed.' I wonder how they know these things – their meanings feel reserved for a world beyond mine.

There's a clubs and societies fair as part of our orientation. The only extramural I intend to sign up for is Art Club. I convince Melody to join too. But on the way out, I catch sight of the stall for the debating society.

"Look," I tell Melody, pointing at the sign, "Atif is a brilliant debater. He's got something like provincial colours for it."

I'd told Melody about my new crush on the first day of school. She'd been excited to learn this secret, but then looked confused for a moment when she'd heard the Indian-sounding name. I'd watched her recover herself, and since then *Atif* has been whispered between us, like a portal to a reality more exotic and exciting than ours.

Now she follows my eyes to see two black girls manning the stall.

"Isn't that like public speaking?" she asks. "Why would you –?"

I leave her, my feet taking over as they pull me towards the stall. I nod solemnly at the girls behind the desk and pull the clipboard towards me. My hand shakes as I print my name on the sign-up sheet. One of them gives me a funny look when I hand the pen back to them.

5.

At our first art club meet-up, Ms Mathie suggests we go round and introduce ourselves by sharing one artist that's inspired us.

"Da Vinci," Melody says when it's her turn. "I like his painting of God and Adam's fingers almost touching. It shows how close we are to God, yet so far."

"Michelangelo," Ms Mathie corrects her, her fingers drifting up to tuck a strand of hair into her head band. She's done this three times already, as if she's reaching above herself to find her words. She's wearing a plain shirt dress, which looks like it's made of expensive material by the way it drapes her limbs.

I feel my throat closing as Ms Mathie's grey eyes settle on me next. I don't know how to explain my experience with the picture in Romi's lounge. And trying to explain it –

especially in this environment – might undo its intensity. But then I remember how eloquently Atif described his work and I make myself utter Kentridge's name.

"His work is very visceral," I explain, "and it sends a strong message about white capitalism."

Ms Mathie gazes at me. I redirect my focus to some paper mache models hanging behind her, suddenly scared that she'll ask me to explain what I mean by that.

"William Kentridge is one of South Africa's best living artists, girls," she says to the class. "I encourage you all to look at his work, which masterfully explores our country's issues."

I feel Melody's eyes on me, charting how much I've changed over the holidays.

"Have you seen his latest work is showing at the Market Theatre next month, Elizabeth?" Ms Mathie asks.

"Oh really?" I sit up straighter.

"You should look into it. It's different from his previous work – it's based on an absurdist Russian short story. But I'm sure it will be brilliant."

After we've finished going round the circle, Ms Mathie sprinkles coloured paper and old magazines on the tables among us. She tells us that our first project will be a collage of our environments, whatever that word means to us.

I hang back while the rest of the group scrambles for the magazines. I watch them as they start turning the pages of *House and Leisure* and *YOU,* their scissors poised. I'm not sure for how long I sit there until Ms Mathie comes and asks if I need any help.

"I'm struggling to think of anything inspiring," I say.

"Then collage why you're uninspired," Ms Mathie says. "Show us what you don't like, what you find uncomfortable. That's the power of Kentridge's work, isn't it?"

She drifts away. I picture the drive into Edenvale: the dried-up fountain, the main street filled with smoke shops and motorcycle dealers, and the guard lifting a candied boom to our home.

6.

I hear the noise a corridor away – a hum, only broken by outraged laughter and shouts in Zulu. It gets louder as I near the auditorium. I'm expecting that my debating debut will be as successful as the art club's, but as I enter I immediately sense that I'm in the wrong place. I'm the only white person in the room, for one. I'm about to turn around, but a short girl comes up

behind me and booms “Order!” A silence falls, and everyone in the auditorium turns to the front.

Trapped, I slip into the nearest seat. The girl who shouted stands directly in front of me. A long line of badges stretches over her chest. I read her name on the top one – Lieketso Marabeng – and underneath it, the block letters on a large, gold badge: DEBATING SOCIETY CHAIR.

“Every Thursday, we co-create the only conscious space in this school,” she says as she circles the front. I follow the clicks of her school shoes, how her heels strike the floor.

“We all play a part in the revolution,” she continues. “If you’re here, I expect you to start unlearning everything our oppressors have taught us.”

“Hear, hear,” a girl calls from the middle of the room, which is followed by hands banging on the desks.

I look around to see what the teacher must think about all this, but as I search the faces in the rows above me, I realise there’s no adult in sight. While Lieketso continues to speak, my mind hangs onto her request, unsure of what she means – who our oppressors are supposed to be, how I could possibly unlearn something.

When she’s finished, Lieketso divides us into groups, where committee members run through the structure of a debate.

“For next week,” my group’s committee member says, “you’ll do a mock debate. You three will be the proposition,” she points to me and two others. “The topic – write it down – ‘This house supports the disbanding of the tripartite alliance.’ Questions?”

I look at my team members, Zaheera and Olwethu, whose expressions I can’t read.

“The tri-apartheid alliance,” I finally say, “by that, do you mean…”

The committee member studies me for a moment before turning to my teammates.

“Can anyone help her?”

“ANC, Cosatu, SACP,” Zaheera answers.

“The South African Communist Party,” the committee member explains.

“Ah yes, of course,” I say, and write the names down. I didn’t know a communist party existed in South Africa.

In the week that follows, I spend a few nights after supper researching the topic on the internet. I don’t know what I expect to find – maybe a group of people at a press conference wearing Russian looking hats. But instead I find pictures of masses of black people in red, marching the streets of downtown Johannesburg and waving flags with axes on them. They make me feel funny, and I wonder if it’s too late to pull out of the debate. The only things I

know about communism are what my parents must have told me – that it doesn't believe in God and it doesn't work.

A day before the debate, I meet with my team.

"Here," Zaheera says when she sees the three sentences I've written on my exam pad. "You can be the second speaker and take the rest of my points."

She's typed and printed out three pages, and gives me the last one.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't mind," she says, "We're comrades."

That evening in my room, I read Zaheera's words in front of my cupboard mirror.

"*It's clear that Mbeki is no longer serving the majority of this country. His policies are pandering to the white minority and global elite. You can see this on the ground. Think of the exploitation of our working class – the mine workers travelling miles underground to service the greed of the capitalists, the domestic workers travelling miles everyday to service the white minority in their gated communities. While our president is planning to build a high speed train that only the people in Sandton will use. My fellow comrades, why should the SACP and Cosatu continue to support the ruling party?*"

As I read the question, I look up at myself in the mirror – my solemn eyes, my darkened brow – and I notice that goosebumps are riding up my arms. I continue to read, picturing myself circling the front of the auditorium like Lieketso did, and the audience banging their desks each time I drive a point home. The more I rehearse, the more I think I understand what they're saying. The pylons and mine dumps surface in my mind, and I glimpse their hidden messages, what the art critics meant by all those big terms. Then I imagine Atif sitting in the audience as I read "*People, not profits!*", my final line. His glasses gleam as he murmurs 'Hear, hear,' and quietly taps his knee.

7.

There's an ominous event in our school diaries for February – the Valentine's dance. Unlike the primary school farewell, it requires that we invite a partner, a boy.

Melody already has a date – Rory. She asks him one afternoon in my kitchen while he's making himself a bowl of ProNutro.

"Sure," he shrugs.

We're all silent as he scrapes the powder from the side of his cereal bowl and puts the milk back in the fridge. I look at Melody once he's left – her face is as fluorescent as the

moon. If it were anyone else she'd asked, I'd be squealing with her, but for Rory it's just weird.

"Are you gonna invite Atif?" she asks, realising the need to downplay her elation.

Obviously, Atif was the first person I thought of when I heard about the dance, but I shrug and tell Melody I'll see.

At our next debating meeting, I ask Zaheera if she knows a guy called Atif. We're preparing for an inter schools tournament – my first one – and she looks up from editing my speech.

"Why would I know him?" she asks. "Do you know how many Indians there are in Jo'burg?"

"That's not why I asked," I say, growing warm. "He's a really good debater. He has provincial colours."

Zaheera is a rising star. Despite only being in Grade 8, Lieketso has already sent her to the provincial trials. She frowns at me and I can tell that she's contemplating whether or not to answer.

"Atif Ghaffar?" she asks. "He's not that good. His rebuttal was all over the place."

"Well, not as good as you, obviously."

She continues to study me, somehow aware that I have more to say. So I confess that I want to invite Atif to the dance, but I don't know how to get his number. I can't read her reaction to that. I look down at my speech in her hands – the points I've come up with to propose the motion, 'This house would nationalise the mines.' The page looks pretty much overwritten by her corrections. Maybe she's wondering if someone like Atif would agree to go with me.

"I'll see what I can do," she finally says.

8.

The dance is all my classmates talk about – they discuss which of the St Benedict's boys are already taken and design dresses on their exam pads during class. Melody's picked out two metres of bright fuchsia material from Fabric City and is getting her dress sewn by her granny. I try to distance myself from the hype, but I can't stop fantasising about Atif as my date – the conversations we'd have, the touches we might share. But even more, that inviting him could be the start of a life so much more inspiring than my current one.

That's when I strike upon the idea to wear a Stoned Cherrie dress. I ask my mom if she can take me to The Space one day after school.

"Rosebank?" she asks, when I explain where it is. "What's wrong with Eastgate?"

I know my mom doesn't want to drive to Rosebank because she hates crossing Louis Botha Avenue with its taxis and pedestrians who clog up the street.

"Stoned Cherrie is Proudly South African," I say, trying to remember Atif's reasons for its significance. "I think it's important to support local businesses."

I can see she's not sure what to say to that, so she relents.

On the way to Rosebank, I tell my mom that Melody asked Rory to the dance while he was making himself a bowl of Pronutro.

"That's special," my mom says. "Your brother will be at your first school dance. How about you take Kyle so that he has a friend?"

We turn into Louis Botha Avenue and she locks the car doors. She's too distracted by the approaching red robot to notice that I don't respond. I sense her brace as people move between the cars. A taxi pulls up next to us, a man hanging out of its open doorway. This is the real Jo'burg, I think, and I'm impressed by my insight. A poem starts to form in my head: *The fear of Louis Botha / Taxis taking over…*

When we get to Rosebank, I see a poster that has fallen off a lamp post by the car park. I stop in my tracks.

"William Kentridge's new show!" I shout, recognising his name emblazoned above what looks like a giant red nose on legs.

"Who's that?" my mom asks.

"My favourite artist."

"I've never heard of him."

"He's a friend of Romi's parents. He was also involved in The Struggle."

"Oh – maybe Dad knows him too, then."

I look around us. There are mostly shoppers making their way through the parking lot and the car guards are busy shepherding cars in and out.

"Do you think I can take it?" I ask.

"The poster? What on earth for?"

I know her brows are furrowed under her sunglasses. But she hands me the car keys and I snatch the poster up, holding it against my chest as I run back to the car.

9.

The Space has a distinct scent – sandalwood, maybe – which softens the mall sounds from outside. Inside, the golden clothes rails line up like vineyards. I walk through them and let my fingers graze the outfits, which clink on their hangers as I pass. I touch a silk shirt dress, similar to the one that Ms Mathie wears.

I see Romi's jumpsuit and hurry over.

"Here!" I call to my mom, and start to rake my way through the Stoned Cherrie rail. Most of the dresses have prints and beads and puffed sleeves, and by the time I've got to the end, I realise that the jumpsuit seems to be the most normal-looking piece in the collection.

My mom comes over, her eyes drifting around the store. I pick a tasselled dress and a few others I might be able to pull off before heading to the changeroom. I try each dress on, my mom frowning each time I pull back the velvet curtain. "Striking," she says of one; "Very flamboyant," of another.

"Which is your favourite?" I ask, once I've emerged wearing the final dress – a shweshwe print in burnt orange.

"I'm not sure," she says. "We could always look around a bit more and come back here."

"It comes with a headwrap," the shop assistant says, who's been watching on the side. She approaches me, her mouth pinched as she guides the material around my head.

I look at myself in the mirror when she's done. All my hair is hidden by the headwrap's towering folds and my face radiates with the burnt hues of the dress. I look completely unlike myself. And I know that this is more than an outfit for some Valentine's dance. Rather, it stands for something much deeper – my cultural and political awakening.

10.

On her way to her seat in the bus, Zaheera hands me a slip of paper. I unfold it to see Atif's full name in her neat hand, along with a cellphone number. I tuck it into my shirt pocket and touch my heart to try calm it down. Then I open my speech for nationalising the mines. I'd typed out the final version and practised it for my dad the night before.

"Convincing points, Lizzy-Pie," he'd said. "If I didn't know better, I'd think I'd raised a real commie."

We drive out of Edenvale to a high school in Linksfield, where clumps of students in different uniforms are waiting in the carpark. Once we've joined them, one of the organisers leads my team to a classroom.

"We're just waiting for the adjudicators," the organiser says as Zaheera, Olwethu, and I take our seats at the front. The opposition is already sitting across from us – three boys from a private school in the north of Joburg – and I start rereading my speech to avoid meeting their eyes.

More people shuffle in and I hear Zaheera jerk in her seat. When I look up, I can tell something's wrong by the way she's leaning over Olwethu to stare at me, her eyes large and solemn. Then I see him – Atif, in a deep green blazer decorated with scrolls and badges, taking his seat at the adjudicator's table at the back.

I look back down. A white page. Black words wafting across my vision. But they're senseless, as if all the letters have turned to Russian.

"What?" Olwethu whispers.

"Nothing," I hear Zaheera hiss, her voice suddenly very far away.

The debate must be starting because she gets up, a blurry figure moving to the table in the middle. I continue looking at my page, but all my senses are being absorbed by the green presence of Atif at the back of the class. Maybe he's recognised me instantly. Or if not, that his mind is turning, trying to land on where he knows me from – a summer afternoon by a pool, or the charge between two strangers as they gaze at a piece of art.

There's a smattering of claps. Zaheera sits down. I didn't hear a word she said.

The first speaker of the opposition goes up and I try to bring myself back to the classroom. I adjust my posture – lean forward and tap my fingers on my lips to make myself look deeply critical about what he's saying. But his voice also sounds distant, as if I'm wearing giant ear muffs. I sense my teammates springing up a few times to object to something, after which they lean across to me, whispering points I can raise in my rebuttal when I go next. I nod vigorously, jot some notes on my exam pad.

I know it's my turn now. My legs tell me this, but my mind is carrying me somewhere else – to a darkened auditorium where I'm making my way through an expectant crowd, and setting my speech on the podium before me.

"The mine dumps," I boom. "What do they really stand for?"

But when I lift my head to gaze at my audience, I'm in a classroom somewhere in Linksfield, and the only people here are the organiser and two adjudicators. One of them is Atif – the person who's led me to this exact moment – and he's looking straight at me.

We stare at each other, his expression glazed by his glasses. I take a breath to continue, but when I look back down at my notes, I see that 'mine dumps' was the only thing I'd written. I stand there, trying to connect the question back to my rebuttal. I know what I'm trying to say. And I know that Atif understands too – he was the one who told me about the mine dumps' hidden meanings: the capitalist –

"Forget the rebuttal," I hear Zaheera's voice from somewhere far away, "just go on to your points."

I hear myself shuffling the papers to my speech. Water is pushing at my eyes, trying to escape. And when I look at the page, the giant words – typed out in double-sized font to help me keep my place – morph into big black blobs. How beautifully I read these exact words to my dad the night before, and all I want is to be back there in Edenvale, at home.

"I'm so sorry," I squeak before I run out the room.

11.

Rory asks Kyle to the Valentines Dance for me. To try and make me feel better, Melody says she knows three girls in our grade who have crushes on him. He and Melody come to our house beforehand for pictures. She looks like Ariel in her fishtail dress. Rory says I look like the first lady of Nigeria.

"Put your arms around each other," my dad says to us behind the camera.

I feel Kyle holding my shoulder bone between his fingers. It's the only time we touch that evening.

On my birthday, my mom gives me an envelope. I open it to find five red and black pieces of cardboard inside. She's booked tickets for the Kentridge show as a surprise. I stare at them, unsure how to tell her that I don't want to go.

I'd spent the rest of the inter schools debate in the girl's bathroom. The first thing I did when I got home was take the Kentridge poster off my wall. And the next day I'd quit debating, and art club too. Ms Mathie had asked me why and tried to convince me to stay.

"Your collage is really coming together," she'd said. "I can feel the claustrophobia in it."

I'd looked at the floor and muttered something about needing to find myself again, how I'd been masquerading as someone I'm not.

"What's wrong?" my mom asks me now, when I fail to say anything about the tickets in my hand. "There's one for each of us. I thought you were dying to go."

“I should phone Hugh to get the scoop on this guy,” my dad says. “Mom says he was part of The Struggle.”

So I find myself piling into the car one Saturday evening, Rory complaining about the compulsory cultural outing and Ruth singing Sorry Ms Jackson until she finds her head locked in his arm.

At the Market Theatre, we enter a lobby full of people who look like Hugh and Anna, most of them sipping wine. I see a girl with a long plait down her back. Her arm is slung around the shoulders of an Indian-looking guy. I go cold and step behind a man in a polo neck. But the couple turns, and I see it’s not Romi, or Atif.

Once we’ve filed into the small theatre, an orchestra begins to play and a man starts screaming in French from somewhere in the pit. Ruth leans forward to look at my mom. I keep my gaze neutral, pretending like this is what happens in Kentridge’s plays all the time. Rory pokes me.

“What’s he saying?” he asks, not bothering to keep his voice down.

I shrug and look ahead. A nose on legs appears on a screen above the orchestra pit. It transforms itself to the music – a horse, a nose on a horse, a person twirling a red flag. I try to look for the hidden messages – what the art critics would say it all means. But instead I’m taken back to Romi’s house, where I’m eating mango dessert while the rain starts to fall. The memory collapses into Louis Botha Avenue, the central locking clicking on the car doors. And now I’m in The Space, how pained the shop assistant looks as she wraps my head with shweshwe print.

The music crescendos as the nose tries to climb a set of diving board steps. I watch it fall again and again, and I cry softly for its struggle.

Twenty minutes later, the lights come up.

“Is it over?” I hear my dad asking my mom.

“It’s the interval,” the lady next to her says, and I notice her smirk.

My mom jerks as the lady tries to move past her.

“I must have fallen asleep,” she says.

“This play sucks,” Rory says.

I look around, hoping my family won’t notice my red eyes. Ruth’s also nodded off on my dad’s shoulder.

“We can leave if you want,” I say.

My mom gazes up at me from her seat. “I’m not sure what to do,” she says, “I keep falling asleep.”

We leave the theatre, only a few smokers outside the entrance to witness our escape. My dad's talking about the dancing nose the whole drive home.

"That was a shocker, wait until I tell Hugh and Anna. But what's it about, Elizabeth? Were you getting any of it?"

"I don't think the point is to get it," I reply, "you had to feel it."

I press my forehead against the window, looking for the mine dumps' silent mounds.

My dad takes the offramp. Ruth leans into me as we round the familiar bend into Edenvale. Her head feels like a boulder and I'm about to push her off, but let her sleep. I watch Edenvale appearing in the night. Then we approach the guardhouse to our neighbourhood and wait for permission to go in.

2007

Where Should We Put This, Lizzy-Pie?

1.

The wind is howling on opening day, running off Devil's Peak and across the carpark. It's harassing the hair of the girl in front of me, fanning open the white of her scalp as it whips over her face. We're in a line of other first year girls and their parents, waiting to enter the residence. Most of them are surrounded by large shopping bags from upmarket homeware stores. My mom, on the other hand, has managed to fit all my bedding in her suitcase, which she checked in on the plane. When we've passed registration and are inside my new room, she makes up my bed, smoothing over the creases of my childhood duvet cover. She places Yellow Rabbit on the pillow.

"Where should we put this, Lizzy-Pie?" she asks, holding up a statue of Mary next, which has somehow made its way into my bag. I point to a far corner of the bookshelf above my bed. On the other side of the dividing wall, my new roommate's mom is helping her unpack too. I hear them complaining about the stains on the mattress and the lack of cupboard hanging space.

I stick my head out my window. My new view. A carpark, mostly. But if I crane my head further to the left, I can just see Devil's Peak, and Markus's residence under it – a short walk up the hill. We've had long talks about entering our university years together. The importance of setting boundaries, allowing each other the freedom to try new things. My mom also gave her advice, broached carefully around 10,000 metres in the sky on our way to Cape Town. She'd asked whether I'd thought about my and Markus's new proximity, our new, unchaperoned lifestyle, and the value of practising self-control.

"Yes," I'd hissed, withering at the idea of the other passengers overhearing her.

"It's easy for young people to lose their way in their first year," my mom continued, "They're not used to so much freedom. Apparently Samata Singh's gone off the rails."

Samata Singh was my school's head girl from the year before me. My mom went on to tell me that Samata saw her friend Sharon for a pedicure while she was home for the holidays, and that Sharon picked up a whiff of marijuana on Samata's clothes.

I dip my head back into the room. My mom is already gathering her things. She's pinned my favourite paintings to my pinboard, as well as photos of my family, and me and Markus. Mary is gazing at me serenely from the corner of the bookshelf. Yellow Rabbit is smiling at me from the pillow. But he looks lonely and out of place in his new environment. A wave of anxiety runs over me. I want to stall my mom, convince her to change her flight to the next day. But I don't say anything, and she hugs me.

"You're going to be very happy here," she says.

I pull away after a second, conscious of our silence. It fills the whole room, competing with my roommate's rustling on the other side. As we make for the door, we glimpse her mom draping a plush turquoise throw over a linen bedspread, which matches the mound of scatter cushions on top of it.

"I should have bought you a mattress cover, at least," my mom apologises as we head down the stairs. I follow her to the hired car, where she traces a cross on my forehead before getting in. I stand in the carpark and watch her drive away. The freedom balloons around me. I squint up at the boys' residence on the hill, the wind pushing my back towards it. I will myself not to take the short walk up, to find Markus's new room, and curl up on his bed while he unpacks his things.

2.

Sometime in the early morning, I'm roused by the sounds of chanting below my window. My ears adjust in the near light – they're boys' voices and the words that reach me form something about ploughing farmers' daughters, screwing carpenters' daughters. I turn over, disturbed by the strange images in my head.

When I wake up two hours later, I'm holding Yellow Rabbit. The room feels safer in the daylight. I can't tell if the songs I'd heard in the pre-dawn were real.

This evening there's a boat party for all the first years in our residence. Before my roommate Blair leaves for breakfast, she asks if I'd like to get ready together.

"Sure," I say, chuffed at the invitation.

Later when I get back from orientation, two other girls are dressing in my room. One is leaning over our basin mirror, her tanned breasts proffered in a push-up bra.

"Vix and George," Blair tells me when she notices my halting smile, "my friends from Durbs."

She digs around in her shoe cupboard and emerges with a white bottle.

"There's coke in the fridge, Vix," she says, waggling a finger at the one girl to fetch it. She lines up four tea mugs and starts to pour a clear liquid into them.

"Elizabeth, would you like some?"

"What is it?" I ask.

"Malibu," she says. "It's got a coconutty taste. You want to try some of mine?"

She tops up her mug with coke and gives it to me. I take a tiny sip.

"No, thanks," I say, surprised by its sweetness. Although I can't taste it, I'm almost certain it has alcohol in it. It doesn't seem like a smart idea to start drinking before getting on a boat.

I see George observing my side of the room in the basin mirror, a curious expression on her face. I have the urge to step in front of my Mary statue. But there are more pressing things to worry about. I go to my cupboard and start to flip through the pile of t-shirts my mom had unpacked for me just yesterday. Everything suddenly looks like it belongs to an 11-year-old.

"Come join us when you're ready," Blair calls to me.

I glance over to her side of the room. She's perched on her bed in a purple boob tube dress, her mug of Malibu resting in her hands. I finally choose a black t-shirt and jeans and change behind the cupboard door.

On Blair's side, there's a warm smell of hair dryer mixed with grown-up perfume. Blair pushes some scatter cushions off her bed to make space for me to sit. While they continue to talk about some girl they knew from their old school, I look at her pinboard. It's covered with at least 20 photos of her and her friends at night clubs or tanning on beaches – a brunette with a sprinkle of freckles on her nose, surrounded by blonde girls. Maybe it's the perfume or the lingering taste of Malibu that puts a ticklish, unsettled feeling in my stomach. I'd feel safer if I had a roommate more like me. Blair looks a bit wild, the kind of girl that could go off the rails like Samata Singh did.

*

At the boat party, I sip one Smirnoff Spin as slowly as I can. Around me, my res mates have ordered fish bowls filled with colourful drinks. I wonder how they've all learned to drink so much.

I tell Markus about it when I visit him the next day.

"And Blair is hiding alcohol in our room," I say, "which means we could get expelled."

"Everyone does that," he says. He's swivelling on his desk chair while I talk. I'm sitting on his bed, the first time I've seen his new room.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"I went to a mate's pre-drinks last night, and another mate's the previous night. They all had drinks in their rooms. No one checks."

"You went out two nights in a row?"

"We have to. It's part of Orientation. And then we have to get up at four every morning to serenade the girls. I'm broken."

"What girls?" I ask.

"The girls' residences. We were in the carpark outside yours yesterday."

I sit back against his wall. "You were singing those horrible songs?"

"They're just for fun. They're not serious."

"I *knew* I wasn't imagining them. I can't believe you were singing! Do you even understand what they're saying?"

I stare at Markus, waiting for his answer. But he's distracted by his new maths textbook on the desk. His brows crinkle as he looks for a good spot to tear off the wrapping. On the shelf behind him is his *Narnia* book collection, just like he'd arranged it in his room at home. My shoulders relax as I spot more familiar things – his guitar, his neck chain with the cross pendant, the picture of us at his matric dance that his mom framed.

3.

Wednesday of Orientation Week is also the start of Lent. I'm supposed to be fasting, but I serve myself a small portion of eggs and baked beans at breakfast when Blair asks why I'm not eating. I don't feel like explaining my reasons, certain that she won't understand.

In the afternoon, there's an Ash Wednesday service at the Catholic chaplaincy. I walk up the hill from my residence, the sun still high in the February heat. By the time I'm inside, I'm sweating and feel dizzy from missing lunch. The altar server and her incense burner make me feel worse – she's swinging it vigorously on its chain, clogging the chapel with sweet smoke.

The nausea comes on while the priest reads the gospel. I try to focus on his words, but my eyes settle on a carving of a Madonna in the corner, and I wonder if my mom noticed how I tried to hide the Mary statue on the bookshelf in my room. I wish I'd hugged her goodbye as long as she wanted to. Then I taste the beans and powdery eggs and know I'm going to be sick. I stumble across the other students, sprinkling the ones in front of me as I look for a way out.

Blair laughs when I tell her about it, after I arrive home in a ZIMSOC t-shirt and a pair of soccer shorts. A student who lived in the chaplaincy residence had lent them to me, then quietly cleaned up the mess in the aisle while the priest blessed the ashes. Once I'd changed, they'd let me join the line to receive a cross on my forehead.

"The worst part is that everyone thought I'd drunk too much the night before," I tell Blair. "I could see it on their faces."

Blair starts cackling. "I'm sorry," she says, "you look so traumatised."

I turn to the basin mirror, where a thundery Elizabeth looks back at me. The cross on my forehead has smudged into a black cloud of ash.

"Is Markus also Catholic?" Blair asks. She'd met him yesterday, when he'd come to see my room. He'd extended his hand to her formally and asked her questions about her business science degree, how many siblings she had, and what societies she was planning to join – things I hadn't even asked her yet. I can tell she likes him, just like most people do.

"No, but he's also religious," I say. "We actually met at the Christian camp between our brother and sister schools."

"Cute. Was it love at first sight?"

I smile. "Sort of."

I think back to that weekend, now well over a year ago. It was the last day of camp and we were invited to share our testimonies. Markus had got up and shared his experience of the night before. While most of us had used the previous evening to flirt with each other after praise and worship had ended, he'd found a spot by the dam to cry and pray.

"I'd never felt so loved," he'd said. "I knew from last night that, truly, God is all I need."

I obviously don't tell Blair all these details – just about how I'd been eyeing Markus out in the worship band all weekend, where he was second guitar. He didn't make any grand displays like some of them did, only reverent strumming with his eyes closed. I'd felt strongly

that his testimony was a sign for me to approach him, to tell him how much it moved me. And so, completely out of character, I did.

Blair goes to the mirror and spritzes on some perfume. The room fills with the scent from the boat party night, which I'll relate in the future to the start of something new. She flicks her blouse to let it air through her. She's going to the wine society's opening event.

"My dad says if he's sending me to Cape Town for university, I better come back knowing a thing or two about wine," she says.

The scent lingers after she's closed the door behind her. I look out the window, tilt my head in the direction of Devil's Peak. The sky is still light. I wonder what Markus is up to tonight. I fight the urge to walk up to his room and tell him about the antics of my day. But we'd promised to give each other space. I should be out somewhere making friends.

4.

It must be God that makes Jasmine talk to me. We meet on a packed shuttle from Hiddingh, the arts campus in Cape Town's city centre. She gets my attention through the legs of a standing student and asks if I'm also in first year fine art. I nod, then peer across the aisle to where she's sitting. From her sandals and jeans, she doesn't look like she's a fine art student. Everyone else in my class wears deadpan expressions and looks like they've stumbled out of an Andy Warhol film. For the rest of the trip, we swap the usual first year fact sheet – where we're from, what res we're in, and how we're finding the first week of term.

"It's okay," I say, when that question comes up. "I'm still taking a while to find where I fit in."

Jasmine nods in the same way my mom does when I decide to be vulnerable with her – deeply, prompting me to say more. But we're nearing the first stop at the university's main campus, and I'm not sure how to go on.

"Hey," she says, "this might not be your vibe at all, but you should come visit my home group sometime. There's some really cool people."

"Like a church home group?"

"Ja," she says, a half proud, half sheepish look on her face. "I mean, I promise I don't just sit on these shuttles trying to evangelise strangers."

I smile at that and tell her I'm a Christian as well.

“You know, how cool is God?” she says, sitting back in her chair. “I just had an urge to talk to you and now I know why.”

I nod, but feel a little embarrassed too, aware that Jasmine hasn’t lowered her voice the entire journey. I sneak a look at the student who’s standing between us. I recognise him from our class – he’s worn the same trench coat and long sock every day this week. I can’t read his expression behind his sunglasses, but he can’t have avoided listening to the entire unfolding of our fateful meeting.

We exchange numbers before Jasmine gets off at the first stop. The trench coat guy takes her seat. I ride the rest of the trip to the residences in silence.

When I get off and reach the entrance of my res, I see a familiar figure sitting on the wall outside of it.

“Hey you,” Markus says, as I bound up to him.

“Why are you stalking me?” I ask, reaching my arms up to his waist for a hug.

“I missed you. I know we’re only supposed to see each other in two days, but I got you a treat.”

He unzips his backpack and takes out a paper bag. I peer inside to see a white dusted pastry, which he tells me is an apple cinnamon samoosa.

“From the Hare Krishna stand,” he says. “You have to start queuing five minutes before they open otherwise they sell out.”

He dusts some powder off my cheek after my first bite, then jumps off the wall. We walk slowly up the hill towards his res and stop to sit on a bench that overlooks a soccer field. We exchange notes about the last two days – Markus’s eccentric statistics lecturer, the food at res, how strangely the students on the Hiddingh campus dress, how homesick I feel.

“I met a nice girl though,” I say. “I think we could be friends.”

“You see?” Markus lifts his hand for a high five.

“She’s a Christian, she invited me to her home group on Thursdays. You should come too.”

“Ja, maybe,” he says. “Thursdays are crazy, though. Everyone goes to Foxy’s for jug night.”

I swing my feet, trying to shake out my annoyance at his response.

“I know it’s first year and all,” I say, “but you’ve been going out every night, almost. How are you going to manage when your studies start to pick up?”

“Come on, poppet,” he says, his voice low like a parent’s. “Remember what we talked about. We’d said we’d try new things, have fun.”

“Yes, but it’s a balance,” I reply, my voice rising a little. “Do you remember Samata Singh, my head girl in the year above me? My mom says she’s smoking dagga now. And I ran into Chantelle the other day. She told me it’s true. Apparently she’s addicted.”

“Oh ja,” Markus says, “there’s been something I’ve been needing to tell you. I tried hubbly bubbly the other night.”

“That thing with the pipe?”

“There’s nothing bad about it. You’re just smoking water. But I figured you’d want to know.”

I look at the field below us, trying to wade through the red clouds that are massing in my mind. The soccer players slow at the sound of the whistle. One of them claps the other on the back – easy, no worries about things like fitting in, or making friends, or a boyfriend who’s doing things entirely at odds with who he is. Markus is supposedly the only person in Cape Town who understands me. I want to wind back to my first bite of the samoosa and forget everything he’s said since then.

5.

I spot a white Tazz pulling up in the residence car park. Jasmine manages to pull open the back door as I approach. I duck in, trying not to trample on the papers all over the car’s floor.

“Hey, friend,” she says from the front passenger seat, and reaches to clutch my hand hello. The driver of the Tazz turns around and extends the same excited smile. He has a handlebar moustache and is wearing a white linen shirt. He looks like a man from Victorian England. Jasmine introduces him as Bart and explains to him that I’m also studying fine art.

“Another wild artist,” Bart says. “You’ll fit right in.”

“Bart’s in fourth year. Sculpture.”

I can now picture him wafting across the Hiddingh campus, his shirt billowing around him.

We park outside a block of flats somewhere in Newlands. We take the stairs up, following the sound of a guitar to the third floor where a light shines from a door at the end of the corridor. The flat is packed – at least five people holding cups of tea in the tiny kitchen, and the rest on chairs or couches or the floor in the lounge. Most of them look up as we enter

and give the same greetings as Jasmine and Bart – *Hey, friends* – warm and glowing. Even the guitar player looks up from his strumming and raises his brows in a hello, as does the woman on the floor next to him, who's singing in a low, lilting voice.

Jasmine walks over to a bearded man in the corner. He turns from the conversation he's having, a book in his hand.

"Heeeey Jazz, is this our visitor?"

She introduces me to Russell, the home group leader. He hands the book to the guy he's been speaking to.

"And this is Patrick," Russell says, introducing him. "Pat's new here too – also first year. You guys should chat later."

He opens his hands towards me in welcome. The woman who's been singing on the floor looks up and comes over.

"This is my wife, Madeline," Russell says. Madeline takes my hand in both palms and gives it a slow shake. Her hands are very cold.

"So, tell me about yourself," he continues. "Have you found a church here yet?"

I explain to Russell that I'm Catholic, so I've been going to mass at the chaplaincy on campus.

"But I'd love to attend your home group, if you'll allow me," I say, looking around as more young people filter into the lounge, all laughing and chatting as they find their places.

"Ah," Rusell says. Madeline looks towards him, as if waiting for his response to inform her own. "Everyone's welcome," he continues, "but let's see how you go. And you should definitely join us one Sunday for the full experience."

He leaves to the kitchen to call the final people through. I look around, then take a seat next to Patrick, who's bouncing his leg up and down.

"So, what are you studying?" I ask him.

He mumbles something I can't hear, then clears his throat and repeats it. I watch his Adam's apple quivering as he speaks.

"Oh, AcSci? As in, actuarial science? My boyfriend's doing that too."

He nods. My palms start to stick to my pants as we lapse into silence. Around me, everyone else is engaged in conversation. Maybe I'm like Patrick, I think, ill-socialised for this new phase of life. And that these sorts of church groups, who have to welcome the misfits, are the only places that will have us.

My eyes fall on the book in Patrick's lap.

"*The Case for a Creator,*" I read.

"Intelligent Design," he mumbles. "You know – counter theory to Darwinism."

"Russell's doing a PhD in philosophy," Jasmine chimes in as she takes the empty seat on my other side. "He's really smart."

Patrick taps on the book in his hand, nods a little.

*

While Russell talks through a bible passage, I look around the lounge and realise it's the first time I've been in a real home since moving into res. There are plants and lamps and framed pictures of Russell and Madeline's wedding day. I'd prefer to stay here rather than go back to my res room, with its plastic chair and metal bed frame.

When home group is officially over, Russell asks if I want a small glass of wine.

"Sure," I say, surprised. I join some others on the couch, realising too how I've missed the feeling of sinking into a heavy piece of furniture.

"It's a grenache," Bart says, giving his glass a swirl.

I take a small sip, feeling it warm my throat as it goes down.

"Nice for the summer," Russell says. He turns to me, and looks generously into my eyes. "So, you're an artist like Bart and Jasmine."

I nod bashfully.

"What a gift – I've been telling Bart for years that that campus needs Jesus. Did he tell you that he and some other folk have started early morning prayers at Hiddingh?"

I look at Bart, who smiles at me.

"It's hard being a Christian in the humanities," Russell continues, "but that's why I'm called to do philosophy. It needs strong believers."

"You should join," Bart says to me. "We meet on the grass outside the library and pray for the campus. It takes 10 minutes max."

I nod slowly. I'm not that excited by the thought of my classmates seeing me, but I'm also impressed by Bart's confidence to pray in public.

The guitarist has started playing again. He's harmonising with Madeline to a worship song I recognise.

"I think my boyfriend will like this group too," I say. "He also plays guitar."

*

When I arrive back at res, the corridors are quiet and bright, most of the first years still out. And my room is shrouded, absent of Blair who's at the Foxy's jug night, where Markus is too. I brush my teeth and wash my face, comforted by the events of the evening. And comforted too that Blair will be here when I wake up.

6.

My weeks begin to take on a familiar rhythm. Most days, I eat lunch with Jasmine on the grass outside the Hiddingh library. Sometimes Bart joins us, flopping on his back with plaster up to his elbows. The days I'm on the upper campus for my psychology elective, I meet Markus for lunch at the Hare Krishna stand. We sit on the steps by the commerce building and he tells me how chance works, and the one guy who sits at the front of his lecturers asking stupid questions, and the rest of his class who are dropping out of AcSci like flies. I tell him about a man who preserved a shark in formaldehyde and called it art, how we're exploring our own positionality as artists, and different types of hegemonic discourses.

"Surely religion would be a hegemonic discourse?" Markus asks, making the term sound easy on his lips.

"I suppose," I say, annoyed at his choice of example. "It could be an oppressive worldview if it's misused. Like any ideology."

One lunchtime Markus tells me about how his friend Wayne-o decided to go bush diving after jug night – he jumped from his bedroom window into the bushes behind their res.

"So Ricardo jumps after him and a branch goes straight through his butt. He was bleeding out of it for three days."

I stare at Markus. I want to laugh, but I try to hide it with my concern.

"You didn't take him to the hospital or anything?" I ask.

"Nah, he'll be fine," Markus says. His eyes dance at me until I relent, snorting a stream of mucus into my hand. I hold my hand away from me, disgusted, which makes Markus laugh harder as he moves to wipe it with a serviette from the Hare Krishna stand.

"Promise me you won't do anything as stupid," I say, once he's done.

"Promise," Markus says, putting his hand on my calf. He looks at me with soft eyes. His hair has grown so long it's started to form curls around his neck.

"You should join for jug night sometime, though," he says.

“I have home group on Thursdays,” I say, “plus it sounds wild.”

“I’ll look after you. And Blair will be there too.”

I think about Blair sleeping late on Fridays, me tiptoeing around her to make it out in time for the shuttle to the Hiddingh campus. Last Friday I’d spotted a hairy foot sticking out the bottom of her bed. Once I’d got over my shock, I opened the window to air the room from the heavy smell of boy. She’d apologised afterwards.

“I was so wasted,” she’d said, “otherwise I’d never have invited him up. But it was just fraps, I promise.”

“What’s fraps?” I’d asked.

“Friendly naps, like no sex.”

I’d felt jealous of her for some reason then. Being able to do things for the fun of it and blaming it on being drunk. Now, as the lunch hour comes to an end, the same feeling comes over me. The stories Markus is collecting are like the ones my dad would tell me and my siblings about his varsity days, when we were old enough. Even the one time he was so broke, he ‘dined and dashed’. My mom had overheard that one, and he’d laughed at her dismay.

I get up, dust off the stones that have stuck to my pants. Markus kisses me goodbye on the forehead and I’m alone again, being passed by clumps of chattering students as they make their ways to class. I’m left with the suspicion that I’m not doing this properly, that first year should be the best time of my life.

7.

But then, like a sign from God, come the invitations to good, clean fun. Like the movie nights at Bart’s digs, where we watch Italian neorealist films on his projector. We sip wine and discuss them afterwards, but never get drunk. And the live show that Gabriel, the guitarist from home group, is playing in. Seven of us crowd into Bart’s Tazz to watch him perform in his folk band at a crowded bar in Observatory. And the hike to a secret waterfall, where we take turns jumping into a pool of dark water from the top. The group watches from below and cheers when, after Bart’s gentle coaxing, I finally take the leap.

That’s the time when Bart tries to baptise me. He jumps in after me and swims over to where I’m recovering on the other side of the pool. When he tells me about the idea, I laugh because I think he’s joking.

"Now? By who?" I ask.

"In Matthew 28, Jesus tells us that anyone can baptise another believer," he says.

I study his lashes, which have formed dark triangles from the water. I explain that I've already been baptised, that in the Catholic church you do it as a baby.

"Right," he nods at me, "but does that really count? Now that you're an adult and conscious of your choices, it's important to make a commitment for yourself."

He looks around us – the clouds moving across the sky, the water plummeting into the depths – and then at our friends. He shrugs, smiles at me.

"It just feels like a pretty cool moment to do it."

I look over to the other side of the pool. Gabriel has brought out a water pistol. Jasmine is squealing and Patrick's looking on with half a smile on his face. Another group of hikers have just arrived and are settling themselves on the rocks.

"It would be," I reply, although I can't think of much worse. I picture our friends making a circle around me in the pool and extending their hands, the other hikers looking on as Bart dunks my head in.

"I'm going to save Jasmine from that pistol fight," he says, "and if you're feeling ready to take the next step, just let me know."

I watch him paddling away. I notice I'm shivering. I climb onto the rock behind me, feeling it warm the back of my legs. Across the water, a girl in the other group has opened a cooler box and is passing around beers. Another girl has taken off her t-shirt to reveal a purple bikini and a full sleeve of tattoos. She turns around so that her boyfriend can rub sunscreen across her back. Intimate, familiar. I watch as his hand moves closer to the girl's bikini bottom, then dips his fingers under it.

I'd invited Markus to join today, but he'd made some excuse about studying. Markus, who knows my mind so well, but hardly knows my body – he's never even touched my bum. I feel a pang between my legs. I squeeze them together to ease it, then close my eyes and lie back on the rock.

8.

One lunchtime towards the end of the first term, Jasmine has to stay in the studio to finish her art prac. Instead of meeting Bart on the grass without her, I decide to browse Kloof Street. I

walk the short stretch from the Hiddingh campus and stop along the way at a record store, then dip in and out of the boutiques, surprised by the amounts on the price tags each time.

On my way back, I pass a sandstone wall and a sign obscured by a tangle of jasmine bushes. I look beyond it to glimpse the pointed roof of a chapel, and feeling entitled by my religion, push the pedestrian gate to find it opens.

Inside, the chapel is cool and smells of St Joseph lilies. I know it's Catholic by the red flame next to the tabernacle and a large painting of Mary above it. I follow the rituals with little thought – dipping my fingers in the holy water, genuflecting, kneeling in one of the pews. Then I look up at her. She's wearing a green cloak and encircles the child Jesus in one arm. The picture is familiar – I must've knelt in a similar chapel somewhere in my childhood, with the same smells of flowers and dust, the same Mary looking down at me with an almost resigned smile.

I start to pray – for my family and especially my mom, who Mary always reminds me of. But then my thoughts drift under her gaze. I'm bothered by what my home group friends would think about me kneeling under a giant picture of Mary – they might say it's idolatry. In the same way Jasmine has commented on how much Hare Krishna food I eat and how it could be affecting my spiritual health. I refocus, say a prayer for Markus, who I've been worrying about lately. He doesn't seem to have any conscience about how much he's been partying and drinking his way through the first semester. Then there are my home group friends, on the other hand, who don't care at all that they're missing out on these things. Instead, their type of hedonism lives off jumping into waterfalls, spraying each other with water pistols, and Jesus. And I wonder why I can't have it both ways.

"But why can't I?" I ask Mary out loud.

She looks back at me, her smile pulling up her lips until I get a strange sense that she's laughing at me.

9.

The next morning, I forget to set my alarm. I wake to see Blair doing her make-up in the basin mirror. I watch her lips, wide and beguiling, as she paints them with lipgloss. She catches me in her reflection and turns around.

"Aren't you late?"

"I guess," I say, climbing onto my elbows.

The time on my phone says 07:45 – too late to even try catching the shuttle to Hiddingh. I look around the room, enjoying my sense of defeat. It's Thursday.

"Are you going to jug night?" I ask.

"Of course," Blair says, "You wanna come?"

I stare up just past her, wondering how I'll rescue the day.

"I have home group."

"Come after. Things only pick up later, anyway."

*

When Bart and Jasmine arrive that evening, I step into the Tazz in Blair's off-the-shoulder top. She'd helped me get ready and insisted I wear it, despite me saying that it's too exposed for home group.

"It's not revealing anything," she'd said, laughing at me.

It's only when we're turning into Russell's road that I summon the courage to tell Bart and Jasmine about my plans, which involve them dropping me at Foxy's on the way home.

Bart turns back to me, stroking his moustache.

"And what, pray tell, will you be doing there?"

"Mission trip," I say.

They laugh at that, but then I see the look they exchange at the front.

"Sjoe, Liz," Jasmine says. "First you bunked class, and now you're off to Foxy's."

"You know you're going to be the only sober one there, right?" Bart adds.

"Of course," I laugh. "I'm curious, that's all."

"Remember I'm just an SMS away," Bart says. "I'll come and fetch you, any time you want to come home."

*

At home group while we're bowing our heads in prayer, I feel very hot. When it's my turn to offer my words up, I feel conscious of Jasmine and Bart and I start to doubt what I'm saying. Before we leave, Madeline touches my shoulder with her cold hands.

"Come for tea sometime," she says. "I'd love to find out how you're doing."

I say that would be great, and subtly try to shift Blair's top higher. Jasmine once told me that Madeline has the gift of prophecy. I wonder if this extends to mindreading – if she knows what I'm up to, or is picking up on desires that I'm not even aware of yet.

I message Blair on the way to Foxy's and see her standing outside as we near it. She takes my hand as I get out the Tazz.

"Have fun," Bart says out the window. "Don't do anything we wouldn't do."

He winks at me to soften the warning before driving away. I try not to think about the conversations he and Jasmine will have on their way home.

In her other hand, Blair's holding a giant jug filled with green liquid.

"Cane and creme soda," she says, handing it to me. "You can share mine."

We head inside, where she pulls me through the crowds to the dance floor.

"Pardon," I mumble as I rub myself against the bums and chests of the people we pass. It's so packed, I can't help it. I recoil as my arm brushes a wet body. I can't even see Blair, who's like Moses parting the red sea ahead of me. I only have her hand, whose grip is relentless until we reach her friends on the dancefloor.

Blair offers me her jug again. I take small sips while I orient myself. Through the smoke machine's haze, I recognise a girl from my psychology tut group a few metres away. She hardly says a word in class, but has received the highest marks for every assignment this semester. Now her fringe is damp with sweat as she dances under the strobe light, a whole jug to herself. I start to dance, clutching Blair's jug as an anchor, but I keep looking at the girl, second guessing if it's really her. I'm confused by how easily she's able to straddle two worlds.

It must be after I've drunk more of the green liquid that I begin to feel the bass underneath each song. I let it buzz from my feet into my veins, working out the stiffness I'd started with. I raise my hands when I sense the music wants me to, watching how the strobe light flickers across my wrists as I swirl them. I stop looking at the psychology girl, especially after she and some guy start to rub their bodies against each other. Instead, I close my eyes and see a coral reef, swim along it, following the sun dapples that the lights make on the insides of my eyelids. Then I feel someone's hands on my hips. I jerk away towards Blair and snap open my eyes.

"Markus!" I screech.

He pulls me towards him, laughing as he finds my lips.

10.

During the exam time, I walk to Russell and Madeline's flat for tea. I take the route from the main campus that runs under the highway into the deep streets of Newlands.

It's been two months since my first jug night. Before the exams started, I'd begun to go most Thursdays after home group. One time before dropping me off, Jasmine asked what I found so appealing about hanging out in the dark with a bunch of drunk first years. I tried to explain the energy of the dance floor and the surplus that's generated.

"There must be a name for it in art theory," I'd said.

Then I assured her and Bart that I usually sip from Blair or Markus's jugs, have never ordered my own. I didn't tell them that I've begun to recognise the feeling of light-headedness after a while: it being easier to dance, to socialise.

I think about it as I duck into the shaded avenue that will take me to Madeline's. Soft, smooth. Every time I reach that point in the evening, I stop drinking. It's a line I've created between two worlds. I've been tipsy, I tell myself. Tipsy, but never drunk.

When I reach Madeline's, she makes a pot of loose leaf tea. While it steeps, she shows me her herb garden on the balcony. She asks about my studies, if I've always been a Catholic, and how I came to know Jesus.

"And there's a boy courting you, right?"

"Oh, Markus? Yes, we're courting," I say, which makes me picture two jesters dancing around each other.

She guides me inside and pours the tea. Then she tells me how she and Russell also met when they were very young and got married when they were still in undergrad.

"Which was quite romantic, but difficult," she says. "You build a life together from nothing."

I nod and look around the living room – Russell's piles of philosophy books and classic literature, Madeline's plants.

"Do you think you'll marry Markus?" Madeline asks, curling a finger around the handle of her tea cup.

"Probably," I answer, although her question scares me. "But I guess only after we graduate."

"That's a long time to wait. Are you saving yourselves for marriage?"

“Oh, of course,” I say quickly after a gulp of tea. “I mean, Markus and I don’t, you know.”

Madeline nods, gazing at me. I look down at my cup and the leaves that are gathering at the bottom. I wonder how long it will take for my tea to cool, so that I can go home.

“Waiting is hard,” Madeline says, “but it’s worth it.”

*

The sun is just above the mountain when I leave. I’m agitated and don’t feel like walking the main road back to my residence. Instead I choose a narrow street that takes me deeper into Newlands. I look at the houses – the shutters and creepers, a bay window of one, the long verandah of another. I’m annoyed by the conversation with Madeline – how nosy she was about my relationship and how quickly I wanted to assure her of my purity.

I turn into the next road, where most of the houses look renovated. They now have high walls, but have kept to a theme of white with green trim. I pass one with an open garage where a SUV has turned in and glimpse a box for an inflatable splash pool. Two golden retrievers are circling around a woman's legs, the rest of her hidden by the open car door. I feel nostalgia for something I haven’t yet experienced – being a middle-aged mother entangled in dogs and shopping bags and a career and compromises. And that would be it, I think. Once I’m consigned to a house with a high wall, there will be no more chances to be to lose control. What if, on a late weekday afternoon as the sun disappears behind the mountain, I wish I’d allowed myself to give in to my restlessness?

11.

Blair’s birthday. We go to a restaurant for a 2-for-1 happy hour and I order the Long Island iced tea. George, who’s studying business science, is fascinated with my fine art degree and the idea that I take the shuttle to a studio in the centre of Cape Town most days. With her high cheekbones and almond skin, she’s more beautiful than I remember from the boat party night and, like Blair, she smells of expensive perfume. I drink my first cocktail quickly because she intimidates me and I’m scared I’m boring her. After I’ve explained the inspiration behind my latest art prac, she tells me she’s jealous that I’m studying something I love.

“I don’t know if anyone can say they love accounting,” she shrugs and looks deep into her melting mojito. “Will you be an artist one day?”

“Hopefully,” I say, which makes her look even more wistful. “But I can see you have a creative soul too.”

“How do you know?”

“Maybe by your bone structure. It’s like it shows how strong your inner landscape is.”

She studies me, savouring my words.

“I don’t tell many people this, but I always wanted to study fashion,” she says. “Do you believe in fortune telling? Maybe you have a gift.”

That makes me think of the tea leaves at the bottom of my cup at Madeline’s and I start to feel dizzy. George excuses herself to go have a cigarette. On either side of me, Blair’s friends are in their own conversations. I drain my cocktail and try to refocus my vision.

When happy hour’s over, Blair wants to go to the bar upstairs. I stand up, placing my fingertips on the table to steady myself. George laughs and offers her hand. She leads me up the stairs, then grabs my waist when I stumble halfway. The others head to the tiny dancefloor in the corner and I follow George to the balcony for another cigarette.

“You need a glass of water first,” she says once she’s secured me at a table overlooking the main road. She disappears inside, leaving me to the reality I’ve found myself in. The breeze feels good against my face. I follow the brake lights of cars slowing at the robot below me. Red on red on red. Maybe this is how Samata Singh felt when she was at school. The pile-up of rules and responsibilities. And how liberated she must have felt when she came to university – just a face among faces, finally free to do whatever felt good.

I slouch across the cool metal of the table and rest my chin on my hands. The cars pull away as the robot turns green. I think of Markus. He seems to be spinning out onto a trajectory that feels unknown to me, but fresh and true. I dip one hand into my bag and dig for my phone, then type him an SMS: *Proud od you. Lovd u.*

George returns with my water and sits down next to me. Her lighter deepens the shadows under her cheekbones, her face solemn as she hovers her cigarette in the flame. Once she’s breathed out her first plumes, she starts talking about her fashion design dreams again and how she was forced by her parents to study business science. I slip back onto my arms, watching her full lips as they speak.

“Doing what you love is so important,” she continues. “I see it in you – there’s like a contentment about you because you’re following your heart.”

I snort at that. I tell her the opposite is true – that I think I'm going through a life crisis, that I'm struggling to remember the reasons for the things I'm supposed to believe in.

"But everyone goes through that," George says, putting her hand on my arm. "It's scary."

I look up at her. Her smile reminds me of Mary's in that chapel. She moves closer so that the heady mix of tobacco and perfume makes me close my eyes. Then I can taste it as her lips graze mine. That pang between my legs. It shoots through my pelvis and into my toes. I wait until I hear the cars pulling away, then I open my eyes.

2012

Foreign National

1.

I notice it on Nelson Mandela Boulevard – the moment I cross over from the shadows. When I left Rondebosch, the sun had already disappeared behind the mountain and my housemate was running a bath, her pyjamas waiting on the towel rack. Now as I round the other side, I put on my sunglasses to avoid being blinded by the light.

In Sea Point I find Jasper's street, which spans a block between the main road and the ocean promenade. It's filled with high rise flats and old trees, the tarmac is cracked and strewn with Jacaranda flowers. I stay in the car for a moment, watching a girl about my age carrying two packets of groceries. She keys herself into Jasper's block, where she'll unpack them in her flat somewhere above me. This is how I imagine Tel Aviv, or some exotic city where life takes place between apartments and corner stores a stroll away.

Jasper's own flat, I'm soon to find out, is on the highest floor. He's six years older than me, further into his career. I can tell by his Smeg kettle and fancy salt and pepper grinders. It's tasteful, too – its earthy rugs and woven cushions soften what might have otherwise been a typical bachelor's flat. He points out the things he picked up on his trip from Bordeaux to Cape Town by motorbike – a piece of driftwood lugged off a beach in Kenya, a Malawian wax print tablecloth, a miniature wireframe bicycle bought from a street seller in Joburg.

"So then what happened?" I ask. "When you reached Cape Town. You fell in love with it and never left?

He looks up at the ceiling for a moment, then back at me.

"That's the short answer, I suppose. But I didn't fall in love with the mountain and the lifestyle and all that white person shit. This place felt different from France – like, here I could actually make a difference. So that same holiday my dad flew down to join me, and he fell in love too. Well, more with the cheap property prices." He smiles sheepishly, taps his knuckle on the marble kitchen counter. "He viewed this flat and bought it on the spot and I've lived in it ever since."

"And that's the short answer?" I ask. "What's the long one?"

He smiles, takes my hand.

“Long answers are boring.”

He leads me from the lounge through his bedroom, which opens onto a balcony. On my way I glance at his bed – large and slightly rumpled. Across from it is a dressing table. Its velvet stool makes it look decidedly feminine. I pause just enough to ponder it so that the pull of his hand increases.

“And how can you not fall in love if you have this view?” he says as we cross the threshold. I face the expanse of the ocean. But the dressing table is pulling at a corner of my mind, and I can’t recall what sort of love he’s referring to. Then I look down to see he has a full view of the promenade, which is awash with people at 7 o’clock in the evening.

“I wish I lived this side of the mountain,” I say. “It feels so much more foreign. European, almost.”

Jasper laughs, as if what I’m saying is cute.

“I don’t know about that. Back in France, I couldn’t hike from my flat to the top of Lion’s Head,” he says, “or walk for miles along the ocean.”

I trace the coastline with my eyes until it disappears from my view.

“It looks like you can walk all the way to Clifton from here if you want to.”

“Even further,” Jasper says. “Sometimes on the weekends we’d walk to Bakoven and back. It was a good way to decompress from the week.”

“Who’s we?” I ask.

He looks startled for a second, realising he’d used the plural.

“Oh, me and an ex.”

Then he points to a small table for two at the end of the balcony. Its surface is mosaiced in hues of cobalt blue, which make me think of Tel Aviv again, or some island off Italy. He pulls out a chair for me.

“What would you like?” he asks. “Wine, G&T? I was also thinking of smoking a blunt.”

“What’s a blunt?” I ask.

He raises his brows. “Marijuana. Sorry, I should have asked if you smoke.”

“Oh, right!” I say, feeling silly. “I’ve tried it. Once, a long time ago. Someone passed it to me at a party and I burned my lips because I smoked it from the wrong end.”

“I don’t know if that counts,” he says, smiling. Then he disappears inside. He comes back after a few moments with two gummy bear sweets in his palm.

“Since you don’t seem very good at smoking, we could eat it instead.”

I peer at the bears, feeling like the main character in one of those peer pressure videos we were made to watch in high school. Then I look at Jasper, whose eyes crinkle into a smile as I meet them. I can’t quite believe I’ve met him – someone who lives in the same city as me, but whose life feels like it could be in another country.

I take one. His eyes smile even wider as he pops the other into his mouth.

2.

With more than an hour of daylight left, Jasper suggests a walk down to the promenade. In the lift, I look at myself in the mirror and feel the ground falling under me as we descend.

“Can you feel it yet?” I ask. “I’m a bit lightheaded.”

He leans down to kiss my forehead, tells me it should only kick in after half an hour, at least.

When we reach the prom, the sun has turned everything golden. I watch some men straining at the bars of an open air gym, the sweat on their muscles catching the light. Below us, a family is picnicking on a small beach. The mother sits on a lone camping chair, covered head to toe in a Hijab.

Every now and then my arm brushes Jasper’s and I can smell a damp scent – something like shower gel mixed with cologne. He’s very tall, so I have to double my steps every now and then to keep up with his gait. I like everything about him – his height, his pace. There’s something driven about him, electric. He’s talking about deep house – how thankful he is to have found such a thriving scene in South Africa.

“I have to admit,” I say, “the night we met was the first time I’ve ever been to a – what would you call it – house music party? I only went because Heather invited me.”

I can see his eyes studying me behind his sunglasses, but he’s smiling – a sort of wide, infatuated smile that I recognise from that first night.

“Fancy that,” he says. “I would never have met you if you hadn’t decided to try something new.”

I think back to that evening. I was having a pretty awful time with the music. Heather’s a new friend I’ve made through my internship and seems cooler than me in every

way. I didn't want to disappoint her by leaving early. I'd lost her at some point, made my way off the dancefloor to find her and her girlfriend standing with a tall man, one of the few other white people there. He'd turned to me as I'd approached, had to introduce himself three times because it was hard to make out his name through his French accent and the pounding bass.

"Let's go outside," he'd said, and had taken my hand.

He's taken my hand now too. It feels like a good sign for a place as public as the promenade, and I secretly wish that someone I know could bump into us.

"How do you know Heather?" I ask.

"I don't," he says. "I'd lost my friends at that point and recognised her girlfriend at the bar."

"Vuyo?" I ask, surprised at the idea of Jasper knowing someone like her. "How do you know her?"

"Through an ex," he says, looking into the sea. "They were lawyers in the same field."

I nod as casually as I can, but can feel the facts trying to piece themselves together in my mind. Vuyo is a human rights lawyer, as Heather loves to tell people. There's something uncompromising about her, as if her mission is to call out any trace of privilege or injustice in all her interactions. I'd been on high alert when I arrived at Heather's place before the party. She'd left me and Vuyo in the kitchen for a few minutes while she finished getting ready. I felt paralysed, scared to say anything. I was even scared of refusing the whiskey she offered me, and it had burned itself all the way down my throat.

"So your ex," I venture, "did she and Vuyo –"

"Rasmus!" Jasper suddenly calls, and I turn with him to see a couple who's just walked past us. They turn around too, their eyes squinting in the setting sun. Jasper introduces the man to me as his CTO, an acronym I don't know.

"I'm sorry I stole this guy away from you," Jasper says to the woman next to Rasmus. "Last week was just insane."

"Don't apologise to me," the woman says, not returning his smile. "He's the one burning out."

"We're so close, Melinda," Jasper says. "I have their word that the first round of funding will come through in February. And then we can go on a hiring spree."

He squeezes Rasmus's shoulder before saying goodbye. They don't meet my eyes, and I give a faltering half wave instead.

Jasper shrugs, blows air out of his mouth once they're gone. "Rasmus made the decision to keep his day job while we build this app. And now I've got his wife on my back."

He launches into a discussion about his start-up, most of which I already know from the night we met – an AI app that he's building to increase financial literacy among poor South Africans.

"Anyway," he turns to me, after he's tired himself out, "you're doing that therapist thing again – making me do all the talking."

"I wish I could make my actual patients do that," I say.

"What are they paying you for, then?"

"They aren't. They're at Groote Schuur."

He looks at me blankly.

"It's a big public hospital. I've been put in the psychiatric ward," I say.

I go on to explain the current rotation I'm on, which is part of a compulsory internship for clinical psychology students. That the sorts of people admitted to Groote Schuur are so advanced in their disorders, made even worse by substance abuse. And that most days, it's impossible to tell if I'm getting through to them at all.

"What would you do if you could?" Jasper asks.

I look down at our footsteps – mine still having to skip every now and then to keep time with his. When I look up, I see two black girls. The one is taking pictures of the other in front of the railing to the sea, posing as if she's won something. People are funny, I think, and then I remember that Jasper asked me a question.

"I think that gummy bear's having an effect," I say. "I can't remember what you asked."

"Your dream job."

I look down again, let my mind drift to my initial decision to change my degree. When I'd thought about becoming a psychologist, I'd had a very different idea in my head – me in a comfortable room somewhere filled with rugs and bookcases, a client telling me their problems, and the soft ticks of a clock in the background. But I can't share that with Jasper – it seems so middle-class.

"I'd be an artist," I say. "That's what I started off studying anyway. But I soon realised I'd never make a living off the sort of art I like."

“That’s bullshit. That’s what capitalism tells you. My startup won’t make me a millionaire, but I’m doing something meaningful. And for that, the universe will provide.”

I look at Jasper, his side profile – eyes behind his sunglasses looking out to sea. Maybe it’s the gummy, but I hadn’t noticed how long his nose was until now. It looks indignant, like a rudder that can’t be swayed. And I envy his passion, his resolve.

“All I’m saying is, don’t be a Rasmus,” he says, giving my hand a squeeze. “Too scared to fully commit to your cause, which is what you need to do to change the status quo. The world doesn’t need more Rasmuses.”

That makes me think of the dressing table in Jasper’s room. I see a woman sitting at it. I’m aware of my silence, that I should say something back, but my thoughts are distracted by the woman, who I imagine is wearing one of those lawyer gowns and is winding her long hair up into a clasp. Of course Jasper would date a human rights lawyer, I think. And I realise that the dressing table was probably hers, that they lived in his flat together. I suddenly feel very sad.

“Let’s walk through the grass for a while,” Jasper says, veering us into the large field alongside the prom. He lets go of my hand and forges ahead. He’s bored of me, I think. How long had we walked without talking? But two dogs are running great circles in the grass as if we’re on a dog planet, and I play with this thought until it makes me happier. On the other side of the field, the sun is shining against the windows of a block of flats, making them look like thin sheets of gold.

I sigh and close my eyes. I think of how this time two weeks ago I could never imagine I’d be as high as a kite, walking in a field with a French man. If I hadn’t met Jasper, I’d probably be spending tonight in Rondebosch, watching a movie on my laptop in my pyjamas.

I’d invited Jasper to supper during the week, the first time we’d seen each other since the party. I’d shown him my room and it was strange having him in it, standing next to my single bed. I’d felt like a little girl.

“You have a fireplace,” he’d said when he entered the lounge. Thinking back, it was probably the only thing he’d liked about my home.

Ahead of me, he passes a couple in the grass. As I follow his path, I see they’re two girls. One is lying on the other’s stomach, reading a book out loud while the other girl strokes

her hair. I find myself skimming their faces to grasp some understanding of their attraction to each other.

Heather's my first real lesbian friend. I was surprised when I found this out because she's so conventional looking, so pretty, and it would be easy for her to find a guy. I was embarrassed by this thought, am embarrassed now by my urge to look closer at the girls in the grass, or at Heather and Vuyo at the party, the times when Vuyo held her from behind. And I wonder if it's also hard for me to understand their relationship because Vuyo is black, because I myself have no reference for being attracted to a black person.

I shouldn't have eaten that whole bear. I refocus on Jasper, follow his arc back to the prom, where he finds a bench.

"Now if they created a public space like this in Khayelitsha," he says when I join him, "can you imagine?"

But I'm not following him.

"They wouldn't, obviously," he adds, and does that thing of blowing air out of his cheeks.

We sit in silence for a while, letting the people walk past us. I try to bring up a map of Cape Town in my mind and realise I have no idea if Khayelitsha borders the sea. His ex the human rights lawyer would know. And I recall Jasper on his balcony, telling me about how he walked all the way to Bakoven with her. I picture her in walking shoes and a cap, her ponytail sticking out the back and swishing as they discussed their plans to change the world. She must be taller than me, able to keep up with Jasper's strides.

"At the house music party," I ask him, "what made you want to talk to me?"

"Look!" he says, touching my arm and pointing somewhere into the sea. "A whale."

All I see is a mass of kelp glittering in the last of the sunlight. He tries to lead my gaze to where his finger is.

"That's a rock," I say, which makes him take out his phone to try and zoom in.

A black woman approaches, looking like she's wanting something.

"Can I help you?" I ask her.

Jasper looks up, startled.

"Oh, hey," he says, and he gets up, reaches across me to hug her. She's small – his arms find their way around her shoulder and waist, as if she's a present he could easily pick up. When they come apart, she looks down at me with an expectant smile.

“I thought I’d say hi,” the woman says. “I’m Sinazo.”

“Sorry,” I say, “I didn’t realise you two knew each other. I thought maybe you were looking for ‘the whale’ as well.”

I make inverted commas with my fingers, and smile up at Jasper. She studies me and I realise how ridiculous I sound. She says it’s nice to meet me before saying goodbye.

“That girl thinks I’m crazy,” I say as she walks away. “I think it’s time to go home.”

3.

The neighbour’s TV is on. It carries through the balcony into Jasper’s bedroom. I follow the voices – even and conversational, like a talk show or a sports match – as Jasper kisses my neck. I let out a long breath. I still feel high, and his hands on my skin feel like the sun on those windows making them all golden, or the sun on the whale that Jasper claimed to see, and then I think of that black woman, her eyes roving over me while I sat on the bench. I open my eyes and see the dressing table ahead of me, can just make out my distant head in its mirror, and the back of Jasper’s, kissing me.

In the morning I wake to the vibration of Jasper’s phone. He stirs as well, reaches for it on the bedside table.

“It’s Rasmus,” he says. “He wants to meet now. We have to finish a pitch and it’s the only gap he has.”

I reach for my own phone to check the time – seven-thirty on a Sunday. There’s a message from my housemate too, checking if I’m okay. I hadn’t planned to stay the night, but I was way too high to drive home.

“This guy is causing me more pain than it’s worth,” Jasper says, wrapping his limbs around me.

“Can’t you ask him to meet an hour later?” I ask.

He blows air from his cheeks, then climbs out of bed. I watch him as he walks towards the balcony door in a pair of red briefs.

“How’s this,” he says. “Enjoy the morning here and I’ll return with breakfast things.”

He pulls up the blinds for me. I prop myself up and take in the sea.

“Croissants,” I tell him. He consents, then leans down to kiss me before going to change.

When I hear the front door closing, I imagine the future – the idea of living here and him kissing me goodbye every morning before leaving to build his start-up. I'd make myself coffee, climb back into bed, and take out my diary to check my clients for the day. Then I see the dressing table and I remember the human rights lawyer – how she'd probably sit there, brushing her hair.

Now it stands quietly. I follow the dust particles dancing across it in the sunlight. The whole apartment is quiet. I get out of bed, pad over to it, and take a seat at the velvet stool. There's a tickle in my heart, which extends into my arms, and when I touch the handle of the top drawer, its coolness gives my fingertips a small thrill.

Inside, it's mostly cleared out. The only items are a pair of nail scissors and an open box of banana-flavoured condoms, which makes me feel weird. I shut the drawer, open the one below it to find a stack of books and magazines. I lift them carefully, see what looks like a photo album, and underneath it, a thin hardcover book. I study the writing on the cover – a date and Jasper's name embossed in silver, which is linked with another's.

I open it, let the pages fall where they want to. It's the woman from the promenade. She's in a white and blue dress and is flanked by a group of black bridesmaids. She's looking at me with half a smile on her face – the same smile from last night, which I now recognise as triumphant, as if she knows something I don't.

I look up at the mirror, notice how white my face looks against the covers of Jasper's bed. So I turn to the view, see the round table for two and think of Tel Aviv, the islands off Italy, and long for somewhere more foreign than I could imagine.

The book remains open in my hands. On the opposite page is Jasper, shirtless, with a tapestry of turquoise beads draped over his pale shoulders. He's beaming at me. I close it, push it back between the magazines, and begin to collect my things.

2014–2015

Little Women

1.

In December, one of those nothing afternoons after Christmas, my younger sister Ruth returns to the holiday house, where I am biding my time with extended family on the stoep. The guests get up, ready to greet them, while my dad finds chairs for her and David. But she pauses with a funny look on her face, as if she's remembered a dream or eaten something sweet, and says she's engaged. Now everyone rises and I make my own lips follow in a smile. David is bashful behind her, accepting hugs and handshakes. I'd like to ask him why he didn't tell me, ask my parents if they knew. Of course they knew.

My aunt takes pictures of our family on the stoep – David now snug among us, Ruth with her hand splayed. There are pictures of us barefoot on this stoep as children, holding the Easter eggs we found in the Wild Coast overgrowth of what one might call a garden below. It's thoughtful of David to propose in Mbotyi, somewhere on those shaggy hills overlooking the sea, and for them to return to celebrate in the house that has been ours for generations. My great great grandfather bought the land from a chief for three bottles of sherry – an anecdote that my family used to share freely, a perk of putting up with this strange country. But it's gradually been left out of our repertoire, like an ivory heirloom we pretend not to own.

We'll remember this holiday as the one with the bedbugs – they seem confined to the bed where Ruth and I sleep, but somehow they haven't touched her. As we smile at the camera I joke that I'll be the sister in the pictures with bites on her face. My older brother Rory hits me in the side to hide his laugh, then hugs me.

I'll also remember this holiday as the one I work on a tan – methodically, as responsibly as I can. After three years away, I am trying to re-bond with my country. I read books about it, wait for low tide to run the bay back and forth, but feel restless by my surroundings – the sounds of speed boats through the mangroves, the screams of city children in the waves. Also, I have no clarity about what I'll be doing come January, and Ruth's news seems to unmoor me further.

In the evening after the aunts and uncles and cousins have left, we pick at turkey leftovers in the kitchen. Before we peel off to bed, Ruth suggests we close with a prayer. We all bow our heads, the buzz of the fluorescent lights and grasshoppers growing louder in the silence. I hear the tones of my dad – earnest, grateful – and I feel my head grow heavy, my closed eyes twitching. Since I was young, following the prayers of others has made me feel sleepy, almost drunk.

2.

It was in a Joshua Doore store somewhere outside Edenvale. We were buying a bunk bed for me and Rory and were passing the king-sized beds on show. They were huge, piled with blankets and cushions, and looked like a joy to jump on. I asked my mom whether anyone could share a bed when they grew up.

"Only if they're married," she'd said.

"So not a man and a woman who are friends?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "No, only a husband and wife sleep in the same bed."

3.

In the house in Mbotyi, Ruth and I have always slept in the second bedroom, and Rory in the old servants' quarters, which he now shares with his wife. The bedroom has only a double bed, which Ruth and I pretend to resent sharing. When we were younger during blackouts we'd carry our candles to our night tables, pretending we were Meg and Jo in *Little Women*, who shared a bed too.

For this holiday, David's been given a mattress to sleep in my grandfather's old study next door. Around bedtime each night he and Ruth have gone in, the light on and door ajar. I hear them while I read, exchanging words in warm breaths just above a whisper. When she finally comes to bed, she gets in quietly with the air of a solemn woman entrusted with a secret.

Tonight she remains there longer. This time there's more silence between their conversation, filled by the sound of clothing scratching against a blanket. I dread her return, our first time alone after the news. I close my book early and pretend to sleep.

4.

January comes – a funny month in the southern hemisphere. In London, the Christmas lights will have come down and there'll be a good stretch of cold to help people out of holiday mode. But, back in Johannesburg, the days get hotter as everyone refinds their routines and I long to return to the sea. Ruth enters the year with the knowledge that she now has a partner forever, and I search for jobs from my parents' house. Old friends and family members welcome me back from my studies and the news of my sister. They turn to me and ask about the wedding plans, and I am gracious, enthusiastic, more conscious of my appearance in a way I never used to be – my hair, my weight. On one visit my aunt asks if they've picked a date, which makes me remember a friend's engagement party from when I was in university. Her older sister had gone around handing out save-the-date magnets. I'd felt sorry for her because she was single, but had decided she was redeemed, at least, by being very pretty. Now I realise that she couldn't have been older than twenty-four, younger than I am now.

My family and I were only onlookers at weddings until Rory got married two years ago. Then, we sat at the main table, elevated from the other guests, and I felt like a cast member in a show we were putting on for the first time. The music stopped at 11 and the MC directed everyone to send off the bride and groom. Ruth and I found ourselves at the end of the tunnel we all made. I'd never liked this tradition – the guests cheering on the couple to continue their wedding night alone. As Rory and his wife ran under our arms and into the car, Ruth and I watched after them, sharing the weight of a story that had ended. It was hard knowing that our family car or a quiet Christmas morning could no longer contain just the five of us. But the pain felt right – like growing pains, an expansion.

The pain feels different this time, as if it's misplaced. I think about how each morning in Mbotyi, Ruth would take a camping chair to a far corner of the stoep. She'd spend half an hour before the open bible, having what I assume were long chats with God. That same holiday she still managed to escape dishes duty and sulked when she was losing in Monopoly. Things I'd expect her to grow out of before finding herself in a marriage. But I suspect everything appears conquerable by the purity of youth, a promise from God, perhaps delivered to David in a moment in church where he realised he wanted all of Ruth.

They've started attending marriage preparation classes. The girls in Ruth's houseshare have created a vision board for her in their kitchen, both as a sort of planner for the wedding and the readying of her soul. I observe cut-outs of things from bridal magazines and read

excerpts from worship songs, which contain words like “surrender” and “blessed”. On one visit when I’m eyeing out updates on the board, Ruth tells me that she’s invited Grace to be a third bridesmaid, in addition to me and her best friend Crystal.

“Why?” I ask. Grace is five years older than Ruth, two years older than me. “Are you that close?”

“I think Grace would be a good idea as a sort of mentor person,” she explains, “being married.”

I picture Grace, two rows ahead of me in church, her husband’s hand resting on her back. When everyone shakes hands at The Sign of Peace, they usually kiss lightly. Grace: faithful, rewarded. Having crossed the threshold to lifetime love, she is an obvious choice.

5.

Bored from the job search, I download a dating app. I set a generous radius and match with Paul from Pretoria.

He makes an effort to meet me in Joburg on the first date. He knows a café in Parkhurst, and we sit on the sidewalk swapping stories from our travels. I tell him about my time in London and play down the second masters I’ve just completed, all the while relishing his impressed nods. After a season on the yachts he feels lost on the highveld, and we strike up a snobbish affinity – that travelling has made us more broad-thinking and restless than our peers, while carefully acknowledging the aspects of our race and class that has allowed us to feel these things.

“He’s going to cook dinner for me,” I tell Ruth, when she asks how the date went.

“Where, in Pretoria?” she asks. “Should you be travelling home so late?”

I shrug, let her read into my silence. Naturally, I won’t tell my parents. I feel like a teenager, planning a story that I’m sleeping at a friend’s.

Ruth’s brow quivers a little and I know she is questioning what to say next. I am snatching something from her, creating my own shortcuts.

6.

The bridesmaids agree to share a gift for the hen party. We decide on matching gowns for the couple.

“And I’ll get some practical things,” says Grace.

I buy the gowns from a high-end store in Rosebank that Ruth and I follow on Instagram – a place we can usually only browse. As I watch the shop attendant wrapping the gowns in tissue paper, I am reminded of the games Ruth would make me play when we were younger, if I was feeling kind.

Ruth wants the hen party, like the wedding, at our house in Mbotyi. Grace and Crystal seem reluctant, I am ambivalent – impressed on the one hand that Ruth is making her friends brave the dirt roads to the Wild Coast alone, but also a little queasy at the idea of a group of white girls wandering the place in sashes and flower wreaths.

We arrive in November, a week before the wedding. The house is musty, having waited for its owners since January. Ruth and I take the second bedroom as always, and let Grace and Crystal share the master bedroom. The others set up Christmas beds in the lounge.

We walk to the beach. The sun is behind banks of consistent grey clouds. I'm the only one swimming, the rest walk the bay in little groups. Since I've returned to South Africa I've taken every opportunity to swim or hike – to bond with my environment, to re-awaken something. I am trying to find meaning in natural beauty, pretending it's neutral, pure.

The next day, we gather on the stoep with champagne and snacks. Despite me warning her that no one really cares to sit and watch, Ruth unwraps her gifts. She gasps at the gowns. While she holds hers up I spy an assortment of pharmacy items nestled in the tissue paper.

"You can unwrap the rest later," Grace says, "some handy things for the honeymoon."

When the others get up to refill their plates, my eyes drift to the pile of lingerie among the gifts. More underwear than I could dream of. I try not to think about Ruth waking up, walking around in her gown, somehow older, somehow older than me.

In the evening we walk to the backpackers, an island made for tourists who believe they are adventurous, but also want to feel safe. We crowd around a table, order Black Labels to fit in. Nearing peak season, it's relatively full. One group looks like friends nearing the end of university. They constantly roll cigarettes. There are travellers from somewhere in Scandinavia and another group of Joburgers with their 4x4s parked out back. Most people are barefoot, a little unravelled round the edges, compared to our own party who has arrived in closed shoes and make-up.

I see a girl in white at the campfire. She's kneeling oddly and talks to the other people in the way a salesperson would – her shoulders open, a cock to her head. Crystal sees me looking at her.

"She spoke to me earlier," she whispers, "she says she's training to be a sangoma."

There's a rope round the girl's waist. Her dress appears to be made of a stiff cotton and is cut just above the knee, which makes the outfit look chic, almost.

"I didn't know there could be white sangomas," I reply.

"Her mother spoke to me too," Crystal continues. "She's visiting her from Durban. Apparently it can happen – the ancestors call you."

Crystal turns her head to a group of middle-aged people eating supper in the corner. The two women sip white wine, the man has a draught of beer.

"The brown-haired woman," she says.

She's tanned, wears a knit jersey and tennis shoes. She reminds me of the mothers of girls I knew at school, who never worked and drove their daughters to extra-curricular activities in their SUVs. I imagine the woman talking to her curious friends, providing updates about her daughter's training in the Transkei, a surprising gift of living in this country.

I look back towards the campfire. The girl is around Ruth's age. Her eyes wear the same mesmerised look of people on drugs at festivals, except she is engaged in what looks like a very lucid explanation of her calling.

"She's been going round to all the tables," Crystal says. "Sometimes she gives people things from that brown pouch round her waist – herbs or something."

I turn back to our own table, hoping the girl doesn't approach me. I'm doubtful that her calling is real, or that she understands what sacrifices she may need to make. But maybe this is the point of real faith.

7.

God has never made me convicted about something, sure of the path before me. Instead, I have felt like a bystander that witnesses the faith of others. I wonder if they pray more, trust more, follow their religion more fervently. And that this rewards them with clearer callings, deep love.

Paul and I have continued to see each other, but the distance between Edenvale and Pretoria is an excuse for not making our visits more regular. We like each other, which comes from a shared understanding of going about the world: with tolerance, independence, a tendency not to lose ourselves in things. Halfway through our meetups, he usually takes my hand and starts to stroke it. I know it's more for the touch of someone than any particular affection for me.

Sometimes this has led to me staying over at his. Sometimes at the dinner table back home when my family starts to discuss the wedding or bow their heads in prayer, I take my thoughts to my nights with Paul – the brand new feeling of a stranger's body, of sharing a bed.

8.

At her make-up trial, the beautician gave Ruth an advance tip: that when she does Ruth's face on the day, they should be alone and silent. It will be the only time Ruth will have to herself.

I doubt Ruth will take the advice – that she'd want me for company at least. But when the day arrives, one of those first hot days in Mbotyi, she closes the door of our bedroom and remains alone for the hour. The photographer is granted access, I see evidence from the pictures after. There's a typical shot in black and white: Ruth's lashes lifting to be painted, her pupils far away. In another picture, I am confronted again by how young she is, perhaps by how the angle of her hairpiece makes her look like a princess.

She was stressed, she tells me later, once we're allowed into the room to help her dress. The feeling is bittersweet, less certain than she anticipated. Her head on my mom's lap the night before, she'd wondered what would change – if she could still claim her youngest place in the family and falter into dodging the dishes, her sulks. A part of me wants to console her, but another objects to the role she wants to keep. Ruth, who'll share a bed with her husband, who'll leave me to sleep in the second bedroom alone.

We've created an aisle that starts at the top of the stoep, where the bridal party will descend to the guests in the garden, and David at its edge.

I'm the final bridesmaid to make my way down the steps. I'm reminded of school assembly, a careful walk to collect my prize. I resolve to smile for the duration of the ceremony, so no pictures can prove anything other than joy.

When it's over, Ruth is given to the guests. The only moment we share is just before her speech, as she pleads for an anxiety pill she left in our bedroom. She leaves just before midnight. The dance floor fizzles shortly after, exhausted by the joy of the sober crowd.

9.

I'm disturbed by the cicadas early in the morning, the bedroom fully light and hot. My head and legs feel heavy, as if I've had a long night of drinking and the alcohol is sitting in my veins. I find myself in thoughts of half-sleeping, when they're allowed to escape from me, to become their own thoughts, sometimes their own people. The sangoma-in-training approaches my table at the backpackers and begins a sermon about her calling. I am jealous, and then drowsy, wishing she would stop talking.

It's 8.45 when I wake up again. I lie in the centre of the bed without a blanket, let my limbs stretch to each side. I think of what I'd like to do once we've cleaned up. I feel the expectation of a holiday, the restlessness that has followed me. Perhaps I should run the bay and have a swim. And I wonder if the sangoma in the dream wasn't trying to convince me of her truth, but rather that my family and I don't belong here. Then I think about Paul, that I haven't replied to the message he sent two days ago.

The night before the wedding, as Ruth and I lay in this bed, she asked about him. She was trying to sound casual, so as to hide her confusion about the lack of the relationship's momentum. Ruth is all too aware of the importance of guarding one's heart, despite hers never having been broken. As we lay there, I doubted I could give an answer that would make sense to her. I know she thinks I'm involving myself with someone who has no real intentions. But I don't know if I have intentions either – for him, for returning home. Now, as I lie in the light, I wonder if that's what faith could be – unfolding, unsure.

2017

Where are the Rock Climbers?

1.

We bond over a book about wolves. It's lying on Annika's bed when I come in to give her her post. She tells me a friend had given it to her because she recognised a wild wolf woman inside of her.

"It's so bad," she says. "Read the first page. You can read it to me while I paint if you want."

She clears some clothes off her bed for me to sit. I begin reading to Annika in her curtainless room. Maybe some residents in the flats across the way can see us – Annika's downturned lashes as she mixes paint on an old ice cream lid. Refilling her cup from her chipped teapot, and every now and then turning to meet my eyes when I stumble over a line about female underworlds or instinctual psychic forms.

After that evening, we make jokes about the wolf book. But the more time I spend with her, the more I begin to understand that she is a wild wolf woman. And I'm running after her, the thing she has that I'm longing for – an unshakeable independence, a surrender to who she is. I'm fast approaching thirty and I long to find my life companion. Annika, on the other hand, tells me that she's never had any real relationship, doesn't see the need for one. She says she doesn't want to give up her freedom, her time to herself. Some nights she stays in her room with the door closed. I ask her what she does in there for so long, and she acts all coy, although all she's probably doing is painting or watching series. Still, I wish I could cocoon myself up like that.

I love living with her. We waft around our flat drinking tea. On Winter nights, she makes a flask of hot water, whiskey, and lemon and continually tops my tea cup. We hardly own any furniture, become almost competitive in how frugally we can live. We cut everything with one sharp knife, which I bought for us as a treat from Outdoor Warehouse. Our dining room table is a door on two trestles. It doubles as a workbench for our art. She makes me start sketching again. On Fridays, when we both have no plans (which is often), she'll bring her easel and shoebox of treats to the lounge. She'll take out an old olive jar filled with weed and

pack us a joint. We'll share the armchair next to the open window and pass it between us. Then we'll pretend we're in an artist's residency or some factory in the sixties, and take turns queuing songs on the playlist while we work. Some songs make us down our tools and float to the centre of the room where the parquet flooring is loosening. Annika will close her eyes and sway with her arms raised and I watch her, imagine the sight from outside – a girl with long brown hair dancing in her nightgown on a Friday night, a wild wolf indeed.

Most nights we end back on the armchair and peer at the people in the block across the way. There's a bachelor I've come to feel sorry for. He often drifts onto his balcony for a few seconds before going in again, as if lost or looking for something. I think he might be recently divorced. From our window, I can just make out an artwork hanging in his lounge – some attempt to abstract his pain, give new definition to his life. Annika's favourite resident is a girl with pink hair, probably because she doesn't care for curtains either. She's installed a special lightbulb to infuse her lounge with a matching pink glow. She owns a legavaan which we sometimes see sunning itself on the windowsill in the daytime. But we like it best when she moves between her bedroom and lounge in a bra and a thong, taunting all the people in our block to watch her.

Sometimes, when it gets late we'll lie in silence together, letting the playlist run where it wishes. One night, when its algorithms make it into a meditative patch, she asks what's been the happiest time of my life. My first thought is now – us in this flat, its wooden tiles loosening from our living in it, and her paintings of ocean dreamscapes, naked women swimming flat-backed with whales and sunfish. But she's not one for sentimentality, so instead I tell her about London, when I'd travel everywhere by bike, and the cold nights I would cycle home. It must be the weed that makes me less self-conscious – I recount how I felt on those evenings – my mind blank, feeling fully myself, wanting nothing. She looks rapt, her brown eyes egging me to continue, so I tell her about my route past the Georgian houses, and how sometimes I'd take my bike out just to see their lit interiors.

"We could do that here too," she says.

We look out the window. Our eyes find the street lights that dot the road up to Oranjezicht, the fancy suburb above our flat in Gardens.

So we buy two second hand bikes, and although our zigzags through the streets to those houses don't produce the blank, freewheeling thoughts from those London nights, I feel rebellious – the two of us alone, our bike lights blinking in the dark.

2.

And then we get a flyer in our mailbox, like one of those wartime leaflets that fell from the air. We read it before the landlady tells us herself – the flat feels so much like our own that we've mostly forgotten about her. It shares details of the block's demolition – some developer will be replacing it with a set of boutique matchbox apartments. I find pictures on the real estate company's website – all wood and steel and glass with kitchen islands and sunken lights. I hold my laptop up to Annika while she washes her painting things in the sink.

"I could never live in that," I say, "it looks so sterile."

"We could never afford it either," she replies.

Then we're silent. Annika focuses on scrubbing the oil paint off her ice cream lid. I pretend to scroll through the pictures.

"We'll find something better," she says. Our eyes meet for a second and I see the vulnerability hidden in her offer. "If you'd like to keep living together," she adds.

I tell her I'd love that. She takes her flask off the window sill and I clink it with my tea cup.

Most days leading up to the demolition, Annika comes home with something – a drill, a tin bin, a mat with a faint stain on it. She'd picked them up in the lobby. It started with one item that someone left there for anyone's taking and now new things appear daily.

The block is getting quieter. From outside, many of the windows look glassy, reflecting only the white walls and gaping cupboards that are left behind. I create a wishlist, send links of nice flats to Annika, but she's temperamental in opening them so I visit the ones I like on my own.

I cycle to a flat viewing in Xanadu Court. It's at the top of a steep cul-de-sac in Tamboerskloof, the suburb on the rim of Signal Hill. An old man waits at the gate. He watches as I struggle up the incline. I gasp hello as I dismount, but he doesn't say anything, only wears a faint smile as he watches me faff with chaining my bike to a nearby pole and blowing my nose from the exertion of the ride.

"This one's quite a hill," he finally says, once he's determined that I've collected myself.

I tell him they're everywhere in Cape Town – impossible to avoid if you want to cycle – but in truth it was a real struggle to reach this flat, as if the hill was verifying that

Tamboerskloof is that much more inaccessible than where we live currently, that its steep streets lead to more expensive views.

The man puts out his hand and introduces himself as Marshall Bassingthwaite, which I know from the online posting. But throughout the viewing I call him Mr Bassingthwaite because his age intimidates me. He seems to like this, as well as the fact that I went to the University of Cape Town. He says he's also an alumnus, and that he's been on the board of its ornithological society for many years since. He tells me he bought the entire block in the 70s and sold off a few of the apartments to friends and business partners. The rest he still owns and rents out.

"Do you like the outdoors?" Mr Bassingthwaite asks as we reach the apartment. He holds the front door open and beckons me to go first. He tells me there are a few women of a similar age to me in this block – single, young professionals who like trail running and rock climbing.

"We've created quite a special community," he explains, "which is why I like to meet my tenants personally. Apparently many of the girls meet up for a glass of wine every now and then or do outdoor activities together."

He shrugs, smiling, as if to indicate he has no control over the bonds that are being forged under his watch.

I wander the rooms. They have the same parquet floors as our current flat, except these ones are still shiny and have no missing pieces. In the lounge, a tall tree by the window dapples the view green. We'd put the couch right underneath it. And Annika's painting of Ophelia floating down the river would fit perfectly on the opposite wall.

Mr Bassingthwaite shows me out along the corridor towards the fire escape. I stop to take in the view, follow a car meandering along Signal Hill Road in the distance.

"The best part about living in Tamboerskloof is that there's no wind," Mr Bassingthwaite says, leaning on the low wall. While the rest of Cape Town howls in the windy season, he explains, Tamboerskloof – pressed against Signal Hill – enjoys a special kind of shelter. I look down from the corridor. The block is sheltered by a sheer wall that runs from the bottom of the carpark all the way to the street above us. A manicured creeper covers its entire surface.

"That is Bulelani's pride and joy," Mr Bassingthwaite says when he sees me observing it. I notice movement and realise that the wall is tiered in steep steps that hold

various plants and hedges. A man is standing along one of them, almost hidden in the foliage. He's wearing blue overalls and a sunhat.

Mr Bassingthwaite whistles, even though he's seen us. The man waves with the pincers he's holding.

"Exceptionally talented," Mr Bassingthwaite tells me in a hushed voice. "He's a landscape artist more than a gardener, really. No formal education – entirely self-taught."

He taps his head with his finger to indicate a brain. "He's one of the few that have the right attitude – that you can transcend the circumstances you're given."

I nod along with him, as I'm not sure what else to do. We walk down the fire escape to the carpark.

"Bulelani's going to clean this up a bit," Mr Bassingthwaite says, pointing to a sandy clearing on the far side, "create a social area and a vegetable garden."

Then he shows me to my bike and we talk about the rental price, which is a couple of grand more than my and Annika's budget.

"Give it a think," he says, "and if you're stuck, let's chat."

We shake hands and I ride away, warmed by the knowledge that he seems to want us.

Annika's in her room when I get home, playing with the drill. She's found a plank of wood to practise on.

"You want to try?" she asks. "There's nothing to it. I don't know why men make it seem so difficult."

I step forward and she tells me to aim vertically into the wood. I squeeze the trigger and an enjoyable force pulls into my hands. I ask if I can try again.

Then I tell her about Xanadu Court – the large lounge, the leaves that cover the windows so that it feels like a treehouse, and how the landlord seems to favour young, female rock climbers.

"Xanadu," she repeats. "Sounds like a cult. Is what he's doing even legal?"

"What, creating a community?" I ask.

"Being so selective with his tenants," she says. "I bet you there's no one of colour in that block."

I shrug, annoyed by her display of righteousness. She starts to drill the plank again, so I leave her and retreat to the armchair in the lounge. The bachelor's resting his elbows on his balcony wall, his brows furrowed against the sun. Annika might be right, I think, but I can't

see how it would be realistic to choose a new flat based on its diversity – how would we determine who else is living in the block in the first place?

Mr Bassingthwaite calls me the next day and asks if we've had a think about the apartment. I think of Annika, curse her inwardly because I know she is right – that I need to turn him down.

"We'd have loved to take it," I say, "but it's a bit out of our budget, after all."

"That's a pity," he says, "I think you girls would thrive here."

Then he offers a substantial discount, says getting good tenants is more important to him than the rental income.

So I go back to Annika, tell her she can take the master bedroom, which will give her even more space for her painting.

"It's so big, you could paint Jackson Pollocks on that floor," I say.

"Fine," she replies, "although he still sounds like a pervert and a racist."

"A pervist," I say.

She turns back to her drilling, but I can tell she's smiling.

Before we move in, Mr Bassingthwaite arranges a flat inspection. He shows us how to use the alarm system ("although we've never had a problem") and apologises that the towel heater no longer works.

"I never knew such a thing existed," Annika says.

"Oh, you'd love it in the Winter," he says. "It can get a bit chilly in the flat. What I'll do for you girls is bring my old gas heater."

"No, we'll be fine," she says. "We managed the whole of last Winter without curtains."

Mr Bassingthwaite chuckles. "I'm sure the neighbours didn't complain, but unfortunately for your neighbours here, they're a building regulation."

"We've got curtains," I assure him before Annika can reply.

As he's leaving, Mr Bassingthwaite says he'll have one of the resident trustees add us to the block's WhatsApp group.

"Besides planning those wine nights, they mostly use it to tell people if there might be any disruptions in the building," he says. "You'll see that everyone is friendly, very considerate."

3.

~ Carter Arderne [09:35]
Hanging a picture. Using a hammer so will be a couple of bangs. Sorry in advance.

~ Dale [09:36]
[sunflower emoji]

~ Kimmy Mulder [09:41]
[sunflower emoji]

On my first morning in Xanadu, I wake up at 5am to the sound of a phone vibrating. I lie in the dark, wondering if I dreamed it, and drift off until I hear it 10 minutes later. It continues in the same intervals, dislodging me awake until it stops around six. Then I hear a juicer somewhere else in the block, then a dog yapping, and what sounds like a flock of Egyptian geese taking off.

It's the weekend. I check the WhatsApp group to see if any of these count as a noise disturbance. Someone had added me the day before and asked me to keep the residents updated about the move. So I sent a few messages about the whereabouts of the moving truck, which was followed by a few sunflower emojis from my new neighbours. And a message from a Dale, who said I must ask Bulelani for the special padding for the lift so that the movers don't scratch the interior.

"Please don't add me," Annika had begged, after she'd seen me running around looking for Bulelani for 45 minutes. "I can find out important updates through you."

But the group is silent this morning. I get up, decide I'll cycle to the shops to buy milk for our coffee. When I exit the lift, I meet the dog I'd heard yapping. It's a Pomeranian and it doesn't seem to like my bike. Its claws leave long scratches on my shin after it jumps up at me. Its owners introduce her as Sarah, and themselves as Carter and Carol.

"Sorry," Carol says, pulling the pom's harness, "she just loves making new friends."

"You cycle the Argus?" Carter asks, surveying my bike.

"No," I reply, "I just use it to get around."

"Must be quite a thing up these hills," he says.

They tell me they're walking to the Blue Cafe for their morning cortado and Sarah's doggochino.

“It’s just up those stairs,” Carol says, pointing to the set of steps that bridge the cul-de-sac to the road above it. “It’s so tucked away, only the locals know about it.”

We make some more introductory conversation, and I hope that they might tell me about the wine nights Mr Bassingthwaite had mentioned. But after a few minutes Carter wishes me a safe ride and we part ways. I only notice Bulelani when they pass him on the way out. He’s behind a hedge on one of Xanadu’s highest tiers, and the pom alerts us by erupting in a fit of yaps.

“Sarah, stop that,” Carter tells the animal, who continues.

“Sorry,” Carol calls, “she’s just saying hello.”

Bulelani holds his pincers up, smiling. I hear Carol let out an embarrassed giggle before scooping the pom into her arms.

When I arrive home, Annika’s in the lounge unwrapping her paintings. I proudly tell her that I’ve met our first neighbours.

“Those people didn’t look like rock climbers,” she says.

“How would you know?”

“I saw you talking with them in the parking lot before you left. You were doing that cute laugh thing you do when you feel awkward.”

“You were listening from the corridor?”

“That wall creates an echo – you can hear everything.”

I go back out onto the corridor. We’re on the second highest floor and have a full view of the parking lot. I feel self-conscious, and wonder if other residents overheard my conversation with Carter and Carol too.

Annika joins me outside.

“Are they a couple?” she whispers. “They look more like brother and sister.”

I shrug, feeling defensive of my new acquaintances. They were weirdly similar, though – both short, with strawberry blonde hair and fair skin. Carter was wearing a powder blue golf shirt and slip slops. Carol was also dressed in pastels and had a string of pearls around her neck.

“What do rock climbers look like, anyway?” I ask.

“I dunno, but I don’t think I’ve seen any yet. Maybe they're all hiding along that wall.”

I shake my head at her, but we both turn to look at the tiers of Xanadu. The wall is at least 15 metres high. Then we go back inside, and I ask her if she'd also heard the alarm going off at 5am.

"It sounds like a builder left his phone in the wall," I say.

"Didn't hear it,' she says. "Maybe it's the neighbours on your side. Those damn geese, though."

The alarm continues into the week, waking me up everyday at five and going off in the same ten-minute intervals until its owner finally muzzles it at six. One morning, I fling my duvet off me, stand on my bed, and give the wall a number of sharp hits. I listen for a response – some surprised scuffling, the vibration ceasing. But it continues without care and my palm stings. I sink back under my covers, feeling miserable about my behaviour.

4.

~ Dale [13:50]
Anyone else hearing drilling?

~ Carter Arderne [13:50]
Yup. Not us though.

~ Dale [13:51]
Thx Carter. To everyone else, please if you're going to drill in the middle of the day give us a heads up, it's only considerate. Thx [sunflower emoji]

~ Dale [13:52]
Still hearing it. Some of us take important work calls from home and this is highly inconsiderate. If the person in question requires a copy of the building's rules and regulations, let me know. I or one of the trustees will be happy to send them if you're unclear.

~ Dale [13:53]
It's clearly someone in the building. And it's still going on? An apology? Anything?

I'm at work when I see Dale's messages. Over the last two weeks, every time I've seen a notification on the Xanadu group my heart has jumped, as if I might be responsible in some way. Now a voice note arrives. I make myself press play, hear static noise, and then a very distant buzz.

"Are you hearing any drilling?" I message Annika.

“How’d you know?” she texts back.

I send her a screenshot of Dale’s messages.

“Oops,” she writes. “But I did it for you [heart emoji].”

She sends a photo of her Ophelia painting mounted on the lounge wall, exactly where I’d wanted us to hang it. Blood floods my face. I send an apology to the group and tell them that my flatmate will let everyone know in advance next time.

“Please add them immediately,” Dale writes. “Everyone who lives in Xanadu should be on this group. Thx.”

I add Annika. She leaves the group.

When I come home, I find her working on her laptop on the couch.

“Hell’s teeth, it was one nail,” she says, when I confront her about Dale’s messages. Then I tell her what Dale said about the WhatsApp group being compulsory.

“That’s not true,” Annika says, “Gavin and Hannes aren’t on the group. They’ve survived without it for seven years.”

She turns back to her laptop. I have a feeling she’s waiting for me to ask who Gavin and Hannes are, but I don’t for that exact reason. Instead, I become interested in disassembling one of the empty boxes that are lying around the lounge.

“Maybe they’re the ones with the alarm,” she continues. “They’re the neighbours on your side.”

“Oh,” I say. “Glad you’re making an effort with the neighbours.”

“Yes, I met them a few days ago.”

She goes on to tell me they’d invited her into their flat, introduced her to their cats, and gossiped about the WhatsApp group. And then they sent her home with some weed as a housewarming gift.

“They sell to the whole block,” she says. “They said I should come by anytime.”

“What, you think this Dale person buys from them as well?”

“It probably calms him down.”

I ignore that, instead start to tear the masking tape off another box. I’m surprised, and jealous, that Annika has infiltrated Xanadu’s social circle quicker than I have. And that she didn’t tell me.

“So you didn’t ask them about the alarm?” I ask.

“Why don’t you ask on the group?” she says. “That sounds a lot more inconvenient than someone drilling one nail in the wall.”

“You said they’re not *on* the group,” I hiss.

She laughs and stretches her arms up for a hug, as if I’m a highly-strung child.

I see Gavin and Hannes the next Friday as I’m leaving for work. They’re coming out of the flat next door and we reach the lift at the same time. One of them is almost bald. He wears a tote bag and dwarfs the other one, whose black hair and delicate pale ears makes him look like an elf. They don’t strike me as the type of people who set their alarms for 5am to gym or rock climb or whatever.

I’m nervous about how we’ll all fit in, and they hold the lift door open for me so that I go first with my bike.

“I think we can all make it,” I apologise as I pin myself behind my bike in the corner. The taller one waves his hand, and allows the lift doors to close in front of them. As I descend, I’m annoyed that I missed the chance to introduce myself and make friends with them like Annika did.

When I arrive downstairs, there’s a commotion in the street. It’s coming from a group of bergies who are searching the bins outside the flat block across the way. As I wheel my bike out, I see a few others sitting on the pavement outside Xanadu. They’re so near, they could easily come in as the gate rolls closed behind me. I say a faint hi and they nod at me. I feel them watching me with syrupy eyes as I get on my bike. One man has tattoos climbing up to his jaw line and an infected looking earring. As I freewheel down the hill, I shiver a little.

Before turning into the next street, I glimpse back to see Gavin and Hannes emerging from the pedestrian gate. They don’t seem bothered by the bergies – there’s an ease in their shoulders and I can tell they’ve been here a long time.

Now that I can picture Gavin and Hannes in my head, I tune in further to their movements next to my room. I recognise the sound of their keys in the trellidor when they come home. One of them – I guess the shorter one, Gavin – always greets their cats as if he’s been away for weeks.

“Did you miss Daddy?” I hear him say in a baby voice. “Have you eaten all your critter snacks?”

Sometimes, if their window is open, I can hear their voices from inside. Gavin's voice carries the most. He tells what sounds like long, dramatic anecdotes to which I can just make out short, low responses from Hannes. I also begin to notice the pattern: neighbours tapping on the trellidor, and one of them coming out and making small talk. They never mention the weed directly, there's only an exchange to confirm how much is owed and how thankful the neighbour is for their service. It all sounds so casual, so benevolent, they could be selling Tupperware.

"Are they gay?" I ask Annika one night, after she returns an hour later from her own visit. I'd heard her knock on their trellidor too, and they'd invited her in to try a new strain they're cultivating. Now she's leaning against my door eating a bowl of cereal.

"Did you not pick that up?" she asks.

"I had a feeling," I say. "They sound so comfortable with each other."

"They've been together for thirteen years. They're each others' first loves."

I feel jealous again – that she knows them well enough to know this information. Then I admit to her that I feel excluded, that they never really seem interested in talking when I see them, that maybe it's because I'm English.

"You're overthinking it," she says. "Just ask them questions. Ask them about their cats."

She straightens up and heads to her room. There's a smugness about her movements, as if she knows she's winning.

5.

~ Dale [11:41]
It's come to the trustees attention that someone has been feeding the Egyptian geese. Not only is this harmful for the geese and for the environment, they are becoming a nuisance in the block. We trust your cooperation. Thx, on behalf of the Xanadu trustees. [sunflower emoji]

~ Carter Arderne [11:42]
Dale the woman feeding them isn't on the group.

~ Dale [11:42]
Can someone add her?

~ Carter Arderne [11:44]

I don't have her no. & she doesn't rent from Marshall. I suggest going to visit. She's in the ground floor flat.

~ Dale [11:50]
OK. Thx. [sunflower emoji]

Annika wants to have a flat warming. She brings it up on a Saturday morning, when we're in the lounge still in our pyjamas. She's painting and I'm drinking coffee in a patch of sun, looking at my one leg dappled by leaf shadows. Her suggestion cuts through our silence, ending a rare moment we've enjoyed in each other's company since moving here.

"But we're already two months in," I say.

"When did you ever say no to a good party?" she asks. By her smile, I can't tell if she's being genuine or making fun of me.

"It's different from the old place," I say, thinking back to the demolition party we'd held there before we'd moved out. By that time the block was half empty. "People here seem a lot more uptight about things," I add.

"Why don't we invite the neighbours too, then? Gavin and Hannes would come."

"I suppose I could invite Carter and Carol."

She doesn't say anything to that, instead focuses on mixing a skin colour on her ice cream lid. I imagine Carter in our flat, holding a glass of wine and looking at Annika's pictures of naked women with a confused expression on his face. I passed him on the fire escape the other day. I had thought we were around the same age, but he was wearing work clothes this time – a black button-up shirt, pointy leather shoes – which made him seem much older than me. He was talking on the phone and lifted his eyebrows above his sunglasses in greeting. After we passed each other, I could hear his voice carrying all the way down to the parking lot.

"It's not an emotional decision, it's a commercial one," he said to whomever colleague was on the other end.

"Let's ask Gavin and Hannes to invite some people they know here," Annika says, cutting through the memory. "That way, we have some neighbours who'll take our side. Maybe some of them belong to that wine club you want to be part of so badly, and they'll formally invite you to the next one."

"Fine," I say, "but only if we go easy on the noise."

She puts down her painting things, scampers to where I'm sitting, and wraps her arms around my shoulders. I close my eyes, enjoying the sun and the smell of her hair.

6.

~ Kimmy Mulder [09:45]
Any suggestions on how to go about dealing with the bergies? They are increasing in numbers…

Annika thinks the flat warming presents a good opportunity to ask Gavin and Hannes about the alarm. I still don't know why she can't ask them for me.

"I'm helping you to be more assertive," she says. "This is good practice."

On the night of the party, she pours me a shot of tequila in the kitchen, then leads me to the balcony. Gavin is cupping his hands around a joint Hannes is trying to light. When he notices Annika pushing me forward, he asks what's up. I laugh awkwardly, and ask them if they set an alarm in the mornings. They look at me with the same blank faces from the first time we tried to share the lift together – as if whatever I'm doing or saying makes no sense.

"It's waking her up," Annika says, as if to help me.

Gavin hands her the joint, then she passes it back to Hannes after taking a drag. And I think of the nights in our old flat when it was just us on the couch in our robes, passing a joint between us. I feel homesick – I'd much prefer being alone with Annika tonight, rather than having an awkward conversation in the cold with my neighbours.

"Maybe it's Janu," Gavin says. "He's here somewhere."

He dips his head inside, summons someone. A boy emerges. He has sandy curls and is wearing a deep green corduroy shirt. He looks around expectantly, sees the joint in Hannes's hand. As he takes it, Gavin introduces us to our upstairs neighbour. Janu smiles at us and puts his hands together in a discreet namaste gesture, but in a way that seems cool rather than overly spiritual.

"You two have a beautiful place," he says. "Really moving artwork on the walls."

I can sense Annika growing impatient next to me. Janu offers me the joint as I'm next in line. His fingers graze mine without any self-consciousness.

"She has a question," Annika says, signalling to me.

"Sheesh, way to introduce me," I laugh, but no one joins in.

Janu looks at me. He has the same dark eyes as Annika's, but they're wider than hers and remind me of a kitten's. I ask him about the alarm and recognition wells up in them, which then turns to remorse.

"Hey, so sorry about that," he says, touching the back of my arm. "I do the morning pages. Free writing while everything's still quiet."

"Are you a writer?" I ask.

"Elizabeth says that alarm goes off 'til six." Annika says. "So you just press snooze for an hour?"

He looks bewildered. "I dunno, sometimes I don't get up immediately."

"It's just the vibration that comes through the wall," I stammer, "So if that setting is turned off, I doubt I'd hear it."

He takes out his phone, unlocks it. On the homescreen I see an illustration of what looks like the Molteno reservoir, which Annika and I used to pass on our cycles through Oranjezicht. I watch Janu's fingers as he scrolls through his settings. They hover with the same gentleness as when he passed me the joint.

"Actually, I've got a better idea," he says. "I'll put my phone in the lounge. I've been wanting to make my bedroom technology-free for a while now." He looks up and meets my eyes, "I'll take this as a sign."

A WhatsApp notification appears on his screen. I involuntarily look, can make out the familiar letters of the Xanadu group.

"Is someone complaining?" I ask him before I can stop myself.

He opens the message. "Yup. Although it's not yet ten."

"Let me guess, it's from Dale," Gavin says.

Janu nods and tucks his phone back into his pocket.

"She can calm down, she's not even thirty for Pete's sake," Gavin adds.

"Really?" I ask. I'd pictured Dale as a forty-year-old white man.

"She's Marshall Bassingthwaite's granddaughter or goddaughter or something," he says, "which makes her behave like she's a trustee."

"Chair of the body corporate, more like," Hannes adds.

"She's not a trustee?" I ask.

"Please," Gavin says. "That girl is so wound up. All she needs is a good pomp."

Annika laughs and I look to her to explain.

“Then on the other end of the spectrum you have Carter and Carol,” Hannes mutters.

“They’re like rabbits.” Gavin says. “They’re directly under us. They do it in the shower, so it echoes and shit.”

Janu shifts next to me and I feel embarrassed. I excuse myself to go check my phone.

“Send her a sunflower emoji,” Gavin calls after me.

Inside, a fresh message from Dale appears on my phone. She’s sent six of them to the group, is threatening to lodge a noise complaint. I feel foggy from the weed – I should never have had some of that joint. I go back to the balcony, ask Annika if we can chat.

She gets up slowly, follows me in. I tell her that I think we should call everyone off the balcony and turn the music down.

“It’s not even ten,” she says, “and that Dale girl’s not a trustee.”

“But she’s Mr Bassingthwaite’s granddaughter. We could get kicked out.”

Annika looks at me. In my high state, her eyes tell me that I’m a sell-out to Marshall and his minions. She goes back outside. I see her talking to Gavin and Hannes.

“We’ll move the party next door,” she says when she returns. She squeezes my shoulder as if to console me. “You probably don’t want to risk joining.”

I watch as she turns the music down and explains the plan to our guests. Some of them come say goodbye, others leave for Gavin and Hannes’ place. I notice Janu hanging behind, a serious expression on his face.

“Hey, sorry about this,” he says, when the final person has left. “I’d be stressed too.”

“This is the closest we’ve had to a fight,” I say.

The music is still playing, which makes me feel even more sorry for myself. Janu’s watching me as I look around the lounge.

“No pressure,” he says, stammering a little, “but you could come smoke a joint at mine. If you think that would help you relax.”

A joint would definitely not help, I think, but I hate the idea of being alone.

I follow Janu up the fire escape to his flat. He keeps his voice to a whisper, takes care to unlock his gate as quietly as possible.

“She lives next door,” he apologises, shifting his eyes to Dale’s lit window in the flat next to his.

Inside, one lamp is on to welcome him home. The lounge is minimally furnished. Some journals titled *Alternative Architecture* are stacked on a Mid-Century coffee table and a

framed illustration takes up the one wall. It looks like a beach alcove somewhere in Cape Town, rendered in the same style as the image I'd spied on his phone's screen.

"Is this Bakoven?" I ask, thinking of the tiny beach that all the hipsters go to for sundowners.

"Nah," he smiles, "somewhere much more remote."

He walks over to a record player in the corner. I watch his fingers as he opens it, and then carefully takes a record out the sleeve. I shiver a little, recalling their touch. Then he opens one of the coffee table's drawers and takes out a wooden box, where I see his weed is stored. As he packs a joint, he asks me what I do for fun.

"That's really cool," he says, when I tell him about the nighttime bike rides Annika and I used to take into the streets of Oranjezicht. He tells me he doesn't own a car – that he gets around on foot or public transport. Or Uber, if really necessary.

"Sure, it's inconvenient," he says, stretching his arm to rest it along the back of the couch, "but I'm much more present to my environment that way. Even at the back of an Uber – it's more mindful than driving."

I nod, wishing I could fully convey how much his worldview resonates with my own. I want to tell him about my time in London – how alive I felt cycling home on those cold nights. But that memory is too tied to Annika now, and it feels like I'd be betraying her by telling it to Janu.

He gives me the joint and I take it for the touch of his fingers again. The more we talk, the more I like him. I learn he's an architect for a bespoke design firm in Woodstock and that he writes Afrikaans poetry in his spare time.

"Hence the alarm," he says, grinning shyly. "I'm most creative in the mornings."

After I nudge him enough, he reads me one of his poems off his phone. I close my eyes and rest my head on the back of the couch, conscious it's touching his arm. I don't understand it, but the words feel so wholesome, as if I'm running my fingers over a husk of wheat, and I have the thought that it would be worthwhile to learn Afrikaans if I found myself together with him. Then he translates it for me, a faraway look in his eyes as he grapples for the English experience of what the poem is conveying. When he's finished, I smile at him in wonder and he leans in to kiss me. His fingers curl against my neck, just as gently as they handled the record player. In our silence, I can make out the din from downstairs – Gavin's voice carrying up, and Sarah barking, somewhere else in Xanadu Court.

In the morning, Janu's flatmate is in the lounge. He's leaning over the coffee table rolling a cigarette. Janu introduces him as Marnus, then they talk in Afrikaans. I catch something about Marnus playing in a band last night, but can't follow much else. I start putting on my shoes.

"I'll see you soon, though?" Janu asks as he lets me out the door. He watches as I walk down the corridor. I turn to wave when I reach the fire escape. The image stays with me as I walk down the stairs – the white shirt he slept in being pulled by the breeze, the mound of his penis under his chequered briefs.

At home, I find Annika in her gown, cleaning. I wait by the lounge door after greeting her.

"Have fun?" she asks when she finally looks up.

I smile and drop onto the couch.

"I did," I say.

She throws a bottle into a black bag.

"But not like that," I add. "I mean, we didn't have sex."

"So what if you did?" she says, before heading to the kitchen.

I can hear her running water into the sink. I almost get up to follow her, want to tell her more about my night – that Janu's an architect, that he doesn't own a car, that he read me a poem – but I stay on the couch. I hear a lawnmower and Sarah yapping at something and I feel guilty. I shouldn't have mentioned anything about sex. We hardly talk about that, or boys, even. I've come to understand that Annika thinks there are much more interesting things to talk about. I'd asked her about it once, late on a Friday evening in our old flat.

"What, if I have sex? If I enjoy it?" she'd asked.

And I'd half nodded, half shrugged, immediately regretting bringing it up. Then she'd told me that she'd slept with someone the Tuesday before. I was surprised, and betrayed, that she'd kept this to herself. Later, I tried to backtrack to what I was doing that Tuesday. I was at home, bored with a documentary I'd chosen to watch. I remember her coming back at some point, she'd said something about seeing a friend when I asked her where she'd been. Even now I can remember her eyes as she left me for bed – swimming, filled with syrup. Like the bergies on the pavement outside Xanadu.

7.

~ Kimmy Mulder [06:23]
Hi guys. My friend almost got mugged on the stairs to the Blue Café yesterday. She has told TBK Watch. Please be vigilant.

~ Carter Arderne [06:30]
Is she okay? This is the second incident I've heard of in the last two weeks.

~ Dale [06:31]
Definitely driving to Blue Café from now. It's crazy.

I laugh when I see Dale's message. I'm in bed browsing my phone before I get up. Janu's propped up against a pillow next to me, writing his morning pages.

"Now Dale wants to drive to the Blue Café," I tell him. "It will probably take longer for her to park and walk from there."

Janu reaches down and finds his phone in his shoe. I watch his eyes moving back and forth as he reads the latest messages, a frown forming at his lips.

"Reminds me of that seminal text from Jane Jacobs. When she writes about the eyes on the street."

He looks at me to check if I've caught the reference. Then he goes on to explain it – how an architect from New York profoundly influenced his understanding of what safe spaces should feel like.

"You need people on the streets, like walking or socialising on the sidewalks," he says.

"Have you ever met Dale?" I ask, feeling a vague restlessness coming over me.

"Yeah, she tried to start a wine club in the block a while ago. I went with Marnus once or twice."

"What's she like?"

He puts his phone back down, crosses his legs under the blankets.

"She seems lonely," he says. "I think she'd be happier if she had someone. Like I have Marnus, and you have Annika."

"Or a boyfriend."

He looks thoughtful.

"I'm not sure," he says. "I think people overlook other types of companions. They're so focussed on the idea of finding their soulmates."

We're silent for a moment. In the weeks following the party, Annika and I have spent less and less time together. She spends most nights in her room. So I go up and see Janu, and often land up staying over.

I check the time and see I'm running late. I kiss Janu as I climb over him to go shower. When I open my door, I'm relieved to see Annika's is still closed. Last night was the first time Janu stayed over at ours. I couldn't accuse Annika of being impolite, but she didn't offer much in conversation and it felt awkward being around both of them at once. We danced around our turns to brush our teeth in the bathroom, and I felt guilty when I finally closed my door for the evening, with Janu behind it.

Once I'm dressed, Janu comes out with me and we part ways by the lift. When I reach the ground floor, I hear the bergies in the street already. I've been trying to leave earlier for work on Fridays before they come. They're always so loud, shouting what sounds like jokes or alerts or warnings to each other as they weave between the bins, and their eyes scare me.

I hear Sarah, and see Carter and Carol emerging with her from the fire escape. I feel better that they'll be exiting the block with me. But when I open the gate, Sarah makes a run for it. Carol's caught off guard, can't pull the leash in time. I watch, my hands frozen on my handlebars, as Sarah hurtles towards a woman rifling through the bins outside Xanadu. She screams as the pom fastens her teeth around her kneecap. A man at the neighbour's bin hurls a tuna can at Sarah, which bounces off her head.

"Hey!" Carter shouts. "Don't touch my dog!"

He strides across to the man, who meets him in the middle of the road. I can't hear their words above Sarah's yaps, but something happens between them – like a current or a flash of light – which makes the bergies yell in excitement. Carol's cursing and fumbling with her pepper spray, but just as she holds it up, I see Bulelani running out. He steps between them and drags Carter away.

"Carol, call Tamboerskloof Watch," Carter yells, while Bulelani fights to restrain him. The man spits at them before disappearing up the stairs to the street above.

"He had a knife," Carter says, when he's back behind the gate. A few residents have come out and are looking down from their corridors. A coloured woman emerges from a door on the ground floor. I hear her asking Carter if he wants some sugar water. He nods and she disappears back inside.

“Has the WhatsApp group issued a press release yet?” Annika asks when I arrive home that evening. I open the chat, browse the messages as I lean my bike against the lounge wall.

“Some tributes to Bulelani for being the UN,” I say, “and someone from Tamboerskloof Watch will be patrolling the bergies every Friday.”

“I wouldn’t call them ‘bergies’.”

“Why, what would you call them?” I ask, taking a seat on the couch.

“I don’t know – ‘informal waste collectors’ sounds better.”

“I was being ironic, anyway,” I mutter.

She shakes her head, goes back to her painting, “This place is the wild west. If I was a trustee, I’d figure out what to do about the pom. She was the aggressor, wasn’t she?”

I nod. I’ve begun to tolerate Sarah less and less. Even in our flat, with all the windows closed, her barks find their way deep into my inner ear.

I lie back on the couch and look at the ceiling. My mind pulls me back to the morning. Bulelani’s hands were shaking. Once the commotion had died down, he’d held them up to no one in particular, just observed their tremors. Most people had gone back inside by then and I was late for work. But I kept thinking of him as I freewheeled down the hill, wondering what he made of all this. Then I remember the woman who emerged from a door I’d never seen before.

“I think there is a person of colour in this block,” I say.

Annika looks at me funnily.

“You said Mr Bassingthwaite was racist, remember. Before we moved in. Well, I saw a coloured woman this morning. She lives on the ground floor.”

“Shame, her flat must hardly get any light,” she says.

“I think she’s the lady feeding the Egyptian geese.”

“Good for her.”

I look back up at the ceiling, fighting the mounting suspicion that Annika was right about this place. There’s something unsettling about living here as a result.

“What are you doing tonight?” Annika asks. “You want to do dinner or sketch or something?”

“I think I’m meeting Janu later,” I say.

“No prob,” she says.

She wanders out the lounge and I hear her in the kitchen opening and closing the cupboards. I flinch as she bangs one of them particularly loudly, still rattled by the events of the morning. She re-enters with a bowl of cereal.

"Are you two official now?" she asks.

"I'm not sure," I say. "We're just seeing where it goes."

"That doesn't sound like you at all."

She takes a seat on the armchair.

"I definitely like him," I say.

I wait for her to say something back, but all I hear is her chewing.

"What do you think?" I ask.

Annika looks up from her cereal and our eyes meet.

"Of him? Does it matter?"

I laugh, tell her that I'm sure she has very different tastes. But I can hear that it's my awkward laugh, hiding that it matters very much, that Annika's opinion matters more than I wish it did.

"I don't know," she says. "I'm biassed. I hung out with guys like him all the time in university. But now that we're almost thirty, they're less interesting to me."

"How so?"

She takes another bite before she can answer, then looks above my head with an expression of deep thought, as if she's trying to show how carefully she's choosing her words.

"Those, like, purist artist types. They're predictable. They only hang out with certain people, only watch or listen to certain things. And they have all these ideals and principles that most of us only believed in when we were studying philosophy or theory of architecture or whatever."

I nod along, pretending that what she's saying about Janu isn't a surprise to me. But she's attacking the things I admire about him the most. Like his passion for poetry, or his desire to move around the city without a filter.

"You're an artist type too, though," I reply, "and you're very principled."

"About what?"

"About being independent… and frugal. And woke."

She exaggerates a grimace.

"I'd be careful using that word. And anyway, you convinced me to rent from Marshall Bassingthwaite because of the master bedroom. I wouldn't call that very principled on my part."

She tips her bowl to drink the remaining milk, and I feel tears forming at the back of my eyes – from humiliation, or being misunderstood. Or from the fear, mostly, that Annika is right about everything.

8.

Marshall Bassingthwaite
to me

Dear Elizabeth,

I trust you girls are continuing to enjoy your time at Xanadu Court and are staying safe. In light of the recent security incidents in the neighbourhood, please find minutes from the emergency body corporate meeting for your perusal. May I direct your attention to Section 2, effective 1 June. I remain at your service, as always, to address any concerns.

Yours,
Marshall Bassingthwaite
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Marshall Bassingthwaite, SC
Senior Advocate, Rhodes Chambers
Advisory Board Member, UCT FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology

Friday mornings have a different feel about them now that the guard is there. The bergies still make the same racket as they drift past Xanadu, but the air feels less charged. I think Carter and Carol miss that feeling of something about to happen. I'm almost certain that they time their morning walks for when the bergies come – as if they enjoy seeing how aggravated Sarah gets, and are waiting for the bergies' reactions, and what the guard will do about it. The guard seems more concerned with Sarah than anyone else, because she barks at him too.

I receive Mr Bassingthwaite's email the Friday before Annika's birthday. I'm in my room dithering over what to write in her card and am grateful for the distraction. I open the document that's attached, jump to the section that Mr Bassingthwaite highlighted. It details a decision to close the stairs between the cul-de-sac and the road above it, install security

cameras in the street, and to erect a guard house outside the block. *To benefit from these essential security measures,* it goes on to say, *a nominal monthly levy will apply to residents of Xanadu Court.*

I stop reading. Annika's in her room with the door closed and I feel exhausted by the thought of sharing this news – her eyes narrowing, some righteous rhetoric to follow.

I look at the blank card in front of me. Last year, I sketched a picture of a wolf for her. I remember dithering over what to write back then too, because it seemed like a rare opportunity to tell her how happy she made me. But instead, I quoted some characteristics from the wolf book as a joke – her bravery, creativity, instinctual knowledge. Which were things I secretly admired about her, anyway.

Now I'm not sure what to write at all, so I put the card back in my stationery box, because Annika doesn't care much for these sorts of things anyway.

The next morning, we walk to the Blue Cafe for breakfast. We find a free table on the sidewalk, overlooked by the Victorian houses across the street. The sun is out, but Annika tightens her scarf around her and there's a chilly wind which makes me wish the waitron would hurry with the coffees. While we wait, I ask Annika which house is her favourite. She points at the one I like too.

"We'll buy it together," I say. "I take the top and you take the bottom."

She's silent, starts picking some dried oil paint from her fingernails.

"Fine," I add, "since it's your birthday, you can choose."

"You and Janu can have it," she says. "I can see him living in one of these when he's fifty. Strolling over here to have a coffee, some architecture magazine under his arm."

"Maybe," I say, smiling at the thought. "I'm not sure if this would be an example of high density housing, though."

"Whatever that means," Annika replies. She looks past me to Lion's Head.

The waitron arrives with our coffees.

"What does he think about privatising our road?" she asks.

We look at each other. Her eyes are flat, deflecting my surprise. Then she tells me that Gavin and Hannes had told her about the emergency meeting a few days ago already.

"Janu probably won't support it," she says, "but I doubt he'll move out."

We're silent for a moment.

"I'm not going to pay for that shit," she says.

Her hand is resting on the table. Little flecks of blue and white paint are still on her fingernails. She seems so forlorn that I have the urge to reach over and take it.

"We don't have to renew our lease," I say. "We can find a new place together."

"No," she smiles. Her hand moves forward a little, and then she tucks it under the table. "Living with you, I've never been happier. You know that, right? But I'm not your person anymore, and that's okay."

She looks away. Her eyes are glassy in the sunlight. Then she points to a man and a pom coming out of our house. He's wearing giant reflective sunglasses and spots a group of other men he knows at a table nearby. We watch as he jogs across the road, dragging the pom by the harness, and slaps his friends' hands.

"Carter ten years from now," I say, hoping to forget what we were talking about so that it won't be true.

9.

A month after Annika's departure, I'm wheeling my bike out for work. I'm about to mount it when I hear someone calling. A bergie is crouching outside the fence. When she beckons me again I feel compelled to walk over, wishing I'd got on my bike faster and had pretended not to hear her.

She points to the bins that are waiting outside Xanadu. The guard hut has been erected and the stairs are now closed, so the bergies can no longer access our street.

"You see those bottles," the woman says.

I follow where she's pointing, can only see a mound of a recycling bag sticking out one of the bins. She asks if I can fetch it for her and bring it to where she is on the other side. I'm about to tell her I'm not allowed to, but her eyes are pleading and she does that namaste gesture that Janu still does when he's grateful for something.

I look towards the guard hut, which is empty. He must be wandering by the stairs somewhere. I open the gate and walk towards the bins, but then I see Bulelani, watching me from one of Xanadu's tiers. I turn back, but he hops off the wall and comes down to meet me.

"I'll talk to him," he says, looking at the guard who's appeared and has begun to walk towards us. "Just make sure no one else sees you."

2018

Wayfinding

1.

It's the central heating that finally gets me. First a background buzz while I pull my clothes from the cupboards of the Airbnb and begin to pack, which eventually becomes deafening in its message that I'm spending my final night in London alone.

Now I'm sitting on the floor among my scarves and tights and blouses, staring at the radiator's cream grills.

I'd heard them – my colleagues just ahead of me as they left the office, ping ponging light plans between them. The new pub around the corner, something about the happy hour. Which must've ended hours ago, by now. I'd thought about following them, but I imagined entering the pub, just too far behind for the last person to hold the door open. Turned backs and too few bar stools. Ordering a beer and choking to finish it, while I fought with myself to say something interesting.

I pick up my phone. Still nothing from Janu, his 'last seen' on WhatsApp was hours before. He's probably in a bar tonight too – just a t-shirt, the prime of Cape Town's summer, forgetting time as he drains each glass on the half hour. My impending homecoming forgotten by him having fun.

My eyes drift to my clothes on the floor. My sports bra, unworn and stiff from my fabric softener back home. I've had every intention to run in the week. I wanted to run the same routes I did when I lived in London six years ago. But the workshops clogged up my daylight hours and when I finally made it out the office, it was already dark outside.

When I first lived here, I didn't mind running at night, in the middle of Winter. I didn't mind most things – getting lost, being cold, being alone. Maybe I had more stamina in my early twenties. And I was wayfinding, trusting that the masters I was studying would lead me to my purpose. That whole time, and on all those runs I took within it, I had no need to think about the limits I might face when I returned home.

Now I face the hours left in the evening. Packing, the sound of the heating, my phone blank and silent. So I decide to undress.

2.

Tonight is the first night I've felt restless. Up until now, I've been surprised by how much I've enjoyed my own company. In the week I've stayed here I've grown to like the AirBnb, despite its obvious style of business trip living – canvas wall art, cheap filter coffee pods, a handful of dishwasher tablets to last the duration of my stay. Each night I've experienced outsized delight in picking up some wine on my walk home from the office, feeling the heating as I open the front door, and all my things – my dirty dishes, my slippers, the towel I dried my hair with – the same as I left them and waiting for me. I first take off my bra and put on my pyjama pants. Then I idle through the apartment with a glass of wine, sometimes saying out loud what I plan to do over the hours I have left, aware of the windows of the surrounding office blocks looking in.

There seems to be few residents in the centre of London, and each trip up and down the stairs to my door on the third floor has been dark and quiet. I've wondered if I'm the only person staying in the building. From my bedroom, however, I can see the window of an apartment across the street from me. I've observed it over the week, my view allowing the corner of a bed and a clothes rail, and it's assured me that I'm not the only inhabitant in an unaffordable office district. Sometimes I've seen a piece of clothing on the bed, or better yet, a lump of a foot under the covers.

Now I lock the door behind me and tuck the little key into my sleeve. I trot the stairs down to the bottom of the building and when I open the door to the street, the cold smacks me into a gallop. I'm surprised by my pace down the deserted road, fuelled by the need to heat myself as quickly as I can. My toes feel like pellets in my shoes, the warm blood yet to reach them. When I reach the end I turn into High Holborn, run straight into the herds round the station. I'm a shadow, I think. While they're being funnelled towards the turnstiles in their bulging coats and scarves, I find the partings and slip through them in my one layer of clothes until I reach the thick artery of Kingsway which is quiet and black ahead.

I've been a shadow all week. If someone could track my movements, they'd see I've moved silently between places, causing no rifts in the fabric of the city. Certainly no rifts at the workshops either. My director had sent me because they were about consumer behaviour and I have a degree in psychology. But I found nothing to contribute – no specialist knowledge, no insights into the human psyche. Instead, I typed up what everyone else said

into a report – any of my Cape Town colleagues could have done the same, and networked with their London counterparts while doing so.

I pick up my pace to forget this fact. The pedestrian light at Archway is red. I skip it, run past a man waiting to cross. I imagine his gaze following me, observing that I must know this city. Even six years after living here, and returning to South Africa to find myself in a consulting job that has nothing to do with what I studied here, and certainly nothing to do with making any great difference. But I still know these streets and can skip red lights because of a speed and sureness that that man doesn't have.

A chill meets me as I join the onramp to Waterloo Bridge. I run alongside the cabs and buses and bikes, all in our lanes. The Thames opens below me, slowing the river it reflects, and the lights float like lipids on the water. We all seem to slow, swamped by the sounds of traffic and the low hum of boats. I pass pedestrians, mist dragging from their breaths. The ones who have chosen to stop look like they've been willingly turned to stone. They stare out towards the water, wrapped up with their backs towards me.

On the other side I take the stairs to the South Bank. I'm the only person on them, and I feel a thrill at the thought that Janu has no idea where I am. I could run anywhere tonight, take as long as I want until I return home to find his goodnight message sent hours earlier, unlooked at, unanswered because I've been out running.

3.

It's busy on the South Bank, even in mid-Winter. The food trucks are still open, wafting smells of onion mixed with burnt caramel from the chestnut roasters. The children are still out too, little Michelin men in their layers of insulation. I run past the South Bank Centre, where there's a crowd of young adults milling outside a tunnel made from scaffolding. Then I veer to the promenade's edge, drawn towards the fairy lights that string the lampposts.

A thin layer of sweat has gathered between my skin and my shirt. It's my only warm running shirt and it hugs my hips, my breasts, the grooves of my abdomen more than the clothes I run in back home. I'd spied myself in the mirror before I left. My black outfit thinned my arms and legs and I shifted my weight from foot to foot, following the movements of my hips. I took a selfie and sent it to Janu with a joke about looking like a ninja. But I secretly wanted him to see what I saw, and to miss my body. I left it, deciding to run off my desire instead.

I'd attempted to send him a revealing picture earlier in the week. One night after I'd finished a second glass of wine, I lay on the couch, untied my gown, and angled the camera at myself in my underwear, cutting off my head. I looked at each shot, put off by the faint path of hair to my belly button and a few ruddy pimples on my chest. I deleted them all – I couldn't imagine pressing send even if I liked how I looked, because I wouldn't know when or where the pictures would find him. His serious reaction, a tremor in his fingers as he quickly relocked his phone on seeing them. And I was scared the whole thing would leave us both feeling awkward.

I shake out my arms to get rid of the memory. I focus instead on a couple walking towards me, take advantage of my shadow status by looking at them longer than I would at people back home. They're both wearing knee-length coats, the woman's is buttoned and tied at the waist. She must be about my age. Her high bun pronounces her cheek bones and glistening eyes. The man is jutting his chin towards her. I pass them, hear her saying *I need to make time for my own art*. The man follows up with a question behind me, awe in his voice. I see the orbs of the London Eye rise above the trees. I make my breath hit the bottom of my stomach before it clambers back up.

My own art – the words have stiffened my shoulders. I picture the woman behind me, talking her thoughts into the cold. Fed by the fairy lights and river tide, the man's attention. On impulse I turn around and start running the way I came, as if I can snatch something else from her as I pass.

They're following the crowd into the tunnel at the South Bank Centre, the woman's hands happily in her pockets as she speaks. But now they're too far for me to catch anything else she says. I look at the sign outside the tunnel – it looks like an exhibition on residential high rises. The photographer's name sounds familiar, maybe Janu has talked about him. He'd fit right in here, I think. I can see us following the couple inside, him in a beige coat and a maroon beanie, staring just above me as he explains the significance of the work we're about to see. I'll remember how endearing he is, how passionate he gets about art and architecture and those sorts of things. And how his passion, his apparent expertise, seems to prove that the realm of art is now more of his thing than mine.

I pass the skatepark, follow the gaze of a man who looks mesmerised by the rhythm of wheels on concrete, the clatter of falls. He reminds me of my director – a bachelor in his

fifties who's kept his figure through hours swimming laps at the gym – and I wonder what he's doing out here alone, if he also doesn't have a family at home.

I continue, hoping to regain the clear-headed feeling I'd started my run with. But that couple is sticking with me. It was the way the man pitched his chin towards the woman, believing in her own art, trying to absorb everything she was saying.

Janu called last night. As I lay on the couch looking at the office blocks, he asked me what it was like to return to London. I told him about the walk I took to my old university, a few blocks from the AirBnb. And my surprise at how I knew my routes with a muscle memory, how I could anticipate the things I'd see around each corner. Nothing had changed. The same soccer matches were being played in the floodlit field next to my residence. And on entering the cafe I used to study in, I was met with the expectant look of the same barista, unaware that six years had passed since I stepped in.

Janu listened patiently, made some *mmm* sounds in appreciation. As an architect, I thought he'd engage with these thoughts more – he's always talking about people's relationships with their environments. But his response ended the conversation, rather than found a foothold to advance it. Maybe my thoughts didn't fit the theories he'd studied on the subject. I'm not sure if they fit anywhere.

I'm on a quieter stretch now, the footpath squashed between an office block on one side and the lapping Thames on the other. Blackfriars Bridge is ahead. I could take it to the other side or run to the next bridge, or the next one. My legs feel tired from the thought. The thrill of running without a plan has left me, and the menu of bridges to choose from feels overwhelming.

I think of the couple inside the exhibition, light and warm. I could go there. And as I run, the idea tickles me until I let my feet do an arc back on themselves, just after I've passed two walkers. I feel self-conscious, as if they can read my reason for turning. And I imagine returning to the AirBnb, texting Janu about the run I took – that I decided to follow two strangers. Him asking why. And I won't know how to answer, even now. *They just interested me,* I'll say.

The skatepark again. My director is still there, watching. Maybe I'm running back to figure out why I want to follow the couple. I'm running out my itch. I reach the tunnel outside the South Bank Centre and go in. I scan the interior for them. It's all heavenly white, with people orbiting in that slow, drifting way that seems compulsory for exhibitions. But I can't

see them. I turn to a picture, put my hands on my hips and try to level my breathing in the warmer climate. It's like one of those patterns I'd stare at when I was little, waiting for the 3-D animal to appear. Instead, I'm facing a collection of giant apartment blocks with hundreds of windows and balconies and air conditioners camouflaging the lives inside of them. Janu's specialty indeed, I think. He's a champion of high density housing, he recently published an article about the evils of Cape Town's sprawl. I feel for my phone to take a picture for him, instead pat the tights that cling to my skin. I turn away, wrap my arms around myself to keep warm. Then I see her in the far corner, her hands still easy in her pockets as she talks to a group of people. I notice their heads, cocked in the same way as the man's did when I first ran past the couple, as if they all see the woman as an expert on something. I edge closer. Someone touches her shoulder before turning to leave, as if thanking her. The man is behind her, nodding with her as she talks.

"We had the opening last week," I hear her saying. "I'm here tonight just because."

Appreciative laughter. Then, "What's your favourite?" from someone else.

The woman almost looks at me as her eyes locate a picture on the other side. "Go take a look at that one."

I involuntarily turn with the others, feel my body heat up as I realise she might notice I've been listening.

"He's deliberately impersonal," she continues. "The scale is so big, you usually can't see anyone in the photos. But I've spotted a woman in that one – I won't tell you where – and she looks so lost, as if she's the only human living there."

There are murmurs and footsteps. I pretend to study another picture while they move on and when I look around again, I spot her disappearing into the tunnel, the man's hand on the small of her back. I check my watch, wondering what they'll do next. It's 9.55 – too late for supper. Maybe they'll find a drink somewhere or go home – undress on each side of the bed, then talk in the dark until they're asleep. I follow them out, afraid that I've lost them. But I see them on my right when I exit, walking towards the skatepark.

It's silly, I think, as I keep to a walk so that I don't pass them. How I'm wanting to know things as trivial as the neighbourhood they live in and what their route home is. Ahead of me, the woman stops and turns around. I shift my gaze out towards the water, pretending to look deep in thought as I get closer. I should start running soon, the air around me feels like it's condensing on my clothes. I wrap my arms higher around myself to warm my breasts.

“She’s been following us,” the woman says as I approach, “even before Mike’s exhibition.”

I’m passing them now, their eyes thawing my body, and all I can do is continue to stare at the dark waters as if I’m unaware, haven’t heard them. I’m desperate to start running, but that would give me away.

“We should tell someone,” the man says behind me. His words wind my back. “Isn’t there a guard back there?”

I begin to run.

4.

I stop when I’m halfway over Blackfriars. The bridge is mostly empty, and when I allow myself to look back there’s only one pedestrian ambling towards me in the distance. I look out over the water. I can’t see the South Bank from here, the office blocks I ran past are hiding the food trucks and fairy lights and happy people paired up in the cold. I think about Janu, my skin baking with embarrassment at the thought of him knowing I’d been found out. Why this matters so much, I’m not sure. I start running again, wishing the route would contract so that I could get home faster to check my phone. He must be home by now, his reply waiting – he had a good evening, thanks, how was mine? And he’s looking forward to picking me up from the airport tomorrow.

On the other side, the bridge flows into Farringdon Street, the long uphill road that once formed part of my regular running route. It was in these roads six years ago that I fell in love with running, amazed by how I could find myself from one place to the next with my own feet. But always with the possibility of not making it, of losing my way. I think I secretly enjoyed the times when my sense of direction failed me, and I’d find myself among council houses, or warehouses, or deadend canal ways. Figuring out how to correct my course was like solving a crossword and it distracted me from my exhaustion. I felt very close to myself when I was lost, especially when the people around me all looked like they knew where they were going.

I continue on the slow ascent home. What would Janu say to these experiences? A few gentle *mmm* sounds again, maybe. And I want to be gifted a night where I can walk with my hands in my pockets, my cheeks stinging from the cold, and talk like I’m a specialist in

something. A master of remembering old routes, maybe, or being a shadow, following strangers. Perhaps not so much.

I take a left, knowing that my feet are detouring me past my old residence, despite wanting to go home. And knowing that passing it will hurt me – the lit windows of present day students, the noise drifting up from the basement common room – music and voices, confident, excitable.

There it is – tucked into its square. Two smokers stand under a lamppost across the street, on a break between drinks. I remember sitting there on the kerb with another South African. I try to recall why we were eating leftovers from a lunchbox together. I do remember she had lit a cigarette and passed it to me for my one drag. Was it then that we talked about what we'd do when we returned? She was going to use her epidemiology masters to help turn the tide on TB. I think I was regurgitating what I'd written up in my scholarship application – that I'd use art and psychology as tools for working through trauma. I'd truly believed in it, though. Especially when I was sitting under a lamppost on a square in London, a couple of beers in.

I shake my arms, hear my elbows click. I make myself think about the brisk walks home from the office instead – when I returned to myself, so by the time I reached the AirBnb I was hot and happy.

I see my road ahead. I turn into it and pick up my pace for the final stretch. Then I open the door to the building and climb the stairway, preparing for the affront of the heating, the office blocks looking in. Inside, I'll find my phone, the screen probably blank. And all my things the same as I left them, waiting for me.