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In Two Genres: *Blood Intimates* and *The Smiths and the Coelacanth*

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

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Abstract

There has been a change of regime in a place with very different co-ordinates to the real world, and the President and his intimates – his chef, barber and portraitist – are being held accountable for their complicity by the new Commander. Each man in turn speaks of his appetites, the physical, the tactile, the hurt done by him and to him, detailing the intimacies of his particular embodied life. The significant woman in each man's life gives voice to the minutiae of pain, balancing melancholy, farce and horror, until all characters' voices elide in a whirlpool of personal and public reckoning, memory and desire.

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Blood Intimates

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I speak of the banality of evil...

– **Hannah Arendt**, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

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PART I

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1 His portraitist

He came every two months for a sitting. Always early in the day, usually on a Friday, when he still had something vital in his face from the week's effort, but a mellowness in his eyes from the knowledge it was almost over. The fallen jacaranda petals lay luminous on the pavement outside at that time of day, and his assistant would scoop them up by the handful and strew them over the couch where he sat, or lay, or lounged for each portrait. Regal purple petals. Made him feel like a king.

I always mixed my palette before he arrived. I knew the shade of his skin, the hue of his hair, the pinkness of the half-moons in his nails. When he arrived, and was seated, I adjusted the colours slightly, according to his mood. If it had been a bad week, his skin tone needed more yellow; if he were feeling benevolent, I added a daub of blue to the white for his eyes. He said having his picture painted was his only therapy.

I would start with a charcoal sketch of his face. I was ruthless about detail, and documented each new wrinkle or discolouration or sausage spot. This is what he wanted. In his very first sitting, I flattered him on the canvas, and he threatened never to return. The next time I painted him as he was, and it pleased him. You would be surprised what can happen to a face in two months. One day I'll bind together all the surviving charcoal sketches and make a flipbook that jolts single frames into action when thumbed quickly. The flipbook's action will be the ageing of the President.

The oil portraits used to take me exactly six hours. He would decide on his pose, and when he had settled into it his assistant blotted his face oil with foundation and, on days when the President looked particularly tired, added some authority to his eyes with eyeliner. He had an uncanny ability to sit still for hours. At the end of each session his assistant collected the previous sitting's portrait to hang next to the flag in Parliament, so that the portrait in Parliament was always the most current. The outdated ones were distributed to dignitaries to hang in their homes.

2 His chef

The President's favourite meal was Sunday brunch. I would do a fresh seafood platter for him and serve it in the private dining room in his city apartment. Not even his family joined him for this meal. We established a comfortable routine over the years. The guard would let me into the apartment at 9am. I brought all the ingredients, uncooked, with me, and prepared the meal in his own kitchen, as quietly as I could, so as not to wake him. I had equipped the kitchen suitably to meet my needs. I did tasks in his apartment kitchen that I long abandoned doing in the main Presidential Residence kitchens. Things like disembowelling crayfish with their own feelers, destoppering sea snails, beheading prawns. These are normally jobs for lowly kitchen boys. But in his quiet kitchen on a Sunday I grew fond of doing my own dirty work - I communed with an earlier self that way, remembered my own humble beginnings. It reminded me of my respect for processes, the satisfaction of peeling and chopping and mincing and grating, all the myriad ways one can put a culinary world into order. I can't deny the pride I felt knowing that each item I prepared in that kitchen would nourish the President.

As soon as I arrived, I would place the live abalone on the floor of the pantry. They were tense from being transported and had to calm down before I could kill them, otherwise the flesh would be tough. I left them there until everything else was almost ready, then I crept up on them and hit them on their soft underbellies with the end of a rolling pin. If they sensed me coming they contracted like a heart muscle and were wasted.

3 His barber

The President was meticulous about his facial hair. Same with his ear and nostril hair. He insisted that I use tweezers to dig deep into his orifices to root out the hair at its source. This inevitably inflicted pain, and he swore and threw things against the wall to cope. Afterwards he panted like a dog on heat (I secretly suspected he liked it). He had a daily late afternoon appointment in preparation for evening functions. His hair grew fast and blue and by the end of each day his stubble showed its colour, but the ear and nostril ritual I performed only weekly. Like all men, the President's favourite part of the session was the lathering. The brush I used was soft but firm, and the shaving soap lathered easily with moisture, needing little encouragement. I made small circles on his lower face until the soap foamed. I know it felt good.

For me, the satisfaction was de-lathering. I would sharpen my knife in front of the President. He winced from the sound, but never opened his eyes to look, which could be interpreted as a sign of both cowardice and bravery. Then I would take his head firmly between my hands and tilt it backwards. This was the moment I waited for each day: with a brisk twist of my hands, I could have snapped his neck; slit his throat with a knife-flick. I did neither. I would start at the bottom of his neck with the blade and glide it slowly upwards, watching the stubble mingle with the foam.

Every evening the floor of my shop was covered with hair. Hair is an extension of self - I know it has power. When I looked at the hair of so many people lying tangled on the floor, it was like seeing earlier selves and discarded personality tics made manifest. I never threw it away; my assistant swept it into a heap then bottled it to keep on shelves in the back room.

4 His portraitist

I was forbidden by the President to paint any other person's portrait. This was the condition on which I was initially commissioned. He said my eye was always to be fresh for his face. I agreed because the fee I received meant I needed to do no other paying work and could paint as I used to, when I was a student: only for myself and anybody who chose to be my audience.

My wife was the first to choose to be my audience. I had painted furiously for several months at university and hired out an industrial basement to exhibit my work. I was proud and believed good art speaks for itself, so I didn't advertise or print flyers or put an ad in the student newspaper about the exhibition. I hadn't seen friends during my painterly hibernation. My professors weren't sure that I still existed. Nobody came. I sat in the basement and drank the beer I'd bought alone. She appeared at the door (looking for a toilet, she told me years later) towards midnight - her shoulders narrower than her hips, her hair undyed, her collar bones demanding attention. I opened her a beer and let her browse my work while she sipped. She took a long time over my drawings, paying them attention they weren't used to in a room of oil paintings. She slunk in and out of the pools of light thrown on each one, cocooned in her sequined slip, and eventually she went to the toilet at the back of the basement.

"It's not flushing," she said. "The handle is broken."

At least, I thought, something of her will be left when she leaves. Later, after I'd fallen in love, everything about her - clipped nails she'd left in a jagged pile on the floor, her morning breath, her week-old underwear in the laundry basket - became a clue to her chemistry, and I began to believe that I could possess it, could possess her, if I were vigilant enough to collect all the clues. When she'd left the basement I stood above the toilet bowl and inhaled like a dog. I wet my finger and lifted a sequin from the floor.

My wife was also in the business of aesthetics - she was a food beautician, her specialty hamburgers. She told me that they only ever film the front half of a burger; the back half looks like a construction site. She painted soft wax onto buns and placed individual sesame seeds strategically. Once she sifted through two hundred lettuces to find the perfect frilled salad leaf to spray with silicon. The worst part about it, she always said, was watching an actor bite into the burger, having to smile

full-mouthed with the wax starting to congeal on the roof of his mouth. She kept a special bucket for them to spit out what they'd chewed as soon as the camera stopped rolling.

One evening, dressing for dinner, she held up a photograph on a cardboard box from a pair of sheer stockings she'd just opened. It was a picture of a pair of legs in tights, the limbs long and beautiful.

"Do you think she has nice legs?" she asked me, and I nodded. "You know that she is a he. All stocking models are men."

She always warned me that things are not what they seem.

She is eight months pregnant now. It kills me that I can't see her. Her hair had mushroomed thickly, her tummy was taut, her belly button left an indent on anything she wore, her nipples had spread like a pink stain across her breasts, claiming space. When they took her she only had time to put on her dressing-gown. Her hair was still wet.

I should have known, at the last sitting, that something was wrong. The President had changed colour, every fibre of him was a tone I hadn't mixed on my palette before. He scratched around on the settee like a fussy poodle making its nest for the night; then he wouldn't sit still. He brought his bodyguards up to the studio when normally they waited in the foyer of my apartment building. His assistant forgot to collect the petals.

My wife was in the bath, the first ritual of her day. She would lie dead-still, with just her belly protruding, watching the baby's movements ripple the water. She could lie there for hours, transfixed.

The bodyguards were shot with silenced guns. They simply crumpled where they stood, like puppets a child has lost interest in. The President's assistant, without a word, opened my wardrobe, stepped into it and closed the mirrored door behind him quietly. It was only then that I saw them: two masked gunmen, slick as spiders, with their weapons trained on the President. I dropped my palette and raised my hands in supplication. I could hear my wife murmuring in the bathroom.

They motioned for me to move to the President's side. I sat next to him on the couch, our shoulders touching, with one gunman behind us. The other moved towards the bathroom door.

"Please." I only realised later that I whispered this. "Please. Not her."

He opened the door and for a few seconds stood watching her. I could see into the room from the couch. She didn't turn her head, she thought it was me.

"It stops moving when I sing to it," she said.

The gunman said nothing and she turned to look. He lifted her roughly from the bath in one movement. She stood naked, barefoot on the bathroom floor, screaming my name.

"Put on your dressing-gown," I whispered. "Behind the door. Put it on."

The silk clung to her and darkened around her breasts and stomach as she clutched the gown strings around her waist. The gunman forced her to walk in front of him, and as she approached me and the President sitting on the settee she dropped to her knees. The gunman forced her to stand, to move forwards. She leaned towards us, straining, but the gunman held her back around her belly. She reached out her arm and I reached out mine, but she only managed to grasp the President's outstretched hand. I was sitting on the other side of him, further from her. She screamed my name but clutched his hand. Then she was gone, forced down the stairs and out the foyer. The assistant wasn't discovered. I wonder if he is still hiding in my closet.

We are being held prisoner in one of the guestrooms of the President's summer residence – me, his cook and his barber. The room is far too high above the ground to contemplate escape. We each have a bed with virgin linen so white I feel guilty sleeping in it, and there is an en-suite bathroom with silver fittings. A man brings bread and water and cheese and tomatoes to our door in the mornings and soup in the evenings. I haven't seen my wife since the day they took us.

I was the first prisoner to be left in the room. They blindfolded me and the President in my apartment, forced us into a vehicle, and drove into the mountains. I know those spiralling roads too well to be fooled. The air thins and you start to drive faster from lightheadedness, to overtake and stay for longer than you need to on the wrong side of the road. Those roads bring out the death-wish in people. The President and I leaned into each other as the driver took the corners; his body is more pliable than I imagined.

We were separated at the summer residence - our blindfolds were removed and he was led away into the building. I recognised it immediately from postcards and magazine spreads; it was declared a national monument last year. I was led up many flights of stairs to the bedroom and left

alone. The chef was brought in the afternoon, straight from the President's kitchens, where they were in the middle of making zabaglione for lunch-time dessert. His sous-chef was shot because he tried to sneak out the delivery entrance and the kitchen boys stood gaping as the masked gunman bound the chef's wrists and blindfolded him. He still had dried egg on his hands. He immediately ran himself a bath and sat in the bathroom with the door closed for a long time. The barber only arrived at dusk. He's taken the whole thing quite badly, and eventually talked himself to sleep.

From where I stand on the small balcony, I can see the valley below dimly in the moonlight, the only fertile ground in the country. It must be a new agricultural trend, to farm in circles – the fields are separated into massive green polka dots with a slice of yellow cut out of them, which makes them look like they are devouring each other. My wife and I came winetasting in the valley for her birthday, years ago. There were only two vineyards and the wine was close to awful, but once we were in the valley basin we felt newly created – the hot air had collected at the bottom, and as we descended the mountain road to the valley base we peeled off layers of clothing; another layer for each drop in altitude, until we were almost naked and sweating and even the bad wine was soothing. The vineyard owner took us on a tour of the underground cellars. He said the monks had used underground caves to store their wine for hundreds of years, but gradually the caves were forgotten until a farmer out with a pack of hunting dogs stumbled upon one of the openings. He grandly revealed cobwebbed caskets of the original monk wine, rendered undrinkable by years of imprisonment within glass, but my wife persuaded him to let us smell it and it seemed to burn the hairs within my nostrils.

The chef is snoring like a stalling motorboat. Something else is bothering me, though, some sound of distress beneath the night sounds from the room. Men's voices playing hide-and-seek. I trace them to the air vent above my bed, and stand on the mattress with my ear against the cold metal mesh.

“Did you...hundreds of...list them...their names?”

I pull on the mesh cover. It comes out of the wall, leaving the vent gaping in the darkness. The voices seem to be travelling upwards from the room beneath me.

“List each order...spare...burden...is my condition.”

Another man's voice disguised with pain rises to me. He dissolves into grunts to ward off new blows to his stomach – or so I imagine, from his breathing. A door slams. A man heaves, his solar plexus in spasm.

I have avoided thinking about why I am here. I never paid attention to politics; if I am exempt from one thing as an artist, surely it is knowing what my government is doing. Much more interesting to me than the puny stirrings of student revolutionaries was how to transform a thought into an image, how to paint the sky without using blue, how to get perspective wrong on purpose. My wife and I made it a rule never to listen to the news. "It's all relative anyway," she would say, imagining politicians do to their actions what fast food advertisers do to their burgers. It seemed purer to know nothing than to glean bits of information thrown to us like chum to sharks. We didn't even own a television set.

She had her own reasons for choosing ignorance. Her father is a prominent farmer who owns the biggest prawn farm in the country and breeds sleek horses as abundantly as rabbits. He was wooed into politics just before we got married and became famous for using fire hoses instead of bullets to remove protesting students from a government building. People put his compassion down to his love of animals. His position meant the paparazzi attended our wedding as invited guests, and it was at his insistence that I got me the job as Presidential portraitist. The President had never been painted before, only photographed. My wife's father, quietly horrified at her choice of husband, organised for me to spend a weekend with the President at his coastal villa, painting his wife and children. The children were old enough to sit still long enough for a watercolour. His wife had the same ability as he did to withstand an artist's scrutiny for hours. She smelled like a fallen woman. He sat in on part of her session and she became pert under his gaze, making me feel like a voyeur. Then she insisted I paint her husband too.

The voice from the air vent moans a name: my wife's name. It must be the President - his wife and mine share the same name although they are generations apart. I didn't recognise the voice at first, but trauma will do that to a man.

5 His chef

Morning has broken. I throw aside the curtains and look out at the valley below, my wrists throbbing from rope-burn. I slice the tomatoes and cheese that have been left just inside the doorway. The tomatoes are the kind that smells of sugar, valley tomatoes; in the city they arrive bruised and insolent. I wonder if the supermarkets have anything left on the shelves - on my blindfolded drive to the mountains, I could hear the sounds of rioting in the streets around me, and somebody punched a fist through the rear window of the car before the driver swerved onto the pavement to escape, and hit somebody, or something, but didn't stop. Once we were out of the city, I could smell that the guards in the car were eating large chunks of matured cheese that should have been consumed in small and savoured doses.

I tear the loaf into three and close my eyes to conjure the smell of coffee. I open them to find the portraitist looking directly at me, his face harrowed. I saw him last night standing on his bed in the dark, fiddling with the air vent. I suspect he's planning some kind of elaborate escape that will get him killed.

"Do you know," he says quietly, "why you're here?"

The barber and I look at him sharply. These are the first words he's uttered this morning.

"Regime change," I respond. "We just got caught in the middle of it, that's all."

Maybe I shouldn't have said that so flippantly - he looks like he's taken it personally. The barber fidgets as if he has an unbearable itch, then stands, takes our plates, throws the crumbs out the window and begins to wash the plates in the basin.

"They're only leaving us alone because they don't know what to do with us," I continue. "They can't figure out where we fit in."

The barber closes the bathroom door and I hear him lower the toilet seat. My own bowels start to move in response. The portraitist has moved to the window and surprises me when he speaks again.

"Why would they take my wife, then? How does she fit in?"

"Pollution through association."

He turns to look at me, hurt. "But not my child. Not my unborn child."

That would be too far for even me to go, so I leave him to stare out at the fields below. There is nothing to do but get back into bed and wait for the barber to leave the bathroom.

A key scrapes at the door and it opens to reveal a man standing in the corridor. He is dressed as if he's about to be taken sailing, in leather slippers that have become soft and oily at the places that rub against his heels, casual slacks, a dress shirt with the top four buttons undone. He is beautiful. I feel suddenly shy, but I'm relieved to see the portraitist is also gaping. The barber chooses this moment to emerge from the bathroom, the toilet flushing noisily behind him. The man smiles, walks into the room and sits with his legs crossed on the couch facing the windows.

"Gentlemen," he says.

He looks at us as if waiting for approval. I only manage to clear my throat and throw the bed covers to one side.

"Your wife is safe," he says to the portraitist. "You needn't worry about her. But you cannot see her until the child is born."

The portraitist's face collapses with relief and fury. He swallows his tears.

"I apologise for the unintended similarity of your situation to the children's rhyme. What is it, butcher, baker, candlestickmaker? Let me make it up to you by saying you can call me Commander. Equally ridiculous."

He laughs with his eyes only.

I chanted that rhyme to my daughter when she was small, and it scared her witless. She couldn't bear the thought of those men bound together, stranded. She came home from school a few weeks later and told me they'd read about how men were punished for doing bad things a long time ago. A man would be tied in a sack with a monkey and a poisonous snake, then dropped overboard, and the three creatures killed each other before they drowned. She said it reminded her of that rhyme I used to sing, the one about the three men stuck in a tub at sea.

"You won't be harmed. Each of you has spent many years perfecting a skill; we want you to make yourselves useful." The Commander pauses, then looks directly at me. "I want you to prepare dinner for me, starting tonight. You can make a list of ingredients you need."

I am, despite myself, flattered, and my mind begins to whirr thinking of what I'll need. The barber looks at me in surprise, then with something like wry recognition; the portraitist is still struggling with his tears. The Commander stands and leaves the room, walking like a man who has had many women.

This week I will make for him what I learned to create first: pastry. My grandmother taught me. She would only come to stay with us in the hot months of the year. I loved her so much I would sneak into her room and sniff the dresses she left in the cupboard between stays, and even now a wet facecloth reminds me of the smell of her stockings drying on the clothing rack. When I was about to get into trouble with my mother, I would run screaming to my grandmother who gave me sweets instead of hidings. Pastry-making had to happen so early in the morning the summer sun hadn't yet risen. The night before we would fill glass bottles with water and stack them in the ice-box and the dough would be left to rise under a dishcloth in the pantry. She would wake me just before dawn. She kneaded the dough and then began to flatten it using a frozen glass bottle as a rolling pin, keeping the dough cool so the butter didn't melt too easily as it was rolled onto each layer. My task was to add new ice blocks to a bowl of water she dipped her hands into when they became warm and began to make the dough sticky.

In the town where I grew up, there was a chocolate factory, and when different winds blew I could smell different chocolates being made. The north-easterly carried the smell of peppermint. In my second year of school my class went on an excursion to the factory and we were allowed to descend on the hexagonal cardboard bins at the end of each conveyer belt carrying finished chocolates to their wrappers. These bins were brimful with rejects - warped chocolate bars that had grown tumours or blistered or become stunted - but we swore it only made them taste more delicious, and the primal allure of all things deformed induced us to dig into the bin up to our arms. Before we left, one of the boys somehow stuck his hand in a chocolate blender - a large machine that looked like it could mix concrete - and lost his pinkie. The floor manager could barely disguise his contempt for the child for ruining the batch. I was secretly fascinated with the image of his blood mixing with the chocolate, and with the knowledge that our small class was the only keeper of the horrible secret. For months afterwards I was convinced that brand of chocolate bars had taken on a rusty tinge.

Tonight I will make the Commander paella. Paella only needs scraps of creatures, and I assume that is all that's going since the coup. I am interested in poor people's food: pizza, paella, minestrone – these were all desperate creations, the end-product of a search to make dregs of food palatable. And potato salad – I remember one week when my father was unemployed when we ate potato salad for every meal. Now it's acceptable to serve it at official functions, spruced up with capers or cured ham. I once called in an order for a thousand servings of the stuff for the President's summer banquet. A local potato farmer had his workers make it on the farm and the farmer drove it into the city in two trucks.

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6 His barber

I called my house the glass box. It meant I could never throw stones, just like the proverb warned. I designed containers for everything so that things could be neatly tucked away and not clutter the surfaces. In my bathroom drawer, I had a customised compartment for my toothbrush, floss, facewash, deodorant, razor. In my bedroom cupboard I kept my caps and glasses colour-coded and had small hollows for each belt to fit into, once rolled. I've never liked lying down on my bed in my street clothes, even with my shoes off - I believe it pollutes my sleep. I always leave a window open at night, no matter how cold it is, and I can't bear leaving my house on a long trip if there is any dirty linen or clothing in it. If I know I have to go away somewhere for a while, I lay out the clothes I'm going to wear, take off the clothes I'm wearing, put them in the washing machine with my sheets and walk around naked until it's almost time to leave. That's why I was naked when they took me: ready for my trip, about to put on my clean travelling clothes, and next thing there was a man in my laundry pointing a gun at me.

The chef has given me the task of washing a bucketful of mussels. I have to check that each one is firmly shut - if it has opened in the bucket it is dangerous to eat and I'm supposed to throw it out. The portraitist is de-boning fish. We are the chef's kitchen boys for the night and the chef is transformed; he has completely lost himself in the logistics of preparing a meal and is cackling like a smug housewife over a pot of rice. The kitchen is as large as one would expect from a summer residence used primarily to entertain. We were escorted here by two men - armed, but dressed like they just got back from the office. The chef couldn't resist telling them the menu for the evening, but they didn't respond. Somebody had managed to find fresh seafood and every other item on the chef's ingredient wish-list, and it was waiting for us in the kitchen in paper bags. The chef was like a small child on his birthday, going through the bags gleefully, then he did a quick spot-check of the kitchen equipment and found it all to his satisfaction. The two armed men have stayed in the kitchen, perched on kitchen stools with their backs against the wall, watching that we don't poison the food.

"I've worked here before," the chef says, stirring the rice. "Many years ago. Before I insisted on spending the summer holiday with my family at the coast. I came with my wife at the time, we

spent a month living in one of the suites. I experimented on the President – pushed his tastes, fed him wild meats, foreign fruit. He liked that I pushed him. Most people around him wouldn't dare.”

He takes the knife from the portraitist and fillets a fish effortlessly.

I find three mussels, still in a hoary clump, that have opened in the bucket and throw them aside. The smell of raw fish reminds me of my brother, of what he would come home smelling of at lunchtime. He was older than me by ten years, and I would be sitting at the round table in the kitchen with my mother, eating crustless sandwiches and telling her about my morning at school, and I would smell him coming before I heard the door slam. He would wash off stray fish scales from his hands at the tap outside and rinse and remove his boots, and come into the kitchen in wet socks. My mother hovered about him like an anxious bee about the Queen, ladled out a hot lunch she had cooked, asked about his catch. He left so early in the mornings the gulls weren't even awake and went out on a borrowed trawler for the nine hours it took to catch enough fish to make a living. If we were lucky he would bring a bunch of small fish for our supper, but my mother never asked him outright, we just waited to see if he would volunteer them from his canvas bag once he had eaten lunch. At school in the afternoon I could still smell him on my pencil case and sometimes on my hands if he had agreed to play aeroplane.

It broke my mother when he disappeared. I was older then, and not paying anybody but myself much attention. I hadn't even really registered his absence. It was only when she sat down one lunchtime and put her head on the table and wouldn't eat anything that I realised he hadn't eaten meals with us in over two weeks. For a long time we thought he had eloped with his fiancée - she disappeared with him - but I couldn't understand why none of his crew had come to tell us. They avoided us at the market and at the dock. My mother stopped getting dressed in the mornings.

It was on my birthday that the letter arrived. It was from him, but had been posted almost a year before, and he had written only one sentence: 'Taken captive political prisoner we'll be fine.' That letter lit a fire beneath my mother and she went visiting – old friends, close family, vague family, ex-girlfriends – until she had pieced together a patchwork of possibilities. It turned out he and his fiancée had been active in some kind of underground resistance movement. His fishing crew had never approved, said he was asking for trouble. The second letter arrived two months later. It wasn't from

my brother. The writer, anonymous, told us that my brother's body had been buried in the mountains. The writer said he – or she – was sorry.

The chef has put on full serving gear that he found in the pantry. He's even put on the hat, which makes him look like he has dough rising slowly on his head. My task during the meal is to pour the water and wine for the Commander, but the portraitist refuses to serve him and says he'll wait in the kitchen. The chef alone will serve the food. He uses his shoulder to bump the swinging doors into the dining room and walks ceremoniously towards the Commander, who is seated at a small, square table in the centre of the room. The long dining table has been moved aside and a single place is set. The Commander smiles at the chef and smirks at me dutifully carrying a bottle of wine in a bucket of ice. The cork is so stubborn I am tempted to put the bottle between my legs and pull on it, but instead I put it under my arm and tug. The chef places a napkin on the Commander's lap with flair. My job is done; I leave the room.

The portraitist is standing at the kitchen window, staring down into the courtyard. He is in agony: I have never seen an emotion made so manifest.

"My wife," he says. "She's here. She's being kept here. I saw her in the courtyard."

I place my hand on his shoulder gently. "Is this not a good thing? You know she is being looked after. You know where she is."

He turns to me and, before I can move away, has put his head against my chest. His grief spreads across my shirt, heating it. "I called to her from up here. I opened the window and called down to her. She was alone, sitting on that bench. She looked up at me like a stranger. Then she stood and walked away."

I imagine I know why she did this, something about the pollution thing the chef said to him this morning. I pat his head awkwardly, but I am no good at consoling. When he shifts his head I move away towards the swinging doors to listen to what the Commander is saying to the chef. His fork makes scratchy music against his plate.

"You have excelled yourself."

The chef murmurs deferentially. The scraping stops, the plate has been licked clean.

“And do you have a wife?” The Commander asks this the way one would speak to a small child, with bored patience and no expectation of a reply.

If the chef is surprised, his voice doesn't betray him. “Ex-wife. Haven't seen her for months.”

He stops, uncertain how much the Commander is willing to listen to.

“Ah. Why did you divorce?”

The chef pauses. “She went crazy,” he says, his tone ironic. “Became obsessed with energy flow. Made me knock down three walls in our house because she said they were blocking peace lines.”

The Commander laughs loudly.

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7 His portraitist

We slept together for the first time in the afternoon. That was always her favourite time of day for sex. We would eat lunch on my balcony, drink a beer, and then lie on the bed, the heat and sleepiness in itself arousing. She didn't want me to use any protection. She said she took her own temperature every morning and she knew exactly when she ovulated. She kept a small thermometer and a notebook beside her bed. In the morning, she'd sit up, her hair like a mane, and before she'd even opened her eyes she'd open her legs and sit with the mercury between her thighs, waiting. Then she'd squint to look at the reading, write it down, and walk naked to the toilet. I loved how her thighs shuddered as she walked. She would stand at the basin, brushing her teeth, and mumble through the foam, asking me what I wanted for breakfast, or whether I was planning to work in the studio. I couldn't answer, transfixed by the sight of her, her stomach separating into three bulges as she bent to rinse out her mouth.

One afternoon we used protection because her body temperature was two degrees higher than normal. It broke inside her; I felt the pressure give. We went to a clinic together, but I had to wait in the outside waiting room while she was let into the inner sanctum after being frisked. Security was tight. She came out after an hour, clutching a small booklet with two pills in it - one she had to take immediately, one in the middle of the night.

When midnight struck, I didn't even hear the alarm. I only woke when she shook my arm - she was on her hands and knees on the bedroom floor, searching in a panic for the pill she'd dropped in the dark. In our sleepy confusion we didn't think to switch on the light. I leaned over the side of the bed while she scoured the floor with her hands, reaching into the gap beneath the skirting. Then she felt something and lifted it on her palm. The pill was tiny. She swallowed it and crawled back into bed and we held each other as if we'd just escaped certain death.

I'm waiting for the voices. The chef and the barber fell asleep long ago; they sleep like babies, guiltless. I have already removed the casing from the air vent above the bed. I'm trying not to think of how she looked at me from the courtyard.

"Freedom...your life."

Here they are. That is the Commander, I can recognise his voice now.

“Stay...power...better for everybody. Come to me then...talk about sacrifice.”

It sounds as if papers are being thrown onto the floor.

“Have...witness.”

I hear the door slam, and then footsteps on the stairs. I hold my breath. Someone unlocks the door and a man pulls me soundlessly from the bed. I follow him barefoot down the stairs, wondering if I should have screamed to wake the others.

The Commander stands at an open door in a silk dressing-gown made for a man and I remember what my wife looked like as she was taken out of the apartment. The President is shirtless, sitting on a couch in the middle of the room. It is strewn not with petals, but with photographs, hundreds of them upholstering the sides and patterning the floor at his feet. His face is broken in places; his nose swollen. He keeps his legs tightly together, his hands in his lap, and it is only as I get closer that I see that his wrists are still bound. It is dreadful to look at him, but my eyes can't help sliding back to the sight. The man shuts the door behind me and locks it.

“Sit next to him,” the Commander says to me. “Push some of those aside and sit on the couch.”

I look at the purple bloom on the President's chest and imagine being winded by a fist. I lift a handful of photographs and manage not to look at them as I put them on the floor.

The Commander sits in an armchair facing us. He props his feet on the coffee table between us and yawns. “This man sitting next to you, I want you to hand him one of the photos.”

I look directly at the Commander, feel with my left hand for a photograph without looking down, and put it on the couch next to the President. The Commander's fatigue leaves him as I watch, the way a demon leaves a man possessed.

“Look at the photograph.” He pulls on his chin, fiercely coiled for attack.

Can I will myself not to see when my eyes are open? No. The man's face is a failed pudding, flabby and flecked with blood. His head makes an obscene angle with his spine. I hold it out to the President, forgetting his hands are bound.

“Hold it for him, would you? Make his job a little easier.” The Commander has lent forward in his armchair like a man whose team is winning the championship match.

The photo quivers in my hand, it must have a will of its own. The President clears his throat, but says nothing. The Commander leans back in his chair, pensive. I let go of the photo and it drops with deadweight to the floor. The President lifts his chin as a warning, but it comes too late. Something connects at the level of my kidneys and they scream their trauma throughout my body. I cough and spit onto the photos pooled at my feet. I refuse to look behind me, but I can hear the henchman retreat to the shadows. All the blood in my body has left my brain, my tongue, it has been drawn to my kidneys to help them haemorrhage. I lick my lips. The pain has made me fearless. Until it passes, I care nothing about what they do or say to me.

Even pain makes me think of her. The night we spent in a run-down guesthouse on holiday, where we stood in the bath in sandals, afraid of what we might catch barefoot, and washed each other with the handheld hose. There was no hot water. I tried to warm her under the sheets by lying stomach-down on her back, pressing her into the mattress. I had a cyst on the inside of my wrist, a small lump between the veins. She'd heard that cysts can be cured if you put extreme pressure on them. In the dark, her skin pockmarked with cold, I held out my wrist, closed my eyes, locked my jaw, and she pressed her finger as hard as she could against the cyst. It throbbed unbearably the rest of the night, but in the morning the lump was gone.

8 His chef

It is Sunday. The crayfish will be crouched in their buckets waiting for me, the abalone will be tight as marble, piled on top of each other, contracted against contact. It will take a while to soothe them. I touch the portraitist's forearm to wake him and he starts and looks at me, hurt - he still hasn't forgiven me for what I said about his wife. He walks like a pensioner to the bathroom, looking like he has aged overnight. I must try to avoid him or he will drag me down with him. I hear him gasp through the bathroom door, then the sound of his piss hitting the side of the bowl. He's even started to piss like an old man, in spurts.

I do my own ablutions when he emerges. Funny how we leave clues behind us in bathrooms, making us vulnerable. It took me by surprise the first time I noticed the evidence my wife left behind her when we moved in together: a faint smudge just below the water line. I felt like a trespasser on a crime scene. The Commander's questions about her have put her back in my mind. I hope she has survived the coup, not for my sake, but what would my daughter do without having that structure in her life, of visiting her mother every day, brushing her hair and turning her in the bed and arranging her flowers?

That child. Just last week she left her journal on the kitchen table. She had asked me for a recipe late at night - something basic, like how to make stock - and had scribbled it in the book and then gone to bed, leaving it closed on the table. Her journal began to call my name; it began to burn a hole in the table. I started cautiously, opening it at random and snatching bits of prose. Then I saw the page where she had listed names of men, three thick columns of them; men she had slept with. I stopped being cautious and read her journal like a book, from start to finish. In the morning she asked me what was wrong and said my face looked pinched and worn as if I'd just heard that somebody had died in the night. I asked her if she had lost her self-respect and she knew immediately what I'd done. She asked me if I had enjoyed it, if I'd enjoyed the part about her trying to have sex in a swimming pool.

In the death throes of our marriage my wife and I became frantic lovers, like hospital patients with third degree burns on an adrenaline high in response to the pain. She slept with me in the morning even when she knew I had been with someone else the night before. After so many years of marriage,

and a child, her body had rebelled and turned upon itself. The women I chose to spend my nights with had all the usual attractions for a man of my age. My wife understood this. She went crazy only after I left her. It was my daughter's boyfriend who had to knock down walls in the house.

The barber is waiting for the bathroom when I open the door. He is letting his beard bloom unchecked. He has avoided speaking to me since I prepared the paella. The Commander used his finger to sop the last juices on his plate, which thrilled me. The portraitist is eating a tomato like a piece of fruit, whole. I don't touch my share of the bread and cheese. I'm craving fried prawn flesh, over-cooked so that it begins to cream, the meat past the point of resisting. A knock on the door signals my release: it's the same guard as yesterday, still in button-down and loosened tie like a banker at the office at midnight. The portraitist and barber will stay in the room today - I did without kitchen boys on Sundays in the President's apartment and I will do without them today.

We walk in silence to the kitchen, along the balconies that give onto the central courtyard. The residence is bustling like a hotel on a Friday morning. Men and women group in the courtyard, on benches and around picnic tables. I have not seen women here before. They are in similar after-hours workwear – slacks and pencil skirts and sleeveless knitted tops, sensible shoes. One of them glances up at me and smiles, making me feel alive. I would like to add her to my album. I wonder if my house has been left intact, if the album is still on its shelf in my bedroom. I have a photograph of every woman I have pursued in it. It's the old kind, with a plastic sheet over an adhesive back that has lost its glue over the years. The photos have started to escape the plastic film holding them down, to creep off the pages. This is what old age does to a man, even past conquests want to escape you. My daughter used to beg me to get it out, to tell her the stories of each woman as bedtime stories. Bedtime stories indeed. I would tone it down for her when she was younger, make each woman the heroine of our romance, give her details about their dresses and perfumes and how they wore their hair. Later she became shrewd and probing. She wasn't content with fairytales, she wanted to know who these women really were and how I had seduced them. Her first boyfriend was regaled with tales from the album. She invited him to my place for dinner and brought out the album when I brought out the coffee. "Tell us the stories, Dad," she said. "Start from the beginning." It only strikes me now that my daughter could easily have asked if I'd lost my self-respect.

The first woman I slept with was the least attractive of them all. In the photo her knees are fat and dimpled. We skimmed over her, until we got to what I like to call the model years. Two years, many models. I had just begun to grasp the power of making women feel wanted. The first woman I noticed from my car. At a red traffic light I stopped next to her car and looked across at her, and at the next traffic light I stopped behind her. I noticed her left brake light wasn't working, wrote down her licence number, and called up the traffic department that afternoon pretending we'd had an accident so they would give me her name. I found out where she lived and sent her flowers that evening with a note attached: 'Your left brake light is broken. Call me.' Within two days we had dinner plans. In the photo she is dressed in satin for a shoot.

Much further on in the album is my wife. I decided to marry her on a Saturday evening, at a dangerous time of the day when the light was so beautiful I wanted to prostrate myself and offer a sacrifice to it. I'd taken her to an afternoon movie and came out of the theatre feeling vulnerable. Afternoon movies have always done that to me, something about whiling away two hours of my life in a darkened room when it is still light outside. I drove her home in my car with my name on the numberplate - she loved that - and I couldn't find a park right outside her apartment, so I parked further down the road and walked her to the gate. A picket fence, about knee-high, shielding a tiny garden from trespassers. I don't remember if we kissed goodbye. I turned to go and had almost reached my car when I heard her shout my name, and as I turned I saw her leap over the picket fence and run towards me in her boots, and when she got to me she jumped and hooked her legs about my hips and her arms behind my neck and kissed me with such passion I decided to marry her.

I learned about sex from animals. Chickens, to be precise. Like most poor boys. My mother, harried, asked me to go out to the coop to get some eggs one morning when the sun was high and I was less than twelve years old. I pushed the gate open and crouched in the chicken run, only to discover the cock in a compromising position with a hen. I shut the gate again quickly behind me and crouched beside them in the sunlight. He paused for a while, watching me suspiciously with one lidless black eye, then reanimated, setting the flap of loose skin below his chin into motion. This went on until my mother screamed from inside, "Is there something wrong with the cock?" I couldn't drag myself away; his movements were mesmerising. But it wasn't the sex that made me keep these

photographs of women, to hoard them like a trophy hunter adorning his mantelpiece with severed heads. In fact, I've never enjoyed sex much. When we decided to have a child, my wife had to plot ways to lure me into bed more often. One afternoon I was outside mowing the lawn, shirtless, the cut grass sticking to the sweat on my back, and she called for me, promising cold lemonade. A ruse, it turned out - she was ovulating.

The ingredients I asked for are waiting for me in the kitchen, some of them still alive. The crayfish butt against the sink wall and each other in slow motion, their long limbs finding no tenure on the metal. The prawns are grey and succulent, with foetus eyes. The sea snails have withdrawn into their shells and stoppered them against violence. A fish has already been skinned, gutted, deboned and quartered, its flesh pearled and pink. There is garlic, eggs, butter, herbs by the bunch, mayonnaise, olive and groundnut oil, and a sack of lemons. Basic, but seafood is best with little adornment. The man takes his leave of me. The Commander has begun to trust that I will not put ground glass in his omelette.

I will start by deep-frying the fish in a pan half-full of groundnut oil. My sous-chef used to believe it was his responsibility to start with the creatures that were still alive, to put them out of their water-less misery. It was excruciating to him that abalone had to be left for hours to relax before they were ready to die. I doubt he survived the gunshot. When they dragged me out of the kitchen, he was lying facedown on the floor at the service exit, his blood pooling around him. I cannot say that I was glad of this, but I know that he had been biting at my heels like a small, yapping dog, hoping to tire me so that he could bring me down. The President told me one Sunday morning in his apartment, through a mouthful of crabcake, that he was ready for a change. I interpreted it as a warning and the next morning in the Residence kitchens the sous-chef could smell I felt threatened. My fear of usurpation rose off me in waves and it encouraged him.

I hold a thermometer in a cup of hot water, then dip it in the oil. It is ready for the fish. I coat each fillet in flour and pepper and slip it gently into the pan. When the pieces rise to the surface I will know they are ready. I turn from the stove to attend to the prawns. The woman I noticed in the courtyard has entered silently and is standing next to the sink, watching the crayfish. She turns to me, smiling. Her pencil skirt compacts her lower body beautifully. Her arms are bare and tapered.

“Are you always this cruel?” she says.

I am stirred by her. Stirred to desire. “They can’t feel pain. Haven’t you heard of the gutted shark that took its own insides as bait?”

“I know they scream as they die in a pot of boiling water.”

“Just trapped air being released from their shells,” I respond.

She looks back down at the struggling crayfish. The fish pieces have begun to surface, browned. I take a slotted spoon and lift each one out and onto crumpled absorbent paper towel. The oil pools darkly around each piece. I keep my back to her, feeling watched.

“Are you here to make sure I don’t poison the Commander?” I say archly.

She doesn’t answer.

“It would be easy, you know. I could forget to debowel the crayfish, undercook the fish, use opened mussels in the soup. Don’t think I haven’t considered it.”

Her silence persists, forcing me to turn around and look at her again. She has lifted a crayfish by the carapace and broken off its feeler. It squirms and searches the air tentatively with a pincer. She finds its anus and inserts the feeler smoothly. The creature contracts. Then she pulls it out again in one movement and the intestinal tube comes out casing the feeler. The shit is green.

“I usually wait for them to die before I do that,” I say. “Even if they can’t feel pain.”

This is true. I have never debowelled a live crayfish.

She drops the crayfish back into the sink and soaps her hands rigorously. Her hair is thick and unapologetic. When she turns to face me again, I see traces of some faint disappointment.

“Did you know that crayfish have a grain of sand in their brains that gives them their bearings?” I ask her. “That’s how they know up from down. A supplier told me he once put a metal filing in a crayfish’s brain, and a magnet at the bottom of the tank, and the crayfish swam upside down until it died.”

She steps away from the sink and perches on a kitchen stool near the swinging doors, the same place the two men sat the night I made paella. Her pencil skirt forces her to cross her legs. Her ankles are slim and veined and even her closed-toe shoes can’t detract from the elegance of her feet. She looks the other way, disinterested. The water is boiling. I drop the sea snails into the steaming pot, and

they immediately begin to scream - at first silently, a whine so high-pitched only a dog could hear it, then descending to a moan designed for the human ear. They rattle in the pot against each other's shells. After a few minutes they give up and their stoppers float first to the top, then sink to the bottom. When I drain them they clatter into the sink. The side that attached to the creature is smooth, with a blue copper swirl, the other side is stuccoed and prickly.

I select a sharp knife, get a grip on a stunted boiled sea snail and slice it finely. It pares off firm and grey.

"Where have all the women come from?" I ask. She doesn't answer until I'm forced to twist my head to see if she is still in the kitchen. She has her hands above her head, twirling a sausage of hair around itself into a bun, the faint line of a muscle showing in her upper arms.

"There are new men here too," she says. "We've been keeping order in the city - trying to stop looting, getting services running again."

"And now that's been achieved? Does order reign?"

She pauses and tucks a wayward hair behind her ear. "To a degree."

I begin to crush garlic cloves with coarse salt, pressing them with the flat of the knife against the board until they yield, then paste. "What's it like out there? What are people doing? Are houses intact?"

She laughs and stands. "You mean, is your house intact?"

I smile conspiratorially, take a frying pan down from its handle and cover the base with oil. She walks towards me and I hand her the pan and the garlic and sea snail on a wooden board. "Fry this until it becomes opaque."

She takes the handle, finds a spatula and hovers over the pan solicitously. The garlic releases its scent into the oil. "People are confused. Many had chosen not to know about the President's crimes."

I look at her inquisitively.

"Of course you don't know," she says. "Convenient."

I notice small pieces of grass clinging to her back and flecking her hair. She must have been lying in the sun outside this morning.

I have the rolling pin in my hand. It is time to creep up on the abalone and surprise them with a deathblow. She watches me walk the length of the kitchen towards the darkened pantry. I tiptoe the last few steps for dramatic effect and then crouch above them. Three I kill before they contract. The last realises what is coming and stiffens. I will have to throw it out.

She looks at me carrying my spoils back to the sink and says, "Death by rolling-pin. Must remember that one."

I fry the three steaks quickly, searing their flanks. She dries her hands on a dishcloth and leans against the sink, facing me. The prawns have pinkened in hot oil.

"Will you put your debowelled friend and his companions out of their misery?" I ask her.

She looks sheepish as she lifts each one and drops it into the pot. The one missing a feeler has died in the sink. They begin to scream. "Did the man who kept watch on you before ever help you cook?" she asks.

"He never offered."

"Neither did I."

"You had blood on your hands. You couldn't refuse."

"Crayfish shit. Not blood."

I reach for her hand across the pot. She lets me hold it briefly, then pulls her arm back.

"The steam. It's burning me."

I notice neat circles of discoloured flesh on the inside of her forearm. Six small circles in a row. The skin has creased and stretched as it healed.

Behind me, a man clears his throat. The Commander. He is standing just inside the kitchen, next to the pantry. Does it matter if he saw? His beauty makes me feel ashamed. I look down at my hands, the hands of an old man - too many years of using them to make my living. She has turned to wash her hands in the sink again. The Commander approaches, picks a prawn from the oil and dangles it, waiting for it to cool, then peels the prawn with one hand, removes the head and chews.

He reaches out his hand to her, "Come, darling, let us seat ourselves."

They leave through the swinging doors, her arm through his. I take off my apron and hat and carry through two platters and a plate of cut lemons. He immediately sets about using his long fingers,

dipping bits of flesh into a pot of melted butter, squeezing lemon with gusto, deshellng and digging for the most succulent bits of the creatures. I hunch at the kitchen counter and chew on a few secretly hoarded cooked prawns. They are as I wanted - creamed past the point of resistance.

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9 His barber

The portraitist has asked the man who brought us bread and tomatoes if we can go for a walk in the courtyard. Why he wants to walk is beyond me since he has been struggling just to get to the bathroom and back. When he stands from sitting, he keeps one hand on his belly and uses the other, palm spread, to support his lower back like a pregnant woman. The man surprised us by agreeing, but he said he'd follow behind us a few metres, keep an eye on us. The chef has scuttled off sideways like a scavenger to attend to his crustaceans.

My pyjamas cleave to me like a second skin, filthy, and my beard is encroaching on virgin territory. We leave the room like an old married couple going to church, the man trailing us at a disinterested distance. The portraitist shuffles along the corridor next to me.

“What is it?” I ask him. “Why are you walking like that?”

He looks at me as if he's surprised I noticed. “Lower back. Must have pinched a nerve in my sleep.”

“There are exercises you can do, you know - to release it. I'll show you back in the room.”

We turn the corner into the passage that opens onto the courtyard below. It is full of people. We lean on the railing and look down at the tops of their heads. Many of them are women. They sit in small groups, bucolic in the late morning light.

“Party officials,” the man who has been trailing us says. “They arrived last night.”

He has joined us at the railing, and leans a little too far out over his arms, ogling the women. The portraitist, too, stares at each woman like a hungry man. At first I wonder that his eye could be roving so soon, but then I realise that he is only staring in the hope that one of them will be his wife. No wonder he was so desperate to get out of the room. He wants to find her - or see her, or glimpse her. I turn my eyes back down to the courtyard. Something is not right. I find that each person I look at seems to jolt some recollection in my mind, to reignite some memory pathway.

“Every person I see looks vaguely familiar,” I say to the portraitist softly. “Should that worry me?”

“In a strange place, your brain does things like that,” he says. “Seeks out familiarity. A survival tactic.”

Perhaps. I have almost accepted his explanation when I see her - not vaguely familiar, but intimately known. My brother's fiancée. She disappeared when he did. She is sitting on the grass in the sun, her face offered up to it like a sacrifice, with her closed-toe shoes kicked off and her pencil skirt keeping her legs chastely together, crossed at the ankles, toes curled as she soaks up the warmth. That thick hair. I used to find her hairs on my brother's pillow when I was younger, so young that I would snoop about his room, desperate for clues about things older boys did, for clues about women, and sex, and intimacy. I collected those strands she left behind. The only evidence she had been there. They were thick enough that even singly I could tie them into knots without snapping them. I couldn't believe those hairs were dead.

She opens her eyes and the angle her face makes with the sun means she is looking directly at me. Do I flatter myself to think she would recognise me? That she has banked my face in her memory? She closes her eyes again, uncrosses her ankles and lies down completely, her head against her palms, relaxed.

"I just want to see her," says the portraitist. "Not even speak to her or touch her, I just want to see her."

His wife. The man guarding us, in the intimacy that comes from looking at women together, says, "She walks in the rose garden in the mornings. On the other side of the courtyard. We let her walk and stretch for an hour."

The portraitist grips his forearm. "I have to see her. Please. She doesn't even need to know I'm there."

The man is feeling good in the sun. Maybe he has his own lover amongst the women milling below. He hesitates, then agrees. "You can see the rose garden from the opposite passageway. I'll take you there." He turns to me. "I'll watch you from across the courtyard. I know you won't move."

I won't move. She is beneath me, on her own in the sun. An image of my mother flits into my mind like a fly that needs swatting. In the hospital, disguised by tubes, thinking I was my brother and crying with joy that he had found her at last. Her last words were: my son. She wasn't speaking about me.

I say her name, then call it more loudly. A few people in the courtyard look up at me, registering my presence. I shout it and she opens her eyes and sits up, looking around her to source the voice. A man points up to me, to the railing where I'm standing. She looks up, shielding her face from the sun with one hand. She can't see me because of the glare. She stands and walks barefoot towards the edge of the courtyard and looks up. Then she disappears out of my sight, into the passageway beneath me. I am relieved, relieved that it isn't her, that I don't need to know. Somebody touches my shoulder gently and I turn. It's her. She stands before me, barefoot on the cement floor, her hair ruffled from lying on the grass, slightly out of breath from running up the stairs.

"My God," she whispers. "For a moment I thought..."

I know what she is thinking. She and my mother. Wishing me away, wishing he were back.

She reaches out a long limb to cup my face. "With that beard..." She can't finish the sentence. She doesn't need to. "What are you doing here? Are you with the movement? What section are you in?" She is holding back tears unsuccessfully. They pool and spill, pool and spill.

"I'm being held captive. I was taken in during the coup. They're keeping me with two other men in a room."

"Captive?" She wipes her tears away impatiently, trying to concentrate on my words. "But that's impossible, there must be a mistake..."

"No mistake. I'm one of the old guard. I shaved him each day, plucked hair from his nose, made him look presentable..."

"The President?" she says, incredulously.

"The President."

"You mean you held a knife to his throat every day and never slit it?" Her tears begin to pool again. "After what he did? To me, to your brother?" They are spilling hopelessly now. Her face is blotched with the effort of her grief.

I am beginning to resent her accusations. "What *did* he do to my brother?"

She has covered her face with two hands, blocking me out and everything I recall in her.

"What happened to him?"

She moves her hands, holds them out to me, to take my hands in hers. I relent. She holds them, rubbing them with her thumbs, looking at me with pity. “You don’t know, do you?” she whispers. “Of course you don’t. Why does nobody *know*?”

She pulls me towards her, nestles her head against my chest. I am taller than she, but only just. She has to stoop slightly. Then she pushes me away as suddenly as she drew me to her, and steps away from me, remembering some forgotten propriety. She looks around us, looks down at her bare feet, feels with her hand for her collapsed hairbun. Fraternising with the enemy. She glances over the railing, down at the people grouped below. Nobody is paying us any attention. She looks over her shoulder, her neck tendons diagonal for a second, as if expecting somebody to be lurking, eavesdropping behind the columns of the passageway. She rubs the inside of her right arm compulsively. Whom is she conjuring?

“He died in the mountains,” she says quietly. “We were ambushed. We left the village to make a difference, to change things.” She looks over her shoulder again, keeping her distance from me impersonal. She opens her mouth, takes a breath to relaunch.

I have to interrupt. “I know he’s dead,” I say, trying to keep my bile masked. “I got the letter. I suppose you saw him being buried.”

She burns at this, catches alight like a holy bush in the desert. “So you did know.” Then she turns her back to me, lifts her hands to recoil her hair, and says softly, “Traitor.”

She walks down the stairs, pointing each graceful foot before it lands. I watch her ease onto the courtyard grass, pick up her shoes with one hand, and merge with the shade boxing in the sunswept courtyard.

10 His portraitist

“There she is,” the man says, and pulls me behind a pillar so I’m not exposed.

She is walking as fast as our child will let her around the small rose garden, forced by the narrow path to turn comically often. From this level, I can see her full head of hair from above, her parting straight until halfway back her skull where it veers sideways. The grey strands have gathered courage and refuse to be flattened into a ponytail; she doesn’t have her hair dye as an ally anymore. On Saturday mornings she looked like a mad surgeon, emerging from the bathroom with two plastic gloves held up as if she were waiting for a nurse to remove them, and a showercap covering her hair, the dye coaxing the plastic red against its will. If she were careless, the rims of her ears would be slightly pink for days.

To give birth in captivity. If I think too long about the position I’ve put her in, my mind begins to seize up like a crushed windpipe. She looks fine - healthy and vigorous - but what is the stress doing to our child, unseen? Coursing through her into the baby, a fatal kind of nourishment. Will they let us go once she has had the child? Why are they even keeping me here, insignificant player that I am? Why has he dragged me into this cycle of confession and witnessing? Stop. Stop it. My kidneys pulse in response. They have a muscle memory of their own.

She has done another abrupt turn and is pumping her arms, propelling herself forwards, eyes level, face determined. Her breasts bob slightly from the motion, getting in the way of her arms on every backward swing. She bends to touch her toes, stretches sideways, lifts her arms in the air. What would we be doing right now if none of this had happened? She would be sitting in the sun after her bath, topless, rubbing lemon juice onto her nipples - she said this prepared them for the onslaught of breastfeeding. The small potted palms on our balcony kept this a secret from the street. I would be in my dressing-gown in my studio, music blaring, working on a drawing I was planning to give her after the birth - charcoal, like the ones she originally admired at my exhibition. She would be wandering around the kitchen with just a sarong tied around her waist and faint traces of lemon pulp and sometimes a stray pip sticking to her breasts. Our fridge was stocked with champagne and each time I opened the rattling door it felt like a mini-celebration just from the sight of the gold foil and green

glass. This was in case her milk didn't come quickly enough after the birth; she said a few sips of champagne would get it flowing.

Now she has lain on the grass between the gravel, lifting each leg slowly in the air and holding it in the stretch. She looks like just another stone sculpture planted in the surrounding garden - conventional shapes: cupids, half-naked women, tentative sprites. The rigidity of the sculptures reminds me of a boy I saw on the beach when I was young enough not yet to have chosen a profession. He was on his hands and knees in the sand, sculpting life-size sand creatures: buffalo, crocodiles, lions, giant tortoises. His only tool was an old detergent bottle filled with seawater. He sprayed the sand and then used his hands to mould. The animals were so realistic they scared me; it was as if they had bones and muscle and sinew and were waiting for the sun to set so that they could stand and stretch and begin to hunt. He had no pictures with him; the animals were entirely in his mind's eye. I sat and watched him until the light was gone. Further down the beach obedient swimmers swarmed in a thick triangle between the flags. Choosing to be an artist never seemed like a risky thing to do. In fact, it seemed to be a guarantee against risk.

A soft voice with fishy breath speaks into my left ear: "The child is getting impatient. It wants to greet the world, meet its father. She's looking well, no?"

I turn to look at the Commander. He is picking his teeth with a twig, working away at something caught in the gum next to his incisor. He keeps his eyes fixed on my wife. She is still on her back in the grass, leg pulled towards her in a stretch. I wish she would stand up, get out of that ridiculous position.

"Quite a catch, I must say," he says. "Don't know what she saw in him."

"In me?"

"Yes, in you."

"Thank you."

He laughs. Then he calls out my wife's name. She looks up, suspicious. "Darling, we have your husband here to see you. Can you bear to look at him?"

The Commander pulls me from behind the pillar like a schoolroom dunce. I stand at the railing awkwardly, not knowing what to do with my hands. She looks up at me patiently, with a look of forbearance. Putting up with me. Is that what she's doing?

"Hello," she says, her voice raised so that it will reach me. "How are you?"

How am I? My God, how am I?

"Fine." I put my hands on the railings. "And you?"

"Okay." She puts one hand on her hip.

"And the baby...?" I ask.

She puts her other hand on her stomach. "Alive and kicking." She glances at the Commander as she says this.

I look at him too. He is smiling down at her like a priest from a pulpit. I suddenly feel desperate to connect with her, to know if she forgives me, to hear her say she loves me. I will even risk humiliation.

"Do you hate me?" I say to her, my voice warbling. "Do you hate me for what I've done?"

"You forget it was my father who got you the job," she says dryly.

The Commander laughs loudly.

"I love you," I say to her, the panic rising.

Am I imagining that her face becomes tender for an instant, that she closes her eyes to stop tears? She looks up at me and then the baby kicks and the shock and pain flits across her face. She puts her other hand on her belly too, and looks down at the unborn child, so insistent.

"Stop it," she says to me. "Stop doing this." She turns and walks through the rose garden back into the residence, without looking back.

I slump onto the railing, fighting back tears. The Commander pats me on the back like a team member after a defeat.

"Her father got you the job?" he says slyly.

"I don't suppose I have a choice not to answer your questions."

"No, you don't. How did it happen?"

He takes me by the arm like an invalid and starts to walk me down the passage. I try to disguise my shuffle, but he picks it up and slows his steps to suit mine.

“He was ashamed of me. So he pulled some strings and next thing I was at the President’s summer house with his family, painting his wife.”

“Did she try to seduce you?”

“Who?”

“His wife.”

“Yes. He knew about it. She was too old for his liking by then anyway. He preferred younger stock.”

“Like your wife.”

“My wife?”

“Somebody of her age.”

“Well, yes, I suppose...”

“Did you fall for her?”

“For who?”

“For the President’s wife.”

“Of course not. I loved my wife. I love my wife.”

“So she was too old for your liking too.”

“That’s not the point.”

We turn a corner in the passageway and find the barber leaning heavily on the railings, staring down into the courtyard. The Commander offers him his other arm. He looks at the man trailing behind us a few steps, decides it’s not worth making a fuss, and reluctantly lets the Commander hook his arm beneath his. He stands, rigid, willing himself not to be repulsed. We continue on our walk, a stiff three-legged race in slow motion. We have arrived at our bedroom door.

The Commander turns to me. “I’d like you to start tomorrow on a portrait. And I’d like you to groom me tomorrow afternoon,” he says to the barber. “We’ll start with a haircut until I can trust you with a razor.”

He drops our arms suddenly like two sacks of flour he has carried as a burden and walks briskly away.

“Come,” says the barber from inside the room. “I’ll show you how to unpinch that nerve.”

I close the door behind me.

“Lie down - no, on the floor, not your bed. You need a hard surface for this to work.”

I ease myself slowly towards the floorboards. He stands above me, his beard an upside-down halo.

“Now bend your right leg and pull it across your left leg. You should hear your spine click.”

I wish it were that simple. He is young, this barber, and optimistic. He must be in his late twenties. I haven’t asked him anything about his life; all three of us have been in siege mode, refusing to yield. My mind has been full of my wife, my own pain.

“There - did you hear it?” he says hopefully. My back has clicked despite itself. “Now pull your knees to your chest and rock your spine against the floor, like a cradle.”

I obey him, even though this movement forces my kidneys into impossible contortions. He sees me wince. I lie still on the floor, my legs extended.

“Do you have family you left behind?” I ask him.

He sits on the bed, his legs dangling.

I get to my feet and hobble to my own bed. “I haven’t asked you whether there’s a wife or child waiting for you when you get out.”

“No,” he says. “I’m not married. My mother died last year.”

“Siblings?”

“I had a brother. Died years ago.”

“Does anybody know you’ve been taken?”

“My shop assistant must have figured out something happened. But if there’s been a coup nobody will be worrying about anybody but themselves.”

I get a sudden glimpse into what it must be like for the Commander, with people not knowing anything, not knowing what was done in the President’s name.

“He did awful things, you know,” I can’t resist saying.

The barber says nothing, I lift my head to look at him. He removes his shoes and socks and lies down on the bed, on his hip, facing me.

“Who did?” he says.

“The President.”

“How awful?” he says. “What did he do?” I can’t decipher his tone.

“Had people killed. Dissidents. That sort of thing.” I dare not go any further.

“You knew this and kept working for him?” He looks at me quizzically.

“No...” Now look what I’ve done. I’ll have to tell him more. “The Commander told me.”

“And you believe him? How do you know he’s telling the truth?”

“Photographs. He has photographs. Of people who were killed.”

The barber swings his legs off the bed and goes to the window. The curtains are half-closed, but he sweeps them open vigorously. The valley below is hazy in the midday light, expectant, waiting for evening and the promise of shadows. From the way his back is tensed, I assume our conversation is over, so I roll onto my stomach and try to sleep. Something that the Commander said to me has been percolating in my brain. About the President’s wife. Of course she told her husband, that I understand. They must have laughed about it, lying in their twin beds in the first-floor bedroom, about how she’d seduced the gangly artist, the young portraitist, persuaded him to sleep with her. But why would the President tell the Commander something like that?

The President’s wife was suffocating to look at - her pores were so blocked from years of foundation use I always wondered how her skin could still breathe. It was the third night of my stay at the summer house. She had been sitting for me for two days, with pearls strung around her neck and a gold pendant that kept getting stuck between her sweating breasts each time she shifted. Mock-coy, she would dislodge it slowly as if we were sharing a secret, and I would turn my attention furiously to my palette. The President watched us that afternoon, sitting behind me on a small chair upholstered with velvet. She made eyes at me even more vigorously as a result.

At dinner, the four of us - my wife was there, too - sat with our plates on our laps on the deck overlooking the sea. They were redecorating the house so there was no picnic table for eating outside, and it was too hot to sit indoors. We served ourselves in the dining room and then carried out our

plates and perched on the edge of our chairs, sitting in a row facing the sea which made conversation difficult. Whenever the President said something, I tried to turn my head to face him, but his wife was sitting between us and she obstinately kept her head right in front of his. It was a meal full of discomfort, of making sure I hadn't left food on my face, of wanting to take a second helping but worrying it would look gluttonous. I remember trying to keep my elbows tucked against my sides while eating a chicken drumstick without cutlery. My wife dropped her fork on the deck and went to fetch another from inside.

The President said, his mouth full of coleslaw, "We'd like you to keep going on the portrait tonight. You seem to be making good progress. My wife would like to keep working."

I craned my neck to see his face, but her head was still in the way, her thick nostrils quivering like a giant trying to smell her prey. She chewed on a piece of meat, her mouth primly closed until she swallowed, then parted her lips and said, "It would be a pity for us to lose momentum." My wife resettled herself on her chair with a clean fork.

We had already been trying for a child for over a year at that stage. Sex had become a trial for me, only a few years into our marriage. My wife would remove her underwear to shower in the morning and curse when she discovered the first smudge of her period. I would lie on the bed, watching her through the haze of just-departed sleep, and feel personally responsible. We stopped making love at any time other than when she was ovulating, and then it felt clinical, like a doctor doing something to a patient. When she finally did fall pregnant, she took all the credit. I don't blame her, of course. I did want a child, but more as living proof of my complete union with her, than for the child itself. I was afraid - perhaps I still am - that I would be left out when it arrived, that all her love and attention would be redirected to this child, and I would be left holding the toys and the baby bag full of clean nappies and bottles, alone. She seemed possessive of the child, even before it could be called a child - when it was the size of a grain of rice - and wouldn't let me put my ear to her belly to hear its heartbeat.

When we had finished eating that evening, the President's wife went to her bedroom to prepare, and I kissed my wife and left her with the President out on the deck. A night wind had come up, full of seasalt, and her hair was being whipped around her head like a helicopter blade. She smiled

at me strangely, as if she knew something I didn't. I turned to look back at her from the dining room, through the glass of the sliding door, and saw she'd taken out her pocket mirror and was applying lipstick, flicking her hair out of her face and mouth repeatedly. The President watched her from his deckchair, mesmerised. I was used to seeing men look at her like that, but that time it made a thirst well up in me, a crippling nostalgia for the simple days of our courtship when she hadn't yet come to equate marriage, and me, with disappointment.

I walked barefoot through the dimly-lit house to the studio, the plush pile giving way beneath my feet. The studio was the only room built into the roof and doubled as a kind of observatory, with a domed glass ceiling and a telescope pointed at Saturn. I hadn't been into the studio at night before. It was beautifully lit with small lamps that glowed back at themselves in the glass, but horribly impractical for my purposes. I searched unsuccessfully for the light switch at the door for overhead lighting, then hooked my thumb into my palette and began to squeeze out small amounts of paint from the tubes I had already laid out for the next day's work.

I heard the door behind me open and shut, and twisted to see the President's wife turn the key in the lock.

"So we won't be disturbed," she said when she saw me looking at her with my eyebrows raised. She was wearing black slacks and an off-the-shoulder jersey with beads sewn along the neckline. "I thought we could try something a little different," she said. "I've always admired your drawings - I saw some years ago at an exhibition - they were sketches of your wife, I believe? In pencil? Could you do something like that of me?"

Those were done before she was my wife, when it aroused her to be under my gaze as it wavered between that of lover and of artist. She would strip silently in my bedroom and then walk naked to the tiny, cramped kitchen that doubled as my studio and perch on a stool with her back to me, inviting me to draw.

"Let's start with something simple," the President's wife said. "What if I sit on this chair facing forwards?"

And then in one movement she pulled her jersey over her head and stood before me, her hair slightly static and her breasts insistent. I'm not sure what it was that made me sleep with her in the

end. The thrill of being desired? Payback for the way my wife had applied lipstick in my wake? Perhaps it was just that she stirred pity in me and desire surprised me by stirring with it. The zip on her slacks caught on her underwear and for a few seconds she was bent over, her breasts lunging towards the floor, trying to unhook them. She blushed then, a blush so profound it showed even through her foundation. And I pitied her.

I flip onto my back, my brainwork heating up the pillow. Of course. The President's wife is being kept here too. Why else would the President call out her name in the loneliness of his pain? If I was close to power, she was closer.

University of Cape Town

11 His chef

I have just remembered that I left a pocket of potatoes, skinned and halved, on the cutting board in the kitchen. I forgot to transfer them to a tub of water and tonight they will be green from being left in the air too long. I take a chair out to the balcony and put my legs up on the railings. It is only early afternoon, but the light is already starting to magnify the colour in the valley below.

This woman, the Commander's wife, is making me feel like a boy trapped in an old man's body. Desire inflames my loins, but with no visible result. She let me hold her hand in the kitchen, briefly, until the steam from the pot singed her arm and the Commander surprised us, but I know he doesn't mind. He reminds me of myself at his age. I would catch strangers staring at me in a movie queue or at the bank - they always looked like they were trying to drink in my beauty, to ingest it and make it their own. In bed, women would tell me they wanted to possess me. There was one woman - a doctor - who thought beauty was the elixir of life. She latched onto me and sucked away until I cast her off. But it never bothered me if I caught one of my women with another man, even my wife.

My daughter's face and my own are unnervingly similar. Male beauty does not translate well to a female; she has a hardness about her jaw and I always half-expect to find stubble pushing its way through her pores. But she still attracts men, especially the ones who don't know what they want. I used to tell her to treat men like stations on a radio: if you listen to one for too long, who knows what you're missing on the next bandwidth? I had a three month rule for myself: no matter how much I liked the girl, if we were still together after three months I ended the relationship and moved on. My wife was the only one who managed to break my rule, but I kept it intact in my affairs afterwards. The cloying ones fell to pieces, of course. And my wife did too, in the end.

There is a shifting in the low shrubs beneath the balcony. The Commander's wife emerges from the overgrown path, her eyes already raised to my level. Was she looking for me? My old heart wants to believe it. She has changed out of her uniform and now wears a summer dress that pulls slightly over her hips, and her hair has been released from its coil. She smiles at me with restraint and calls, "What's for dinner?" I stand and lean on the balcony, glad that I unbuttoned the top three buttons of my shirt before she arrived.

“I’m making pastry at four in the morning, while it’s still cool enough for the butter to stay firm. Care to join me?”

She reaches down to fix her sandal strap and when she lifts her head again her smile fades beneath my gaze - she is looking at something behind me. I turn and see the barber standing in the doorway, looking down at her with sleep still rising warmly from his head. Something passes between them on a wavelength I can’t tune into and the barber comes forward and leans on the rail next to me.

She pulls at her dress where it clings. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I had no right.”

He rubs the back of his head and clears his throat. “But perhaps you do.” He glances at me as if I’m eavesdropping.

I look back at him obstinately, my arms firmly on the rail. She looks at me imploringly. I sigh loudly and walk back into the room, a word flitting around in my head: cuckolded. Cuckolded. I sit on my bed facing the window and see the barber, really see him, for the first time. He’s dark and vital, with veins that expose the strength of his blood and hair that flows from his head like the fountain of youth itself. But there’s something crumpled about him, about the way he walks and the sound of his voice, as if he’d been crushed when he was small and never recovered. He reminds me of my daughter, that’s what it is - it makes me want both to reach out to him and to despise him.

It’s silent on the balcony - what kind of game are these two playing? I lean sideways and peer around the open door. He is holding an apple with a note tied around it with masking tape, greedily ripping the tape with his teeth to release the note from its fruity prison. Ingenious. And what would the Commander think about all this? The barber reads it quickly, then nods agreement to her. I listen to her sandals click against her feet as she walks away. Such small things can summon desire.

My fingers smell of garlic and coriander, years’ worth of the stuff. The barber comes inside.

“Lucky boy,” I say to him. “Midnight tryst planned? Well done.”

He ignores me. It’s hard to think of myself as an old man. My daughter said that to me the day before I was brought in here. “You’re an old man,” she said. “You will die soon. I don’t know if I will miss you.” People don’t realise what it’s like to age when you’re beautiful. To feel like you reached your peak when you turned forty and every day since that day you’ve become just a small bit uglier. A less attractive man has nothing to lose when he ages. As an older man, I was still handsome, but there

is an invisible line that I've crossed: my body's done a dirty deal with gravity and my hair has given up the ghost once and for all. It's not the wrinkles, it's things you're never told to expect - having to piss five times a night, discovering that your calf muscles are disintegrating against your will leaving you bandy-legged, watching the spider veins cast their purple webs across the backs of your knees, waking up with your eyelids sealed together because your eyes can no longer self-lubricate. And now this: desire that exists without proof. All this shutting down must have a purpose. I think what my daughter was implying is that it's meant to encourage reckoning and accounting. Moral reckoning.

Okay then, let's reckon. I don't believe my wife was ever really mad. I think mental illness is a luxury most people can't afford. Even after her psychiatrist had persuaded me to put her in an institution, I would sneak into the gardens and look through the window into her room on the ground floor, always half-expecting to catch her doing something that would prove she was pretending. I never really thought about what that something would be - maybe she would be on the phone to our daughter, laughing and chatting normally? Or she would be doing yoga in her striped legwarmers, on her mat on the floor, with sweat beading gently at her hairline, and her face focused and calm? The disappointment each time I found her sleeping in her bed or staring at the television or sitting on the low armchair rubbing her hands would start deep in my gut and work its way up to the back of my throat where it gagged me.

Having been failed by my own flesh, and those of my flesh, what else can an old man turn to except power to shore himself up? Or at least proximity to power? We all know power and desire couple effortlessly.

12 His barber

She had tucked the key beneath the tape around the apple when she threw it up to me on the balcony. A poison-green apple, like the kind we used to grow in the back garden of my mother's house. She remembers them, of course. It was a small miracle that anything alive could push its way through that ground, so sandy it couldn't be called soil. The fruit always arrived tasting salty; perhaps the water table had been contaminated by seawater. There was a mulberry bush in the back too, a thriving plant that unfurled leaves textured like the surface of a brain. My brother and I fed those to his silkworms until he swapped them for marbles with a boy at school. We would dare each other to put a worm on our tongue and see who could bear the soft, blind wriggling the longest. Once he swallowed one by accident and examined his stool meticulously the next day to see if it would emerge alive. He cut out small shapes from cardboard - stars, hearts, circles - and put them in the silkworm box that he'd punched repeatedly with a knitting needle so that they could breathe. Slowly they spun according to his demands, desperate for something to attach their silk to, and then he hung these silken shapes from a mobile above his bed. If he gave them beetroot leaves they spun dark-pink thread instead.

I have the key hotly in my hand beneath the covers. I know the chef intended to stay awake to watch me, but his age got the better of him, and now he is snoring on his back like a pensioner, tempting flies. I wait for her signal, straining my ears. The cicadas outside lament the lost heat of the day. Above their scratchy chorus rises a single bird-note, sweet and clear - it's her. Within seconds I am at the door trying to coax the key noiselessly into its slot, and then I am outside in the dark, guardless corridor (who knows what she said to him?), and using the wall to keep my bearings as I run down the steps to the courtyard, and there I find the door that she said would lead to the outer garden, and it does, and she stands before me in the dark, her hair gleaming, and takes my hand. I know I look like my brother right now, in the half-light, with my hair grown out and a thickly-sprouted beard. An impostor.

She leads me with quiet urgency through the garden, beneath a willow tree and around a batch of strange sculptures, to a car parked on an overgrown road that seems to lead nowhere. She pops the boot of the car and motions for me to get into it. Fear flits through me until I dismiss it, but once I'm curled in the darkness like a foetus it starts to course through me violently, and I think, why did I

believe her? She thinks I'm a traitor, that I'm being kept here because of my loyalty to the President! The engine hums in time to my mind's frenzy. Then the car stops and I begin to imagine all the ways I could die, and I pray to my dark cocoon not to betray me, not to open itself and display me.

The boot hinge squeals open. "Sorry," she says. "But that gate is guarded. You can sit in the front now."

Looking up at her, at this woman whom I have just imagined killing me in all the ways my mind would let me, I want to be a child again, and I wish it were my mother hovering above me, about to put her cool, dry hand to my forehead and tell me I'm dreaming. I try to uncurl my legs to sit up, and for a panicked second I think I'm paralysed. Then my legs obey and I sit up and hook them over the edge of the open boot and propel myself to the ground. We are on a dirt road, not far from the President's residence - I can see it lit up in the distance like a luxury ship at sea. I want to savour this, to think of it as freedom, but the adrenaline is still pumping too fiercely through my veins and I sit in the front seat uneasily, my legs twitching with pins and needles. The road slopes down towards the vineyards in the valley below, a twisted road that seems hazardous at night. The window is open and as we descend we drive through pockets of warm air trapped from the day's heat, and emerge from them into cool air fragrant from the midnight opening of buds.

"You'll have to go back," she says quietly, her eyes on the road. "This is just so we can talk. I don't have the physical strength to stop you from running, but he'll find you again anyway, and then you won't be kept in a room with white linen and silver fixtures."

I suspected this, and perhaps it's why I'm not breathing this night air with as much relish as a free man should. She doesn't speak again until we're at the base of the valley and the gnarled stumps of the vineyards are silhouetted on either side of the road like paper cut-outs of dwarves linking arms.

"Your mother..." she says.

I wait for a few seconds. "She died last year."

The shape of an unlit farmhouse looms ahead of us.

"She blamed me, didn't she?" she says softly. "For what happened to your brother."

I laugh, my voice brittle. "No, actually. She blamed me."

She stops the car next to the farmhouse, rests her head on the steering wheel for a few moments, then leaves the car. She is still wearing her summer dress; I can see the hem faintly beneath her coat as she walks towards the house. Her calf muscles ball and stretch as she climbs the steps onto the veranda, then she pushes tentatively at the door and disappears inside.

By the time I reach the veranda, she has re-emerged holding an unlabelled bottle of wine by its neck and a slim door wedge.

“Think you can open this?” she says, handing both to me.

I put them down on the wooden deck, push against the flyscreen and wait for my eyes to make sense of the dark room. There are barrels stacked against the wall and a tasting counter with wine bottles of increasing size, like Russian dolls that fit inside each other, arranged in a straight line. The spitting bucket is half-full and there are glasses with dirty rims. People must have left the farm in a hurry. I take two glasses and rub the rims and inner bellies with my shirt, then I fumble in the dark behind the counter and find a corkscrew next to a coil of metal foil shed by an already-opened bottle. I take them out to the veranda, where she has pulled two cushionless deckchairs together. The cork crumbles as I twist it, and I have to push it into the bottle to clear the bottle neck.

“There’ll be bits of cork in it,” I say as I pass her a glass. “Maybe I should have used the wedge.”

She smiles and takes the glass by the stem. The wine is warm, red, gritty. I haven’t eaten since the soup we were given at four, and I feel the wine winding its hot path to my stomach.

“Do you remember my father?” she says. “You met him at the dock. He was on a fishing crew too, not the same as your brother’s. He and his twin sister were swimming in the surf when they were little, no older than ten, only chest-deep, when she was dragged out to sea by the current. He never came to terms with why he had been spared. He was sent to school the next day as if nothing had happened.”

She drains her glass and holds it out to be refilled. I pour for her, fill her glass almost to the top.

“Is that how you feel? Guilty?” she says, pulling her legs up to her chest.

“My brother chose to put himself in harm’s way,” I respond.

“Your mother didn’t see it like that.”

I refill my own glass. “He was her first. She cherished him.”

“And you?”

“She remembered my brother as a golden child. Everything I did seemed dull and heavy to her.”

She holds out her glass again and smiles sheepishly, keeping her lips together. Her teeth are porous and always blacken from wine. I know that from watching her drink in the kitchen with my brother when they were supposed to be babysitting me. When I hand her glass back to her she takes my hand and threads her fingers through mine. With my free hand I drink straight from the bottle.

It must be eerie for her to see me as I am now, a grown man who looks like her dead lover. The last time she saw me I was still disguised by youth, had not yet found my proper form and face, had not yet acted upon my genes. I think of my uncle whose wife died when their daughter was only a baby. He had adored his wife, loved her absolutely, and then suddenly her liver packed in and he was left with the small child as his only reminder of her. As she grew older she began to look uncannily like her mother, and he found himself staring at her across the supper table, watching this girl become a long-dead woman in measurable stages before his eyes. It drove him crazy in the end; he began to think she had returned to him, and that he was twenty again and courting her.

She whispers to me, tightening her hold on my hand. “Would you sit beside me?”

I obey and she lies on her hip next to me and curls one leg across my stomach. I can feel the plastic slats of the deckchair cutting into my back. They must be cutting into her soft sides too. I lift her onto me, put my arms around the dent of her lower back to stop her from rolling off. I stroke the inside of her arm, the soft skin that the sun never sees. The skin is taut but puckered, and I hold it up to my eyes to understand it. Six circles vie for space on her skin - an old scar, but not old enough to be from childhood.

“Kiss them,” she says into my ear. “Like he used to. When the wounds were fresh.”

I kiss each circle in turn and the silken circles of my brother’s mobiles flash into my mind and then are gone. She is lucky to have escaped with so few scars. She sits on me, grips my hair, digs her fingers into my beard, strokes the soft skin on my chest - all the tactile markers that remind her of him.

I have no choice but to let her use my body like this, to give her one more night with him. I think of my mother dying in the hospital bed with its labelled linen, saying that I mustn't speak, that I must just sit next to her with my long hair and my man's body, looking like him. There is no relief when I pull out of her on the deckchair and she falls forward onto me, sobbing. Her tears run into my ears and collect there warmly. She cries until sleep comes.

I wanted to work for the President. I wanted to find a way to work for him so closely I could touch him daily. It wasn't difficult for me to move to the city once my mother began her descent. She hardly noticed when I kissed her goodbye. We had become outsiders at the coast by that stage anyway - the crews never forgot what my brother had done and still couldn't understand it. They thought it was frivolous to care about politics if you're putting your body on the line every day at sea. Nobody asked me to take his place on the trawler when I came of age. So I took an early bus into the city with my suitcase tied to the rack on top amidst fowls and pockets of oranges and wooden rocking chairs and anything else that somebody was going to try to sell in the city.

The first job I found in the city was disinfecting implements and sweeping hair in a salon in the Presidential district. The barber gave me a small room to stay in above the shop, with a door out onto the roof from where I could see the Residence lit up at night. The President's motorcade would regularly push itself through the narrow road the shop was on - seven black, shiny sharks in an unnatural school, none of them betraying the contents of their bellies. My guess was that the President always rode in the first one, unable to relinquish precedence even for his safety.

One afternoon, as the motorcade was passing, I asked my boss who cut the President's hair. He was smug and amused by the question, and answered, "I do, of course. He only takes the best." And there it was: the chance to be close to the President, to put my hands on him. The barber went up to the Residence whenever he was beckoned, which was every day, as I discovered. I had seen him leave the shop each day, for a few hours, but had not bothered to wonder about it because it was to my advantage. I used that time to practise on customers - to spray and cut and lather and shave. He didn't mind - in fact, he encouraged it because it freed him up to do his Presidential duty.

What makes a barber better than all other barbers? I thought about this, sitting on the roof looking up at the Residence, wrapped in a blanket, feeling my ambition burn in my gut. I could sense

it there, like a living creature, crouched and focused. I was grateful sometimes for that dogged sense of purpose which kept me calm in a strange city in the confusion of youth. During the days in the shop, I would examine each man's reactions to my movements. They would sit before me in the red swivel chair with its adjustable height lever, some looking businesslike, some looking sheepish. Many knew exactly what they wanted, many didn't. But they didn't expect pleasure, and that's what I gave them - small, almost unnoticeable pleasures that they didn't have to feel ashamed about receiving. I would brush my hand slightly against his neck as I fastened the cloth sheet; I would hold his jaw firmly between my hands as I stood behind him, looking at his face in the mirror, appraising it; I would run my finger down his cheeks as I described what I was about to do. All businesslike, I must repeat - nothing obviously sensual about it - and the men didn't know what it was, but when the haircut was over their whole bodies buzzed and they felt like a lobe of their brain had been hypnotised. Certain people have had that effect on me during my life - always somebody doing something meticulous, putting something in order - a teacher at school who made my brain tingle when she used a ruler to draw a line in my workbook; a stocktaker at the grocery store on every last Friday of the month, delicately piling tins of canned vegetables into neat rows.

I persuaded some of the men - the ones I felt could take it - to have their hair shampooed while they were at the shop, before the cutting, and I massaged their scalps as they lay with their necks slotted into the ceramic basin. I found the lumps and dips on their skulls and rubbed them - the parts that curved out or in, that revealed pleasure points. And the cutting itself - so rapid, so crisp. Like brisk magic when I got it right. Word spread. Men began to ask for me even when the barber was present. And then one day the barber came back from the Residence and said the President had asked for me. This was my proof that the President had eyes everywhere, that even the smallest shift in preference at the barber salon in the district didn't escape him. The barber was gracious in his defeat. He had no choice: the President had spoken.

The first time I cut his hair was in his own bathroom. It was cavernous - the tiles stretched away as far as I could see. Two bodyguards escorted me through the Residence and then stood just outside the open bathroom door, ears pricked. There was a faint tremor in the President's hand when he greeted me. The bathroom lights did not flatter him - I hadn't realised he was so old. He was

already smartly dressed for an evening function and he wanted his haircut to be so fresh the other men would be able to smell it, like cut grass on a warm evening. He sat on a plush armchair before the mirror, so low it made me lose my bearings briefly. I hadn't thought to bring one of the high chairs from the salon. It meant that everything I did that evening was hunched. I bent over him to cover his shoulders with a cloth sheet and fastened the clasp at his neck. I held his jaw between my hands, tilted his chin up and down and side to side, appraising. I sprayed his hair with faintly scented water and the beads spread finely across his strands. I cut briskly, with comb and scissors, and saw him lulled by the order and rhythm of the snipping. I used a razor along the nape of his neck and at the edge of his hairline. Then I whisked off the sheet, not letting a single strand fall onto his suit. He was pleased. The next time he let me shave and pluck him too. The next day I began to convert my room above the salon into my glass box. I needed to purify myself. That's when I started sleeping with the window open, and removing street clothes before I sat on the bed. Keeping the things around me - socks, glasses, belts - in rigid order was part of the purging.

She stirs. The sky is slowly preparing for dawn. She lifts her head, confused, and then stands quickly when she sees my face and pulls her dress back over her hips. As she leaves the veranda she knocks over the empty wine bottle, propelling it on a suicide roll off the side and onto the tiles below.

I follow her to the car and get into the passenger side obediently. She fights with the ignition until the motor splutters reluctantly into life and we drive back along the dirt road, the stars already starting to fade, winding our way out of the valley. It is the coldest time of day, even in summer: the hour just before the sun reveals itself. I look at her bare legs, pocked with cold. It used to fascinate me that my brother could casually hold his hand on her thigh beneath the table at supper with my mother and me. I would sneak peaks sideways at them - it was such a possessive gesture, but high enough on her thigh to be more than simply proprietary. I would blush involuntarily each time I saw it, and they would laugh at me, not knowing the cause. To me, unschooled in intimacy, it seemed more daring - more charged - than if he had kissed her passionately in front of my mother.

"You know about me and the Commander, right?" she says, her eyes on the road ahead. "I'm sure the chef told you. I'm his wife."

Instinct makes me look at her ring finger. There is no ring.

“Congratulations.” It comes out with bitterness, brittle. Not what I’d intended.

She looks at me with concern, perhaps interpreting it as a younger brother’s jealousy. “He was in the same camp as we were. Your brother respected him deeply.”

The residence has appeared on the horizon, oddly comforting.

“Who kissed your wounds when they were fresh?” I ask. “My brother? Or the Commander?”

Her pity dissolves visibly; she sets her mouth and jaw and we don’t speak again until she tells me to get into the boot. This time I welcome the crawl into the cramped darkness.

University of Cape Town

13 His portraitist

Somebody must have fetched my old materials from my studio. The sight of these wrinkled metallic tubes, all half-squeezed, with their ends rolled tightly like slugs in distress, is not comforting. I think of the last time I touched them, the morning the President had changed colour and all the shades I'd mixed were wrong. My palette lies next to them, its surface thick with years of duty. Two canvasses are propped against the wall. I recognise them too, recognise the labour of stretching the canvas over the wooden frames and forcing staples into the spines to keep them taut.

This is the room where the President sat crumpled on the couch, photographs thrown at his feet. The furniture has been pushed aside, leaving long streak marks on the dusty floorboards, all but the couch, which is centre-stage, facing my easel. I fiddle with the bolts on the multi-jointed legs, sliding the sections together until the easel has shrunk to the right height. It is marked with accidental paint - this process always leaves a trail of evidence. My sketchbook is here too, a large and insistent reminder of all I have done wrong. Shards of charcoal lie in the groove at the bottom of the easel. Someone is familiar with my methods.

The Commander hovers at the door, uncertain for the first time, perhaps cowed by the tools of skill, of expertise, that surround me. He lopez into the room and settles himself on the couch, crossing his legs and letting one shoe dangle from his foot.

"I didn't bring petals," he says. "Can we make do without them?"

I know that a portrait is a trapping of power, that each one I painted increased the President's control by a fraction; that the image of him, freshly rendered in oils, hanging in Parliament, had some value outside of itself, that it strengthened his legitimacy. That it will do the same for this man sitting before me. The Commander's slipper drops from his dangling foot, revealing long, thin toes. He puts his hand into the back pocket of his pants and emerges with a fistful of purple blossoms, jacaranda.

"It's not just me you're painting," he says, his fist still clenched around the petals. "It's us."

The President shows himself at the open door, flanked by guards. His head is held low; his jowls have lengthened and hang uneasily. He is wearing a purple dressing-gown, tied with a knot at his thick waist. He shuffles towards the couch, and the Commander stands and throws the petals like confetti above his head. A few of them stick to his hair and shoulders, attaching themselves like

barnacles to a rock. He leaves them there, slumps onto the couch and then raises his head to look at me, his jaw steeled. The Commander sits jauntily beside him.

I flip open my sketchbook to a blank page, trying not to look at the previous sketches, and with a stick of charcoal I shape them on the page. I start with the President: his face is familiar, comforting, the lines are known and expected - I can be honest with him; it is what he always demanded. Within these lines I find new signals his body has sent for imprint on his skin - wrinkles and spots and patches of dryness. All these I document. What stirs in me, as my hand follows its own instincts, is what stirred for his wife in the observatory with the burning lamps. Pity.

University of Cape Town

14 His chef

I open the freezer and remove an ice-filled plastic bottle stoppered with its red lid. On the counter is a bowl of ice cubes in fridge water; next to it the chilled pastry dough is slowly making its way back to room temperature. My grandmother would call me a cheat if she could see what I'm doing. I've found a way to avoid the excruciating layering process (dough, butter, dough, butter, dough) - this batch took me just an hour last night - but I haven't shaken the habit of rolling out the risen dough with an ice bottle or dipping my hands in the ice bowl whenever my fingertips become too warm. It's not really even necessary to do it this early in the morning. Working in huge restaurant kitchens as a cog in a wheel cured me of most of my sentimental attachments to certain processes, but this one never died.

Funny the things you see around here in the coldest hour of the night. The barber wasn't in his bed when I left the room. From the kitchen window I saw the Commander's wife crossing the courtyard barefoot, her sandals in her hand, her back hunched with the effort of trying to be quiet. Her hair looked like it had been tied up hastily, an attempt to hide its bushiness. Hair becomes bushy when someone puts their hands in it. Used to happen to my wife. She depended on head massages before sex; her skull had erotic receptors that the rest of her body lacked. She would nudge her head up against my neck like a cat to remind me, and then writhe and purr. Afterwards her cheeks would be bright pink and her hair nest-like from the added volume of the massage. I tried it on other women too, thinking it might be a secret weapon, but they became bored after a while and redirected my hands.

I'm surprised at my lack of jealousy. Perhaps, finally, I have accepted my age and have begun to look at the desire of younger men indulgently, the way an old woman looks at a bride, not wanting to be back there again but still interested, still invested in the process, still glad that other people have the energy to spend on it. She would have been my type, too. She would have made it difficult for me, would have extended the game, made me scour my imagination to find a way to entice her into my arms, just for a single night. That's what no woman other than my wife understood. It was never about the sex. She knew she had to make our daily interactions into a game that interested me. She would approach then retreat unpredictably, leave for days without explanation, purposefully ignore me at parties and speak only to other men. I thought she enjoyed it, but it took its toll in the end. Pleading

insanity as a way out. Or perhaps - I've not thought of it like this before - could it have been her most ambitious game of all, to make me constantly search for her sane mind - now I'm sane, now I'm not? To make me woo her each time her sane mind disappeared and she had to be told who I was? She was very polite to me then, as polite as she always was to strangers - would try to make me feel at home in her ward room, would invite me to help myself to tea or coffee, would ask me questions about my life and listen earnestly to my replies. Oh, I played along alright, it was fascinating to see if I could crack her open, get her to laugh and admit it had all been a game. She reminded me then of my daughter when she was very small, when she came with my wife to the airport to fetch me after I'd been away for a particularly long time. She obviously only faintly recognised me, and so she turned on all the charm her little mind could muster and sat in the back seat of the car next to me, entertaining me all the way home with stories about her friends and her preschool and her pets.

My fingertips are getting too warm. I plunge them into the icy finger bowl and then grip the solid bottle and keep rolling out the dough as evenly as possible. I use the rim of a glass to cut out even rounds and place them gingerly on an oiled baking tray. I seem to have lost my appetite. Normally I would pick at the ingredients as I go, using the excuse of quality control, so that by the time the meal is served I am already full. But since the seafood brunch I haven't eaten a morsel of the food I've prepared.

I have a feeling the Commander will be moving to the city residence soon. He'll have to, to control the city and take up the full reins of power. The kitchens will be in disarray, probably looted and trashed. It will be difficult re-establishing my supply lines. One thing I hope has been stolen is the linen, always over-starched so that it was heavy and sullen and scratchy to touch. It made my eyes puff up and my fingers swell. That was in the days when I was nothing but a busboy, clearing dirty plates and laying bright white tablecloths and making sure the cutlery was correctly spaced. Nobody paid much attention when I left home except that my mother expected a cut of whatever wage I received. I didn't give her anything. Much later, when I'd been made sous-chef, I think I sent her some money, and paid for her bus fare to the city. She didn't come. I am a self-made man, I used to say to myself whenever the guilt began to creep up on me. A self-taught chef. I used to wonder why they called it

blind ambition because I know my eyes were wide open while I clawed my way up. My daughter could explain that diction. She was always good at things like that.

University of Cape Town

15 His barber

The red wine is taking its revenge today; since I woke my brain has felt tender and my body bruised. There is a purple welt across my back from the slats of the deck chair. But stronger even than the dry pinch behind my eyes is this longing to be with her again, at any cost - right now I believe I would even disguise myself as him, wear his clothes, speak with his lilt, if it would mean she would lie next to me once more and thread her fingers through my hair. She does not realise it, the power of her grace. It has always transfixed me. At least I have that to lay at her feet: fidelity.

The chef had a good look at me while I was in my bed this morning. He came back from the kitchens smelling of butter and yeast and stopped next to my bed for a long time. I pretended to be asleep, but I could sense his eyes searching for clues. The wine stains on my lips probably gave me away, the wooliness of my hair, or the stench of last night's liquor hanging above my bed. And her scent just beneath it, the quiet smell of her hair and body. He took a deep breath and eventually shuffled away from the bed into the bathroom and stayed there for a long time.

The tools of my trade have just been miraculously delivered to the room by one of the guards. They must have broken into my shop to get them and terrorised my poor assistant to find out what I would need to groom the Commander. With this pounding in my head it is not an easy task to pick out a pair of scissors and a comb from the tangle that has been thrown into the bag, but it must be done - he is expecting me. The portraitist came back from his session yesterday sucked dry like an old lemon, with bits of paint all over his hands making them look diseased, and collapsed into bed without a word. When I crept back in early this morning, he shot up in his bed with his face towards me for a few chilling seconds, until I realised his eyes were closed and he was still asleep. He lay back down again very stiffly like somebody being laid into a coffin, then he cried softly in his sleep and this morning he had a faint pattern of salt on his cheeks.

The guard thumps on the door to tell me to hurry up, so I grab my few utensils and wait for him to unlock the door. He walks beside me along the corridor around the courtyard. I look down at the square of grass in the sun and wish I could stand at the railing and look down on her again as she turns her face to the sun. The guard grunts and motions with his head to the stairwell and I realise that this is the first time I am going up and not down. The next floor is identical to ours, but with a guard

outside every room. It is unnerving, but of course the desire begins to burn within me to know who is behind each door, what secrets are they guarding? And beneath that desire is a slight deflating - logic has told me that we are not the only prisoners, but to have the proof before me is still a small disappointment, a generalising of our experience. Are they all being roomed in threes? Or are only the harmless ones put together and the real threats kept on their own to prevent plotting?

We cross to the other side of the floor and then climb another small stairwell that curls around itself onto the top floor. There is only one entrance on this floor, a large wooden double-door. The man standing outside unlocks it and lets us through into a room that I see immediately is the master bedroom, with a wall of glass through which there is a panoramic view of the entire valley, and even further - the city residence is visible from here, a doll's house from this distance, and at night they must be able to see it lit up on its hill above the city.

"Quite a view," says the Commander from an armchair against the wall. "Our President certainly liked to keep an eye on things. His things, mostly."

He stands and smiles languidly and wanders towards me with his hand outstretched. He is impeccably dressed, with a crisp line down the middle of each trouser leg and a collar as stiff and white as ice. I shake his hand because I have no option, and he grips my elbow while he shakes, an added intimacy. The guard opens a door behind us leading into the bathroom. One of these walls is also glass, revealing its own view of the valley, and the rest of the walls and the ceiling are covered with mirrors, even the floor, which gives the strange sensation of walking on water that has frozen over and could crack and give way at any step. The basin and toilet and bath do not obstruct the complete view of oneself in the mirrors as they are not built against the walls but in the centre of the room, a little pod of gleaming steel. They too reflect: I can see my body truncated in the surface of the bath. The Commander is amused by my unsteady walk across the mirrors and laughs with the guard as I pick my way towards the basin.

"We need a chair," I say quietly. "A high one, preferably."

The guard leaves and returns with the armchair the Commander had been sitting in. It is so low I will have to bend almost double to see what I am doing. I position it beside the basin, facing the solid wall of mirror. "Please..." I say to the Commander, and hold out my arm to the armchair like a

butler ushering in a guest. He smiles and sits and crosses his legs and shakes out his hair, watching himself in the mirror. The guard hovers at the door, a few steps away from me, his eyes trained on me. I lay out the necessary items from my bag along the edge of the bath, in the order I will use them, then with a graceful arc I throw the soft plastic sheet over his front and clip it at the back of his neck so that no part of his clothing is exposed.

“I will be shampooing?” I say tentatively to the Commander.

He nods assent. I never ask a man if he would like a head massage with his shampoo, I simply do it. If you ask they feel embarrassed for saying yes - a man is not meant to chase sensual pleasure of that sort, they like to think a haircut is a brisk, business-like transaction, something as necessary and as banal as flossing. I test the water with the inside of my wrist to make sure it won't burn him, roll a towel to place at the edge of the steel basin, and then gently rest the back of his neck on it, so that his head is lolling back slightly into the basin. I guide his head beneath the tap so that the water just catches his hairline and barely wets his skin. The hair strands darken and clot with the water; he will feel the slight weight of them pulling away from his head, uncreasing his forehead, and the warmth will spread like a tide across his skull to the back of his brain. I turn off the tap, leave his head in the basin, squeeze shampoo onto my palm and lather it. It will feel slightly cold against his warmed-up scalp, invigorating, and the hair will foam easily and become smooth against his skin.

I start with my fingertips at his hairline, working the gel into the roots along the edge of his forehead, and then just above his ears, his temples. Then I hold one hand against the top of his head and with the other in a soft fist I lather the underside of his skull, the lobe that protrudes just above the nape. I vary the pressure and motion and move slightly upwards over the lobe and to the flowering of the skull bone, where it makes its bulbous departure from the neck, and I stay here for a long time, rubbing with the flat of my palm against it, solid and circular, conjuring. He keeps his eyes closed, but I notice his breathing becomes more pronounced and the artery at his neck reveals itself like the path left by a tunnelling creature. I check the water again against my wrist, then let it run warmly down from his hairline, watching the soap lose its clutch on his hair and leave the strands glossy and viscous. I lift another towel and place it in the basin beneath his head, then lift the edges and rub against his scalp quickly and with pressure, and tie it at his hairline so that he has a turban knotted at his forehead.

“You can lift your head now,” I say very quietly. He obeys.

The cutting itself is over in a few minutes, my scissors and hands flitting like butterflies about his hair, gently guiding his head in the direction I need it with two fingers on opposite sides of his jaw. The bits of wet hair drop heavily to his shoulders or slide down onto the sheet pooled about him on the armchair. He keeps his eyes closed, perhaps worried about the scissors so quick and close about his pupils. I unclasp the sheet and throw it off him before he has opened them. He jumps slightly with the surprise, then looks down at his clothes for stray hairs. There are none, I have made sure of that. For a moment he looks sheepish, embarrassed to have felt such pleasure at the hands of another man, wondering if the guard noticed. They all look like that at the end. The trick is simply to ignore them at this point, motion with your head to the assistant at the till, remind them it is a cash transaction, no more, no less, and with relief they remember and sternly but quickly pay their bill and leave without a backward glance at you.

University of Cape Town

PART II

University of Cape Town

1 His barber's brother's fiancée

We are installed in the city residence and already the guilt is crouching at the back of my mind. What struck me while I was carrying my suitcase up the staircase is that after the shock of a forced changing of the guard, the follow-up processes are in themselves rather insignificant. Human beings dispose of each other, set themselves up in the place of the deposed, and then go about their daily tasks: shave at his basin, shit in his toilet, examine yourself in his mirror, pack your old socks in his underwear drawer. That in turn made me think about contamination, and if a bad person leaves behind bad things in his space, excretes badness like foul air, can you catch it like a cold? I watched my husband sitting on the edge of the bathtub, waiting for the bath to fill, and then watched him submerge his body in it, and I thought of the President lying in that bathtub and his pores touching the same marble. When he climbed into bed next to me, his skin still warm and fragrant from the bathwater, I didn't want him to touch me.

He wanted to carry me across the threshold of the President's bedroom in his arms when we arrived, but I told him it was a sick joke and started packing my clothes into the cavernous wardrobes. The President and his wife had separate bedrooms, which came as a surprise because she seems like a rancid woman who would put up with anything. We decided that we should move into his bedroom because it has a better view out over the city from the balcony - you can see as far as the sea and the stunted palms dotting the concrete parking lots. The heat is oppressive, as it always is in the city at this time of year. You forget the heat when you're up in the mountains the way you forget what pain feels like as soon as it's over: memory sieves out pain, dulls it with accumulated time; an essential trick to make us do it all over again. As we wound our way down from the summer residence, I could see the pollution bowling in the city, a hot soup of toxins. My ears popped, taking me by surprise - I didn't realise how high up we'd been. It felt like a descent into hell, but I couldn't tell my husband that. He was excited, this was what he'd been waiting for: reclaiming space, in the name of freedom. The city had been secured with very little violence and we'd been told that the people simply wanted to get on with their lives.

I can't sleep. He has lost himself in his dreams, and mumbles each time he turns over. I walk out to the balcony, twisting my hair up into a loose bun. The heat is still rising invisibly from the city,

from the sidewalks and the tops of buildings and swimming pools, making the lights flicker more violently. The Residence is perched at the top of the highest ground in the city, lording it over the rest of the district. The guards, from habit I suppose, have closed off all the roads around it for the night, forcing late-night commuters to give it a wide berth. The district is quiet, relieved that the sun has abandoned its siege. There are signs of struggle - the blackened lobby of a hotel, sandbags layered where glass once was, a stairway that leads to nothing, roads with pieces of concrete levered from them by explosions, looking like hunks of black ice floating in a frozen river in late winter - but mostly the city hums on oblivious to the changes. I can't decide if that is right or wrong, but I'm disappointed regardless. I had imagined we would be welcomed like homecoming heroes, fêted and applauded, have roses flung at our vehicle. But still nobody will believe what the President did, and if they do, the rumours fly that we will do no better.

I miss the barber; I took for granted the pleasure that came from knowing that we were under the same roof, hearing the same night sounds, feeling the same cool wind from the valley. He's no longer at the summer residence - of the three men in his room, only the portraitist has remained there, and that was by choice, because he was told his wife wouldn't be released yet. I imagine the barber has either tried to make for our home village on the coast, or he is still on his way to the city - without the benefit of a motorcade it will take him much longer than it did me. My husband will employ him when he gets here; he said the trial haircut he gave him was magical, which struck me as a strange word to use. And of course he insisted that the chef come with us - he trusts him completely - and already he has the kitchens in working order again. He doesn't serve us personally anymore, or at least he didn't last night at dinner. I even miss feeling *his* gaze - reverential, appreciative - on me between courses. It amused my husband, this chef's infatuation with me, and made me feel desired, desirable. He often looked at my arm, trying to catch a glimpse of the scars on the inside of it, the ones he touched over the steaming pot and feels in some way that he owns. I am not proud of them, I would not go so far as to casually roll my arm over while he is presenting the dessert and let him see them. They are not a badge of honour or a tool of titillation. The barber is the only one who knows what to do with them: show neither pity nor horror, let them neither increase nor deflect desire, but simply acknowledge their presence. I had to guide him the first time, but he is a fast learner.

My husband changed his mind quite suddenly about some of the prisoners. The ones he feels have in some way proven their usefulness he has released, while others who are more closely implicated have remained in the summer residence. He likes having them there, the way a cat likes having a lizard to play with, with no intention of killing it, but perhaps severing its tail, safe in the knowledge that it can grow another. The photographs have been distributed throughout the city, blown up into macabre billboard posters, a decision I didn't agree with. My husband says that now nobody has an excuse not to know.

I can smell the sea-salt on the wind. The promenade is usually wet with waves at high tide, the miles of concrete failing at their task to keep out the sea. The sea air is laced with something else too, a sweet smokiness that reminds me of the rubbish tips back home which festered daily in the sun, and bred over-sized wild flowers that opened in the evenings, lacing the stink with their fragrance. It was a playground to me, each discarded object a wealth of future possibilities. After my parents died and I lived alone in the cottage, I decorated it entirely with things I'd found at the tips and restored to a state of usefulness and beauty. I sanded down wood, defogged glass, turned a stack of old iron wheels into a table, painted crates for chairs, used a car door as a desk. There were other people at the tips, usually making fires and digging around for food, which made it less desolate, but there was always an imminent danger that threw into relief my pleasure at getting home safely with my hoard. It was a solitary activity. My fiancé at the time - the barber's brother - wanted to come with me; he said there were gangs at the tips who preyed on solitary females, but I refused. It was a necessary danger, vital to me: I couldn't believe the joy that came from salvaging discarded things and making them my own.

Once I found an old wooden wardrobe lying on its side, ankle-deep in rubbish. I managed to get it upright and forced open the door. Inside was a thick grey coat, ideal for winter. I took it home and let it soak in soap in the bath for a few hours. When I began to scrub the coat by hand, I could feel that something had been sewn into the silk lining, that something was wadded in there and rustling. I lifted the coat out of the water, unpicked the lining and gingerly peeled it back. Inside I found damp banknotes - hundreds of them - and a document from an even older regime, something that looked like an identity card for a police force. The name on the document was illegible; it had bled from the bathwater. I lived off the banknotes for a year after that - like a queen, in fact, allowing myself all

kinds of extravagant foods and luxury goods imported from overseas. I didn't tell anybody about it, not even my fiancé. He would have told me to save the money, or to find the owner of the coat and somehow return it. I had to hide all evidence of my affluence (rare cheeses, good wine, aged meat) before he arrived for our pre-lunchtime trysts. He came straight from the boat, reeking of fish, scrubbed his hands at the sink with scented soap, and then we slept together as quickly as we could before he had to return home to his mother and younger brother for lunch. Only once he spotted an empty wine bottle outside my back door and looked suspiciously at the silver-inscribed label like it was a mortal enemy. All those secret, stolen pleasures - the tips, the treasure hoarding, the illicit sex. No wonder I'm still at it. Oh woman, have you no shame? The city lights blur despite my refusal to cry, to let remorse get the better of me. I turn back into the darkened bedroom and crawl between the sheets, inching closer to my husband, nesting against his warm body.

University of Cape Town

2 His chef's daughter

She hasn't shifted her position for four hours. I keep note of these things because I have to. I've been sitting in the low armchair, reading, and she's been sitting in the hard-backed chair she likes, with her hands in her lap, looking at the clock on the wall. I think she likes the symmetry of it. If I look at her for too long my face starts to burn, the heat the harbinger of such sadness that I have no choice but to ignore it. Watching a parent like this, watching her stare at a wall for four hours, forget she has a daughter, lose all interest in my life, is not something I would wish even on my father. I don't know how to deal with this excess of emotion so I shelve it. It will come out later, when I drink myself to the point of being vulnerable.

It has been a month now since the coup. I was with my lover when it happened, lying drowsily next to him, grateful for his presence as I slipped out of sleep. We heard distant, constant gunshots and then people streaming out of the building into the street. He got up and pulled aside the curtain and said they were all gazing up at the Presidential Residence, chatting as if it were a street picnic. It was festive, come to think of it - I lay in the bed feeling excited, as if it were a snow day and I didn't have to go to classes, or if the electricity grid had crashed for the whole city and nobody could go to work. I like those kinds of mini-catastrophes that let me off the hook for a few hours or days, that let me guiltlessly shirk routine. I didn't worry about my father's safety, even though I knew he was in the Residence kitchens. I'm still not worried, even though we haven't heard from him since then. He'll do whatever it takes to survive.

Unfortunately people always say I look like him. When I was a little girl, and too young to know any better, I took it as a compliment, but later on I noticed how people looked embarrassed after they'd said it, when they realised I might be offended. I've spent far too much time in front of mirrors, wishing parts of myself away - I remember mirrors I've used in my life the way other people remember men they've slept with, that's how intimate I've been with them. I can recall precisely which ones distorted the size of my nose, which ones showed skin blemishes during the day with the sunlight streaming into my room but not at night by lamplight, which ones made my legs look longer, which ones unfailingly depressed me, which ones gave me hope. So many half-truths. If I could somehow get a composite image of all these reflections, maybe I would know the whole truth about

my own face and body. The mirror in my mother's en-suite bathroom is of the depressing variety, by day or by night, no matter which angle. I even tried standing on the edge of the bathtub to get a different view of my legs in the reflection, but the verdict was no better than when I balanced on the toilet seat. Ironic, considering this is meant to be a place where you go to feel better about yourself, or, in her case, to remember who you are and why you went crazy. When she takes a look at herself in that mirror she probably won't want to remember. But she's older and must have negotiated a truce with her body long ago, laid down the hatchet, raised the white flag, whatever she had to do to achieve an uneasy peace. I look forward to that time in my life, when I can blame the stretchmarks on a baby and not on my own inconsistencies. Although I do remember asking my mother once how old she expected her face to look every time she glanced at the mirror, and she said eighteen. I asked a lot of people the question after that, and they all said eighteen. My mother said she sometimes got a shock if she went to the bathroom in the middle of the night and caught a glimpse of her face. She said it was like finding an intruder in your house. She stopped turning on the bathroom light and that's when she had her bad fall. Split her head open. That's unrelated to the madness, which was the result of a different kind of splitting. A marriage falling apart, to be precise.

After my initial excitement about the coup, I realised I had to come here to her, to protect her if there was any trouble. My lover and I dressed quickly and I packed a bag of clothes and some tins of food, and he walked me to the home through the crowded streets. Word had spread fast. One of the bars was handing out free beer and shots with a hastily-sprayed, multi-coloured sign hung over the entrance: "Brace yourself for the revolution!" The owner of a cake shop had set up a trestle table in the street and was handing out cream pies for people to throw at an effigy of the President. Things got stranger and more serious in the days that followed. My lover fled the city - he said he had no choice. I moved into my mother's room permanently. I still feel that I can't leave her in the home alone with things so uncertain. I prefer to call this place a home. It makes it sound as if she's simply been put in an old-age home before her time and not in an institution. It's not really an institution, just a care facility, an expensive one, but there's no denying the fact that she's mad. Yesterday I occupied myself for over an hour thinking of all the different ways you can say that she is crazy. Off her cracker. In the loony bin. Lost the plot. Lost her marbles. Loopy. Gone bananas. Lost her mind. Bonkers. Stark,

raving mad. I guess that means it must have happened to a lot of people. My father paid the bill, blood money, with his fat salary from the President. The management hasn't received any payments for their guests this month, with all the changes, so we're okay for now, but I hope he starts paying up again soon otherwise they're going to kick her out.

I went out this morning to get milk and teabags. People were grouping around posters that had been glued to walls like theatre bills. The posters are horrific - they look like they are blown-up photographs of mangled people. The new government has already begun its propaganda push, it seems. I didn't hang around or try to edge my way to the front of the crowd. There is a delicate line between knowing too little (ignorance) and knowing too much (perversity). People were panting in the little group, whether from horror or excitement I couldn't tell. My father probably knew it was going on, he was close enough to the President in a non-political capacity that the President liked to confide in him the way one confides in one's plants while watering them on a sunny balcony. He's not the grovelling type though, my father - that's why men in power like him - they recognise themselves in him, utterly committed to one man alone: himself.

I spent time at the President's summer residence years ago, when my father was still obliged to cook for him on holiday. It is perched above the vineyards in the valley, a child's dream with its courtyards and passages and sculpture garden. My mother and I were terrified to meet him, utterly intimidated. The first day he and his wife invited my father and mother to lunch with them. It seemed like a generous gesture, but my mother suspected it was designed to boost the President's wife's ego more than her own. She said to me, "She is going to rub my face in my inferiority the way you rub a puppy's nose in its own shit." She didn't want to get dressed for the lunch because she didn't know what she was going to say. I sat with her in her bedroom, like two naughty children, and she locked the door so my father couldn't come in and drag her out. As soon as he had abandoned her she began to feel guilty and she put on the red dress she knew he liked and painted her lips and ventured out to the dining room. I heard the murmuring and scraping of cutlery on crockery stop in its tracks for a few seconds, presumably when she appeared at the doorway, and then continue as before, at a slightly higher volume because of the effort of pretending nothing had happened.

My mother and I would go for long walks down the winding road to the valley base, and walk between the vineyard tresses. I tasted wine for the first time there, at one of the wine farms. It was almost as momentous an occasion as my first kiss. I remember thinking after my first mini-cup of wine, "I am no longer a child, I am a woman." My stomach burned and my head grew hot with the burden of that knowledge. My mother laughed at me all the way home because I had the hiccups.

My father never let me sit in the kitchen to observe him while he was working. I spied on him several times, to try to understand what kind of magic he was doing in there with all those strange utensils and live creatures, but he always caught me and I would get a hiding and run to my mother who would look at my father like he was a monster, and that would make my attempt worthwhile. The President and his wife were hopeless with me. I was a precocious little child, already full of big ideas and deep thoughts, but they would converse with me as if I were an imbecile. Once I bumped into the President in the sculpture garden. He had been watching me, silently, and I had been immersed in pretending the sculptures were alive and backed into him and screamed when he moved, thinking one of the statues had come to life. He looked at me strangely, bent down to my eye level, and said with a pause between each word, "Do...you...like...ice...cream?" I ran away, more because I was offended by his question than from fear. His wife insisted on giving me a hug each time she saw me, and she would press me into her bosom and leave make-up on my clothes. When I grew older, I regaled the other children in my class with these stories of my intimacy with the President, and they gazed at me impressed. It created a definite aura - something so effective it was almost visible, like a halo - and I milked it for all it was worth. It was the most effective weapon in my arsenal in the war with other girls to attract boys.

I'm skirting the issue, but there were other children there too. The President's kids, two of them, a girl who was years younger than me and a boy who was years older. Five years older. Come to think of it, the best evidence anybody could present of the President's capacity for cruelty is his son, who must have learned it from someone.

My mother stirs, finally, and asks me for some water, very politely, like I'm a stranger. It's time for me to start drinking too.

3 His portraitist's wife

I can't deny I'm a magpie. I've always loved shiny things - even when I was little my mother said I used to pick up anything in the street that gleamed and she would have to wrench my hand open to throw it away. I could spot a dropped coin from metres away. My favourite was the glimmering grains in the pavement concrete. I don't know what they were, bits of glass that got mixed in with the concrete perhaps. At night the streetlights would make them dance as I walked and to my mother's horror I would squat on the pavement and scratch at them, believing I could take them home. My grandmother had a wooden box full of jewelled buttons that I would spend hours polishing with a handkerchief and laying out in long, magical rows. So it was only natural that I moved on to bigger, better shiny things as I got older...real jewels and rare metals, namely, and crystal too. All my lovers knew they had to keep the magpie in me satisfied. And then I met my husband, realised he would be the perfect way to reject my mother, and renounced publicly all things glittering. But my father secretly kept me well-stocked with my heart's desires, and I still maintain it was worth it for the look on my mother's face when she first met my husband at one of his exhibitions. The masterpiece was the shattered fragments of a raw egg that he had dropped from the tenth floor of a building onto the pavement below. My family was his only audience.

I don't think about him much, even though I know he's under the same roof. He made a fool of himself last week, calling down to me while I was exercising in the sculpture garden. He wants me to share this baby with him; ever since I fell pregnant he has been niggling away at me to include him. It is none of his business, that's how I feel. He had all kinds of tricks to try to feel a part of it: stocking the fridge with champagne, buying lemons, making hundreds of useless sketches to present me with when I've popped it out. After I told him I was pregnant, he observed me even more closely than before. I'd grown used to his constant scrutiny - not critical, but worshipping: smelling clothes I'd left behind on chairs, getting a jolt to his heart if he recognised my silhouette in the car in front of him, gazing at me from the bed with love in his eyes even when I was taking a shit with the door open. But he really turned it up a notch after the baby was announced and it threw me. I would turn around in the bath to find him staring at me silently, or wake in the middle of the night to see him watching my belly rise and fall in the dark. Before the baby, early in our marriage, I felt it was the kind of attention I

deserved, that he was the only man who grasped my true worth, and I thrived under his gaze. I would even let him draw me naked. But there was something infantile about his obsession that made it quickly become tiresome.

There is a calm that comes from thinking only about oneself; I would venture so far as to say it is the only true freedom. I discovered that early on, encouraged by my mother's good example. Self-devotion - and by that I mean devotion to oneself - takes time to perfect, like all skills worth developing, and requires extreme discipline. I am grateful for the time I invested in the process now - in this situation it stands me in very good stead. I am not in the least bit concerned about my father or mother and their fate after the coup. They're either lying murdered in their country house or they've flown their private jet out of the country and resettled in one of their meticulously-decorated overseas houses. My mother was the type to fill a house with invaluable artworks and priceless furniture even when she had a small child (me) and then to lock me in my room as punishment if I destroyed anything accidentally during a slumber party. She never cooked a single meal. We had cooks, but she hardly used them - we would meet at a restaurant for most meals. She has an unfortunate stutter - it's rumoured as a result of a childhood trauma, but she's never told me about it - so despite her excellent breeding the only man who would marry her was my father, who was compensating for his disfigured face (an accident with hot oil when he was a child) by pursuing power as if it promised him deliverance. Perhaps it has, if they've murdered him.

The President's wife is in a room down the corridor. She is allowed to visit me every few days and bores me witless. It is unfortunate that we share the same name because she thinks it gives her the right to expect intimacy with me. She's always trying to tell me secrets, whispering them conspiratorially even though nobody is listening, and then looking at me greedily when she's done, expecting me to tell her mine. She dissolves into tears every time she mentions her husband, frets about her children even though they are safely ensconced overseas, asks me repeatedly if I think she's looking old and then disappears into my bathroom to look at herself in the mirror. She pulls at various lobes and rolls and dangling bits so that her face smoothes out and then when she lets go her skin creases like a discarded glove. I asked if she'd been allowed to see her husband and she said that she had, and then pulled her face into its coarse, secretive look and asked if I'd been allowed to see mine.

"I chose not to," I said, just to shock her, and it worked, she was shocked.

She put her hand to her breast and said, "Has something happened?" and then stared pointedly at my stomach.

I didn't expect to feel this way about the child. I hated how pregnant women at garden parties would bond over the minutiae of their body functions as if they were a different species from the rest of us. I imagined it would make me feel invaded, the baby like a tapeworm curled in my stomach, feeding off me. Instead, it felt like I was feeding off of it, that it was my own private regenerator: my hair thickened, my skin glowed, even my fingernails grew more robust. It changed the way I slept so that my dreams were full of beautiful, restless detail. As soon as my stomach showed women looked at me with wonder and men couldn't take their eyes off me. It is a strange, public trial, being heavily pregnant, being forced to walk around with proof of your sex act before you, visible to the world. Most of the time you can only guess what - if anything - other people are getting up to, but in those few months of exposure you know everybody knows what you did. For a different kind of woman, not used to that kind of scrutiny, it must be excruciating. I suppose your skin betrays you too, in the end - it gives you away, despite your best efforts - but it discloses the dirty truth of what is about to happen to you (death) whereas pregnancy tells the seamy truth of what you did a few months before.

I think the problem will come when it is old enough to speak. My mother believed I was born evil and had to be made good through severe discipline and by not paying me any attention so that I wouldn't think I was entitled to anything, not even her love. She would drag me along with her to tea parties or committee meetings and leave me outside to play on my own in the garden, like a domesticated animal. I would scratch around to find wild fennel, which I'd suck on like a sweet, or I would dig up bulbs and try to eat them like apples. My father says she was wonderful with me when I was a newborn - she loved that stage and craved it afterwards, but he refused to have another. She loved my wordless snuffling and simple needs, but it scared her when I grew old enough to talk, not because I could talk back, but because I might decide independently that I didn't like her. So she acted first and decided she wouldn't like me and saved herself a lot of hurt. My father marvelled at me, and still does, but not at the kind of person I am or at the things I've done, but at my intact, unmarked face. I think he didn't fully believe that his deformity could never be passed down to me, and he would

often call me over to his side when I was small, hold my face up to the light and turn it from side to side.

He gave me an early appreciation for aesthetics. My work later on, as a food beautician, was more about appearances, which is a perversion of aesthetics: making something seem what it is not. I fell into it at first - nobody decides to be a food beautician - but immediately liked the duplicity that is its basis. Soap foam had to be scooped on top of beer, vegetables had to be lacquered, raw meat had to be sprayed brown (when cooked, it looks too dry and shrivelled for a close-up), plastic had to be melted to form cheese strands with just the right consistency. It was a small world I could control and manipulate that required meticulous attention to detail and an eye for deception. My husband took it far too seriously, told me that I was an artist like him, that the only difference between us was that the President wanted the truth and my boss wanted anything but. I didn't need to work - despite the fallout over my marriage even my mother wouldn't have dared to question this right - but it amused me, got me out of the apartment and let me spend time on trivial details that comforted me with their smallness.

I think I did once love my husband, right at the beginning. I say this as if I'm an old woman looking back on the vastness of my married life, but I feel that old sometimes, and I know what it's going to be like before it even hits me. It might just be the lumpiness of pregnancy, the dragging, the slowing down, or the fact that you age twice as quickly once you're married. After the initial bloom of it, the thrill of using those new words, "my husband," it began to feel like I had hit a dead-end, ploughed straight into a solid wall, a dread sense of the complete shutting down of all possibility. From the earliest years of girlhood, it had been the dominant mystery in my life - whom would I marry? And when? - and suddenly it was solved, overnight, and the unseen magic force that had propelled me onwards all those years wilted. I think that's why people stop caring when they get old: there are no more mysteries to solve. You know what job you've chosen, whether you've had children, how many, girls or boys, what their names are, what childbirth felt like, where you're living, how much money you earn, who your husband is, what he does, how often he makes love to you, whether your face wrinkled at the eyes or the mouth first. And then you get old enough to start putting pressure

on younger people to solve their mysteries, because deep down you want them to suffer the same slow onslaught of boredom that you did.

University of Cape Town

4 His barber's brother's fiancée

This morning my husband had already left the Residence by the time I woke up. Sleep lay heavily on me, an almost physical force pinning me to the bed, and I had to throw it off like an attacker and drag myself to the bathroom, feeling wounded. I'm always grateful that my husband never leaves the toilet seat up, especially in a sleep-drugged state, when I'm entirely capable of sitting down without looking and feeling the hard, cold porcelain bowl hit against my bones instead of the flat safety of the lid. The day's beauty revealed itself through the bathroom windows, an oppressive beauty, demanding some kind of worship of me, and left me feeling vaguely guilty. I dressed and went down to breakfast. The Residence was bustling with servants and party officials, all of whom greeted me ceremoniously. I know it will be all too easy to become soft here, to start to expect things. In the dining room, breakfast was laid out for me, a myriad of choices. As I ate, the swinging doors into the kitchens opened to reveal the chef. I was glad to see him and invited him to sit with me. He told me the kitchens were almost destroyed from looting, but slowly he was piecing things together again. He was perky and solid; the move to the city had blown new air into him like a blow-up toy. He stole a glance at my arm as I ate grapefruit.

I've been walking through the Presidential district, watching people, seeing how shop owners have improvised with broken windows or missing doors so that they can keep trading despite the wreckage. The mood is upbeat; groups have gathered under the intact trees to share stories and borrow tools. I look at my reflection in a large, unbroken shop window, pretending to look at the wares behind it. My slimness always takes me by surprise - I suppose because of my height I don't think of myself as small, but it is pleasing to see my narrowness. My body promises ascetic pleasure, not full-bodied. Somebody from within the shop stirs, thinking I'm interested in buying, and I change my focus and look beyond my reflection and into the shop.

A young man, a boy, really, emerges at the door to my left and says, "I've never cut a woman before...but I'd be happy to try."

I look at the storefront: BARBER it says, in thick gold letters. I look at the boy again, and he looks back at me open-faced - I don't think he meant to offend me. I know this must be the barber's shop, my barber's shop. He said it was close to the Residence and that his assistant would probably

still be hanging around it, unsure what else to do. I lift my hand, release my hair from its clasp, and follow him into the shop.

It is dark inside, and one can observe passersby unnoticed. He must have seen me looking at myself. There are no wares in the windows other than a few sideways-sprouting potted plants. The shop is tidy but bare. I can see that things have been pulled off the walls and not yet replaced. Many of the bulbs embedded around the mirrors have burst their filaments or been smashed; others flicker in and out of consciousness. My reflection jumps out then recedes. The assistant wheels a high red chair to me and motions for me to sit down. He has a spray bottle filled with liquid and from a jar of milky water he lifts a pair of scissors with long blades and a thin-toothed comb.

“I would wash your hair first normally,” he says, nervously screwing the spray tip back onto the base, “but the basin’s cracked.”

I look over my shoulder at it and see that the crack has branched out like a lightning rod, splitting the basin into small shards that are still clinging to each other. He whips a plastic sheet over my front and ties it too tightly at my neck. The first squirt misfires and he hits me in the eye with the spray and then agitatedly wipes around my eye with a small towel, as if he’s hoping I won’t notice. A fine mist forms around my head as he works, and I feel my hair pull gently on my scalp with the added weight of moisture. Each time the fickle light bulbs illuminate, the mist becomes gold. He begins to pull at the strands with the comb, but my hair knots around it and he curses under his breath.

“I’m not used to this long hair,” he says, embarrassed. “Men’s hair never knots.”

I smile at him in the mirror, then wince as he pulls at the comb. “Is this your salon?” I ask, between tugs.

His eyes flicker at my reflection, as if he’s trying to see if he can trust me. “No,” he says eventually. “The owner went missing during the...um...” He trails off, unsure what to call it.

“The coup?” I offer.

He nods silently, frowning with concentration.

“What’s he like, the owner?” I ask as he attacks another knot.

“He always treated me well,” he responds. “I started off just sweeping and cleaning, ordering stock, that kind of thing, but then he taught me some things and let me work with customers when he wasn’t here, when he was up at the Res...”

He stops abruptly, catching himself, and glances at my reflection again, to see if I’m listening.

“Was he good at what he did?” I ask, ignoring his slip-up.

He has managed to get my wet hair into long, separate, knot-free strands and is now brandishing the scissors. His face lights up.

“Men came from all over the city to him. He didn’t turn anybody away. Sometimes there would be a queue out onto the pavement.” He points to my hair. “How much?”

I shrug. “Just a trim. Straighten it out.”

He begins to snip, not in layers, but straight across the edge of my hair, using the comb occasionally to measure the next cut against the one he just made. I let him work in silence. In the mirror I see a man pause outside the shop, peer through the window and then rummage through his pockets. Not finding anything, he keeps walking.

It still makes me uncomfortable to have my hair cut by someone other than my mother. To have a stranger perform a task that is so intimate - cutting the very fibres that grow from your head - is somewhat vulgar to me, distasteful. I always wonder how people long ago could let their servants bathe them, scrub their backs and pour clean, hot water over their naked bodies to rinse afterwards. Once a hairdresser pointed out that I had a patch of dry scalp near my hairline, and I was so indignant that I never went back to her. She had broken the unspoken contract never to make a judgement of me when I was at my most vulnerable, letting a stranger look at my scalp. My mother’s haircuts were unpredictable (I never knew what my hair would look like afterwards), but they were safe because she wasn’t a stranger. After she died I tried to teach myself to cut my own hair but it made me too sad and I would end up staring at myself in the mirror and crying. Not for long, because crying is not designed for doing alone, and my tears soon dry up unless there is a witness to them.

They were simple people. My father was a fisherman like all the men in the village and my mother was a fisherwoman, unlike all the women in the village. It wasn’t thanks to my father because she’d been doing it for years before they got married, but she wasn’t militant about it; she didn’t

demand to be allowed to fish, she was simply too good at it for them to refuse her, and meek enough that they couldn't feel threatened. She and my father always worked on separate crews after I was born, just in case, but that one day his crew was desperate for another member and she took a chance and went out with them. They drowned together; the survivors said that they were last seen clinging to each other in the water. It probably made them sink faster, the double weight. I expected that losing them would make me stronger, that I would grow hard and self-dependable with time, the way wood eventually becomes stone-like with age. Instead, it created a need in me for a man, just one, not men, who would make me his first priority. Friends weren't good enough - they had obligations to many people. A lover alone could ward off the loneliness enough to let me function, to venture out into the world.

My fiancé, the barber's brother, was my first lover. The most difficult time of the day for me after my parents drowned was the early afternoon, those no-man's-land hours after lunch, when the light was too stark for shadows and drowsiness made me desperate. I worked from home then, making baskets and decorated bags for the market, and he would come back to my flat after he'd eaten at home, telling his mother he had to return to the docks. I depended on him coming; it was always such relief when I heard him let himself in at the door and come straight to me as I lay on the bed. We wouldn't undress, it was not the time for it and we'd already let desire run its course during his morning visit. We simply lay there and I would beg him not to let me fall asleep because my grief fed off afternoon sleep and I would wake up disoriented and listless. He was a bulwark against my sadness. Later on, at dusk, when he had gone, I would see the indent his head had left on the pillow next to me, or perhaps a stray hair on the linen. Small reminders of his presence, that he had been there, that somebody in the world knew about me and my life and its detail. As I've grown older the time of day that I find most depressing has changed. Now it is the mornings, but I suppose that is not unusual - for most people waking up reminds them of things they'd rather forget.

"How do you like it?" asks the assistant, standing back from me to look at his handiwork.

He picks up a mirror and holds it behind me with a flourish, so I can see the back of my head in the wall-mirror. There's nothing much to see, other than my hair ends in a rigidly straight line and already starting to frizz slightly as they dry. Something else catches my eye in the mirror, a man whose

shape has become familiar, pausing outside the shop, looking at it critically, tracing a faint crack in the glass with his finger.

“Don’t you like it?” the assistant says, worried.

“No, it’s fine, of course I like it,” I say, trying to smile, stealing another look at the reflection of the man outside. The assistant follows my eyes and then turns to look at the man himself. He throws the scissors onto the counter and rushes outside, leaving me perched on the high chair, an island marooned in a shallow sea of my own hair cuttings. The assistant embraces the man fervently, throwing his arms around his neck and almost being lifted off the ground as a result. He really must have believed the barber was dead. The barber smiles down at him, listens patiently as words begin to pour out of the assistant’s mouth in relief. The assistant follows him into the shop, then remembers me and falls silent. In the time it takes the barber’s eyes to adjust to the darkness of the shop, I manage to untie the plastic sheet around my neck, pull it aside and step down from the high chair. My damp hair clings to the back of my shirt.

“Leave us, will you?” he says and for a horrible second I think he’s talking to me until the assistant slowly takes his wallet from the counter and lopes out of the room, stealing a backwards glance at us. The barber moves towards me, lifts me under my arms and places me back onto the high chair. He swivels the chair so that I’m looking at my reflection again in the mirror. A bulb fizzes, then blows. He stands behind me and looks for a long time at me, using the mirror as our medium, perhaps afraid of what will happen if we look directly at each other, using his reflection as a decoy so he can see if I’m going to shoot at it mistakenly or lay down my arms. There is an accusation in his eyes - one that has lingered since our first night together, that I cannot dispel no matter what I say to him. He scans my face for any sign that I am searching for someone else, perhaps blurring my eyes so that the shape of his jaw changes slightly, or that his hair curls a little less. He has shaved off his beard and he rubs the fresh stubble with his hand, as if inviting me to protest, to ask him to grow another, so that the resemblance to his brother is maintained. I notice a small mole above his lip and a faint scar at the base of his chin and will myself to remember them: they are his own private markings, they are what his body alone saw fit to do to his skin. I reach up my hand without turning to look at him, using the mirror to locate the scar, and trace it with my fingertip. I have passed his test: he swivels me around to

face him, kissing me as he lifts me from the chair. I curl my legs around his hips. He carries me to the door to the backroom, nudges it open with his shoulder, and closes it again with his foot. The darkness is complete.

Before I leave, he says he wants to show me something. He fumbles on the wall in the dark for the light switch. A bare florescent bulb dangles from the ceiling, starkly outlining rows and rows of shelves, extending from wall to wall like book stacks in a library. At first I don't see what's on them, absorbed in smoothing out my skirt to rid it of creases. I look up to see him holding out a small glass jar to me, filled with something fibrous and dark. I look around me at the shelves and see hundreds of glass jars, all containing different shades of the same matter.

"These are yours," he says. "I collected them from my brother's pillow the mornings after I knew you'd slept there."

The jar is full of hairs, thick ones that I recognise immediately. They are my own. I take down another jar from the shelf and find it is filled with stubble and short hair, probably a week's worth of clippings from the shop floor, swept up and bottled.

"Good thing nobody got in here," he says, surveying the shelves. "Can you imagine what it would look like if they had?"

5 His chef's daughter

My mother always spoke about making love in rapturous terms. She was first obliged to tell me what it was when I was five and went to find her when I heard the telephone ringing late at night. My father thought I was an intruder and jumped up naked from the couch in attack mode. My mother quickly put on her dressing-gown and herded me back into bed, promising they would explain everything in the morning and hoping I would forget all about it. At first light I arrived on their bed, woke them, and demanded an explanation. After they'd told me that they were "revealing their true love to each other" I cried bitterly, thinking that I wasn't good enough for them and they were betraying me to make another baby. My mother told me that for years afterwards she was worried I would be scarred for life by the experience of seeing my father jump up naked, ready to punch me.

But she never told me that sex can be for fun, or it can be for pleasure, or that it can be a tool of manipulation, or that it can be a way to mark important moments in your life that have nothing to do with the other person. I had to find that all out for myself. Who it was with the first time wasn't important - it was all about me. I cried afterwards and he thought that he'd hurt me, but they were proud, self-indulgent tears. My mother didn't know for years afterwards. By then her radar must already have started going haywire, because she certainly knew instinctively when I got in the car after my first kiss at a party, my cheeks burning. The boy and I planned our next kiss for weeks afterwards, in letters and messages through friends, but it never happened; we just skirted each other like tentative dogs.

I look across at my mother in her bed in the half-light from the streetlamp outside, her head lolling almost off the pillow, drooling slightly, the grooves around her mouth so deep they show even when she's sleeping. I brushed her hair for her before she went to sleep. She likes that - it calms her and she smiles at herself in the mirror and then closes her eyes. I have been sitting in the dark, drinking, not for the oblivion most people seek but because it's the only way I can be emotionally honest. It scares me that I feel so little sometimes, that in the face of sadness I can be so collected. The wine is a relief because it makes me feel human again, if to be human is to be sad.

I don't think my mother was just trying to make me do the right thing by insisting that sex is only about love. She genuinely believed it; she lived by it. It must have helped her understand my

father's infidelities - that was just sex, not love. He always came back to her after a few months. Until he left her for good, and she went crazy. It wasn't for another woman - that would have made it more bearable for her, to know that he was in love with someone else rather than simply not in love with her. There were other women, of course, but he didn't choose to live with any of them and they came and went like the ebb and flow of tides. That is what broke her: he chose nothing over her. I didn't pick up for a while just how broken she was, then I came home one day and found my boyfriend holding a pick-axe, looking sceptically at the wall partitioning the lounge from the kitchen and my mother standing behind him egging him on, saying the energy in the house was trapped and she had to release it. She made him destroy three walls in the house before my father intervened and checked her into the home. For the first week she didn't once stop crying; the staff here said she cried even in her sleep. Her face became so swollen it was unrecognizable to me. Now she is just very quiet - she hardly talks to me, and when she does it is to ask me to do something functional for her: pour a glass of water, brush her hair, put her to bed. She's calm around me and very rarely she takes my hand and strokes it as if she's trying to summon something from the past.

Her head falls suddenly clear of the pillow, onto the mattress, and she begins to snore in her effort to get more air. I walk to the bedside and gently lift her head with two hands. It surprises me by how light it is. Full of so many things, so precious, and yet so light. And none of the things she knows were passed onto me. How tiring that you have to start from scratch with each generation when it comes to knowledge, and then by the time you're old enough to want to ask your parents what they know, it's too late: they're either mad, estranged or dead. If I imagine having a child myself I feel exhausted at the thought of having to teach it everything I know but haven't even put to good use yet. All these years and years of input and things so painstakingly taught and I haven't done anything with it. I would resent its little gaping mind trying to soak up what I know, absorbing it from me against my will. Unless the point of it all is to pass it on, like a baton in a relay, without doing anything fancy with it while it's your turn to sprint. And when I think of what is in my father's head, what kind of carnal knowledge is lodged there, I understand that wiping clean the mind is necessary for survival, for purity of the species.

My mother wanted a child; she didn't feel like this about me. She loved teaching me things and seeing me grasp at bits of knowledge and fit them together. I was a strange little girl. I talked in tongues for the first four years of my life. My parents had someone come in to observe me and apparently he identified snippets of four different languages that I'd never been taught. I came up with strange theories and experimented with inventions. One theory I had was that fruitflies only bite an apple once, so I put a nail on the end of a plank and made a hole in ten apples, believing I could trick the fruitflies into thinking they had already been bitten. All the apples rotted. I wanted to be a magician for a while. I started at a school for gifted child magicians before the age of ten. My mother encouraged me, and even my father became interested, probably thinking I would boost his own ego by being a child prodigy. I lost interest after a few lessons, but my father forced me to keep going, saying one day I would regret giving up. Parents put strange pressures on their children. I remember reading in the newspaper about a little girl whose parents taught her to fly an aeroplane and at age seven she attempted to be the youngest person ever to fly solo across the country. She took off from the city in the middle of a storm and crashed the plane. In interviews afterwards her parents said that she died doing what she loved.

I find it difficult to reconcile tender stories that my mother has told me about my father during my early childhood with my own later memories of his many betrayals. It was a slow process of deflation, a long, tedious, dragged-out series of small disappointments in him that at this stage in my life add up to something substantial. She said the first time they decided to let me cry through the night without feeding me they locked themselves in their bedroom, put their pillows over their heads to dull the sound of me screaming, and both cried for hours, horrified at what they felt they had to do. I have a photograph of him, shirtless and barefoot in a pair of faded jeans, holding me as a tiny baby in the crook of one arm as he vacuums with the other hand. My mother said he would put his music on as loud as it would go and dance around the house with me as he cleaned. There's another photograph, of the three of us going for a hike and I'm packed into the top of his rucksack and he's looking up at me and laughing. Then there's the memory of being in hospital to have my appendix out, and waking after the operation, still groggy, to see the doctor leaning over me, scanning my face. She was wearing a thick gold necklace that lay flat against her skin and I remember looking at it admiringly, liking how it

didn't move even when she bent forward. She saw me looking at it and said, "Your father gave it to me," without spite, but without apology. When she stood up I saw that my mother was standing at the door to the room, watching us wearily.

Or the time he took me to the ballet, many years later, and then disappeared backstage to woo one of the dancers when it was over, telling me to wait for him in the foyer. The foyer was full of faded red velvet drapes and upholstery, an attempt at decadence that had failed - bits of it had rubbed right through on the couch, leaving it looking like a diseased dog's coat. As the foyer emptied, the smells of people out for the night (heady perfume, hairspray, soap, mints) faded, leaving behind the damp odour of cigarettes and wine. In boredom, I put my hand down the side of the couch, beneath the cushions, and found a piece of brittle chocolate, a silver coin minted ten years earlier, and an earring studded with stones that shone too brightly not to be fake.

Eventually there was nobody left but me on the couch and a man at the bar. He was bundled up in a coat and scarf so that his age wasn't apparent - men's faces always look older than their bodies because of cold winds and countless shaves and sports injuries and sunburn. He made eye contact with me and then joined me on the couch. He'd been to see the ballet on his own, he said, because he was in the city on business and leaving the next day. I was unused to male attention then, especially an older man's attention, and I liked how a vein on his temple throbbed when he laughed and how his eyes creased as he talked. I remember thinking that he would never know how wrinkled his face was because he wouldn't talk to himself in the mirror. I wondered what my face looked like while I was talking. The cleaners began to collect glasses from around us as we spoke. Somebody dropped one on the tiles around the bar and then noisily swept up the shards. A woman began to vacuum directly at our feet and he laughed and suggested we go somewhere more comfortable - to his hotel, just down the block. He didn't ask whom I was waiting for so I didn't tell him. He helped me with my coat and stood aside to let me walk out of the rotating door first. It was snowing outside, the kind of snow that's like flour, fine and dry, and he held my hand as we crossed the road.

At the hotel he poured me a drink while I went to the bathroom. I squatted above the seat - I can't bear sitting down on a foreign toilet seat - and accidentally got urine on one of my snow boots. I was so horrified at the idea of peeing on myself that I began to cry, silently, watching myself in the

mirror, seeing my face crumple and the colour of my irises intensify with tears. I wiped down my boot with damp toilet paper and rubbed soap on it to disguise the smell. When I re-emerged he was stretching in the small lounge area of the room. He'd taken off his coat and shoes and was bending over and touching his toes in short, rhythmic sets. I saw immediately that he was too skinny for me. Even my shoulders were wider than his. But it was too late at that stage. He stood up, smiling, red-faced from his stretches, and suggested that I take off my shoes and make myself comfortable. I gladly removed my snowboots and took deep sips of the wine he gave me. He looked down at my feet which were still prune-like from the boots and said, "I love that you paint your toe nails. That's so...feminine." They were hardly painted, the last coat I'd done was months before, and all that was left were some shiny, ragged streaks mid-way on the nails, showing where they'd grown out. Then he sat down on the bed next to me and began to feel my breasts. When he pushed me back and climbed on top of me he was so light I felt I could lift his whole body with one arm. It was like having a small child lie on me and writhe against my body. I let him do what he wanted to, feeling almost maternal, and when he was done I moved to the other twin bed and fell asleep. In the morning I walked home in the snow and arrived before my father did.

My father didn't hide the evidence of his conquests - in fact, he documented them in a photo album that was kept on a shelf in my parent's bedroom. I discovered it one day when I was too young to know what it was, and scribbled with a green crayon on the inside of the cover. I must have sensed somehow that it would be inappropriate to scribble on the photographs themselves. For a while I would bring it with me to bed, thinking it was a story book, and demand that my father tell me the stories before I went to sleep. Later on, when I began to grasp what it was, it fascinated me differently and I searched for more evidence of the secret lives my parents lived as people. In a box with my birth certificate and fading diplomas I found a stack of old love letters they'd written to each other. There was something about lying on the bed in the afternoon sunlight and marvelling at each other's bodies and references to what they'd done the night before. My mother walked into the bedroom while I was reading them and I went bright red and started to cry from the double embarrassment of having read these details and then being discovered doing it. She comforted me and I lied about my tears, saying I was crying because I didn't know if I would ever love anybody like that. She didn't pay the letters

much attention - she wasn't nostalgic or sentimental about them - she simply looked at them like long-buried artefacts that have become obsolete, much the same way that she looked at ancient coins in museum display cases.

She would drag me around to museums on school holidays to get new ideas for coin designs. She was head coin minter at the Central Reserve for her entire career. She decided on the new designs for the coins every five years, and manually changed the template each year to include the new date. It always sounded like a thankless job to me, but she found pleasure in small details. If you think about it, a brand-new coin with the new year's date is a symbol of a state's confidence and power. You hold it in your hand, so shiny it looks worthless, and you feel you're holding the evidence that the state is healthy, in order, legitimate. It pleased her to think that each new batch of coins would change hands millions of times, would fuel the economy, would drive human endeavour. She saw the coins as the catalyst of all activity in the country. She always wished she could track a coin to see how many times it was used and reused and for what purposes. Often she would examine coins from her purse as if she were hoping to recognise them. The dirtier they were, the better she felt she'd done her job.

I leave the armchair, put the empty wine bottles in the sink and slowly find my way to the bed next to my mother's in the dark. I lie on my side in the bed - I can't sleep on my back - with my right arm cupping my left breast. That's how he lies behind me, my lover, when he feels tender towards me, which is not often. I strain my ears to hear my mother's laboured breathing. The sadness overwhelms me again, and I think of lying in my bed as a small child, unable to sleep when my parents had dinner guests because I knew I couldn't call them if I had a nightmare. I could hear them laughing and talking and the music on in the background, and I would lie there rigidly, crying, feeling desperately lonely and helpless and distant from them, even though they were in the next room.

6 His portraitist's wife

The fool has chosen to stay here at the summer residence even though he's been released along with the others. He woke me from blissful sleep this morning, banging on the door, screaming my name. I thought he was being chased by a pack of wild animals. The guard let him in, and he rushed in on me, threw himself on the bed and said, "My darling, I'm free," and immediately started rubbing my belly as if I had a stomach ache. He said they'd given him permission to take me on an outing and he wanted to take me down to the cellars where we went for my birthday, years ago. He'd heard that the vineyard is abandoned now - the owner is too afraid to return - but apparently the stacks of wine bottles are still there and we can help ourselves.

"Not now, obviously," he said, gazing at my stomach, "but for later. When things are back to normal."

It comes as no surprise that I'm being kept on in captivity.

He is looking gaunt and scruffy, but I have to admit there was a thrill of pleasure feeling his body next to mine on the bed. Perhaps it's that I've been starved of physical contact from the outside - on the inside, of course, there is a constant bodily pressure from another being, but it is not enough. The President's wife often suggests we hug more, or give each other neck massages - "Touch," she says, "is healing" - but I refused, saying the baby has made my skin hypersensitive and how could I hug her with this belly in the way? She has tried over and over to tell me about her own births - two children, when she was already quite old - in disgusting detail: dilation and fluid and excretions and contractions that I want nothing to do with. Mothers should learn not to ruin it for other women, but she can't help herself, it's her way of possessing childbirth, of making sure I'm on the outside. She does this in other ways, too, usually around money and standing.

Sometimes she forgets who I am - that I'm not just the portraitist's wife - and starts pitying me my position. She doesn't know that it's an open secret in my family that the only reason the President married her was because she was wealthy enough not to embarrass him and ugly enough never to humiliate him with another man. My mother is the same age as she is - they were at school together, and their families used to holiday at the same coastal resort. She observed their courtship from close quarters. I think if my mother hadn't stuttered she would have had a chance with the President.

Stuttering is more shameful than ugliness in their circles, because there's nothing you can do about it. I've worked out that my mother was already pregnant when she married my father. She was always secretive about their wedding date (they've never celebrated anniversaries), but I've a way with secrets and I always end up cracking them open like nuts. No wonder they say the truth comes in kernels. She says I was a honeymoon baby. My father was probably just grateful that she had let him be intimate with her and I don't think he thought much of it.

I was ten when the President's son was born. I remember it vividly because at the resort that summer all the adults expected me to be excited to play with a baby. Instead I almost killed him. My mother walked in on me holding a large toy truck above his cot, ready to crush his skull. She was strangely sympathetic afterwards, and I recall thinking that I should try it again to elicit similar understanding from her. So I pushed his pram off the veranda, onto the sand below. This time the President saw me do it, and he, too, was tender with me and didn't tell anyone what I'd done and I wasn't scolded or banished to my room. The baby didn't cry for a week after that and I thought I had done them all a favour. My final experiment was to drop him on his head on the cool concrete floor of the beach cottage. I was holding him, cooing, and then threw him up in the air and pretended to try to catch him on his way down, but let him slip through my hands, slightly breaking his fall. I didn't try anything again after that. Even for me the sound of his soft skull hitting the concrete was sickening. He survived these trials, and I watched him closely as he got older, looking for evidence of my experiments. The only aberration seemed to be that he crawled sideways before he learnt to go forwards. He went on to become a cruelly handsome boy, capable of anything. The thought has occurred to me that the only thing I knocked out of him on the concrete was his moral compass. And that would have been as useful to him as his appendix, or the vestigial nipples on his chest.

The President only asked my father to go into politics when I got engaged to the portraitist. Perhaps he had been worried it would damage my chances of finding a spouse, or attract only the power-hungry like sharks who've smelt their next meal from far off. My father took to it like a fish to water, and transitioned seamlessly from making millions off animals (prawns, horses) to making millions off people (taxes, embezzlement). I had to travel in an armed motorcade to get to my wedding because there was a kidnapping threat at the time - the rebels, and God knows who else - had landed

on the unoriginal idea of taking rich kids hostage and demanding ransom. Sometimes I wonder if my mother would have paid it to get me back.

I was glad to see my husband at the altar, if only because compared to the faces of old boyfriends in the crowd his had not yet collapsed from years of living excessively. It seeps into you, excess, through the pores of your skin like sweat going the wrong way, until you're so bloated you're got only two choices: pop or float like that until you die. Most of us choose to float. One of them propositioned me in the coat room at the reception - his family also bred horses and he had turned out just like one: glossy, sleek-coated, arrogant. I reminded him of the time he pissed in my bed in his sleep, and the time he looked at the alarm clock while we were having sex. He left the reception with his horse-like wife soon afterwards. Another asked for a dance and I remembered feeling sick the first time I saw his feet - his toes curled like claws and were so uneven I wondered how he could walk. Sex with him was always prickly because he clipped his pubic hair with blunt scissors and it would leave me with a rash on my thighs. Out on the balcony trying to sober up, I bumped into one more, one of the beautiful ones who managed to disguise the bloating better than the rest. He was still single, looking, he said, "for perfection." He hadn't changed. I wasn't bitter after he broke up with me because I realised no woman would ever satisfy him: he was looking for himself. His quirk was sex in front of mirrors or any reflective surface he could find. Once he invited me to a hotel for the night because he'd discovered a room with a sliding door that reflected at the same time as letting him see beyond to the city lights. I usually saw nothing but my own feet.

My husband was refreshingly dirty after all these well-groomed men. He purposefully didn't brush his hair while he was at university, and for a while he refused to wear shoes, even in winter. He said he could grip the snow better with bare feet. He marvelled at my ability never to lose my balance on the iced-over roads and pavements, even in high heels. I told him I simply invented a new dance move every time I slipped. I was dancing seriously at the time, as supple as a snake, and my muscles righted themselves effortlessly if I made any sudden movement. He also marvelled at my freckled eyelids. He would make me close my eyes under a streetlight in the snow, and he would kiss my eyelids, warming the sockets with his breath.

I have tried stretching in the rose garden, but everything feels too tight, and even cross-legged I can barely push my knees to the ground. The President's wife asked me the other day in what position I wanted to give birth and I said on my hands and knees, like a dog, again just to shock her. She nodded wisely and said that's what she had chosen. So I'm determined now to do it on my back, in the position that started all this in the first place.

One of the benefits of age is that you learn to view your body as an asset instead of an enemy. I would be a better dancer now than I was when I was younger, baby aside. Back then I felt that my narrow shoulders and wide hips made me dance off-kilter, restricted me from true grace because the distribution of my flesh was wrong. I would bore my eyes into the other dancers who were spindly, the way dancers should be, long and narrow like pencils, trying to find a flaw in their movements. Now I would use my weighted centre to make myself dance like a spinning top. I would do all kinds of things the hip-less girls would envy. It would be for the other women, my performance, as most things in a woman's life are. I have never looked at men from my seat in the theatre, or through the car window, or in an elevator, or at a restaurant. I look at the women and they look at me and we rank ourselves constantly according to what we see. In fact, it's a wonder to me that men ever manage to get our attention when we're all so busy looking at each other. In a dancers' changing room you even give up disguising your glances or looks or stares and girls stand next to each other in the full-length mirror and systematically calculate which of them has the better body. The one who loses usually has a prettier face, but that is no consolation.

My husband is outside the door again, waiting for me. I have pulled on a dress and shaken out my hair and brushed my teeth. The guard unlocks the door and once again my husband rushes inside like a puppy and envelops me in an embrace made awkward by my stomach.

"How are we going to get there?" I ask him.

"Your guard will drive us."

"What is this, a holiday camp?"

He laughs. "The Commander probably thinks he made a mistake ever taking any prisoners. My theory is that they're keeping you on here for your own good, for our baby's good. We don't know if any of the hospitals are even up and running yet."

I have my own theories, but I don't share them with him. He takes my hand as we leave the room and strokes it as we walk behind the guard. The residence is strangely quiet. It seems that most of the party officials have returned to the city. Many of the doors to the rooms are open, and the linen has been stripped from the beds and lies in piles on the floor, waiting to be washed. The courtyard is empty.

The car is parked just inside the residence gates. The guard lets me sit in the front seat and my husband perches in the back, sitting forward on his seat so that our heads are almost in a line. I reach into my handbag and the guard watches me sideways and seems relieved when my hand emerges with my lipstick and compact mirror. Something flits across my husband's face - fear? guilt? - as I apply the lipstick. I can see him behind me in the compact. Then the familiar dotting look returns and he strokes my shoulder.

The valley spreads below us, revealing more of itself with each turn of the road. I can't see it from my room - my windows face the other way - so it comes as a surprise to remember it's here below the residence. My family was invited to stay here by the President many times, but my mother always preferred the coast so we never came.

"How are you, my love?" my husband asks, trying to catch my eye in the rearview mirror. "How is our baby?"

There is a pleading tone in his voice that betrays him. He still thinks I'm angry at him for putting me in this position. I will have to play along.

"How do you think I am?" I spit out. "I'm being held captive, for God's sake."

He runs his hands through his tangled hair and bites his lip. I look down at the valley again, at the rows and rows of useless vines, untended, unharvested. It will take them years to recover before they will yield fruit again. Vines don't forget abuse easily.

We pass an invisible altitude marker and the air around us thickens perceptibly with heat. The car seems to feel it and slows down, whining with the effort. The sweat arrives without warning, making my dress stick to my belly in patches and my thighs to the car seat. My husband sweats at his hairline and a dark spot begins to form at his chest. The guard rolls up his sleeves as he drives and I notice that he holds the steering wheel with two fingers instead of a whole hand. At the base of the

valley he speeds up and the vines fly by us in a green and grey blur. Heat waves have already begun to fuzz the outlines of things, and the farmhouse appears hazily ahead on the road. It is smaller than I remembered, but the last time we were here we were still in the selfish phase of being in love and anything that we did seemed grand and large and spectacular. We looked down on the people around us, pitying them their love-less existence, and my husband talked the owner into taking us down into the cellars which were not open to the public, and he agreed because he envied our love and wanted to be a part of it in any way he could (or so we liked to think).

There is no wind in the valley, so when I leave the car the sweat doesn't dry or cool me down, but makes me more clammy. My husband follows me, after a short, under-his-breath chat with the guard. He must have asked him to stay in the car because the guard sits back down, leaving the door open, lowers his seatback and stares out at the surrounding fields.

The farmhouse is deserted. Vandals have passed through and gutted it quite neatly, removing everything possible from the walls and floor so that the rooms have a pleasing, empty simplicity. My husband gets onto his hands and knees in the backroom, searching for the ridge in the floorboards that will betray the trapdoor's opening. It is well camouflaged, just like last time. The owner said if we could find the opening he would take us down to the cellars. I fell to my hands and knees to search that time too. My husband finds the ridge and pushes on it to release the catch. It works, and he looks up at me joyfully, then pulls open the trapdoor and drops down into the darkness of the cellar. After a few seconds a dim light appears beneath the floor - he has located the light switch. His head re-emerges in the hole.

"Don't be afraid," he says. "You'll make it - and I'll catch you if you fall."

I ease myself onto the edge of the hole and then jump forwards into it, but I misjudge the distance and end up knocking him over and landing on top of him, winding him with my stomach. He starts to laugh and wheeze, trying to get breath that his laughter immediately steals from him again. I can't help laughing too, even though my wrist is throbbing painfully. As he writhes and wheezes he keeps holding me on top of him with his arms firmly around my back. Eventually he catches his breath and gazes up at me. I can feel his blood pulsing at various points in his body: at his neck, in his stomach, in his hands. He is warm and soft and he will forgive me for anything. He kisses me, his lips

wet from laughing, and after so much time it is almost as exciting as kissing a stranger. I feel desire unfurl in me, starting at the base of my stomach, unobstructed by the baby, shooting around my body.

As I sit up to pull my dress over my head I notice a movement behind one of the barrels, a quick blur of colour that stands out from the pinkish wood. My first thought is cats - they're everywhere in the valley, stray ones, you never see stray dogs here - but then my heart quickens with anger as I realise it is a human being, hiding behind the barrel, a silent but willing witness. My husband is lying on the cool floor, motionless, smiling with his eyes shut, enjoying the feel of my legs around him. I grip his arm with an urgency that makes him open his eyes and nod with my head to where I can see a shoe sticking out from behind the barrel and motion to my husband to stay quiet. I lift myself off him and he springs upright, ready to defend me. He tiptoes to the barrel and then throws himself around it onto the intruder. They roll onto the floor, and he manages to pin the man beneath him with his legs, a perversion of the position we were in moments before. The man gives way easily and looks up at us with a familiar face. It's the President's son. The one I dropped on his head as a child.

"What are you doing?" says my husband, bewildered.

"I'm hiding," he says. "I've been down here since the coup. I thought nobody would find me here."

My husband releases him from his grip and leans against a stack of barrels.

"Are you looking for a place to hide?" the son asks scornfully.

"No," says my husband. The son looks at my face and then down at my belly. He licks his lips. He is holding something behind his back. He licks his lips again, staring at me.

"I know what you did," he spits at me. His tongue darts in and out of his wet lips.

"What I did, you mean," my husband says. "What I did."

The son lunges at me with a spoke, something he must have pulled from an abandoned bicycle wheel. I anticipate this and step behind a tower of barrels and push the topmost. The barrel is empty but heavy enough still to inflict pain when it hits him, crushing his foot. He slides to the ground and sits cross-legged cradling his leg, his pulpy flesh held together by the shoe.

My husband makes for the trapdoor opening. He pulls a stepladder from the shadows and places it beneath the door, then grabs my hand and tells me to climb. I manage to use my arms to pull myself onto the farmhouse floor. My husband follows, and lets the trapdoor slam shut. Muffled, I hear the son begin to laugh, slow and luxurious laughter, designed to ring in our ears. My husband crawls to where I'm lying on the floor, rolls me over so that our weight is directly above the trapdoor, fits his body into my back, lifts my dress and rubs my stomach in small circles with his free hand. He buries his nose in my nape, inhaling the smell of my scalp, of my faint sweat. He clings to me like a marsupial clutching its mother's fur, as if I were balancing on a tree branch high above the ground, being swayed by the wind, bearing his weight. How would you shake off the child on your back? Would it have dug its claws into your fur too firmly to fall? Would it pull you down with it in its terror?

University of Cape Town

7 His barber's brother's fiancée

My father's hair thinned early. One of my first memories is watching my mother massage olive oil into his scalp, believing - almost religiously, since she did it every evening - that it would slow the relentless retreat of his strands. It didn't, and by the time I was old enough to ride on his shoulders it made it difficult to get a grip on his smooth scalp, residually oily from years of massage. I don't think he complained, though - I would watch his face closely while my mother stood above him, thinking it was some kind of ritual that all parents had to perform. He would close his eyes while she kneaded his head, keeping her fingers in one place as she moved his loose skin against his skull. He particularly liked his hairline being rubbed - as it faded, she would move closer and closer up his skull, but at the beginning his hairline was just above his forehead and she had to stand in front of him to get traction. The reverse ritual was that my father shaved my mother's armpits for her. She said if she tried to do it herself she nicked the soft skin from not being able to see the blade. She would sit in the bath and he would crouch on the bathmat next to her, lather her armpit hollows and then hold each arm up in the air in turn as he slid the razor gently along her contours.

At breakfast today the chef was insistent that we discuss the menu for the weekend at length, in private. My husband smirked at me across the table - he likes to watch the chef desiring me, he says - then finished his eggs and strode out the dining room with that open-leg gait of his that is beginning to seem like a deliberate showcasing of his crotch, forcing people to acknowledge before anything else that he is a man, and a virile one at that. Last night I tried to delay getting into bed until he was asleep, but he was waiting for me like a crab in its lair, and dragged me into an embrace before I could stop him. It is terrifying that desire can rot into disgust, and so quickly too. It makes me deeply suspicious of my brain, that it could mislead me so willingly in the past, make me crave his hand pressing on my breast or probing my thighs. I wonder if all people consensually put themselves under a man or woman's spell, if the necessary precursor to desire is blocking out, suspending disbelief, overlooking the things about that person that - when the spell is broken - make you wonder how you ever desired them at all. The spell can be broken even after somebody has died. When my husband first touched me, only months after my fiancé - the barber's brother - had been buried, I was surprised he did not smell of fish. The spell was broken: I wondered how I had put up with fish-scales in my bed, on my

skin, the fish-oil scent of my pillows, the salt in his hair. I must remember this, that one day I will look back at the barber and wonder how I could ever have touched him.

The chef followed me onto the balcony, where strong wind in the night had pulled a small palm from its pot. I knelt to pick it up and scoop the soil from the tiles. He knelt beside me, too close to me. His eyes searched for my scars greedily. Then he took my arm and turned it to reveal the puckered circles, six of them. In the morning light the skin looked worse than usual, dark and purplish.

“I brought something for these,” he whispered. “It will help them heal.”

Without letting go of his grip, he used his other hand to dip into his apron, removing a small glass bottle filled with oil. I tried to pull away, but he gripped more tightly.

“It will make them feel better,” he whispered.

I began to get to my feet, desperate to wrench my arm free, and then his voice changed its tenor; it was no longer beseeching.

“I know what you did,” he whispered, slightly out of breath from the effort of holding me. “What you’re doing.”

I stopped struggling. He tentatively let go of my arm. I did not move it, it lay leaden on his lap, the scars on the inside of my forearm exposing themselves to him. He rubbed oil slowly onto them, anointing me. Then he let me go. I did not know where else to go but to him, to the barber.

This time I ignore my own reflection in his shop window. Glued to the outside of the cracked glass is one of the posters the Party has pasted throughout the city, at my husband’s orders. It cannot be coincidence. I have not seen this photograph before, this particular pattern of damage done to a face. It is his face: my fiancé, the barber’s brother - it is his face, but who would want to recognise it like this, who would want to attach themselves to it in any way? My husband must have hidden it from me, this photograph; he claimed there was no documentation of his death, that at least this small mercy had been granted. It is freshly applied, the glue is still wet in places, making bits of the poster opaque. I pull at the edge, hoping it will glide off smoothly, but it sticks and the thin paper tears. I put my face against the glass to peer inside. It is dark and empty, he is not yet here. Where did he say he lived? I don’t think he told me. I begin to scratch at the poster with my fingernails, ripping long shreds of it away from the glass, but not enough. It refuses to come off. A group of men further down the street

look at me suspiciously, huddle more closely together, surveying the debris that surrounds them, littered down the street from the riots. I look around me frantically, and spot across the street an abandoned chair with sturdy iron legs. I force it against the glass. The existing crack sends out shoots, but doesn't yield.

Somebody above me begins to shout. Afraid, I look up. It's the barber, standing on a ledge above the shop, sleepiness banished by the violence of what I'm doing. He disappears, probably running to get downstairs to stop me. I swing the chair against the glass again. It varicoses but holds. Then he is next to me, and gently takes the chair from my arms, and folds me into his arms, my head turned away from the window. I feel his body stiffen as he sees the poster, but he holds me against him still, and I cleave to him.

"Go upstairs," he says. "The stairs are through the back room."

I obey him, tired of my useless rage, and walk through the shop without looking back, aware of the bulbs fizzing around the mirror, and through the back room where the bottled hair seems to press against the glass like jars of large, captive spiders. Halfway up the stairway I hear the window glass shattering, throwing its splinters to the pavement, releasing the poster from its grip.

The barber's room is small but ritualistically tidy. He must have made his bed after leaping from it only seconds ago - despite the urgency with which he must have known he had to act, he still managed to pull the cover straight, to flatten the pillows. The spices stacked against the wall beside the sink are colour-coded: from chilli to turmeric to saffron down to the blue-tinged pepper. His belts are rolled into tight circles and propped in circular plastic holders, specially designed for the purpose. I pull open a drawer to find underwear folded neatly into perfect squares. Only now, seeing this, do I realise how the state of the shop downstairs must bother him, must eat away at his desire for order. I wonder if my body is pure enough for him, if my laxity about certain things bothers him, if he has to will himself not to pull my dress straight or untwist my stockings when I leave him, looking dishevelled, after we've been together.

"I didn't want you to see this," he says quietly, behind me. He is standing in the doorway. "The way I live. I thought it might scare you, put you off."

I swallow and close the drawer. “You must have your reasons,” I respond. “I’m only afraid I might not be clean enough for you. Not ordered.”

He buries his face against my neck. “You purify me,” he whispers into my hair. “You are my salve.”

“As in salvation?” I whisper back.

He doesn’t respond, but carries me to his bed and lays me upon it. The thought runs through my mind - I am an offering on a pyre, a sacrifice, soon I will go up in flames. He removes my dress, his own shirt. I notice his hand is bleeding, dripping blood onto his pristine bed cover. He notices my scars are inflamed, an angry crimson, and oily as if oozing. He kisses them softly, tastes the oil.

“It’s just a balm,” I say quietly, in justification. “A poultice.”

The face of his brother, of my fiancé, hovers above us like an apparition. I think of the poster torn to shreds by the shattered glass. Or perhaps the pieces have clung to its back, a limp, heavy mosaic. The barber will want some proof that it is not his brother I’m imagining against my body. What can I give him this time, what small offering? I will give him possession, give him pity for his loss.

“I’m so sorry about your brother,” I whisper as he unclasps his belt.

Not my fiancé, but his brother. Put his loss first, dim my own, and hope he believes me. And it is true, at least for now: it is his face I want beside my own, his chest against my back, his feet curled beneath mine. He cries; it worked.

Before I leave, I ask to see my jar of hair again. He is dubious, worried that I find it perverse. He does not remember that I, too, am a hoarder, or perhaps his brother never told him about my treasure-hunting. I appreciate this instinct in him, the urge to sweep up strands and bottle them. I would have taken it even further and transformed them into something: a woven floor-mat, a curtain tie-back, a wig. I am surprised to feel jealous of the women’s hair that he has collected that is not mine. It gives itself away because the long hair coils against the jar; the men’s is short and stacked. He hands me my jar and I pull out a single thick hair. How strange that this was loosened from my scalp in the course of silent desire, not wanting to wake his mother and brother, and forgotten on the pillow for this man beside me to collect the next morning in his foraging. It is hard to believe that hair is

dead, even when attached to the skull. My fiancé went grey from the shock of being captured in the mountains - surely a fibre that can change its own colour is alive? Why does wet hair freeze as hard as an icicle in the winter, but does not snap in two? Why do strands jingle against each other like metal if they are dead?

“Do you remember,” I say to him, “the bits of china in the scrub around your house?”

He looks suddenly shifty, worried that I will forsake him for the memory of his brother.

“I never knew how old they were, if they were newly-dumped or had been exposed by the wind after years,” I continue. “I collected bits of it. I once managed to piece together a whole tea cup with a delicate handle.”

He relaxes; he sees I am confessing my own taste for collecting.

“I saw one of your rubbings once,” he says shyly. “My brother showed me. It was a life-size silhouette of a knight with crest and armour. From an old gravestone.”

The thrill of making those! Stealing into churches in the late afternoons, before the bustle of evening service, with a roll of cheap paper and a hunk of charcoal and rubbing away like my life depended on it. The lines at first didn't make sense and I would despair, but gradually the details appeared, filling out the figure: a breast-plate, a spear, a scroll, pointed metal foot armour. My hands and face were black when it was done. The church disapproved, of course - they said it was equivalent to desecration. I had each one framed and hung above my bed.

“And your cowries, he showed me those too.”

Big and tight as a baby's fist.

The barber kisses me goodbye; watches me leave from the backroom. The shop is draughty now. I step through the empty window instead of using the door. On my way back to the Residence, I collect things, my scavenging instincts reawakened. It is calming, the slow process of perusal. The streets are full of treasure overlooked by looters - the whole city has been turned into a tip to dig through; the sandy soil has been forced to loosen its clutches on the bits and pieces that have sunk into it over the years and disappeared. The concrete slabs along the sea-front have been shattered by an explosion - the shards push against each other like tectonic plates, revealing soiled underbellies. In one recess I find a glass bottle with the stopper intact. It is green like ice in evening light, soft and cloudy

from being rolled by the sea. I wish impulsively there was a note inside it, but of course there isn't, just a faint sweetness like an old woman's perfume. The base of the bottle is thick, sturdy: glass and tar are liquid, they thicken at the bottom over time. Women too.

Beside the railing overlooking the sea, I see a folded baby's pram, the old-fashioned kind with four wheels and a hood. It is upholstered in corded velvet, the pile still plush but drenched by the sea. I unfold it with force - the salt has already begun to rust the joints - and find inside the carriage a thin mattress and fringed blanket. What are babies heads meant to smell like? Mothers always say their napes smell milky, distinctive, like a puppy's breath, addictively sweet. I would not know. If I were to give birth in nine months' time, I would not know who the father was. Would a different father mean a different nape-scent?

I think about what the barber asked me when we lay together in his bloodied bed, the cover dirty and twisted. I could sense him restraining himself, forcing himself to let the pillow lie skew on the floor, to leave his clothes in a tangled puddle. He asked about my husband, "the Commander," he called him. Was I in love with him? What did I see when I looked at his face? I told him the truth. That I'm afraid of him, that I've been afraid for some time now, even before the coup. I had not seen the President's face up-close until he was captured and put in a room in the summer residence, and when I saw him for the first time I saw my husband as he will be as an old man: haggard, greedy, lustful. At first his zealousness was attractive, but now I have learned to pay attention to what he is a zealot for, and sadly, it is as unoriginal as power. In turn, I asked the barber what makes him feel so dirty, so tainted. "What do you think," he replied, without archness.

I leave my hoary treasures at the base of the stairs in the Residence. As I climb the stairs I think about the lake on the far north border of the country, where I have always wanted to go. Legend has it there is a plane, a bus and even a helicopter at the bottom, all tragic accidents, now slowly growing barnacles. The fish are so aggressive they will swim up to you and stare into your eyes. A scavenger's dream. I let myself into my bedroom cautiously, as if expecting someone to be waiting for me. The shades are drawn and my eyes adjust slowly. Across the bed - my side of the bed - someone has draped the same poster that I have beneath my fingernails. The head is perfectly positioned on my pillow. I know my husband did this. His descent into tyranny has begun. I run to retch into the toilet

bowl. The lid is up; another man has been here, has lifted the lid to piss. Behind me in the mirror I see the chef. I know what he has come for, and what knowledge he has to make me give it to him. He starts by kissing my inner arm slowly, one kiss for each scar.

University of Cape Town

8 His chef's daughter

On their own, in isolation, each of my facial features is acceptable. If I cover my nose and mouth with my hands and stare only at my eyes, I see two perfectly fine ovals looking back at me, one could even call them sultry. If I cover my nose and forehead and stare at my lips, they are bud-like, fleshy, pink. But taken all together something is not right; as an ensemble my face is a failure. It will only get worse with time. For a fancy dress party a few months ago I drew exaggerated black lines in the corner of my eyes to make them seem feline, but the effect instead was an anticipation of crow's feet and it surprised me that I will become even uglier as I age. Standing at the basin brushing my teeth, I glance down at my pale, stocking-sheathed feet and think, this is what they will look like when I am dead.

The bill has still not been paid, and yesterday the manager told me he would have to kick out my mother if he does not receive payment by the end of the month. So I'm finally forced to go searching for my father at the Residence. I'll have to pretend to be looking for work as a kitchen girl so I can at least get into the kitchens and find out if he's still there. I kiss my mother's forehead goodbye: she has dried food around her mouth and her chin is gristly with the beginnings of old woman's whiskers. I can't bear to watch her eat anymore - the sound is the worst part of it, the damp mastication. Last night she somehow got food on one of her eyebrows and in her hair. I have a strong urge to suck my thumb, all of a sudden. To find a spot on my pillow that smells gamey (of my scalp and spit and night breath) and lie with my nose against it and my thumb against the backs of my front teeth. Childish impulses, but perhaps it is from being around my mother for too long: she has reverted, so why shouldn't I?

I walk towards the Presidential district, wondering if it will be renamed. Already it is hot and dry outside. Days like this remind me of the story my mother always used to tell, of drying my clean, wet nappies in seconds by holding them outside the window of a moving car in the dead-heat of midday. It is early; the city streets are empty except for the men at the roadblocks. They lounge on the pavements smoking, and make sucking sounds when I cross onto the other side of the street to avoid them. They are armed - their pants bulge with their weapons. I regret wearing stockings in this heat. They scratch at the sweaty parts, at the backs of my knees, my feet, at the small of my back. I veer

towards the seafront for the relief of the cool air off the sea. The Residence looms above the city from its perch at the summit of the hill. I used to be able to see it from my bedroom window in our last house. At night it would glitter with the hundreds of flashes of cameras - tourists visiting for the view of the city lights from the top. All those photographs of the same thing; so many albums stuffed with the same memento.

The paragliders are up already, and throwing themselves off the hill into the morning thermals. They hover about the rocky outcrops like giant butterflies. Every time I see them I almost will them to fly into the rockface or land in the sea, just to know what it would look like. I once climbed up to the ledge they jump off and came eye to eye with one of them - he, a human cocoon, hovering, airborne - and me, landlocked. It was like coming face to face with an alien creature. Things must be back to normal if they're out again - they are like weather vanes that way; they gauge the tensions on Presidential hill because their launching place is closed off to them in times of stress, to keep people away from the Residence. The sea is two-toned and calm this morning, and the line marking the edge of the reef is crisp. Cats twine around each other at the rubbish bins along the seafront. One lurches guiltily out of a bin as I pass. The sea has washed away some of the debris left here after the looting, and the pavement is wet and dark with bits of coagulated rubbish stuck against the wall keeping out the sea.

I am longing for him as usual, craving him guiltily. To stave off my longing I pinch the thin skin above my knuckles with my fingernails until it bleeds. It is the places that are usually never touched that can generate unexpected pleasure, mostly just from the surprise of it: heels, the flesh between thumb and forefinger, the front-side of a thigh, the inside of an elbow, pressure put on the half-moon of a fingernail. They can also generate unexpected pain, but I can no longer tell the difference. I could blame him, of course, but it would be like blaming God for creating me, for giving me this face, these legs, this stomach. I prefer to blame my father. He is, after all, the one who gave me a taste for cruelty - although he likes to inflict and I have been trained to endure. I can't bear to think of my lover holed up somewhere, in hiding, without me. Where could he have run to? I would know if he were dead; it would be sweet release and despair.

He was five years older than me, still a child himself, when it all began. We were in the room at the summer residence with the framed puzzle of a dignitary on the wall. The pieces fitted tightly, but still his face seemed cracked from the hundreds of slotted joinings. We lay together on the floor of the room - there was no furniture, or it was covered with sheets - and stared up at the picture. It bothered me: why was it a puzzle and not simply a painting? I wanted to get behind the glass and pull his smirking face apart into its constituent pieces. No matter how much to the left or right I moved, the eyes followed and fixed me with their stare. I could feel his skin against mine, our arms touching. I tried to match his breathing - I held my breath until he breathed out, then waited for him to breathe in again. He took my hand and squeezed it very tightly, so tightly I gasped. Then he told me to follow him.

He kept squeezing my hand all along the corridor, across the courtyard, through the sculpture garden, and to the base of a thickly-leaved, spreading tree growing closely against one of the bottom windows of the residence. He told me to climb the tree, but my fingers were numb from being gripped and I fell and shaved off a fine layer of skin against the bark. He laughed and pushed me against the trunk again to climb. I managed to claw my way up and onto a branch, my new wound burning, desperate to please him. He lifted himself onto the branch next to me and cautiously parted the leaves so that we could see into the room through the window without being seen ourselves. At first I could see nothing but the reflection of the tree in the glass. Then I saw something white moving inside the room, some kind of animal. Then the animal separated into two, and I realised it was an entwined mass of naked human flesh. The President's face came in and out of view as the mass rolled; the woman I did not recognise. I was transfixed by the violence of what they were doing. The President's son moved his leg against mine on the branch. His breath was hot against my cheek, his breathing quickened as he watched.

"I watch him often," he whispered. "He likes to hurt many women. He thinks nobody knows."

A strange ticking began in the base of my stomach, a nervous pulsing, and I began to feel thirsty. The son put his mouth against my neck and bit me slowly, clenching his teeth tighter and tighter until I yelped. Then he put one hand between my thighs and with his other he dug a fingernail into the open wound on my knee, keeping his eyes on the moving flesh inside the window. If I strained

my ears hard enough, I could hear the woman inside moaning from pain. I tried to be silent, proud of my resilience, proud that he wanted to hurt me. It felt good.

It still feels good; he is still my lover. I feel guilty because now I know that pain and pleasure are not meant to be paired, but it is too late to unlearn it, it has been burnt into my brain, gouged into my body. I have tried to resist him, but it is useless. In a drought wild animals are driven mad by thirst and swarm to the sea against their instincts, drink seawater and then die a horrible death, leaving the beach littered with their bodies. I am perpetually mad with thirst for him; without him I will go even madder.

In the thick of the Presidential district the debris is denser and there are the same gruesome posters plastered against walls and windows and even nailed into trunks. The avenue slopes up towards the gated entrance to the Residence, canopied by jacarandas. I approach the security booth with my best school-girl walk, looking innocent and apprehensive while the sweat threads its way down my back. The guard is on edge, his radio buzzes with barked commands that I can't decipher. He swallows my story and radios the kitchens to ask a busboy to fetch me at the gate. While I wait he shifts from foot to foot, looks at his watch nervously, and glances at my legs. I notice my stockings have laddered badly up the back of my knee and beneath my skirt. We wait in silence punctuated by men's quick shouted orders on his radio.

The busboy leads me through the gate and across the lawn towards the kitchen garden and then through a service entrance into the dishwashing gulley where three men stand side by side hosing food scraps off plates. One of them sees me and nudges the young boy to his side, and they both whistle and grunt at me as I pass. The busboy tells me to wait in the gulley while he fetches somebody who will interview me for a job – “nothing fancy going,” he says, “just peeling duty and the dishes.” I peer through the porthole window in the swinging door into the kitchens. The room is steamy and filled with men dressed in white with plastic caps over their hair and bright red faces. With all the banging and clanging it sounds like a factory assembly line. My father would not be back here, though, unless to scream at somebody in fault.

I clear my throat and shout at the dishwashers above the noise of the plates being piled in the sink, “Who is executive chef now?”

The oldest man, wrinkled as a walnut, hears me and shouts back, "Same as before."

Relief flows into my blood and through my veins, not just for my mother's sake, but for my own. I have missed him, despite myself, I am still his little girl. I knew he would survive.

A harassed man pushes at the swinging door wildly, spots me and says, "Start tonight, trial week."

I turn to him and say coldly, "I'm not looking for work. I'm looking for my father."

Even this man must see the resemblance because he looks suddenly terrified and his eyes dart from my eyes to my jaw-line and back. The dishwashers have turned off their hoses to listen and now stand staring at me, their hands pink from the hot water.

"He's not here now," the man manages deferentially. "You can wait in the lobby, I'll tell him you're here."

He points through the service door to the main entry to the Residence, where guards bristle on the stairway. All four men watch me walk away across the gardens and towards the stairs. I take them two at a time and get to the top out of breath. The guard seems to think I'm a servant because he pays me no attention - I suppose he saw me leave the kitchens - so I walk through the door and into the quiet, carpeted lobby. I sit on a chair with a leather studded seat in a dark corner and fold my legs.

From here I can see into the dining room on my left and into a large meeting room (long reflective wooden table, important chairs) on my right. This is the official part of the Residence, the part that is for public living. The curving stairwell before me leads to the bedrooms and bathrooms and reading rooms tucked away from scrutiny on the next floor. At the base of the stairs is a small pile of what looks like debris - a folded pram and a plastic packet bulging with junk. The cleaners must not yet have thrown it away. Who is living here now - who sleeps in the President's bed? I haven't followed the papers; I don't even know who organised the coup. Does he have a wife?

The lobby is so quiet I can hear faint sounds of metal being sharpened, crockery being piled, a man shouting a joke, from the kitchens behind the dining room. My curiosity wells like strong hunger. Even though I know nobody is in the room, I look around me suspiciously and over my shoulder and around the corner as far as I can see. Then I stand quickly and walk up the stairs confidently, like I'm meant to be there. I can always say I got lost - first day on the job, that kind of thing. Although if my

father's relationship with the last President is anything to go by, he will probably be a solid favourite already and he'd be able to talk his way out of anything, even his daughter snooping around the Residence. After days cooped up in the home with my mother, I wouldn't mind a little adventure. I've always liked to see the earthly trappings (underwear on the floor, toothbrush in the basin, tabloid on the bedside table) of people in power. Probably as a result of what I saw through the window with the President's son in the tree. It becomes addictive.

The stairs are carpeted and muffle my steps. I remember the way to the bedroom from the time the President's son gave me the grand tour of the Residence. His parents were out and we lay on their bed and he pretended to be his father (distorted his eyebrows, scrunched up his mouth) and lay on top of me, suffocating me until I kicked him to get a breath of air, then begged him to cover me again. There were foundation stains on his mother's pillow - she even slept with that stuff in her pores - and on the sheets half-way down the bed there were cryptic stains, vaguely oily.

I walk along the corridor, keeping to the wall, counting the doors. At the third door on my right I stop: this is the bedroom. Of course he won't be in there now, it is mid-morning and he'll be out on official duties or doing whatever a new President does. The door is cracked open; maybe the maid is in there cleaning. I put my eye to the gap - the room is dark and empty, the blinds are still drawn but they flutter in the wind from the open sliding door onto the balcony. I push tentatively on the door and step inside the room. There is a poster draped across the bed - one of the mangled body ones - and clothes on the floor next to the door leading to the bathroom. Suddenly I hear a sound from the bathroom, a low whine like a dog in distress. I walk quickly across the room and out onto the balcony. The President's son showed me a way to look into the bathroom from outside without being seen. I reach up to the air vent and remove the lid carefully. Then I put my eye to the gap.

9 His portraitist's wife

Before I realised I was pregnant I was perturbed by a spate of strange shooting pains in different bones around my body - shins, spine, collarbone. Afterwards, when I was told I was expecting, I began to suspect that the pains were from the child gathering material for itself, leeching nutrients from me, digging deep into my bones to nourish its own. I also believed it was digging for something else: knowledge of my own painful memories, deposits left by anger, pathways forged by fear, so that it could collect them and soak them up and could thereby spare itself the pain of having to make its own mistakes. I resented that it thought it could get away with it and sidestep misery so easily.

I want it out of me. I am sick of my lumbering, my slow side-to-side shuffle that passes for a walk. I am tired of my swollen ankles and the dark stain down the centre of my stomach and the mask around my eyes and the incessant need to piss and waking myself with my own snoring because this baby is pushing something against my lungs and suffocating me. In the sculpture garden I still try to stretch but it has become a comic routine so now I am simply walking in slow circles around the rose bushes. Glancing down, I notice a strange plant I haven't seen before - a single glossy-green leaf like a sow's ear pushed flat against the soil. I pull it out of the ground and find that its roots are surprisingly shallow and wispy. It reminds me of the desert up north where the winds are so strong the trees have grown with their trunks almost flat against the ground. I always found their prostration distasteful - it seemed to me the ultimate concession, literally bending over backwards to accommodate a stronger force. A cat lurks against the garden wall, rubbing itself against the bricks. I call it to me cheerfully, entice it closer, and then hit its flank as hard I can with the flat of my hand. It squawks and skitters away and over the wall. An old childhood trick I learned from my mother. She always preferred dogs.

I keep catching myself thinking about her against my will. Probably because I'm about to become a mother myself, and the only model I have for this process is her. I dreamed last night that I had caught her stutter like a common cold and all the men I spoke to looked at me at first with pity and then not at all. This morning I woke with an extremely clear image of her in my mind, hovering above me at the beach with her face very close to mine, digging me into a sand motor car. And I could have sworn I caught a whiff of her night perfume in the garden just now, close to the wall, but then I saw

the camellias growing thickly around the tap. She would come to kiss me goodnight before she and my father went out at night and I would hear her high heels clicking on the polished parquet and smell her scent before she'd even opened the door. Freshly-bathed, in my nightgown, I would beg her not to go, or make her promise to kiss me again when she arrived home at the end of the night, and I told her I would know even if I was sleeping because she could kiss my cheek and I would find the lipstick mark in the morning. I never found a mark, but I would console myself that it had simply rubbed off onto my pillows in the night, or she had wiped it off herself after kissing me, not wanting to soil the linen.

And lately I have had the urge to be back at work, for the small, quiet frivolity of it, the open-faced superficiality, the detailed deception. I am tired of the burden of bearing another human being, the enforced earnestness of impending motherhood. I want to lather a square box with shaving cream and call it a cake, and dye a glassful of water with food colouring and call it wine, and put a chunk of dry ice at the bottom of a bowl of rice and call it steam. I'd like to paint grapes with clear nail varnish or cut chips out of styrofoam or spray moisture beads onto the side of a can. At work I mastered the art of showing no expression, appropriate given my vocation. I cultivated a habit of leaving a long pause before I answered any questions. The people I worked with gave me a wide berth because of it, and because of who I am (or who my family is). They had a healthy respect for power and the privilege it confers.

The guard whistles for me to return to my room. It is a relief to sink into the bed and lift my feet onto the bedpost to try to drain the fluid from them. Even as a dancer my feet never hurt this much, this consistently, although I had terrible bunions growing like bulbs out of the sides of my feet and my nails would ooze after a big performance. I have started to crave space - this room is not exactly small, but as I've ballooned the ceiling has begun to bother me; it hangs so low and solid above me. I've been longing for my first apartment in the city, the one my father bought for me to live in at university. It was one of the city's oldest buildings and had somehow survived despite the ravages of slick sky-scrapers surrounding it. There was a balcony from every room, and high, canopied ceilings, and sprawling rooms. I hung beads from doorways and painted the doors aquamarine and always had bowls of nuts and strange fruit lying around on side tables and window sills. I made one of the rooms into my studio - I lined the walls with mirrors and installed a long

wooden bar along one side. With the doors onto the balcony open I could see directly into one floor of a glassed-in office block, the kind with fluorescent lighting and air conditioning no matter what the weather; a sterilised climate all year round. Men in suits would stand with their faces to the glass at lunch time to watch me perform. When the dance was over, sweaty and heaving, I would look directly at them; acknowledge their presence. Some looked forlorn, others made obscene gestures, a few pressed their phone numbers writ large to the window.

There is a knock at the door and the President's wife calls in her pearly-bright voice, "I'm coming in!" The guard rolls his eyes at me before he closes the door behind her and locks it. She looks about her and pats her bushy hair and walks towards me shaking her head.

"My poor dear," she says. "Let me give you a massage."

Before I can move my legs she has sat down on a chair next to the bed and swung my feet down into her lap and begun to roll my left ankle while gripping the heel with her other hand.

"And how was your little outing with your husband?" she asks coyly, winking at me while she milks my foot like an udder. "I loved being...intimate when I was pregnant, especially with the first," she says suggestively when I don't answer. "It made me feel so feminine, so rounded and, well, desirable, you know?"

She lifts my right foot entirely off her lap and begins to bang her palm against the heel, over and over. She looks at my stomach pointedly. "But the stretchmarks are going to be horrendous. You'll have to work hard to keep him interested." She tugs at each toe in turn, until the tiny bones click. Then she threads her fingers through the spaces between my toes and jiggles them violently.

"There's something I need to tell you," I say. "I wanted to wait until we were released but who knows when that will be."

She is delighted at the promise of a confidence, and leans close towards me so that my feet push into the folds of her belly, licks her lips and says, "Oh tell me."

"It's about your son," I say, then pause and look out the window wistfully. I will make her wait; I intend to enjoy her suffering. Her grip has become vice-like around my ankles and her eyes are bulging slightly.

"He's..."

I pause again and look down at my hands, then adjust my dress over my stomach, pulling on it to undo the creases.

“Your son is dead. I saw his body at the vineyard.”

She falls forward onto my outstretched legs, clings to me about my knees, and sobs and moans and wails until the guard opens the door to see about the noise. He quickly closes it again at the sight of her thrashing about with grief. Her make-up drools onto my dress and my bare legs, but I can't find the right moment to pull them away. Eventually she lifts her head, keeping her arms around my knees, and looks at me with her melted face.

“Oh you poor thing,” she sobs. “You don't even know it is your loss too.”

My loss? Does she intend that in the patriotic sense, that we have all lost a good “son” of the country? I pat her head, reassuring her that no, it is most definitely her loss. She becomes impatient, and lets go of my legs and sits up.

“But there's something I need to tell you now,” she says, sniffing, her mascara blurred like a black eye. She grips my feet again, pulls at my big toes nervously. “He was...” she breaks down and weeps again.

I begin to feel alarmed, backed into an enclosure like an animal fattened for the kill.

“He was your half-brother. You have lost your half-brother.” She moans loudly and pulls at her hair.

“But the President?” I whisper incredulously. She watches me closely, despite her tears.

“He's your father,” she whispers back. “We thought it was best for you not to know. I promised your mother I would never tell you.”

My insides contract into a breathless, timeless point of agony and then, as suddenly, the pain is gone. She puts her hand to my stomach, but I don't want her to touch me anywhere, I can't bear her cloying fingers on me, and I push them off violently and kick at her to let go of my legs. Before I can stand up the white-hot pain paralyses me again and I squat on the floor and dig my nails into my knees to wait it out. In that time she manages to come around to me and crouches beside me, stroking my hair.

“It's starting,” she says. “The baby.”

As soon as the pain is gone I stand and run towards the door and hurl my fists against it, screaming to the guard to open it. As he opens the door, there is a liquid flush and suddenly I'm standing barefoot in a pool of water. He looks with horror down at my feet and then at my drenched dress and turns his face away. The President's wife hobbles to me and screams at the guard, "Get somebody, can't you see she's going to have the baby!" and he disappears gratefully, sprinting down the corridor. I push her aside against the post of the door, hoping that she will hit her soft head on the hardwood, but at that instant the pain debilitates me and I squat again by instinct to ease it and clench my eyes and ball my fists. She is still there when it passes and just the sight of her face makes me nauseous, I want to hurl out the contents of my stomach, of my entire body, leave them in a slop on the floor and peel off my skin like a cooked beetroot and then I will be nothing but a membrane for things to pass through.

Oh mother, you win. I underestimated you. You have a taste for deception, a taste I have inherited. How did it happen? Where were you? In the dunes? Beside the reservoir at midnight? On a blanket beneath the power lines? Did you feel your spine against the warm hood of his car on an abandoned road? Did you stutter when you whispered to him your desires, instructions, preferences? It was not love - I know that he is incapable of it. Did his hands look different when he was young? Were his fingers more agile, more insistent? Oh the great art of it, the sidling up to father afterwards, reeking of another man. Did you lock your jaw stoically when you had to let father touch you to take the credit, the responsibility, ownership of me? No wonder he always examined my face under the lamp. He wasn't marvelling at my unscarred skin, he was sniffing like a suspicious dog around a lamp-post, trying to figure out which was his piss and which was someone else's, and whether I could be taken for granted as his territory. He was always gratified by my face - did he not see the strange size of my eyes or the foreign slope of my cheekbones? But his own face had been disfigured for too long for him to remember the geography of his own features, and there were always photographs of long-forgotten ancestors that could be brought out to account for these little discrepancies.

I run into the sculpture garden with my thighs gliding smoothly against each other and my wet dress clinging to my legs. She follows me, tries to pull me back by my shoulder, but I slap her hand away and then I'm bent over again with the pain, the terrible wait, the anguish, a pain that banishes all

sense of time. It passes - how long did it last? - and I realise she is rubbing my back, kneading the knobs of my spine through my dress. I swing out at her sideways and keep running, searching, my eyes focused on the ground, warding off the next spasm of pain, trying to take as many heavy steps forward before it re-attacks.

We were on the deck, night-time, salt on the air. Corn on the cob. A dropped fork. We were in the forest behind the Residence in the dark. A monogrammed towel filched from the laundry closet. Someone lurking behind a tree nearby, watching. A desperate sprint away. A photograph left under my pillow. To provoke me, to invoke his power, to stir our desire. Sausage-spotted face above me, wrinkles, discolouration, panting. Sagging belly, bandy legs. Old man's hands. The aftertaste of submission. His terrifying ascendance.

I see the shearers lying in the grass ahead of me. If I can just get there before the pain cripples me, but no, it hits again, a solid wall of it, and I crouch and dig my hands into the soil. When I open my eyes she is beside me again, and now there are men, and they see me staring at the shearers and quickly they are removed, and here's my husband running towards me, damn fool, and the guard is holding him back and he's screaming. As though he knows what pain is. I will be dragged somewhere and will have to force it out. Perhaps there is another way to do it, I could hold back and not push when I'm supposed to and starve it of oxygen and keep its dirty soft skull lodged in me. Two guards hook their arms beneath my armpits and the President's wife tries to hold my legs but I kick at her and manage to connect her on the chin. She reels backwards holding her face. Before the next contractions shunt me into oblivion I glimpse the almost black blood streaming from her split chin.

I should have known. He was a sick old man. Sick old men don't just like young women - that wasn't it after all. They like a little something extra, a bit of a twist, a cherry on top of their perversion. I hear a man shouting far off in the distance, and a woman howling faintly a long, long way away and a terrible weight in my head and on my eyes and a heaviness and pale fading.

PART III

University of Cape Town

1 His barber

I have been summoned again, this time to the Residence on the hill, and now he wants to try something new: a lather and shave. It seems he trusts me enough to put a knife to his neck. I soak the blades in peroxide then sharpen them against each other, unwrap a new block of shaving soap from wax paper, trim the shaving brush of its matted ends, and put three drops of camomile oil in a bottle of distilled alcohol to dab at his cheeks and neck while they are still raw from the shaving. My assistant fusses around me with clean towels and a plastic apron. He is particularly clingy today and keeps asking me when I will be back, what time he should expect me, and should he keep me some supper? I ignore him, but kindly - he has not been the same since I was taken away and he had to hide from the looters in the back room. I am thankful they could not force their way through and up into my bedroom; I could not deal with any more disorder. Just before I leave, I hold the tweezers in the open flame of a match to disinfect them in case the Commander wants his ear or nostril hair pulled.

The district is quiet. It is the time of day when the heat makes movement uncomfortable and people close their windows because the air trapped inside kitchens and dark bedrooms from the morning is cooler than the hot wind blowing in from the valley now and must not be contaminated. This wind makes me brittle and parched and although the sweat evaporates quickly from my back and forehead it brings no relief. Even the juice of my eyes and the mucous in the back of my throat begins to dry up. I veer towards the seafront but the sea air just makes it worse, throwing its grit into my open wounds until I feel like a piece of salted meat hung up to mature. I welcome the pain the way only the guilty can, as if it will absolve me of my sins to be in hot discomfort. It is my brother I want to see me suffer and to watch closely how my eyes sting and my throat burns. He is haunting me. I feel his scorn as clearly as I feel my own blood beat, I sense his anger as close to me as my breath, I know his sadness the way I know hunger. I do not feel his presence beside me like a shadow - I feel inhabited by it, as if he looks with my eyes and feels with my hands. It is a figment, I know - brought on by my raging guilt and hallucinated willingly by my mind. But when he is inside my head he whispers things to me from the deep insides of my ears so that they travel the wrong way and could be heard emerging from my lobes by somebody standing next to me. Over and over he whispers that I have failed him. It is the truth of it that is making me go mad.

I came to the city to kill the President. I looked for a way to put my hands on him - to touch him every day as part of my job, to lull him with my touch like a snake charmer hypnotises with a flute, to pierce his inner circle of security through the deftness of my skill, perform for him an unalarming service, at its essence manual and thus reassuring. And I found that way, and put my hands on him, and every day I held the slim blade of the shaving razor to his throat and could not find the will to slit it (or perhaps will lets me off too easily, it was the courage I could not find). I feared the consequences too much to be able to take my revenge, to avenge your death, brother. I had not yet seen then the detail of your disfigurement, the exact nature of the pain he ordered somebody to inflict on your face, the grotesqueness of your death, as I saw it blown up and plastered onto the window of my shop yesterday. But I suspect it would have made little difference: I am a coward, and I wanted to live more than I desired vengeance.

And each time I would return to my shop and my little room and swear to myself I would kill him the next day, and then I would clean fiendishly, and purge and purify myself by curling belts and folding caps and polishing buttons and putting jars upon jars of other people's hair onto shelves according to the shade of their strands, from jet to nut to amber to auburn to pale gold. I was not always like this - before you disappeared I don't remember ever feeling such a strong desire to scrub at my body in the bath until I bled, the way I would after each failed session at the Residence. She thinks I worked for him because I hated you for soaking up our mother's attention like bread in water, that I wanted to groom and pamper the President in thanks for what he did to you. But how could I hate you for being our mother's favourite? You were my God too, and a man cannot be jealous of a god. And then there is her, your first and only lover, whose body I now feel on top of me, whose hair falls into my mouth, whose legs curl around my back to pull me closer. I plead guilty, again, but hear me out: I love her the way you did, she is the only pure thing in my life, I cannot ever replace you and I will forever carry the burden of wondering if she closes her eyes when she feels me lower myself onto her and imagines it is you, but what we have done is the only good thing I have done in my life and I ask your forgiveness but I will not give her up. And now you must leave me alone, because there is nothing else I can do for you, and no way to atone, so leave me here at the Residence gate and do not come back to me. I beg you.

The guard radios somebody else when I tell him my purpose, receives confirmation, opens the side gate. I walk along the avenue up to the main entrance with my tools in a black carrybag like a doctor making a house visit. The Residence gardens have not changed - the same curt flowerbeds and clipped fruit trees and circumscribed trees - of course, what would one expect? Another guard at the front entrance to the Residence looks through my bag suspiciously, picks out the razor and holds it up to the sun as if to divine its purpose. He radios somebody, is told to let me in and reluctantly holds open the heavy door for me. The foyer is cool and dark and soothing to my eyes. I climb the stairwell to the first floor, catching a whiff of my own odour from the effort of my journey and hastily brushing the sweat from my forehead into my hair to disguise it. Another guard stands before the bedroom door, expecting me, holding the door open, and he follows me into the room. I am determined not to look at the bed - their bed. I know it is on my left, at the periphery of my vision. But as I approach the bathroom I cannot resist its pull on my eyeballs and I turn my head to stare at it and wonder which side she sleeps on, and whether he waits until she is asleep to make his advances or demands succour in the fog of morning. When last did the servants change the sheets and pillow slips? Does she refuse him now? Does she have a choice?

The Commander is waiting for me in the bathroom, this time on the chair I brought especially to the Residence the first time I groomed the President. It puts his head at the level of my chest so that when he leans back onto the headrest his neck will be exposed and will give me the best angle for a close shave. There is an excitement about him today, the impatience of a small boy awaiting a gift. It is early afternoon, but he is barefoot and in his bathrobe, with a faint white stain of dried toothpaste down the front of the lapel. He barely greets me, waves to the guard to wait outside the bathroom, and almost greedily puts on the plastic apron I hand him to keep the soap from dripping onto his chest. He closes his eyes and lies back expectantly with a deep sigh before I have even laid out my implements beside the basin. I look closely at his face and neck: the stubble is blue and some hairs have curled back on themselves and tried to burrow beneath his skin, ingrown and red. Small white scars stand out beneath the stubble, past injuries, self-inflicted - all men know the horror of slitting one's own throat with a razor, no matter how small the wound or how little it bleeds. I notice things about him that I missed the last time: the yellow grease of ear wax hidden within the whorl of his ear, grey bristles

venturing out of one nostril, the suggestion of dry scalp, a mole on his chin that has been sliced off so often by shaving it has become aggressively mutant. I wet the brush, massage it in tight circles against the soap until it foams thickly, then use the same circular motion with the brush against his skin, the cream lathering and growing in volume until his cheeks and chin and neck are covered by it.

I hear the bedroom door open and a woman's sandals clicking across the floor - her sandals, the sound of her dress swishing against her knees. Before I can turn to the doorway she is inside the bathroom, and the guard murmurs a greeting to her then turns away, and she looks at me with her eyes bright and sad as a small bird.

The Commander does not open his, but lifts an arm lazily as if to acknowledge her, and says, "We're busy, darling. Did you really have to bother us?"

She looks down at her feet then walks quickly to the cupboard beneath the basin and kneels beside it. "I forgot something," she says, and rummages amongst the bottles and vials and boxes. "I'll be quick."

I watch her hands as they search, so delicate, so assured. And then I see them: six new wounds on the inside of her left arm, raw and fresh, identical to the scars on her right, a sick symmetry of pain. The circles of flesh are raised and blistered. In places the wet scab has split and released clear liquid. She has not dressed them - they are unbandaged, untended, infected. She looks at me suddenly, closes the cupboard, and leaves the room empty-handed. I hear her opening a drawer in the bedroom. The Commander still has not opened his eyes.

I lift the blade from beside the basin and split open his neck like a soft fruit until I reach his oesophagus. The blood seeps more slowly than I expected into the white foam. His head slumps forward until his nose rests against his sternum and his lips are pressed to his own collarbone. The foam is now frothy and pink.

I pack up my utensils carefully, put each one in its proper place in the bag, rinse the knife, turn on the shower, and close the bathroom door quietly behind me.

"Showering," I say to the guard, and he nods and looks bored and wanders out onto the balcony. I walk slowly towards her, to where she sits at the edge of the bed, lift her left arm, turn it, kiss each wet wound softly, then take her hand and lead her gently out of the room. She looks back

once, towards the bathroom, but grips my hand. I feel nothing but conviction. They are all the same, these men. It is best to nip them in the bud.

University of Cape Town

2 His portraitist

I was not allowed into the room while my wife was in labour with our child. The guards let me wait outside the door, but the sounds of her agony fought their way beneath it and made me want to tear my ears from my head and rip my own stomach open if it could only ease her pain. The President's wife was let in to be her midwife. She gave me a dark look as she passed me - the first time she has looked at me with anything but lust in her eyes. The thought that I had ever let her touch me, that our bare skins had ever slid across each other, made me sick to my loins. The labour took a day and half the night. The guards told me to sleep, but how could I while she moaned like a sick animal so close to me, and to think as each scream faded that I had done this to her? I glimpsed her once, when the doctor called for more hot water and the President's wife opened the door to receive it from the guard. She was lying curled up like a baby on the bed, mimicking the position our own child was in, with her knees drawn up to her stomach and her eyes closed and her mouth set in such grim determination I barely recognised her. The doctor was trying to swing her legs down and open and place her feet against the bottom of the bedstead, but she only clenched them more tightly together. It was only then that I began to worry about the child. Until then I had thought only of my wife, and longed for her pain to be over, whatever the consequences, but I saw the panic in the doctor's face and the fear for my child became a dull thudding in my gut.

Night fell slowly. I felt the dusk's beauty as an insult. I could see the rose bushes glowing and the statues' shadows as they thinned and I saw my wife lying on the grass on her back with her legs in the air, stretching, and my love for her made me promise all kinds of things to myself, things I would never do again if she could only survive this, things I would do for her every day if she could endure. When the light had faded and the statues loomed like threats in the blackness I am ashamed to say that I would even have promised my first born to anybody who asked for it, if it would have guaranteed my wife's survival. It is a crippling desperation to be a man when a wife gives birth. I did not realise how low I could be forced to stoop - that I could promise such an unnatural thing, to hand away my own flesh in a dank deal with the spirits of my mind. And then it wailed, a rattle-blood cry, a howl to the moon. I would never have believed a child that had just been through such trauma could have the lungs to yell its way into life like that.

The President's wife came to the door and spoke through it: "It's a boy. She is fine, just exhausted. Go to bed now, you cannot see them until the morning."

I hugged the guard against his will and he pulled away from me awkwardly and shifted his feet. I ran into the rose garden and rolled on the grass with delight and climbed on top of one of the statues and leapt from it into the darkness, and cried and wept and laughed until the guard pulled me up and told me to go back to my room. My back was wet with dew and my hand began to bleed from the rose bush thorns and my ankle felt strange from the way I landed and even my kidneys began to pulse their old warning, but I felt none of it as pain until I woke this morning in my bed and noticed the blood smears on my pillow and felt the thud, thud of my thickened ankle and the tension in my kidneys. And then I remembered I had a child, a tiny new baby boy, and it was rapturous to lie there with that precious, warm thought in my head and let my mind suck on it like a sweet under my tongue.

I washed ritually before leaving the room this morning, as a private tribute to my wife. I wanted to cleanse myself of all my past sins with the bathwater, and soaked for a long time to soften my pores so that they would release all their grime into the water. The water was grey when I let it out. I combed my hair, trimmed my fingernails, shaved, and put on my last clean shirt. As I walked along the corridor overlooking the rose garden I looked down and saw the bush I had damaged in my leap from the statue, and the grass I had flattened with my back. I walked slowly down the stairs, admiring the pattern the sun threw of the iron banister on the wall, and along the passageway to her door. Several guards were posted outside and stiffened when they saw me coming. One of them told me I could not see her in her bedroom, that I was to wait in the room where I painted the Commander's portrait and that she and the child would be brought to me there.

I have been waiting for over an hour in this room. The couch where I sat beside the President has been pushed against the wall, and several chairs have been brought in and placed in a semi-circle around it, as if expecting an audience. I cannot understand why I have been forced to wait here to see her and the child. I hate thinking of her having to climb the stairs with the ache that she must have between her legs - surely she is weak and wounded and should be allowed to rest. The room is stuffy; the windows are closed despite the rising heat outside. I pull back the curtains and unclasp the latch

and slide open the window, but there is no wind today to bring cool relief, and the air hangs still and obstinate just outside the frame, refusing to move. The valley shimmers colourlessly in the heat.

I hear voices and go to the door impatiently. The President is being led by three guards down the corridor towards me, his hands bound in front of him, his jowls hanging as low as a wolf's, his head droopy. He does not look at me as he shuffles into the room, nor when he is made to sit on the couch against the wall. The guards pay me no attention and ignore my questions. I start to feel dizzy like a dog chasing its own tail, and go to the window to breathe more deeply and try to slow my heartbeat. Fear grips my entrails again - they are already bruised from last night's desperation, but the new fear is relentless. Something is going horribly wrong, there is an arena being set up here before my eyes and I know I am going to be asked to witness something horrific and I know it will involve the child. One of the guards stands next to the couch, the other slumps into one of the chairs facing him. The third leaves the room. More voices. The sweat is pooling in the small of my back now, my pulse is racing, the veins on my hands and arms are engorged.

The President's wife is led into the room and as she sees her husband she pushes the guard away and stumbles to him and kisses his face and skull and puts her face in his lap and cries. He does nothing - he barely looks at her, and the guard pulls her off and makes her sit in one of the chairs facing the President. She blows kisses at him through her tears and whispers endearments to him, but he does not even raise his eyes.

The third guard closes the door and clears his throat. "The Commander wanted to be here today," he says, glancing at the President. "But it seems he has been tied up in the city."

He pauses, looks slightly uncomfortable. I watch the sweat marks forming beneath his armpits, spreading darkly against his shirt. Then he opens the door. My wife is standing outside, holding our baby. The child is naked, and she is barely clothed, in a night-dress that is transparent in the morning sun. Her nipples have leaked onto the front of the dress. I start to run towards her, but the guard steps in my way and holds me back. She takes an unsteady step into the room. The baby begins to squeal its hunger.

I stop struggling and watch her walk slowly towards the President. Her face seems fleshless; her eyes do not seek me out. She reaches him and kneels before him, her kneebones cracking against

the hard floor. She lays the baby in his lap. I see its face for the first time. Its forehead is vast, its eyes are too close together.

“Your son,” she says to him. Then she spits in his face.

University of Cape Town

3 His chef

I told him anyway. Even after what she let me do to her in their bathroom, I told her husband what she and the barber had been up to, lurking in the bushes, seamy looks, sly desires; that she would come home smelling of him and corrupt their sheets with his stench. He had no idea - how he could have missed it is beyond me, but perhaps my sense of smell is more acute after so many years of infidelity. I can always smell another man on a woman, beneath the soaps and lotions and perfumes they use to mask it. But that barber was too quick for him, it seems. Not quick enough, however. The guards outside rounded the two of them up like a pair of startled cattle and hustled them into the back of a van and drove them to the old revolutionary graveyard in the mountains. I gave particular instructions for them to be killed in just the fashion his brother was. I like the symmetry of it.

Why they left through the front door and walked straight into the trap confounds me - if the barber knew the Commander's plan to capture him and killed him because of it, why did they not escape through the back? There were no guards there, and she would have known the way out. The Commander's guard only realised what the barber had done hours later, when the Commander's shower had seemed to go on for ever, until the steam was so thick in the bedroom he could barely see his own hand before his face, and he risked all censure and opened the bathroom door cautiously despite receiving no permission to enter. My men acted quickly to stem any protests, but there were not many, just confusion. It was worth the trouble it took to gain their loyalty these past months. They knew the Commander favoured me, that I had been his eyes when he could not see. They liked that I had no previous political experience (they are ignorant of the tyranny of an executive chef in his kitchens), that I would bring attention to detail (the exact placement of garnish on a plate) and respect for due process (mincing, grating, blanching) to the position. It has been a smooth transition.

I've moved into the master bedroom already. The bathroom has been mopped and bleached, and the balcony door has been left open to air out the room, but I asked that the sheets not be changed. I wanted to sleep for just one night on her side of the bed, with my nose against her pillow. I am sorry to lose her, but she would not have taken kindly to my betrayal. In time, there will be others. Other women, other betrayals.

My daughter was still here when it happened. She had come to find me at the Residence, pretending to be searching for work. I sent her back to the home when the Commander's body was discovered, fearing violence, but it turned out to be an unnecessary precaution and I sent word for her to pack her bags and leave her mother in the home (the bill will be paid) and arrange her things in the bedroom furthest down the hall from mine, with the view of the seafront. I have promised her that her little lover can move in here too, if we can find him. The President's son. She was horrified that I knew about it, but I didn't read her diary for nothing. It will take some explaining to my men, but he can always pretend ignorance, shock, horror etc. about what his father did - the children can usually get away with it. And my men will accept it and he can move in and they can continue their strange affair under my roof. It amuses me that she is more like me every day.

She moved into the Residence today. When I saw her I could sense she was trying to restrain herself, to withhold some emotion, but she failed and ran towards me with tears streaming down her face and jumped into my arms with her hands around my neck and would not let go. She tries so hard to hate me, to deny to herself that we are more similar than she would like, but there is too much of me in her to resist it. She sobbed into my shoulder for a long time.

I felt such tenderness for her suddenly and I remembered the weight of her head against my neck when she was a tiny baby. It was a shock to me to have a baby daughter. I was surprised at how sorry I felt for all the terrible things I had done to women in my life - they were baby daughters too, once, and their fathers had held their soft heads against their necks and wished feverishly to protect them from all harm, if only for a moment - and I had paid their wishes no attention and abused them in ways to make a father's blood run cold.

The compunction didn't last long. In this kind of place, it rarely does.

In Two Genres: *Blood Intimates* and *The Smiths and the Coelacanth*

Ceridwen Dovey (DVYCER001)

A dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

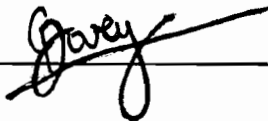
University of Cape Town

2006

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

Signature: _____



Date: _____

22/3/06

Abstract

In 1938, the incredible discovery of a prehistoric fish, a Coelacanth, had the world media descending on the sleepy town of East London in a feeding frenzy. The fish was caught just off the East London coast and landed up on the decks of a trawler in the harbour. The trawler's captain noticed the strange fish and called the nascent museum's curator, Marjorie Courtney-Latimer, to come and collect it for her display cases. She knew immediately it was no ordinary fish: it had prehistoric features such as fleshy, lobed fins and armoured scales. She in turn contacted the brilliant but eccentric ichthyologist, JLB Smith, in Grahamstown. He rushed to East London and saw before him an example of what Darwin had himself searched for decades before: a living fossil, thought to have become extinct 70 million years earlier, an extraordinarily powerful weapon in the fight to prove Darwin's theories on evolution and natural selection. Marjorie and JLB were showered with accolades, but JLB knew that he would have to find another intact specimen (the innards of the first fish had been thrown out) for science fully to accept his claim. This propelled JLB and his young wife, Margaret, on a desperate and obsessive search for another Coelacanth along the east coast of Africa.

The story of the discovery of the first Coelacanth and subsequent search for another is a strange fish tale, full of eccentric characters and obsessive personalities, and it gets to the heart of the still-controversial debates surrounding evolution and the origins of life. It is a story that captured the world's imagination in 1938, when people from around the world flocked in the thousands to catch a glimpse of a fish that could be a cousin of the first tetrapod – that is, potentially one of humankind's earliest ancestors. Today, however, very few people in the world, and even fewer South Africans, know the story of the Coelacanth and its scientific significance or the role it played in putting South Africa on the world's natural history map.

THE SMITHS AND THE COELACANTH

by

CERIDWEN DOVEY

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

University of Cape Town

EXT. UNDERWATER - DAY

A large dageraad fish struggles on a hook underwater. The shadow of a small canoe can be seen at the water's surface.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)

Len always said that fish feel no pain. Perhaps that is why he was drawn to them.

The fish is hauled up from beneath the water and into a small rowing boat on Knysna lagoon.

A small boy, JAMES LEONARD SMITH, age seven, crouches above it as it flaps its death-dance on the floor of the boat, his face a picture of delight.

His FATHER shows him how to pull the hook from its mouth, lets it suffocate a little longer, then hits it once on the head with the back of a knife. It dies instantly. Some faint sign of distress flits across Smith's face, but quickly disappears.

Fascinated, he watches his father swiftly scale the fish, and slit it along the belly to remove its guts and gills. He examines the organs closely.

SMITH'S MOTHER, a severe, gaunt woman, appears on the shoreline, her mouth in a thin line of disapproval.

MOTHER

(shouting)

If I have to tell you one more time to row that boat back here...

Smith looks at his father with concern. His father winks at him and tries a weak smile, but obediently begins to row the boat back to the shore of the lagoon, his shoulders hunched with another small defeat.

As they reach the shallow water, Smith's mother wades out and clips Smith on the ear, then drags him roughly from the boat.

His father looks on, powerless, and says nothing.

INT. SMALL BEACH COTTAGE - EARLY EVENING

Young Smith, his father and mother sit around a small dining table, eating dinner silently. Smith's father finishes his meal.

FATHER

That was very good, dear.

He pats his wife's hand, but she pulls it away sharply.

Smith's father stands and carries his plate into the sparsely-furnished kitchen. As quietly as he can, he takes an almost empty bottle of brandy from its hiding place under the sink, and slinks out of the fly-screen into the garden.

Smith's mother hears the fly-screen closing and sits very still at the table.

Smith moves to carry her plate to the kitchen and accidentally knocks over his water glass.

MOTHER

Oh, you stupid boy! Now look what you've done!

She throws down her napkin and storms to the front verandah, leaving Smith bewildered at the table.

He walks quietly to his room and closes the door. Then he pulls an amateur chemistry set from beneath his bed, and looks fondly at the tiny card still attached to one of the test tubes: From your father, for my clever son. He pulls a Bunsen burner and Petri dish from beneath the bed, and several vials of chemicals, and finally a thick textbook: CHEMISTRY FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. He opens it to a dog-eared page and reads earnestly.

Smith's mother sits on a rocking-chair on the front verandah, her hands fidgeting with a piece of tissue.

A group of YOUNG WOMEN, all prettily-dressed, emerge from the house opposite, gossiping and excited, for a late evening stroll. She watches them bitterly.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

A MOTHER lifts up her new-born BABY just after it is born to see its sex.

The baby is a girl.

The NURSE writes carefully in the birth certificate: MARGARET MACDONALD, born 26 September 1916.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)

I was born on his nineteenth birthday.

EXT. TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE - DAY

Smith (now nineteen), wiry and sharp-angled, with oddly intense eyes, walks across the Trinity College courtyard green holding a stack of books, oblivious to the sign saying: ONLY FELLOWS OF THE COLLEGE MAY WALK ON THE GRASS.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)

By that stage he had already taught himself seven languages, won a scholarship to Cambridge, and could identify every species of fish found in South Africa. (BEAT) I suppose you could say I was precocious in my own way, but in those days...well, what can I say. I was a girl.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A small girl, MARGARET, very tanned and with unsettlingly green eyes, sits at her desk alone.

Outside the window children run ragged in the playground, chasing each other. It is obviously break-time.

Margaret has a thin journal open in front of her: SOUTH AFRICAN SCIENTIST MONTHLY. She is engrossed in an article titled: EVOLUTION vs CREATIONISM in SOUTH AFRICA.

Suddenly a group of boys push their faces up against the glass of the classroom window and make ugly faces at Margaret, ridiculing her. She tries her best to ignore them.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)

I used to fantasize about being in the audience when Darwin debated Agassiz back in the 1800s. Or, more accurately, I would fantasize that I was Darwin, tearing down Agassiz's anti-evolution arguments.

INT. PUBLIC HALL - DAY

SUPERTITLE: BRITISH ROYAL SOCIETY, 1872

The hall is packed with MEN who are listening intently, their attention focused on the stage.

DARWIN and AGASSIZ stand at podiums facing each other on the stage, both in a state of heightened agitation, sweat at their brows, in mid-debate. Embossed name-plates have been placed before each scientist on the podium.

Between them is a low table, where a slab of slate with a clear outline of a fossil fish is propped.

DARWIN

Even if you *don't* accept that our ancestors were primates, their ancestors were reptiles, and their ancestors, in turn, were fish, the peculiar fins of this fossil fish - extinct seventy million years ago - give reason for pause...

Darwin holds up the slate with the fish fossil.

Members of the AUDIENCE crane their heads to see the rock slab. They buzz excitedly.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

It has strange, lobed fins - which seem to suggest that it walked on the ocean floor...

Darwin pauses for effect.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

And possibly, right out of the sea and onto land!

AUDIENCE MEMBERS grasp his meaning and stand up, unable to contain their excitement. They gesture at each and at the fossil and begin to talk loudly to each other.

AGASSIZ

(shouting above the din)
I refuse to admit the possibility of evolution - it is a mere mine of assertions! Let me repeat that every animal on the earth appeared here through an act of special creation by the creator himself!

A MAN in the audience at the back of the hall stands and points furiously at DARWIN.

MAN

Prove it, Mr Darwin! Make a man out of a monkey!

The man turns to the audience and gestures to them with his arms.

MAN (CONT'D)

Do you really want to have apes in your family trees?

Other AUDIENCE MEMBERS erupt in shouted refutations or support.

Agassiz looks slightly bolstered by the man's criticism of Darwin. He wipes his brow wearily.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)

(wryly)

I had to settle instead for being one of only two women accepted to study Chemistry at university.

INT. LECTURE HALL - DAY

The bustling lecture hall full of MALE STUDENTS goes deathly quiet as soon as a wiry man in a wheelchair, SMITH (age 39), wheels himself into the room. He wears open-toed sandals and a safari suit that is too big for him. His hair is short and spiky and prematurely grey, and crow's feet already show at the edges of his eyes.

MARGARET (age 20), as brown as a berry and with striking green eyes and a sizeable gap between her front teeth, watches Smith with curiosity. She wears slacks and a collared shirt.

Margaret turns to the only other female student in the class, ANNABEL, who is sitting beside her.

MARGARET

(whispering)

Whatever happened to him?

ANNABEL

The war. He was in East Africa. He got malaria, dysentery, acute rheumatic fever...or so I've heard.

Margaret watches Smith as he wheels himself to a low table set out with equipment.

SMITH

Put away your textbooks. Just give me your eyes and your pea-brains.

The students laugh nervously and put their textbooks in satchels or under the desks.

Smith loses his grip on a test tube and it shatters on the floor.

The students are deathly quiet, unsure what he is going to do.

Smith ignores it. He scans the room and notices the two women at the front of the class. He looks closely at Annabel, then down at the class register before him.

SMITH

Miss Bailey, please join me at the table.

Some of the male students whisper and laugh as Annabel walks uncertainly towards Smith.

Smith takes a long glass tube and a vial of liquid from beneath his podium and pours the liquid into the tube.

Smith then hands Annabel a match and indicates that she should light it and hold it in the tube.

After a few seconds a bright blue combustion wave travels down the length of the tube and then explodes with a sound that is identical to the bark of a dog.

Annabel jumps a foot high in fright.

Smith smiles smugly to himself as the smoke clears.

The male students dissolve into laughter and Annabel scuttles back to the safety of her desk.

SMITH

Now...can anybody tell me what just happened?

None of the students speaks. After a while, Margaret raises her hand.

MARGARET

It's one of the few examples of chemical luminescence in the gas phase. Carbon disulphide reacted with nitrogen monoxide to form nitrogen, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and sulphur.

Smith looks at her suspiciously. He holds out a piece of chalk to Margaret.

SMITH

Care to write the equation on the board?

Margaret walks slowly to the blackboard, thinks for a while, then writes an equation in chalk: $4 \text{ NO} + \text{CS}_2 \implies 2 \text{ N}_2 + \text{CO}_2 + \text{SO}_2 + \frac{1}{8} \text{ S}_8$

Smith is finally impressed.

Some of the male students look extremely put out.

A blonde, ditzy-looking secretary knocks nervously on the door.

SECRETARY

Professor Smith...so sorry to
bother you, but there's an urgent
call from your wife..

Smith barely conceals his irritation as he wheels himself
from the classroom.

INT. LABORATORY - AFTERNOON

Smith is sitting at the lab bench, dissecting a fish. He is
no longer in a wheelchair and his crutches are propped
against the bench. There is a wad of letters next to him on
the table.

Margaret hovers unseen just inside the open door of the
laboratory, obviously nervous. She takes a deep breath and
walks towards the bench.

Smith doesn't turn from his work.

SMITH

(dryly)

Miss MacDonald...always a
pleasure.

Smith continues with his dissecting.

Margaret approaches the bench shyly and stands next to
Smith, watching him work.

Smith notices her looking at the letters. He lifts the
first one off the pile and reads from it.

SMITH

I write from Japan. I hear you
have invented a fish
classification key for every
species of fish in the world.
Please identify enclosed
specimen.

Margaret looks at him quizzically, unsure what to say.

SMITH

Ichthyology.

MARGARET

The study of fish?

SMITH

I don't have the time to do as
much as I'd like. What with the
teaching and Chemistry
textbooks...

MARGARET
All seven of them...

Smith looks pleased that Margaret knows this, but then turns back to his dissecting, slightly irritated at being disturbed.

Margaret notices a nearby cupboard filled with bottles of preserved fish. With intense interest, she peers into the dark shelves of the cupboard. She spots something amidst the bottles and holds it up to the light. A faint outline of something can be seen on a piece of rock. She takes it back to the bench.

Smith glances at the rock.

SMITH
A copy of a fish fossil...

MARGARET
...that became extinct millions
of years ago.

Smith is surprised that she knows what it is, but says nothing more. He picks up the fossil and rubs his finger across the rock surface, seeming to lose himself in time.

A bell rings to signal the end of a class, startling Margaret into realising where she is.

MARGARET
Um, Professor...I'd like to apply
for the assistant lectureship in
Chemistry...after I graduate.

SMITH
Well. You've produced some
excellent work already. But the
university might not be open to
it...

Smith trails off, vaguely uncomfortable.

Margaret nods, but pulls her application from her satchel, places it on the bench beside him, and turns to go.

Smith immediately becomes absorbed in his fish again, and doesn't notice her backward glance from the door.

EXT. UNIVERSITY COURTYARD - DAY

Smith leans on his crutches beneath a tree, surrounded by a group of SEATED STUDENTS. Margaret is one of them.

SMITH

You are the select few I've chosen to go on this year's fishing expedition to East London.

MALE STUDENT

Prof, what does fishing have to do with chemistry again?

SMITH

Right, that's one less student. Margaret, tell Annabel she's invited.

MALE STUDENT

But Prof!

SMITH

I told you, no messing around.

EXT. EAST LONDON BEACH, EASTERN CAPE - LATE AFTERNOON

Smith and the students arrive at the beach on an ox wagon. Smith barks out orders: tents are pitched, fires lit, chemicals safely stored. Smith is barefoot, wearing loose knee-length trousers and a fishing hat. He hobbles around using only one crutch.

One of the MALE STUDENTS watches Margaret and Annabel carry wood to the fire.

MALE STUDENT

Think you can handle this, girls?

MARGARET

(to Annabel)

I didn't grow up with brothers for nothing...

EXT. SEA'S EDGE - EARLY EVENING

Students dot the beach, fishing rods held or in the sand next to them.

Further down the beach THREE BLACK WOMEN comb the rocks for mussels, keeping their distance.

Margaret wears gumboots and shorts. Her canvas fish bag is bulging. Another fish bites and she digs her heels into the sand for the struggle.

Smith wanders along the shore, watching each student in turn. He stops beside Margaret and watches her struggle in silence.

Margaret heaves, her face contorted with effort.

SMITH

Pain can be controlled.

Margaret looks at him in surprise and almost loses the fish.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I would know. I'm in constant pain.

Margaret is distracted by the sight of a young woman, MARJORIE COURTNEY-LATIMER, walking alone along the beach, holding her skirt full of shells and starfish. She is small and sprightly, with curly black hair, pronounced cheekbones, and glowing skin.

Marjorie approaches.

SMITH

Collecting for fun or for science?

MARJORIE

(sparkling)

Bit of both, really. I'm the curator of the new East London museum, and I'm always looking for things for our shelves.

SMITH

Courtney-Latimer, right?

MARJORIE

(bemused)

I see my fame has spread. Marjorie.

SMITH

Professor JLB Smith, Rhodes University.

MARJORIE

(taken aback)

The Professor Smith? Who designed the fish classification key?

Smith is pleased with the attention but tries not to show it. Margaret looks on at their interaction enviously.

MARJORIE

You must do me the honour of visiting the museum sometime. It's nothing special, but we'll get there.

Margaret finally reels in a large galjoen and lands it on the beach.

Smith hits it once on the head with the back of a knife and holds it out to Marjorie.

SMITH
Need a galjoen for your display
cabinets?

Margaret stares at Smith open-mouthed, then takes a knife from her own bag, slits the fish down the belly deftly and removes the guts without flinching.

Smith watches her, bemused.

Marjorie smiles, drops the shells and starfish and takes the large fish with both hands.

Smith watches her walk away until she is out of sight.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

The students sit before Smith as he does a fish dissection by firelight around the campfire.

Margaret looks at Smith's left hand closely.

MARGARET
(to Annabel)
Where's his wedding ring?

ANNABEL
Didn't you hear? They got
divorced - few months ago.

SMITH
If you lift the pectoral fin you
can make a clean dissection along
its stomach cavity...

A MALE STUDENT starts quietly strumming on a guitar, putting Smith's words to music.

MALE STUDENT
(singing softly)
Its dorsal and pectoral fins...the
angle they leave the body. If
you lift the pectoral fin...you can
cut it along its tummy.

The other students start to snort and giggle. SMITH stops the dissection and stares at them, unamused. The student boldly strums a few more chords.

MALE STUDENT (CONT'D)

Come on, Margaret, give us a
tune.

Margaret blushes but clears her throat. She takes the guitar from the male student and begins to sing a plaintive sailor's ballad, without once looking at Smith.

Smith is unimpressed and clears away the dissection equipment, pretending not to listen.

EXT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

Smith and his students emerge from a bus and run across the street in the pouring rain towards a low, squat, unassuming building with a handpainted sign: EAST LONDON MUSEUM.

Marjorie emerges from the reception with a handkerchief tying her hair back and her sleeves rolled up, and walks fearlessly into the rain to beckon them inside.

INT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

The students and Smith assemble around her, dripping wet.

MARJORIE

(with a hint of sarcasm)

My dears...let me show you some
of the wonders of this tiny
museum.

Marjorie leads them to a small exhibiting room and gestures grandly to the almost-empty shelves.

MARJORIE (CONT'D)

A bottled piglet with six
legs...some old evening
dresses...six birds riddled with
demestes...and my personal
favourite, my great-aunt
Lavinia's dodo egg.

The students laugh and split up to look around.

Marjorie motions for Smith to follow her to her office.

MARJORIE (CONT'D)

I'm trying to create a fossil
exhibit.

Smith looks around her messy office with horror. The floor is strewn with stone implements, fish in bottles of formalin and pressed flowers.

MARJORIE (CONT'D)
Just received this one from
Canada.

She hands Smith a fossil fish.

SMITH
I've been obsessed with these for
some time now. They sadden me, I
suppose. That lines die out,
cease to exist.

MARJORIE
Survival of the fittest...

Smith walks slowly around her office, surveying the posters
and notes stuck to every inch of the walls. He stops before
a hand-drawn poster titled: DARWIN'S FAILED SEARCH FOR A
LIVING FOSSIL.

SMITH
He actually searched for a living
fossil?

MARJORIE
Well, he *is* the one who coined
the term. Mounted a complicated
sea expedition. Couldn't find
one.

SMITH
Of course he believed they'd be
found deep in the ocean -
relatively untouched by the
environmental changes that drive
evolution -

MARJORIE
Exactly - a living creature
previously known only from fossil
records, lurking in the salty
depths.

Smith reads the poster more closely, then turns to
Marjorie.

SMITH
Thus proving his theory of
continuous descent with
modification...

Marjorie nods.

SMITH (CONT'D)
What formal qualifications do you
have, Miss Latimer?

MARJORIE

(unashamed)

None whatsoever. I think the clincher was the dodo egg. I told the Board in the interview I'd donate it to the museum.

Marjorie and Smith laugh.

Margaret trips over a box just outside the office door, making a large noise. She has been listening to their conversation, just out of sight.

Smith sees her before she creeps away, red-faced.

EXT. RHODES UNIVERSITY GROUNDS - DAY

Margaret stands in cap and gown holding a teacup. It is her graduation. Her eyes search the crowd. She looks forlorn.

MARGARET'S OLDER SISTER appears and links her arm in Margaret's.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Marge, I'm so sorry you didn't get the job...

MARGARET

(brusquely)

Oh, what was I expecting: a woman getting a lectureship in Chemistry? Fat chance.

Her MARGARET'S SISTER pats her arm sympathetically, then spots something out of the corner of her eye and frowns.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Who on earth is that old man making eyes at you?

MARGARET

What old man?

MARGARET'S SISTER

Don't look now, but he's right behind you. Grey spiky hair, thin as a rake...

Margaret disobeys and turns her head to find Smith looking in her direction. She blushes deeply.

MARGARET

Just like you, to think every old man is after me.

(MORE)

MARGARET (cont'd)
 That's my crotchety Chemistry
 Professor, silly - what on earth
 would he see in me?

Her sister is unconvinced.

Another FEMALE FRIEND, a ditzy blonde, greets the sisters,
 beaming. The friend thrusts out her left hand.

FEMALE FRIEND
 Guess what...I'm engaged!

Margaret's sister squeals with excitement and hugs her.

Margaret manages a weak smile, then excuses herself,
 pointing to her empty teacup as an excuse to leave.

She finds a quiet spot beneath a tree and sinks to the
 ground with her head on her knees.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Margaret, looking uncomfortable in a dress, sits behind a
 typewriter in a small office decorated only by a forlorn
 potplant.

A half-typed letter is wound into the typewriter, but
 Margaret has abandoned it and is reading from a scientific
 journal open on her lap, concealed behind the desk.

JLB Smith's name is clearly visible as the author of the
 article.

Her BOSS, a middle-aged man in a three-piece suit, suddenly
 pops his head around the corner of the door into the room.

BOSS
 Margaret, sweetheart, you do
 realise what time it is, don't
 you?

Margaret hurriedly closes the unseen magazine, glances at
 the wall clock, and starts to type again.

BOSS (CONT'D)
 Margaret...

She looks up at him with eyebrows raised, trying to conceal
 her frustration.

BOSS (CONT'D)
 Teatime? Does that mean anything
 to you? And I need that letter
 urgently!

Margaret realises what he's implying and goes hurriedly but unenthusiastically to the tea table to prepare his afternoon tea.

MARGARET
Sorry, Mr Munting.

He disappears back inside his office, apparently satisfied.

Margaret gazes out of the window for a long time, stirring his tea, then carries it through to his office. He is on a phonecall and points pompously to where she should place it.

Margaret returns to her desk, unrolls the half-typed letter, and places a clean sheet of paper in the typewriter.

She types a heading: "The Rate of Decomposition of Nitrogen Monoxide at Very Low Pressures."

She pauses, then types a name beneath the title: "By Matthew MacDonald."

EXT. GRAHAMSTOWN STREETS - LATE AFTERNOON

Margaret emerges from the building with obvious relief on her face, hitches up her dress without a second thought, climbs onto her bicycle, and pedals furiously down the road.

She takes a short-cut home through the university courtyard, ignoring the signs not to walk/ride on the grass, and sails across the green.

Smith emerges from the Chemistry building and catches a glimpse of Margaret as she pedals past. He watches her thoughtfully as the bicycle disappears around the corner of the courtyard and out of his sight.

EXT. MARGARET'S SISTER'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Margaret wheels her bicycle through the front gate and onto the porch where her sister, visibly pregnant, sits on a love-seat knitting baby booties.

Margaret throws down her bicycle and flops at her sister's feet. She puts her head on her sister's lap and sighs with frustration.

MARGARET
I'm never, ever going to get married.

Her sister smiles and strokes her hair.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Who would ever marry me? Men look straight through me, it's like I don't exist.

Now her sister's face becomes slightly worried.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

And God forbid that I open my mouth and say I've studied chemistry...

MARGARET'S SISTER

(surprised)

But Marge, you've never wanted men's attention!

Margaret is silent.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Why don't you take up some kind of a hobby? Something that would let you meet some nice young men...tennis, or bridge, perhaps?

Margaret sighs and closes her eyes.

EXT. MARGARET'S SISTER'S HOUSE - MORNING

Margaret emerges from the house onto the porch dressed in men's overalls, a hat with thin wire gauze covering her face and neck, rubber gloves, and thick boots.

She lets the door slam and waits for her sister - on the love-seat again - to look in her direction. Finally she does, and when she sees Margaret she jumps and gives a faint scream.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Margaret, what on earth are you up to?

MARGARET

(muffled from behind the gauze)

I have a new hobby. I've joined the Grahamstown Beekeeping Society.

Her sister watches in shock as Margaret lifts the hat from her head, flings her leg over her bicycle, and pedals off down the road with the hat under her arm.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - MORNING

Margaret leaves her bicycle against the wall of the farmhouse and walks around the house to a large stretch of land beyond it. Nobody is there. She wanders around the house, looking for signs of life.

A door slams and a thin man emerges in overalls. She walks towards him, but stops in her tracks when she realises who he is: Smith.

Smith smiles wryly when he sees her.

SMITH

Miss MacDonald...it seems you are
our only new recruit today.

Without making any gesture that she should follow him, Smith turns and heads towards the hives at the back of the piece of land, beneath a grove of trees.

For a moment, Margaret looks mortified, and tries to tuck her overalls more firmly into her boots to make them less baggy. Realising it's a lost cause, she sighs, picks up her headgear and follows him with determination.

Smith stops beside the beehive - several wooden boxes in sections stacked on top of one another - and puts on a helmet with gauze, similar to Margaret's. Margaret puts on her own home-made helmet.

SMITH

Make sure you tuck the gauze into
your shirt.

Margaret does her best but there is a small section at the nape of her neck that is not tucked in.

SMITH (CONT'D)

At the back of your neck too.

Margaret can't see the section that is not tucked in.

With something like impatience, Smith steps towards her and tucks it fairly roughly into her shirt. Margaret stands dead-still, as if in a trance.

Smith tears off a large piece from a grain bag and lights it so that it starts smoking.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Now we have to smoke them out the
top box, where the honey is.
Don't panic if they come for you,
just stand still.

Smith uses a pump to push the smoke through a hole in the top box. There is an immediate response to the smoke: a low, angry humming. Dozens of bees emerge from the box and fly towards Margaret.

Smith looks up at her, somewhat concerned that she will run away. She doesn't move, but looks on with fascination at the effect of the smoke. Smith smiles to himself and keeps pumping smoke.

SMITH (CONT'D)

That should do it.

MARGARET

Is it true beehives are always faced north to make the bees work for longer?

Smith nods.

SMITH

I wish we could do that with humans.

He lifts the top section off the hive and carries it away, across the back garden towards the porch of the farmhouse.

Margaret follows.

Smith's face (unseen by Margaret) is wracked with pain at the effort of carrying the box. He begins to limp slightly.

On the porch, Smith puts down the box and quickly removes his headgear. His face is pale and sweat pours down his face. Margaret does not seem to notice.

Smith opens the box cautiously. A few stragglers fly out and away.

Once they are gone, Margaret removes her hat. Her hair sticks to beads of sweat on her face. She wipes them away impatiently, engrossed in the process.

Smith takes a knife from his overalls and scrapes off the top layer of wax from the honeycomb, revealing the honey. Then he places the frames into a spindle: a mesh basket with a drum beneath it and a handle attached, and begins to spin the handle. The honey drips slowly down into the drum.

MARGARET

May I try?

Smith seems surprised that she's asked, but immediately lets go of the handle to let her spin.

He watches her face. She is deep in concentration on her task.

SMITH

And then we let it rest, and tap
off the wax.

There is an awkward silence. Margaret turns the spindle
slowly.

MARGARET

I caught a triggerfish a few
weeks ago. At the coast.

Instinctively, Smith puts his hand to his head and feels
along the back of his skull.

SMITH

Got bitten by one years ago.
Still have the hole in my head to
prove it.

Without thinking, he takes Margaret's hand - still in its
rubber glove - and places it at the back of his head.

She feels cautiously around until her finger finds the
hole, then she laughs spontaneously.

MARGARET

I see it's appropriately named..

Smith smiles too. Then they both suddenly feel sheepish.
Margaret removes her hand instantly.

SMITH

Miss MacDonald..

MARGARET

Oh, call me Margaret.

Smith pauses, as if he's lost his train of thought.
Margaret looks up.

SMITH

I'm sorry about the job - the
Chemistry Department, well, it's
somewhat backward, one might say.

MARGARET

(slightly defensive)
Oh, it's fine. I found something
else.

SMITH

(with interest)
In a lab?

MARGARET

Well, no, actually. In front of a
typewriter.

She smiles self-effacingly. Smith looks horrified, then thoughtful.

SMITH

Are you by any chance related to
a Matthew MacDonald?

Margaret loses her hold on the handle but quickly regains it. Smith seems not to notice.

MARGARET

Not that I know of.

SMITH

He's been writing some
interesting papers recently in
the Chemistry Monthly. I take it
you've seen them?

Margaret mumbles something unintelligible.

SMITH (CONT'D)

In fact, come to think of it,
he's working on some of the same
things you did last year...

Smith suddenly turns and stares at Margaret. The penny has dropped.

She pretends not to notice.

Smith bursts out laughing; an uncharacteristic spontaneous display of mirth.

Margaret says nothing, but grins as she turns the spindle.

When his laughter has died away, he sits, and she stands, on the porch in companionable silence.

EXT. OFFICE BLOCK - EARLY EVENING

Margaret emerges from her workplace looking radiant, immersed in her own thoughts.

Absentmindedly, she hitches up her dress and is about to throw her leg over her bicycle when she realises Smith is waiting for her beside her bicycle.

She blushes but forgets to unhitch her dress.

SMITH

May I...?

Smith takes Margaret's bicycle and begins to push it for her.

She walks beside him, unable to hide her delight at seeing him. They seem familiar with each other now; some time has passed.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I see Matthew MacDonald has had another productive month. I enjoyed his last paper, especially because I see it has generated some strong reactions in letters to the editor.

Margaret smiles.

MARGARET

Not the least of which is from a certain...Professor JLB Smith?

Smith chuckles.

They pass pedestrians and other cyclists on the streets of Grahamstown in the light of dusk and pass into the university courtyard, where the shadows are lengthening.

STUDENTS are gathered in small groups beneath trees or outside lecture halls.

PEOPLE walk their dogs around the courtyard.

Smith and Margaret once again ignore the DO NOT WALK/RIDE ON GRASS sign, and continue on their path across the green.

In the middle of the green, Smith stops suddenly, and looks at Margaret with something like consternation on his face.

SMITH

I have always had a premonition - a conviction - that I am destined to discover something quite outrageous. Something unknown to science.

Margaret is speechless, surprised, confused.

Smith suddenly lets go of the bicycle and it falls on its side in the grass. He grasps Margaret's hands in his own.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I can't promise you happiness, but I can promise you'll never be bored.

Margaret is still confused, unable to believe what she is hearing.

SMITH (CONT'D)
 Marry me, Matthew MacDonald. Link
 your destiny to mine.

Margaret's face creases into a broad smile. The evening light catches her green eyes, setting them on fire.

INT. MARGARET'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Margaret lies awake in her bedroom in her sister's house. A full moon shines through the open window and crickets chirp outside.

Margaret's sister pushes open the bedroom door in her nightie, now heavily pregnant.

MARGARET'S SISTER
 Marge...are you awake?

Margaret turns towards her.

Her sister walks to the bed and sits down heavily.

MARGARET'S SISTER (CONT'D)
 I just don't know what you see in
 him.

Margaret is silent. The whites of her eyes gleam in the moonlight.

MARGARET'S SISTER (CONT'D)
 Is it because he's brilliant?
 Are you hoping he'll give you a
 life you'd be unable to lead on
 your own?

Margaret gives no response.

Her sister sighs dramatically and stares out the window, exasperated.

EXT. SMALL CHURCH - DAY

FLOWERGIRLS create havoc in the rose garden behind a small church.

On a wooden bench in the shade, Margaret and Smith sit smiling for a photograph. They don't hold hands. She wears a white skirt and jacket and a white hat; he is in a suit that hangs loosely on his painfully thin frame.

Behind them the handful of GUESTS mills about on the church stairs.

Smith turns to Margaret while the photographer changes spools.

SMITH

Lass, it might be nicer if you don't wear that stuff on your face. And perhaps tie up your hair?

Margaret looks briefly taken aback, but she promptly uses her white glove to wipe off her lipstick and lifts her arms to tie her hair into an austere bun.

The photographer begins to flash again, then is distracted by the flowergirls' antics and turns to photograph them.

MARGARET

Len...

She pauses, as if momentarily embarrassed at using his first name.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I haven't even asked you about your first wife.

Smith shrugs nonchalantly.

SMITH

Not important. I was too young. I thought it was what one was supposed to do at that age.

Smith spots Margaret's sister, dressed to the nines and holding a tiny baby, rushing from the church down to Margaret holding a small suitcase.

SMITH (CONT'D)

In the end, she got in the way of my work.

MARGARET'S SISTER

I can't believe you're going on honeymoon! The taxi's arrived.

She thrusts the suitcase into Smith's hands.

Smith winces as he tries to stand, and pales from the old pains.

Margaret suddenly grips her sister in a fierce hug, then she takes the suitcase from Smith gently and begins to carry it to the taxi.

Margaret's sister watches Smith follow Margaret slowly to the gate, her face full of concern.

INT. SMITHS' DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Margaret sits at the dinner table alone, eating dinner. The wireless is on in the background. A plate of food sits unattended at the head of the table.

WIRELESS ANNOUNCER

German leader Adolf Hitler today began a military campaign to annex Austria - Hitler's homeland. Now it is rumoured that Hitler has his sights set on Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland...

Margaret stands and switches off the wireless with a sigh. She is noticeably pregnant.

She looks sideways at the uneaten plate of food and then continues eating, with a look of resignation.

INT. SMITH'S STUDY - NIGHT

Smith is bent over his desk in a pool of lamplight, surrounded by open books and vials and test-tubes. The study floor is ankle-deep with thick Chemistry tomes.

The study door opens cautiously and Margaret peers around it in her dressing-gown, holding a plate of food.

She climbs over the books on the floor to Smith's desk.

He is fast asleep.

She pulls the glasses from his face.

Smith wakes abruptly and tries to take his glasses from Margaret, as if to carry on working.

MARGARET

You're going to kill yourself with these textbooks. We're going to Knysna next week, whether you like it or not.

Smith submits to Margaret; lets her fold up his glasses.

SMITH

Lass...I'm not always the easiest person to live with. I should have warned you before we married.

MARGARET

Oh, don't you worry, I had an inkling...

Margaret smiles tiredly and sits on his desk.

She looks at Smith and moves her hand to caress his face. As she does, she accidentally knocks over a sepia photograph of Smith's parents: his mother stern and sour; his father defeated.

Margaret picks it up and looks at the photo in the lamplight.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You never speak about your mother.

SMITH

I haven't spoken to her since I was fifteen. She never understood me.

Margaret pulls another chair up to the cluttered desk.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I put myself through school, you know. Taught myself everything worth learning.

MARGARET

What did your mother think you would grow up to be?

SMITH

Anything but clever.

He smiles ruefully.

MARGARET

My mother wanted me to be Prime Minister of South Africa.

She snorts and grins.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Now where was I up to with the proofing?

Smith immediately locks back into focus mode, shuffles through the typed pages, and points to a page with an elaborate diagram drawn on it.

Margaret takes a pen and begins to read through it, while Smith goes back to making notes and diagrams beside her.

EXT. KNYSNA COTTAGE VERANDAH - EARLY MORNING

Smith sits on the verandah of a painted blue wooden cottage right at the edge of the lagoon.

Margaret appears from behind the cottage, dragging a heavy canvas canoe in her wake. She wears shorts and is barefoot and visibly pregnant. She launches the canoe into the water and then stands knee-deep and motions to Smith to get into the canoe.

Smith moves slowly and with some pain from the verandah, unwraps himself from a blanket, and gingerly wades into the water. He wears a safari suit and a helmet hat.

Once he is in, Margaret gets in and begins to paddle.

EXT. KNYSNA LAGOON - EARLY MORNING

The canoe is dwarfed by the expanse of the lagoon and the looming Knysna Heads leading out to open ocean. Margaret rows firmly and swiftly to a sandbank on the other side of the lagoon.

TWO LOCAL FISHERMEN are already digging in the sand.

Margaret wades out, kneels in the sand and begins to dig in the sand.

Smith watches her from the canoe. The fishermen look at her sideways.

FISHERMAN 1

You looking for bloodworms? None here, missy. We been looking all morning.

Margaret smiles at them politely and keeps digging until she is shoulder-deep in sand. The fishermen snicker.

Within seconds, Margaret surfaces clutching a handful of the thick worms. The fishermen look at her in amazement. Smith looks on, bemused.

Margaret paddles across to the Western Head, near a large rocky outcrop. They bait their lines with the worms and cast. They both have homemade rods with wooden centre-pin reel.

SMITH

I've been thinking that if I change my diet it might help with my...illness.

MARGARET

We may as well try - I mean, after everything else - your tonsils gone, your teeth, appendix...

SMITH

All smooth-skinned fruits grow
harmful organisms on the skin.
Tomatoes, grapes, apricots...we
won't eat those.

Smith gets a bite and struggles briefly with the line.

SMITH (CONT'D)

And I only want us to eat live
foods. Nothing cooked. No bread.
And no meat and carbohydrates in
the same meal.

Smith reels in a barbell.

Margaret kills it with a blow to the head with the back of
a knife, then looks at Smith expectantly, waiting for an
explanation.

SMITH

Barbell. Vermin. We'll bury it
near the fruit trees as
fertiliser.

MARGARET

Is this the one you said holds
the young in its mouth until they
hatch?

Smith nods.

SMITH

The male of the species, yes.

Margaret gazes with intense interest at the fish lying on
the bottom of the boat.

MARGARET

(tentatively)
What is it about fish, Len? For
you, I mean?

Smith takes a long time threading another blood worm onto
his hook.

SMITH

My father taught me to fish.

Margaret waits for him to go on, but he doesn't.

Smith recasts.

EXT. KNYSNA COTTAGE - LATE MORNING

Smith holds a large bunch of elf fish in the air, in a victorious pose, his eyes proud.

Margaret photographs Smith and his catch using a large, unwieldy camera.

Smith turns and walks towards the cottage with the elf.

Margaret pulls the barbell from the bottom of the canoe, wipes her brow, takes a spade and begins to dig beneath a peach tree.

A YOUNG WOMAN in a pretty summer dress and sunhat appears at the roughly-hewn garden gate. She is carrying a cake covered with a fly-net. She pushes the gate open with her hip and walks gingerly towards Margaret, who doesn't hear her coming.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hello there...

Margaret turns with a look of surprise. Her face is sweaty and dirty and her shorts are still wet from the boat.

The young woman looks slightly taken aback, but tries to hide it.

YOUNG WOMAN (CONT'D)

My husband and I are holidaying at the next cottage. I wanted to say hello.

Margaret lets the spade fall to the ground and takes the cake gratefully from the woman, and with nowhere else to put it, she places it on the ground in the shade beside the dead barbel awaiting burial.

The young woman again looks a little disgusted, but smiles sweetly when Margaret looks up.

MARGARET

Thank you - very kind of you.

The two women couldn't look more different from each other as they stand in the shade of the peach tree, both unsure what else to say.

YOUNG WOMAN

Well, I must get back - got to start dinner, you know.

Margaret smiles her farewell, then turns back to digging the hole.

The young woman takes a surreptitious - and slightly shocked - backwards glance at Margaret from the gate before hurrying away.

EXT. KNYSNA COTTAGE VERANDAH - EARLY EVENING

Margaret sits alone on the verandah watching the setting sun. She bends down and lifts a violin to her shoulder and begins to play.

After a few seconds of the plaintive music, Smith appears in the doorway. He walks to Margaret's side and stops her hand moving the bow.

SMITH
Music stirs the emotions.

Margaret looks at him hopefully, expecting praise.

SMITH (CONT'D)
So it has no place in my life.

Smith drops Margaret's hand.

She says nothing, then stands suddenly, and walks purposefully towards the canoe, still carrying the violin.

She puts it on her knees and starts to row forcefully out to the centre of the lagoon. When she is far from the shore, she once again places the violin on her shoulder and begins to play.

Smith stands on the verandah looking contrite. He can still see her but only hears a few faint notes drifting across the water from her playing.

INT. KNYSNA COTTAGE DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The door to the verandah opens quietly. It is Margaret. She lights a gas lamp, lifts down two bottles of preserved fish and a thick, well-thumbed book from the makeshift bookshelf, then seats herself at the rough wooden table.

The book is Smith's fish classification key. She picks up the first jar, looks closely at the fish, then begins to flip through the book.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)
He tried so often to explain it to me; this conviction he'd always had that he was destined to discover something for science. He believed it so strongly it made me afraid. Afraid that he would fail.

Margaret takes the preserved fish from its jar of formalin and places it on a piece of newspaper in front of her.

She begins to sketch the fish very delicately on a blank sheet of paper; glancing every now and then at the classification key.

INT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - AFTERNOON

Marjorie, the curator, kneels on the floor of her office, surrounded by large bones.

Across from her kneels ENOCH, her black assistant, a young man with kind eyes behind grey-rimmed glasses.

There is a small Christmas tree in the corner and carols playing on the wireless.

Marjorie and Enoch wipe sweat from their brows and sweat has seeped darkly through Enoch's shirt.

Enoch holds out two connecting bones to Marjorie. She examines them carefully, then searches through another pile.

The phone rings. Marjorie looks hopelessly at her desk, then at the bones surrounding her. She picks her way with difficulty around the bones and trips as she gets to the desk, knocking her hip.

MARJORIE

Ouch...yes, Marjorie here?

She listens briefly.

MARJORIE (CONT'D)

Now? Well, no, it's not the best time. It's Christmas eve, and I'm assembling a rare fossil dinosaur...

She listens again.

MARJORIE (CONT'D)

Okay, fine, fine. Tell Captain Goosen I'll be there in ten minutes.

She hangs up and turns to Enoch.

MARJORIE

Goosen's got a fish for us at the docks.

Enoch glances up at the clock on the wall, looking anxious.

ENOCH
My family will be waiting for
me...

Marjorie looks at him pleadingly.

He sighs deeply and takes his hat from the rack.

EXT. EAST LONDON FISHING DOCKS - AFTERNOON

CAPTAIN GOOSEN waits impatiently next to his trawler, looking frequently up at the road leading down to the docks. A Dodge taxi cab appears in the distance and he follows it with his eyes.

Marjorie and Enoch emerge and walk quickly down to the docks.

Captain Goosen's face lights up when he sees Marjorie. Goosen has a big nose, ears like handles and a fat chin. He tries to give Marjorie a kiss but she holds back and offers her hand.

Enoch hangs back a bit and doffs his hat to Goosen. Goosen ignores him.

GOOSEN
Marge...thanks for coming. You
won't be disappointed.

MARJORIE
You know me...can't resist a good
fish tale when I hear one!

They laugh and Goosen leads them to his trawler. A South African flag flies from one of the masts.

A CREWMEMBER in overalls and beanie brings gumboots for Marjorie and Enoch, and they pull them on. Marjorie hitches up her dress.

Goosen gets a glimpse of her legs and blushes, but can't help staring. He clears his throat.

GOOSEN
It's the most beautiful colour,
Marge - sort of mauve-blue. Never
seen anything like it. The men
almost threw it out with the
dogfish.

Marjorie and Enoch wade out onto the deck, ankle-deep in fish, following Goosen. The vermin have been swept to one side.

Enoch begins to sift through the pile.

ENOCH
 Deepwater shark, ray, sponge,
 starfish, rat-tail fish...

Goosen points to a fin in a pile. He and Enoch lift the fish and put it atop the pile.

The fish is large, about five feet long, with blue scales like armour and fleshy, limb-like fins. Its eye alone is bigger than a golf ball.

Marjorie and Enoch stare at the fish, entranced.

GOOSEN
 It tried to snap at my hand when
 I pulled it out. It was still
 alive.

Marjorie bends over and strokes its scales.

MARJORIE
 (breathless)
 What a strange, beautiful fish.

Goosen beams.

ENOCH
 Most unusual looking - look at
 its fins, and those scales...

MARJORIE
 Preserving it's not going to be
 easy...but I'll take it.

Enoch looks doubtfully at the huge fish, and then up at the waiting taxi.

EXT. DOCKS - AFTERNOON

Enoch and Goosen lug the sack-covered fish to the waiting taxi.

Marjorie unhitches her dress and walks smilingly up to the horrified TAXI DRIVER.

TAXI DRIVER
 Oh, no you don't...

He runs to the open boot and slams it shut.

TAXI DRIVER
 Over my dead body, put a goddamn
 dead fish in my taxi? You're
 crazy, woman!

Enoch and Goosen drop the fish and Goosen pulls a wad of notes from his back pocket.

The taxi driver stares at the notes, still horrified, but somewhat appeased.

EXT. MUSEUM - AFTERNOON

Marjorie and Enoch emerge from the taxi, carrying the fish between them.

TAXI DRIVER
(muttering to himself)
A goddamn fish. A goddamn
stinking fish.

The door slams and he speeds off, his tyres squealing.

A pompous middle-aged man, the MUSEUM DIRECTOR, walks over to them from the carpark. He reels from the fishy smell emanating from the sack.

MUSEUM DIRECTOR
And now? What have we here?

Marjorie excitedly uncovers the fish's head to show him.

MUSEUM DIRECTOR
(scornful)
Mistress Madge, you're making a
fuss about that? It's nothing but
a common rock cod!

He saunters off, disdainful.

Marjorie turns to Enoch.

MARJORIE
Enoch, I know it's Christmas eve -
but I just have a feeling about
this fish...

ENOCH
Well, the last time you had a
feeling about something it turned
out to be a dinosaur fossil...

Enoch pulls the sack down from the fish's head to gaze at it.

ENOCH (CONT'D)
Just don't expect a Christmas
present from me this year!

Marjorie grins and bends to look more closely at the strange fish.

EXT. EAST LONDON TOWN STREETS - AFTERNOON

Marjorie and Enoch each hold onto a handle of a large wheelbarrow, pushing the fish in its sack through the streets of East London. The streets are full of FAMILIES doing last-minute Christmas shopping.

There are trams down the centre of the main road, and dozens of bicycles, but only a few automobiles. WOMEN wear hats and calf-length dresses with stockings, MEN wear suits and hats. Many stores have the Union Jack hung up in their display windows.

Marjorie and Enoch dodge PEDESTRIANS as they push the wheelbarrow down the sidewalk. People look at them crossly, stare at Marjorie as if she's a crazy woman, at Enoch with disdain, and then wrinkle their noses with disgust as they catch a whiff of the fish sweating in the sun.

Every now and again Enoch catches Marjorie's eye and they both dissolve into laughter.

EXT. EAST LONDON MORTUARY - AFTERNOON

Marjorie and Enoch stand together above the wheelbarrow, looking embarrassed.

A MAN in a labcoat stands in the doorway of a building labelled EAST LONDON MORTUARY, his face twisted in disbelief. He stares first at the fish, then at Enoch, then at Marjorie.

MAN

What an iniquitous request!
Whatever is everybody going to say!

ENOCH

With all due respect, sir, I don't think they'll notice..

He glances at the MORTUARY sign above the door.

MARJORIE

And it's such a beautiful fish..

MAN

Get your stinking fish and that kaffir boy out of my face. And fast.

The door slams in their faces.

Marjorie and Enoch look furious. Marjorie kicks the door in anger, but to no avail.

EXT. EAST LONDON COLD STORAGE - AFTERNOON

Marjorie and Enoch stand together above the wheelbarrow, still looking embarrassed.

Another MAN in overalls stands in the doorway of a building labelled EAST LONDON COLD STORAGE, an expression of amazement on his face.

MAN
(doubtful)
Well, are you going to eat it?

MARJORIE
(indignant)
Of course not!

MAN
Well then I can't help you, lady.

He looks at her as if she's crazy and shuts the door on them.

MARJORIE
Oh darn...

Enoch wipes the sweat from his face, exhausted.

In a fit of frustration, Marjorie lifts the wheelbarrow and tips the fish into the bushes beside the cold storage building and storms off pushing the now-empty wheelbarrow.

Enoch looks at her with alarm, then starts to laugh slowly, and bends down towards the fish lying in the bushes, covered in the oily sack.

EXT. TAXIDERMIST'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

A contrite Marjorie and bemused Enoch stand above the wheelbarrow with the recovered fish (now covered in leaves), looking exhausted.

The taxidermist, ROBERT CENTRE, looks at them kindly. He is ancient, with a fragile, bony face. A handpainted sign hangs on his porch: ROBERT CENTRE, TAXIDERMIST.

ROBERT
Marge, you do know it's Christmas eve...

MARJORIE
I know, Mr Centre, I'm so sorry, but this fish - well, you'll understand when you see it.

She whips the sack off the fish with a flourish.

ENOCH
Isn't it beautiful?

Robert looks warily at it, unconvinced. The fish has faded from steel-blue to bronze-brown.

MARJORIE
I've never seen anything like it before. If I weren't afraid you'd think I had sunstroke I'd swear it looks prehistoric...

ROBERT
(wearily)
Okay, Marge, I'll do it.

Marjorie hugs him tightly and Enoch smiles with great relief, hanging back at a slight distance.

Robert disappears inside the house to fetch his equipment.

Marjorie sits on the stairs of the porch, pulls a scrap of paper and a pen from her pocket, and begins to sketch the fish roughly.

Robert returns to the porch with a bed sheet and a vat of formalin, in which he starts to soak the sheet, with Enoch's help.

EXT. KNYSNA COTTAGE VERANDAH - MORNING

Margaret and Smith sit silently on the verandah in the morning sunlight, eating green peas for breakfast.

The POSTMAN arrives with a stack of letters.

POSTMAN
Professor Smith? Your mail went via Grahamstown, so it's a few weeks late.

Smith takes two bundles impatiently from the postman, hands one to Margaret and starts to work through the other pile.

Suddenly Smith drops his fork and stands abruptly, overturning his chair. The sun shines through the back of the letter, illuminating a rough sketch of a fish.

Smith rushes into the cottage, leaving Margaret staring at the sketch.

Smith re-emerges holding a thick book with the title:
FOSSIL FISH.

He flips through the book feverishly, then pauses at a certain page. He holds the sketch next to the drawing of a particular fossil: they are almost identical.

SMITH
(muttering to himself)
Could it really be...No, it's
impossible...

Smith starts to pace nervously up and down the verandah, wringing his hands, his face determined, then he turns to Margaret and takes her hands in his.

SMITH (CONT'D)
If this fish is what I think it
is...it will be the greatest
scientific discovery of the
century!

His face darkens.

SMITH (CONT'D)
What if they think I'm crazy!
Nobody will ever believe me...

Margaret looks hopefully up at Smith, her eyes wide with excitement.

He paces up and down the verandah, muttering to himself.

Margaret clutches the letter, a wave of terror passing over her face.

MARGARET
Len...she wrote this over two
weeks ago! What if...

She can't bear to finish the sentence.

EXT. KNYSNA TRAIN STATION - DAY

Margaret, dressed in the same shorts and t-shirt and sandals she was wearing on the verandah, sprints down the length of the railway track, holding a small case.

PASSENGERS already on the train stare in shock and disapproval at her from their windows.

The CONDUCTOR blows his whistle; the train is about to leave.

SMITH comes hobbling after Margaret, carrying nothing.

Margaret barely makes it onto the carriage; then she turns to lift Smith onto the now-moving train.

EXT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

A taxi screeches to a halt outside the East London Museum. Smith emerges, rushes for the entrance and disappears inside.

A few seconds later, Margaret emerges awkwardly, her shirt stretched over her pregnant belly. She lumbers towards the entrance.

INT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

Margaret walks slowly through the first few display rooms of the museum. Mounted buck trophies loom above her on the walls and various stuffed birds are lit up in display cases.

A JOURNALIST, with a camera and massive flash around his neck, creeps quietly behind Margaret into the museum.

Margaret turns the corner and finds Marjorie and Smith huddled together over something obscured from view.

For a second, Margaret's face looks uncertain, as she remembers her previous envy of Marjorie.

MARGARET

Miss Latimer...how lovely to see you.

Marjorie looks up, glances quickly at Margaret's belly, and smiles as warmly as she can manage.

Smith steps aside to reveal a large, mounted copper fish. His face is flushed with excitement.

SMITH

(hoarsely)

This is extraordinary. This is a fish that supposedly became extinct 70 million years ago, at the same time as the dinosaurs!

Margaret stands absolutely still, looking at the fish, then her husband, in amazement.

The journalist pauses and eavesdrops on them in the next room.

MARGARET

(quietly)

What makes you think that?

Smith turns and points at the fish.

SMITH

You see that tail? No living fish has a tail like that. It's a Coelacanth, I've not a shadow of a doubt. A living fossil.

Marjorie bends and strokes the fish with wonder.

MARJORIE

What Darwin predicted would one day be found...

SMITH

"The living remnants of a once preponderant order!" This discovery will be on the lips of every scientist in the world!

Smith circles the fish repeatedly. His face clouds and he turns to Marjorie.

SMITH

But to lose the innards is a tragedy. It will be difficult to prove anything without them...other scientists will crucify me for this...

MARJORIE

(distressed)

I didn't hear back from you for three weeks - I had no choice - the fish was rotting...

SMITH

A terrible loss to science!

Marjorie's eyes fill silently.

Margaret steps forward and takes her arm.

MARGARET

(sternly)

You should be grateful for this alone, Len.

The journalist steps forward suddenly from his hiding place, camera raised, and photographs the fish, blinding them with the flash.

Smith lunges for the journalist, snatches the camera from him, rips out the film and tramples on it.

SMITH
 (icily determined)
 If a photograph of this fish is
 published, another scientist
 might identify and name it before
 I do.

The photographer, Margaret and Marjorie look in shock at Smith, flabbergasted.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

Margaret, Marjorie and Smith stand on the platform in a row next to a steam train that is about to depart, looking up into the carriage.

Margaret and Marjorie are still somewhat awkward with each other.

TWO ARMED POLICEMEN stand to attention inside the train carriage above a large, rectangular box. One of the policemen sniffs the air, glances at the box and screws up his nose in disgust. The other officer surreptitiously nudges him with his elbow and pretends not to notice the smell.

Smith boards the adjacent train carriage and leans down to help up Margaret, who seems surprised but pleased at his chivalry. Smith pauses on the step and bends down to Marjorie who is still on the platform.

SMITH
 (whispering)
 I'll have it safely back to you
 as soon as I can..

Marjorie smiles nervously and waves as the train pulls out of the station.

Smith and Margaret sit side by side on the train seat. He looks out the window distractedly, and she looks at him without him knowing, smiling faintly.

MONTAGE SEQUENCE:

SHOTS that fade in and out of each other:

1. Smith directs as their HOUSE MAID and their GARDENER lug the heavy, rectangular box through the Smiths' house and manage to lift it with great effort onto the dining room table.

2. Smith excitedly pulls apart the box with the back of a hammer to reveal the Coelacanth on a bed of cottonwool.

Smith gives the horrified house maid and gardener, who reel from the fishy stench, a stern lecture:

SMITH

You save the fish first if
there's a fire, do you hear? And
you're never to leave it
unaccompanied, understand? Never!

The house maid and gardener nod, but behind Smith's back roll their eyes at each other.

3. The house maid and gardener hold a large white bedsheet in the back garden to form a backdrop against which to photograph the fish, which is perched on a box covered with another white sheet.

Smith and Margaret photograph the fish from every angle, as the maid and gardener become increasingly exhausted from holding up the sheet.

A neighbour, unnoticed by Smith, pokes his head above the fence and looks with amazement at the Smiths' antics, shaking his head.

4. Smith sits at the dining room table in labcoat, glasses and gloves, feverishly at work dissecting and analysing the fish.

Margaret stands above him scribbling notes he dictates while he dissects.

The house maid carries through two plates of steamed carrots for Smith and Margaret, who are still working at the dining room table. Neither Margaret nor Smith notices the food.

5. Marjorie sits at the window of the museum in East London in the early evening, watching the light outside fade, looking wistful.

EXT. SMITHS' HOUSE - DAY

Margaret's sister opens their garden gate with difficulty - she is loaded with soft toys and a baby mobile. She walks up to their porch, towards the front door, which is slightly ajar.

INT. SMITHS' HOUSE - DAY

Margaret's sister pushes at the door tentatively and then drops the toys in horror when she sees the massive, dissected fish spread out on the dining room table, with Smith and a very pregnant Margaret hovering above it, looking dishevelled and slightly crazed.

Smith and Margaret look up at her like deer caught in headlights, panicked, then relax when they see who it is.

Margaret walks to the door, makes sure nobody is hiding on the verandah, pushes it closed and locks it.

Her sister's jaw hangs open, unable to believe what she is seeing.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Look, I don't even want to know what's going on...just tell me where the baby's room is.

Margaret looks at her sister blankly.

MARGARET'S SISTER (CONT'D)

Oh God, there is no baby's room, is there? Margaret, look at you! You're about to burst!

Margaret looks nonchalantly down at her huge belly. Her sister steals a look at the fish and Smith.

MARGARET'S SISTER (CONT'D)

(under her breath)

I just pray it's not born with fish scales...

Margaret's sister picks up the soft toys and disappears into the bedroom, sighing heavily.

Margaret and Smith return to the dissection as if nothing's happened.

After a few moments, Smith puts down his scalpel and turns to Margaret, his face contorted.

SMITH

What if I'm wrong? I'll be ridiculed for the rest of my life. Can I really stake my entire reputation on..

He pauses and looks down at the fish.

SMITH (CONT'D)

On this?

Margaret looks him in the eye with utter confidence.

MARGARET

Yes, Len. You can.

INT. SMITHS' HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Smith and Margaret pack the Coelacanth with infinite care into the wooden box, using cotton wool to pad it.

A scientific paper lies beside the box, addressed to Nature Magazine, England.

The wireless is on in the background, playing a military march.

MONTAGE OF SWIRLING NEWS HEADLINES:

Local and international newspapers and magazine covers land on top of each other, their headlines highlighted, and pile up as if somebody is throwing them on top of one another.

There are snippets of various announcers on radio describing the discovery, and dramatic music.

1. Newspaper headline: LIVING FOSSIL CAUGHT IN THE SEA

Radio snippet: A Coelacanth has been discovered in the seas off East London, it was announced today...Crowds are clambering to catch a glimpse of what could be the missing link...South Africa has erupted in an upsurge of national pride, already claiming this fish as their own national icon...

2. Magazine headline: ONE OF THE MOST SENSATIONAL SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES OF THE CENTURY

Radio snippet: Scientists from around the world have been shocked by the discovery...some say it's impossible...

3. Headline: THE MOST STARTLING LIVING FOSSIL EVER DISCOVERED

Radio snippet: Thousands of people have descended on East London from around the country...the rest of the world is looking on in amazement, eager for a distraction from the threat of imminent war...

4. Headline: LOCH NESS OUTDONE

Radio snippet: Credit goes to the lady curator of the East London museum and a fish specialist from Grahamstown, Professor JLB Smith...

5. Headline: LONDON ZOO OFFERS £1000 FOR A LIVE COELACANTH AND IS BUILDING A SPECIAL TANK FOR IT

Radio snippet: But the innards have been discarded, which some scientists say makes the claim that this is a prehistoric fish untenable...

INT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

Frantic JOURNALISTS swarm around the room where the mounted Coelacanth is being displayed, jostling to get to the front of the crowd for a better view.

Marjorie and Smith walk into the room with a POLICE ESCORT surrounding them. The photo bulbs flash like lightning and the journalists surge forwards. The policemen push back the journalists to stop them from being mobbed.

Marjorie looks overwhelmed; Smith looks unperturbed, as if he feels he deserves this kind of attention. They stand in front of the fish.

JOURNALIST 1

Professor Smith! Professor Smith!
Carl Tanner, New York Times. Is
it true that this fish is the
missing link?

SMITH

No, and I have by no means
claimed that. It is very closely
related to similar early types
that are accepted as the
ancestors of man and all land
animals. The closest you could
say is that it's the cousin of
the missing link.

JOURNALIST 2

Professor Smith! John Burns,
London Independent...Does this
fish walk along the ocean floor?

SMITH

Yes, I have no doubt that this
fish crawls about on the bottom
of the sea - if you look at its
fleshy limb-like fins, you won't
doubt it either.

JOURNALIST 3

Professor Smith, Simon Banks from
the Cape Times...could you
explain the scientific name
you've given it?

SMITH

I've named this species *Latimeria
chalumnae*, after Miss Courtney-
Latimer, this lady beside me, who
saved the fish for science, and
the Chalumna River mouth, near
where it was found.

The photo bulbs flash again briefly, capturing Marjorie as she blushes slightly and smiles.

MARJORIE

I really couldn't have done it
without my assistant, Enoch...

She pulls Enoch from the crowd behind her. He stands next to her awkwardly. Only a few journalists take photographs.

JOURNALIST 3

(to Smith)

Isn't she the one who threw out
the innards?

Marjorie stops smiling. Smith ignores the question but looks unnerved.

JOURNALIST 4

(in thick Afrikaans
accent)

Professor Smith, Jan Dorings, Die
Burger. Could you tell us the
scientific significance in
layman's terms?

SMITH

Let's just say this is as
exciting as walking down the
street and bumping into a live
dinosaur...

Some journalists gasp, others laugh; they all scribble furiously in their notepads.

SMITH

In fact, it's even more exciting
because the Coelacanths are more
ancient than dinosaurs - the
oldest fossils are 375 million
years old!

JOURNALIST 4

But what if the theory of
evolution is false? Then this
fish means nothing! I mean,
really, Professor, are you trying
to tell me that this fish is my
ancestor? Talk about a fish tale!

Some of the other journalists snigger at him openly.

SMITH

(bitingly)

My dear sir, what point was there in Eve eating an apple from the tree of knowledge if you people insist on being so damn ignorant?

Most of the foreign journalists laugh loudly. The Bloemfontein journalist pushes his way out of the crowd angrily.

EXT. EAST LONDON MUSEUM - DAY

PEOPLE queue in a long line that snakes around the block, out of sight, sweating in the hot sun, waiting patiently for a glimpse of the fish.

INT. MARJORIE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Marjorie draws the curtains in her office, exhausted but happy.

The Museum Chairman appears at the door and clears his throat.

CHAIRMAN

(cloyingly)

Mistress Madge...how proud of yourself you must be!

Marjorie looks at him suspiciously.

MARJORIE

I think everybody's glad to have an excuse to take their minds off Hitler...

He clears his throat again.

CHAIRMAN

Given the significance of this specimen, the Board feels that the Coelacanth should perhaps be...um...sold to the British Museum.

Marjorie looks at him with fire in her eyes. He loses courage.

CHAIRMAN (CONT'D)

(timidly)

Where true experts could observe it and it could be safely kept for posterity.

Marjorie advances on him threateningly.

MARJORIE

(livid)

You laughed at me when I first started here, at my dodo egg and shabby bone collection. And now you want to SELL the one significant thing this museum has to the British Museum, which is so full of significant things it doesn't know what to do with them? Over my dead rock cod.

Marjorie slams the door in his shocked face and then leans against it and laughs quietly to herself.

INT. BRITISH ROYAL SOCIETY HALL - EVENING

Smith stands at a podium on the stage of the British Royal Society. He is nervous, and the bright spotlight on him reveals beads of sweat at his hairline.

The Royal Society banner hangs behind him, next to a large Union Jack.

Margaret sits in the audience in a prim floral dress, looking green with nervousness. She holds their tiny baby, WILLIAM.

The hall is packed with PEOPLE. Those without a seat stand along the sides or at the back of the hall. Many audience members wear military uniforms.

Smith clears his throat.

SMITH

Thank you for coming to this open session. It has been suggested I start by taking questions, since you have all already read my article in *Nature*.

A MAN in the audience raises his hand and stands to ask a question.

MAN

About your claim that there are only minor differences between living and fossil Coelacanths - that it has barely evolved - surely you need an intact specimen to prove it?

WILLIAM, the Smiths' baby, starts to wail. Margaret shifts nervously and bounces him on her knee.

Smith looks crumpled but severe.

SMITH

You are correct. It is imperative to find another specimen with its innards intact for me to substantiate my claim.

The AUDIENCE MEMBERS murmur to one another. Smith tries to pull himself together and continues more belligerently, stabbing the podium to emphasise his points.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Let this fish be a powerful warning against overly confident scientific statements. In view of its fossil record and all the work that has been done in the sea, it is astounding that this specimen has been found alive, swimming right beneath our noses...

Another AUDIENCE MEMBER raises his hand to ask a question.

MAN 2

Of course this fish escaped notice: it obviously has retreated to the darkest depths of the sea!

SMITH

To the contrary - I think this fish was a stray, brought down to East London from East Africa by the Mozambique current. I believe this fish will be found in relatively shallow water, living in rocky ledges and reefs - everything about its anatomy points to this...

Smith is drowned out by the audience murmuring and various audience members shaking their heads. He stalls.

Margaret looks around at the audience hopelessly, still bouncing William.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I intend to find another one. Intact.

Some audience members start to laugh at Smith.

The CHAIRMAN motions to Smith to leave the stage.

Smith slowly gathers his notes and leaves the stage dejectedly.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)
 You'd think one Coelacanth would
 have been enough. Not for the
 British Royal Society. And
 certainly not for Len.

INT. SMITHS' KITCHEN - DAY

SUPERTITLE: GRAHAMSTOWN, AFTER THE WAR

Margaret and WILLIAM (now 7) eat toast in the kitchen.

William hears the postman at the door, runs to collect the mail, and returns with a fat wad of letters. The radio is on in the background.

Margaret opens a letter and starts to laugh. William looks at her expectantly.

MARGARET
 Here's another great one for the
 crackpot file - they just keep on
 coming! Bloody fundamentalist
 Calvinist Afrikaners...

William takes the letter and reads aloud.

WILLIAM
 Heathen! How dare you say a fish
 is our ancestor? Haven't you
 heard of Adam and Eve?

William turns the letter over.

WILLIAM
 Mom, this one's from America!

MARGARET
 You'd think the war would have
 distracted them all...

William plays with his last piece of toast.

WILLIAM
 (wistfully)
 Ma, when's dad coming home? How
 much longer is he working on the
 trawlers?

Margaret does not answer.

William turns to look at her and she is staring with amazement at a letter she's holding in her hand, her mouth open.

EXT. TRAWLER DECK - DAY

The seas are rough and the sky is threateningly stormy.

Smith holds onto the side of a large fishing trawler as it lurches towards the port. He is dressed in identical waterproof gear and gumboots to the mostly coloured WORKERS on the trawler. His face is grey with sea-sickness.

WORKER 1

Hey, Prof! Maybe today is the day!

The worker winks at another worker who grins.

WORKER 2

(singing to the tune of a hymn)

Today is the day that the Coelacanth will be found...

Smith smiles weakly at them, but grips the trawler more tightly.

WORKER 1

I am going to be a RICH man today, I can feel it in my bones! Don't worry, Prof, we'll share the reward with you if we find one!

Smith nods without smiling, his face now green.

The trawler docks and the fishermen and Smith go into instant action, hauling the nets overboard.

Fish of all sizes and shapes - dogfish, rays, sharks, starfish - spill out onto the trawler in a slippery mess.

Smith takes one of the baskets piled on the side, kneels, and begins to sort methodically through one section of the pile. He looks exhausted.

INT. SMITHS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

Margaret sits up in bed alone, paging through Smith's fish classification key.

She tilts her head as she hears noises at the front door, and starts to put on her slippers. She takes a letter from the bedside table.

Smith appears at the bedroom doorway, exhausted and still wearing his waterproof coat. His face shows weary disappointment.

MARGARET

We're going to East Africa,
Len..we're going to look for a
Coelacanth...

Smith snatches the letter from her and reads it quickly.

MARGARET

An independent funder wants to
pay you to do research for a book
on the sea fishes of southern
Africa!

Smith's eyes light up. Margaret watches him, smiling.

SMITH

Mozambique first. Lourenco
Marques, Ilha da Mozambique,
Lumbo, Pinda. When can we leave?

EXT. GARDEN OUTSIDE SMITHS' HOUSE - DAY

The lawn is almost completely covered by a chaos of boxes and jars, explosives and chemicals.

Smith and Margaret both hold long hand-written lists and are checking each box for its contents.

The yard is full of PEOPLE milling about, trying to help.

William clumsily bumps into a large box marked "EXPLOSIVES" and falls to the ground, laughing. Smith looks up.

SMITH

(furious)
Somebody get this kid out of
here!

Margaret frowns at Smith but herds William to a car where Margaret's sister is waiting in the driver's seat.

William climbs into the back seat and then hangs tearfully out the window. Margaret wipes away his tears.

MARGARET

You'll be in Knysna! You can
catch as many fish as you like!

WILLIAM

But I want to catch fish with
you.

MARGARET

Darling, I've explained why you
can't come - it's far too
dangerous...

She grips his hands tightly.

MARGARET'S SISTER

Good luck, Marge...come home in
one piece, please?

Margaret's sister starts the car.

Margaret looks around for Smith frantically and spots him
across the garden.

MARGARET

James Leonard Brierley Smith,
your child is leaving, the least
you could do...

Smith hurries across the lawn as fast as he can with his
permanent limp, and shakes William's hand through the
window. Then he is distracted by somebody calling for him
and wanders off.

Margaret frowns with irritation and tries to compensate by
squeezing William's hand again.

The car pulls away and Margaret watches it sadly until it
is out of sight.

SMITH

Margaret! Where the heck is the
paraffin?

Margaret sighs with exasperation, but hurries away to
Smith's side.

EXT. DOCK LOURENCO MARQUES - EARLY MORNING

SUPERTITLE: LOURENCO MARQUES, MOZAMBIQUE, 1949

Smith and Margaret stand on the coconut palm-lined dock,
surrounded by dozens of boxes. The sea burns blue behind
them. Smith wears khaki shorts, sandals and a safari shirt
and hat. Margaret wears a simple floral dress and sandals.
They are both sweating profusely.

Facing them is a line of PORTUGUESE OFFICIALS in white
military uniforms and their smartly-dressed WIVES.

Smith and Margaret greet each in turn along the line,
shaking hands.

OFFICIAL 1

Professor, the residence is within walking distance - if you and Mrs Smith don't mind a stroll?

The official pushes forward a MOZAMBIQUAN MAN dressed in a butler outfit. The man begins to load their luggage into a buggy.

SMITH

It is essential to my health that we walk daily. I take it you have already hired the artists?

OFFICIAL 2

Of course, Professor. Our wives saw to that.

Smith and Margaret fall into step behind the GOVERNOR, who leads the way up an avenue lined with flamboyant trees. An ancient mansion with a derelict decadence looms before them.

Smith stops to rest half-way, and the official looks at him curiously.

LOCAL MOZAMBIQUANS sell coconuts, oranges and cashew nuts along the avenue.

On the steps of the residence is a small group of YOUNG PORTUGUESE STUDENTS.

OFFICIAL 1

The artists, Professor...

Smith and Margaret shake hands with the students, who lead them inside the mansion.

The bottom floor has cavernous ceilings and long bay windows overlooking the sea. It is sparsely furnished, with overturned boxes functioning as chairs and tables. They wander through the rooms.

OFFICIAL 1

You will of course come up to the Palace for breakfast?

Smith and Margaret exchange a quick look that shows they have other plans.

EXT. LOCAL FISH MARKET - MORNING

Margaret and Smith wander through the thickly-thronged fish market.

VENDORS shout and display their wares, but stop to stare at the two white foreigners who are calmly working their way through the fish stalls.

Margaret and Smith each carry a thick wad of posters. As they walk through the market, they hand them out to as many FISHERMEN as they can. The poster has a reprint of a photograph of the Coelacanth and text in three different languages.

Fishermen group around the posters to read them, and gesticulate wildly as they discuss the content. Some fishermen take dozens of posters from the Smiths.

LOCALS stare at the Smiths open-mouthed, watching them as they dig into barrels of fresh fish with their bare hands, and Smith holds fish up to the light to measure size and shape, and lifts fins and tails, inspecting the fish. Then he takes a wad of notes from his pocket and buys four fish of wildly-varying size and colour from a VENDOR.

SMITH

(in Portuguese)

Do you get these often? Many times?

The vendor laughs shyly but nods his head. The WOMAN sitting behind him laughs at Smith openly.

Smith hands the fish to Margaret, who calmly puts them in a large canvas sack she has slung across her shoulder. If they are heavy, she does not show it.

SMALL CHILDREN gather around the Smiths and follow them as they go about their fish purchasing. They mimic Smith behind his back, picking up small fish and holding them up as if to inspect them, then laughing hysterically.

Smith is oblivious to them but Margaret smiles quietly.

Several large ships are docked at the port. Smith notices a PORTUGUESE CAPTAIN in full uniform along the promenade and runs after him with a handful of posters. Other CAPTAINS notice the commotion and join Smith's group, listening intently and each taking bundles of flyers.

EXT. RESIDENCE - MORNING

Smith and Margaret walk slowly up the avenue towards the mansion. Margaret's canvas sack is bulging with fish.

The students are lounging about on the verandah of the mansion, smoking.

Smith storms past them up the stairs, his face grim. At the top of the stairs he turns.

SMITH

I work twenty-five hour days and
I expect the same from everyone
associated with me.

The students stare at him, dumbfounded, not sure whether he is joking. A brave student, a HANDSOME YOUNG MAN, grins brazenly.

STUDENT

Professor, we're simply relaxing.

SMITH

Relaxing? But you relax when you
sleep, and you'll relax forever
when you're dead.

Smith continues into the mansion, then stops again but doesn't turn around.

SMITH

And please forgo that disgusting
habit in my presence.

A few of the students hurriedly put out their cigarettes, but others grin and continue to smoke.

Margaret follows Smith but pauses at the top of the stairs.

MARGARET

(softly)

The professor demands a standard
of work and behaviour far above
the capabilities of the normal
man...

She is about to say something else, but stops herself and walks quietly into the house.

INT. MANSION - DAY

Margaret and the students sit on boxes around a large wooden table in one of the expansive rooms. The windows are open and the sound of the sea and rustling palms drifts through. The heat outside is oppressive, but the room is shadowed and cool.

A large fish has been propped up on the table and the students each have a set of paints before them. Every now and then one of the students makes a face at the fishy smell and the others giggle. Margaret sits at the head of the table, concentrating hard on her drawing.

Smith hobbles into the room with sweat pouring off his face and a thick bundle of Coelacanth posters in his hand. He dumps them onto the floor beside the table.

The students group around to look at the flyers.

FEMALE STUDENT
A reward poster? How much are you offering?

SMITH
One hundred pounds.

The students gasp and one of them whistles slowly.

MALE STUDENT
That's more than the locals earn in a lifetime!

SMITH
It's an important fish.

MALE STUDENT
(under his breath)
I'll say...

Smith lifts a stack of sketches from the table and looks through them.

SMITH
Who did these?

The students look up, inspect the sketches and then shake their heads.

Margaret does not look up.

SMITH
Well, one of you must have - who was it?

One of the students motions with her head to Margaret, who is still bent over her drawing.

SMITH
Lass, you didn't tell me you could draw! Why have I been doing my own sketches for years?

Margaret blushes deeply and mumbles something.

Smith looks back at the sketches, shaking his head, but pleased.

EXT. GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S PALACE - NIGHT

Smith (still in khaki shorts and open-toed sandals) and Margaret (who has made some effort by changing her dress) walk up an imposing flight of stairs lit by flaming torches on either side. Smith hobbles somewhat and clutches Margaret's arm suddenly, his face in a spasm of pain.

TWO UNIFORMED SERVANTS come forward to lead them ceremoniously through the palace and onto the outdoor back patio.

A long, elaborately-set table glistens by lamplight on the patio. Around it, MEN and WOMEN mingle with drinks in their hands. All of the male guests are in official military uniform and the women are beautifully dressed and wear layers of make-up. Some of the women throw disdainful looks at Margaret's attire.

The GOVERNOR spots Smith and Margaret looking somewhat awkward at the edge of the gathering.

GOVERNOR

Professor! Welcome...what to drink - brandy, gin, vodka?

He snaps his fingers at one of the nearby servants who promptly appears at his elbow.

SMITH

(in Portuguese)

Water, thank you. And for my wife too.

GOVERNOR

You speak Portuguese? Already?

MARGARET

My husband speaks fourteen languages. He has a photographic memory.

GOVERNOR

My, my...well, I must say we are expecting big things of you, Smith. Now that the war's over...

SMITH

The priority was hunting Nazis, not Coelacanths - rightly so.

They are joined by another red-faced, uniformed OFFICIAL who shakes Smith's hand vigorously.

OFFICIAL

And with those flyers, surely you will have success?

GOVERNOR

One hopes, but it takes a good deal of hard work to hammer anything outside his ordinary life into a native's head!

The two officials chuckle together while Smith looks vaguely uncomfortable.

GOVERNOR (CONT'D)

Professor, must you insist on leaving tomorrow for the north - and with your illness?

SMITH

I must, indeed.

Smith instinctively looks around for Margaret, but doesn't see her anywhere.

RED-FACED OFFICIAL

The north? How far north?

SMITH

As far as Baixo Pinda, if we can.

RED-FACED OFFICIAL

Pinda? But that's lion country, and the natives are wild, untamed - you won't see a white face up there unless you look in your shaving mirror.

SMITH

(unperturbed)

Yes, so I've heard.

Smith turns again to look for Margaret. He spots her near the set table.

She is watching several large flies buzzing about a covered dish on the table. She glances over her shoulder to make sure that nobody is watching, then swats at them with her palm. Three fall to the table. She digs in the pocket of her dress, pulls out a pair of tweezers, and picks each fly off the table and into her pocket.

One of the official's WIVES sees her do this and looks horrified. Margaret turns to find the wife staring at her.

MARGARET

(embarrassed)

(MORE)

MARGARET (cont'd)
 I found a chameleon in the bushes
 today. Behind the residence. I've
 taken it as a pet.

The servants begin to usher the guests to their places at
 the long table.

Margaret thankfully escapes the woman's scrutiny by moving
 to the other end of the table.

GUESTS slowly begin to take their places.

As one of the FEMALE GUESTS passes Smith, she puts her hand
 on his arm and looks up at him, batting her eyelids.

FEMALE GUEST
 Tell me, Professor, do you bathe
 in the sea? We're always told it
 has medicinal benefits.

SMITH
 Seldom, and then in a rockpool.

Their interaction has attracted the attention of many of
 the other guests at that end of the table. They listen
 attentively.

FEMALE GUEST
 Why ever not, if you're so mad
 about fish?

Smith holds out her chair for her.

SMITH
 (mysteriously)
 Because I know what's out there.

The guests around him laugh, titillated.

Margaret quietly takes her seat opposite Smith.

INT. SMITHS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

Smith and Margaret lie side by side in their bed, eyes wide
 open, with the moonlight streaming through the window.

All the dogs in Lourenco Marques seem to have congregated
 to howl at the moon outside in the gardens of the
 residence.

Smith throws aside the covers with impatience and begins to
 dig around under the bed in the dark. Margaret sits up to
 see what he is doing. He emerges with a long rifle and
 loads it.

MARGARET
(whispering)
Len, what are you doing? You
can't...

SMITH
I'm going to need your help here,
lass. Your party trick?

Margaret relaxes her face into a look of comprehension and starts to smile. She gets out of bed and stands beside Smith at the open window.

He aims the gun out of the window, towards the moon, and fires. As the gunshot fades, Margaret begins to howl at an earsplitting volume like a dog dying in agony. Eventually her howl dies down to a whimper, then complete silence.

The dogs don't make a sound. Then lights begin to go on in the surrounding mansions, and OWNERS begin to shuffle out onto their balconies to whistle for their dogs and call their names urgently.

Margaret and Smith laugh as they climb back into bed.

EXT. DECK OF CABIN CRUISER - EARLY MORNING

Smith and Margaret wave back to the port - where the Portuguese officials are now no more than specks on the horizon - from the deck of a stout Vedeta, a forty-foot, diesel-engined cabin cruiser, as it powers out of the Lourenco Marques port and into open sea.

The SKIPPER AND CREW (all local Mozambiquans) are busy on the deck, and Smith insists on helping, even though he is so weak from his constant illness that he can barely lift any of the boxes.

Margaret is barefoot, wearing khaki shorts and her shirt sleeves rolled up to her shoulders.

One of the CREW points to the water excitedly and Smith and Margaret are immediately at the side of the deck, straining to see. Two fins glide through the water, side by side, but suddenly the fins disappear and the Smiths see that it is not a pair of sharks but a giant manta ray with its wings lifted, cruising through the water.

As they approach, several CREW MEMBERS fetch harpoons and aim for the ray's expansive body. They throw them simultaneously, and the spears find their mark like pins in a giant pin-cushion. The ray thrashes and flounders, its blood seeping into the water.

The crew manages to pull it overboard and immediately presents it to Smith.

He is delighted and Margaret fetches a vat of formalin from below the deck and begins the process of preserving it.

EXT. DECK OF CABIN CRUISER - DUSK

One of the crew, ABDULLAH, launches the small dinghy off the side of the cruiser, which is anchored in the shallows near the edge of a seemingly uninhabited island.

Smith and Margaret climb into the dinghy, followed by Abdullah, who begins to row them towards the shore.

Margaret takes three hard-boiled eggs from her canvas bag and shells them, handing one to each man and eating the third herself.

As they approach the island, Smith begins to squint his eyes and stare more closely at the beach. Margaret follows his gaze and also looks perplexed. Abdullah smiles and nods his head.

ABDULLAH

(in Portuguese)

No, you are not seeing things.
The island is alive with snakes.

They reach the shallows and Abdullah jumps out and beaches the dinghy on the sand.

Smith and Margaret, both barefoot, climb out. The sand further up the beach, at the edge of the vegetation, is seething with snakes of all colours and sizes. Smith walks closer to the seething mass, unafraid. Margaret hangs back a bit and watches. Spiny monkey-orange trees form a line at the edge of the sand.

ABDULLAH

Come. We will go around the
rocks. The ruins are on the next
beach.

Abdullah heads off across the sand, keeping close to the water. Margaret follows, but Smith, exhausted, sits down on the sand, motioning to Margaret to go on without him.

Abdullah and Margaret climb over the rocks at the edge of the stretch of sand, and onto the next beach.

At the edge of the vegetation are the ancient, rambling remains of a stone fort. Abdullah lights the end of a paraffin-dipped torch and waves it before him as he approaches the ruins. The snakes slither away from the flame.

Margaret is enchanted by the ruins. She climbs the remaining stairwell into the second level of the fort, with Abdullah behind her.

ABDULLAH

This is all that remains of colonisation of the Portuguese in much earlier times. Hundreds of years ago.

Margaret scrambles up the stairwell and onto the roof of the fort. Abdullah follows.

ABDULLAH

You see, they have been interested in our land for a long time now.

Margaret gazes out at the sea.

MARGARET

Why did they leave?

ABDULLAH

They were killed. By the Saccalaves, a seafaring people from Madagascar. They'd come in the dead of night and creep along the shore...the Portuguese had no idea until it was too late.

He smiles and climbs down from the roof.

Margaret lingers, watching the sky's dusk colours, then follows Abdullah back to the shore. It is darker now, and the flame illuminates their faces.

As they approach Smith, they see him sitting with his head cocked to one side, listening intently. Then he begins to slap his face, his arms, his legs.

SMITH

(urgently)

It's a swarm. Malarial mosquitos.

MARGARET

Malarial? How can you tell?

ABDULLAH

They don't make a sound.

Abdullah begins to swing the flame through the air into the swarm and all three run for the rocks. They clamber over them, slapping at themselves as they climb.

On the next beach, Abdullah digs into his shirt and brings out three cigarettes, all the while swinging the flame frantically in the air.

ABDULLAH
 (out of breath)
 Here, smoke these...it will keep
 them away...

Smith grabs a cigarette, lights it without a second thought on the torch flame, and begins to puff furiously. He immediately succumbs to a coughing fit, but continues to run along the beach towards the dinghy.

Margaret does the same, and all three run along the beach while exhaling cigarette smoke into the swarm of mosquitoes.

They reach the dinghy, push it into the water, and Abdullah starts to row urgently towards the cruiser. The torch flame lights up their faces as they face each other in the dinghy.

Margaret takes one look at Smith puffing away on his cigarette and dissolves into laughter. Abdullah begins to laugh too, and finally Smith throws his cigarette butt overboard and laughs despite himself.

The oars churn glowing green phosphorescence in the water.

EXT. DECK OF CABIN CRUISER - MIDDAY

Smith is poring over a large, creased map on the deck as the cruiser slices through the water. The shore is visible from the deck. The skipper stands nervously beside him.

SMITH
 You mean to tell me we're
 navigating with an Admiralty
 chart that's hundreds of years
 old?

SKIPPER
 There are no others, sir. The
 Portuguese haven't even managed
 to chart these territories. It's
 too far north.

A cluster of men with canoes on the shore see the cruiser and immediately run for the cover of the vegetation. The crew members start to laugh.

MARGARET
 Have they never seen a white
 person before?

The crew members go silent. Finally, Abdullah speaks up.

ABDULLAH

The opposite, madam. They think you are coming to jail them for not paying canoe tax.

The crew members roar with laughter again.

SMITH

(unamused)

But I must speak to them! I need to ask them if they've ever caught a Coelacanth!

ABDULLAH

Not unless you are a fast runner, sir.

The crew erupts hopelessly into laughter once more.

Smith ignores them and looks out at the sea. He tugs on the skipper's arm.

SMITH

Here, this will do. It's not too close to the reef.

The skipper anchors the cruiser.

Smith disappears beneath the deck and re-emerges with three bricks of Ammon Gelnite in one hand, and three detonators (a three-inch long percussion cap of nicked tubing with a long waterproof fuse attached) in the other.

Margaret hands him a pair of pliers and he clips the fuse to half its length. Margaret glances up at the skipper's nervous face and smiles.

MARGARET

Don't worry, we've done this before.

The skipper just looks more nervous.

Abdullah launches the dinghy overboard and Smith and Margaret climb into it.

SMITH

Make sure you and the crew follow up with the canoes.

Abdullah nods, but looks doubtfully at Margaret's arms.

She grabs the oars and begins to row so strongly through the water some crew members gasp out loud. Smith looks vaguely bemused.

As they approach the coral bank, Smith takes a box of matches from his pocket and prepares to strike one.

SMITH

You ready, lass?

He strikes the match, lights the end of the fuse, and hurls it in a bowling motion through the air away from the dinghy.

Margaret abruptly begins to row urgently in the opposite direction, her arm and leg muscles tensed with the effort.

Twelve seconds later, there is the sound of a muffled underwater explosion, like a door slamming, and a fifty-foot column of water shoots into the air in the distance. Almost immediately, hundreds of fish appear on the surface of the water.

SMITH

Abdullah! Now!

Abdullah and the rest of the crew launch small canoes from the deck and row swiftly towards the thick layer of fish floating on the surface of the sea.

Margaret rows back towards the fish. Most of them are dead, many are simply stunned. The crew, Smith, and Margaret lean over the side of the dinghy and the canoes with long pole nets to scoop the fish off the surface and into the boats.

Sharks begin to appear in the water around the boats, attracted by the vibrations of the explosion and the masses of dead fish. They thrash and eat their fill.

Eventually most of the fish have been scooped and the canoes and the dinghy return to the cruiser. They have to scoop the fish out of the bottom of the boats and onto the deck of the cruiser using buckets and baskets and nets.

The pile of fish accumulates on the deck, a vivid, seething mass of primary colours and patterns. Margaret climbs aboard, disappears beneath the deck and reappears with a notepad and set of watercolour paints. She kneels beside the pile and begins to pick individual fish from the pile, making quick colour notes in her pad.

Abdullah climbs aboard and watches her work.

ABDULLAH

It is sad that their colours fade so quickly after death. You must work against time.

He picks a strange fish out of the pile which has fleshy red lips in a sultry pout and hands it to Margaret.

She takes it from him and matches the colour of its lips to her palette, then pulls a brightly-striped fish from the pile.

Smith climbs aboard the deck, sweating and pale from the effort of scooping the fish. He looks at the pile of fish like a small boy on Christmas morning looking at his presents.

SMITH

My god...parrot fish, needlefish,
angel fish...can you believe it?

Margaret smiles but keeps working steadily.

Smith begins to sort through the ones Margaret has already made colour notes on. He brings a microscope from below deck and places individual fish beneath it to examine them, then makes notes.

Smith turns back to Margaret, unable to contain his excitement.

SMITH

And if we're really lucky...

MARGARET

Don't say it, Len. You'll jinx
yourself.

Abdullah is watching the pile of fish quietly. He turns to Smith.

ABDULLAH

Professor, is it really necessary
to bomb to collect these fish?

Smith's face hardens into a look of defiance.

SMITH

There is no anticipation whatever
on the part of the fish. Death is
instantaneous and painless. If I
had my way, we'd be bombing for
Coelacanths in the shallow water
closer to the reef, but the
authorities won't allow it.

ABDULLAH

It's not the fish I'm worried
about - it's the fishermen.
There'll be nothing left for
them...

As Margaret sorts through the pile, a fish with short, stout spines in its fins makes a final death leap and stabs her in the hand. Her blood flows quickly.

Abdullah takes one look at the jumping fish and his eyes widen with panic.

ABDULLAH
Rabbit fish...

Smith looks up sharply and sees Margaret's bleeding hand. He hands her disinfectant from a medical kit he has brought onto the deck.

Margaret tears a piece of cloth off the bottom of her shirt, dips it in disinfectant, wraps it around the wound, and continues taking colour notes on the fish, showing no sign of pain.

Abdullah watches her closely and whispers something to another crew member. The crew member's face registers shock, and he too stares at Margaret.

ABDULLAH
(with disbelief)
That is impossible...the stab of
a rabbit fish is one of the worst
pains known to man.

Smith looks approvingly at Margaret, then concentrates on his microscope.

The blood has begun to seep through the cloth around Margaret's hand. Her face has become pale and her jawline tight, but she continues to work.

Abdullah cannot take his eyes off Margaret, as if he is waiting for her to fall over at any second.

The last few sharks lurk in the water around the cruiser.

EXT. JUNGLE PATH - EVENING

Margaret carries a vat of formalin along a path cut out of thick jungle that bleats and buzzes with various insect and animal sounds. Smith walks beside her, carrying a small box. The wind is violent and throws sand into their faces.

The crew trails behind them, also loaded with boxes and vats and baskets of fish.

The path opens up suddenly to reveal a red-and-white striped lighthouse in a large clearing, with a verandah running along the side.

The clearing is full of LOCALS, who turn and stare at the Smiths as they appear as if from nowhere. In the distance, perched amidst the bush, their huts are silhouetted.

The Portuguese lighthouse keeper, LEONEL MOURATO, spots them and runs towards them, clapping his hands for the locals to form a semi-circle to welcome the guests. Leonel smooths his hair and his impeccably-ironed shirt and bows ceremoniously to the Smiths. A well-groomed squirrel perches on his shoulder.

LEONEL

(in Portuguese)

I welcome you to the lighthouse at Pinda. May your stay be fruitful and the fish plentiful.

SMITH

(in Portuguese)

I'm relieved you were informed of our arrival - I must admit I doubted the mail would ever reach you.

LEONEL

It is a miracle. The roads are only in use for a month or so a year.

Leonel tries to take the vat from Margaret to carry it to the lighthouse, but she shakes her head and smiles and lugs it herself towards the verandah. Leonel hovers around the Smiths and the crew, trying to help.

The locals stay in their semi-circle, watching with wide eyes as the strangers and their even stranger equipment are loaded into the lighthouse.

The WOMEN'S faces are masked with dry, white paste and many of them smoke cigarettes with the burning butt in their mouths.

Leonel sees Margaret looking curiously at the smoking women.

LEONEL

The wind, Mrs Smith. It makes the cigarette last longer.

Night falls suddenly and the semi-circle of locals begins to dwindle as people wander back to their huts.

The crew and Margaret continue lugging boxes and vats into the lighthouse.

Leonel follows Margaret on each journey back to the shore, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Every now and then he looks over his shoulder or sharply into the bush on either side of the path.

Eventually Abdullah and the crew say their farewells to the Smiths and head back to the cruiser, leaving the Smiths alone with Leonel on the verandah covered with fine mesh wire.

Leonel unslings the rifle from his shoulder and gestures to a door covered with mosquito netting leading into the lighthouse.

LEONEL

I have not had guests here for so long...well, since I was posted here, to tell the truth. It has been a long, long time.

He bows again ceremoniously, then moves gracefully ahead of them to open the door leading into the tiny dining room. A table has been set elaborately with a starched white cloth and candle-holders and rough wooden chairs. In one corner is an oil-burning refrigerator.

On the wall is a corkboard with a single item pinned to it: a Coelacanth reward poster.

SMITH

Well I'll be damned...how on earth did this get here so fast?

Leonel smiles, with pride.

LEONEL

The Lord works in mysterious ways, Professor. Please, sit.

He disappears through a door, leaving Smith and Margaret staring up at the poster. The sounds of clanging pots and pans float from the kitchen. One of Margaret's hands is heavily bandaged.

Leonel re-emerges from the kitchen, carrying a large platter. He presents it proudly.

LEONEL

A local specialty...roasted tree bat. Freshly plucked from its baobab tree on the island of Lumbo.

Smith's face looks almost green. Margaret glances at Smith with concern.

Leonel sees the look on Smith's face and frowns.

Smith pushes away his chair suddenly and leaves the room.

Leonel is dismayed.

MARGARET

My husband has special dietary requirements. Essential to his health. You must understand...

Leonel nods but looks deeply hurt. Smith re-appears with a handful of small tins and a banana. He opens a tin of beans and begins to eat it straight from the tin with a fork.

Leonel regards the meal with slight contempt.

Leonel pours three glasses of water as if he is pouring gold. He looks expectantly at the Smiths, expecting thanks, but receives none.

LEONEL

Water...it is a precious gift out here in the wilderness.

He gets no response. With effort, Margaret helps herself to a small helping of roasted tree bat. She picks at it with long teeth, then smiles weakly at Leonel.

LEONEL

Water...it is very scarce.

MARGARET

(apologetically)
Oh, yes, right, thank you, Leonel.

She takes a large swig of water and nods to him appreciatively. Satisfied, he tucks into a large helping of tree bat. Smith peels the banana. They eat in silence.

INT. SMALL BEDROOM IN LIGHTHOUSE - NIGHT

Smith lies in a small camp bed, fast asleep. The room is bare except for boxes of their equipment and one old-fashioned cupboard.

Margaret sits at the edge of another camp bed, feeding flies to a large chameleon. She puts it back in a small cage and fastens the latch.

She slowly unwinds the long bandage from her hand, revealing swollen flesh and a deep wound lined with white pus. She flinches as she dabs the wound with disinfectant, then slowly winds a fresh bandage onto her hand.

She lies down in the bed and blows out the candle.

After a few seconds, the roar of a lion pierces the air. Margaret's body stiffens. It sounds so close it could be next to the bed. She holds her breath. Another roar.

MARGARET
(whispering)
Len! Did you hear that?

Smith does not stir in the next bed. Margaret swallows loudly and pulls the covers closer, despite the sweat on her brow. She lies with her eyes wide open in the dark.

EXT. LIGHTHOUSE - EARLY MORNING

Margaret and Smith, both in khaki shorts and shirts and helmet hats, and laden with nets and canvas bags bulging with equipment, leave the lighthouse.

MARGARET
Hang on a second, Len.

She walks around the side of the lighthouse, to the windows of their bedroom. She squats and looks closely at the sand.

MARGARET
I knew it.

Smith, intrigued, follows her. In the sand below their window are the tracks of two large male lions.

Leonel emerges from the lighthouse with rifle ready and a large empty cake tin. His pet squirrel is once again perched on his shoulder.

LEONEL
It's this way to the warrula trees.

He starts to walk into the bush, banging on the tin every few steps and looking carefully into the long grass.

Margaret follows, and Smith brings up the rear. As they walk through the bush he looks over his shoulder repeatedly. Margaret jumps at a movement in the bush, but it is just a bird.

They reach a thicket of trees and Leonel shows Margaret and Smith how to scrape the bark pulp off the tree and collect it in small vials.

While they work, Leonel hangs back with rifle cocked, keeping an eye on the long grass behind the trees.

Margaret and Smith work swiftly. When they've filled three, they follow Leonel back through the bush and towards the reef.

There is a loud rustle in the bushes beside the path and Leonel turns and trains his rifle on the spot.

Two tanned ITALIAN MEN appear suddenly on the path. They throw their hands in the air on seeing the gun, laughing.

ITALIAN MAN 1
(in thickly accented
English)
Leonel! You have forgotten us
already?

Leonel looks irritated.

ITALIAN MAN 2
Visitors! Where do you hail from?

MARGARET
We've come from South Africa.
Fish expedition.

SMITH
What are you doing in this
godforsaken place?

ITALIAN MAN 1
Godforsaken? Have you seen the
reef in the morning light yet?

ITALIAN MAN 2
We pay the natives to dive for
shells to make cameos in Italy.
Huge demand. Meant to leave years
ago, but it's hard, you know?

He gestures to the surroundings. Smith begins to fidget impatiently. Margaret notices and leads the group along the path towards the beach. The Italians follow.

The path through the bush ends at the edge of a stretch of white sand. Before them the sea has patches of varying colour, from deep green and blue to palest green where the water is shallowest. A massive coral reef extends from the edge of the water out as far as the eye can see. It is low tide: the reef is exposed.

Italian man 1 looks smugly at Smith as if he is personally responsible for the early morning beauty of the reef.

Margaret and Smith waste no time in pulling on heavy, tin-lined, knee-high rubber boots and rubber leggings. Leonel and the Italians watch with deep interest.

Margaret picks out various bits of equipment and puts each item in a specific pouch of her canvas bag: nets, jars, the vials of bark, test tubes, a long pair of tweezers, and a hunting knife.

ITALIAN MAN 1
What is in the vial - this pulp?

MARGARET

Poison.

Margaret slings the heavy canvas bag over her shoulder, gives him a sweet smile, and strides onto the exposed coral reef. Smith follows her. Leonel sniggers at the Italian men's confusion.

Smith wades out into thigh-high water of the reef with a harpoon and nets.

Margaret stays on the higher section of the reef, her eyes searching. She sees a large rockpool and quickly dams it using coral and netting. Fish flit colourfully beneath the surface. She takes a pinch of the warrula bark pulp from the vial and sprinkles it on top of the water. Then she moves onto another large rockpool, dams it similarly, and sprinkles the poison.

When she returns to the first rockpool, the fish are swimming in circles in rapidly increasing panic. Slowly they asphyxiate and float to the surface.

Italian man 2 has followed Margaret onto the reef, without her noticing. She jumps when he speaks.

ITALIAN MAN 2

Do you believe in God?

Margaret looks briefly annoyed at his intrusion, then recovers herself and begins to scoop the dead fish out of the rockpool.

MARGARET

The creatures I study are too lovely to be created by mere chance.

ITALIAN MAN 2

Do you believe in playing God?

Margaret stops scooping and looks him straight in the eye.

MARGARET

It may look cruel, but this work is essential if we are ever to catalogue all the fish species that exist. Is that not glorifying God, to show men the wonder of all of his creatures?

The Italian looks doubtfully down at the surface of the rockpool, thick with dead fish. The fish in the second rockpool have begun to swim in frantic circles.

Margaret continues to scoop out specimens, then she squats beside them, takes her watercolours out of the canvas bag, and begins to make detailed colour notes of the dead and dying fish.

The Italian turns to walk away.

MARGARET

Watch your right foot.

The Italian, confused, pauses with his right foot still in the air. He looks down. A giant spotted moray eel as thick as his thigh has emerged from a hole in the reef just below his right foot. He jumps to the left, out of its way.

It sways with its fang-lined mouth open.

With his eyes attuned to their camouflage against the coral, he now sees that the reef is literally alive with eels - big, small, coloured, spotted, crawling and gliding all over the coral, some of them four to five feet long.

He looks back at Margaret sheepishly.

ITALIAN MAN 2

I have heard tales of natives
being seized by morays, pulled
into deeper water, and drowned.

Margaret just smiles and keeps working.

MARGARET

It's the stonefish you really
want to watch for. One stab in a
main artery and you're dead.

The Italian picks his way back across the reef gingerly.

Further out on the reef, Smith throws his spear into the water.

EXT. LIGHTHOUSE VERANDAH - LATE AFTERNOON

The lighthouse porch has been transformed into a makeshift laboratory. Vats and jars of preserved fish in formalin cover the floor. Smith has set up the microscope on a rough wooden table in the corner of the porch.

Smith injects some of the larger fish with formalin.

Margaret writes out each fish's scientific name on a tiny label, and then delicately ties them to each specimen's tail-bone.

Leonel approaches from the courtyard outside, and looks dismayed at the mess on his porch, but says nothing.

Margaret uses water colours to shape and paint rough sketches of each of the rare specimens, then she places them in jars of formalin.

LEONEL

Professor, the men have come, as you requested.

Smith looks up from his microscope and sees a small group of LOCAL MEN waiting outside the porch. He wipes his hands on his shirt and leaves the porch.

The local men lay out grass mats in the clearing and motion for Smith to sit down. Many of them light pipes. Smith refuses their offer of a pipe. They are all old. Leonel joins the group and sits cross-legged.

SMITH

Ask them if they have heard of the Coelacanth.

LEONEL

(in local language, not Portuguese)

The Coelacanth fish, do you know it?

Two of the men nod excitedly and reach into their pouch bags. They draw out Coelacanth reward posters like treasured possessions and unfold them carefully.

LOCAL MAN 1

Dez Contos Peixe!

Smith is once again amazed to see the reward poster.

LEONEL

They call it the hundred pound fish.

Smith nods, having already understood the Portuguese.

SMITH

Ask them if they have ever caught such a fish.

LEONEL

(in local language)

Have you ever caught this fish?

All of the old men except one shake their heads. He nods slowly and deliberately. Smith looks at him sharply. He is missing a finger on his right hand. Leonel notices Smith staring at his hand.

LEONEL

Moray eel.

LOCAL MAN 2
 (in local language,
 Leonel translates
 simultaneously)

Yes, I caught one once. Long ago. One evening in the deep channel south of Bazaruto Island. In the water it was like a big rock cod but when I got it out it had big scales and strange fins. That is why I remembered it. It was very oily. I have never seen one again.

Smith is visibly over-excited as Leonel translates. He looks at the porch where Margaret is making sketches.

SMITH
 This man caught a Coelacanth!

Margaret drops her paints and swings open the porch door. She is smiling, but looks worried.

Smith shakes hands with the men.

SMITH
 (in Portuguese, with
 Leonel translating)
 Please, keep looking, and if you find one, you must take it to the authorities.

The men walk back to their huts, banging tins. Smith watches them go, his eyes lit with hope.

Leonel holds the porch door open for Smith.

LEONEL
 And now, dinner is served.

Smith looks immediately wary and Margaret looks like she is steeling herself. They follow Leonel to the dining room.

Smith immediately places a set of tins on the table in front of him defiantly.

Leonel disappears into the kitchen.

Margaret puts her hand briefly over Smith's.

MARGARET
 Len, it's good news. But don't get your hopes up too much...

Smith nods and removes his hand. He opens a tin and eats from it with a spoon, while staring up at the Coelacanth poster on the board. Margaret looks at him with concern.

Leonel reappears with a platter and places it with a flourish on the table before Margaret.

LEONEL

Manioc roasted with bark!

Smith stares at the long sticks that look like sugar cane with pieces of bark sprinkled over it.

Margaret takes a big breath and then serves herself a small helping. Leonel watches her face as she tastes it. She chews for a long time, swallows with some difficulty, then smiles weakly, again.

Leonel, satisfied, serves himself a huge helping. Once more they eat in silence.

EXT. LIGHTHOUSE VERANDAH - EARLY MORNING

Smith and Margaret prepare for another day of collecting on the porch. They pack vials and knives and paints and dynamite into their canvas bags.

Smith sits down heavily.

Margaret looks at him, worried.

SMITH

Lass...I'm feeling weaker by the day. The pain is sometimes unbearable.

Out of the clearing the two Italian men appear suddenly.

ITALIAN MAN 1

Visitors! Professor and signora!

Smith watches them coming towards the porch with irritation and exhaustion.

Margaret waves with a forced smile.

Leonel appears at the porch door with the squirrel on his shoulder and peers out.

LEONEL

Oh no, not the Italians...

He moans and hits his head and disappears inside again.

Italian man 1 swings open the screen door onto the porch and knocks over a tightly-closed preserved fish in formalin. The jar rolls across the floor towards Smith. Unimpressed, he stoops to pick it up and inspects that it hasn't cracked.

ITALIAN MAN 1
Guests! Today we will show you
some Italian hospitality.

ITALIAN MAN 2
Some African-Italian hospitality!

Italian man 2 is holding something behind his back. He displays scuba masks and flippers with flair.

ITALIAN MAN 1
We go snorkelling!

Smith looks at them as if they're mad. Margaret looks amused and interested.

EXT. LOCAL FISHING DHOW - MORNING

Smith, Margaret, the two Italians, a sick-looking Leonel and his squirrel and a LOCAL MAN are racing across the sea just beyond the reef in a dhow. The sails are tied with palm fronds to the strong centre pole.

Margaret is delighted, and laughs with the wind in her hair.

Leonel looks like he's about to vomit.

The Italians motion to the local man who is sailing the dhow to slow down and stop at a particular spot.

They help Margaret to adjust the mask to fit her face, and wash it out. Margaret is wearing a full-piece swimming costume, with khaki shorts. Her injured hand is wrapped in bandages.

Italian man 1 takes hold of her leg to help her with the flippers. She glances guiltily at Smith, who is staring at the man like he's about to kill him. She pulls her leg away quietly, and puts on the flippers herself.

Smith sits at the edge of the dhow with his legs dangling in the water, in his usual khaki shorts and shirt and sun-hat. He watches Margaret out of the corner of his eye.

She is aware of his gaze and surprised but quietly happy about his jealousy.

She slips into the water with Italian man 1, who has borrowed Smith's spear-gun. They start to swim around the boat, kicking with their flippers. They drift a little distance from the boat. Every now and then he points out something to her and she follows him to see what it is.

ITALIAN MAN 1
He is a hard man, no?

Margaret lifts her face from the water.

MARGARET

My husband?

ITALIAN MAN 1

Who else?

Margaret and the Italian man tread water.

MARGARET

A woman can choose to be either independent or indispensable. I choose to be indispensable.

She kicks with her flippers and submerges her head. The Italian man grins and follows her.

Smith watches them with a dark look on his face. Leonel takes one look at Smith's face and dissolves into a fit of giggles, despite his own sea-sickness. Italian man 2 also starts laughing. Smith's face becomes even darker.

Margaret watches closely as Italian man 1 stalks a large kingfish. He dives suddenly beneath the water and shoots it with the speargun. He smiles triumphantly at Margaret from underwater.

She smiles back, but then her face becomes tense behind the goggles. She stares down into the depths beneath, watching the fish struggling at the end of the line.

Beneath it, ten or twelve fathoms below, she sees a large shoal of fish waiting and watching. She stares more closely at the torpedo-shaped fish with enormous mouths and sabre-like teeth, then grabs Italian man 1's arm and surfaces. She spits the pipe out of her mouth.

MARGARET

(whispering)

Barracuda...

Italian man 1's face is seized with fear. He takes one look down into the depths and then the two of them begin to swim as fast as they can for the boat in the distance.

Margaret is a stronger swimmer and takes the lead. The water several metres behind Italian man 1 begins to churn as the barracuda devour the kingfish on the line.

Smith realises immediately what has happened. He stands abruptly on the deck of the dhow.

SMITH

Barracuda...

Leonel and Italian man 2 follow his gaze and see the two streaking for the boat, with Margaret far in the lead.

Smith is beside himself, and seems to be about to jump into the water himself, but Italian man 2 stops him and holds him back. His face is paper-white with fear. They can do nothing but watch and wait.

Margaret gets closer and closer to the boat, and Smith kneels on the deck and stretches out his hand to her as she approaches, and hauls her aboard. He immediately checks her body, removes her flippers and checks her legs.

Italian man 1 makes it to the boat and is pulled aboard by Leonel. He is intact.

Smith hugs Margaret as tightly as he can, getting completely wet. She is shaking from fright. He holds her head against his chest and kisses her forehead repeatedly.

Italian man 2 drags the line of the speargun from the water. All that remains of the 25-pound kingfish is the dripping head. It has been literally torn to pieces.

The barracuda froth and churn the water beside the dhow, in a feeding frenzy.

They sail back to the shore in silence. At the edge of the reef, the others wade ashore, but Smith and Margaret stay on the deck of the dhow. Her head is still on his shoulder.

Smith stares out at the sea.

SMITH

I have begun to wish that there was no Coelacanth to divert me from this pursuit of ours...

Margaret lifts her head and looks up at him.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Every fish we catch...I want it to be a Coelacanth.

Smith is still staring out at the sea.

SMITH (CONT'D)

If only I could get to the Comoros Islands. They are so close, so tantalisingly close - Grand Comoro is barely 200 miles away. But we have no permission.

Smith strokes Margaret's wet hair.

SMITH (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Am I going mad, lass? I'm the only scientist in the world who believes the Coelacanth came from somewhere about tropical East Africa. And I can't even prove it.

Margaret takes his hand and kisses it, then rests her head on his shoulder again.

MARGARET

If you're mad, Len, then so am I.

Margaret puts on her sandshoes and jumps into the thigh-high water.

Smith follows her. They begin to wade through the water towards the shore, still holding hands. Smith moves very slowly, in obvious pain.

INT. LIGHTHOUSE DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Smith hobbles into the room holding onto Margaret's arm. He is deathly thin and pale. It is evident that some time has passed.

Margaret sits opposite him and keeps glancing at his face as if to reassure herself that he is fine.

Leonel swings open the kitchen door, brandishing a steaming platter.

LEONEL

Tonight, in honour of your last night here, I present...

Margaret and Smith smile at each other across the table, looking doubtful.

LEONEL

Fish and potatoes!

Leonel opens the platter lid with a flourish. Margaret begins to giggle. Smith looks guilty.

MARGARET

Oh dear.

Leonel's face drops.

MARGARET

He refuses to eat fish with potatoes. One or the other, but not together.

LEONEL

Then let him eat potatoes.

Margaret smiles and dishes a small helping of potatoes onto Smith's plate. He stares at it, eating nothing, then leaves the room abruptly.

Margaret sighs and serves herself a medium-sized helping.

Leonel is delighted and dishes himself a massive helping. They eat in silence. The squirrel is perched on Leonel's shoulder.

INT. SMITHS' ROOM IN LIGHTHOUSE - NIGHT

Smith digs around in a box and finds what he's looking for - a vial labelled: CYANIDE.

He holds it up to the lamp, his face showing the turmoil of his mind, then puts it gently back into the box, and covers his face with his hands.

EXT. DECK OF UNION-CASTLE LINER - DAY

Smith and Margaret stand side by side on the deck of the Dunnottar Castle, a huge passenger liner.

A WOMAN hovers nearby, eager to speak to them.

Land is visible in the distance.

Smith looks a little stronger.

CAPTAIN

(over loudspeaker)

We will shortly be docking at Zanzibar.

The woman gathers up courage and approaches the Smiths.

FEMALE PASSENGER

Dare I ask the million pound question...did you find a Coelacanth?

Smith's face becomes drawn and Margaret glances at him quickly with concern.

MARGARET

We discovered many other species of fish previously unknown to science. That alone was entirely satisfying.

Smith turns and walks away and Margaret hurries after him, leaving the woman staring at them in silence.

INT. GOVERNOR'S RESIDENCE, ZANZIBAR - EVENING

Margaret is unusually dressed up. She wears an evening dress and a gold fish brooch pinned to her lapel. There is a hint of lipstick on her lips.

She welcomes GUESTS to a small exhibition of the most unusual exhibits that she and Smith have collected in Mozambique.

Zanzibar's FRENCH COLONIAL OFFICIALS and their WIVES are out in their finest attire, as are all the PASSENGERS from the Dunnottar Castle.

Smith is nowhere to be seen.

A strikingly attractive man, ERIC HUNT, who is a dead-ringer for Errol Flynn, appears at the door to the residence. He has olive skin, shockingly blue eyes, a large moustache and a habit of licking his lips repeatedly. He's much shorter than Margaret.

Hunt catches her eye and her hand and kisses it with a flourish.

HUNT

Mrs Smith, I presume? I am Captain Eric Hunt.

Margaret smiles, a little embarrassed.

HUNT (CONT'D)

And where is the Professor?

MARGARET

He is not feeling well.

Hunt looks slowly around the room at the rows upon rows of bottled specimens.

HUNT

Would you do me the honour of showing me your favourite specimen?

Margaret grins and leads him away from the door.

MARGARET

And what are you doing on Zanzibar, Captain Hunt?

HUNT

I trade in salted shark and other things - coco-de-mer, cinnamon oil. I'm mostly based in the Comoros.

Margaret's face becomes alert.

MARGARET

The Comoros? I wonder, Captain Hunt, if you could do me - us - a favour.

Hunt is intrigued.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You see, we have wanted to visit the Comoros to search for a Coelacanth, but just haven't managed to get there.

Margaret stops beside a table that has been pushed against the wall, laden with Coelacanth reward flyers. She picks up a huge wad and holds them out to Hunt.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Would you distribute these in the Comoros? To every fisherman you can find?

Hunt looks at the reward poster with his eyes glittering.

HUNT

Ah, a kind of treasure hunt - delightful!

Margaret looks slightly offended, thinking he is belittling her.

MARGARET

It's not child's play, Mr Hunt...

Hunt playfully takes another huge wad from the table and puts both beneath his arm.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

If we can find another intact specimen my husband can prove definitively to the world that the Coelacanth is a living fossil...

Hunt takes a third wad of posters from the table and puts it beneath his other arm. He begins to chuckle.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

And with the new Prime Minister of South Africa such an ignorant Creationist - not to mention racist - we evolutionists need all the evidence we can muster.

HUNT

Never fear, Mrs Smith - I know about your quest for another Coelacanth. Who doesn't? It's received more news coverage than both world wars put together.

Margaret still looks a little put out.

HUNT (CONT'D)

And now, your favourite fish? I'm a bit of a collector myself. I've a private aquarium where I keep the strange ones.

He winks knowingly at Margaret.

She is a little flustered by him; she's not sure how to interpret his charm.

MARGARET

Oh, right...um...let's see...

She scans the room quickly, then spots one jar and points to it.

HUNT

It's beautiful...

Margaret blushes and laughs.

MARGARET

It's the only fish my husband named after me.

Hunt nods approval, his eyes sparkling.

Some of the Dunnottar guests approach Margaret. Hunt sees them coming and takes his leave.

HUNT

It was a pleasure, Mrs Smith. And when I get a Coelacanth, I'll send you a cable.

Margaret laughs softly. Hunt lingers at the edge of the group of passengers.

HUNT (CONT'D)

Mrs Smith, one more question. If
I can't find formalin, how should
I preserve it?

Margaret turns away from the other passengers, aware that they're observing her interaction with Hunt.

MARGARET

Salt it. Like you do the sharks.

The passengers laugh; Hunt salutes her and wanders away from the group with the posters under his arm.

He glances back at Margaret without her noticing.

INT. SMITHS' CABIN ON DUNNOTTAR - NIGHT

Smith lies wide awake in the small cabin. Beside him Margaret is fast asleep. He looks agitated. He shakes her awake.

MARGARET

Len, what is it?

SMITH

(beside himself)
Every blasted fool asking me
where the Coelacanth is. I can
see it in their eyes, they think
I'm a failure!

Margaret holds him and rocks his head gently.

MARGARET

(whispering)
We're going to find one, Len.
Whatever it takes.

Smith lets himself be held and comforted until he falls asleep. Margaret now lies wide awake in the small cabin.

Margaret nudges Smith awake and swings her legs off the bed. She starts to get dressed.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Come on, let's go up to the
bridge. Get some fresh air.

Smith willingly puts on his dressing gown and follows her. They creep through the quiet ship and out onto the bridge.

Lights from land shimmer in the distance. It is still dark. They lean over the rail beside the searchlight.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Durban...there it is.

SMITH
It will be a long time before
anything gets me back to the
tropics again.

Smith looks longingly at the lights.

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)
I'll confess something to you.
I'd already given up by then.

EXT. UNDERWATER OFF COMOROS ISLANDS - NIGHT

A hand-spun cotton line coated with fat is lowered into the dark water. Beside the hook is a lump of coral the size of a man's head, acting as the sinker.

Spotlights and black hulks of dugout canoes floating on the surface are visible from beneath the water.

The hook and coral are illuminated as they sink.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

SUPERTITLE: DOMONOI, ON COAST OF ANJOUAN, COMOROS ISLANDS -
THE SAME NIGHT

Local fishermen drag their *gallawahs* (dugout canoes) out of the water and up onto the beach by the light of the moon.

One fisherman, AHAMADI ABDALLAH, drags a large fish out of his canoe and hits it once on the head to kill it. It is too heavy for him to carry, so he drags it up the beach towards his hut, then dumps it outside the door to his hut and goes inside.

The moonlight shows a glistening fish with thick scales and large fins. Its eyes are opaque.

EXT. BEACH - MORNING

The Domonoi beach is lined with coconut palms and the water is clear, revealing the lava reef. Further back is the deeper green of tropical rainforest. Tiny fishing huts dot the sand and the turret of a small mosque is visible in the distance.

Abdallah, wearing an old, white overshirt and small cap, turns the fish over and rinses it. He sharpens a knife in preparation for scaling it.

Beside him his WIFE, with a brightly-coloured scarf covering her hair, begins to crush coconut husks to make rope.

The village imam, AFFANE MOHAMED, passes the couple on his way to mosque.

MOHAMED
(in local language, not
French)
What fish is this you have?

ABDALLAH
The one we say has fire in its
eyes.

Mohamed stoops to have a closer look at the fish. He straightens immediately.

MOHAMED
This is that fish - on the
posters - you must not skin it
yet!

Mohamed takes off across the beach towards the mosque, leaving Abdallah and his wife looking bewildered.

At the mosque, Mohamed rips a tattered and weather-worn Coelacanth reward poster from the noticeboard outside and sprints back across the beach towards Abdallah.

MOHAMED
It's the fish! The fish! You will
be a rich man!

Other FISHERMEN notice the commotion and drop what they're doing to gather around Abdallah and Mohamed. They all inspect the poster and compare it to the fish.

Abdallah clears his throat, holds out the poster before him, and reads from it.

MOHAMED
(in French)
Do not cut it or clean it or
scale it, but take it at once to
some...responsible person.

All the fishermen express an opinion, simultaneously, on what should be done. One FISHERMAN shouts above the rest.

FISHERMAN
(in local language, not
French)
I know where the posters came
from - that man, Hunt, he has a
big boat at Matsamudu!

ABDALLAH
 But Matsamudu is on the other
 side of the island...

With determination, Abdallah's wife and ANOTHER WOMAN begin to wrap the heavy fish in large palm fronds and husk string.

EXT. BACK OF PUBLIC WORKS TRUCK - DAY

Abdallah and Mohamed hitch a ride on a Public Works truck heading across the island. They hold the palm-wrapped fish across their laps. The sun beats down on the exposed truck. Abdallah starts to wave a palm frond over the fish to keep it cool.

The other HITCHERS look at him strangely.

INT. DINING ROOM OF DUNNOTTAR CASTLE - MORNING

The Dunnottar Castle is now docked at Durban.

Smith and Margaret sit at breakfast with a YOUNG JOURNALIST who is obviously a bit nervous. Smith barely eats as he answers questions. The dining room is strewn with Christmas decorations and carols are playing on the radio.

JOURNALIST
 And when do you expect that your
 book - Sea Fishes of Southern
 Africa - will be published?

SMITH
 (bored)
 As soon as we've finished all the
 illustrations and cataloguing.

A waiter appears with a thick pack of letters on a tray. He places them before Smith. Smith begins to open and glance through them as he talks, ignoring the journalist.

The journalist clears his throat.

JOURNALIST
 What is your greatest scientific
 triumph so far?

Smith doesn't answer. He is staring at a telegram in his hand.

JOURNALIST
 Professor?

Margaret looks up from the letter she is reading and is immediately alarmed.

Smith stands suddenly, knocking his chair over.

MARGARET
What's the matter?

SMITH
Hunt's got a Coelacanth.

Margaret takes the cable and reads it quickly. Smith shoos away the journalist who is furiously taking notes, and hobbles as fast as he can to a young NAVAL OFFICER nearby.

SMITH
(shouting)
Where the hell is Dzaoudzi?

The officer looks alarmed, and leaves the room in a hurry.

MARGARET
Len, he sent this four days ago -
on the 20th.

Smith has begun pacing in the dining room.

Other PASSENGERS look at him sideways and shake their heads.

The officer returns.

OFFICER
Dzaoudzi is on a small island
called Pamanzi in the Comoros,
sir.

Margaret and Smith look at each other with a mixture of excitement and terror. Smith turns to the officer.

SMITH
Get me the Captain. Now.

EXT. HUNT'S SCHOONER AT DZAOUDZI - DAY

Hunt is bare-chested, brown as a nut, and sweating in the midday heat. He smokes a pipe, and paces up and down the deck of the schooner, looking agitated. He looks at a gold pocket watch slung around his bare neck and sighs with frustration.

The FRENCH GOVERNOR of Dzaoudzi approaches the schooner, dressed in official white uniform. He looks flustered.

FRENCH GOVERNOR
(in French)
Hunt!

(MORE)

FRENCH GOVERNOR (cont'd)
 I've had no response from the
 French scientific base in
 Madagascar - but I won't let you
 give it to Smith unless he
 personally comes to collect it.

The Governor, obviously irritated that the French might be missing out on something, but not knowing what else to do, storms off again.

Hunt looks at his watch again and then descends the ladder into the dark hold of the schooner. In the centre of the hold is the palm-wrapped fish, now surrounded with blocks of ice.

Abdallah and Mohamed hover over it nervously. Hunt joins them.

A DOCTOR in traditional white coat descends the ladder with a large bag.

DOCTOR
 (in French)
 Monsieur Hunt? There is an
 emergency?

Hunt looks at the doctor with immense hope.

HUNT
 Do you have any formalin?

The doctor looks confused, and shakes his head.

DOCTOR
 There is none on the island,
 Captain.

Hunt begins to dig urgently into the ice surrounding the fish, piling the chunks onto the fish to cover it completely.

HUNT
 Can nobody find me any goddamn
 formalin? This fish is ROTTING!

The doctor looks at Hunt, worried about his mental health.

Abdallah and Mohamed look as worried as Hunt.

EXT. CAPTAIN'S BRIDGE ON DUNNOTTAR CASTLE - DAY

Smith, Margaret and the CAPTAIN are all using different telephone lines on the bridge. Bits of each person's conversation are picked up.

SMITH

Yes, Post Office? Get me the
Minister of Economic Affairs...

MARGARET

Yes, hello, could you put me
through to the secretary for the
Minister of Internal
Affairs...yes, I'm aware it's
Christmas eve...

CAPTAIN

Minister Sauer, I'm so sorry to
bother you at this time...

A wide-eyed MAN runs onto the bridge, DR VERNON SHEARER, an old friend of Smith's who has government connections. Smith acknowledges his presence but is deep in his telephone call.

SMITH

Minister Louw is in America? I
see, how unfortunate.

Smith hangs up abruptly.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Vernon, thanks for coming. Is
there any chance you could get
hold of the Prime Minister for
me?

Vernon looks at him like he's delusional.

VERNON

Smithy, have you lost your mind?
You want me to try to track down
Dr Malan on Christmas eve?

The phone rings again and Smith answers.

SMITH

Yes, I'll hold...

He holds the phone to his ear. Beads of sweat dot his
hairline and his face has gone bright red.

A man in MILITARY UNIFORM enters the bridge.

MILITARY MAN

I heard you were trying to
contact somebody in the armed
forces?

Smith keeps the phone to his ear but shakes the man's hand
gladly.

SMITH

Yes, you see, it's of national importance that I collect a fish from the Comoros...

The military man's face starts to change colour.

MILITARY MAN

A fish? Of national importance?

The military man starts to laugh but stops when he sees Smith's face.

MILITARY MAN (CONT'D)

(barking)

It would take a week to organise a flight to a foreign territory.

SMITH

(barking back)

Well god help South Africa if we should suddenly be attacked!

The military man tries to restrain his anger. He marches to the door and turns before he leaves.

MILITARY MAN

You may as well try to get a plane to the moon.

He slams the door behind him.

Margaret finishes her call and puts down the telephone.

MARGARET

(quietly)

Minister Donges is on a train and can't be contacted.

CAPTAIN

And the Minister of Transport says to try the French.

While still holding the first phone to his ear, Smith grabs the other phone and dials.

SMITH

Yes, post office, put me through to the French Consul in Durban, immediately!

Margaret greets Vernon with an absent-minded kiss, keeping her eyes on Smith.

SMITH (CONT'D)

What do you mean the Consul's closed!

(MORE)

SMITH (CONT'D)

You think Russia has an iron curtain? Try South Africa on a goddamn public holiday! Boom, and everything's dead!

Vernon begins to lose his temper.

VERNON

Does somebody want to tell me what's going on? Why are we calling every bloody politician in this country?

Margaret, Smith and the Captain look surprised that Vernon doesn't already know the momentous news.

SMITH

It's a Coelacanth, Vern. They've got one in the Comoros. I have to get there in person to collect it otherwise they'll give it to the French.

VERNON

And what, may I ask, does this have to do with the Prime Minister?

Again, Margaret, Smith and the Captain seem surprised at Vernon's ignorance.

MARGARET

The only way to get there now is on a military plane...

Understanding dawns on Vernon's face, then incredulity.

VERNON

You want me to convince the Prime Minister - a fervent Creationist - to authorise a military plane to fly a mad scientist to a foreign country to pick up a dead fish that may or may not be the missing link? You're out of your minds!

INT. VERNON'S LOUNGE - NIGHT

Margaret and Smith sit side by side on the couch, ears pricked, both leaning towards Vernon, who is waiting on the telephone.

Vernon's WIFE enters with a tray of tea and Christmas angel-shaped biscuits. She looks sympathetically at her husband, then stares pointedly at the neglected Christmas tree with its lights pulsing, and leaves the room.

Margaret and Smith are oblivious to the tea and cookies.

VERNON

(nervously, in
Afrikaans)

Yes, Madam, Vernon Shearer here.
How are you, Mrs Malan, and is
the Doctor well? Terribly sorry
to bother you on Christmas eve. I
have with me Professor
Smith...it's a matter of national
importance...you don't think it
could be done now?

(crestfallen)

Yes, thank you very much indeed,
very much obliged. Good night.

Smith and Margaret look crushed. They lean back onto the
lounge in an attitude of despair. Vernon puts the phone
carefully back on the hook.

VERNON (CONT'D)

She says he's already in bed and
she won't disturb him.

INT. DR AND MRS MALAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

An elderly PRIME MINISTER MALAN, who has a large, blotchy,
red birthmark covering part of his forehead and bald head
and wears his characteristic thick-rimmed glasses, sits in
bed in his pyjamas.

MRS MALAN enters the room.

MALAN

(in Afrikaans)

Who was that, my dear?

Mrs Malan sits on the edge of the bed, still in her day
clothes, with a severe bun pulling back her hair.

MRS MALAN

Vernon Shearer from Durban - had
a Professor Smith wanting to
speak to you...at this time,
really! The insolence of people
these days!

Malan listens closely.

MALAN

My dear, I believe we brought his
book on the fish of South Africa
on holiday with us...

Malan begins to climb out of the bed, but his wife stops him and herself kneels beside the bookcase to search.

She finds it and hands it to him disapprovingly.

MRS MALAN

It's late. You should be asleep already.

Malan begins to page through the book slowly. He seems to be deep in thought. He stops at the page with a large photograph of the first Coelacanth.

MALAN

This man Smith is well-known. He would not ask my help at a time like this unless it was desperately important.

Mrs Malan has unpinned her hair and sits before the dressing table mirror brushing it.

MALAN (CONT'D)

If it's another Coelacanth...well, perhaps God will never forgive me, but do you remember the outpourings of national pride after the first one was discovered? Now that could help the Nationalist Party turn this country around!

Malan climbs slowly from the bed, carrying the book, and waddles out of the room, leaving the door open.

His wife continues to brush her hair, looking grimly into the mirror.

INT. VERNON'S LOUNGE - NIGHT

Margaret slumps in the couch.

Smith paces up and down the small lounge with his hand to his temple.

Vernon has fallen asleep in the armchair.

Suddenly the phone rings, making Vernon jump.

VERNON

Vernon Shearer here...

(pause)

Yes, Prime Minister, he is right beside me.

Margaret jumps to her feet. Smith is frozen to the spot.

EXT. VERNON SHEARER'S CAR - EARLY MORNING

Smith, Margaret and Vernon are squashed into the front of Vernon's small buggy. Smith is at the wheel and driving like a lunatic. Vernon's face is drained of colour, Margaret is holding onto the door for dear life. Smith overtakes any vehicle in his path.

In the distance, in the dawn light, is the Durban military aerodrome. Smith speeds onto the tarmac and comes to a screeching halt.

Before Margaret or Vernon have even registered that the car has stopped moving, Smith has jumped out and begun to hobble across the tarmac towards a South African military Dakota plane and three waiting AIR FORCE OFFICERS. He shakes their hands enthusiastically.

Margaret and Vernon struggle to lift out several boxes of supplies from the boot of the car and lug them across the tarmac after Smith.

Margaret dumps one of the boxes at Smith's feet and heads back to fetch another one. The officers stare open-mouthed at her physical strength.

Smith looks the PILOT in the eye and smiles wryly.

SMITH

Bet when you joined the Air Force
you never expected to command a
plane sent to fetch a dead fish.

The pilot keeps a straight face.

PILOT

No, Professor. Can't say I did.

The officers struggle to contain their laughter behind the pilot's back.

The pilot scrutinises the boxes of supplies piling up outside the 'plane.

PILOT (CONT'D)

Professor, may I ask what is in
these boxes?

SMITH

Litchis, biscuits, dried figs,
cheese, fruit and fresh water for
ten days, and equipment to cover
air, sea and land travel.

The officers stare at him with eyebrows raised.

SMITH (CONT'D)

In case we're wrecked or
marooned. It's East Africa, boys,
trust me: we can't take any
chances.

Margaret begins to climb the stairs to the 'plane, but the
pilot steps in her way.

PILOT

Madam, I'm afraid that's not
allowed.

Margaret is taken aback.

PILOT (CONT'D)

No woman has ever been allowed on
a South African military 'plane,
and never will be under my
command.

Margaret's face flushes with fury, but she climbs back down
and stands silently beside Vernon.

Smith squeezes her hand.

SMITH

It's alright, lass. I can do
this.

Smith kisses her briefly, then climbs aboard impatiently.
He sits towards the back of the hold. The interior is
absolutely basic, with three-inch holes in the side to
provide ventilation.

One officer climbs inside with Smith; the pilot and other
officer into the cockpit. The officer hands Smith a pair of
earplugs and puts in a pair of his own. Smith looks at them
with disdain and slips them into his pocket.

Margaret and Vernon watch the plane take off from the
airstrip. Margaret sighs and instinctively takes Vernon's
hand. She is exhausted with worry.

EXT. HUNT'S SCHOONER AT DZAOUDZI - EVENING

Hunt, Abdallah and Mohamed carefully unwrap the fish from
its palm covering. They look distressed. Hunt wields a
large hunting knife. Mohamed places the fish on a block of
ice and Hunt starts to slit it open across its back. Oil
seeps out of it onto the ice.

EXT. LUMBO (MOZAMBIQUE) AIRSTRIP - SUNRISE

Smith stands at the entrance to the Dakota, about to board.

The PORTUGUESE GOVERNOR of Lumbo and his WIFE, both dressed in their official best, stand in front of a CROWD OF HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE who have come to watch the 'plane take off.

LUMBO GOVERNOR

I meant to ask, Professor - are you entirely sure this fish is a Coelacanth?

Smith swallows and his jaw tightens.

SMITH

Not at all sure, Governor. This situation is typical of my life: either heaven or hell, and seldom anywhere inbetween.

The Governor and his wife are speechless.

PILOT

(under his breath)

Talk about a wild fish chase...

Smith, the pilot and officers board the plane and it taxis to the small airstrip.

The pilot turns around in his seat towards Smith. The noise in the 'plane is already deafening.

PILOT (CONT'D)

(shouting above the noise of the engine)

I just want to warn you...we have no navigation aids and no clearance to land in the Comoros.

Smith's face is set in grim determination.

The Dakota 'plane takes off and circles above the small town of Lumbo before heading off across the sea towards the Comoros.

Smith's face is visible through the window near the back, looking tense and exhausted. The crowd waves to the 'plane.

In the distance the flamboyants and palms lining the seafront glow in the early morning sunlight.

EXT. SMITHS' HOUSE IN GRAHAMSTOWN - DAY

An exhausted-looking Margaret jumps out of the passenger seat of a large removal truck and runs towards the house.

William flings open the door, sprints into the garden and jumps into his mother's arms.

Margaret's MARGARET'S SISTER holds back, watching the reunion, then gives Margaret a kiss on the cheek.

WILLIAM
Where's Dad?

Margaret smooths her hair back and sighs.

MARGARET
It's a long story...

The REMOVAL VAN DRIVER opens the back doors of the van to reveal dozens of boxes of equipment and carefully packed jars of preserved fish.

Just as he begins to off-load, another removal van of the same size pulls up behind him. The SECOND DRIVER opens the back doors of the van to reveal a similarly stacked holding of boxes, jars and vats.

INT. DAKOTA AIRPLANE - MIDDAY

Smith sits at the window of the airplane, earplugs in, riveted to the spot. Below him the string of the four Comoros Islands seems to float like jewels in the sea, coming in and out of vision beneath the thick clouds. There is heavy turbulence and storm conditions.

PILOT
(over the in-flight
radio system)
I'm not receiving permission to
land...

Smith looks beside himself. The pilot and other officers seem increasingly worried.

PILOT (CONT'D)
And I'm not sure where I would
land even if I got the go
ahead...

Smith glares out of the window at the extensive barrier reef that lies west of the island of Mayotte. They are at 3000 feet. Adjacent to Mayotte is the small island of Pamanzi.

Smith spots a thin line of white at the edge of the reef on Pamanzi and points it out to the officer, who in turn points it out to the pilot.

SMITH
The airstrip's been made on the
reef...it's flattened coral rag.

As they approach the island, Smith sees a tiny, toy-size vessel docked at Pamanzi. He stares intently at it. It disappears beneath the clouds.

The radio crackles with the sound of somebody from airport control.

AIRPORT OFFICIAL
(thick French accent)
What is the mission of this flight?

PILOT
To get a fish.

There is a pause, then another crackle.

AIRPORT OFFICIAL
Have I heard you right, a F.I.S.H.?

PILOT
Yes, a fish.

Another pause.

AIRPORT OFFICIAL
You mean a thing with scales?

PILOT
Roger.

Another pause.

AIRPORT OFFICIAL
(angry)
Can't you think of a better story for why you want to land in our territory in a military plane?

The official sitting next to Smith starts to crack up laughing from the conversation. Smith looks furious.

SMITH
Just land it anyway. What can they do?

The pilot shrugs uncertainly, but manoeuvres the plane down towards the tiny airstrip built onto the reef.

Smith grips his seat; his knuckles show white.

The Dakota lands with a thump, wavers, and eventually slows to a halt. It is raining torrentially.

Before the 'plane has even come to a standstill, Smith is on his feet and yanking at the exit door handle.

He gets it open, hastily unfolds the ladder, climbs down and starts to hobble across the airstrip.

A figure appears through the mist: somebody is sprinting towards the 'plane. It is Hunt.

SMITH
 (shouting across the
 distance)
 Are you Eric Hunt? Where's the
 fish?

Smith and Hunt keep sprinting towards each other, followed closely by the Dakota officers. The rain stops and the clouds start to clear as suddenly as is possible in the tropics.

Smith reaches Hunt, and they shake hands. Smith is now beside himself.

SMITH
 The fish...where is it?

HUNT
 (out of breath)
 On my boat...

Smith suddenly spots the row of FRENCH COLONIAL OFFICIALS lined up in their smartest uniforms, outside a tiny building next to the airstrip. He looks at them with dread.

Hunt makes a face at Smith as if to apologise as the first official dashes forward to shake Smith's hand.

FRENCH OFFICIAL 1
 (with heavy French
 accent)
 Professor...welcome...please join
 us for an aperitif.

Smith takes a horrified look at the table that has been set out, laden with food and alcohol.

SMITH
 Look, I'm going to be terribly
 rude, but I've been flying for
 two days to get to this fish and
 I'm about to lose my mind...

Smith looks around him, spots a car and starts to walk as fast as he can towards it.

A red-faced Hunt looks guiltily at the French officials.

HUNT
 (in French)
 I'm so sorry...you know how it is
 with these scientists...

Hunt leaves behind a bevy of shocked French officials and runs after Smith towards the car.

Hunt jumps into the driver's seat and they speed away from the airstrip and towards the port.

EXT. PAMANZI PORT - DAY

They screech to a stop beside a concrete wall with steps leading down to the level of the dock where Hunt's schooner is anchored. The steps are jam-packed with LOCALS selling their wares.

Smith literally leaps over groups of people, taking the steps five at a time. Hunt struggles to follow him.

Smith runs onto the deck and spots a large, coffin-like box near the mast.

Abdallah and Mohamed sit beside the box as if it is their child. They stare in amazement at Smith.

He runs towards the box, then stops, frozen, as if afraid to see what is inside.

Hunt comes up quietly behind him. Very, very slowly, Hunt lifts the lid to reveal a sea of cotton-wool. Hunt peels back the cotton wool delicately. The fish is revealed: intact, whole, salted.

Smith kneels suddenly beside the box. He caresses the fish in amazement. Tears flow down his cheeks and onto his hands. He weeps without shame.

Hunt looks up at the heavens and sighs deeply. The relief on his face is palpable.

Abdallah and Mohamed rejoice. A CROWD has gathered beside the schooner. People push and shove to get closer to the front.

Smith emerges from his reverie and turns to Hunt.

SMITH

I will name it after you. You and
Prime Minister Malan. *Malania*
huntii.

Hunt looks nervous.

HUNT

Actually, I'd prefer it if you
gave credit to the French.
They're not happy about me
letting you have it.

Smith thinks for a moment, the tears on his face still wet.

SMITH
On which island was it found?

HUNT
Anjouane.

SMITH
Malania anjouanae, then.

Hunt looks at him quizzically.

HUNT
After Prime Minister Malan? Who doesn't even believe in evolution? What will your wife think?

Smith gazes at the fish.

SMITH
How do you think I got to the Comores? I really don't have a choice. Maybe it will shock some sense into him.

Smith turns his attention to Abdallah and Mohamed.

SMITH (CONT'D)
Who are these men?

HUNT
They found the Coelacanth and brought it to me.

Smith stands slowly and then embraces each man, the tears still streaming down his face.

He reaches into his pocket and withdraws a 100 pound note, and hands it warmly to Mohamed, who immediately hands it to Abdallah.

SMITH
(in French)
Had you ever seen this fish before?

ABDALLAH
Yes, but not often. We call it *gombessa* and say it has fire in its eyes. It is very oily.

SMITH
At what depth did you catch it?

ABDALLAH

On a line held by my hand. Not deep.

Smith looks immensely satisfied with himself.

SMITH

(to Hunt)

I've always maintained it would be found at relatively shallow depths. No other scientist in the world would believe me.

Hunt spots the French colonial officials and the Dakota crew who have arrived at the schooner and the crowd of locals parts for them to pass through.

They shake Smith's hand and pump Hunt's arm and gather around the fish lying in the chest for photographs taken by a local journalist. Smith refuses to budge from his spot kneeling beside the fish. He barely smiles, but his eyes are still moist.

As the camera flashes and the officials become increasingly self-congratulatory, Smith's expression changes - a dark thought seems to flit across his face. He carefully lays the cotton wool back over the fish and pushes the chest shut.

He holds Hunt's arm and speaks closely into his ear.

SMITH

(whispering)

I want to leave immediately.

Hunt is surprised.

HUNT

But Professor, the Governor...

SMITH

(cutting him off)

I don't want to give the French a chance to change their minds.

Smith motions to Mohamed and Abdallah to lift the coffin and follow him. He catches the Dakota pilot's eye and he and the crew follow Smith off the boat, leaving the French officials and Hunt looking hurt.

As a last minute thought, Smith turns and shakes their hands again, each one in the row. This appeases them somewhat. He gives Hunt a warm handshake and his eyes are full of gratitude. Then he turns briskly and leaves the schooner.

INT. DAKOTA AIRPLANE - DAY

Smith sits on the floor of the 'plane, beside the coffin-sized box containing the Coelacanth. He does not take his eyes off it, as if worried it will disappear at any moment.

The officer sitting next to him leans forward, sniffs the fish, and reels from the stench. He takes the ear plugs out his ears and puts them in his nostrils.

PILOT
(over the in-flight
radio system)

Professor...I've intercepted a message that a squadron of French fighter planes left Diego Suarez before we took off with orders to intercept us and force us to land in Madagascar.

Smith's face whitens and tenses. He thinks hard.

SMITH
What speed can they do?

PILOT
All I know is they're a heck of a lot faster than we are.

SMITH
Is it possible for them to overhaul us before we get to Lumbo?

The pilot nods gravely.

Smith thinks again, his mind churning.

SMITH
(defiantly)
Well...I don't know how you chaps feel about this, but I'd be prepared to chance being shot down rather than turn back.

There is a short pause, then the pilot and other two officers burst out laughing. They are pulling his leg.

Once Smith recovers from the shock, he manages a wry smile, then turns his attention back to guarding the Coelacanth.

EXT. RUNWAY OUTSIDE DURBAN AIRPORT - AFTERNOON

The tarmac is covered with PEOPLE.

JOURNALISTS wait with large cameras strapped around their necks and notebooks ready.

The MAYOR of Durban stands near the front of the crowd adorned with his mayoral chains.

AIRPORT STAFF have erected a rope barrier to keep people from straying onto the runway itself.

The Dakota appears in the sky overhead, making the crowd rustle with excitement.

The Dakota does a perfect landing, gliding to a stop just in front of the crowds. The entrance door swings open. There is a pause, and then Smith appears triumphantly at the opening.

The camera flashes explode like lightning. The crowd starts to push against the barrier to get a closer look.

One CBS AMERICA JOURNALIST extricates himself from the crowd, shows his pass to the airport officials manning the cord, and walks past the barrier, followed by a SOUND MAN with complicated sound-recording equipment.

Smith unfolds the ladder from the entrance of the plane and climbs down slowly.

CBS JOURNALIST
Professor Smith! Is it true? Is
it really a Coelacanth?

Smith reaches the ground, turns, and nods and gives a small smile. The crowd goes wild with delight.

CBS JOURNALIST
Can we see it?

SMITH
(wryly)
Not until Prime Minister Malan
has first laid eyes on it.

CBS JOURNALIST
Professor, please give me an
interview right here - the world
has been waiting with bated
breath for your return.

Smith sighs with exhaustion, but agrees. He takes a long drink of water from his flask, clears his throat, and sits on one of his boxes which the Dakota officers have unloaded from the 'plane.

The CBS journalist sits beside him, on another box. The sound man puts on headphones, checks the equipment, and holds the boom mic above their heads.

The CBS journalist motions to the sound man to record.

CBS JOURNALIST

This is Michael Danner, for CBS News America, with a live broadcast of Professor JLB Smith's latest adventure.

The CBS journalist nods to Smith. Smith takes a deep breath.

SMITH

It is my astounding privilege to announce to the world the discovery of a second Coelacanth. This all started fourteen years ago - no, of course I am wrong, it really started 300 million years ago. For that is the time that scientists estimate as the first appearance of the Coelacanth fishes on earth...

INT. VERNON'S LOUNGE - AFTERNOON

Vernon Shearer and his wife sit beside their wireless, listening intently to Smith's live broadcast. At times his voice breaks with sheer exhaustion or emotion.

SMITH (O.S.)

These rather curious fishes were evidently a vigorous line, their fossil remains being found over a great area, and they kept on almost unchanged for a far longer period than any other type of creature we know...

INT. PRIME MINISTER MALAN'S LOUNGE - AFTERNOON

Malan and his wife sit beside their wireless. Mrs Malan looks put out, as if she is listening against her will.

SMITH (O.S.)

Scientists assumed without question that the Coelacanth became extinct 70 million years ago.

(MORE)

SMITH (O.S.) (cont'd)

It can be understood, therefore, that the discovery of a living, 5-foot long Coelacanth near East London in South Africa in 1938 was the greatest shock to scientists everywhere, and the South African Coelacanth became probably the best-known biological curiosity in the world...

INT. ENOCH'S SMALL LIVING ROOM IN TOWNSHIP NEAR EAST LONDON
- AFTERNOON

Enoch, Marjorie's assistant at the museum, sits beside a wireless radio in a small but very tidy living room, with his extended family around him, listening intently. Just outside his door, small children play in the street.

SMITH (O.S.)

The unfortunate dislocation of normal life by the Christmas holidays eventually resulted in the loss of all the flesh and skeleton of this wonder fish. Can you imagine a more tantalising situation? I was prevented from being able to find out what most of its body and organs were like. It became more than normally desirable - really imperative - for me to find another. I gave more thought to this matter than any other living man - not only that but I have probably a more informed and intimate knowledge of the coast and seas of South and East Africa than anyone else.

INT. MARJORIE COURTNEY-LATIMER'S BEDROOM - AFTERNOON

Marjorie sits on her bed, her hands in her lap, and a look of absolute delight on her face, listening to the wireless on her bedside table.

SMITH (O.S.)

One European scientist who had not seen the fish attempted to explain the mystery of the sudden appearance of the Coelacanth by saying that of course it lived in the great depths and that this one had come up casually. I did not share his views.

(MORE)

SMITH (O.S.) (cont'd)
 No fish from the depths ever bore
 so powerful an external armour of
 bones and scales as the
 Coelacanth. My mind at once
 turned to the vast reef system of
 East Africa and all the islands
 off it, especially the Comoros.
 For some reason, over the past
 few years those remote and little-
 known islands have been nagging
 at my brain.

INT. SMITHS' KITCHEN IN GRAHAMSTOWN - AFTERNOON

Margaret and William sit at the kitchen table. Tears are pooling in Margaret's eyes. William is flushed with excitement.

SMITH (O.S.)
 And so it was. The second
 Coelacanth was found in the
 Comoros, and thanks to my wife's
 diligence in giving Captain Eric
 Hunt a Coelacanth identification
 poster, he was able to save and
 preserve it for science. There on
 his deck, swathed in cotton-wool,
 was the fish. I'm not ashamed to
 say that after all that long
 strain, I wept...

Smith's voice cracks with emotion and he weeps again. Tears begin to roll down Margaret's face.

There is a long pause in the broadcast.

CBS JOURNALIST (O.S.)
 One more question, sir...what
 will you do now?

Smith clears his throat to recover.

SMITH (O.S.)
 Fetch my wife, and fly her with
 me to the Prime Minister's house
 in Cape Town.

Margaret looks at William with surprise and joy.

EXT. RUNWAY OUTSIDE DURBAN AIRPORT - AFTERNOON

Smith and the CBS journalist still sit side by side on the steps.

CBS JOURNALIST
 Thank you, sir, thank you.

The crowd on the tarmac begins to applaud loudly, without stopping.

The mayor of Durban steps up to the microphone.

MAYOR

And may I say on behalf of South Africa how much we congratulate and are proud of you.

The crowd continues to applaud; cameras flash. Smith looks briefly overwhelmed and unsure what to do.

CBS JOURNALIST

And that is the actual description of the newest page in South Africa's history.

He motions to the sound man to stop recording. The crowd's applause thunders with no sign of abating.

Smith climbs back up the steps into the Dakota. The pilot pulls him aside once he's in the hold.

PILOT

Just one small problem: I've already told you I can't let your wife on here.

Smith shrugs and smiles.

SMITH

No military plane has ever been authorised to fetch a dead fish either...

The pilot looks extremely unhappy, but climbs into the cockpit looking defeated.

INT. TAXI CAB - AFTERNOON

Smith and Margaret sit side by side on the back seat of a taxi cab with a large boot. Margaret is dressed in her Sunday best and looks almost unnatural wearing a hat and gloves. Smith is wearing the same khaki shorts and open-toed sandals that he wore on the Dakota.

They hold hands tightly but unobtrusively and look at each with mutual excitement. Uncharacteristically, Smith kisses her on the cheek. She smiles and goes bright red. The taxi driver sees it in the rearview mirror and smiles to himself.

Smith and Margaret turn simultaneously to look into the boot of the taxi: the coffin-shaped Coelacanth chest has been squeezed into it.

EXT. MALAN'S HOLIDAY HOUSE IN CAPE TOWN - AFTERNOON

JOURNALISTS swarm outside the Malan's holiday house and surround the car as soon as it stops. Margaret and Smith take opposite sides of the chest and heave it out of the boot. The photographers' cameras flash in a frenzy.

Mrs Malan opens the front door and barely disguises her shock at finding a sweating Smith and Margaret holding a large chest between them. She crinkles her nose with disgust at the smell.

A JOURNALIST from the pack waves his arm in the air.

JOURNALIST

Mrs Malan! Is it not a contradiction for Dr Malan to support this venture when he - and you - are Creationists?

A SECOND JOURNALIST from the pack pushes forward.

JOURNALIST 2

Surely it is a nasty blow to Dr Malan's theory of the superiority of whites over blacks if this fish proves that we all have a common ancestor?

Mrs Malan gives the journalists a scathing look and slams the door.

SMITH

(out of breath)

Mrs Malan, forgive me for not greeting you properly...

She shakes her head as if unperturbed, motions towards the back garden and watches with horror as they traipse through the immaculate house.

Malan comes forward as he spots the Smiths with their heavy load. He holds a cup of iced tea and wears a bowler hat that barely disguises the ugly red birthmark that spreads over his forehead.

Smith and Margaret put the chest in the shade of a jacaranda tree in the garden. Margaret's gloves are now grubby and her hat is lopsided. She hastily tries to rearrange her dress, then shakes hands with Malan. Smith shakes Malan's hand enthusiastically.

Mrs Malan emerges from the house with two glasses of iced tea and hands them to the Smiths.

MALAN
 (in thick Afrikaans
 accent)
 So...Professor...what have we
 here?

Smith kneels beside the chest and pulls open the lid. He takes hold of the cotton wool layer and begins to pull it back. Margaret watches intently.

SMITH
 (in Afrikaans)
 Dr Malan, may I present you
 with...the Coelacanth, *Malania
 anjouane*.

Mrs Malan pulls a handkerchief from her dress pocket and holds it to her nose.

Malan stands for a while in silence staring at the fish, looking vaguely horrified.

MALAN
 (in Afrikaans)
 Do you mean to tell me we were
 all once this ugly?

Margaret and Smith glance at each other and smile conspiratorially. Margaret reaches for Smith's hand as they stand side by side. He squeezes her hand.

SMITH
 Well, yes...I suppose I do.

The Coelacanth lies in the cotton wool bed, in its full salted, fishy glory.

EXT. KNYSNA LAGOON - EARLY EVENING

OLD MARGARET (V.O.)
 People could never understand why
 it ended the way it did. But I
 knew, of course. To him, nothing
 was worse than losing the power
 of his mind.

Smith and his son, William, sit in a small canoe on the Knysna lagoon.

Their dog, MARLIN, sits at the head of the boat watching the water intently for fish.

Smith is painfully thin; his eyes are sunken. He is not much older, but his hands shake as he tries repeatedly to bait a hook.

William, now in his teens, has already cast. He notices his dad struggling.

WILLIAM
(gently)
Here, dad, let me...

Smith ignores his son and keeps trying to bait the hook with trembling hands, and increasing frustration.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
Dad..

The hook suddenly slips and lodges itself in Smith's finger. He sucks in his breath and pulls it out. The wound bleeds.

William tears a sleeve off his T-shirt and wraps it around his father's finger. Smith looks out to the distant Knysna Heads, his face full of despair.

INT. SMITHS' KITCHEN IN KNYSNA COTTAGE - NIGHT

Smith sits at the kitchen table in the same cottage that he stayed in with his parents as a young boy. Before him on the table is a large elf fish, laid on paper. His scalpel and microscope lie next to it, and beside them are a few small vials of chemicals.

Margaret, her hair just showing the first streaks of grey, and dressed in her nightgown, takes out the rubbish, letting the flyscreen close noisily behind her.

She washes her hands at the sink, then bends to kiss Smith on his forehead.

MARGARET
'Night, Len. Don't stay up too late.

Smith sits very still and then suddenly takes his wife's hand and kisses it gently. He strokes a strand of hair back from her eyes. She seems taken aback at this attention.

SMITH
I won't, lass.

Margaret smiles and leaves the kitchen.

Smith sits at the table for a long while, looking at the fish.

He separates one of the vials of liquid from the others and places it before him.

Then he takes a sheet of paper from beneath the newspaper, and begins to write: The sight of one eye has almost gone; back pressure is proving unbearable. I live in perpetual fear of becoming bedridden and helpless.

Smith pauses. His hands shake uncontrollably. He takes a new piece of paper and writes: Goodbye my love, and thank you for a wonderful thirty years. Careful. Cyanide.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Margaret - now an old woman, but still with her sparkling green eyes - sits propped up in one of the beds. Sunlight streams through a window into the room.

Beside her on a chair by the bed, sits another old woman, whose kind eyes and mischievous face give her identity away: it is Marjorie Courtney-Latimer. A gold pin brooch of a coelacanth is pinned to her lapel.

Margaret looks past Marjorie out the window; lost in thought. There is a quiet intimacy between them. When Margaret speaks, we recognise her voice immediately as that of the narrator, and realise she has been speaking to Marjorie.

OLD MARGARET

But even that was many years ago
now..

Marjorie nods and smiles sadly. Then she grins impishly at Margaret.

MARJORIE

Now, my dear, I have a little
surprise for you..

Marjorie pushes the call button for the nurse and then sits in the chair with a mysterious look on her face. Margaret is intrigued.

The nurse arrives, pushing a large video projector before her into the room. She plugs it in, then draws the curtains against the sun. The room is dark.

Margaret looks at Marjorie in surprise, but Marjorie simply smiles enigmatically.

The nurse pushes a VHS tape into the machine and switches it on. Static is projected onto the bare white wall opposite Margaret's bed. The nurse leaves the room, closely the door quietly behind her.

Suddenly the static dissolves into the image of a live coelacanth, floating underwater, doing a strange kind of headstand, with its head pointed towards the bottom of the sea. The underwater light is dappled and shows the coelacanth's spotted scales. It is majestic, graceful, unperturbed.

Margaret takes Marjorie's hand tightly, deeply moved. Tears run down her cheeks. She is speechless.

MARJORIE

(whispering)

It's the first live footage of a coelacanth. Young German man sent it to me. Took them over thirty dives in a submersible to get it.

Margaret can't tear her eyes from the fish projected on the wall.

MARGARET

(hoarsely)

I'll take this memory to him.

The coelacanth continues to hover on the screen, hardly moving, oblivious to its own significance.

Montage of photographs just before credits:

1. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto screen of Prime Minister Malan in black bowler hat, looking down at the Coelacanth with a disgusted look on his face.

SUPERTITLE: Prime Minister Malan is now known as the architect of apartheid in South Africa. He remained a fervent Creationist until his death.

2. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto screen of Eric Hunt shirtless on the deck of his schooner.

SUPERTITLE: The French were furious that a South African had nicked the Coelacanth from under their noses. They promptly banned all foreign scientists from searching for Coelacanths in the Comoros for the next two decades.

SUPERTITLE: Captain Eric Hunt drowned in a shipwreck four years after the second Coelacanth was discovered.

3. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto screen of Ahamadi Abdallah mending fishing nets on the beach beside his hut.

SUPERTITLE: Ahamadi Abdallah's fame was short-lived. A group of South African scientists managed to track him down in the Comoros in 1999. None of his children or grandchildren knew the story of the Coelacanth discovery or the role Abdallah had played in it.

4. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto screen of Marjorie Courtney-Latimer as a young woman with her wry smile, standing in front of the first mounted Coelacanth.

SUPERTITLE: Marjorie Courtney-Latimer was curator of the East London Museum until her retirement. She passed away in 2004 at the age of 97. Her 97th birthday cake was shaped like a Coelacanth.

5. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto screen of Margaret and Smith up to their thighs in sea-water on one of their fishing expeditions in Mozambique. Margaret holds a large net and Smith a spear-gun.

SUPERTITLE: After her husband's suicide, Margaret Smith was appointed the first director of the JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology in Grahamstown. She continued to undertake arduous fieldwork expeditions and returned often to northern Mozambique until her retirement. She died of leukemia in 1986, at the age of 70.

6. STILL: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH flashes onto the screen of the first Coelacanth as it lay on the deck of the trawler, still alive.

SUPERTITLE: Almost a year after the Comoran Coelacanth was discovered, the French caught another specimen off Anjouane. The French were delighted: the front page of *Le Monde* proclaimed that it was: "Notre Coelacanth!" The year after, they caught another two, and subsequent years brought many more specimens. By the 1960s they were averaging five Coelacanth a year, bringing charges of over-fishing.

SUPERTITLE: In 1998, a Coelacanth was discovered in Indonesia by an American scientist and his wife. The media quickly caught onto the story and described the find as the "zoological sensation of the decade." The scientific Coelacanth world received the news with shock and amazement.

7. BLACK LEADER

8. FOOTAGE OF LIVE COELACANTH HOVERING ABOVE THE SEA FLOOR, WITH SUBMERSIBLE SPOTLIGHT DAPPLING ITS SCALES. IT IS BEAUTIFUL: CALM, GRACEFUL AND UNPERTURBED.

END CREDITS