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“One of the favourite themes of science-fiction writers is the near-destruction of human civilisation by hordes of insects that have developed into giants owing to some genetic accident. The sober truth is that, as a source of trouble to humanity, the insects have done well enough at their present size. Since the beginning of recorded history insects have caused the death by disease of more people than all the wars, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and fires combined.”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

1.

“The investigator very soon comes to the conclusion that all motivated movements are dependent on what we call memory. These predetermined inherited motivated movements we call instinct. You come across this in all its original perfection in insects...”

From *The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugène Marais

This is my first memory:

I am running towards several geese on the edges of the lake. It's late afternoon and sun splinters through the trees, throwing fragments of shiny slices onto the dark mud. In my left hand I have a chunk of bread, damp from my eager palms. The geese, upset by my untamed enthusiasm, lurch strangely towards me, biting, squawking; their weird, wide eyes almost evil with intent.

It's like a film fragment - that memory. I wonder how much of it I have embellished over the years, how much of it really was as clear as that. I know for certain that the mud was slimy – I can (even now) feel the slick mud slipping smoothly between my toes. And I still bear the scar across my left palm, where the largest of the geese settled its serrated beak.

From then on, the memories are thick and fluid. I tumble down the stairs on a tricycle and slice my forehead open, burn my hands on a hot water pipe, lose three teeth and break my wrist in a car accident.

They say I am accident-prone. Ill-fated Alice who draws around her a dark little world of scars. My skin, a parchment of tales. Here I slipped through the wooden slats on a school holiday, there – that really large, long scar across my stomach – was when I was dragged out to sea by a freak rip and then just as suddenly, cast off, semi-conscious onto the greedy rocks, grinning sharply as they swallowed chunks of my skin.

I have always been unlucky. For several months I tried entering the lottery, but not a single number I selected ever came up. Not one. For a long time I suspected that fate hated me. Today, I am sure of it.

Today, Veronica died.

At 4.45am in the morning, her pallid, skinny body gave up the fight and she “passed on”. That's what the doctor had said as he stood awkwardly in the long green corridor.

Death has always intrigued me.

I was bored of Veronica before I'd even met her.

My mother had spent weeks with the phone clutched to her ear, informing her network of friends (those to be outdone, outshone) about the wondrous creature that was her son's new girlfriend: "She's so beautiful, and classy. Just very classy. Her father is a property baron you know, Max Rowland... Yes Marjorie! It's his daughter... Yes, his daughter!"

Groggy. That's the only way to describe the day on which I finally met the daughter of my mother's dreams - the self that had completely eluded me: Veronica Rowland. Andrew, Veronica and I met at the Mount Nelson Hotel. The world was bleary, it was the day after a black South Easter had gusted, tearing branches from trees, toppling bins in the streets - the city was jumbled, startled. Inert rubbish strewn across sidewalks, cardboard cluttering the roads. But not the hotel. I remember driving up the manicured palm-lined driveway of the Mount Nelson, bewildered by this sanitized litter-free zone. Just like the real Alice in Wonderland - as if I'd slipped through the looking glass into a wonderland so efficiently foreign.

I was early, which was a mistake, especially dressed as I was. Unsettled by the grandeur, the plump carpets, the floral sofas and the bored pianist from whose fingers flowed the most monstrous elevator music, I slipped into some outlying corner - behind a fortress of fat cushions. From there I spied out this alien landscape.

I was surprised - I had expected to find myself awash in a world of hoity-toity lipsticked sixty year olds, but I wasn't. Across from where I'd hidden were a bunch of twenty-somethings, lounging lazily - casually decked in jeans and trainers - foreigners, German or something. Further along was an elderly couple (she in a pink cashmere cardigan, he in a pastel blue golf top - the "his and hers" for retirees) both mutely absorbed in their respective books.

And then there was Veronica. Stylish, beautiful, narcissistic bitch. I was never going to like her - my mother had made sure of that. But I sometimes wonder whether I could have liked her - perhaps if we'd met under different circumstances? Perhaps if she hadn't been Andrew's girlfriend and the darling of my mother's life?

No. Probably not.

The first words Veronica ever uttered to me went along the lines of, "You'll never believe what calamity has just occurred. My heel, look." She slumped into an armchair and surveyed the wreckage. "I mean, honestly, Andrew," she sighed, giving my brother an annoyed pout "they're my favourite shoes."

They looked tight, cruel, too high - viciously dangerous. And virtually unscarred.

Apparently the heel had broken as she had stepped from Andrew's car. Well, not quite her heel, rather that tiny rubber bit at the end of the stiletto.

Calamity, indeed.

The concierge was sent to have it repaired. While the beloved leopard print stilettos were out of action, housekeeping brought her a pair of plastic sheathed towelling slippers to wear: "Oh shit. They don't hide the fact that I haven't had a pedicure." Veronica's gnarled toes (no doubt weary of being forced into Cinderella-like stilettos) drooped glumly out.

A stab of delight at those horrid little toes.

And then feeling guilty for feeling that.

Then it began: "Andrew's told me so much about you..."

I bet he has.

"He mentioned that you're into maps or something?"

"I work for a cartographer at the moment. An old guy..." That appalling piano music, do they always have to plonk out a bastardised Beatles number? Eleanor Rigby, I couldn't help thinking that it was peculiarly appropriate. "But really I don't do the maps myself. I just sort of help out with a few letters he needs done, his bills." I remember thinking I sounded so inane, so uncertain – so nowhere. "I'm really just his assistant, I suppose."

Miles Murphy. His business card read: "Cartographer Extraordinaire". He was eighty-three when I worked for him, eccentric, crotchety. But he's dead now - too. His heart eventually broke – well, that's how his long-suffering wife had put it when she'd phoned to tell me the news.

It was all so long ago. Miles, Veronica, the impeccable Mount Nelson – only odd, disjointed, snapshots return - like the leopard skin stilettos, Veronica's gnarled nails, and Andrew; Andrew, the good-looking golden-boy so nonchalantly, so disarmingly slouched on the couch – no doubt courting a hangover. Well, that's what I would have thought then.

I remember the waters though, Veronica's waters, because she used them as some sort of entry point into my aberrant scars. She ordered a trio of mineral waters from a waitress called Madge. I remember her name because it was on her badge and I thought (likely by way of a frivolous distraction) that Madge rhymed with badge. Why do I remember so clearly the silly, inconsequential details, but can't seem to remember the substance of most of our conversations?

I think they call it repression. Maybe I'm in shock, maybe I'd remember more if everything wasn't as weird as it so suddenly is.

Veronica: "Three sparkling mineral waters for me. In glass bottles – little glass bottles."

“Are you sure you don’t want one big bottle? It works out about the same,” Madge countered.

“No. I want the three little ones.” Madge scribbled something on her notepad - I imagined it to be: “Cocky cow wants three baby sparklers.” Childish, I know. For me: “Inspid weirdo wants tea,” and Andrew: “Arrogant sap wants rock shandy.” Madge and her imaginary orders drifted off.

Veronica: “Just one of my quirks. A trio of baby mineral waters.” Verbatim. She actually said that. “We all have to have our little eccentricities – you know, a little something that separates us from the crowd...” a practiced shrug, “so, Alice, what’s your little tic?”

“I don’t know.”

“Surely you must have something?”

“No, I don’t think so.” I don’t go around pretentiously ordering three baby mineral waters and imagine I’m interesting as a result.

“She’s unlucky.” Andrew, of course. After all that’s why I was invited.

“Yes,” Veronica drawled, “that’s right... Andrew told me about that. Says you’re a magnet for bad luck.” A slight pause, Veronica always had perfect dramatic timing. “He says your body is riddled with scars?”

What can I say? People always ask about that. As if I’m some kind of unlucky freak show. “Ooh, show me your scars,” followed by, “someone told me they were self inflicted.” The really weird guys almost always ask me - with their voices all lowered to skanky levels - if I’m into self-mutilation or sadomasochism. It’s a never-ending gauntlet of curiosity. It sometimes feels like a double whammy of bad luck – first I get fucked over by fate, and then have the world thinking I’m some tortured soul obsessively injuring myself to get a fragment of attention.

Can’t I just be plain unlucky?

I had a psychology student I fancied telling me one evening that I suffered from a persecution complex.

“But how can it be a complex when you really are being persecuted?” I retorted.

He was a tall boy, sandy hair, grey eyes - we were sitting against the wall in the dim enclave of a dying party. “So, tell me,” he asked somewhat curtly, “what’s persecuting you?”

“Life. Or fate. I don’t know. I just know that I’m unlucky, or accident-prone. Or something.”

He opted for the tortured soul route, telling me that I possibly had “borderline tendencies...” before he deftly evaporated.

Madge returned with the drinks and Veronica, annoyed to be distracted from my unlucky fables, told her to: "Just pop them on the table and hurry along. Thank you."

Andrew and Veronica. That day, I was their little game. I can imagine how it all came about. Andrew would have been telling Veronica about his weird anti-social sister with her body that had, over the years, amassed something like 300 or so stitches (the actual figure then was 316). I can hear him saying: "Weirdo of note. You know, Addams Family type stuff. Even looks like the kid sister in the film. You've actually got to meet her to believe it."

They'd have had fun choosing the spot. High tea at the Mount Nelson Hotel with the oddball sister, who'd look ludicrously out of place. I'd spent a good ten minutes carefully laddering a new pair of stockings, clawing a big hole over my unshaven knee. I smudged my mascara under my eyes, and caked lumps of it onto my lashes. I found a tacky purplish lipstick that I'd worn to a fancy dress gothic party in Obz one night, and digging under the bed, finally pulled out a pair of old, hardened maroon Doc Martins from my teenage angst years.

They'd screwed me with the venue, so I reckoned I'd screw them with the outfit.

But as we were leaving that day, standing in the parking lot, crammed with extravagant cars – each worth more than my annual salary - Veronica leaned over to kiss me goodbye, saying, "I do both cheeks. Very French, I'm afraid." Air-kiss, air-kiss, and pulling away, looked me up and down, and said, "Your skater-girl look is very cute. So... Avril Lavigne when she was an angsty teenager."

Fuck.

But I'm ahead of myself. Rewind back inside, back to the puffed-up lounge, where the leopard skin stilettos are being returned to Veronica, triumphant on a tray.

Once her feet are again imprisoned in the cruel toe-devouring leopards, Veronica nibbles on a teeny cucumber sandwich. She's cross-examining me about the luck: "But it just seems unbelievable that one person has all those scars. Are they very..." she twists her mouth downwards theatrically, "gross?"

I'm sure if I offer, she'd accompany me to the toilet for a scar tour. Imagine: "And this little one over here, just above my nipple, see? That was four stitches. A Dr Stemple did them, quite a good job, actually. One of the better ones - almost invisible. I was about eight when it happened - fell from a tree, it got nicked by a branch. And this one, just to the left of that, it was only three stitches, but the rib broke too. Now that was eina. Tripped on the neighbour's poodle, and landed on the picket fence."

But I don't offer her my imaginary scar tour. I run my index finger along the wide, web-like ladder on the stocking on my left leg.

"I think," I begin slowly, pulling the stocking hole round my hairy knee wider, as I do, she surreptitiously scans my knee, "that I'm cursed. In fact, I know I am. I know things I'm possibly clairvoyant. Or maybe not strictly clairvoyant, but I have these really disturbing dreams." Veronica is intrigued. Andrew is sceptical. "You know I keep on having this same weird recurring dream about a dog we had when I was a child. Pluto... he disappeared when I was eleven and Andrew was nine. Do you remember him Andrew?"

Andrew sits up, "That's enough Alice."

"Enough of what?" I ask innocently.

"Veronica and I have had enough of this crap. I'm calling for the bill." That's Andrew for you. Mr Avoidance. Spent his whole life avoiding himself.

It had to catch up sometime.

Or did it?

Veronica is dead. I didn't think she'd make it after how she'd lain, so strangely peaceful, over the bonnet.

White, flecked with tiny red petals of blood.

I was the first out of the car - my body unbroken. Disturbing not to see the familiar crimson - even my hands, miraculously uncut - some kind of aberration. And then I noticed her: oily dark blood in her bleached blond hair.

Another terrifying crunch, as Andrew forced - with fury - his crumpled door open, and like a madman from a movie, stumbled out of the car, backing off from the bloodied bonnet. "Jesus! Fuck! Fuck!" and realising that Veronica was utterly motionless stopped suddenly and mumbled, "Oh fuck."

Perhaps it was that moment that changed my life. There was something in the way that he mumbled, "Oh fuck" - a shard of regret: splintered, broken, but alive. Alive enough to make me feel that perhaps I'd always been wrong about Andrew. Doubt. Sickening doubt. It made me doubt everything I'd needed to believe in order (I'd thought) to survive our twisted little war. The sibling rivalry in our family had long ago escalated into hostile warfare, and that war hinged on one incident.

Or rather, more ominously, on my memory of one incident.

Everything slides around in the mud of my memory, it's as if Veronica's blood is seeping into the dried sand of certainty - making everything mushy again. This horror, this sudden death yet again unsettles everything I've been trying to trust - like the past. Do I only remember what I needed to remember back then to make sense of everything that happened

between Andrew and I? And yet, perhaps like a photograph that only sees one part of a scene – his nine-year-old fingernails – there was more that I didn't see. That I didn't want to see?

What is it that I didn't see then? And if I didn't see it then - couldn't or wouldn't see it then - is it possible that I could see it now?

And then there is Ralph.

I can always rely on Ralph to blister the past. All those sleepless nights - spellbound by the moon's passage around the blunt shadows of my room - thinking of him, about all the possible unsaid saids. Filling the moonlit room with anxious equations: he said that, was there anything unsaid that I didn't notice? Some tiny gesture, which held in it his capacity for betrayal. You see, when Ralph left, he stole everything I believed in. Melodramatic, I know, but somehow, it's true.

When I met Ralph, I was twenty-six years, eleven months and twelve days old.

I was working in a decaying hotel in London. One of those places straight out of the 70s - her first makeover had been her last, and with time, the tart panache of her heyday had peeled away. Like her carpets, she was worn out, tired of middle class businessmen (who had evidently long since tired of her). Somewhere in the mid-90s I imagine, even the budget travellers had had enough.

I loved the place. It was full of losers who didn't seem to notice that most of the furniture had been glued together somewhere, somehow. For a lot of them it was a good place to lay low, get high. And of course, bonus – it was dirt-cheap. Dirt-cheap, but as clean as old-grubby can be. Of course, I would say that - housekeeping was my department.

I used to think that rich, swanky London bankers in their marble-towers-that-overlooked-the-Thames-and-London-beyond, would look over the city – their city – and never see us down below under the rotting Hotel Tisca roof. To them we were invisible, tiny – almost insect-like in our seeming insignificance. The bottom feeders of society.

I liked being that invisible person. For so long I had felt as though I had been singled out by fate to be luckless. Everyone at the Tisca had a hard luck tale.

It's as if fate hated us all. There was always a struggling artist lounging about who'd be muttering something along the lines of:

You know, I'm doing what I love, so the money should follow. The laws of attraction and all that. But I'm getting tired now, I've been giving myself to the universe for eight years now. Eight should be lucky – the Chinese reckon it's lucky, you know. So that's why I came here, now, with my life savings, you know. I visited a gallery the other day, showed the guy

there my work. It was some of my best stuff, stuff that I did when my dog died – really meaningful stuff, really powerful stuff. But that stupid toff at the gallery knew nothing about art.

Nothing.

He told me in his stupid toff voice: “It’s not our market, thank you for considering us.”

Thank you for considering us... but fuck off!

Pratt.

Part of this suffering - this poverty I’m experiencing now - it’s a manifestation that my soul has agreed to bear – I’m bearing the poverty in the soul of the world – because there’s poverty in the souls of pratts like that.

They don’t understand beauty, truth or art...

Hey, just thinking, you wouldn’t want to buy a piece, would you? I’d give you a good deal. Art’s a brilliant investment, you know, because I’m on the up, you know.

Everyone at the Tisca was on the up. There was only one-way from down there and it was up. That’s not quite true, there was always the ever-popular sideways route, where those who’d been way too screwed over by life would roll themselves another joint and spend daze contemplating their stagnant navel. Eventually they’d try and skip the hotel at 3am in the morning to avoid paying their bill, only to be cut off curtly at the front door by Sophie, the stout, insomniac manageress.

And then they’d try and pay with their art:

Fuck you! Matisse used to pay his way in restaurants with his work. Why can’t I?

The only ones who ever had money to throw around were the self-nominated amputees.

Just like the rest, they were hiding out – but this time from their whole selves. They consciously set out to permanently maim themselves by removing some part of their body. The ultimate form of masochism.

For some reason Julian always sticks in my mind. He was 34 years old and beautiful. Soft blue eyes, tiny wire spectacles, a little anxious – which I liked. He’d had his pinkie toe removed. He stayed for a few weeks, and every afternoon I’d sit and play gin rummy with him in the lounge. Thick central heating, fetid carpets; no matter how often you vacuumed there was always a thin film ash floating through the air. It felt very “velvet underground” – a smoky, seamy lounge; always the pungent crisp stench of the anti-septic from the wound dressings of one or another of the amputees who’d be sprawled across a fraying settee, groaning sporadically.

“Why did you have it done?” It was one of the first questions I’d asked Julian. It seemed like all the self-nominated amputees wanted you to ask. I was the only staff member who ever did - the others had been there too long to be intrigued. The deviant had become normal, routine, boring.

“Just another sad bloody attention seeker,” Sophie would retort after another bandaged hand or foot had checked in.

But Julian wasn’t like that.

It turned out that he’d had six toes on his left foot. “I can’t explain why,” he frowned, “but it’s always bothered me.” He didn’t want to be different anymore. He wanted to be normal: “Just like you, Alice.”

Perhaps that’s why I remember him, he was the first person I ever met who thought I was normal; I think I half fell in love with him for that. But, unluckily for me, Julian was obsessed with normal, with fitting in. “Once my foot heals,” he told me one afternoon as he lay sunken in the belly of the soft green sofa, “I’ll never, ever return to the underworld of freaks – not in my body, not in my mind.” He was looking up at the pressed ceiling. It needed a paint. “I think you should come away with me. Escape this grimy little nut-hole of a hotel.” He proceeded to hand me a sketch he’d made - detailed plans of the hotel with possible escape routes mapped out: “To avoid that insomniac bitch.” He was obviously referring to Sophie.

After Ralph left me, a sputter of curiosity: what would my normal life have been like with the ten-toed Julian? But it was never to be. I showed him the scars on my stomach and he took his map back. We didn’t play rummy again and he left the next day, hobbling hastily away, away, away.

Without saying good-bye.

I’d like to say that he was the most normal of the amputees, but logic dictates that, as he was the one I remember most clearly, he clearly couldn’t have been normal, could he?

The Hotel Tisca can be found (even today) at the end of a shady cul-de-sac off Hammersmith High Street. Back then, each room had an old black telephone with a fat round dial, and Sophie would nag me sharply, constantly, to clean the dial part with a damp rag: “Not wet, Alice. Damp.” She said there was nothing worse than the hard muck of people’s fingers that collected in the dials. It was strange that she was so fussy about this particular point. The rest of the hotel was grimy and frayed; outside, plaster had dropped off the façade, and the salmon pink paint was streaked with black mould. Not that Sophie would have known - after all she never crossed the threshold, either way.

The first person you'd generally meet when you did cross the threshold was Illana, the 23-year-old Bulgarian receptionist who chewed too much gum and spent her days watching Japanese anime movies in her little cubicle behind reception. She told me expressively (in her broken English) that she liked these films because she wanted to be a cartoonist, but as she demonstrated, she couldn't draw. Maybe she hadn't meant that at all. No one really knew what Illana meant; her English almost always sounded like a foreign language (a lot like Japanese, in fact) and she often connected callers to the wrong rooms. My worst was that she always stuck messages for various staff members on the wall at the back of her reception desk, in an indecipherable Bulgarian scrawl - with her chewed gum.

Needless to say, the hotel's clients enjoyed her inadvertent eccentricity.

One of those clients was Ralph.

It was Illana's day off, and I was trying, petulantly, to remove a glob of dried gum from the wall with the end of a clear plastic ruler. In my other hand I was holding the message she'd left for me and between bursts with the ruler, was desperately trying to decipher the cryptic concoction of Bulgarian and Japanese-English.

"Excuse me..."

I recognised the clean-shaven man immediately. Room 945. He had one of those little wooden shaving brushes in his bathroom, and usually stayed for three or four weeks at a time - returning a month or two later.

"Pardon me," I told him brusquely - in the way that I imagined a receptionist at a swanky hotel would. Illana usually grunted at guests, so this should make for a nice change; setting the ruler down, I purred sweetly, "Can I help you?"

He began to laugh, "Are you for real?"

"No. This is the Tisca. Nothing here is real. It's all part of the collective subconscious." I stuck an Avis-type smile to my face, and keeping up the masquerade: "So, what can I do for you today, sir?"

He smiled, shrugged and said, "My name is Ralph Winokur. And, um... well. Hi."

This wasn't exactly going according to plan. Surely he was supposed to ask for something. His key, perhaps. "Are you looking for your key?" I asked, turning efficiently to grab the key from the key holder on my left.

"No. No. I have my key..." He held up his key, jingling it foolishly, and then buried it back into his trouser pocket.

"Oh," I shrugged. "Perhaps you are expecting a message?" Hoping to hell that he wasn't, because it's only Illana who'd have been qualified to decipher that.

“No. No.” He hesitated and then suddenly, “I was wondering where Illana is...”

“Oh,” I said, and then thinking that he must like her, “Oh... um, well, yes. It’s her day off.” And tidying nothing in particular on the desk, added: “Every Tuesday.”

“Oh no. No, no, not like that...” he replied quickly. And then he smiled at me, held out his hand and said, “I don’t think we’ve met properly, actually. My name is Ralph. Ralph Winokur.”

Before I officially met him, I’d often tried to figure out how scrawny, clean-shaven Ralph in his standard issue jeans and T-shirt had landed at the Tisca. Too Julian normal for my liking. He wasn’t nearly weird enough for the place. Most guests had no money, serious drug problems or a genuine quirk – a desperate desire to have a finger removed “because ever since I was a child, I had this haunting feeling that that finger didn’t belong to me...”

I’d applied to work at the hotel, after seeing an advert in a phone booth: “Hardworking woman wanted for various duties (chambermaid, kitchen, waitressing, front of house) in hotel in Hammersmith. Quirky oddballs need only apply. No straight-laced chancers or struggling artists please. Disabilities preferred.” I’d phoned immediately and Sophie had barked down the line: “What makes you think you’re so odd then? Make it snappy and make it good, because I’m bored of these tedious calls.”

“Um, OK... fate hates me. My body is riddled with scars - I’ve had 353 stitches. I have broken twenty-three bones, mostly in different accidents...”

She cut me off: “OK, stop winging then. You’re hired. Get your arse down here on the double. It’s a live-in job. Twenty five quid a day.” With that she dictated the address and slammed down the phone.

I loved the Tisca - it was a place where I could hide. No one was odd, as everyone was. Our communal weirdness was comforting - it was a sanctuary for strangeness. I disappeared into the absorbent world of the Tisca for two years, made the odd, evasive phone call home to mother, telling her I was working in a dive - shit pay, shit lodgings. Deliberately vague - the last thing I wanted was the siphons, Andrew and Veronica, and their slick coke friends descending on London and pulling into the Tisca for a weekend of frivolity. Imagine how they’d have loved the spectacle, I can just see Andrew, pulling Ingrid - the blind chambermaid - aside and saying, “Look here,” holding something up in front of her cloudy unseeing eyes, “you didn’t clean this.” After which he and Veronica would crumple into giggles. No. That was the last thing I wanted - my little haven defiled by the histrionic coked out couple and their perverse little groupies.

So, at first, Ralph's apparent normality troubled me. The first time he asked me out I told him I was busy. He later found me reading in the smoky lounge.

"Very busy, I see," he said sauntering in, and plopping himself down on the frayed chair opposite me, he proceeded to light up.

I continued to read. "It's a good book."

"Better than a drink with me?"

"I had a date with the book before you invited me. What was I to do? Let it down?"

"True, true," he nodded earnestly, "you don't want to hurt a book's feelings."

"Of course not."

"At least we agree on that," he smiled, taking a drag on his cigarette. "So, it seems we have something in common - a respect for books and..."

"And their feelings," I interjected.

"Impatient I see," he raised his eyebrows, "I like you. You're feisty."

"And you're too normal," I retorted.

"Ah, but Alice. Didn't anyone ever teach you never to judge those books you love so much by their covers?"

He was funny. And persistent. With a week he was trading kisses for a laughs: "I get a kiss for every laugh I get out of you." He made me laugh a lot - in the beginning.

My only defence was to rag him about his GQ look - telling him that he was a sick voyeur who enjoyed the Tisca spectacle. He chuckled at that, entertained by what he called my "endearing doubts" and reassured me that his quite ordinary façade held beneath it a strange and irreverent writer, who plucked characters from the Tisca for an off-kilter, bizarre novella he was writing, "something surreal and yet... disturbingly real".

"A dark comedy?" Surely something Ralph wrote had to be funny.

"I don't think my book will bring out the kisses."

"A horror then?" I asked.

"Nah." He twisted a strand of my hair between his fingers. It was an uncommonly sunny day and we were up in Ralph's room, drowsily spread across the bed. "A type of psychological thriller, where the surroundings become motifs for parts of the psyche." A suddenly serious Ralph.

"Very deep."

"I read English at uni."

"Oh. I never went to uni, as you lot call it. Did a six month secretarial course when I left school."

“Secretarial course? Alice...” he sighed, sitting up and heading towards his desk, “What the shit were you thinking?”

“I was in search of a life lacking ambition,” I’d intoned dramatically. “It’s a long story, but I don’t really fit in very well in the whole secretarial world,” I’d shrugged, “and these days secretaries are very ambitious. One of our big insurance companies in South Africa is now being run by a woman who was at first the secretary to the guy in charge - when he left she was the only who knew what was going on, and stepped right in.” I was fiddling with one of those frustrating flaps of skin on the edge of my thumbnail. “But it’s not my scene, really. Easy way to make money. I can touch type,” I held up all my fingers, wiggling them, “with all my fingers.”

“I like it though,” he said sitting down. “A frustrated, unambitious secretary. A great detail for my book.” And he began typing.

I always remember Ralph most clearly arched over his laptop in his room at the Tisca, two finger typing up his mythical book. He told me that it was to be called *The Sea of Wise Insects*.

“I like the title,” I told him, “what’s it about.”

Distractedly, typing, “Life, love, death.”

“Love?”

“Yes.” He stopped typing, looked out of the window, “All great stories have to have some great, smashing love interest somewhere.”

“So what happens in the love story? I mean, what makes these lovers so special.”

He turned to face me, “The best love stories are always the ones where the one person loves the other person more. But there’s is a twist on that in this story.”

“What do you mean a twist?”

“Well... It all turns in on itself, and nothing is what it seems in the end.” He stood up, stretched for a moment and then sprawled on the bed beside me, resting his head on my lap.

“It sounds confusing... frustrating even.”

“Life sometimes is both confusing and frustrating.”

“You are so full of it sometimes!” I laughed. “Do you know it’s sometimes very hard to have an ordinary conversation with you?”

“Well, that’s something to be grateful for, hey?” he pinched my chin, “My little luckless lover.”

“OK, so how do the insects fit in?”

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure that bit out. Maybe there’s a plague, you know, like in the bible.”

“Honestly Ralph. Are you sure this isn’t a comedy?”

“Well, not unless you have a very sick sense of humour,” he looked up at me with wide overly dramatic eyes, “which I know you do. But no, it’s about insects – you know, the underbelly of our world is surging with these little guys. They’re everywhere. Besides, what would the book world be without the buzzing of the cicadas?” I laughed at that one. “And your eyes... What would they be without those teeny weeny insects living in your eye-lashes who love mascara.”

That was Ralph. Eccentric details – most of them of dubious accuracy. In particular, he loved details about insects - this was, I suspected, his real reason for the quirky, beguiling title of his novella. He told me one gloomy evening while we were wading through the chill in Hyde Park, that he’d been mesmerised as a young boy by a *MacGyver* episode in which a minor villain had slipped down a ravine in some African jungle and had fallen directly into the path of army ants who had eaten him alive. Crawling into every crevice, making a sinister yet mechanical crunching sound as they went, the army of ants methodically obliterated the villain, leaving only his John Lennon spectacles as evidence that he’d ever been there.

Ants were never to be the same again. Just the other day, for instance, I opened a kitchen cupboard and saw a single (rather lost looking) ant trundling round the spices – disorientated between the salt and the cinnamon. Alone, the ant seemed so benign, but I couldn’t help thinking, nostalgically about Ralph and that wintry walk in Hyde Park, and the shivers that spiked through my body as I’d thought of how it must feel to be eaten alive by an army of tiny ants – of how the miniscule can be so murderous. Like airborne diseases – invisible, tiny terrors. Feelings are a lot like that, invisible, secret, destructive – particularly when they’re hidden, ashamed. Afraid.

I often wonder if Ralph really knew how much I loved him.

He’d spent hours enveloped in his room, a prisoner of his laptop, pages unfolding beneath his fingers. When he emerged, he was often still lost in some scene, grappling with the colourful creatures that were partly inspired by this world and then frothed into frenzies in his imagination. He didn’t talk much about these characters – I knew some names, some bland details. There was a heroine called Lucy who died at the end. I quite liked her from the rough description Ralph had given me: “She’s this determined, defensive woman who’s grown up in the shadow of her family. She wants desperately to be her own person, and that’s what a lot of

the novella's about." He stubbed out a cigarette. "About her finding herself, finding love and losing love. And then dying."

"But why does she have to die at the end?" I pleaded.

"Because, in all the best novels, the protagonists often die. It's more realistic like that."

"If you're following a model for what happens in the best novels, that's hardly being eccentric. You told me that you were writing an offbeat, eccentric novella," I accused.

"Well. You'll have to read it. Lots of weird things happen to her." That was the longest conversation Ralph and I ever had about his book. He told me the day after we'd had this chat that he didn't really like talking about it, that he was an "artiste" and that he didn't want his ideas contaminated by other people's opinions. He'd already been reconsidering his decision to kill off Lucy since we'd spoken, and it was a thought that "challenged the validity of the entire novella". After that I stayed out of Lucy and *The Sea of Wise Insects*.

For a very long time.

Until last week in fact, when I saw the title in the window of a bookshop in the mall. It all happened in slow motion. Everything around me constricted. My seeing splintered, spinning fragments of shops out of sync. The shopping centre was alive. I felt its intent - evil, determined to squeeze me. My lungs wouldn't open: my body, finally, cruelly, closing me out.

And then, quite suddenly, the solid plasticity of the mall returned, and with it, a strange kind of dread: *The Sea of Wise Insects* by Walt Turnbridge.

On the cover, a young woman asleep on a bed.

2.

“An insect that has been starved has a better chance of surviving a cold spell than one that has been well fed...”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

“So,” sitting down, “I believe there’s a little confusion. The question is simple. Who was driving?”

“I was.”

The man looks at me, tapping his pencil impatiently on the table. “A woman has died.” His statement is strange, heavy.

A woman: Veronica is sitting on the deck of her Bantry Bay apartment, an indistinct blonde blob backlit by the sunset, “Oh, Alice, so good that you could join us for this little celebration.” Again that edgy clammy feeling – does it ever go away, that not fitting in thing?

“I was driving,” I say.

In the past few hours there have been various policemen. The first ones came in uniform in a little white van, their blue lights skidding through the trees. It must have been a strange sight: the bloodied bonnet (the blood already hardened and sticky) and me, crouched, fetus-like to keep warm, leaning up against the buckled front wheel. The two tow-truck drivers lurking in their cabs - the one was drinking coffee from his tartan flask earlier.

“Why didn’t you wait in the car?” one of the policemen asked me.

“I was afraid that the car would explode.”

“That only happens in the movies,” he’d said, annoyed with my inanity. “Besides, if the car had blown, you’d also have blown up sitting there.” He indicated to the patch of ground where I’d been crouched.

“I felt safer there.” They were quiet, “I don’t know why,” I was almost whispering now, a guttural, nervous murmur, “I know it makes no sense, but I just did.”

The one policeman had thick dark freckles, all over his face, on his neck and even his hands. He asked me about the accident, asked me what we were doing here. I didn’t know what to say. “We were lost,” I said lamely.

“Up here?”

Tell them there was a dog.

There was a dog.

“There was a dog...”

“A dog?” He looked around, sceptically, and sighed irritably, “According to the paramedics you were driving.” The accusation in his voice completely splintered me. “Your friend is very seriously injured.”

I felt foggy, afraid.

Then the other policeman seemed to intervene, said that I should know my rights before they cross-examined me, said that I would be arrested and charged for negligent and reckless driving, and that the charge could alter to culpable homicide if the victim was fatally wounded. Everything he said seemed so textbook, as if the words were weighty, but were in reality somewhat lost, vacant. He said what they always say in movies (the same movies where the cars blow up) he said that I had the right to remain silent, that anything I said could and would be used against me in a court of law.

Blue lights spinning through the dust. Another van arrived. More police. “Moses, get Saunders to arrest the girl.”

And then the rain. The smell of wet soil.

Handcuffs, rough, too tight on my wrists. “Why? I’m not running away,” I said.

“It’s standard procedure in an arrest, lady.” He pushed me roughly into the back of the van.

Inside it was dark, hard - a peculiar stench, rancidly metallic. It was an unsettling drive - the cold, hard-edged steel of the handcuffs bit into my wrists with every jitter of the van. The city lights eventually emerged through the mesh-like bars of the van - the streets and houses, grimy through the grate. At one point the van stopped at a set of robots, a car pulled up next to us, and the man in the driver’s seat, clean shaven with short dark hair looked up at me, not just a quick glance, but a long curious stare. I felt grotesque, ashamed - me, the face in the darkness. And then the robot must have changed because we were gone. Hurtling through the city, a white van carrying its guilty cargo. I wanted to yell into the bright, night lit buildings, “It wasn’t me! I didn’t do it!”

But isn’t that what everyone says, the guilty and the innocent?

The one called Saunders pulled me from the van, he looked about seventeen, pudgy fingers wound round my arm. Led me through the face-brick charge office, one officer was resting his head on a desk. There was a woman, my age, sitting at one of the cubicles, “I think they also stole some CDs...” The officer opposite her was slowly filling in a form.

There was a pin board filled with blurry black and white identikits – “Wanted”.

I was led down a corridor and locked into a cell. Just like in the movies - perhaps prison films are a perverse kind of preparation for real life, or a sadistic kind of warning – a modern morality tale. I had my own cell, at the end of a long line of crowded cells. As I was walked, still handcuffed, other faces in other cells moved towards their bars, curious to see the latest perpetrator snatched by the police. Me the dangerous criminal! In retrospect it all seemed so ludicrous, after all I was usually the bloody victim, I'm the one that fate hates.

A sour stench of urine. A man's voice bellowed, "So, what's the little white girl done?" A few hoots and whistles. "Killed her pussy?" A flood of laughter.

They removed the cuffs in the cell, after the door had been slammed. Every sound, loud, jarring, unsettling. I remember Saunders turn the key in the lock. I don't know why I remember that so clearly – such a cliché – a suffocating sense of powerlessness. Locked in. My wrists were painfully itchy, with red indents, I rubbed them – Ralph liked to handcuff me to the bed, but he'd always been gentle, only rough in jest. This was meant to be mean.

A small man with yellow teeth came to take my fingerprints. He first took my left hand, the hand with the missing finger, he had to hold it steady, I was shaking or shivering, I can't remember which. He was gentle with me, said, "It's usual to be nervous."

Perhaps it was because he was kind that I whispered, my voice sounding more like a strange grunt, "I didn't do it."

He had soft, dark eyes, gentle. He nodded, and continued gently, firmly rolling each finger onto the ever so slightly sticky inkpad and then rolling them onto his cream form. When he was finished, he made a note over the missing print and then held out a tub of gelatinous cream, "To get the ink off your hands." He indicated, "Rub this into your fingers and wipe it off on the toilet roll." I complied, not all the ink came off though. On each finger, black edges of ink remained - tiny specs of accusation.

And I thought of Andrew and his nine-year-old nails.

I waited, not long. Then the man with the needle arrived, he was surly, impatient, roughly belting up the top of my arm. "Make a fist of your hand," he demanded. "Harder, tighter. You can do better than that."

He pushed the needle in, not gently like they do when you donate blood, but brusquely. My blood dribbled into the little glass vial, disturbingly red, like the blood that turned blonde Veronica into a ghoulish redhead.

When he was done, he seemed triumphant, pleased with his attainment – he shook the vial lightly. He packed everything neatly into his bag, nodded and without saying a word, left.

They let me phone my mother then, she was at the hospital with Andrew.

She was icy: "Veronica's in an extremely critical condition. She lost a lot of blood. They don't know if she's going to make it."

I didn't know what to say. I hadn't thought she'd make it. I'd thought she would be dead by now. "You can come and fetch me when you want," I said quietly.

She was silent for a while, and then she said, very slowly, "I think it's a good idea if I come now. I think you should be at the hospital with Andrew and Veronica's mother and sister. I think you should see what consequences your actions have."

They made me sign forms, told me that the case would be referred to court. I felt disorientated, as if I'd somehow stepped into a quagmire of bureaucratic sinking sand. Every signature felt heavier, twice the pen slid out of my hand, and fell stupidly onto the table. It was as if I couldn't hold it tightly enough, as if I'd blundered straight into some cliché and lost my grip.

They came for me again after she died. Then I was at the hospital, outcast from the others. This time they weren't in uniform, and they didn't handcuff me either. They brought me here, to this room. To this man.

It's cold in here. No one-way mirrors, no tape recorder, no window. Just a grubby, pokey room with a table and a few chairs scattered aimlessly about.

"Look," he says, leaning forward, "I don't know what you're up to. You and your brother, but it's not good for you." It's an unsettling observation, as if he has a magnifying glass into my soul. *You and your brother.*

He has a name, he told it to me when I came into the room, but I've forgotten it. There's something of Ralph about him. It's his hair. It's neither short nor long - light brown - it would be called mousy on a woman.

"I'm sure you're still in shock. And I'm sure that..." he picks up a file from his desk, and opens it, his eyes scanning the page, and finding what he was looking for, continues, "Veronica was a friend..."

What to say to that? No, actually we really didn't like each other. In fact, it's probably closer to mutual disregard, bordering on hate. But she's dead. *You shouldn't think ill of the dead.* Who said that? Dad? Would mom have ever said something like that?

Should I be sad? Should I be crying, remorseful? They never cry in CSI.

Silence.

More ruffling of the file. "You're in serious trouble, you know."

I know, I know. I'm always in trouble. I'm no good at hide and seek. Trouble always finds me.

"Am I going to be charged with... murder?"

It's not what he's expecting. He sighs, leans back and taps his pencil on the table again, studying me. Finally: "No. It was an accident. But you will be charged with culpable homicide." He then scans through his file again, "The evidence at the scene points to speeding... negligent and reckless driving." He looks up, "The autopsy is currently being performed on the victim."

Veronica, a victim.

"And then what?" I ask.

"And then we'll submit evidence. You'll go to court," he shrugs, "almost certainly be found guilty. Sentenced."

A phone rings in the distance. Something banging in the far reaches of the building. Even further out, I can hear the murmur of early morning traffic.

"Will I go to jail?"

"Look," he seems tired, defeated, "Alice. It's not likely. It depends on your blood tests. Still, from what your mother was saying to my colleagues at the hospital you have a history of car accidents. So, I don't know. The prosecution may want to use those to make an example of you. Imply that you have a record of negligent and reckless driving. I don't know," he shrugs. "If they do, it could mean a jail sentence. Probably nothing more than a year."

I nod. A year in a jail. A jail. That same feeling at the bookshop. Spongy melting lungs, melting thickly, unable to breathe properly.

He closes the file (the distorted sanitised translation of events) and fiddles with the top rim of the folder. "One more thing before we finish." His eyes, a weird silver. "I just want to say that although perjury may be a national past-time in this country, it is a criminal offence." He doesn't smile ironically at his joke. "You can go to jail for lying under oath and for defeating the ends of justice."

I nod. Footsteps in the corridor outside, they pass the door and crumble into the distance, then nothing. Just this man and I, in this nauseous little room.

"Alice," his voice is even, disturbingly bland, "you're digging your own grave. Why are you protecting your brother?"

I am one year, two months and five days older than Andrew. My mother wanted to get the childbearing part "over and done with" (her words not mine). I can't imagine my mother

pregnant, she's too groomed, too careful about her weight, too completely tight. I just can't picture her body expanding to accommodate another life – she told me when I got my period at thirteen that she hated being pregnant, that it felt like her body had been snatched. I suppose this was her way of warning me against an unwanted pregnancy. In my mother's world the foetus was a body snatcher, the baby, a time snatcher. Children were easier for her (well younger children at any rate), she didn't have to breast-feed us, she could leave us with Gladys who had a way with macaroni-cheese and crushing hugs.

Thank God for Gladys (and my father before he left). Whenever I think of Gladys, I always see her emerging ever so slowly from the distance in the early mornings; I would wait at our gate as she heaved towards our house, her bubble shape growing bigger as she got nearer. Most siblings fight – verbally, physically, emotionally - and Gladys was, by default, our rational, diplomatic referee. During the day, my mother locked the phone - the key would vanish into the front pocket of her cream handbag - and we were only to call her or dad from the neighbour's house in extreme emergencies. "If someone is dying," my mother would intone strictly, "and Alice, stitches or broken bones don't count. You know where the doctor lives." And I did, his surgery was four painful blocks away. It was Gladys who'd walk me slowly to the doctor, leaving Andrew with our creepy neighbour Miss Finkelstein who had purple crinkly lips, and five jerseyed poodles.

Once, Gladys pushed me to Dr Asher's in a rickety Checkers trolley when I'd broken my leg, and shaking her head told me: "Ai, Alice-baby, you got too much bad luck, I speak to the Sangoma for you and find a cure."

The trolley's wheels clunked awkwardly over the rough pavement, sending shudders of agony through my broken leg; snivelling, I replied, "But you said that last time, Gladdy."

"I know, and I did. I visited the Sangoma, even took some of your hair." Gladys pushed me on resolutely, "Eish, but it's a powerful magic against you. Even the Sangoma struggles to lift this curse."

So, from a young age, I believed I was cursed, badly cursed by mysterious things, invisible things. Around me, in the air, dwelt a potent evil, intent on wounding me. Gladys knew about it - she believed. Mom never did. She'd always come home, and on seeing me with another bandage wound round a bloody patch, or plaster cast (already scribbled silly by Andrew) would sigh, angrily, haughtily, "What have you done to yourself now, Alice?"

Feeling sorry for myself, "I didn't do it, it just happened."

"Things don't just happen." Thumping her bag irritably onto the dresser. "This is ridiculous, Alice. I'm going to have to start punishing you, if you don't stop this nonsense. I

don't want to come home to any more injuries." Her crisp blond curls tight with fury. "Do you hear me?"

She was especially tetchy with me at night. That's when Gladys was gone, and the house would constrict around me, taunting me with its sinister rasping and squeaking, the darkness amplifying its restless moans: "It's a light sleeper," daddy would say of the house. "You've got to be brave, angel," he said, stroking my clammy cheeks. "Your mommy and I need our sleep."

It was the same every night - eventually they locked their door.

I remember standing outside their door, my head resting on my tangled hair, suspended in terror - unable to move, to knock. Afraid of the darkness which had swallowed the shadows - afraid of mom's recurring fury, her voice blasting shrilly through the door: "For God's sake, Mike! She's got to learn to grow up. She's five. Don't indulge her. I can't take it. I just can't take the way you spoil that child... Can't you see? She just does it for attention. We don't have this nonsense with Andrew."

My breath wobbled quickly, my pyjamas were sweat sodden. I slipped down, wrapping my knees in my arms.

"I think she's outside," mother's previous whisper fragmented into a crisp pitch.

"Should I..." dad's voice trailed off.

"No. You know how I feel about that," her voice was louder, shrill.

I stood up: *I must make it down the passage*. I held onto the wooden edge of the wall, my sweaty feet mushy in the carpet. Slowly, wobbly breath, wobbly legs. *I must be brave*.

When I finally got to the laundry, Moonface was there, fast asleep.

Why can't I be better and sleep so sweetly like Moonface?

I curled up on the pile of crumpled laundry, watching Moonface. It was always better in there - Moonface made everything better.

"Your mother couldn't have been that bad." Ralph and I were walking up the mountain. It was early January - I remember that because the winds were full fury that year. Ralph's first year in South Africa after we'd relocated from London. The South Easter had blasted, ripping branches and windows as it went. We lost our kitchen window that January - I returned home one evening to find crockery splattered across the floor and a gaping mouth where the pane had been. The South Easter sucked greedily on the curtains, and down in the murky alley below, I could just make out the edges of the shattered window frame.

I love the wind's invisible ways – I love that you can't see it, but that you can feel it. It leaves devastation – a hairdo undone, a car door slammed against your leg as you're climbing in. No one can deny it's there; for me the wind is some kind of reassurance that I'm not mad – that invisible things can exist.

It was early evening and Ralph and I had walked from our flat, over a rocky polluted stream and into the mountain. The wind was made visible by the dust caught in its grasp, and as the dusk stretched lazily into the light, the wind began to flood fast down over the mountain's famous table.

Ralph was uncharacteristically quiet, his hands plunged into his pockets. We'd trudged up, over a school field – a father and two young boys still played kick-ball on the wide field. "The wind's mercifully blown everyone else away..." I'd sardonically intoned. Normally the field was the nuclear-family-paradise-park – kids dashing about after balls as proud mommies and daddies cheered them on. "You've got to love the wind," I continued, "and its mysterious ways."

"It's not mysterious."

"What?"

"The wind. It's not mysterious. It's caused by the drop in temperature," Ralph went on, "that's why it blows at night, and the drop in temperature plus the wind, drives all those happy little families that drive you so mad, away."

"They normally drive you mad too, Mr Grizzle," I countered.

"Not as mad as they drive you. Anyway, my reasons are different to yours."

"What do you mean?"

"The whole family vibe thing. You don't like it because you reckon your family's screwy, and I don't like it because I never had a father."

We'd reached the tree line and entered the forest – we could no longer feel the wind, only hear it scratching through the branches and trees above.

"You never told me that."

"You never asked."

"You told me not to ask, remember." We walked on, under canopies of leaves heaving in the wind. "Now I'm asking."

"What?"

"About your father."

"I never had one, Alice."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know anything about him."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you anything about him?"

"No. She never spoke about him."

"Did you ask?"

"Of course I asked."

We'd reached the gravel road – habit took us to the right, and onto the wooden walkway that led up beside the stream.

"You don't want to talk about this?"

"I don't mind - it's just that there really isn't anything to tell." He'd put his arm round my shoulder and drew me towards him, kissing me delicately on my forehead.

"Does it make you sad?" I'd finally asked.

"It used to. But not anymore."

We'd passed the small dam of water – a dog was splashing enthusiastically about in the shallows, while its owner, an old, long haired man watched patiently from a rock that he had perched on. I often saw them here – the man and his dog.

"What do you think of that old man and his dog?" I'd asked Ralph when we were out of earshot.

"He's a real old character, isn't he?" Ralph replied, "It always smells like he's been smoking dope up here."

"I sometimes wonder about him – I think it's easier for some people to have relationships with animals than with humans."

"Spot on."

"Was that a very weak pun on spot?" I'd asked.

"It was," he admitted sheepishly, and by way of making up, added, "but it wasn't exactly a howler."

"Ha. Ha," I dryly retorted.

We trudged up the dirt track that ran beside the stream.

"I had a dog once," I eventually said, "he disappeared when I was eleven. We never found him."

"What was his name?" Ralph asked. I could feel his fingers softly on the back of my neck. He was always so gentle.

"Pluto."

“Like the Walt Disney dog.”

“Yip, and the Roman god of the underworld – and the planet.”

“It suits you, Alice, to have had a dog called Pluto: Walt Disney, the underworld and a tiny distant planet.”

“I know.”

There were those moments when Ralph got me, so completely, that it felt like we were connected.

And then just as quickly the connection would splinter, as if having got too close he had to pull away. I remember that particular walk ending with us striding down the mountain brusquely, in silence, and I can't remember how we got from connected to disconnected so quickly. I can only imagine it was the wind - we'd ambled through a small stretch of indigenous forest and had turned up into the wind.

“It's really blowing up here.” I was delighted.

“Yip. The temperature's dropping quite quickly. Remember what I said earlier?” Ralph would sometimes do this to me, talk to me as if I were some sort of charge that he was educating. As if being a secretary meant that I was dim-witted.

“Yes. I heard you the first time you lectured me on the wind,” I retorted. “Anyway, how do you know that?” I'd asked, perturbed that there was a practical, scientific reason for the presence of my mysterious wind.

“Oh, I read it somewhere,” he replied vaguely, “or maybe I remember something like that from A-level's - I did Geography. It has more to do with low and high-pressure systems actually than temperature, if I remember correctly. It's quite complicated, scientific.”

I remember feeling annoyed with him then – of course he sensed it. Perhaps over our two years together he sensed all my invisible irritations, and each one became a splatter of doubt, staining his feelings for me?

Perhaps I should read his book - perhaps the answer is there. But I can't. The book lies, so disturbingly calmly, on my bedside table. It's a mockery of Ralph's invisibility - it's so concrete.

And that's what I said to Ralph that day, tetchily, that his clear, concrete explanation of the wind denied me its mystery.

“I'm not saying that the wind isn't wonderful,” he protested, laughing at my little outburst, “it's just that there are actually scientific explanations for it.”

“And are there scientific reasons for the fact that I'm unlucky?”

He didn't answer immediately. We plodded silently over exposed roots worn smooth by other feet, under enormous trees, past a strange rock, curiously pockmarked by years of rain erosion.

"Well," he finally replied, "I don't deny that there are forces beyond our control. Or perhaps I should rather say that there are things... dadum..." he began singing in a mock sinister tone, "dadum – dadum..." and slipping behind me, he grabbed me round my waist, and pretended to gnaw vampire-like at my throat. And then, putting on a phoney Dracula accent continued as he nibbled, "zere are thingz zat are beyond our current underrrtandingz." He laughed jovially at his little joke, giving me a quick squeeze and a forgive-me-peck on my gnawed out neck.

I tugged irritably away from him, "My mother has never believed that I'm unlucky." I blurted. "She thinks I am a spoilt little attention seeker." It was getting darker, the twilight on a slow dimmer. We trudged up the mountain for a while, Ralph's hands plunged into his pockets again. "Ok, here's a vintage story for you." I took a deep breath, "When I was nine, my BMX brakes failed..."

It had been raining and I'd gone soaring down a hill and collided with a moving car. I remember the car as a blur of blue from the left. I'd turned sharply to escape it. There's always a moment before every accident I've ever had, that seems to stretch - expanding stark details. My bicycle wheel throwing up a crisp valley of water as I turned to avoid the car. *This can't be happening again.* Just before impact, the driver sees me, his face, a smudge suspended behind the sodden windscreen.

I had four stitches on my forehead, mild concussion and a broken elbow. The shocked man with the smudge of a face, took me to the doctor in his pale blue car, and from there, phoned my mother – something I begged him not to do.

She had come home that night, her meticulous scarlet lips seething with rage.

Ralph was quiet for a moment, "Your mother couldn't have been that bad."

"But she was."

"Well," he said slowly - it was almost night, the trees, dark shifting shapes in the wind, "maybe that's what you need to remember about her. You know, selective memory retention. Most people are a pretty slapdash mix of good and bad, and what we really honestly feel about our families, most of the time, is some sort of benign ambivalence. We love parts of them, hate other parts."

"Who made you guru of the year? My mother hates me. Why would I need to remember that rather than some wonderful mommy moments?" I demanded sarcastically.

“I don’t know,” he sighed, our feet crunching along the dark path in the wind. “You have to figure that out. Most memories are distortions, ways of making sense of the world.”

Andrew is asleep on my couch. It’s strange to have him here, in my home, some sort of ceasefire for the moment. On the table, a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, I pick them up, I’ve never been a smoker. Veronica smoked – emaciated cigarettes, long and skinny, just like her. I remember her offering me one, her head cocked curiously, her manicured fingers enveloping the box, “Do you want a smoke, Alice?” She had a way of curling her lips at the end of a sentence that was intended to be endearing.

“I don’t smoke.”

“Ah! Live a little. Smoking’s one of the last of the great vices.” She shook the box suggestively at me, as if this gesture in itself would convince me.

“Knowing my luck I’ll probably die of lung cancer.”

“I thought your lack of luck was only limited to accidents.”

“You don’t mess with this kind of curse.”

Veronica shrugged, pulled a gaunt cigarette from the satin sheen box, and reached into her bag for her Zippo. She lit up, and leaning back lazily drawled, “You know, I’ve been thinking, in Cape Town brunette is the new blonde.” Another seductive puff on the cigarette - she must have learnt to smoke watching femme fatales from film noire’s – her gestures were so *dramatique* - so sultrily sexy. “I was out the other night, and I noticed that there were more blondes in Opium than brunettes, and the brunettes were really getting a lot of attention.”

That was the kind of thing Veronica noticed. It was rare for me to spend time with her and Andrew. Contact was mercifully limited to birthdays, the very odd family lunch, their engagement.

The night of the accident had been my thirtieth birthday.

I wander drowsily onto the balcony, lean back on the old wicker seat. Ralph smoked Lucky Strikes – he’d been trying to give up when he disappeared. I sit with Andrew’s pack on my lap, suspended I suppose as we always are, between being a smoker and not.

“It’s one of the most addictive drugs in the world,” Ralph once told me. We’d been on this same balcony, me leaning back on the wicker seat, as I always did, he, perching on the wall smoking. It’s quite disturbing to think of him here, or rather precisely there, on the wall, as if I could somehow conjure him. Memory can, but only snippets come – Ralph’s long nose, but his eyes, the colour, the precise colour... were they a blue-grey or softer, the colour of clouds?

My memory fails me. My fucking memory has stolen parts of my life. I feel the desire to smoke winning me over. It was also Ralph who told me that smoking was slow suicide.

“So why do you smoke then?” I’d asked.

“Because maybe I don’t really like myself very much. Or my life.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“It’s not about you, Alice.” He always used my name ever so tenderly, like a soft stroke. “It’s about me. About things I’ve done.”

“What have you done?”

Where were we when we had this conversation? I can’t quite place it. It’s as if the words float in my memory without a context. *It’s about me. About things I’ve done.* Is that exactly what he said? Oh fuck it. I can’t remember. Everything’s too sudden. As if it’s all happened in a single astonishing moment: Veronica’s bloodied hair, handcuffed in the van, the sadistic doctor who took my blood, that pokey, claustrophobic room with the police investigator, Andrew asleep on my couch. I open the Lucky Strike pack – three cigarettes and a lighter. I pull one out and light up.

The smoke assaults my throat, throwing back a frenzy of gurgling coughs. I can’t help thinking of Veronica’s affected ease. I fetch a glass of water from the kitchen to cool my throat, and try again. Each puff gets easier, the coughing dispersing into a startling light-headedness.

There it is, I am thirty years and two days old, and I have just started my slow descent into suicide.

At around the time of Pluto, daddy left. It was strange that he left then. In my eleven-year-old memory, the two events are soldered together – inseparable, like soul mates. Most poignantly I remember digging in the soft dark soil at night, half afraid of feeling a cutworm in the thick loamy earth, half afraid of inadvertently tearing an earthworm in two. I was digging alone, crouched in the shadows beneath the magnolia tree. Andrew had left clues - he’s never been very good at covering his tracks; he’d washed his grubby hands in the basin, forgetting to clean after him – dark clumps of dirt round the plughole, and he’d forgotten to scrub his nails - each one held under it a black sliver of guilt.

“Where’s Pluto?” I’d asked Andrew earlier, when I got home. I’d spent the afternoon at Sylvie’s house counting cars – she’d chosen white and won. She told me later that her dad sells cars and that most people want white ones.

“*Where’s Pluto. Where’s Pluto,*” Andrew had mockingly replied. He was sitting in front of the TV, waiting for the pattern to end and TV to start. “I don’t know where your stupid dog is.”

“He’s also your dog.”

“No he isn’t.”

“Yes he is.”

I found Gladys in the laundry, ironing one of my school dresses. “Gladys, have you seen Pluto?”

“No.” She carried on ironing, not looking at me. I remember thinking that this was strange, she’d usually scold me agreeably saying, “Eish Alice, did I never teach you any manners! You must always come in and say ‘Hallo Gladdy’ and give me a big hug.”

Unsettled by the disruption of the familiar, I remember asking a disorientated: “Are you OK?”

“Just busy. Busy, busy.” She finished my dress and hanging it up, began on one of mom’s skirts, slipping it through the open end of the ironing board, so that the skirt hung open, bawdily.

I called through the house, “Pluto! Pluto!” opening doors and cupboards as I went.

And then I knew. Frantic feet through the lounge, down the steps past the magnolia tree and to the pool, my thoughts lurching chaotically. But the water was still, unblemished by autumn leaves - or Pluto.

Later, daddy found me in the dark, about six blocks from the house yelling into gloomy gardens, “Pluto! Pluto!”

First came his lights, two round wide, all-seeing eyes in the road, and then his maroon Cortina pulled up next to me. He leaped out, “Alice! What the hell are you doing wandering around in the dark?”

Unused to having my father shout at me (that was my mother’s job), I burst into tears, and sobbing, told him, “Pluto is gone.”

He hugged me, telling me something about how Pluto is a boy dog, and that’s what boy dogs do, they wander, and that Pluto would come home soon enough and that he would phone the SPCA and we could make a note and put it up at the shops.

But when we got home I saw the dirt in the basin, and I knew.

I walked very slowly out of the bathroom and into the lounge where Andrew was watching TV, I sat down next to him on the couch and watched the TV for a long time until I finally had the courage to look at his fingers. When I eventually did, his hands seemed so pasty in the strange light, and his nails were rimmed underneath with dark damning slivers of evidence.

Why did I even think that Andrew had buried Pluto?

When I was six years old, and Andrew was about five, mom and dad hired a beaten scraggly little house on the south coast of Natal - right on the beach. The beds were high, and instead of duvets, were covered in a single sheet with old brown bobbly blankets. We had to make the beds ourselves each morning (no Gladys on holiday), which made the holiday instantly feel less holiday-like. We also had to help mom cook and wash up. Unused to domesticity (Gladys was so invisibly efficient - in retrospect, how did she ever do everything?) I grumbled a lot at first, whining that I was a little slave.

"We're not rich, Alice," mother told me curtly one morning in the kitchen. I was finishing my breakfast, and she'd just asked me to wash the dishes when I was done, which had elicited a stropky refusal from me - Andrew, of course had conveniently disappeared. "Sorry, little Princess Alice, but if I've got to do work around here," she said, "you can too. In other countries people don't have maids like Gladys. In other countries, children help their parents from young. In those countries, even babies have to wash their own nappies."

I remember dad laughing at this and giving my mother an affectionate little kiss on her cheek, "You see, chicken," he told her, "you're your old self again. We just needed this little break." She smiled at this. I had never seen my father kiss my mother, or call her *chicken*.

"That's gross." I said.

"What's gross?" asked dad.

"Kissing mom and calling her chicken."

Dad also laughed at this and slapped mom gently on the bum.

"Gross!" I yelled, and added for effect: "That's so gross!"

"Don't shout like that, Alice, or I'll smack you," my mother threatened, shaking a long painted fingernail at me. "We're on holiday. We're here to have a good time, I'm not going to have you ruining my holiday. Your father and I have bent over backwards to be able to afford this break. You'll behave or you'll spend your holiday in your room."

Silence. We three motionless in the old, paint chipped kitchen, the windows covered in rusty gauze.

"Tell your mother you're sorry," dad said.

I was astounded, shattered. It had always been daddy and me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, staring into my bowl of milky brown coco-pops, unable to look at either of them.

A little after that, Mom, dad and Andrew left for the beach, leaving me with the dishes. When I was clumsily done, I sat on the porch, glumly. I didn't want to go down to the beach to them. I was mad with dad and mom. And Andrew - for being a lazy little disappearing brat. But

I did go, eventually, after spending what seemed to me like hours, waiting for dad to come and fetch me. He never did.

I found them just below the house, dad and Andrew digging a moat for a giant sandcastle they'd built. My mother in a swimsuit, lying back in the sun reading a book. I sat on my towel and buried my toes.

Andrew's set of red and yellow trucks lay discarded in the sand beside me. I picked one up and idly steered it over the dunes of footprints.

I drifted a little way down the beach, and buried, one by one, each of Andrew's red and yellow trucks. There were three of them, identically shaped and coloured, of varying sizes. Andrew's beloved trucks. After that I meandered down to the rocks to see if I could find an anemone to poke my finger into - I still love anemones, the way they're so squishy, and their tentacles wrap around your finger, both sticky and sandpapery.

"Alice!" It was my mother, she was standing up, scanning the beach for me. She hadn't spotted me on the rocks yet, so I ignored her and continued fiddling with a pink and yellow prize anemone I had found. "Alice!" I looked up again - this time I'd been seen, and even from far, I could see she looked exasperated - her hands huffily on her hips. I abandoned my faceless friend and picking my way over the rocks, headed towards her with trepidation.

"Have you got sunscreen on?" she scowled as I got nearer. "Don't come crying to me when you're blistered and burnt to a cinder and wallowing in bed with sunstroke." And, not waiting for a reply, she picked up the bottle and when I reached her began smearing me roughly with cream. Dad and Andrew were finishing off their castle, which had, since I'd last seen it, deteriorated somewhat. They'd ambitiously filled the moat with water and the sides of their once pristine castle had crumbled into what was meant to be the moat. Now it looked more like a lopsided mess - I was secretly pleased, and immediately felt guilty.

It was a strange feeling - that delightful spite, crowded out by guilt. I can't help thinking that that's what I'm feeling now - about Veronica. There's a part of me - a callous, bitchy part of me that's secretly pleased that she's gone from my life, and whenever I feel that, I'm appalled at myself. Am I happy that she's dead? Not exactly, but I'm not exactly sad either. And I know, disturbingly, that these aren't the right feelings I'm supposed to be having. I should be stricken, like Veronica's mother and sister (alarmingly just like her) at the hospital. I should cry for days, unable to sleep or leave my darkened bedroom, the curtains drawn taut against a hostile world. Maybe I am emotionally fucked up. Maybe I did all my feeling with Ralph, and now I'm all felt out? Can feelings run out, like water, oil, life?

There I was, on the beach, paled white with sunscreen, both delighted and guilty that my father and brother's castle had collapsed. Perhaps I'm just drawing this out, afraid to get to the next bit, because it's such an intense memory.

Andrew and dad abandon their castle and dad says he's hungry. Perhaps he says he's famished or he's starving. Mom says that she'll go in and make us some sandwiches. Dad offers to help, and Andrew and I are left alone on the beach, with strict instructions that we're not to go near the sea. Andrew then starts looking around for his trucks. It's one of those vivid, too blue days, the sand squinting fiercely.

"Where are my trucks?" he asks.

Spitefully, laughing, I tell him: "I buried them on the beach. I'll never tell you where. You have to find them yourself. That's your punishment for being so lazy this morning and making me wash all the dishes."

Even as I was saying the words, I knew that there'd be sliding repercussions – it was like that poised, slow moment just before an accident, when details become crisp - iridescent. Andrew has never been able to keep anything to himself - except of course nowadays, cocaine. I don't know how to describe his reaction. Was he confused, confounded by my cruelty? Perhaps that's too generous - or perhaps I don't want to admit that he was upset by my visceral ugliness, that it was me who laid the first bricks of the wall that grew, somehow organically from there, between us. Most people don't want to think that they're capable of evil, and yet, that day somehow, I started something. Something disturbing. Perhaps it had been something unavoidable - most siblings quarrel, don't they?

Ralph once told me that the swampy hostilities which fester between my brother and I were probably inevitable. "It's probably not just about your brother and you," he'd said to me one afternoon while we were toasting waffles from Tesco's up in his Tisca room, "it's about the family – about all of you." He was crouching over his tiny two-element heater (the Tisca had central heating, but Ralph was stringy and constantly cold) warming a waffle for me. "It's about how you all bump up against each other, you and your mom and dad and him."

"My dad left when I was eleven," I'd replied, by way of eliminating dad from the contamination of mom, Andrew and I.

"Where did he go?" Ralph had pretty much burnt the one side of my waffle and was now trying to scrape the dark bits onto a plate with a knife.

"Into exile." I remember telling this to Ralph, and immediately knowing that it was some kind of lie. Even then, I'd wondered why I felt I had to protect my father from Ralph's prying

thoughts. Or why I had to protect my father from the truth, as if the lie I'd been told so long ago eventually became some kind of truth?

And going back even further, is it some kind of truth that my malevolent little outburst at Andrew nourished the seed that would germinate into war? I don't want to believe that I started it, but perhaps I did. Perhaps I began it there, on that glaring beach; and all the rest that came later was Andrew simply reacting. Isn't that a fundamental law of the universe – cause and effect? Or maybe that's too simplistic, for who can really dissect the alchemy of hatred - the precise combination of sleights and assumptions that tumble together in one tiny human being to create an overwhelming rage?

I remember mom and dad returning with Andrew and the sandwiches. He must have run in and told them, because he was with them then, the three of them threading their way down from the house, over a grassy mound that crumbled into the beach. My mother was alarmingly quiet; she sat down on her towel, unwrapped the sandwiches and handed one to my brother and one to my father. She then took one for herself. They began eating, silently. I remember waiting, unhungry, feeling sick with shame. Down at the water's edge, a dog was digging in the sand, just digging and digging. Without looking at me, my mother said frostily, "Alice. There is no food for you until you bring back Andrew's trucks."

I skulked off to where I had buried the trucks, and half-heartedly began digging. And digging. They must be here. Digging. This looks just like the place. Digging. Or maybe I buried them here? I'm sure I buried one near this rock. Hard sand beneath my nails, burrowing into the beach. Mole holes of my making erupting across the beach – I felt mole-like, blind. It was as if the three gaudy trucks had been mysteriously absorbed by the sand. And then the other thoughts: perhaps Andrew found them, took them? Perhaps he's hidden them from me now?

"Andrew must have found them! He must have them," I told my mother triumphantly.

"Nonsense!"

"Andrew! You have the trucks!" I yelled.

"Stop bullying your brother. You buried his trucks. You go and find them." Those wide blue eyes. Seething: "Now."

Now stretched into a week - I was sent, every day (after I'd done some super punishing chores round the house and been smeared brutally with sunscreen) to find the trucks. Every day, I'd gone back to that part of the beach – I was so sure they'd be there, that their bright hard-edged red and yellow bodies would inevitably emerge from the soft sand. I could even see myself, triumphantly loping across the beach, towards them, Andrew's three crisp beloved

red and yellow trucks, a clutter of joy in my hands. They'd be happy to see them, Andrew would forgive me my malice, and I would be the forgiven one, the prodigal daughter returned from the far reaches of the beach – the legendary retriever of the buried trucks.

But that was never to be.

On the last morning of the holiday, my mother woke me brusquely at sunrise, and sent me out to the deserted beach to search. "One last time, Alice," she told me threateningly, implying somehow that I hadn't wanted to find them, that I'd secreted them away somewhere.

The beach was so different at dawn, a lone surfer in the waves. There was a biting, chilly breeze - the rest of the holiday had been so hot and thick, and even the sand was changed – now it was hard and damp. Somehow, I knew I wouldn't find them in this alien landscape. I remember pulling up damp clumps of mush, tearing frantically into the suddenly smooth surface of the beach, confounded by how everything had changed. Nothing was how I remembered it. The trucks weren't where I'd buried them. In my six-year-old mind, the beach had betrayed me.

Even today, sitting on my balcony - parts of Ralph hovering on the edges of here, as he always has since he left - I can't help thinking of that beach, about how those trucks must look now if they are still held captive by the beach. Are they entombed in the sand, half eaten by the salty lick of the sea; would they be slightly deformed by years of oblivious holidaymakers having inadvertently sat on their graves, the slight heave of the sand warping their hard edges – would they have over time, evolved from bright delightful little trucks to grotesque misshapen forms - unrecognisable?

Sometimes I imagine a slightly rotund man in a pair of hush puppies and a maroon cardigan, scanning the alien, early morning beach with a metal detector, after a slow silent plod, his sordid thoughts of a worn, greying woman he has seen on an offbeat internet pornography site are interrupted by a decisive: "beep – beep – beep". The man leans over, poking the sand with a long thin metal stick: an object, half a meter down. He drops to his knees, clumsily discarding his metal detector, now he is governed by that familiar tinge of anticipation – he's a lover of the discarded, the forgotten. Eventually he feels something solid, he peels the sand carefully away so as not break what it is he is he has unearthed. Slowly he lifts it out, dusting off the damp, clotted sand. He can just make out the shape of a child's truck. He finds a lot of these kinds of things. These are the less interesting of his discoveries. This one looks like it's been there for years, it's buckled and the plastic is torn through on the bonnet. It's the metal on the tiny wheel axles that set his detector off.

Always, my hush puppy man ends there. I can't decide whether he keeps the truck as part of an obtuse collection of rediscovered buried junk he has stored on vast shelves in his overstuffed garage, or whether he reburies the truck, returning it to it's beach bound resting place, there forever, as one of the three, to lurk in my memory, hauntingly, accusingly.

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3.

“Things always seem pretty hopeless in the beginning when we are dealing with phenomena which lie far beyond all our senses, but ‘perseverance pays’ must be the motto of the traveller along these dark and unknown footpaths.”

From *The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugène Marais

Who the fuck is Ralph, really? Is he actually Walt Turnbrige? And why the necessity to publish under a pseudonym if he isn't? *The Sea of Wise Insects*. I know I must read it, and that reading it will probably change everything. Here again I can't help thinking that I must be screwed up. Surely most people would have dashed home after having bought the bloody thing, and without even putting the kettle on, would have read it immediately, squeezing the sense from that world into theirs.

But I haven't, instead I've let it sit there dully, allowing it to contaminate every thought, every action. Perhaps it's the only way I can deal with this Veronica thing. Strange that, as the days slide into themselves, like a giant collapsing concertina, I find it hard to say those words: *Veronica's death*. It's as if the further I am from the actual event - not the accident, but the hospital, where the young, freckled doctor (could he have been an intern?) told us, ever so softly that she'd "passed on" - the more obscenely real it begins to feel.

It's been a disturbing day - throughout it, Ralph's book, present. Now I am holding onto this pre-accident moment, deliberately drawing out the intensity of the inevitable read, which has made the events of the day seem somewhat (to borrow a very Ralph word) surreal.

First there is the phone call at around eight thirty. I am still in bed, drifting through foggy half dreams. My old red dial up phone (Ralph bought it for me as a nostalgic reminder of the Tisca) buzzes obliquely. It's got a strange, hollow old-fashioned ring.

"Is that Alice Wolfe?"

"Yes?" I try to sound bright, awake, so it doesn't seem like I've been lolling lazily in bed.

"It's Detective Sergeant Aucamp here." I recognise his voice from the nauseous little interrogation room.

"Hello." Should I ask him how he is?

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm fine thank you, and you." I sit up in bed, trying to re-arrange the pillows with the handset wedged clumsily between my shoulder and my ear.

"Good, thank you." He pauses slightly to take a breath, and then, "Miss Wolfe - Alice. I, um, have some rather disturbing news."

"Yes?" My stomach storming.

"I've just got the autopsy back from the coroner, and it seems that they found cocaine in Veronica Rowland's blood. Were you aware that she was taking coke? Oh, I must inform you that this conversation is being recorded."

"Oh." What to say to that? "I don't know."

"What don't you know, Alice?"

"I don't really know much about that."

"You don't really know much. Does that mean you know something?"

"Not really."

"Perhaps you would rather come in and speak to me at the police station."

"No, um, I mean, not really."

"Well, you might have to if we decide that this evidence is important in the case against you." Silence. Andrew is still staying here, probably still asleep in the lounge.

Finally, "I had nothing to do with Veronica's... habits."

"That's better. That's all I needed to ask. Does your brother know anything?" That creaky floorboard in the passage – probably Andrew at the door. Still sneaking around, after all these years.

"I don't know," I reply.

"I'll speak to him myself."

"Yes, I think so."

"Thank you for your time. Good bye." Click.

I slowly replace the receiver, the house is eerily quiet, a slight breeze puffs up the curtain - for a moment it is altered – fantastically fat, and then it deflates.

"What was that all about?" If Andrew wasn't so nasty he might be good looking. He's standing at the doorway, arms aggressively folded, in a pair of grey baggies and a grimy white T-shirt. He's wearing that just woken up look, his sandy hair rumped, and his eyes still groggy, bewildered, from having been catapulted so abruptly up from the elastic realm of dreams onto the concrete of here.

"It was that detective guy who grilled me at the station the other day. He phoned to say that they've got the autopsy results." The autopsy results. What a freaky thing to say. A

few days ago, Veronica was telling me at my thirtieth birthday dinner that a friend of hers had just had a breast job “from an A-cup to a C-cup” - they had cut under her breasts, and somehow, miraculously filled them up, it had really “boosted her confidence,” (Veronica hadn’t even noticed the pun) and more men were noticing her, and that “after the whole Ralph thing, maybe it’d do you good to consider it?” Now, in some unknown autopsy chamber in this city, a stranger had been slicing into parts of Veronica, looking at bits of the last meal she’d had – I think she’d picked distractedly at the salsa chicken salad – “no dressing”. The stranger was prying into private spaces, translating parts of Veronica through her body – a secret sponged from her blood: her malignant coke habit. Now how will the living see the dead? How will they make sense of this aberration? How will Veronica’s mother marry her flawless daughter to this foreign substance, this deviant drug? This thing that belongs in films and magazine articles – not in her daughter’s bright red, quite dead, blood.

“And?” Andrew demands.

“He said they found coke in her blood. He wanted to know what I knew about it. I told him I didn’t.”

“But you knew about it.” Andrew stares at me.

“Yes. But I wasn’t part of it.” I can feel my insides starting to claw.

“So you’re going to deny that you had any part of the whole coke thing?”

“Yes, Andrew, I am. You and Veronica had your coke thing. It had fuck all to do with me. I saw you using a few times – I didn’t ask you two to snort up in front of me. Coke’s not my thing. What do you want me to tell the guy? ‘Oh yes, I saw my brother and his girlfriend snorting shit loads of coke.’ Come on Andrew, get real. I’m actually - surprise, surprise - trying to protect you.”

“Well,” he says sarcastically, “maybe I should tell this police guy about your little dope habit.”

“It’s not a habit, Andrew. I smoke dope every now and then, once a week maybe. You know perfectly well that I hadn’t done anything that night – my blood was clean. The only clean blood for miles it seems.”

“Hey.” Belligerently. “Just like you know nothing. I know nothing.” Then threateningly, “Or maybe I know something that the police will find very interesting. Maybe I even know where you keep your dope.”

“Fuck you. Tell them what you want to tell them. Most people in this fucking city smoke dope every now and then!” I am shocked at how livid I am with him. It’s an old, ancient kind of rage, almost childlike. “Yes, that’s a brilliant fucking idea. Let them come and arrest me

for the national pastime of dope smoking.” I get out of bed recklessly, spewing duvets and pillows as I go, and darting past him into the kitchen, say, “The point is that he’s onto Veronica’s coke habit and he said he’d call you.”

“Fucking hell Alice! Why didn’t you tell me that right away?” He follows me into the kitchen.

“What are they going to do, Andrew?” I turn on the kettle and haul the last two clean mugs from the cupboard. “Ask you a few questions, which you can bullshit your way through – tell them that Veronica did it on her own. I don’t know. You’re creative. You’ll come up with some believable drivel.”

“No, Alice. They’re after me.”

I turn to face him, “No they’re not. Veronica didn’t die because she took some coke. She died because of the accident.”

“No, they want to take me down,” he says peevishly.

“No Andrew, that’s the coke speaking. You’re being paranoid. Remember, if anyone’s going down it’s me, because, if we both remember correctly, I was driving.”

“Don’t start that on me. There wasn’t much choice.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t know.” Andrew’s dishes crowd the sink, only the soft gurgle of the kettle. “I thought she would die. You should have called the ambulance sooner.”

“Oh fuck you. Don’t lay this on me. Why didn’t you call the fucking ambulance?”

“Because I couldn’t find my phone, remember?”

And I couldn’t. I don’t have any linear recollection of the night. Memories are thrown up, like shards of scattered glass - sharp, cutting - almost impossible to re-piece them.

Veronica was laughing – this was some kind of game. They say that coke affects the frontal lobe – the place of inhibition. They were both fearless.

“Stop it guys.”

“Oh, come on, live a little. It’s your birthday for God’s sake!”

There is a tree, or rather lots of them, the skidding, the crisp potent slow moment before we hit it, the car swings. That’s right! For a moment I think we are safe, my body pops with adrenaline, Veronica laughs.

As she laughs - a sharp empty lunge, enormous, greedy, shattering.

And then her body on the bonnet, the splintered windscreen beneath her. The headlights in this macabre, bleak landscape.

Andrew plunges out of the car, his stark “Oh fuck,” almost the clearest memory of the event. I can still hear its eerie remorse, a shock, a twist in the fabled Andrew.

Then I am touching Veronica's wrist, a faint pulse, her hands are bloody, the red of her blood clashes with the dark maroon of her nail polish. I remember thinking that Veronica would be piqued. Why so many irrelevant thoughts?

"She's still alive," I tell Andrew. He is standing a few metres away, eaten by the dark, his silhouette morphing into the night. "We must call an ambulance."

"No," he says. I ignore him, and start searching the car for my bag and phone, but everything is strangely buckled, unfamiliar. I try the tiny interior light, it flickers slightly and is gone.

"Use your phone, Andrew," I say anxiously, squeezing my arm into the tiny space under the seats, "I can't find mine." No reply. "Andrew?" I crawl out of the car. "Use your phone."

"She looks dead." His voice is thin, lost in the dark chill of the night.

"She isn't dead yet." Maybe he's in shock. I approach him cautiously, he's beyond the reach of the headlights, his features indecisive, blurred by the dark. "Phone the ambulance."

"She's not going to make it."

"Not if we don't phone the fucking ambulance!" I am shouting, surprised.

I often wondered if he loved her, if what he felt for her was love. Maybe he loved her for her money. That's a form of love, isn't it? His reaction was curious, perplexing. She was dying and he was delaying. And so there we were, we three: Veronica, a strange misshapen doll on the bright white bonnet, barely alive, blood seeping from her body while Andrew and I argued about the ambulance. I think he eventually phoned. Or did I? I remember finding her bag – a tiny white sequins bag – lying in the dirt a few meters from the car. I think I dusted it off - I wonder why I did that. Her phone was in it. I may have called the ambulance. But I don't quite remember. I know that people eventually came, startling the night with their red and blue lights.

Tow-trucks, dust clouds in the darkness, tearing through the trees, one after the other, a vicious race, skidding at the accident. Dust settling over Veronica, one trying to tell Andrew that he was contracted to the AA.

And then the ambulance.

They told us to wait, the police were coming, Andrew's voice strangled: "Please can I go with you, that's my girlfriend."

The paramedic had goldy green eyes. "Who was driving? The driver must stay here." He looked from me to Andrew, his eyes settling warily on Andrew. "The police will need to take blood, it's illegal to leave the scene of a crime."

"I was," I said softly.

There was this strange pause, just thick enough to hold his doubt. Or his uncertainty – usually they wouldn't have left until the police arrived, but Veronica was already then wavering, her condition too critical for them to wait. He shrugged irritably, "Are you OK to wait here on your own?" He'd looked up at the two tow-truck drivers, both snug in their cars. One was watching a tiny TV attached to the dashboard.

"Yes," I nodded, indicating to Veronica, "that's his girlfriend."

Once they were gone, one of the tow-truck drivers wound down his window, "Hey, you OK? I got some hot coffee if you want." I shook my head. "You can come and sit in here."

Afraid, I shook my head again, turned away from them, hungry for the shadows.

There I was, in an obscure dusty parking lot at 1.04am - it wasn't my birthday anymore. A stark thought drifted in - had the accident happened on my birthday? It was hard to say, time was being fickle. While I waited for the police, I remember feeling thirsty, pacing to keep warm, crouching to rest my legs - my arms folded round my knees. I thought more about being cold than I did about Veronica - perhaps it was the shock?

I also thought about Ralph, about his unread book that had taunted me since I had bought it – oddly enough the day before my birthday, an almost birthday gift from Ralph.

Mostly I thought about how strange it was that Veronica was wounded - torn open, and not me. I wondered whether I should have been sitting where Veronica was sitting, perhaps the accident was meant for me, that things had gone wrong - perhaps we were meant to hit that first tree, I was so sure we would. Perhaps it should have been Andrew and Veronica who argued about phoning. Or maybe the accident had deliberately happened on my birthday, some kind of depraved message from fate: *See we don't have to get you to get you.*

I would have said that I'd waited for at least half an hour, my tangled thoughts twisting, but the police arrived at 1.08am, their sirens piercing the distance, a mere four minutes after the ambulance left. So perhaps the accident that killed Veronica didn't happen on my birthday, perhaps it happened a few minutes after midnight. Who knows? Who will ever know? I only looked at the time on the phone when the ambulance left - I was surprised it was so late. We'd left the restaurant at about ten, but even that I can't be too sure of. In a distorted way, I hope that the accident didn't happen on my birthday, I don't want to carry that burden, that oblique, noxious guilt.

That strange sense of responsibility. But I guess I'll never know for sure.

Andrew is in the shower when his phone rings – his ring tone is, obscenely, the theme tune from *Mission Impossible*. I'm sitting on the balcony, smoking. My lungs feel fresh, almost minty, I've moved from Andrew's hardcore (his word, not mine) Lucky Strikes to menthol, I remember someone telling me that menthol cigarettes are the worst for you, they deposit tiny toxic crystals into your lungs and cause infertility. I take a long satisfying drag - if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

Andrew appears on the balcony with a dark pink towel wrapped round his waist. His chest is bushy – I wonder why I never noticed that, Dad had a hairy chest. I squint up at him, the white wall behind him hurling a sharp glare from the sun, in his hand, his now silent *Mission Impossible* phone. Aggressively: "Did you hear my phone ring?"

"Yes." I take a long Veronica-esque puff on the cigarette, and look away from him over the trees to the lids of some of the city buildings. Same old Andrew.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You were having a shower." No doubt this little tiff is a sideways continuation of the one we were having in the kitchen this morning.

"I was expecting an urgent phone call."

"Well, if you'd told me that then I would have called you," I say sweetly, hardly able to keep the edge of sarcasm out.

"Fuck Alice. Don't be so bloody nonchalant! This is serious." He looks at his phone, almost willing it to ring. Of course it doesn't.

"Well," I shrug, "if it was that serious, they'll call back or they'll leave a message."

"I don't think you understand," he says very slowly, slicing each word precisely from the others, "these people don't leave messages."

I laugh at this, Andrew's grandiose fantasies, "Oh, really. You sound almost scared of them."

"I am scared of them, Alice. And when they find out where I'm staying you should be scared too."

"Let me guess, some mythical men are going to come and break my kneecaps. It wouldn't be the first time either. Remember when I was fourteen I fractured my right kneecap. Been there, done that." I stub out the cigarette in Ralph's green glass ashtray.

His phone rings. He looks at the number, "Fuck," and answers it sweetly, "Hallo?" A wounded note creeping in, it's obviously not the knee-busting thugs in their sleek black German car with tinted windows – too polite for that. "Hi Maureen." His voice is low, almost husky. "I

know. I heard.” He steps out of the glare of the balcony and disappears inside, his voice shrinking as he goes.

It’s one of those strange Cape Town winter days. No clouds, thin sunshine, I’m on the balcony in my pyjamas, wrapped in cold. I take a sip of my tepid coffee, pet hate (one of many): cold coffee. I decide to make myself a fresh cup, but Andrew’s lurking all sickly sweet and hush-hush inside, the heartbroken man commiserating with his dead lover’s mother. It’s odd to think of Andrew as a man, he’s almost twenty-nine, but he still seems to be that boy. That boy in the photograph.

Mom has a photograph of him at nursery school, it’s the only picture on her bedside table - he’s alone on the jungle gym, hanging on by his arms, suspended playfully, his legs dangling beneath him, laughing – half surprised, as if he was about to slip and fall. It was taken by a photographer the school had brought in – instead of the customary dreary sitting portraits with those kitsch dark grey cloudy backdrops, they decided to do something different that year. Mom loved that photograph, I remember him bringing it home, she’d opened the large, hard brown envelope and taken the picture out – she’d smiled, the edge of her red lips raised characteristically more on the left than the right, and said to Andrew, “It captures you just as you are. All that delight.”

“Let me see too!” I was on my tiptoes, craning my neck, trying to glimpse this magical portrait.

“OK,” she said, “but just don’t touch it Alice, your hands are probably grubby.”

She lowered the photograph down to my eye level, holding it a little way from me, as if it were some kind of precious irreplaceable object d’art that I wasn’t to fondle, let alone breathe on. I studied the picture, searching within it for “all that delight” but all I could see was my five-year-old brother pretending to be funny. Yet another pretence, another mask, another Andrew to wear. Today he’s wearing the sad, mortified, inconsolable, shocked Andrew for Maureen. For me he wears the aggressive, blunt, “fuck you and your self-satisfied attitude” Andrew – hardly the picture of the tortured lover cursing Veronica’s untimely death. For a moment at the accident, some kind of real Andrew emerged. Or did it? Perhaps I was mistaken, in shock, too eager to forgive him his usual easy cruelty. Maybe this blunt Andrew is the real one, because surely one of them has to be real? They can’t all be fakes. My brother, the real human being, has to be in there somewhere.

My brother, the “real fake” (didn’t Pulp have a line like that in one of their songs?) is back on the balcony. He’s wearing a pair of torn jeans and a stylish button up black shirt.

“Don’t you think you should be getting dressed?” He’s still in digging mode, maybe it isn’t a fake self after all.

“Why?”

“Because it’s ten in the morning.”

“I’m not going back to work.”

“You quit your job?”

“I was just temping anyway. They replaced me after the accident, when I didn’t come in after my birthday, they just found some other poor desperate sucker willing to work for shit to pay a few lousy bills in this bloody place.”

“Oh.” He raises his eyebrows. “Tetchy I see. Sorry I asked.” He looks uncertain for a moment, then says, “Look, I was just on the phone to Maureen, you know, Veronica’s mother...” He looks away from me, probably figuring how to phrase this. I’ve got a good idea of what’s coming. “She’s very, well obviously, you know, as we all are, upset about what happened...” he sighs, he actually sighs something sort of sad, bewildered.

“She doesn’t want me to come to the funeral.” I look away from him to my strange lidded view of the city. “Is that it?”

“How did you know?” he asks bleakly.

“It’s not exactly rocket science, is it?” I deliberately don’t look at him, feeling telling tears rallying, “They’d hardly want their daughter’s killer at the funeral, would they?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Too late for that isn’t it?” I reach for my menthols and light up, not looking at him.

“I have to go out,” he says lamely, “can I use your car?”

“Sure bring me some more smokes when you come back please. These menthol ones.” The box is lying in my lap, I tap it lightly.

My father smoked, I can’t remember the brand. I wonder if he still smokes, I’m sure he would have told me if he’d given up, surely it would be one of the items that would have inevitably come up in our odd, erratic, strained telephone encounters. He calls every three months, to the day. He’s usually somewhere different, somewhere obscure. I often have to dig out the map book to find it. Last I knew, he was in Hofmeyr.

“Hi Wonder-girl,” he always says when I answer the phone – it’s his pet name for me, always has been. Apparently I was named after “Alice in Wonderland”, a direct literary descendent. He always calls from a phone booth, says he doesn’t want a cell phone, that he doesn’t buy into “all that consumerist crap”. Whenever he phones, I try to imagine where he is

– in the middle of the Karoo, a late afternoon storm brewing over the thirsty landscape. He's standing at a phone booth on a dirt road – it's the main road of some forlorn town – a bakkie carrying four live sheep hurtles past him, flinging dust into the dying grey day. My father coughs, laughing, "I'm eating some sheep farmer's dust."

I love the double entendres of my father's speak. I don't quite know whether he actually is eating some sheep farmer's dust, or whether he's some sheep farmer's lackey, doing odd jobs to get by. A long time ago he gave up on what he calls "the system". Back then the system was Apartheid, now it's capitalism. When I told him that his little rebellion against capitalism hurts no one but himself, that he's fighting a losing battle, and other tired clichés, he returned: "Apartheid collapsed didn't it?"

It's strange to think that this offbeat, wandering rebel was the man who was married to my meticulous mother. My mother who, even today, seems much more absorbed in her lipstick, matching bags and the perfect perfume to "complement the occasion". She's so uptight that she has perfumes for certain work days – if a particular client will be in, her scent is camouflaged in a carefully chosen fragrant weapon. I remember, as a child, watching her one morning, surveying her perfume collection. It was first light and the bottles were, as always, impeccably laid out on her dresser, the hazy glow of day mystically embalming the curious glass shapes. For a moment she looked at them, her blue eyes soft in thought, and then she struck out, plucked one from the light and sprayed it searingly onto her wrists, her throat and obscurely, her belly button, as she murmured, "Something a little woody, a little masculine. Henry Garboles will be in today."

That's my mother, calculating.

I remember her wardrobe - most significantly, her tightly folded underwear - very Freudian, no doubt. And then there were her dazzling red shoes – almost Dorothy shoes from the *Wizard of Oz*. One day at work, the heel got ever so slightly scuffed - thinking back they must have been something obscene like crocodile skin, rich, shiny and terribly red – I remember her coming home, and before she even dropped her bag on the hall table, she had petulantly yanked the treasured shoes off.

They lay haphazardly on the floor in the hall: twin delinquents.

"Gladys!" she yelled. Gladys knew that tone of voice, she abandoned her duties in the kitchen (rather risking to burn the dinner than toy with that tone), and galloped, as fast as Gladys could gallop, to find my mother half way up the passage. "My red shoes are ruined," she said calmly. "You must have them." With that she vanished into her room.

I watched Gladys kneeling down to gently, reverently, pick up the red shoes, and survey them for the wreckage. When finding the slight, almost invisible tear in the heel of the leather, she looked up at me and said, so softly, “Tsk, tsk. Your mama doesn’t like tears.”

No, mother didn’t like broken objects, used goods or her torn up daughter. I knew this instinctively. Perhaps somehow my father’s rebellious nature was translated perversely into my unconscious, that my rebellion against my mother was through my hundreds of stitches, her sewn up daughter, a perversion of herself, some sort of obscene shadow side.

And then digging further into the past, I can’t help but wonder about what it was that has made my mother so fastidious, so disturbingly obsessed with perfection. And even more intriguing is how did a woman as neurotic as that end up with my father, the revolutionary zealot?

My father disappeared when I was eleven. Someone once told me that eleven is a deeply spiritual number, I think it was an astrologer I went to see in London with Ingrid. Ingrid was into astrology – she was a Virgo, said it made her a good chambermaid, that Virgos were neat, fussy, dirt haters. When I read up about the number eleven in numerology, it seemed to concur – eleven is a mystical number, but it’s also incredibly fickle.

My eleventh year was a fickle year. Perhaps in a deeper, spiritual sense the events of that year have meaning. That’s if you buy into all that “mumbo-jumbo” as Ralph called it. I do and I don’t. That makes me a fence sitter or agnostic – according to Ralph, my biggest problem was my “insipid indecision”.

“You have to decide who you are, Alice,” he once said to me, as if it were a crime to be reflective, thoughtful, evenly weighing the scales.

“I know who I am,” I’d replied defensively. But perhaps he was right. Who am I really? What makes up a person? Their beliefs, their characteristics, their personality traits? Perhaps I am just some wishy-washy person with a few skew, haphazard scars instead of defining, distinct tattoos.

Perhaps this is the curse of the revolutionary’s daughter. As a child, my father always seemed to know, with vehement certainty, who he was. He was a rebel. It was something he could wear to any occasion, slide into any conversation. It was a tough mask that the weak, traitorous man could slip behind. But it’s hard for the children of the revolutionary – the children who are left behind to watch as the years blunt the image of their childhood hero. He called himself a freedom fighter, how was I supposed to know that he was really just a second rate history teacher who read left wing newspapers?

That memory is still so brittle. That strange day he disappeared. He was still there at breakfast, doing up his tie as he hurtled into the kitchen. It was a green and yellow striped tie – such a trifling detail. He gave me a quick kiss hello, told me I was his “special rubbish”, and then we ate. Andrew joined us, but mom never did breakfasts, she’d always be getting ready, dedicating hours in the morning to reflecting in front of her mirrors, twisting her body in improbable ways to see the full effect of each item: dress, scarf, shoes, bag, make up.

After breakfast, he left. I still have a memory snapshot of him walking down to his maroon Cortina, carrying his bag filled with notes for the day. The snapshot is kind of misty, but I imagine that’s pure embellishment. It was seldom that misty in Pinelands. Maybe it was that day.

That is the last time I ever saw my father. My mother was at home when I returned from school. I’d ridden home - Andrew and I always raced each other - today I’d taken a risk, cut through the park (which could sometimes be crowded with prams and toddlers), and beaten Andrew by a few glorious minutes. At nine and a half, Andrew was already a lot taller and stronger than the eleven year old me.

I parked my bike nimbly at the back, and entered the house through the back door, I was in the kitchen, and the house was chillingly quiet. No Gladys in the kitchen, greeting me with a hug and a mid afternoon snack. In fact the kitchen was spotless, almost sterile, with a sickly, foreign stench of disinfectant. There was a curious rummaging sound coming from my parent’s room. I was petrified, certain that we were being burgled, that thieves had seized Gladys, tied her up somewhere, perhaps below the stairs, or in the small wooden Wendy House which was our garden shed.

My stomach tumbled, and I instinctively groped across the counter and drew out a long thin knife from the wooden block.

At precisely that moment, the back door flew open and Andrew appeared, a weird apparition against the light. I remember him being wet, or rather a patch of water at his feet, dripping from his raincoat - perhaps it had been raining that day. When he saw the knife, clenched dramatically in my hand, he began to scream for Gladys.

I could hear the thieves plunging down the passage towards us, my sweaty palm, almost deliciously sticky around the knife - I mustn’t drop it - my eyes seared under their lids, everything became dry, sharp, sudden.

And then my brother was in the thief’s arms. And then I realised, so slowly, that the thief was my mother. I dropped the knife, it clattered grotesquely on the hard tiled floor. My mother and Andrew both looked at me, a ghastly horror.

But the strangest thing of all was that my mother had been crying.

University of Cape Town

4.

“What would be left of our tragedies if an insect were to present us his?”

Emile Cioran

Scattered things are returned to me in a plastic bag. “From the accident,” the policewoman had said, as if I wouldn’t have known.

Or perhaps she just didn’t know what else to say.

But not everything is mine. There’s a lipstick that belonged to Veronica. The shade she always wore: “Paramount”. Like the movie star she never was. I don’t know what to do with it. I put it at the back of my bathroom cabinet, the one under the basin, still musty from when the u-bend leaked. But I can’t walk past the bathroom now without thinking of how I’ve abandoned her, amongst the furry mould, in the dark.

They didn’t bury her. I wasn’t there. Andrew went, with his drug induced post-nasal drip mimicking the snivelling lover. Mom was there too. They scattered her ashes on the mountain on a glaring summer’s day.

I never knew she’d loved the mountain - it had just never occurred to me that stick insect Veronica, in her steely stilettos and darkly sinister Paramount lipstick (that coated her teeth too often) even knew what hiking boots were.

It’s as if that was a life she forgot to live.

I wonder if I would have liked her more if I’d known about the mountain. I hope not. I hope I’m not that fickle.

Perhaps I am. Today I began reading the book – that book - Ralph’s book, Walt’s book; whoever’s bloody book. I know now why I didn’t start reading before. I knew it would change everything, and there was some comfort in the pain that I was in: it was familiar.

Today I really hated Ralph.

I remember coming home one evening; it was mid-summer - for days the weather had been hot and thick – the humidity alien to us Capetonians. I had been nagging Ralph to do sundowners on the beach with me – but the early evenings were his “inspired hours” as he called them. I would usually return home, to find him lost to his writing.

“Hey, Ali,” he’d shout from the spare room that he’d turned into a tiny office, “don’t mind me for a few hours, please. I’ve just hit the flow, got to go with it.” Most evenings were like

that. I was becoming a writing widow, increasingly jealous of the words that seduced him. I would read, go to a movie alone or watch TV, impatiently flicking between channels, irritably popping the volume louder and louder until he'd eventually emerge to give me a quick peck hello on the way to the loo, hunt distractedly for the remote and hit the "mute" button. "Don't mind, do you?" he'd say, crumpling a kiss on my neck. "Just really humming with the writing, can't think when it's so loud. Remind me to get you those headphones."

That reminds me, he never did get them.

For a while he'd been drifting away. I knew it, he knew it. Perhaps it was the way I eventually gave voice to it that made him leave? For a long time I blamed myself, my irrational outbursts:

"I can't do this relationship anymore Ralph," I'd spat at him irritably when he'd arrived home a little later than I had expected him one evening.

"What the fuck, Alice." He looked genuinely bewildered. "Are you breaking up with me? What the fuck's going on?"

"Your film would have finished an hour ago." I was doing the dishes, thumping them petulantly against each other - a cacophony of crockery.

"John and I went for a drink."

"Well, thanks for letting me know. A little sms would have been nice." I noticed that I'd chipped one of the breakfast bowls. A pale blue one that I'd got from Omi before she'd moved into the home. I wanted to cry. Over a bowl, a chipped bowl.

"Alice, when I left, you were happily reading your book. I thought you were happy doing your own thing."

I'd begun digging brutally in the sink for the tiny chip - to stick it back on. That's when the water went scarlet. I pulled my hand out, a deep red grin across my palm, almost perfectly over the goose scar.

"Jesus, Alice!" Ralph lurched forward, pushing my bleeding palm onto his T-shirt. I pulled it away, reached into a drawer for one of the kitchen towels and slowly wrapped it round my hand. "That's going to need a big old nasty needle and thread," he grimaced.

"I know," I sighed.

"Well, I'd offer to stitch you up, but my sewing skills are a little threadbare," he shrugged comically.

"Yip, that's right. It's all very funny, Ralph," I snapped, picking up my handbag and the car keys.

"I'll drive you."

“Don’t.” I put my towel bound hand against his chest. His T-shirt was covered in blood from where he’d pushed my hand into it earlier. It had been such an unconscious gesture of his, such tenderness. Even then, with my palm throbbing beneath the red and white checked kitchen towel, I could see that he cared, genuinely. And even then, an ironic little saying came to mind: *Don’t bite the hand that feeds*. But I did, I bit the hand that fed.

I wonder why I did that.

“I want to go on my own,” I said deliberately, cruelly.

“Alice...”

I pushed past him, threw open the door and was gone.

He followed me down the stairs, and in the courtyard grabbed my arm, “You can’t drive like that. Let me take you.”

“No.” I yanked away. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

I went alone, was clumsily stitched up by an intern. Ralph probably would have done a better job.

Later I told him I was sorry, that I loved him. That I get scared, over-react.

“You can’t do that to people, Alice,” he’d said as we lay in bed in the dark. “You can’t treat them like that and expect them to stick around.”

“It’s just that Dad left, so suddenly, and I suppose I’m afraid that’ll happen again. I guess I push and push and push people away so that if they leave I can have some sort of valid explanation for them leaving. That I made them go. It’s like some sort of warped self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Alice, I love you. You’re the most precious person in the world to me. You’ve made me believe in love again. I never thought I could, or would love again.” I believed him, I wanted to.

If Ralph had really loved me like this, like he said he did, how had it all gone so wrong? Is it just the nature of things to decay?

There were those moments (even near the end) where he seemed to be trying.

Perhaps he knew that I couldn’t forgive him for my finger. But I would have eventually – I did after he left: my grief too heavy to carry that blame with it.

He did try. I remember the night I arrived home, expecting the usual “just hit my flow – blah, blah, blah”, and found the lounge floor scattered with candles and picnic delights: tiny tins of olives, red wine and glasses, pricey little salads from the deli down the road, marinated artichokes, hard boiled eggs, a cheese platter of smellies (my favourites brie and camembert), the toaster with box of waffle-toasts (must have really had to scour shops here for those), and a

box of Lindt chocolate balls – the red kind. “It’s a luxury take on the Tisca,” he’d said as I’d stepped in, “I was going to take you to the beach, but alas your heat wave has just chilled out.”

And it had, the rain had finally arrived.

That was the Ralph I loved. That night we sat on the lounge floor and smeared our toasted waffles with smelly cheeses and fig preserves, and I felt appreciated, deliciously spoilt.

As I cracked at a hard-boiled egg, he told me about a migrating dragonfly that picks up a parasite by breathing it in. If a chicken eats any part of the dragonfly, it becomes contaminated, sick, can’t lay eggs. This migrating dragonfly can cross countries causing pandemonium: epidemics, food shortages.

“So a little parasite, in a little insect can cause foul weather for eggs.”

“Oh, very punny.”

“I’m not yolking! It’s not an egg-celent prospect because there’ll be no eggs for you,” he’d said, giving me his characteristic, endearing kiss on my nose.

“What are the dragonflies called?” I’d asked, peeling the egg, cracked shell slipped under a nail.

“*Libellula quadrimaculata*.” Off the cuff.

“Are you making that up?” I’d laughed.

“Nope, that’s the Latino name,” he’d joked.

“How do you know that?”

“Told you. I like insects, they’re small, and yet highly efficient, highly destructive. We people think we run things on the planet, but we’re nothing compared to the little legged creatures. They’re adaptable too, build up immunity faster than we can come up with pesticides.” And then suddenly annoyed, “They run everything – food pollination, everything.”

I salted my shelled egg. “But how do you know the scientific name?”

“Ah, I just made that up.”

“Maybe you were a doctor of insects?”

“They call them entomologists.”

“So were you?” Biting at the egg.

“Can you honestly see me chopping up little insects?” he squinted teasingly. “Or even worse having one of those obscene butterfly collections, pinned wings on little velvet trays. Those guys are monstrous.”

“Who?”

“Those lepidopterists and entomologists.”

“Why? Because they chop up little insects?”

“Precisely my dear.”

“Wait, let me get this straight,” I took a nibble at my egg, he looked at me expectantly, “you don’t like the idea of a little insect getting hacked up on a scientist’s slab, but you don’t balk at eating animals. Where’s the logic?”

“There isn’t any. Should there be?”

“That’s hypocrisy!”

“Yip, indeed it is, my sweets, but that’s the way of the world. We’re all a bunch of self indulgent hypocrites and there ain’t a damn thing you or I can do about it.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“And love, do you believe in love?”

He’d looked at me, candlelight flickering in his eyes, “What else is there?”

I would never have imagined that he could have left - so suddenly.

I would never have imagined I could have hated him. But now I do, I really do. Thanks to his bloody book. Now that I think about it, the book was always going to do us in. It stole him from me when he was here, and now it’s stolen the only thing I had left: hope. Hope that Ralph was Ralph; that Ralph was who I thought he was.

That he had good reason for leaving.

The Sea of Wise Insects

An intense little read

By Walt Turnbridge

Part 1: The head

“The praying mantis is a carnivorous insect that takes up a deceptively humble posture when it is searching for food. When at rest, the mantis’ front forelegs are held up together in a posture that looks like it’s praying. These front legs are equipped with rows of sharp spines used to grasp its prey. They wait unmoving and are almost invisible on a leaf or a stem, ready to catch any insect that passes. When potential prey comes close enough, the mantis thrusts its pincher-like forelegs forward to catch it. The prey probably won’t escape because the forelegs are so strong and armed with overlapping spines. The mantis bites the neck of its prey to paralyze it and begins to

devour it. The mantis almost always starts eating the insect while it's still alive, and almost always starts eating from the insect's neck."

From www.insecta-inspecta.com

This is a love story.

I know what you're thinking: "*But that quote! That's hardly the way to open a love story.*" But you're wrong, because this is a story about the kind of love that devours you, swallowing you whole, ingesting you into its being.

Just like the mantis that takes a deceptively humble posture, love waits: "unmoving and invisible... ready to catch... to paralyze... to devour... alive."

This is Jack's story. Lucy's in it too – after all, he has to have someone to love. But I shall leave you to decide who devours who – or perhaps more poignantly, who is ultimately devoured by love and who escapes. But, please, be warned, no one in this murky tale escapes unscathed.

This kind of love rarely (if ever) leaves its victims unscathed.

Jack is the hero of the novella - a man of dubious moral integrity. He is a man on the run, running from his past, and later he is to run from his present. Indeed, he is likely to spend the rest of his life running from himself.

Where is he now? Who can say? I doubt even Jack knows exactly where he is now, because, after all the years on the run, after all the masks he has worn, not even Jack can be certain of where the real he is.

You see, many years ago, Jack murdered his mother. Not literally, of course. That would be too macabre, too obvious. Besides, one should never start a book with a murder on the first page. It's such a cheap trick.

No. Perhaps it's better to say that Jack simply let her die. But I shan't say anymore, because it's better not to give too much away at the beginning of a novel, for, if you do, the reader is very likely to become bored – there's no driving motivation for continuing to read. The story loses its appeal, its mystery.

Indeed, stories are a lot like love.

Once you have solved the mystery, the story is over. N'est-ce pas?

There are so many places that one could begin a story – and for days I have wandered through the fog of the past to try and find the beginning.

It could be deep in Jack's childhood on a farm in Switzerland, or it could be at the precise moment that he first saw Lucy.

Ah, Lucy. Yes, Lucy. It was not that Lucy was beautiful, for she was not. Rather it was that she was a curiosity, a mystery. She intrigued Jack, for Lucy lived in a meticulous made-up world: a wonderland of sorts. Lucy had a florid, turbulent imagination and Jack fell in love with her ability to transform the mundane into the magical. She was in many ways a real little "Alice in Wonderland".

How could he not love this wan, wild woman who had defended herself against a hostile world by creating fantastical milieus in her mind?

Perhaps she was slightly crazy, or perhaps she just had the uncanny ability to focus on the freaky and leave the ordinary, somewhat ugly, rest of life, completely... blurry, out of focus.

To be honest, in many ways, this is the story of how the ever so factual Jack became spellbound by, and subsequently ensnared in, Lucy's peculiar web.

What does one do when one becomes obsessed with something, when something consumes one so absolutely? Of course, one wants to own it, to control it, and in controlling it, attempt to regain control of one's own life.

This is that story.

Or is it?

Sorry folks, another really cheap novelist's trick.

So, we shall start our little love story in London... somewhere. And perhaps we should dig a little into Lucy's memory, for she always did have such a wonderful way of telling this particular story. She relished the telling of it, and, of course the embellishing of it, which makes it such a wonderfully captivating story, for, once Lucy knew Jack's side, she took great pleasure in creating such a dramatic sense of tension that it hardly seems worth telling the actual story for it'll simply be too boring, too mundane, and after all this is a book and as a book, I am meant to be entertaining, surely?

Jack's first meeting with Lucy was rather odd. Undoubtedly engineered by that "unmoving and invisible" force of love...

It all begins with Jack, plodding in the twilight, down a dingy alley in a rather unsavoury part of London.

He's lost. It's getting late, and the night creatures are emerging, jadedly set to cure last night's hangover with tonight's. It's a dangerous time to be out, sly folk with criminal intent hover in the shadows - although, Jack thinks sardonically to himself, at this time of night there's very little between the light and the shade... In truth, the alley is splendidly creepy: badly lit, well worn, heaving with overflowing bins and flies, and Jack is - justifiably, I might add - all spooked. Up ahead, he hears a fracas: a searing, ghastly scream followed by a shrill, shattering sound.

His instinct is to turn back, but he can't - he's convinced he can hear the steady, dreaded tread of a mugger behind him. Hurrying along, fearful, lost, he stumbles over a broken jar, shattering it further.

And then a door bursts open, washing the alley in light. And a young woman emerges.

Enter Lucy. The love of Jack's life.

Of course, she doesn't notice him, standing, gawking in the too bright, sudden light. Isn't that what always happens in the best love stories? The woman never notices the man at first. Later, unfortunately, she might notice him too much, but, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We have an entire novella for all that sort of nonsense.

Lucy wanders down the step, and begins searching, rather half-heartedly for something on the cobbled street.

Jack pauses, unsure of what to say, and eventually comes out with (given the circumstances: a woman in a dodgy, malevolent alley at night) what has to be one of the best chat-up lines in the history of romance: "Hi, I'm Jack. Jack Jones."

Not.

Not the best chat-up line, gentlemen. In fact, a complete and utter no-brainer of a chat-up line. Indeed, an unmitigated disaster of a chat-up line.

But... and this is what makes love so utterly intriguing: Lucy looks up, a tad perplexed, for here is a complete stranger, albeit a rather dashing stranger, introducing himself to her in a not-so-darkened alley. "Hi," she replies, a little cautiously. It takes a while for her to continue, after all, she is by her very nature, an extraordinarily private person and exceedingly suspicious of strangers. But eventually - miraculously, one might say - she says: "I'm Lucy." And she smiles, a mouth of delightful teeth.

For some reason, whenever Jack thinks of Lucy, it is her lovely milky teeth that nibble their way forward. Even after he has left her, buried in the graveyard of shattered love, she sometimes comes (uninvited) to assault his memory; and then it's her teeth that always come first - biting into his conscience.

"Well, Lucy," he says, by way of making conversation, "it seems to me that you've lost something?"

"Just a finger," she replies nonchalantly.

He immediately thinks she must be joking (or mad) because - he surreptitiously checks - she has all her fingers. His next line is a notch up on the first line, "Which finger? A fish finger?"

She laughs at this. "No. Afraid not. One of the patrons had an argument with his wife. It seems that she tossed his finger out the window."

"They were pointing fingers?" he says, thinking of course that she must be joking.

She chuckles, "Well, she probably was pointing his missing finger at him..."

"A missing finger?" He's heartily enjoying this little interaction now.

"Yes. Well, it was missing from his hand, but now it's missing from his life." She peers into the dark reaches of the alley. "It was in a little glass jar, in plenty of formaldehyde to keep it fresh, so to speak. But I expect that's history - the formaldehyde, that is - and so, at this stage it's really just the finger I'm after."

Mortified, Jack realises it's the same glass jar that he'd just tripped over and crushed even further. And thus the rubbery finger (pinkie) is found, jammed with glass fragments, and is returned (wrapped in a yellowing face cloth) to the hapless, pinkie-less man and his impetuous wife - she of the ghastly, searing scream.

And so Jack and Lucy met. There was the butterflies-in-their-stomachs time. A time of purity and delight. The time of the lovers. Well, perhaps I should say: the time of new lovers, because as we all well know, lovers have different times. Like so many before, Jack and Lucy had their time of frivolous froth, deep sighs and feelings of such connectedness that it just had to be the One... Like so many One's before that eventually dissipated into someone else's

One. This was the One story of Jack's life that always seemed to be the same - that butterfly feeling was always subverted by the worm in the apple. Each and every woman that he'd loved-and-left had been a shape-shifter. According to his logic, every woman had ensnared him with her unobtainable allure, and every time her inaccessible mask could be held in his hands, and a real, vulnerable, needy woman emerged, he would feel repulsed by this reality.

In truth, he was an addict – addicted to the fantasy of love. In his mind there was no space for reality in love. And that is why he thought that Lucy and her wild imagination would be different. She would never abandon him to the real her, after all, she lived in a whimsical fantasy world. And, had it not been for him, she may well have succeeded in being his queen of hearts. But, he was playing another hand – even another game.

He was playing God, and she was just another little insect under his literary microscope...

There were things Jack loved about Lucy - things he still loves about her, although she is gone from his life, and will never return.

He loved her hotel. In it she obliterated such a sad world – the real world.

In her mind, the Hotel Taglio was inhabited by a charming assortment of characters – she'd borrowed them from stories she'd read or films she'd seen. Everyone was a technicoloured eccentric.

There was Yusuf, the paraplegic chef – according to Lucy, that is. He had suffered from polio as a child and hobbled awkwardly with two sticks; in Lucy's mind he had been caught in the crossfire in during the on-going Kashmir skirmishes – a bullet had penetrated his spine, and he'd been forced into a wheelchair. Lucy always enjoyed telling Yusuf's story: "A story," she would boldly declare, as if lecturing Jack, "about the brutality and the senselessness of war and violence..." In particular (and this was something that annoyed Jack immensely) Lucy was fond of morality tales, and Yusuf's victim-of-war story was one of her well-worn favourites...

Lucy would regale Jack with tales of the guests too – guests who'd had fingers and toes chopped off – she told him they were "your regular,

garden-variety self-nominated amputees: exhibitionists, attention-seekers, hypochondriacs”.

What a load of twisted drive!

Worse than that, what if it's true? What if that's all I ever was to him: the means to a means for this pathetic excuse of a book? How could I have only been some measly insect under his “literary microscope?”

I find myself storming out of the flat, slamming the door as I go. I stomp up towards the mountain. I never go there anymore, but today I hover on the edges, tempted. It always looks so beguiling, so peaceful – the green trees, their lids swaying in the wind.

There's that reckless feeling again: *Throw caution to the wind. Live a little.* There's a part of me that's angry, destructive. It's Ralph again. How can those old feelings feel so present? What happened to the time that was meant to fucking heal me?

There's so much fact embedded in his clumsy fiction. Is this what writing really is? I turn from the mountain – defeated – and trudge off along a road lined with tall walls, private lives. There's something cruel about his book, something invasive. There are parts of me that have been warped, contorted, forced into a fictional being who simply isn't me. And then there are the fragments of other people - there's Yusuf, a paraplegic chef from Pakistan. Just like Ramon from the Tisca. Except that Ralph now credits a fictional me with concocting huge chunks of Ramon's story.

A dog barks at me from behind a menacingly spiked gate, momentarily frightening me out of my angry reverie.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Perhaps if I breathe deeply enough, for long enough, it'll calm me down.

It doesn't.

It's as if Ralph has robbed everything of its essence. Denying Ramon his truth, his trauma. Ramon was in a wheelchair, and he would always tell the story of how his spinal cord had been severed when he'd been caught in the cross-fire in Kashmir: “A bullet from a sinful Pakistani gun.” His accent was thick, and he often used strange animated adjectives, “Must have passed out from the mad pain, and when I came to, in a glittering room on a houseboat, I couldn't feel anything, anymore. A bullet from the gun of one of my own very people. That's why I'm in London - life's too crazy there. Too totally cheap.”

Of course, right now, striding through the tranquil suburb of Oranjezicht on this cloudless Cape Town day, Ramon's story does seem implausible, even a little ridiculous. It

feels like another world, a fictional world that belongs in a book, and in truth, even I could never tell how accurate Ramon's tale of tragedy was, for Ramon enjoyed telling it, and each time he did, "slight" details would change – at times the gun would be an Indian gun: "Shot mercilessly by a gun of our estranged enemy..." In his Indian version, he would awake on a raft that floated on a mystical, famous Kashmiri lake, surrounded by enormous red flowers that later emerged to be "my own dreaded blood!"

This is not my fiction, it's Ramon's story – his actual living life. Or rather his own somewhat questionable versions of his life. Surely Ralph or Walt or whoever the fuck he is just can't go around stealing other people's stories. Or worse, denying them – mocking them.

Mocking me.

It's like he's stolen our stories and then buried the truth beneath his fantastical lies.

Can stories be stolen, twisted, buried? Like hearts, like trust. Can they Ralph?

Is that why he ran away / disappeared (delete where applicable). Maybe he knew I'd freak-out, tell him that the book he'd been so frantically conjuring from his laptop was nothing more than poorly reversioned reality. Perhaps that's why it's published under a pseudonym. It certainly explains why he's never been back to the Tisca since he vanished.

"Thief. Bloody thief." The words sit thickly in my throat as I stop for a while and look out over the city. The Eastern Boulevard winding through the metropolis like an enormous dull centipede. Why am I so angry, still, after all this time? It's been over a year. Surely time should heal? Isn't that's what they say?

Perhaps it's because there really is something so disturbingly Lucy about me – she's obviously me – an unhinged me. A me that lives in a fantasy world. Do I really live in a fantasy world? Is this world I'm in a distorted reality? Was the Tisca not the hotel I knew it to be? Or is that just part of the story, another of Ralph's "cheap tricks" to make Lucy seem more enigmatic than she really was / is? Perhaps that's really how Ralph saw me – a wan woman lost in a fantasy world - which means, in effect that he never saw me at all. And then again, perhaps he did see me in the end – back here at home, on the end of Africa. And perhaps he didn't like what he saw, really.

I turn around, leaving the city views behind and head home slowly, heavily.

It's just a story. I keep on telling myself that. Just a story. And what if there's a chance that Ralph did this deliberately, that this is some kind of cryptic message from him, perhaps he's sending me a sign, telling me that he's out there?

Nope. Now that's downright delusional. Truly the stuff of fantasy. If he'd wanted to contact me he would have called, or sms'd or mailed me. Cryptic messages in books belong in

the sixteenth century. He's just a bloody plagiarist, stealing stories from real people because he's got none of his own to tell.

Thieving fucker.

"It's what people do." I guess I shouldn't have expected Andrew to understand.

"So people steal? And that's OK?" I counter. We're sitting on my balcony, early evening, smoking.

"Hey, it's a book, most writers draw on their lives for inspiration. Alice." He often does that, makes a nasty plosive of my name at the end of a sentence when he's trying to make a point.

"This is not drawing on his life for inspiration, Andrew." In reply. "This is actually robbing other people of their stories and putting it down as your own work. It's a little bit different."

"Well from what you've been telling me it doesn't sound very plausible."

"What doesn't sound very plausible?"

"That there's actually a hotel where people go to recover from self-inflicted amputations."

"They're not self-inflicted amputations, they're self-nominated."

"Same difference."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"No it's not." How is it that two adults can regress into infantile behaviour when they're with their siblings?

"It's hardly reality, Alice. Fingers falling out of windows into alleys. And what? Some Pakistani guy in a wheelchair who doesn't remember how he was paralysed."

"But it's true! That's Ramon's story, and the hotel actually exists."

"Yes, in the book Alice. It exists in the book, and in your imagination, Alice. And we all know you've got plenty of that to go around. You and that flipping Moonface thing when you were a kid. Look, sorry to break this to you, and I hate to be the one to do it, but as far as I can tell you haven't got any friends to tell you this shit, so I guess it's got to be me." He takes a long final drag on his cigarette and stubs it out in Ralph's green glass ashtray. "Alice, I don't think Ralph wrote this book – it even has someone else's name on the cover. Why would Ralph publish under a pseudonym?"

I don't answer. Night devours the dusky gloom.

He continues, "Look, it's shitty that he went away without really telling you why, but let me tell you Alice, sometimes guys just can't face the girl, you know. I know it's cowardly and all that, but it happens sometimes, and to be honest, I don't think you would've taken it very well even if he had told you. You know, you're going to hate me for saying this, but I could see it coming. He was totally nuts about you in the beginning, but you were..." he sighs, looking out over the darkening trees, "you seemed a bit arrogant about the whole thing. Like you had him where you wanted him. I think he sensed that, rebelled. And then you guys were fighting all the time. You gave him a hard time, especially after the whole engagement thing. You're like that Alice, you can't keep your mouth shut. Want things your way. And he couldn't take that."

"Everybody wants things their way sometimes. That's not a crime."

"That's controlling, Alice. You can't control people."

"And this little pearl of fucking wisdom from you." I take a long, severe drag on my cigarette.

"You see. I can't speak to you. You just don't fucking listen." He shakes his head. "I'm telling you what I saw, and it wasn't pretty."

"It's life, Andrew. That's is what happens in life, in relationships. People bump up against each other, and then they eventually figure it out."

"Yip, and in relationships, people sometimes decide they just don't want to figure it out with that person anymore, and the bottom line is: That's what Ralph decided, and now he's gone." A hard didactic tone. "There's nothing more to it. Let it go. Move on. He has."

The city lights are beginning to surface, flickering in the distance. An electrician came round one day - in the Ralph days. He came to check the stove, it wasn't working; turned out that the element had broken, clean in half. He was chatty, I thought lonely. He asked me if I knew why it was that lights flickered at night. I didn't. He told me that electricity was phased: it pulsates. Fifty times a second, to be precise. We can't see it pulsating in our houses, we're too close, the naked eye too insensitive. We can only see the flickering (the phases pulsating) from a distance.

"I think that you're having a little bit of a..." Andrew searches for the right word, and sighing, says, "Look, let me put it to you like this, OK? You've been under a lot of stress lately, this whole thing with Veronica and the cops and I know - I know better than anyone how hard this has been for you. I mean, why do you think I came to stay with you?"

To spy on me? To make sure I didn't go to the police? To borrow my car? To hide from your scary connections? Because you had nowhere else to go? You could hardly have carried on staying at Veronica's place - that would have been tacky, really tacky. And mom,

well, we all know you weren't going to go there. No place to hide your little coke stash there. How the fuck do I know why you're here? I just know that you are – you and all your nasty little secrets, hiding out here till it's no longer expedient.

I stub my cigarette out viciously on Ralph's ashtray.

"Hey?" He digs in his cigarette box and slips one out. "I came to stay with you because I know what you're going through. I'm your brother. I want to be here for you."

"Ah, right. Forgot about that one. And a few days ago you were telling me about your lovely friends - that I'd better hope they didn't find you here. That doesn't by any remote chance have anything to do with you being here now, does it?"

He lights his smoke, taking a deep thoughtful drag, "Ah, that little imagination of yours, Alice. Working overtime again."

"Whatever Andrew, whatever. Look," I say picking up the book, "Ralph wrote this book. I worked at this hotel. I'm not going nuts from fucking stress, OK? I didn't imagine it all. But it doesn't really matter what you think, because, it never has."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way about it. But, Alice, the very sad truth of your life is that it actually does matter what I think. It really, really does. Because right now, as far as I can see, you've got nobody else but me."

"I've got dad," I spit. "And Omi."

"Oh, yes. Forgot about that. A three rand conversation every few months. Plus a delirious old duck in a home. That's a whole lot of support for your shitty little life." With that he's up and out. As he slams the front door: "I'm taking your car again. Hope you don't mind, sis."

The phone rings. I've been sitting here for hours now, on the balcony, in the dark, lost down my own murky alleys, running from my past, tripping over severed memories in glass jars. I am hesitant to answer it, but it rings insistently, my red phone accusingly translating the message from the other side: "I know you're there. Pick up." But I don't, anymore. I used to pick up as quickly as I could, breathlessly, humiliatingly hopeful that it could be Ralph. It never was. Now, I have a regular caller – an unwanted stalker: Veronica's mother. She phoned me again yesterday, hissing as I answered the phone: "You're an irresponsible, callous bitch, you're the one who deserved to die."

Slam.

For a while I just sat with the phone to my ear, it's mechanical tone throbbing in my head. Wondering whether Veronica still hates me - wherever she is - or whether she'd be grateful for what I did.

I had my first court appearance last week, in the Cape Town Magistrates' Court. It was a few days after the accident, my lawyer told me that this was highly irregular, that I should have appeared in court two days after the accident. The police claimed that they were still investigating, that the case wasn't conclusive, that they weren't convinced I was the driver.

"As if the police are really concerned with justice," my lawyer had bemoaned. "They probably misfiled the docket. Wouldn't be the first time either. I've seen police stations turned upside down to find a missing docket." I can't afford a lawyer, so the state has provided me with one - Jeffrey September. He's a good guy, skinny, wears oversized, second hand suits, the jackets of which he always peels off right away - the lining is usually worn thin with long guitar-like strings hanging over holes. His manner is jittery, frenzied, almost harried, as if he's always rushing to get to his next client. He's one of those "Oh so busy, busy, busy" types whirling through our appointments, chewing his chewed up pens, pacing restlessly, throwing direct questions at me. The first time I met him, before we'd even had a chance to exchange pleasantries (a basic how are you, or nice to meet you) he'd asked me how I'd lost my finger. "It's your ring finger, isn't it?"

"Yip. I've got a freaky finger," I said, waving the warped little stump of what was left of it in front of him. We were sitting in one of the Legal Aid offices in a run down seventies block in central Cape Town, the room was spartan - one wooden table surrounded by five or six hard, bum numbing, black plastic seats. The grubby walls were randomly decorated with tack marks where posters had once been. A lone poster had outlived the rest: "Know your Rights: The law and child maintenance", the writing below the title was so minuscule you'd need a magnifying glass to read it.

"So you're going to tell me what happened?" I remember momentarily thinking that he was impatient, and I realised that he was somehow playing me, sussing me - by throwing me.

"To my finger or in the accident."

"Both."

For some reason it seemed easier to tell him about my finger.

"I've always been very unlucky," I started, "Gladys, our char when we were growing up, used to think that I was cursed. Anyway, I guess it's got something to do with that. My finger was in the wrong place, you know the cliché, at the wrong time. Just plain unlucky for me."

I'd lived at the Tisca for two years with all my digits intact – fingers and toes. My first call, after I'd "lost" my finger (it was lost because I'd fought for it bravely and he'd won), was to Sophie in London.

"Ah, Alice! My long lost luckless chambermaid. We're all missing you here, have no one to warn us against the no-go lottery numbers." Every week, Sophie would sit me down with a pen and a lottery slip. I'd carefully ink in six numbers and the staff at the Tisca would then painstakingly avoid all six of them on their lottery tickets. They did quite well off me, my ill luck became their legendary good luck.

I'd like to say that Sophie had been mortified when I told her about my finger, but she simply said, her cockney accent braying dramatically: "Humph. Pretty brutal. Bet you wish you'd spared yourself that agony and had Dr Hauptsch remove it painlessly and neatly for you." That's Sophie, ever the practical post-mortem.

"Yip, if I had a crystal ball and could have seen the future, I would've definitely gone that route."

The last I time I saw my finger it was in someone's bloody mouth. The police and paramedics searched the area for it - apparently they can sew it back on if they find it in time, like the notorious Bobbitted cock, but they didn't find it. I wonder what he did with it - did he keep it as some sort of gruesome memento? Perhaps he ate it - I have always had a taste for the macabre. I can't help liking this explanation the best: he accidentally swallowed it. Surely that would be some sort of sick justice? Not that I believe in justice, after all, the world isn't that fair. Not in love, not in war.

It started in love. Ralph bought me a ring at the Milnerton market one sluggish Saturday morning. We were stepping through consumerism's junkyard, where the broke in their rusted cars collect with the last of their treasures – eyeglasses, first generation video recorders, Archie comics, brass plumbing pipes. The wealthier market folk have tables, the less wealthy lay their goods out on towels and sheets, and the dirt poor – well, they lay their wares straight onto the bare sandy brown ground, to gather dust over the days.

Squeezed between monolithic, bleak warehouses and a fenced in railway line, with a great view of Table Mountain through the dockyards, and less than a hundred meters from the sea, it's something of a paradoxical, albeit iconic Cape Town market. I can never decide whether it's funky or sad. I think it's sad that people's lives have come to this, but perhaps they're content with their lot on the dirt. Who am I to judge? Most of the folk are old, white, no longer employable in a changing South Africa. Even I'm barely employable. Before, skins were too black, now they are too white. Besides, in the greater South African landscape,

where unemployment percentages rock precariously below the forty percent mark, they're the lucky ones: they have rusty cars and junk to sell.

Ralph and I were ploughing through our childhoods, finding jumbled bits of a game he'd loved as a child, and I, a lone plate that looked just like the crockery set mom used to use - before dad left. I'm always bewildered at how objects (and smells) can plunge you right back into an obscure childhood feeling. It was Ralph who stopped at the jewellery tray, of one the wealthier stalls, and picked out a ring.

"It's not a diamond," the man had told him, eager for a sale, "just a bit of glass. Maybe crystal." There was a little tag on it - fifty rand.

Ralph pulled me towards him, and laughing said, "I, Peter Pan, the boy who'll never grow up, request that you, Alice in her unlucky wonderland, be my wife." With that he squeezed the bloody ring onto my ring finger. And there it remained.

Stuck.

Ralph's spontaneous proposal cost him fifty rand, me my finger, and possibly us our relationship.

Jeffrey September's reaction was more appropriate than Sophie's. Perhaps that was because I had the advantage of being able to chart his delicious facial responses - his lips turned down distastefully at a grisly revelation, his eyes appropriately and dramatically saucer-like with shock at the petrifying moment - whereas Sophie was a delayed voice on at the end of a long distance line. It is a story I relish telling - perhaps my mother was somehow right, because I do delight in the telling of my hapless tales, it makes me feel different, other, as my life is somehow blessed in its curse; I enjoy the attention that my grotesque tales bring me, but does that mean that I actually will these vile, painful things to happen to me?

"That's a pretty mean story. Good for the defence, perhaps we can angle for some sort of Post-Traumatic Stress after something like that." Jeffrey was pacing up and down the small room. He reminded me of a lion I once saw in a zoo as a child - it paced constantly along the glass, it's sultry strides firm, regular, as if the pacing was some sort of pacifier, an escape from the containment - I remember thinking that the lion knew that it was eternally trapped, a victim of some sort of perversion. "Have you seen a psychologist about this?"

I shook my head. He seemed surprised at that. "I couldn't afford it," I explained, "I was working as a secretary, temping actually. I'm quite a good typist, even after I lost my finger."

He smiled at my joke. That's why I like Jeffrey September, he got my black humour right off. "Listen, I'll give you a name of psychologist to see at Groote Schuur - she's employed by the state, and you only pay what you can afford, right now, I gather you aren't working."

“I lost my job. I could probably get another temping gig.”

“You working through an agency?” I nodded. “Well,” he continued, “do you know what it means to have a criminal record?”

“Yes.”

“Alice. You won’t be able to get any more jobs through your agency when you’re convicted.”

“You seem convinced that I will be convicted.”

“It’s more than likely you’ll be convicted. You’ve been formally charged with culpable homicide by a magistrate. We have less than two months till you next appear in court to see how I can help you win over the magistrate, so to speak. It’s not an easy job either, because I can’t see what you guys were doing out there in that parking lot at night, particularly driving at those speeds.” He stopped, gave a quick shake of his head, as if waking himself from a daze, and looked at me enquiringly.

I didn’t know what to tell Jeffrey September that day. There was no way I could tell him the truth, and besides I’ve begun to wonder how interested people are in the truth. In the land that I live in (the land of my birth) justice isn’t important, neither is truth, the only things of substance are vengeance and guilt.

I appeared in court a few days before I met Jeffrey September. I was formally and chillingly charged with the culpable homicide of Veronica Annabel Rowland.

When I arrived, the clerk at the front desk said I could wait in the courtroom, watch the other proceedings.

“I’d rather wait with the other criminals,” I told him. I’ve never liked courts. For many years my mother had worked as a secretary in the legal profession. I’ve always associated her with courts, a hard, clinical justice - although in reality, as a legal secretary, she probably never spent any time in courtrooms.

The clerk had a large round face, and he eyed me warily, “What do you mean?”

“You know, with the other criminals, in the cells.”

It was as if I’d just stepped out of Wonderland as the Duchess, and was suckling a piglet – he was that incredulous: “Look lady. I don’t know what whacky place you just beamed in from, but firstly, most people appearing in court don’t come from police custody, and nobody ever asked me to go into a cell when they didn’t need to. I mean, to be honest with you, that’s just crazy. OK? Wait in the courtroom or wait outside. It’s best to wait in the courtroom

because if you aren't around when your name gets called, you'll be liable for contempt of court." With that he turned away from me to his computer, and began typing.

Negligent and reckless driving. Culpable homicide. Contempt of court. I was already edgy, I could feel the irritation in my teeth.

I took a seat in the courtroom, on the rim, trying to look inconspicuous. The first case was called. Three men came into the court from a door on the side. They were chained, large metal rings round their ankles, they shuffled slowly, clanking awkwardly, their hands cuffed in front of them, behind them was a policeman gripping a large, obscenely threatening gun. I wondered if it was an AK47. Do the police use AK47's? Are guns allowed in a court? They were charged with armed robbery and one count of murder. I looked at them, one looked down, almost bewildered; another seemed bored, even a little superior.

That morning I was the only white person to get called to the stand. I know this shouldn't be important anymore – after all, this is the new South Africa, Mandela's beloved Rainbow Nation, but as I waited in an oppressive, windowless courtroom in the ugly, exposing fluorescent glare, I couldn't help thinking of the time my father had phoned me after I'd lost my finger. We'd had a rare, political argument.

"There's so much crime here now, dad. It's really bad. I'm scared of living in this country. Ralph wants to leave now. I can't help thinking I should go with him, marry him to get a passport out of..."

My father had cut me off: "You're sounding like some scaredy-cat white liberal, for God's sake."

"I probably am some scaredy-cat white liberal, dad. Fuck it. I just had my finger bitten off for a fifty rand ring. Don't I have a right to be freaked out? When am I allowed to be freaked out dad, when I'm dead?"

My father was quiet, I could hear him putting more coins into the pay phone. We usually only spoke till his money ran out, our good byes being said over the warning beeps, the last of our conversations always startlingly cut off, my strained "I love you" always told, relieved, to the mute, unhearing receiver. That day was different, that day he spent a few more of his precious rands trying to convince me of the beauty of our current political landscape. "Look," he said when the last of the mechanical clinking had ended, the belly of the payphone full, "it's just the ghost of Apartheid..."

This time I cut him off: "Apartheid's no fucking ghost!" I had barked. "The ugly word is gone, but most blacks in this country still live in abject poverty, while most whites are still living it up, driving around in their fancy fat-cat cars."

“Give it a chance,” he argued, “it hasn’t been long enough. You’re talking about reversing over forty years of social engineering. It’s only just over a decade into democracy.”

“This isn’t a democracy! The government doesn’t give a shit about the ordinary people. Why do you think there’s so much crime dad? Why do you think that street kid bit off my finger? Because he likes it? No, dad, it’s because he’s hungry – and not for my finger either.”

“I’m glad to see you have a sense of humour about it,” he’d said, laughing.

“But it isn’t funny.” I was angry, tearful, my bitten off stump still throbbing in its bandage. “It’s tragic and the government isn’t doing a damn thing about it.”

“So why don’t you do something?”

“I already am doing something. I pay massive taxes, which get spent on stupid weapons and planes, instead of on housing or job creation. And because the government isn’t spending my money where it should be spending my money, I land up a nine fingered freak.”

“Ag, Alice. That’s not an argument, my girl.”

“Dad, what happened to you?” I’d asked him sadly. “You used to be a communist. You used to believe in some kind of equality.”

He was quiet - for a moment I thought we’d been cut off. Then he said, “We whites did a terrible thing, Alice. Perhaps we’re paying for it now.”

The warning beeps began - hard, shrill.

“I know, I know. We all know,” I said, “but I didn’t believe in it, why must we pay for it? I was just a child – you fought against it...”

“Not hard enough,” he said, and then there was the final long beep, executioner of the conversation.

A jolt of panic when the court warden yelled for me, stretching out the words shrilly: “Alice Wolfe.” I felt exposed, that terrible shame again that I’d felt in the police van.

That name is me.

I stood up quickly, awkwardly, and scurried hurriedly towards the stand. I must have looked comical because a few people laughed.

“Silence in court!” the court warden bellowed.

I waited at the stand for the longest minute, a tiny muscle in my jaw jumping. My fearsome foe, fate, waiting to pounce.

The Magistrate was old, bored, shuffled through his papers, looked at me as if he weren’t seeing, his watery eyes otherwise engaged. He was probably realising he’d forgotten to tell his secretary that it was his wife’s birthday coming up. I sometimes like to do this. It helps. I remember thinking that I should imagine him having a saucy foursome with three

boisterous policewomen, but then I thought I might laugh, or even worse cry, or berate myself for thinking positively un-feminist thoughts.

“Are you Alice Wolfe?” the Magistrate asked.

“Yes,” I replied. There was an edgy silence. “Yes, sir. I am.” I swallowed hard, my throat dry and sticky.

The Magistrate took a sip of his water. “Do you know your rights?”

“Yes sir. I have been present during the other cases,” I replied, nodding stupidly.

He sighed irritably, “We are not talking about other cases Miss Wolfe. We are talking about your case. Do you understand?”

Very quietly, “Yes sir.” I could feel my stomach tumbling, it was like being scolded by my first grade teacher.

“You are being charged with reckless and negligent driving and the culpable homicide of Veronica Annabel Rowland.”

It was so grotesque when he said it - a spiteful nightmare – chillingly final.

He continued, “You have a right to an attorney. If you can’t afford one, the state will provide one for you.” He then set a court date for two months time.

I remember staggering out of the courthouse and being submerged in sunshine. I didn’t know what to do, so I wandered aimlessly through the east city, past coffee shops filled with lawyer looking types sucking down frothy cappuccinos. I found myself standing in front of Parliament, looking at a statue of some guy on a horse. Who was he? I was too embarrassed to look, to reveal my ignorance publicly – still smarting from the courtroom humiliation.

Not ready to head home, to alone, I trudged down the road, and into the Company Gardens. Up the avenue to the right is an outdoor restaurant with tacky plastic floral tablecloths, surly waitresses and mediocre grub. There were only a few tables occupied, I sat down at an isolated table, the furthest from the main building. A waitress indolently sauntered over and dropping a tawdry menu on the table, sulkily asked - her hand on her hip in exasperation, “Don’t you want to move closer?”

“Um. Not really. I like this table.”

“Suit yourself,” she said testily, and stomped off.

“Excuse me!” I said.

She stopped and turned, irritated, “Yes?”

“Could I please have some tea?”

“Ceylon tea?” she drawled cheekily.

I nodded. A few minutes later she brought me rooibos tea. I'd only noticed this once I'd poured it. I tried for a few minutes to get her attention, but she was determinedly not looking my way, giggling in a huddle with the other waitresses.

I stood up with the pot, my handbag and darted through the empty tables towards the tearoom - I could feel my earlier edginess erupting. Another of the waitresses nudged her, but it was too late for her to intersect me outdoors, I had already decided that she would have her warped little war right in front of her colleagues and superiors.

"I asked for Ceylon tea," I said firmly, dumping the pot on the counter. "This is rooibos tea."

"I didn't hear you say you wanted Ceylon tea," she replied. The other waitresses were a sudden flurry of busyness, pretending not to notice the altercation.

"I nodded my head when you asked if I wanted Ceylon tea."

"Ja, but I didn't hear you," she insisted, shrugging.

"Well, you can take your nasty attitude and this rooibos tea, and you can shove it up your lazy little arse," I spat, and with that I was gone, striding triumphantly past the tables of bewildered patrons, into the verdant world of the famous Cape Town gardens.

I felt weirdly elated, almost happy. The happiest I'd felt since Ralph had left. Certainly the happiest since Veronica had died. But I immediately felt guilty for feeling that victorious, justified rush. Veronica was dead, and I was happy that I'd just done something she would have savoured doing. I had cracked, I had bitched, worst of all, I had enjoyed it. It felt perversely as if Veronica were living through me.

Or even worse, that I was becoming my mother.

A man was taking a photograph of a squirrel in an oak tree. Such enviable normalcy, to be able to stroll through the gardens with a camera, capturing celluloid (or digital) squirrels. I could feel the tears fragmenting me. I mustn't cry, not here, not where strangers might stop and ask if I'm OK - their kindness bound to shatter me completely. I sat on a bench and fumbled in my bag for my cigarettes, my baby pink lighter, and lit up - the nicotine calming me, a long thin poisonous adult pacifier.

I sat on that bench in the gardens for over an hour, chain smoking, lighting each new cigarette with the ember of the old. I only left when the box was empty. Then I made my way up the gardens, through the bits they tell you to be wary in, and found myself in front of the legendary entrance of the Mount Nelson Hotel - its large, imposing Roman columns an eternal reminder of Veronica.

I felt somehow guilty, certainly culpable.

I still do, strangely enough, even more so since the phone calls have become a daily, sometimes an hourly, taunt. The monotonous ring breaking in everywhere, into my thoughts, ponderings of Ralph's book. I thought about yanking it out of the wall, but I decided against that. It's like what my mother said that night when I'd phoned her from the police station: actions have consequences.

Inaction has consequences too.

University of Cape Town

5.

“Full investigations have been made into the extraordinary way some insects can remain alive and even active when such apparently vital parts of the body as the head have been removed.”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

I haven't answered the phone for a few days now. And so the knocking begins, my neighbour, Bertha, she lives below me. "What's going on?" Plump fury, when I open the door.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"The phone, Alice. Your bloody phone has been ringing almost non-stop. The whole of last night, and the whole of the night before and the night before."

"I know."

"So..." It starts ringing again. We stand at the door: Showdown at Mayville Court. "Well answer it!" It continues to ring, that hollow familiar mechanical taunt.

I don't move.

"Look, Alice. I don't know what's going on, and quite frankly I don't want to know." Lying bitch, she's dying to know. "But what I will tell you is that if you don't stop that ringing right now, I'm calling the managing agents and I'll have you evicted." She waddles down the stairs.

In the interests of good neighbourliness I pull it out at the wall, it's like pulling a lifeline - dad can't phone anymore. Not that he would have. He has his specific day, his time - give or take an hour or two; his life isn't like mine, there's no way he could know when he'll be near a phone, but every three months, to the day, my phone will ring, and it will be my father. Contact with the outside world is finally severed. My cell phone was lost in the accident, probably found by the police, probably taken as part of the investigation. No juicy drug numbers on there.

Andrew has been gone with my car for three days now. It rained yesterday, it rained today, and I don't have an umbrella, never have had one. Deliberately. Umbrella's are for careful people, people with foresight. Controlling people - Andrew would like that one. Besides I like the rain, it suits me.

I walked to the shop in the rain this morning (mainly for cigarettes), got really wet on the way there and dripped all over the Friendly Store floor. They weren't too friendly about it. The manager, a skinny guy with greasy hair and large plastic rimmed glasses (like an identikit of how serial killers always look), huffed and sighed and eventually yelled, "Tell Jessie to bring

a mop and trail this customer. She's dripping all over the shop." And when surly, slow Jesse arrived, he grumbled loudly to her, "Mop up the lot, right from the door. Fool's going to kill someone like that, dripping all over the floor, just need some kid skidding in here, slipping on that mess and cracking his skull open and then what?" Jesse wasn't answering, her mop eased over my snail trail, its filthy tentacles sloshing against my heels. He continued, pointing in my direction, "She'll waltz out of here and I'll have the family suing me. Run me out of business."

He's definitely an umbrella person. All that foresight. And I thought Andrew said I was the one with the over-active imagination.

Because of the rain, I've taken to smoking inside. I remember Ralph telling me that when you start smoking inside, you've crossed a line. Probably the weather line, Ralph, because that's the only reason why I'm smoking inside. Why do I always think of things Ralph said, things Ralph did? Why I am I obsessed with Ralph, and not something a little more interesting, like deforestation or poverty in the townships or, or Veronica's death. I've been thinking about Ralph more and more lately. I think they'd call it loneliness. Don't the elderly in old age homes live in their memories? Or maybe it's avoidance, Veronica is dead and I'm going down for it. For the rest of my life, in some strange way, Veronica will be with me.

More knocking now. There's a part of me that wants to ignore it, pretend I'm not here, disentangle myself from that hostile outside world - the grimy mop against my heels, Bertha, the Friendly Store man, Veronica's mother, Andrew. And then there's the hunger in me - just someone to talk to, anyone, even the antagonistic Bertha. Even that Friendly Store man. To feel that I'm visible, here.

It's my mother. "Is Andrew here?"

"No."

"Well, do you know where he is?"

"No."

She's impeccably dressed in a cream slack suit; she even has a matching cream umbrella. Maybe this is why I've never liked umbrellas. Mother had too many - different colours and shades for different outfits. When dad left she'd filled part of his side of the wardrobe with her umbrella collection. Shoes, bags, scarves, jewellery and umbrellas. Always the accessory queen.

"I thought he was staying with you." She's guessing now. Andrew would never have told her where he was staying.

"He was. And now he's not."

"I've tried phoning you. Why aren't you answering your phone?"

Because Veronica's mother's been phoning incessantly, yelling obscenities at me down the phone when I answer. "I've been having problems with my phone." Partly true.

"Can I come in?"

To suss out my flat, check for evidence of Andrew. "Sure." I unlock the security gate, and she saunters in. Her impeccable pressed cream colliding with the sour chaos. Dishes in the sink - I have a friend in there, a cockroach who scuttles under dishes, feeds on my scraps, makes me feel useful, alive. Mother would have it killed, call in the fumigators, insects spread diseases, breed. I imagine thousands of roaches, an infestation. I can hear her now: It only takes one. Surely more than that?

She walks in, digs in her bag and plops a newspaper on my table, "I suggest you read that sometime." She looks around suspiciously, "It stinks. Who's been smoking in here?"

"Me."

"You don't smoke."

"I do now." I crumple onto the couch, pull open the box and light up.

"Do you mind not doing it in front of me. I don't want smoke all over my clothes." She's standing across from me, discreetly scanning the room for recent Andrew action.

"You're the one who invited herself in." I can't help feeling so teenage. Why does my mother do this to me?

She purses her perfect lipsticked lips, I wonder if she's had them done, they seem fuller: "You've turned into a no good, lazy little bitch."

Wasn't I always one? I take a long drag and blow out in her direction. "If you've come here to insult me, you can please leave." Cool, Veronica-esque.

She shakes her head, and with a look of practiced disbelief on her face, says, "Don't you have any remorse, for what you've done, for the lives you've ruined?"

"You know nothing about what I do or don't have."

"I didn't come here to argue with you," she snaps.

"Yes you did." I sit forward, flicking the ash irritably into Ralph's green glass ashtray. "You probably woke up this morning in a menopausal mood, and thought: 'It's time Alice got another little verbal whipping. She's not acting guilty enough. Let me go and torment her today. That sounds like fun.' And so you grabbed your stupid fucking cream umbrella and matching cream bag and came here. Bet you locked the phone too before you left."

"How dare you speak to me like that!"

“How dare you come into my flat and ask me about remorse. You know nothing! Nothing, nothing, nothing. You know only what you want to know, which is nothing.”

“I know that Veronica is dead,” she spits, her eyes popping with rage. “I know that your brother is beside himself with grief. He hasn’t called me for two days now. I’m worried about him. I’m worried that he’s going to do something stupid.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” She looks at me accusingly, seething: “Kill himself.”

“Oh please. Spare me. Andrew is not suicidal. He’s afraid, yes. He’s involved in some serious shit with some seriously seedy people. I don’t know how Andrew makes all his money mom, but I don’t think it’s very legal or very safe. And with Veronica gone, I think…” As I speak, the scattered jigsaw of Andrew’s life slides into shape. And then sliding the last piece in, revelation: “I think Andrew may just have gone underground, with my car as collateral.”

My mother stares at me, disbelief. For a moment, a tangy silence, and then slowly, her well chosen words: “Alice, you always had some very strange ideas. But this is one of your most elaborate fabrications to date.”

“Oh, right. My over-active imagination, yet again. Well, answer me just one thing mom. Why was there cocaine in Veronica’s blood stream?” There’s a twitch – the briefest crinkle of her forehead, and I realise, she didn’t know. Veronica’s mother hasn’t told her. Nor has Andrew. I wonder what the twitch is for - shock that Veronica was a coke-head or bewilderment at being excluded from the inner circle of knowledge? “In case you didn’t know this, either,” I continue, “my blood is completely clear, and believe me they tested for everything – narcotics, alcohol, you name it. And while we’re on this subject, my bruising from the accident - it’s not concurrent with somebody who was sitting in the driver’s seat.” I take a long satisfied drag on my cigarette.

“What are you saying?”

“Figure it out mom. You were the legal secretary.”

“You’re more twisted than I ever thought possible,” she shakes her head dismissively and lets out a slow disgusted sigh. “You’re trying to frame your brother for the accident.”

“You just don’t get it.” I stub out my cigarette, it’s only half done, but it’s starting to taste dry, vile. “You never have, and you never will.”

I insert the key into the lock, turn it, that practiced flick of the wrist.

It’s always the same, in my memory. I relive it over and over. First, that scent of incense even before I’ve even reached the door, then the key scraping into the lock, finding its

fit and turning my life upside down. Inside is another world. It's not the world I left behind. Everything is neat, precise. No dishes in the sink, no dishes on the rack. The world is so clean, orderly – almost sterile.

At first I smile, he's tidied the flat, cushions fat on the couch, round, pumped.

Later I will sit on that couch, bewildered. Run my hand over the swollen belly cushions and feel sickened by the precision, the lack of absentmindedness.

Ralph is gone.

A single stick of incense burns, curling out from its tiny red ember is a scent that claws through my nostrils and settles itself into my wilting heart.

The newspaper my mother left is *The Cape Town Post*. It's over a week old. On the front page, a huge picture of a smiling Andrew and Veronica: *In happier days, Veronica Rowland with her fiancé Andrew Wolfe at their engagement party shortly before the death of her father.*

City socialite fatally wounded in car accident

Tragedy struck the Rowland family for the second time in less than a year. Gregarious and well-loved socialite, Veronica Rowland died in the early hours of Wednesday morning following a car accident in an abandoned car park on Table Mountain.

Veronica's death is a double-whammy for the Rowland family. Veronica's father, the prominent property developer, Max Rowland, died tragically of a heart attack only eight months ago.

Veronica, 26, had a Business Science degree from the University of Cape Town and was a student at the Graduate School of Business. According to her sister, Jenna Rowland, Veronica planned to use her business skills in charitable endeavours. "Veronica was one of those people who was amazingly kind," a distraught Jenna told the Cape Town Post. "She wanted to study business models so that she could use them to benefit the people of South Africa. She was always aware of her relative privilege, and wanted to make a difference. It's just the worst thing that could ever have happened."

The driver, a 30-year-old woman, was taken into custody and faces charges of reckless and negligent driving and culpable homicide. The police have confirmed that blood tests were taken. They are awaiting the results.

Veronica's fiancé, Andrew Wolfe, who was in the car when the accident occurred, said that he was devastated, "I can't believe this has happened. I'll never get over this. She was the only woman for me."

A small memorial service was held on Monday where Veronica's ashes were scattered on Table Mountain. The Rowland's home in Higgovale where Veronica grew up borders the mountain. According to Veronica's tearful mother, Maureen Wolfe, "Veronica was obsessed with the mountain. As a child, she would be up there everyday."

I slam the paper on the floor. I can't read anymore of that rubbish. It's just not the same Veronica I knew. No, it's just not her. At all. Full stop. First of all, Veronica never said a charitable thing in her life. She never did anything good for anyone. Nope. Never saw her speak kindly to a car-guard – or even acknowledge one.

She was only interested in money. She wasn't even interested in studying. Did it because daddy had wanted her to do it.

It's yet another twist on the long-suffering truth. Why do they always have to turn the dead into martyrs? *Only the good die young.* That's what they say.

And the bitchy and the bad? Can't they die young?

"What about the coke in her blood?" I say to the newspaper.

Talking to the paper. Lovely.

"How about you and I have a little chat?" I look at the newspaper and raise my eyes. "Not very responsive, are you." No reply. "No, you're just interested in your way. Your distorted versions of the world. Well, I've got a story for you and it isn't picture perfect like their fucking little engagement photo!" I stomp on the photograph, pick up the paper from the floor and begin tearing at it. It makes me feel powerful, like some kind of wicked-word slayer. A saviour of the truth.

And then I'm standing in a puddle of torn up newspaper, my hands black from the newsprint.

Cuckoo.

That's the only word that comes to mind.

How did I land up so lonely, where accusatory, spitting visits from my mother are a relief from the bleary ache of my own company? Where I physically fight with a defenceless newspaper?

I understand why people go crazy in solitary.

But here I have books to read, or rather a book to read. A book I'm avoiding now: it makes the past too present. When it stops raining I can go down to the video store. Maybe I'll eventually need to get an umbrella, or learn how to use the minibus taxis. But there's no money for indulgences like umbrellas or videos or taxis. Three thousand rand into my

overdraft. It isn't good. Eventually I'll have to go to work again, earn some money. The rent's due in two weeks. How big is my overdraft? How much money will they give me before they realise that I'm a system malfunction, that I've lost my job, my car, my marbles?

And what about my car? Should I report it stolen? I can't keep up the payments on a car I don't even have. There's no point in phoning Andrew, asking him where it is. He's either abandoned it, sold it or hotfooting it somewhere in it. He's on the run. I know Andrew, with Veronica gone, it had to come to this. I wonder how long he'll be able to keep it up, before they find him. I should have told mom he's never coming back.

Just like dad. And Ralph.

Now it's just mother and me. And Omi, teetering on the edge of this world.

Andrew was right. I'm lonely. Lonely. Even the word sounds hollow, as if it carries within it a small part of that experience. The cigarettes have become my only true friends, and even they want to kill me. Or so the box says.

Oh, I forgot about my pet roach. Although he's not too friendly. I tried talking to him the other day (maybe it's a her, how do you tell?) but it just flicked its long feelers in my direction and then scuttled off, down the wall and into a hole in the skirting I never knew existed. I scrambled down next to the fissure and whispered, "Hey Roachie, I'm your friend, the one who leaves the plug open so that you can come and go, the dirty one that doesn't do her dishes anymore. You can come scuttle about near me, I'm not going to squish you with my slippers. But don't go down there, because Bertha's down there, and she'll squash you, or spray you. Doomed down there." I laughed at myself.

But he didn't come out, and tears slid down my cheeks and landed plop onto my nightshirt, making big polka dots on the soft blue fabric.

They say that talking to plants helps them grow. I wonder if the same applies to roaches, not that I want it to grow any larger. That would be a bit kafka-esque - or just perhaps... what if the roach is metamorphosed Ralph? Then I'd have to kill it or pity it.

Which?

The sad truth of it is that not even Roachie wants me here. It's just using me. Rent free, full board. Just like Ralph? And then again, those polka dots land on my nightshirt (the light blue one I've been wearing for three days now).

Cry baby, nobody loves you.

The only place where I ever really felt I fitted was at the Tisca.

In a society that prizes the perfect, Lucy loved the crooked, missing parts of her self-nominated amputees. Loved the fact that they had the guts to be so outlandishly other.

According to her, they'd come from far off crevices of the globe to fulfil their fantasies. At a maverick – no doubt highly illegal - doctor's rooms just next door, they'd have selected fingers, toes and in extreme cases, entire feet removed. Dr Heinz recommended, after their surgery, that they convalesce close by "in case of complications" at, what he referred to with an exaggerated wink, as, "the freak-friendly Taglio".

Lucy loved her conjured doctor. According to her, he would often pop in at 7am in his starched white doctor's coat, with his black pug, Primrose, trailing behind, to do his "ward rounds". The staff would scatter, leaving Lucy to the ageing doctor: "Good morning Sister Lucy," he'd nod abruptly. "So..." he would dig in his pocket and pull out a crumpled sheet (according to Lucy: "Scarily his actual surgery notes") and straining through his grubby bifocals to make out what he'd written the day before, would eventually intone: "Were there any complaints during the evening from the patients?"

"No Dr Heinz."

"Very good sister, very good. Did you administer the correct doses of morphine?"

"They had their own painkillers, Doctor."

"I know that sister, but play along for the old man's sake, won't you?"

"Of course, Doctor. I gave them a few injections."

"No, you fool! You'll kill them like that. Learn to be more careful in future."

"Of course, Doctor."

So, Dr Heinz's patients would stay at the Taglio, and here they felt they belonged - along with all the other weirdoes of the world.

In Lucy's mind, any guest sporting an injury of some sort was an amputee – her fantasy was a much kinder account than the icy reality of these misfits' wounds...

One woman, according to Lucy, had three fingers removed in an attempt to elicit sympathy from her philandering husband. The woman apparently told her wayward hubby that she'd fallen through a shop window

and lost her fingers. “Well,” Lucy intoned as she concluded this yarn, “as you can well imagine, that plan failed luminously: the woman’s husband was revolted and ran.” Lucy sighed. “I suppose there’s a moral in there somewhere. I just wish I could work out what it was.” She’d paused dramatically, “Perhaps, the moral is that a finger on the hand is worth three in a philandering bush...”

In truth there was a woman once who stayed in the hotel for a few weeks - Jack had met her too (for a while they’d been lovers, despite the fact that he was with Lucy), she’d lost three of her fingers because she’d spent many years as a drug addict. Hers was a long, gloomy, tragic story of addiction and rehabilitation of prostitution and bad men - nothing as beguiling as Lucy’s conjured, colourful amputees - just the sad, hard truth of a little person who never made it in this world.

Jack liked to have sex with the seven-fingered woman behind Lucy’s back. It gave him pleasure to be able to inhabit the woman’s hard, charred body. He loved the way she accepted her fate as the other woman, he knew it made her sad - but, well, it wasn’t all his doing - there was something fundamentally sad about her.

There was no doubt about it, Jack found sadness attractive, beautiful. There was a part of him that felt powerful in being able to inflict it.

He loved the way his seven-fingered lover held tight (with what fingers she had left) to her tragedy and her cigarettes. And he loved the way that Lucy tried to escape her tragedy - how she buried her sadness in fantasy.

But things started going awry inside of him. Things hadn’t always been that good inside his head. No, not for a very long time.

You see, there was his mother. There was the hotel. And there was his book.

He went to stay at the hotel to write. It was all he could afford after the debacle with his mother. It was cheaper to stay in there than it was to rent a flea-ridden bedsit. Besides, even flea-ridden bedsits were hard to come by in London - he’d spent hours in phone booths pasted with saucy sex ads, phoning the never-ending: “No, mate - that place went hours ago. A word of advice, you gotta be quicker round ‘ere.” No matter how quickly he called

after snapping up the paper, Jack just wasn't popping out of that phone box in a hurry.

So, the scabby, grotty hotel was his only option.

The book was a bitter issue. He couldn't write. He didn't know where to begin, all he knew was that he had a book inside him, somewhere, that itched. He scratched and scratched and all that popped out were stereotypes and clichés.

That is, until he met Lucy.

Lucy was complex, confused. Lucy was perfect. He chose her. He would do her and undo her.

And the writing began to come. The hotel skipped merrily off the pages fuelled by her embellished life...

Slowly, Ralph robs me.

The relationship I remember is suddenly infused with his seven-fingered-drug-addicted-lover. Was that Clara? Did Ralph sleep with Clara behind my back? Could he have been capable of that?

I keep on telling myself that it's a story – he's warped the truth to create some sort of fiction, that it's not real.

I think they call it denial.

Even the Tisca - his dismissive story slowly, subtly robs me of that. It's as if his book is murdering my memory. Nowadays the Tisca seems like such foreign land, my very own wonderland. So long has passed, so much gloomy life crammed between there and here, that it's starting to feel like some imaginary world, some distorted creation.

Just like his book says.

Perhaps I did choose to see only parts – but surely we all do that in life? I remember as a child having a birthday party: hungry eyed friends gazing at the Cheshire Cat cake Omi had made. There is a photo of that somewhere, which is probably why I remember the cat cake bit - my celluloid memory. However, I do actually remember that it had rained that day, and dampened, the party had been washed inside. Mother brought us a tray congested with trivial objects: a pair of scissors, a glove, a fork, a bottle of perfume, a screwdriver, a globe, a matchbox car, a ring and so many other anomalous things. She'd allowed us to look for a minute and then gave us each a pencil and paper, telling us as she did, to write down what we remembered seeing.

I have always had an appalling memory for things like this, concrete things - random objects on a tray that seemed to soften into each other in my mind. I remember feeling anxious, knowing that I would lose; look a fool on my birthday - that I would then laugh and pretend it didn't matter.

Isn't that the best defence against humiliation?

We huddled, each alone - memory poised between pencil and paper - and scribbled our lists. I panicked that I wasn't clever enough to remember enough, I would be found out, seen as a fool. Why did there have to be so many tests of our competence in childhood?

But it was just a game in the end, and it didn't really matter who won. Mother made it fun, silly. She even laughed at some of the inspired imaginary objects that had leapt onto some of the lists...

In the end, there were some things that were memorable - almost everyone recalled seeing the Mickey-Mouse scissors, but mostly, we all remembered different things. No-one, not even Jessie Hill, the cleverest girl in the class, remembered everything.

Which just goes to show: memory is so seductively selective.

Of course, the things that trouble me now are the imaginary ones: those treasures of inspired imagination that leapt, laughingly onto the lists...

What if I have gone mad and made it all up, just as Ralph says in his book? Someone once said that the only thing that precludes madness is the ability to ask that question. I actually think it was said in a movie, a Hollywood movie - scant reassurance. All I have left are my memories - and Ralph / Walt's warped book. Maybe Andrew was right, maybe the book has become my memory. The ultimate escapism. Maybe I read the book, loved it and inserted myself into that imaginary world?

And it does seem improbable, ludicrous.

Crazy even.

A conversation bubbles in my memory: "Who do you think it belonged to?" I'm in the Tisca, cleaning the room of one of the guests - a portly, balding man in his mid-forties who wears braces even though his tight flannel trousers no longer needed holding up.

"To God," he replies earnestly.

"And how are you going to get it to God?" I ask. His podgy, severed finger is sitting on the windowsill in a jar of formaldehyde - well, I hope to hell it is formaldehyde, but frankly I wouldn't put anything past the dear, but dubious Dr Hauptsch - the slicer responsible for all the diced off digits.

"That's why I'm leaving it at the window," he replies, "so that God can get it easily."

I know I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't help it. It seemed like the right thing to do, the kind thing to do. Besides, it just happened. He rarely left his room, no doubt keeping vigil over his finger, not wanting to miss the God moment of repossession. He often ordered room service: boiled eggs with toast soldiers and extra salt sachets.

One morning, I entered his room to find him gone. I began cleaning – the regular ring of grime round the bath, a squirt of blue disinfectant in the toilet. It was a rare day of London sunshine, and when I walked into the bedroom the sun was bursting through the finger jar, throwing prisms of coloured light across the room.

I didn't even hesitate. I took the podgy-finger jar, squeezed it into the bottom of my trolley beneath the worn towels and finished cleaning, speedily, nervily.

He left the hotel the following day, whistling as he went. "You know," he pulled me aside as he was leaving, "God came. He did. He took my finger. I was starting to lose faith. But he took it. It took him a few days to get here, but he got here in the end."

I smiled encouragingly, "That's wonderful news."

"Well, the only thing that troubles me now is my ear."

"Your ear?" I'd asked nervously.

"I think he wants that too..." And with that he was gone, sauntering down the street, whistling *What a wonderful world...*

That was the last time I played God.

Besides, there was still the business of disposing of his podgy finger. But that's another story entirely.

Yet another of my nutty-as-a-fruitcake stories. And it all does seem incredible, barely plausible.

Except that I have the phone number of the Tisca, and I can phone Sophie any time, day or night and she'll be there, and it'll be real and I won't be going mad after all. Not mad, just playing mad or thinking mad or imagining mad to pass the dreaded roach scuttling time.

It was a slushy wet day, a rare day off from the Tisca, and we sat in a small beans and egg diner in Edgware Road. The rain was molten, pouring down the foggy window, the cars - shadows gliding slowly by, umbrella-less people hurtled past, destined for the tube station, their feet throwing up circular welts of water. Others huddled under overhangs, trapped behind streaming curtains. I remember marvelling at how utterly vulnerable to the weather we are. No matter how sophisticated the world becomes, a simple downpour clogs the city. We'd accidentally stumbled in here, back in time, into this shabby green and cream retro eatery,

where most of the patrons looked as if they'd supported the restaurant from the get-go. We were on our way to the Church Street market, had plunged out of the Edgware Road station (the Bakerloo line) and been ambushed by the rain.

Ralph had grabbed my hand, pushed open the door to the nearest café and laughed, "Down the rabbit hole we go."

We came back to this place often over the next year, eventually we knew the owner by name – Freya. With her broad Romanian accent, she charmed her patrons, bossed at her long-suffering cook: "And vot is dat? Is all slimy still. You know old Mista Robbin done like a slimy egg. And ze bacon, he an ole man now, he crack his tooth on that bacon. Make it softer."

Cook grumbled, "Once it's cooked all cracklin' you can't go makin' it soft."

"Done be cheek with me. Make him another soft one. Not too soft now, he done want to catch sick from raw pig."

"And what do I with this one then?"

"There young man out there. He can have."

And so that day Ralph got a crunchy, grizzly rasher of bacon. I doubt Freya ever realised how verbally porous her kitchen wall was, or perhaps she simply relied on the hard hearing of her elderly diners, for it certainly seemed that Ralph and I were the only ones who, to our great amusement, ever noticed these entertaining little spats.

But that day - that watery day - was special, it was our first date. And thinking back on it now, there was something significant about how Ralph grabbed my hand in the rain, and pulled me into the eatery, laughing, "Down the rabbit hole we go..." because I followed, delighted, and for two years was swallowed into Ralph's slippery, uncertain world.

Not that I minded – at the time. I was happy to be Ralph's sidekick, and that's what I was, undeniably, his rescue mission - his own quaint little stitched up sideshow.

We'd sat in Freya's restaurant that morning, a thick smell of pepper in the air, and talked over milky, sugary cappuccinos.

"They tell me you feel very sorry for yourself. You know they call you Bittergirl," he'd said.

"What!" I was astounded, incredulous. Annoyed: "Who?"

"Talk at the Tisca."

"Great." Mortified. "They talk about me." Just my luck some busybody at the Tisca had put him off me already. Indeed, at that moment, Bittergirl was a flawless fit.

“Well, I was prying, asking some pointed, pointing questions.” He smiled, stretched his hand over the table, turned my hand over and traced the long goose beak scar on my palm. “I like that about you.”

“What?” My stomach felt lurchy, goose bumps from my goose scar.

“That you carry your scars on the outside. That you wear your pain - it’s written on you.” He pushed my jersey up my right arm, a long, undulating scar. “What about this one?” He mapped its shape.

I smiled, “I call it the big dipper.”

Hurling on my BMX towards the little hill – afraid, deeply afraid. But I mustn’t show it, not to anyone. Fear is banned amongst the boys. I can’t let them see what a girl I really am. Up in to the sky (like ET on the bicycle) the front wheel twists mid-air, and I collapse shoulder first, upside down doll like, onto the ground. That familiar crunch. And then chain grooves in my arm, the crimson leaking out into the powdery soil. “Fourteen stitches, a broken collar bone.”

Ralph raised his eyebrows, “And did you cry in front of the boys?”

“No, but I winced. I got good at hiding my pain. My mother didn’t like it much.”

“What, seeing her daughter hurt?”

“Something like that.” I sipped my cappuccino, the plush froth had fizzled into two floating islands. “And you?”

“What?”

“Why are you so interested in my scars.”

“I’m a warped sicko, weaving an entire literary world in my novella around your scars.”

“You aren’t!”

“I am too. They’re your talking point.”

“I wish they weren’t.”

“I don’t mean it like that.” A soft squeeze of my arm.

I shrugged, “How do you mean it then?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re astoundingly intense?” He was smiling, his front teeth overlapping each other slightly. I like that, those crooked parts of people.

Scratchy: “I think 324 stitches bring with them a measure of astounding intensity, as you eloquently put it. I’m pretty much a broken bird. Intensity is unavoidable in broken birds.”

“A broken bird. I like that.”

“Enough about me. I’m tired of me.”

“OK. I’ll tell you a little something about my life, or rather about my life before all this,” he gestured vaguely around the room. “Once upon a time, I was a doctor.”

I smiled, “You don’t seem old enough to have been a doctor.”

He raised one eyebrow - a seductive glance, “I was then. I was more than old enough.”

“Is this some kind of fairy story?”

“I suppose. In as much as the past is always a fable of your own making.”

Interesting. “Indeed. It is.”

“Well, back then I was a doctor. Now I am a writer.”

“So, if you were a doctor, why did you give it up?”

“Ethics.” He looked annoyed, just for a moment, as if it was something that still bothered him, although now I would say that he was probably berating himself, he’d probably said too much. Not that I’ve ever been able to piece nearly enough of Ralph together to figure any of it out. Andrew was easier, he wasn’t much good at covering his tracks - Ralph was a master.

“Ethics?”

“Yes, ethics.”

“What sort of ethics?”

“Are there sorts of ethics?”

All my floating islands had drowned - pity, because I like scraping the foam out from the bottom when the coffee part is gone. “OK, Dr Winokur, what sort of ethical dilemma prompted your untimely departure from the medical profession?”

“I never said I was a medical doctor.”

“Were you?”

“What sort of doctor would interested in your scars?”

“Most people are. It’s some sort of perversion.”

“Are you saying I’m a pervert?”

“I guess it depends on what you call a pervert...”

“Well, what do you call a pervert?” he asked.

“Someone who sexually abuses children, kills animals,” I replied.

“Well then,” Ralph scratched his left cheek with his thumb, deliberately, thoughtfully, “most people would be perverts by that definition, because by eating animals they’re virtually accessories in the killing. After all, those slaughterhouse animals wouldn’t be dead if people didn’t want to eat them...”

“Indeed. So I’m a perversion and most people are perverts.”

“And what of perversion?”

“And what of it? I work at the Tisca. I have a great deal of tolerance for people’s fetishes. Missing fingers, toes. Some people might call self-nominated amputees perversions.”

“Aren’t they?”

“It depends on how you define perversion.”

And so the focus was gone, Dr Winokur diffused into the debate on perversion, and by the time I had a chance to bring the conversation back round to his ethical doctor dilemmas, he had simply said, “I think it was a writer who said ‘the past is a foreign country’. At any rate, I don’t like travelling there these days.” And with that, we’d wandered out of Freya’s eatery and into the dying rain.

Eventually I decide to plug in the phone. A necessity, not any kind of meaningful life-altering, lightning strikes realisation. The wallowing in self-pity stuff is still high – it’s the money that’s low. But before I plug it in, I lift up the receiver. I have thought this through very carefully. I don’t want to plug it to the incessant, terrorizing ringing. I hesitantly squeeze the little jack into the wall.

Dial tone: you are now re-entering the world - that fucked up place of ragged mops that nip at your heels as you leave your snail trail on the Friendly Store floor.

I phone the agency first. Carole answers. Great, just my luck to land super-bitch, and no point in putting down the phone and trying again, they have caller line ID. I should have keyed in the code to conceal my number and kept trying until I got Lesley.

Cheerily: “Hi Carole, it’s Alice Wolfe here.”

“Who?”

“Alice Wolfe. I was working for PEP, but then I missed a day because I was in a car accident in which my brother’s fiancée was killed and um, I lost that job, obviously...” It occurs to me that it’s horrifying. *My brother’s fiancée was killed*. Surely that’ll soften her? An insipid silence. What to say? “So I’m phoning because I’m feeling like I should be working again.” It’s weird talking again, after not having talked for days. My voice is high and croaky - a fried-frog. That’s how Andrew would’ve described it.

“Oh yes. I remember. You’re the one with the missing finger. We had a few complaints about that. So, I can’t put you into any front office jobs, which limits the choices quite a bit.” A shuffling of papers.

“My car’s been stolen, so I’d rather take something close to home.”

“You’ll take what you get, I’m afraid.” More shuffling. “Never heard of a minibus taxi?” Now she’s typing something. “Ah. OK. I’ve got something for you. You still living in Vredehoek?”

I decide to try and outsmart her, “No, actually I’m staying with my mother in Pinelands.” She was going to send me to Old Mutual – a big client of theirs. A long haul from Vredehoek.

“Oh,” she seems disappointed. More shuffling, and then, “Pity. Because all I’ve got is something in town. Gardens, actually.”

I sigh, “Nothing else? Nothing closer to Pinelands?”

“Nope. Nothing. Only got the Gardens one. Do you want it or not?”

“How long is it for?”

“Three months. The secretary’s gone on maternity leave. It’s your usual rate.”

Can’t be too keen, “If something else comes up closer, would I be able to move?”

“No. If you take this, you’re locked in for three months. And it’s all I’ve got.”

I hesitate, just long enough, and with a long sigh, reply, “OK. I guess I’ll have to take it if that’s all there is.”

Delighted: “Great!” I wonder how Carole got like this, taking pleasure from causing misery. Or maybe she was always like this? Nature, nurture or a bit of both? She gives me the address. A ten-minute walk from my flat.

Ha! Screw you Carole.

“You start next Wednesday. All your paperwork will be there when you arrive.”

It’s Wednesday now, just one week to get my shit together.

It’s been long enough. As it turns out, a little too long not to be suspicious. When I report my car stolen, they tell me it’s already been found. Abandoned on the N7. Fuck. I hope Andrew’s OK. It’s a pretty weird place to leave a car. Or maybe not, maybe he left it there, an obvious place so that I’d get it back speedily. Why am I imbuing him with altruistic motives?

Possibly because the alternative is too frightening.

Again, the police. This time at the stolen car depot in Kraaifontein. Just last week they found two bodies in the grass in this area. A white couple, naked. The taxi drops me off in front of the depot - across the road is a field, long grass murmuring in the breeze. Further in I imagine the bodies, face down on the flattened veldt, shot execution style. Who was shot first? The husband or the wife? The horror of being second, of knowing what’s coming. Those agonising last moments. It got a lot of coverage. A man, full fury, phoned in to complain on the

morning talk-show: “When it’s white people getting murdered, the newspapers go to town, black and coloured people are getting killed all the time and no-one says nothing.”

It’s a rough place, the lost car depot, a dirt road down to a little office, pale blue linoleum floors worn down to the glue marks on the cement. Behind the bullet-proof glass, a portly policeman behind a too small desk, leaning back on his too small chair chortling loudly on the phone. A Muslim woman with a pink headscarf is waiting this side of the bullet-proof glass. I stand behind her.

“Ja. On Sunday? I thought the game was Saturday. I’ll still bring the beers...” Sounds like a social call. “Will Hannes be there?”

The woman in the pink headscarf turns to me, susses me. “He’s been on that call for a while now,” she’s annoyed, impatient, her lips twitch slightly. She watches me expectantly, and then it occurs to me, she wants me to do something, say something. I shrug. Not wanting to dismiss her, not wanting to get involved, not wanting to antagonise the police – the ruthless perfunctory fist of the state which has me marked for reckless and negligent driving and culpable homicide. But my shrug only serves to infuriate her further. She sighs, shakes her head, turns away from me, her back starchy straight.

“Well you tell Hannes that I’m going to be there, and what I said last week still stands. I’m putting good money on this one...” The portly policeman laughs loudly, seemingly oblivious to the mini-drama unfolding this side of the bullet-proof glass.

My silent voice pours out, dribbling down the back of her pink headscarf: I’m sorry, I don’t want to get involved, there’s too much at risk for me. If I anger this policeman, he may make it hard for me to get my car back. Already there’s suspicion. My brother is missing, most likely on the run, and I’m also in trouble with the law. I have to go to court, only to be handed a sentence. I’m guilty already, it’s a fait accompli.

It’s as if she feels my words, somehow, for she turns again to look at me, raises her eyebrows. For a moment I wonder if I actually uttered the words out loud, a flighty thought: I really am going mad, but then she turns agitatedly back to face the bullet-proof glass, and I realise that she’s just rubbing my lily-liveredness in. It’s as if her annoyance is catchy, because suddenly I feel that seething resentment rising: Why don’t you say something then? Why don’t you knock on the window?

Eventually the policeman, chortling mightily, settles the phone in the cradle, leisurely picks up a pen, makes some notes. The room is brittle with expectation. The woman in the pink headscarf, still taut. He writes something for a while, dawdling a bit, and finally straightening some notes, stands up and trundles to the window.

A bored, “Yes?” to the woman in the pink headscarf.

I brace myself for her avalanche of anger. “Hello,” syrupy politeness. “My name is Faiza Naidoo, I believe that my car has been found that it’s in the pound.” I’m astounded, where is her indignant spewing at his surly impertinence?

“Registration number?”

She gives it. The policeman does everything deliberately slowly, feigning some kind of meticulousness which is betrayed by his sloppy, grubby uniform – smudges of muck on his shirt, as if his breakfast didn’t quite make its intended target. Probably a good thing, I think meanly, judging by the meatiness of him. And then I’m sorry for thinking that.

That guilty little pinch.

Forms are inked in, signed, stamped. When the tubby policeman writes, I notice that the tip of his tongue slips out, limp and pink at the corner of his mouth.

Eventually, he goes back to his Noddy desk, and plopping into his seat, picks up the phone and dials.

Brief ringing close by, just beyond a closed door. The policeman snaps: “A lady here to fetch her car.”

Another policeman enters from behind the closed door. In contrast, he’s short, skinny, shrewd eyes. He picks up the paperwork on the counter, leafs through Faiza Naidoo’s report.

“Yes. Yes,” he mumbles impatiently to himself as he reads, then nips back into his little room and reappears outside: “Mrs Naidoo!”

Faiza Naidoo who has been watching his office door expectantly gives a little yelp of surprise and brushing past me brusquely, follows the man out into the sunshine day.

Leaving me with portly Mr Plod.

Now it’s my turn, except this time when he locates my registration number, he hesitates. “Says here that you didn’t report it stolen,” he looks at me, dull eyed. “We found it two days before you reported it.”

“I didn’t know it was stolen. I had lent it to my brother.”

“Was it stolen from him?”

“I guess.”

“And where is your brother now?” Not such a slow tick after all.

Time to pull out the sympathy card: “His fiancée just died in a car accident. He isn’t himself.” I look down at the patchy floor.

“Oh,” says Mr Plod, “I see. OK, well let’s do the paperwork and get you out of here.”

And then I'm in the pound with the short, shrewd one. Staggering amongst hundreds of cars, sharp in the midday sun. "But where do they all come from?" I ask him anxiously.

He's looking on his sheet, trying to locate mine. "Stolen, my dear, stolen."

"But where are their owners?" I realise that I probably sound like a foreign do-gooder having stumbled onto street children.

"They're coming. They all come eventually. The owners or the insurance companies."

And then I just can't help myself, "Where were they murdered, you know those people. That couple. Didn't they find their bodies near here?"

He stops then, squints up from his sheet, "Not near here. No, nowhere near here. You don't want to know where they found them. You don't want to go driving past that place. It'll just sit in your head if you do. It'll worry you. Best not to know some things."

And then he finds my car. Or rather the shell of my car. It's as if the innards of my car had been devoured by those *MacGyver* army ants. No seats, no steering wheel, even parts of the engine are gone. "I hope you've got insurance," he tells me.

"Oh well," I say. Just my luck. Although I don't think I was going to get to drive it for very much longer, I doubt they'd let me drive after the trial.

"Usually they strip the cars when they've been abandoned like this," he tells me.

"Why didn't they tell me this when I called, that my car had been found like this?"

"Well," he shuffles impatiently, "did you ask?"

"No."

"There you go. Got to ask these things."

I call for a taxi to come and fetch me. For a long while I wait at the entrance to the depot, across from the grassy field. Semi-industrial wasteland, no other way to describe this flat, dismal place. I smoke three cigarettes, crushing the embers into the ground; there's no bin around, so I put the stompies back in the box, with the unsmoked ones.

When the taxi driver pulls up, he tells me, "Not a safe place to wait, you know. They found that couple in there," he waves a hand obliquely towards the eerie grasslands. "Not far from the road."

6.

“Few beetles are truly parasitic, although quite a number live as permanent guests in the nests of ants, fed and tended by their hosts and often consuming large quantities of the ants’ eggs and larvae. These beetles are tolerated and even welcomed because they secrete certain sweet and aromatic substances for which the ants develop a strong craving.”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

Adele Simons is busy, harassed. She smiles at me kindly, guess they’re taught that sort of thing. “I’ll be with you in a minute. Jeffrey sent me your case notes. Just want to find them.” Walls of white papers on her desk, I fiddle with my unkept, scraggly nails while I wait, and suddenly wonder what the fiddling says about me. *Stop fiddling*. Gritted teeth, mom was always telling me that.

“Ah. Alice Wolfe. Got it.” She sits down on a chair across from me, speed reading through my file, flipping pages, getting a sense. “I’m not into reading these police reports,” she says finally, “Jeffrey’s notes are more relevant here. But I want to get a sense from you about what happened, not only the accident, but also your finger.” She leans back, dumping the long searched for case notes on the table beside her. There’s something of Jeffrey to her, small keen teaspoon eyes, but where he’s skinny, she’s a little dumpy, curly. “Let’s start with your finger, I think the accident may be a little too...” her eyes flicker to my hands, “fresh.”

I spare her the trouble, lift my hand to show her the stub, “I lost my finger about a year ago.” Cloying silence. Sussing her for signs of revulsion. None.

“And you never had counselling for it.”

“No.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Ralph and the ring at the Milnerton Market. Should I tell her about Ralph? How much should I tell, and will she sense the absences in my stories, the lies that slip between gaps in the truth? Besides most truth is something of a lie: subjectivity is some kind of lie, some kind of truth. I must have lived in Ralph’s lies for years. Or rather Ralph’s amputated past, never fully gone, always the itchy scar where his past had once been attached to his present.

“There was a boy.”

With a knife. I am usually so careful, so vigilant, hyper-aware, afraid. It's a scary land, this. They say that most crimes are crimes of opportunity.

A long, blade, serrated - dark, dread eyes.

As I talk, the boy seems to have Ralph's face, and then not. Like a dream, where people slide into each other. Slippery memory or sub-conscious terror? Perhaps my mind is thin, membranous, finally disintegrating.

"He had a yellow T-shirt on." Tight to the facts. It was up the road from my home, foolish, walking on the mountain alone.

Taunting fate.

I shouldn't do that, unlucky like I am. There was a dog, Jack Russell, not his. It belonged to other walkers, thought I was safe.

"It's so beautiful up there," I blubber, "I'd always thought I was safe up there."

Felt safe. I'd read the reports, but felt safe. Don't know why. I've been in accidents, fallen from trees, cars, every object in the world is filled with harmful intent – beds, chairs, glasses. Over the years they've all had it in for me. A mirror once broke on me when I was sleeping, lashed at my body. Bloody bed, mattress soaked, paramedic said it was like a gruesome murder scene. More than seven years of bad luck.

I pull up my long shirt, reveal the ragged, crisscross scars along my arms, then my patchwork stomach.

A gouge across Adele's forehead. "Alice. Are you certain you haven't been abused."

"Only by fate. I'm unlucky. That's all."

"Do you believe in luck?"

"I don't have a choice. The alternatives are too frightening."

"What do you mean?"

"My mother used to tell me that I brought these things to myself. That I liked the attention."

"Do you?"

"Sometimes." Enough truth to blind her, the missing pieces in the shadows.

"OK." Teaspoon eyes thoughtful. "Let's deal with your finger first."

Held the blade against my belly, the serrated edges like needles, asked for money. I had none, no phone, no keys. Only that ring. Pretty crystal ring on the wrong finger. A cheap engagement ring. A cheap engagement.

I often wonder if Ralph would have left if it hadn't happened. "This crazy fucking country!" he'd bellowed.

Too late for what ifs, now there's only what is.

Give me the ring. I can't get it off. Give it. Blade pushing, jamming into my belly. I can't, it's stuck. Is he going to rape me? Those not telling eyes. Yanks at the ring, my finger, pulling harder - painful tearing, ligaments shredding. But the ring stuck, as if soldered.

Is soldered.

And his mouth, cruel teeth, feral agony. Now there are the trees, whispering witnesses. Screaming - knife in my belly.

And then the dog, the blood, and this washed out world.

Adele says she wants me to come back. Says that I'm screwed up, not in so many words. Says she's interested in talking more to me about my magical thinking. That she's doing a doctorate on the subject.

A doctor of magical thinking. Sounds a lot like Ralph.

The beach in summer. Very grainy and bright, slightly burnt out. I'm lying on a surfboard, facing the shore. Ralph is in the water next to me, his body disappearing into the foggy water. My lips are salty, my eyes sting.

"OK," he says, "I'm going to give you a push when this next wave comes, paddle like crazy and then see if you can stand up." He swims to the back of the board.

I look behind me, the swell of water approaches, my stomach tumbles. "I can't! I'll never be able to get up!" I cry.

Ralph shouts from behind me, "If you say you can't then you won't be able to. You know, the power of positive thinking and all that. Think that you can, and you'll be able to do it. Don't paddle yet, wait for me to push!"

I feel the push, paddle fast, the wave begins to break on me, my hands flatten on the front of the board, my feet follow, and for a moment I'm up – standing on water, euphoric! And then my bad balance slaps me off. The board flies from under me, hurtles ahead of me, and I watch myself, comic like, flaying arms - a cartwheel into the sea. A wipe-out of spectacular proportions. Ralph swims over and kisses me.

"See. You did it!"

"Ja. For like a moment," I groan.

"So tell me, dearest, why are you always so hard on yourself?"

"Am I?"

"Yes."

My feet are painfully numb from the cold. "I don't know, really," I say, pulling the board towards me by the leash, "maybe it's because if we aren't hard on ourselves, then we'll never grow."

"Guess what, dearest? Growing doesn't have to be that hard."

I give him a quick kiss, "Where did I find you?"

"I think it was in a very seedy hotel..."

I start work on Wednesday. Maudlin and Associates. Carole never said what they did, I guess it doesn't matter, generally I do the same stuff: type their letters, file their receipts, field their calls, fill in their spreadsheets, keep their dairies.

Lie to their wives.

Two days to kill, dry days, blunt sun, windy memories.

Quality time with Roachie.

Ralph's book, those stolen stories, baiting me from the bookshelf. I try to read something else, the cover boasts awards, I choose it thinking I'll be gobbled in, held captive by the pages. But it's Ralph's intriguing voice, his tatty clichés, his stolen tales that have me hostage. Eventually the award winning words wind up on my bedside table: "I'll be back," I promise it, feeling like a philandering lover sneaking off for an illicit liaison.

And then I'm beating through pages, sneering at his thievery, mocking his writing.

Lucy always seemed to be sleepy. She could always sleep, anywhere, anytime. She was often spread across his bed in his attic room at the Taglio taking a "Cheshire Cat nap" as she'd call it. She'd wonder aimlessly into his room, distracted and a little weary from cleaning or chopping vegetables and simply say, "This day deserves a dream, and I'm going to give it one now." With that she'd stretch out on the bed, lazily yawn and fall asleep – too bloody quickly for Jack's liking.

Of course, he had his theory about Lucy's sleeping addiction – in his mind it was another way for her to escape this thorny world.

But he was also jealous of her dreams – she always seemed to have remarkable adventures, visit alien landscapes. She often flew in her dreams, over cities and farmlands. For Jack, dreaming was often cruel – he never flew, he only fell down the stairs over and over and over again. And, if he didn't wake up when he was falling he would always see the same macabre

vision: his mother's severed head with her stony gaze at the bottom of the stairs, laid out on a velvet tray.

Waking up in a sticky sweat halfway through the fall was always preferable to seeing those chilling eyes.

His mother had always had a stony gaze. Her staring eyes – critical, angry, unforgiving and terrifyingly possessive. Her eyes almost seemed blind in their stoniness, but he realised many years later that it was because she was blind – she was blind to who he really was. He was simply there to love her and adore her... *Till death us do part.*

Of course his mother had thought she could keep Jack happy. She had plenty of money and in reality Jack had grown up in an opulent cage. A smothering cage where he had to pander to the every whim of the eternally ravenous mother creature. He was not permitted to have ideas that clashed with hers: "How dare you say that!" she'd scream after he'd disagreed with her about something trivial. "After everything, everything, everything I've done for you and given to you and sacrificed for you, and this is how you repay me? By betraying me? By disagreeing with me? And I trusted you, you nasty, insolent little boy. I thought you loved me!"

"But I do love you, mommy," Jack would plead.

"Then don't disappoint me," she'd warn him, shaking her finger at him. "If you don't behave, I'll send you away to the orphanage where nasty little boys belong, and there they'll whip you every day until you learn that people who love people don't disappoint them."

And so love became a devouring, angry beast. A dragon that Jack would need to slay over and over and over again in his life.

He slayed his mother-dragon, but the dreams kept coming: he'd still fall down the stairs, but now he fell heavier and faster, and almost always he'd see his mother's severed head with her empty eyes on the velvet tray.

There were other loves, other women. He slayed them too, for love was the enemy and he realised that the horror would only end when the dream ceased to haunt him: when he would no longer fall down the stairs and see his mother's stony gaze.

When he met Lucy and she told him about her flying dreams, he realised that if he could learn to fly in his dreams, he would no longer fall.

Learn to fly.

It was as simple as that. At first he thought that he could learn from Lucy, but what good is it to learn to fly from a broken bird?

“I’m a broken bird,” Lucy told him boldly, one day.

They were sitting in a tiny eatery in Edgware road, just beyond the fly-over; they’d stumbled in there in an attempt to escape the persistent rain. It was a depressing, drab, grimy place, but Lucy had described it as quaintly retro: “It’d make a great music video location for a poppy Abba hit.” He’d looked at her doubtfully. “Can’t you see it, Bjorn and the blondie dancing on the counter singing: ‘gimme, gimme, gimme...’ while the brunette froths up the cappuccino’s and the other dude plays piano with the cutlery.” The dingy eatery had been instantly transformed in Jack’s eyes. She could do that in the beginning, when they still lived in London, when she didn’t have a past that pinned her to a place.

Perhaps it was his fault. He had needed to go home with her - her story could only be seen through the dark lens of her past. He thought her world would change her – bring out other aspects of her character that he could mine for his book. But there were things he hadn’t expected along the way. That feeling of love, of powerlessness – he was supposed to be in control – he was the grand orchestrator. It was his book, she had no right to take over. He got her back for all that – but that’s much, much later – at a time when all she was singing in a very off-key, drab tone, I might add, was “gimme, gimme, gimme...”

But, back to the eatery, past the Abba transformation and to the broken bird: “Nonsense!” Jack had retorted. “You’re not a broken bird - you’re the one who always gets to fly in her dreams.”

She shrugged, “That’s the only time I can fly.” She looked towards the window where the panes were streaked with water. “In the real world, I’m broken, wingless.” For a time, she stared blankly at the watery window. Finally, when he thought that she’d forgotten him and their conversation and had got lost down an alley in her mind, she said: “I have a past that is always present.”

“Why, what happened?” he’d asked.

Her eyes had filled with tears.

He'd touched her hand, felt a tear land on his finger, "Lucy, you know that you can tell me anything." A part of him meant it – a part of him had fallen in love with her. Or perhaps he'd fallen in love with the character he was creating. Fiction was sliding into reality – for Jack, it was a heady, dizzying slide around the supple boundaries of fiction – his words were the foaming seawater around the hard sinking stones of reality.

Lucy never replied to him that day. She simply sat, salty tears sliding down her cheeks.

So defensive, so delicate a broken bird in a little Edgware Road eatery in the rain.

And he could never fix her. Jack knew that.

And yet, a part of him longed to heal her – perhaps his broken part could heal her broken part. Perhaps, just possibly, something whole could emerge.

But on the fringes of his psyche, the other part of him dwelt. This was the part that craved to understand what had broken her and schemed to mine Lucy's tortured self to further his novelistic ambitions.

For a while I smoke on the balcony. I wish I could cry, but the tears don't come. I no longer know what is real and what is fiction.

Perhaps Ralph's mother had been a cruel, controlling woman. He never spoke about her; even after our two years together I never knew her name. I'd asked him one day - oddly enough I'd been asleep on his bed upstairs in his room at the Tisca - I remember waking up and thinking that it was strange that I didn't know his mother's name.

"What's your mother's name?" I'd suddenly asked.

Ralph was two-finger typing as usual. He'd stood up, stretched and come over to the bed. "My mother's name?" he raised his eyebrows. "Get this: Cruella de Ville." He'd kissed me on my nose.

"Stop kidding and tell me!" I'd laughed.

"It is!" Mock wounded.

Serious: "Why don't you want to tell me?"

"What difference would it make if I told you her name was Eleanor or Lilly or Jennifer?"

"Names give a feeling of something about a person..."

“Believe me, Cruella de Ville gives the best feeling of something about my mother.” He stroked my hair, “So, any dreams of flying?”

And that was true. I’d forgotten about that - it hurts to think that I’d forgotten that – Ralph always asked about my flying dreams.

It hurts because I forgot how intrigued he was by them, and then it hurts because I no longer have them. They stopped after he left.

He was always going to leave. I see it now. Right from the start, his luckless Lucy who’d already lost before she’d begun. A pawn in Ralph’s bitter little game.

Life twisted into fiction: *to further his novelistic ambitions.*

Ralph, I don’t have much love left to hold onto. Throw me a bone, something to remind me that I loved you, that you loved me, that it you weren’t just some grand orchestrator - that what we shared was real. That I didn’t just imagine it all.

The Sea of Wise Insects

Part 2: The thorax

“butterfly

n

1. *an insect with two pairs of often brightly coloured wings and knobbed antennae. It develops from a caterpillar and lives for only a short time. Order: Lepidoptera.*

vt

to split a piece of food, such as meat or fish, along its length, separating it into halves”

Encarta World English Dictionary

She was a butterfly who became a caterpillar.

Such is the nature of love: metamorphosis reversed. At first, she was bright, colourful, captivating, flighty, unobtainable.

He had to have her.

Eventually she was a vague composite of “irr’s”: irritable, irrational, irreconcilable.

Perhaps you might blame Jack for all that, and no doubt, people are partly formed through their intersections with others: their paths diverge from the individual, there's a merge - parts of their paths are lost, while other parts of the self emerge. This is life, and, as such, Jack can't be held responsible for Lucy's fierce rewinding metamorphosis. Jack would argue that it was inevitable.

Lucy was always destined to become a clumsy portrait of "irr's".

In fairness, indeed, Jack did orchestrate the "irr" aspects of Lucy's personality. He did prod her into it, he forced her past malevolently onto her - that was easily done: he got her to go home. There at the end of a long continent of trauma and war was Lucy's past - the present that he needed for his twisted fable.

Lucy's story began a long time before she even met this world. She was on bad terms with life, with luck, with fate, before she was even sliced from her mother's belly one insipid autumn afternoon. Her mother did not want her, and yet, she was hideously drawn to the child. Her husband, knowing the trauma that the child had inflicted on his wife, decided to give her a name from a whimsical song: "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds". He thought it sounded delightful: little Lucy floating above - a glittering vision that he hoped, would bring a little light to their lives.

He was wrong. So very wrong.

He probably didn't know that he'd named her after a rather trippy, somewhat stubbly hallucinogenic drug.

Such is the pattern of Lucy's life: it was always somehow wrong.

And yet, so much longing was invested in her - first by her father, later by Jack.

There was, for some people in Lucy's life, always to be a lot of longing.

Even when she was gone, even then, Jack still yearned for her, for the fragments of fantasy and delight (she was, if anything, true to her namesake) that she'd woven so skilfully into his life.

But there was no way back.

Just as he had killed his mother, and all his other lovers, so would he kill Lucy. He would have to, he had no choice. He was still haunted by the falling dreams and the severed head of his mother. Lucy hadn't been able to

exorcise his demons. It was either him or her. There was no in between, no metamorphosing cocoon. Jack could not see any other way.

He only knew how to run.

There it is. That hint of the ending. That nagging, aching notion that she's going to get killed off at the end. Isn't that what Ralph had said?

But perhaps I have been killed off. Abandonment was a form of killing me off, wasn't it? With him, I felt alive. For a long time after him, there was nothingness. Until now, until Veronica. And strange that I should find the tiniest needle of light in Veronica's death. Jammy guilt again, that I should be living, just a pin-prick of life - and worst of all, feeling this only now that she is not.

There is still that sudden, jarring disbelief: I can't believe she's gone, that her body is soft grey ash strewn across the mountain, that all that is left are memories, those misshapen spaces in my mind that hold a version of Veronica that perhaps only ever existed in me.

I'd often wished she'd evaporate from my life, and now she has. It's as if fate has an ear inside me and has maliciously granted me my most sinister wish. Perhaps if I hadn't thought it, wished it, fate wouldn't have done it?

I don't want to think of that, so instead I read. Torturous reading, ambivalent. Constantly caught between wanting to know and not. My life and Lucy's life, and the disturbing fusing of the two.

So much of my life, my scars. He describes Lucy as a predatory victim. That her vague dreamy nature was, rather than a magnet for bad luck, a lure, bait:

Lucy always knew. Knew how to play the game. Her great game was the victim game. She was predatory at it. She'd reel people in with her luckless tales, finely crafted vignettes that she'd polished to perfection over the years. What Lucy truly enjoyed was eliciting sympathy.

And she was good at that, after all, she was encased in scars. Over the years, she had engineered situations – perhaps unconsciously at first, perhaps even as a way of extracting some sort of reaction from a mother who was simultaneously horrified and drawn to the child.

Her mother. It was too hard for her mother to love her. It was best to pretend that the girl wasn't there. A son came soon after. He was an easy distraction from the monstrous creature that was her daughter.

And indeed, her daughter became that monstrosity. Made even more monstrous through her mother's neglect. For, eventually, any reaction would do, any thing, any way to be seen by her mother. A badly placed foot on a branch in a tree as a child. Knowing, but forgetting (a cool, deliberate forgetting) that a sharp broken tile had shifted loose at the pool.

It's as if she willed these things to happen to her, it was not so much that destiny chose her. She chose destiny - her destiny.

Ralph too. He believed that too? Drone of traffic in the distance. Adele Simons, her earnest teaspoon eyes: "I'm interested in your magical thinking." A shattering betrayal of trust. Ralph is the broken spine, the bullet wedged in Ramon's back.

And that terrible, mud heavy feeling: nobody knows, ever knew, ever will.

My lonely unlucky life and I.

I've heard it all before, luck is a mere construct. We're as lucky or unlucky as we will ourselves to be. There's no such thing as luck.

Then why is there a word for it?

That's not an argument.

Other people could see through Lucy. Blind Inge was excellent at seeing through people. "You're lucky Lucy," Inge said one evening.

Inge was another of life's luckless tales - another poor wretch who inhabited the Hotel Taglio. She was a cleaner - it was the only job she could get, locked away in her dark, visionless world, feeling for other people's dirt. Lucy would often tell the story of blind Inge and room 567.

It was another of Lucy's tall tales - which were soon to become too tedious for words for Jack to endure...

It would always start with the manageress Gwen, leaning backwards on her chair. Her bulky arms were folded, her breath was raspy, she licked her lips.

"I just don't want to clean there anymore." Lucy would tell her. "I think Ingrid should do it."

"Why should Ingrid do it?"

"Because she's blind."

In Lucy's telling, there would always be a fly at Gwen's window buzzing restlessly against the light.

"Fine. Fine. I'll swap one of 'ers wit one of yours." Gwen made a note in the yellowing ledger on her desk. "But I've go' to say it. I ain't happy, and quite frankly I think you South Africans are bloody lazy and goddamn awful cleaners. Probably because you all had maids or something." She scabbled through a drawer, and threw Lucy a key, "You can go now. Room 702. That needs to be done."

Lucy would push her cleaning trolley down the dark red passage to the linen storage room. Inge's trolley stood outside, she was already in there, moving slightly mechanically through the shelves, her hands feeling for misplaced sheets. The laundry women were not neat packers. Although Lucy hadn't said a word, Inge greeted her.

"So, Lucy, why don't you want to do room 567?" Inge asked. "Is it because they play dirty in there? It's nothing new. He always does it. They love giving that room to the new girls. Guess they think it's funny or something. You know, see their reactions." Inge packed the faded blue towels on top of a little pile she was making on a lower shelf. "Discretion. That's the key to being a good chambermaid. But you don't want to be a good chambermaid, do you? I can tell. I see many things, you know." She smiled at this, her little joke. Inge never wore glasses and her milky-grey eyes rested on the door handle. "At any rate. You passed the test. We'd one girl in here who hauled the cops in. Bit of a scene. You went to Gwen. It's a darn sight better than the coppers."

Lucy would always claim, when she got to this bit in the story that she didn't know what to say, which Jack reckoned was hardly believable as Lucy always had something to say.

"That was a compliment," Inge smiled. "You don't think you fit in here, do you?" A wide smile. "But you do. We're all freaky here."

"Gwen's not that freaky," Lucy countered.

"Oh no? Do you think Gwen can actually get through the front door?" Inge's eyes move from the door handle, to Lucy's face, "She can't, you know. And it's not from her size either. It's in her head. Tinkered. She'll never leave the hotel. You see, I'm sure you know by now that all the people who work here are freaks – and all the people who stay here too." She pulled

some shabby face cloths from the top shelves. “They tell me you’re covered in freaky scars - strange scars. Look like an abuse case when you’re naked. That you’ve got a freaky skin. Everyone talks about it, you know. I’m curious,” she took Lucy’s hand, felt up along her arm, her thumb rubbing against Lucy’s scars, “how did it happen?”

Lucy pulled her arm away.

“What a pity,” Inge said, “they’re everywhere, aren’t they? That must be very sad for you.” She picked up her pile of linen and towels and reached the door. “I’m sorry.”

She pushed the trolley away, wheels squawked over the flea-ridden red carpet. The stretchy corridor absorbed her.

Lucy always ended the story reflectively: “I felt strangely elated,” she would say, staring wistfully into the distance, “it was like an open birdcage. I realised that here, in this trivial, forgotten, discarded hotel I was no pretender wearing a mask of ordinariness. I had no more need for long sleeved clothes in sweltering summers to bury my scarred shame. I had a peculiar sense of belonging, of home. Of a looking glass that reflected a real me.”

I suppose that Lucy would have stayed on, an indefinite escape from the warped world outside - that world fanatical about flawlessness: billboarded bodies, plasticity scarless thighs – but there was Jack, pressing her to return to South Africa, to her very real world. For a long time she evaded the inevitable.

Eventually, though, her visa would expire.

But that’s still a long way off. There are a few twisted plot twists before we can get to all that...

Where were we? Oh, yes. Blind Inge who could see through Lucy. That’s right. It happened one evening, they were in the staff lounge. Lucy had spent the previous half hour regaling Inge with another of her tiresome tall tales: “When I was thirteen a spoke snapped off the inner rim of the back wheel of my bicycle while I was riding home from school. Of course, I was cycling hard and the spoke buried itself into my inner thigh, tearing through the muscle and even chipping my femur bone.” Blah, blah, blah.

Why they so often had to be bicycle bashes, Jack couldn't for the life of him say. She loved her inane bicycle stories. Couldn't she fall off a roof or slip down a well or at least come up with something more exotic than a bicycle? Couldn't she roll off a penny-farthing or something?

When the boring bicycle story had reached its dramatic crescendo – something to do with luckless Lucy's malicious mother who had malevolently punished her daughter for her fourteen stitches, Inge had finally shrugged and uttered the words that Lucy wasn't used to hearing, "You're lucky Lucy."

Lucy was horrified, "Lucky? How on earth do you figure that?"

"At least you can see the earth. You have sight, I am blind."

Lucy said nothing. What can you say to that? Lucy never did like to be shown up. She liked to be the principle performer on the luckless stage. That's probably why she chose Jack.

It just seems to get worse. Surely Ralph must have known that I would read his book. I knew the title and since he left, of course, a part of me has been searching for it - as if his book would eventually have the answers.

Of course they're not the answers I wanted.

There's something sadistic in the book – a warped cruelty towards me – a complete character assassination.

I can see parts of my life – fragments of sentences, moments that I shared with others... The others - Inge / Ingrid, eventually the names begin to spin into themselves, the lines between fact and fiction disintegrating. "*You have sight, I am blind.*" Oh please! Ingrid would never have said that. What she did say one evening after I'd returned from Dr Hauptch's surgery - three stitches in my big toe from accidentally standing on a rat trap in the laundry (I didn't know we had rats at the Tisca, let alone traps for the poor creatures, so could hardly have brought that one on myself, Ralph) was this: "It's probably bloody sore."

"It is," I'd moaned, "and he refused me morphine. Said he'd only give me some if I had the toe off." I was sitting in the staff lounge, stark strip lighting, torn mustard chairs that looked like cast offs from a church bazaar (they probably were) with a cup of sweet, milky tea and chocolate, for the shock.

Ingrid, who was knitting a bright, putrid-purple scarf (she was a speed knitter, went to meetings once a month) snorted, "He's a real old sadist, have to tell you. Don't know who gets more pleasure from those amputations. Them or him. Anyway, good thing about the morphine.

Seen too many post ops of his getting addicted to the stuff. Mr Wilson, Room 5, four months on the stuff. Seeing them come off that is nasty. So count yourself lucky.”

“For not getting painkillers?”

“Yip, blessing in disguise,” she nodded emphatically, murky eyes fixed on me, the thin metallic click of her needles persisting on the purple sin. “Your cursed life is too - also a blessing.”

“How so?” mumbled into my hot tea.

“Let’s see. You didn’t turn into your God-awful mother, that’s pretty useful for starters.”

“That’s the weirdest one I’ve ever heard.” My toe was beginning to throb, surely the bastard doctor could have given me a Panado?

“I’m a weird woman,” she smiled, that enigmatic Ingrid smile. “But Alice, think about that. Your luckless life may have a flipside.” She rolled up her atrociously purple scarf, stood up, and walked to the door - as an afterthought, she added, “At least you’re not blind.”

What I would have given not to have laid eyes on that appalling purple of her scarf.

Seems though that I was blind, blinded by love. Little incidents, conversations that I’d had with people are contorted by my one time lover on the pages of his book.

Worst of all I don’t even like Lucy. She is a wimpy, winging victim. She feels so sorry for herself, it’s smothering. This bicycle tragedy, that scarring tragedy. I hate her, but the nasty truth of it is that I am her.

I can’t help thinking what Adele Simons would have to say about all this, this book that mirrors my life, this must be a class-A felony in magical thinking. She’d have a blast with this stuff, could probably write her entire doctorate on me and *The Sea of Wise Insects*.

At about midday on Saturday, my mother arrives with the police. At first I think they’re the thought police, but then I realise that they’re asking about Andrew, my car.

My mother’s edgy, raw. I can’t help thinking of that little broken bird in the café from Ralph’s book. She paces restlessly. “When did he leave?” she asks, pointedly.

“About a week ago,” I sigh.

“You know,” she tells one of the policemen, “her last boyfriend also disappeared from here.”

“Is that true?”

I came home one night and Ralph was gone. That was it. There was no “Dear Alice” note, no sms, no phone call, no e-mail, no post-it note. Nothing. His clothes had been cleared from his side of the cupboard and mine had been pushed across into the empty space. On the

shelves where his pants had been, he'd carefully, neatly, placed some of my T-shirts. It was a peculiar thing to do. But he did it everywhere. He painstakingly removed every book of his from the bookshelf and then rearranged mine to fill the empty gaps. He obliterated himself from the flat. Not a trace of Ralph. All that was left, and I'm certain he left it accidentally (it had sort of fallen behind the pot plant on the balcony) was his green glass ashtray, the one he'd bought at the Milnerton Market the day of the ring. There was something practiced to the departure. Sinister, calculated. Timed to perfection. He must have started just after I'd left in the morning – he'd kissed me good-bye, "Have a good day, sweets." He must have known that I wouldn't. He must have left a few minutes before I arrived, because the incense was still burning - had just started burning.

I've never experienced anything so disturbing in my life.

Then I thought he could have been kidnapped, I even filed a missing person's report. The policeman who took down the details had looked at me knowingly, sadly. Detective Sergeant Matiwane - that was his name. We sat in his little face-brick office, just off the main charge office. He was slow, methodical. His black ballpoint pen producing a neat, lanky scrawl. Eventually he asked if I had a photograph of Ralph. "They're all gone," I'd replied.

"Do you have any cell phone photographs, that sort of thing? Something on your computer."

"I did have some photographs on my cell phone. But it got stolen last week. I'm not sure where. I think I was pick-pocketed. We think someone took it out of my bag when I was at a bar."

"Do you think your boyfriend could have taken it?"

My stomach lurched, "My cell phone?"

"Yes, your cell phone."

"Why would he have taken it?"

"He didn't want any photographs of himself around."

"That's insane. Ralph would never have stolen my cell phone."

That's when he said, "These things happen all the time. Foreign men on the run, living off local ladies and when they're bored of them, they move on."

On the run.

"Ralph wasn't like that. He would never have done that."

Detective Sergeant Matiwane shrugged.

But I couldn't nudge that feeling: On the run. Like he'd done this before. To other women, other cities. He'd always been so vague about his life.

I remember lying on Ralph's creaky bed at the Tisca, as usual he was two finger typing his mythical novella. I'd been trying to read something Sophie had given me, one of the amputees must have left it in one of the rooms, because it was a really clunky book about a one eyed detective who was following the trail of a serial killer whose signature was to amputate the hands of his / her victims. Sophie had described it as "gripping". I could only imagine it was a very weak pun.

"Why do you never talk about your past?" I'd asked Ralph. We hadn't been going out long, but Ralph knew so much about my life – about Andrew and Veronica, my mother and father, Pluto and Gladys. All my scars.

He'd stopped typing, and had looked at me with his distracted, far away eyes. He'd looked back to the computer for a moment, caught between this world and that, and had finally turned to me. He rummaged around his desk, fished out his cigarettes from under some notes, and lit up. Finally, he'd said, "Believe me Alice, if I tell you about my past, I'd have to kill you, and I really, really wouldn't want to do that."

At the time I'd laughed, told him how fishy he was, slippery and evasive.

It was only after he'd left, so suddenly, that I thought back to that moment and wondered whether it wasn't perhaps a rare moment of truth for Ralph.

Pathetic love: the sad, wretched truth of my miserable life. Until I found the book, I was still clinging to some romantic idea that he'd be back, that he had to leave, that there were perfectly good reasons for his obsessively silent departure. That there was almost an apology in it, something like: I'm sorry, please forget that I was ever here. I'm taking away everything that might remind you - that might hurt you.

Except of course my finger.

All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.

"So you filed a missing person's report about your boyfriend, why didn't you do the same for your brother." The police. Suddenly they're everywhere, swarming around me – the accident, the stolen car, now Andrew. This one is Mr Egg-Head, bald with good teeth, a scrubby moustache, wire-rimmed glasses - chunky.

"At first I didn't think he was missing. He'd borrowed my car..."

"Did he phone?"

"Not that I know of. My landline was giving me trouble – it wouldn't stop ringing and my cell phone was lost in an accident about two weeks ago." For once the truth, so awkward.

"Is this the accident where you were driving and your brother's fiancée was killed."

Quietly, "Yes."

"That's not what you were saying the other day," my mother cuts in, shaking her head fretfully, then nodding at me. "Yes, you were saying that your injuries weren't that of the driver, and that Andrew was in some kind of trouble. That they found cocaine in Veronica's blood. A pack of lies." She glared at me, pointed a manicured finger, "Lies."

"Mrs Wolfe, please," Mr Egg-Head's partner, a mangy looking man, "if we're ever going to find your son, we need you to calm down."

My mother glares at Mr Mangy, "Whose side are you on? I tell you, she's already killed someone! My son's fiancée is dead because of her. Now my son is gone, and," her nail polished finger lunges out at me again, "her boyfriend went missing, strange circumstances, more than a year ago."

Mr Egg-Head: "Mrs Wolfe, we are trying to carry out our investigation. If you insist on doing it for us, I'm going to have to ask you to wait outside."

"OK, OK. Do it your way." Gravelly glare.

Mr Egg-Head: "So you haven't heard from your brother?"

"No."

"And your car?"

"Eventually I reported it missing. It had already been found. Abandoned on the N7."

My mother lunges forward, "You never told me this!"

Mr Mangy intercepts her, holding tight to her by her shoulders, large, agitated voice: "Mrs Wolfe, I have told you before."

Bewildered by the rebuke, undone, my mother shoves Mr Mangy away, slides incoherently onto the couch. Fat tears, mascara drenched, slip down her face. "He's dead," she whispers. "I just know he's dead. My son is dead."

For a moment, nobody knows what to say. Even the police seem sceptical, an abandoned car on the highway, no sign of Andrew. I imagine in their minds, the country shifting out over the mountains, through the scrubby lands of the Northern Cape even further up, into the desert - soft sand, shards in the wind. Anywhere, somewhere, the broken body of my brother.

It's Mr Egg-Head that breaks the murky silence, "Mrs Wolfe. We are here to deal with the facts." But even he isn't convinced, perhaps he would rather leave it up to the police psychologist to say the painful words, "It doesn't look good." And it doesn't look good, but Andrew's always been resourceful, shrewd.

My mother clumped on the couch, bitter blue eyes, foggy tears, "The facts are that my son is dead. A mother knows these things."

"Mrs Wolfe," Mr Egg-Head, desperately trying to regain control of the situation, "I need you to respect the process here. We deal with facts, not assumptions. We never make assumptions. We cannot assume anything. OK?" He raises his eyebrows and his large egg-head bobs nervously - a nodding toy dog in a car, "Let me finish with your daughter. I'm going to ask Detective Sergeant Koppel to accompany you outside for a little while, while I finish with Alice."

Snivelling: "No." Mascara lines, large gelatinous eyes. "I want to stay." She wipes her face with the backs of her hands.

Mr Egg-Head glances irritably at his partner, shifts on his feet - swaying Egg-Head for a moment. A plosive sigh: "OK, but please Mrs Wolfe," as if to a child, "no more outbursts. Let Detective Sergeant Koppel and I do our jobs. OK."

Nothing. She sits, distorted, curled on the couch. And the bitch of it is, that I feel disturbed, moved. Profoundly sorry for her.

Broken bird.

He takes her silence as assent.

"Do you have any idea where your brother was heading to when he took your car?"

"No."

"Was he going to visit a friend?"

"I don't know."

"What was his state of mind? Do you think your brother was suicidal perhaps, after the accident?"

"He stayed with me a few days. He seemed fine." My mother lets out a brief snort.

Egg-Head lets it pass, "When you say he seemed fine, obviously he must have seemed a little sad to you, depressed at the death of his fiancée? Perhaps he was angry with you for the accident?"

I really look at Mr Egg-Head now, small brown blobby eyes made even smaller by his spectacles. A kind look, practiced or earnest? Hard to say. When I was a child my father hated the police, called them pigs, said they were the fist of the Apartheid state. And now they're the good guys - different masters, that's all. Lately the police and I haven't been doing too well. Errant citizen on a downward spiral, more police in one month than any good citizen sees in a year. I was arrested once, you know, I want to tell him, they put me in the back of a van, in hard biting handcuffs and the shocks on the car were shot. I remember that jumpy ride, rough

doctor, blood seeping into the vial. And I want to tell you everything I know, although I know that you know even more than I do. This isn't some routine investigation into a missing person, there's something else going on here. You're looking for Andrew, and not because he's missing.

"Alice?" Mr Egg-Head, "You OK?"

"Um," distracted, "just trying to remember what happened before he left. To be honest, he seemed OK, yes, there was the funeral and he was sad, but he wasn't suicidal."

"Lies!" It's my mother returned from the broken.

"Mrs Wolfe!" Mr Mangy Koppel.

"No! I won't sit here and listen to these lies." My mother unbundling her broken self, shifting up on the couch.

"We're not asking you to..."

Standing up, that painted precipice of a nail drawn in combat, aimed in my direction, "She, she," spitting the words, "she knows more than this. She knows where he is. She even told me that he'd gone underground. She said she thought he'd taken her car as collateral."

Wrong person to have a revelation with: my mother.

Mr Egg-Head, kindness evaporates, guile settles in, "Is this true?"

"Believe me, I know a lot less than you do." I hold his gaze, time settles, dust particles floating through the sun. It feels like a thousand thoughts squeezing into frames, in him and I.

Finally I say: "I don't know why my brother came to stay with me after the accident. We haven't been on very good terms for many years." Taking a chance: "You tell me."

And then it's my mother breaking the surface, ripples in the unsettled pond, "See!" Triumphant, "She even admitted that they haven't got along for many years. She did it, she's got rid of him, somehow."

"Mrs Wolfe, please," Mr Egg-Head sighs, "we are not investigating your daughter at present, we are searching for your son."

"Same thing, it's the same thing." Possessed glare, that rabid pointy nail, "She knows."

Mr Egg-Head in his talking to a child voice: "We have no evidence."

"But you have motive!" she shrieks. "And always it's the family who does it, you know on TV, it's always the family." And realising that she must be sounding looney-tunes with her TV theory, "Besides, I was a legal secretary for many years, and I dealt with many criminal cases. It was most often the family who did away with people. Almost always. She's got motive, she had access."

“That’s not evidence, Mrs Wolfe.” Shifts on his feet again, floating Egg-Head, and then he looks at me, “Listen, here’s my number.” He scrawls it on his note pad, tears it off, “Think of anything that might help us find your brother...” I nod, take the paper, his writing long and squiggly, so unlike him - his name Detective Sergeant Green. Green egg-head.

I think of Andrew chanting something about rotten eggs. For some reason the thought hurts.

“Anything at all to help us find him...” Detective Sergeant Rotten-Eggs looks at me hopefully.

“OK,” I say, but thinking: *he doesn’t want to be found, you know that.*

After they have left (an avalanche of accusations from my mother as they tore her from my house) I sit on my balcony and smoke - an instant sedative. Chain smoking, three in a row, nauseous from it, dry nicotine mouth, that nagging terror, what if he’s not OK? And then I wonder why. Why that terror, it’s such an unfamiliar place? I never liked Andrew. Never.

Blood is thicker than water, the clichéd old saying floats up, slick oil on water.

But uncanny, as if there’s a dark aching thread of kinship that can’t be severed - the sudden pity for my mother on the couch, fear for the despised brother. What is this thing called family, why does it bind us, tear us? And hold us so searingly on the knife-edge of love and hate.

When another elastic band hits me, this time a stinging welt on my neck, I pick up the empty mug on the table and throw it at him. It gets him just above his eyebrow, and drops to the ground where the handle breaks off. Andrew begins yelling, I know I’m in trouble, a tiny trickle of blood down the side of his face. Like a false red tear.

7.

“However much the beetle is afraid, it will not stop the lizard from swallowing it.”

African Proverb

I never found Pluto. And we never got another dog. For years after that the garden seemed greedy, secretive; the enemy. Perhaps that was the worst of it. I had loved the garden as a child, made fairy slippers from flowers and laid them under the giant shiny-dark leaves of the delicious monsters; licked honeysuckle from the flowers, climbed up trees, made tree houses, fell down trees. Found abandoned baby birds, nursed them (sadly always unsuccessfully), buried them. Used sticks as light-sabres to ward off Andrew, searched for four-leaf clovers in the grass; put on garden plays – witches and wizards, watermelon and sticky lemonade on hot days, Gladys’s plump fingers slicing at the melon, my impatient hands snatching for the wedge before she’d finished cutting.

“Ay, Alice, you going to get your hand all cut up again!” she’d scold.

Before my father left (there was so much of before) he insisted that on sunny days, when we returned from school that we spend at least an hour in the garden, “Children should be outside, in nature.” Not that there was anything to distract us, draw us indoors. TV only started at five thirty in those days, the bubble block colour pattern ticking down, watching the minutes slide by waiting for the miracle of easy entertainment.

After Dad left, Gladys no longer forced us into the garden, and besides there was always Pluto, lurking in my mind, somewhere under there. I remember one afternoon, hot sweaty bicycle ride home, I was blocked, couldn’t cross the road: a slow hearse followed by headlight cars – a funeral procession. And I thought of Dad, jabbing knot, was he still alive? We never heard from him, he never phoned or wrote. Later I learned that my mother changed the phone number, intercepted the mail. But that was later, years later. That day Andrew won, his discarded bike - triumphant wheel still spinning at the back door. If it hadn’t been for the dead man I’d have won. Maybe it was a dead woman. And then there was my dead dog.

I threw down my bike in disgust, it scraped along the step. I didn’t care.

Instead of facing Andrew’s victorious smirk, I stomped off to the shed, the open door leaning precariously on its flimsy hinges. I pulled out the fork and still in my school clothes began shoving the long teeth brutally into the soil, feeling for the solid, squishy remains of Pluto. I trudged through each flowerbed, lunging-pulling-lunging-pulling, thick dark sand

lumping off the fangs of the tool as I went. On the third bed, impatiens, I felt a strange thud under the fork, a rock? Not hard enough. Pluto? Clammy hands, I dropped the fork. Glanced back towards the house, windows reflecting treetops and the clouding sky. But I thought that I could just make out the silhouette of Andrew, watching from the lounge. He moved, waved? But I'll never be sure if it even was him - a shadow super-imposed on the reflected world.

I knelt, began digging, slowly, methodically with my hands. I could feel the dirt easing under my nails.

"What are you doing?"

Startled, Andrew suddenly there, standing over me, peering into the hole.

"Looking for something," I reply, continue digging, carefully around the flowers.

"What?"

"It's none of your business." A lie.

"I'm going to tell mom."

"So tell her."

"So I will." He doesn't leave, continues his weird peering over me and into the yawning hole.

It's buried deep, clumps of sand beside me. Somewhere in my mind the back door blows open, and Gladys hurtles out, rushing towards us, pegs on the bottom of her apron clunking against her knees: "What are you doing in the garden Alice?" She reaches me, a disappointed scowl, her large figure looming against the clouded sky. "Hah! And in your school uniform. You only got one of them that fits you good at the moment and now you made it dirty." Shook her head. I don't answer, feeling tears jabbing at my eyes, turn back to the sand, my hands bowling out the moist soil. Gladys, ominously, fearfully: "You know Alice, it's not good luck to unbury things."

And suddenly it's there, not my dead dog, but something flat, smooth: a box or a suitcase. Wrapped in plastic.

"Hey, what's that?" It's Andrew, leaning down, kneeling next to me, his hands keenly pulling at the soil, unsettling the impatiens, plants uprooted, bruised, buried under his hastiness.

"Leave me alone," I hiss at him.

"No, I also want to see it, besides," conspiratorially, raising his eyebrows, "you let me see, and I won't tell mom." Smugly digging.

Gladys clicks her tongue, "But I will tell your mother. On both of you." Bulky arms folded.

“Please don’t, Gladys,” I turn to her, but she’s not looking at me. Andrew’s yanking the object out of the ground, soil scattering, a hard tug and there’s a rectangular object wrapped in a black plastic bag. Andrew tears at the plastic, revealing a suitcase. Old, cardboard kind, dirty brown, something familiar about it. Andrew tries the clasps, it’s locked.

Someone locked it, then wrapped it, then buried it.

Andrew goes to the shed, returns with a spade, and violently shovels each lock off, they hang off the case, unnerved. In the distance, traffic; banging from a neighbour’s building site. Andrew kneels next to me, Gladys towering over us, the suitcase in the soil, torn flowers and tatty black plastic wedged under it.

A delicious moment of anticipation.

And then Andrew stretches his hand out, lifts the lid slowly. Papers shuffle slightly.

I don’t know why, but we never told mom. Or at least, I never did. And I suspect that Andrew and Gladys never did either because mom never raised it. Never has. Perhaps it was something that we felt belonged to us. Rare camaraderie between Andrew and I because we both wanted time with what we’d found in the old, lumpy, familiar case.

We spent the rest of that muggy afternoon restoring the flowerbed. Even Gladys helped. It took a good hour to re-establish what Andrew had brutally unsettled in a few hasty minutes. By the time mom returned home, my uniform had been washed, dried over the heater, packed back into my cupboard; Andrew and I had bathed, Gladys insisting through the bathroom door, as we each took our turns, that we scrub under our nails. And the suitcase had been reburied, this time in the garden shed, under discarded awnings that hadn’t been moved for years. It was Winston’s shed, and he only ever came on a Thursday, limping through the garden, leaning on his fork, smoking cigarettes he rolled from scraps of newspaper, telling me stories about his homeland, Zimbabwe. Always told me that the devil had bitten his leg, then he’d chuckle - a creased face leapt out - and limp off, to pluck at weeds, which looked just like real plants to me.

Mom’s never been the grubby hands gardening type. She’d sit in the garden, or by the pool when we finally got one, but she wasn’t green fingered, and she certainly never went into Winston’s shed, ever. It was the safest place we three could think of for our little hidden treasure.

Treasure that over the years would rip malevolently between Andrew and I, burying any kind of amity that had been torn from the soil on that cloudy day.

Jeffrey September's grey loose fitting suit struggles to keep up with his pacing. I'm back at Legal Aid, in the bricks and mortar room. "Adele's prepared to testify. It's good you know," he stops, raises his eyebrows. I nod. His pacing again, the unwieldy suit struggling to keep up. "I know you may have your reservations. But PTSD is a good place to start building this case."

"PTSD?" I ask - nervy.

"Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," a tad annoyed, "we spoke about it last time. Remember?"

"Yes, sorry, it's just that Adele mentioned other stuff as well."

He stops pacing, his suit catches up. Eager, "Anything that can help us with this case?"

Magical thinking. I think better of it, that's the direct route to the local asylum: Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred rand. "Nope. I don't think so."

He susses me for a moment, decides I'm hiding something, decides I'm hardly the type to blab. "OK, I'll chat to Adele then."

Change tack: "My brother's missing." Flat bland statement.

"What?"

"He's been gone over a week. He took my car, they found it abandoned on the N7."

Jeffrey begins calculating, pacing, "Just give me the low down here, the whole story." He stops pacing, leans across the table towards me, "And Alice, don't leave anything out. I need to know everything there is to know about your brother. Because this could really start looking bad for you." He sinks into a chair opposite me, raises his eyebrows impatiently. The edginess of the pressure, the over-burdened legal system. Too many cases, too few Jeffrey Septembers - after all, who wants to work for Legal Aid when there's easy money to be made in conveyancing? He's got people lined up on blue and red plastic chairs waiting for him just outside the door, impatiently shuffling in their hard seats. I had to wait for an hour and a half.

Something of the truth: "Andrew's involved with some dodgy people. After the accident he came and stayed with me for a few days. He said he didn't want to stay with mom, or in a hotel, or at the apartment in Camps Bay where he stayed with Veronica. But I think he's in trouble," and then it occurs to me, "or was in trouble."

Do I really think he's dead? The word seems so alien: Dead. Not living.

"Alice?"

"Yes."

"You OK?"

"I just hope he's not dead. That's all. Because I think he was kind of hiding out at my place. He was very edgy about some people that he said were trouble. And then, the other

day, some police came to my apartment with my mother. My mother had reported Andrew missing, but I got the feeling that..." I look up. A different Jeffrey September, he seems wary, and I suddenly realise how absurd the whole story must sound, "They, those police, they didn't seem like your missing people kind of cops," I mutter.

"And you can tell the difference." Sceptical.

"I don't know," I fiddle with a gouge on the desk, "I just got the feeling that they were very keen to get information on Andrew because they really wanted to find him."

"They probably do want to find him. Your mother's probably very concerned about him. Most people who go missing in this country turn up within 48 hours, dead or alive. The fact that your brother has been gone for over a week, it doesn't look good, Alice."

He starts sorting paper on his desk. Examining each one, as though I'm not present.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I ask.

"Look, I think you should have some more sessions with Adele." He closes the file, signalling the end of our session.

"You think I've done something to my brother?"

"Your words, Alice not mine."

"That's what my mother thinks."

"Well, now why would your mother think that?" he shrugs. My lungs feel brittle, shredded, paper cuts when breathing. "Just asking Alice. Just asking." A battered silence. Then he continues: "I deal with these stories all day long. So, here's one for you: these bad guys were after this one guy, right. Meanwhile, the wife's dumped his body down the sewer with the help of her sister. Fair enough, the bastard beat the shit out of her every day for six years and she's had endless abuse cases lodged against him, but there's the truth: Man in sewer, killed by wife while he slept on the couch. No bad guys prowling the street looking for him." He leans back on his chair, looks up at the ceiling, "and I hear them all the time: he was in trouble with some guy, owed him some money. Always say to these people with these stories, what kind of loan shark would kill off their money tap. Get real. Maybe they break his elbow, his ankle - that sort of stuff I've seen a lot of, but killing the guy. No ways." He looks at his watch. "Anyway, Alice, just never figured you for one of those stories. That's all."

Then I am out in the passage, expectant eyes on blue and red chairs. Feet shuffling in anticipation of being next. I can't help thinking: *lambs to the slaughter*. I don't know why.

My footsteps too loud down the passage, I have this urge to run, my feet pounding on the floor, completely exploding the sticky silence.

But I don't, I can't. I just can't do it.

I walk home, a sweaty hour. Cursing Andrew, Jeffrey, my mother. And the fact that I live on a hill. Minibus taxi's blast past, hurtling fumes, hooting invitations for a ride. I shake my head at each one as they slow down, I need the walk. In frustration, to escape the insistent toot-tooting, the hurried, harried traffic, I take the scenic route past the reservoir and through Oranjezicht - wooded avenues, secluded houses behind thick spiked walls - through the barred gates, manicured gardens (manicured lives?) in one of Cape Town's wealthier enclaves. I trudge on, up, up. Somewhere along the road, an automated gate slithers opens, a young woman, my age, in dark glasses reverses out in a bulky silver 4x4. In the back a baby. The gate draws silently, swiftly back after her, shutting out prying eyes (this time mine) and then she's gone, silver chariot shrinking down the road. Her charmed life and my luckless, lost one. And suddenly Veronica, sitting on her long cream couch, sipping her Cosmopolitan, "So *Sex and the City*," she'd said when she'd ordered it from her barman - I think his name was Claude, he always did her functions. "Your brother outdid himself with the ring," she'd said, delighted, lifting her left hand, ring finger outstretched, tilting her wrist to marvel at the play of light on her stout diamond. Obscene, I'd thought, blood diamond. The nagging question then - now - where did Andrew get the money?

I cross Buitenkant Street, away from opulent lives and back into flat-land. Back to my grungy apartment where damp spreads its sour reek through my melamine kitchen cupboards and my furniture is functional, affordable, drab.

I scrounge in the kitchen cupboard, no sign of Roachie, and, at the back, dust coated, I find it. A bottle of red wine, a gift from Sylvie before she left for Canada; she'd squeezed the tissue wrapped bottle into my hand, "It's a really good one, so save it for something special. An engagement, or a baby or something like that."

It's been over two years, it's probably off. Don't they say you should drink wine within a certain period? That it matures and then turns to vinegar. This one's probably vinegar, not that I'd know the difference. That woman in the silver 4x4 would know the difference. Veronica would have. A bottle opener? Drawers fly open, shut, open, shut - in the cupboards now, digging through the rubble of food, mismatched plates. Got it, and then I'm drinking, from the bottle, glugging, sucking like it's water after a run. Half a bottle in one go. Music maestro! I find *The Pretenders*, their greatest hits - loud, and I'm bouncing around the room, dancing. I catch myself in the mirror, a strange gangly reflection, jarring, not dancing, really. But I don't care, I'm alone, happy, jarring then, to the music, arms flapping, feet stomping.

Free. For a while I feel the weightlessness of utter liberation.

And then it occurs to me that Veronica will never feel this again. That Veronica as a whole is gone, again, those little ashy bits of her on the mountain (the same mountain where he took my finger) and suddenly the music feels so indulgent. Raucous, insulting. I slam it off. Bereft, tears spluttering. Why?

Is it because she's dead and I'm not?

Do I feel sad for the indulgent, narcissistic Veronica? Or worse, guilty because she's dead and I'm not.

Later I sit on the balcony, swollen eyes in a bright world. My gown pulled too tight around me as I smoke one cigarette after another. No doubt about it, I look like one of those clichéd mental patients from Hollywood films with my puffy eyes and a midday hangover, sucking on cigarettes.

The plants on my balcony are dead. It's not that I killed them, it's just that I let them die - which pretty much amounts to the same thing. I forgot to water them.

Across from me, two pigeons on a red, tiled roof, mating. They bounce around uncomfortably, their eyes kind of panicky, kind of vacant.

Maybe the world isn't far off the mark. Right now I feel completely frazzled, adrift, mad.

At sea, swimming in my own tears, just like the real Alice in Wonderland.

Hard. The water is hard, my tummy stings. I hear someone laughing – a boy. I feel exposed, found out – revealed to be the idiot I am. I swim to the edge of the pool. Hot belly in cold water. It's all wet, the phone is all wet; I am cleaning the black dials of the telephone, the grime of lives collects in the dials and I know Sophie says that I must clean it away, but as I rub, the phone rings. I don't know what to do. I shouldn't answer, but it keeps on ringing, ringing, that insistent whine and whine and whine and then I laugh - it sounds just like Lucy. And then I forget my hockey stick at home, when the gym teacher asks me about it, I lie, saying that I lent it to another girl. She asks me which girl. I pretend I can't remember. She can see that I'm lying. I feel dirty, shameful. She keeps asking which girl, which girl, which girl, which girl and then it occurs to me that phone is ringing, still, and that the call is for me. Deaf dread as I lift the receiver and hold the fat black piece to my ear. It's Andrew: "Fuck it Alice, I've been drinking. More, more than that..." he pauses, the receiver icy on my ear, "You know..." For some reason the phone is becoming even colder as he speaks, I'm afraid that my ear will freeze, meld to the phone, "You know... You have to... You know... Tell them there was a dog..." I don't say anything, my ear too painful, too cold, and then I realise I'm holding a small square black and white photograph from the suitcase in the garden, daddy as a little boy (looks

just like Andrew) on a tiny pony, his mother standing next to him, at their farm in the old Transvaal, before he was a freedom fighter, before he went away, and then the photograph starts to darken because I'm in the shadows now, it's night, and I should be looking for my cell phone. I have to make a call, it's very important, Veronica is hurt. And then I realise that she's dead. And I see her long blonde hair singeing and burning, flames in the morgue, her body now ashes on the mountain. It's too late. And all I can see are words from a book: "*All that is good is gone.*"

The dream wakes me at two in the morning. After that I can't get back to sleep. I try, but part of me is afraid that if I do sleep, I'll start dreaming the same warped stuff. Best to lie awake, tossing, the dank fetid sheets crumpling around me, the blunt shadows of night, gloomy bedfellows.

Lucy chose Jack. She had to have known that he held within him the seeds of her destruction. All that he would need to do was to water them and watch them devour her. He considered himself some sort of social experimenter. His book would chart their story. Who wouldn't be drawn into the macabre tale of the self-serving novelist and his love interest prey? Besides, were not the general motions of courtship predatory? What was the end result of a relationship? Surely there is always some sort of destruction – their single lives are destroyed, a couple emerges. Jack had always found this coupling instinct deeply attractive, and yet, on another level, entirely suffocating.

Of course, it was his mother all over again.

And then the dreams began to warp. Instead of his mother, it was Lucy's severed head which lay at the bottom of the stairs on the velvet tray. Horrifyingly, instead of the cold, hard gaze that his mother had worn, he could see tears falling down Lucy's cheeks. In one dream he tried to wipe them away, but this had just seemed to make them worse, until her face was like the glass window in the Edgware Road eatery: blurred by the streaking water.

He would wake after these dreams to see Lucy, whole and asleep in the bed beside him. He would always be relieved to see her with her head still firmly on her shoulders (although in reality that was hardly the case – she was such an airhead) but it angered him too: he was fighting his demons

and what was she doing? Simply sleeping through it all. Even worse, the silly cow was probably dreaming of flying!

Everything inside him felt both simultaneously in and out of tune. There was no other way to describe his harried world.

He adored Lucy, wanted to protect her, heal her and yet he wanted to destroy her, run from her – “off with her head!”

In tune. Out of tune.

I'm on Buitenkant Street the morning after the lumpy nightmare night. Not long to wait, toot-tooting, I wave it down, a blue minibus, half empty. A woman driver, Muslim, wearing a headscarf. I think of the lady at the lost car depot in Kraaifontein.

As I climb in, “Hi, I want to go to Sea Point.” Half asking, half saying.

The door slams behind me, she pulls out, “You go to the station and then catch another taxi to Sea Point.” Polite, kind.

“Thanks.”

It's a pleasant drive, a little slower than it usually would have taken me had I been driving, with all the hooting and stopping and letting people on and off, but a lot faster than walking, and cheap at the price.

Fifteen minutes later, we're at the station. Chaos of taxis entering and leaving, a hive of exchanges. Hawkers selling T-shirts, shoes, cheap cell phone holders - all made in China, vitamin products in scuffed boxes, “I wonder what truck they fell off.” Who always said that? Ralph? Andrew? Paranoid white person in Africa, pinched fingers tight round my bag, stepping out into a different world, a white-less world. Shouts, heckles, pandemonium, different rules. Didn't someone say they saw a shoot-out up here? I forgot to ask my Muslim driver where to go for Sea Point. I scuttle along, trying to look purposeful, filled with intent. A taxi rank on the roof of the station, the 70s buildings of the city centre crowd round. Bump, man slams by, I'm gripping my bag. It feels too shrill, too many bright colours, I feel vaguely nauseous, fearful, alone.

“Wynberg, Wynberg!” he's yelling from a stationary open taxi door, dirty gold teeth, gold chains. He waves when he sees me, “Hey cherrie, going to Wynberg?”

I stop, shake my head. I must look pale, foolish, bewildered. Attempted yelling, to be heard above the din of bellows, instead a guttural spurt, “Sea Point.”

“Over there lady,” pointing vaguely to the left. “Wynberg, Wynberg!” I'm already off his radar.

Through the crowded clamour, and sure enough: "Sea Point, Sea Point!"

An old HiAce rust bucket, dimly wondering about its roadworthiness. Inside, it's not nearly as well kept as the Muslim woman's one: dirty, sour smell and torn seats, the grubby foam popping through. The guardjie assistant, scrawny, nervy, blazing blue T-shirt too baggy, chewing gum, packs us in, four to a row. Bodies rubbing against each other as we hurtle out of the station. Thick, sweaty arms against mine. Thumping rap music blasting, the shocks: history. More like it, more like what I'd heard about taxis. Through the city, the scrawny assistant leering out the window, yelling; his shouts getting lost under the strain of P Diddy's lyrics. Do rappers call them lyrics?

I'm surprised to find Omi sitting in the lounge, smoking. She shouldn't be smoking in here, but she pretends she doesn't know this. She hugs me too tightly, her soft skin pressing against my cheek. It's startling how soft her wrinkles are. She wrings my hands in hers, her pied skin a slight film over her knobby fingers.

Because I know that she is going to die, I am achingly aware of everything. Even the way she curls her lower lip around the cigarette as she drags haltingly on it. "Don't worry about me, my girl. I've had my share of fun." She chuckles too brightly for comfort.

A woman, whom I recognise - her badge says: "My name is Nokuthula" (although I never seem to remember that) comes to take our tea order.

"Is that Noks?" Omi asks her.

"Yes Mrs Wolfe, it is me, Noks." Noks gives me a little conspiratorial smile.

"Tea and cakes for both of us," Omi bellows.

With that, Noks is gone. Alone, Omi and I at the window.

"I like it in here. It's better than in that bed. Got out of bed myself. I'm not going to peg in a hurry," she laughs at that. Outside a row of cars in the street below, there was a traffic jam on the way here, cars clogged up at the Beach Road intersection, where a cyclist had been knocked over by a car. I think he must have died, because when the taxi finally drove past, P Diddy blaring, they'd covered his face with a blanket.

What do I say to a dying woman? This dying woman with her dying mind - my grandmother.

Oh, I just passed a dead cyclist - that's why the traffic's so bad. Imagine this Omi, he probably left for a ride at about nine, and was dead by ten. Think of it this way - this morning the odds were stacked against you, and things looked pretty good for him. Right? But today,

for the first time in about a month, you've managed to get out of bed, walk to the lounge, and he is dead.

No one got to say goodbye to him.

Some would say we're lucky to have this time. This time that I don't know what to do with because I have no idea of how to speak to you about your death. Because I'm afraid that real life - my little every day tribulations are so trite in the face of it.

How much younger you suddenly look, and I know that you're going soon, because it's just like life to give a chunk of you back to me – a chunk I don't know what to do with – and then suddenly take it away again. It seems so much easier when you're lying in your bed, half delirious, and I can sit quietly, not having to think of things to fill this gap between your experience and mine, because there is no bridge between the living and the near dying - except the suddenly dead cyclist.

University of Cape Town

8.

“Only a few generations ago most people thought of insects as little more than an unavoidable nuisance; the few who collected and studied them were regarded as harmless eccentrics. Today the position is vastly different.”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

Maudlin and Associates. At first I think I must have the wrong address. It's an old, eerie, run down Victorian house not far from the Gardens Centre, no sign on the tall wooden gate. I check the address, chastising myself for having been too hasty on the phone, not paying enough attention. And then I'm up and down the road, scrutinising each house. No gleaming Maudlin and Associate plaque on any of the houses. I curse Carole. Just like her to send me on a wild goose chase.

Dilemma. I don't have a cell-phone yet, can't exactly afford one at the moment, so there's no phoning the agency from here. I could nip down to the Gardens Centre and phone, but that's a good 7-minute walk and that would make me inexcusably late for my first day of work. Not a good idea, I need this job, in this area.

I ring the rusty buzzer on the first address, a high, crumbly wall, sinister double storey house behind. More like something from a gothic novel than offices, but perhaps the occupant might know something. "Hello?" a man's voice, old, plummy.

"Hello, sorry to trouble you, I'm looking for Maudlin and Associates."

"Come in." The gate buzzes open. Sudden terror, what if this old man is some sort of psycho, luring me here under the pretence of work? What if this isn't actually the right address and the man inside is still some sort of psycho, enticing me in? "Isn't it opening?" the man's voice again, buzz, buzz, the opening mechanism clicks, clicks.

"It's open," I say, stepping slowly onto a cracked path, large, leafy trees loom over the abandoned garden, patches of soil with the odd snake of grass creeping along the ground - relics from what was no doubt once a spongy lawn.

"Hello!" the booming plummy voice waving from the front door, "You must be Alice. Welcome to my little wonderland."

If I didn't need the job so desperately, I'd tear out of here, slamming the solid gate as I went. Nutter, nutter, I think as I wave back cheerily to a grey haired, gaunt man in grey baggy trousers held up with maroon braces, at the door. He just needs the winkle-pickers and white

doctor's jacket to complete the picture, and then he'd fit right into some German Expressionist horror. Feeling more like a sex worker climbing into a shady stranger's car than a secretary at her first day of work, grimly wondering if this is how sex workers feel about climbing into any stranger's car.

He shakes my hand, pointy intelligent face, sharp nose. "Harold Maudlin, my dear, and they told me about your finger, so absolutely no trouble there." He releases my right hand, not even looking for the missing finger on my left. Unusual. "That sort of thing doesn't phase me in the least. Terrible world we live in, isn't it, where people get so antsy about missing limbs." He leads me inside. "Well, got to say, I'm glad you're here. We all need a bit of help."

Help? What sort of help, still fixated on the idea that I'm to be led to some dungeon below the house to live out my days as some tortured sex slave. Too many Hollywood films, I tell myself. The thought calms me, and the fact that for the outside of the house belies what is inside.

"Ha!" Harold winks conspiratorially at me, "bet you thought that this was something out of a Hitchcock thriller, I'd put my odds on *Psycho*?" he chuckles, at this - more of a wheezy cackle. A lavish entrance hall with wood panelled walls, a large bowl of St Joseph's lilies on a low centre table, a sort of waiting room with plush couches and coffee table books. "So, when the clients arrive, you're to greet them and sit them in here, and then let me or Steven or Susan know who's arrived. Do offer them teas and coffees, and if Libby's too busy, if you could arrange that for them, I would be most grateful. We had a temp here once, awful girl, wouldn't make tea for the clients. Wanted to wring her neck. Told me that she was a secretary not a tea lady. I specifically asked for someone who doesn't have a problem making teas."

"I have no problem with that at all. I'm here to make your life easier, so please, feel free to get me to do anything you need." Mr Maudlin's paying a good rate, I'd clean his office if he asked me to.

"Well, I wouldn't get you to clean my office, Libby does that." Did I say that out loud? That tummy-tumbling going mad feeling again. "But Libby does have a lot to do. It's rather a large place, and there are plenty of rooms to clean, and she's got to get up to the attic as well on a regular basis. Terrifying how much dust settles in this old house."

"It's a beautiful house," I say.

"Well, not from the outside, but that's quite intentional, I can assure, my dear." He leads me through to a room on the left, a small office with a view of the scrubby garden. "The work we do here is highly confidential and rather tricky. This old house serves as the perfect foil, clients can enter and leave without anyone knowing what's going on here." I'm afraid to

ask, perhaps it's a brothel, high class. "At any rate, I'm sure the agency told you, but you'll have to sign a confidentiality statement."

"Of course." Great, now I'm going to be propping up organised crime, another thing to add to my rapidly expanding criminal resume.

"This is your office."

"It's lovely." All to myself. Unheard of. I usually get to share a three-by-three pen with four talkative, annoying others.

"State of the art computer, printer. You should have all the stationery you need. You can leave your bag here, we have the highest security system money can buy." Definitely organised crime, just my luck. He smiles at me, his smile making his sharp nose seem sharper, "You know I was watching you trudge up and down the road this morning. Checking all the houses," he shrugs, "a silly game of mine. Forgive the old man, won't you? We've got camera's everywhere, beams in trees. But the best defence is its crummy appearance. Not worth breaking into this old ruin." He smiles at his ingenuity.

I am given the grand tour, room to room, Simon's room, Susan's room, "They're out this morning," Harold Maudlin says, vaguely, "on business..."

"Um..." I ask eventually as we enter his room - a boiling mess of papers scattered across his desk, bookshelves to the ceilings stuffed with books, a large anteroom through two open doors, a plastic skeleton (from a joke shop?) computers, odd mechanic equipment - my first fear re-surfacing: some sort of nutter with his torture ante-room. "What sort of business would you be in exactly, Mr Maudlin?"

He narrows his thin eyes, bringing his wrinkled face towards me, "My dear Alice, you are now in the employ of Maudlin and Associates, possibly the best Private Detectives in South Africa."

I wonder how Adele Simons is going to take this one.

I've always been interested in mysteries, investigations, private detectives. As a child it was *Nancy Drew*, *The Famous Five*, *The Secret Seven*, *The Dark is Rising* series. Andrew had been a Willard Price fan, had loved *The Hardy Boys*. Perhaps that was why neither of us ever told mom about the suitcase, it was something mysterious, secretive, something that needed to be fully investigated, absorbed. Besides, by the time we found the buried memories, Dad had been gone about a year, and it was the only thing we had of him. Gladys could see that. As Andrew had lifted the lid of the case, papers shifting, roused from their long slumber, I

remember feeling overwhelmingly tearful – I hadn't found Pluto. Pluto wasn't in the case. I'd been half certain that I'd unearthed a suitcase containing my dead dog.

Instead we'd found fragments of our long-lost father. Notes, diaries, letters, photographs. For years I wondered who'd buried them, knowing why seemed so important. Later when I was older, it was the what that consumed me. I'd spent hours (which always felt like porous minutes) in the shed with my father's papers as a teenager. It was partly his inspired writing on communism, class issues and equality that had steered me away from universities: "breeding grounds for middle class sanctioned mediocrity posing as intellectualism." That's what he'd written. In his diaries he'd rapidly scrawled pages upon rabid pages about the disease of ambition in our society, about how he'd grown up on a simple farm, how his parents had been so happy, so uncomplicated. He'd written about my mother, his attraction (and simultaneous repulsion) to her ambition – for it was foreign to him, and at first he'd been seduced by its brilliant allure. He'd written about the happiest people in the world being those who didn't expect too much from the world. The unhappiest people always expected too much. Their unfulfilled expectations, sharpening their bitterness. There was always someone with more than them. That's what he'd loved about communism – the release from the tug of ambition.

Back then it was all I had of my father. A suitcase of ideas, photographs from a long-lost childhood. Secret thoughts, secret places we were never meant to unearth, to enter. It was a discovery that altered my life, a way a present parent would. It was the only way I could summon my father from the vanished, the only way to be close to a man I'd really barely known.

Now that I'm older, wiser, I'd argue that my father, in his writings on ambition didn't have a handle on human nature. Or perhaps it's actually nurture: capitalism rears it's young to be ambitious, to achieve. The entire education system is angled towards merit: academic, sporting. Ambition is planted in us when we're young, and then it's watered, watered, watered.

But I've tried to fulfil my father's dream (as he's doing somewhere out there in his own way) and it's kept me more or less happy. I sometimes wonder what I'd have done with my life if I hadn't been so inspired by the written ramblings of my absent father. I'd thought that being a secretary would be ambitionless (isn't that ironic, achieving for my absent father) but all I've been doing is aiding the ambitious, greasing the wheels of their companies. I didn't escape ambition by becoming a secretary, I simply became its unwitting accomplice.

Oddly enough, being a chambermaid at the Tisca was the happiest I've ever been in my life. Cleaning toilets and making beds.

But then again, perhaps that was because of Ralph, because of love.

“What happened here?” Ralph touched, so softly, the long dark scar on my left shin.

I laughed, “Oh, just another of my little drama’s.”

He shuffles over to lie next to me. “I love your little drama’s. Your elegy of scars.”

“Ah - it’s an elegy now. I don’t know if that’s such a good thing,” I retorted.

“Come on, tell me.” He leapt on top of me, held my hands down, and mockingly intoned, “I want to know everything about you.”

“That is so bad, so corny!” I cajoled. He gave me his silly wounded look.

“OK,” I acquiesced, “I was nine, and we went on this school trip into the mountains...”

Ahead of me is the bridge. Deep grey furrows in the clouds, chill gusts of wind as I step forward, one plank at a time. Most of the others have already crossed, I am one of the last to go. Hesitantly. Damp ominous planks beneath my feet, in the spaces between them, far below, a rocky stream. “Don’t look down,” the woman had said, but of course I do, nauseous fear in my fingers. It happens so slowly, one of the planks splinters under my foot, I watch curiously as shards of it crumble towards the velvety rocks. My leg slips through. I grip the rope, the entire bridge sways, clouds murmur. Bloody - the bone flecked by dark splinters.

“Eina!”

“You see! You’re getting it. Eina is exactly the right word. You’ll be an egte South African in no time.” I squirmed out from underneath him, pulled on my gown, and headed across his room to the kettle.

“Egte?”

“Real in Afrikaans.”

He slouched back on the bed, naked. “And Xhosa and Zulu?”

“How do you know about Xhosa and Zulu?”

“I’ve been doing a bit of reading on South Africa. So, do you know any words?”

“I know a few words.” I turned on the kettle.

“Like what?”

“Hamba kahle.”

“Which means?”

“Go well.”

“So. When are we going to hamby ghashtly to South Africa?”

I’d laughed, “It’s hamba kahle, not hamby ghashtly. Besides, I’m not sure you want to go to South Africa. It’s going through quite a turbulent time. Quite a lot of crime, rage.” I picked

some grapes out of the fruit bowl, always loved that you can get grapes in London year round. Back home it was mostly in the summer that you'd get grapes.

"Why? I read somewhere that Mandela calls it the Rainbow Nation."

"It's a very complicated country." The kettle turned itself off. I spied one mug under the bed, the other half filled with cold coffee on Ralph's table. Crushed chips in the carpets. "Do you realise what a mess we made in here last night? And I'm the one who's got to clean this pigsty just now."

"Are you avoiding the issue?" He sat up on the bed.

"What issue?" I'd said, glancing up at him as I reached under the bed for the one mug.

"The South African issue."

"Where do you want me to start?" I'd asked flatly, washing out the cups in his basin. "We could start with Apartheid and how that screwed the country," I felt a shrill fury entering my voice, "and how black people are still pissed about it and about the whites living in their big houses while most black people live hand to mouth." I dumped the tea bags into the rinsed out mugs. "Or perhaps you want me to talk about how the present government hasn't been able to deliver change rapidly enough." I poured the boiling water over the bags, they floated restlessly in the mugs. "Or perhaps you want to know about the overwhelming poverty and the overburdened health system, the poor education and how the massive disparity between rich and poor gives rise to such violent crime, and then there's all the corruption, because once I've started, it's hard to stop me on these issues." I turned and stared at him.

"Jesus, Alice. No need to freak out. I'm just asking about your frigging country."

"Well, ask away. But just don't expect some hunky-dory answer about some Rainbow Nation, because as the cynics say in South Africa, the only pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is buried deep in the mines and the ones that go and dig it all out, are black, poor and desperate. Get the picture."

"Not really. I can't get any picture when you're preaching to me," he'd said, climbing off the bed. "Let's finish our tea. I've got a wad of writing to do today."

Memories do that these days: they enter one way – a moment of joy on Ralph's bed at the Tisca and then leave, slamming the back door, ranting as they go. So Ralph and I sometimes had our little spats, doesn't everyone? Isn't that the nature of love - true, mature love – the ability to hold simultaneously to the wonderful aspects of a person and the ugly shameful parts of them? Isn't that ambivalence? Isn't that what life's about, coming to terms with our own

internal ambivalence – ambivalence we have about ourselves – and simultaneously holding onto our ambivalent feelings for others?

Why does Ralph's / Walt's narrator have to be so down on love? Why does it have to disintegrate? Why do I have to be a fucking butterfly that turns into a caterpillar – a complete aberration, always the wrong way round – even my body, my scars, inside-out?

And I'm even doing it now - it's as if the book has contaminated me. Any memory I have of Ralph – any happy memory that comes unbidden to me, now has to be twisted at the end, warped. I have to follow the memory through to a place of irrational Ralph, hateful Ralph, a Ralph I can vilify and despise. And it's too easy to do that when someone leaves the way he left. Perhaps that's why he left like that. Perhaps he reasoned that it was such a hateful, heinous way to go that if I could hate him, utterly despise him, vilify him, it would make it easier to get over him.

It hasn't.

Work has helped. I sleep at night - not through, but I haven't been able to sleep through since Ralph left, worse since the accident, since Veronica died. The half bottle of Sylvie's wine remains un-drunk, it's certainly vinegar now, even if it wasn't before. Some day I'll look up the bottle on the internet and discover it was worth 500 bucks, but I couldn't deal with something like that right now. Now that I'm being boiled alive in my overdraft red, and I only get paid at month end.

I've taken to eating simply. Jungle Oats for breakfast, veggie sausages and beans from a tin for supper. I ran out of honey for the Jungle Oats a few days ago, which makes it barely palatable, or perhaps I'm just spoiled, should retrain my palate. I'm working on it.

Work keeps me busy, no long hours of online solitaire. Susan's the most demanding: daily dumps of audio mp3's on my desk for transcribing. Muffled conversations in restaurants, raunchy sex in hotels. That's Susan's beat, trailing illicit lovers. The hotel ones are the best to transcribe:

Man: I've missed you.
Woman: Don't make it harder than it already is.
Man: Can it be any harder than that?
Woman: Hmm.
Man: God, my wife can't suck cock like that.
SFX: Grunt, grunt, grunt.

Can't help thinking what sort of divorce settlement that statement gets. This time instead of being the secretary lying to the wives, I'm the secretary working for the lied to wives - and the cuckolded husbands. Susan tells me she's getting more and more of those, "They've got to cheat with somebody. And somebody else's wife's a lot less stressful than some *Fatal Attraction* singleton who goes all psycho-obsessive on them. Oh, and hold off on the grunts in the sex scenes please, rather put sighs or aaahhhs."

I mean to argue with her about singletons being psycho-obsessive, but she's gone, out of my office, down the cracked garden path, slamming the gate as she goes. Old Mr Maudlin no doubt watching her on his upstairs monitor.

She's good at her job, a dowdy, ordinary woman sitting at a coffee shop besides a pair of illicit lovers, constantly digging in her large bag, sighing, pulling out dog eared shopping lists and the odd diaper, meanwhile she's really in there rearranging the recording devices, angling the microphone for maximum impact. Who would ever suspect dreary Susan's a PI? Many illicit lovers might suspect some lone man digging in his briefcase, but a flighty woman in long skirts and leather sandals with longish greasy mousy hair?

"My mother cheated on my father," she told me curtly one day. "Just in case you were wondering why I'm so aggressive about catching these fuckers." She was paging through yesterdays transcriptions, not looking at me. "Completely broke him when he found out. It was with the headmaster of my school when I was a kid, a complete scandal, as you can imagine. He was married too. Anyway, my father shot himself, in the garden so as not to make too much of a mess. Harold tells me you think you're unlucky, well, try being fifteen and finding your father half dead on the grass in the garden, his hand trying to get at the gun to finish the job." She'd closed the transcription file. "Good job on this one. We've definitely got the fucker."

They're all fuckers to Susan.

Simon does all the other cases, mostly people disgruntled with low or no insurance payouts. These cases often go to courts, Maudlin and Associates against the insurance companies who've paid good money for some other investigators to prove their point. This is where old Mr Maudlin and his forensic wizardry comes in. His little anteroom is indeed some sort of torture chamber – for the insurance companies not wanting to payout. It's ballistics, substance testing, vials of liquid – very medieval, nothing CSI about his chamber. And then there's the joke shop skeleton.

"Why the joke shop skeleton?" I'd eventually asked him.

"Ah, yes, Boner – Susan gave him that name – not too nice if you ask me, but it stuck. Well, I'm often doing forensic stuff that requires me to have a thorough knowledge of human

anatomy, but as you know I have books that can take care of much of that.” He’d stood up and wandered over to Boner, stroking the skull, his gaunt hands eerily akin to the skeleton, “He reminds me of my own mortality. This is where I’m headed pretty soon. Got to make the most of this world while I’m still here.”

I wanted to say something, anything, but I couldn’t help feeling that my words would be feeble sentimental platitudes. Disprin for a heart attack, well intentioned, but futile.

Mr Maudlin had smiled gently at me, placed his gnarled hand (the one that had so tenderly caressed Boner’s plastic skull) on my shoulder and said, “Words are slippery fellows when it comes to talk of death. I think it was Da Vinci who wrote, ‘All this time I thought I was learning how to live, I was really learning how to die.’” His skeletal hand squeezed my shoulder, urgently, “When you get to my age, and your body becomes brittle in parts you didn’t know you had, you think more and more about what’s beyond this. When you’re young, like you, death is something so distant.” He released my shoulder, quickly, almost apologetically, and strode - a deliberate, purposeful, proving stride - back to his desk, where he’d fiddled with a few pages before looking up and smiling benignly, had said, “Best to leave death to the old.”

But I couldn’t do that, could I? Veronica was dead, and I couldn’t help feeling that she had taken parts of me with her. Correction, was taking parts of me with her.

Yesterday I plugged my phone in again: it was his day. My father’s day. He always calls on the third day of every third month, in the evening between 7pm and 10pm on a weekday, and during the day between 7am and 10am if it falls on a weekend. I didn’t know what to tell him. It had been so long since he called. He knew nothing of the accident, of Veronica’s death, of Andrew’s disappearance. I put on the kettle, paced while it gurgled, the kettle lid wasn’t on properly and the windows in my flat steamed up, a foggy world, water collected in fat droplets on the windows, and dribbled down the misty panes, like tears. As I turned off the kettle, the phone rang, I answered it breathlessly, “Hello?”

Silence. Thoughts whipping - it’s not him. There’s no familiar tickey-box beep. This is someone else.

Again, this time fearful, bloated: “Hello?”

Sigh, “Hello.” A broken, tearful voice. Veronica’s mother. I didn’t know what to say, my hands felt stiff, sour, wound round the red receiver, I wanted to drop it, smash it down into its cradle, but I couldn’t - although holding it to my ear felt nauseating, suffocating. Her voice was tinny, tired, “I’ve left you many messages.”

“Oh.”

“Yes,” a trembling sigh, as if she was crying, “in a few months time, she would have been twenty-seven. I got married when I was twenty-seven.” A rasping sob, “It was a beautiful wedding, you know. She was so looking forward to her wedding. She loved your brother very much, you know,” gurgly sobs, “and he loved her. It was a very special relationship those two. A real meeting of minds.” She was gurgling, rambling, her sorrow simultaneously consuming her and feeding her. Her earlier, vengeful anger had simmered to this torturous, meandering misery. But there was something unsettling about her insistence on phoning, still. Something sinister, threatening – unpredictable. For some reason these tearful ramblings of Veronica’s mother felt more terrifying than the earlier accusatory calls.

“Say something,” she finally said, her voice edgy, choked.

Quietly, deeply afraid: “I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell me why you did it.”

“It was a terrible accident.”

“Your mother says you’ve spent your whole life saying that.”

Click.

The shrill silence. So horribly calming.

I slowly replaced the receiver; my fingers had gripped it so tightly (as if they’d held it against my will) that I felt like I was almost prying them from the phone - they were stiff, slightly creaky. A Mr Maudlin hand.

The kitchen windows were still damp from the earlier steaming, trickle marks down the panes. I pressed my nose against the window, looking at the dark lump of the mountain through the watery blur. The neighbour in the flat across from me had left his curtains open. I could see into his kitchen, him and a misty friend (boyfriend?): him slouching against the cupboards drinking a glass of wine, the fuzzy other standing over the stove, stirring something, idle, easy chatter. I pulled my nose hastily away from the pane, somehow that was too raw, too hard to watch, that semblance of domestic bliss, of ordinariness. Of intimacy.

My nose mark on the damp window, my nose damp. That feeling of not fitting in ever, does it never go away, ever?

My father eventually phoned closer to ten, by that time my nerves had been blunted by the hours – I had practiced so many versions of the telling: there was the mournful version, the hysterical version, the confused version (or versions) – all versions seemed somehow to be parts of myself, of the real experience. But they seemed chopped out, paint by numbers. I could only be blue: mournful, or orange: hysterical, or muddy brown: confused. Why only one colour at a time. And where was the grey? The loneliness? I just couldn’t bring myself to tell

my father the lonely version. Weren't you only supposed to be truly lonely when you were old, when the world had withered, had shrunk from you, had shrunk you, had shrunk your days to a tiny enamel yellow room with easy wheel chair access? When you had outlived all your friends? Somehow I feel that I have - I've outlived all my friends. Over the years they've been eroded by the crime, the fear. They've abandoned the country. Run for their lives.

Sylvie was the last to go, leaving as I'd arrived back from London. "I feel bad going, as if we're running away."

You are running away.

I couldn't blame her, at times I've wanted to go too. Sometimes it's too hard to hold onto hope. Easier though when you don't have a choice, when you can't escape on a foreign passport.

When you're stuck here, hope's the only choice you have.

When the phone finally rang again, I was nauseatingly afraid to answer. What if it wasn't him, what if it was her?

"Hello?"

"Hi Wondergirl, how's it all going?" So distant.

"Terrible." On the edge of tears.

"Terrible? It can't be that dire." It was a bad line, echoing, hissing, amplifying his suffocating cheeriness.

"Dad, is there any way you could come here?"

The line spat, cackled, "Mozambique. Hurry, tell me. Running out..." a fractured hiss, "...time."

"Andrew's gone, his girlfriend is dead. She died in a car accident. I wasn't driving, but I had to say I was because Andrew had been..." I didn't want to tell my father about the coke, strange, that sense of sibling loyalty, a bizarre ancient, almost protective feeling, unexpected, "Andrew had been drinking. He's disappeared. Haven't heard from him in two weeks. My trial is next week."

And then the beeping began, he'd already run out of money. It probably cost more to phone from there. No time for good byes, just that starchy disconnected signal when it was over.

This time he didn't phone back.

Adele Simons agrees to see me after-hours. "Seven pm sharp," she'd said on the phone, agitated. I can't decide whether she's distracted by her daily chaos, or cool because Jeffrey September has gotten to her.

The corridor down to her rooms is surprisingly empty when I arrive, my footsteps loud, vacant, echoey. Most government buildings feel like this, endless bleak corridors with smooth linoleum flooring, claustrophobic, airless, windowless - like being in the belly of a stark mechanical snake.

I can't help thinking of a TV documentary I once saw in London, where they did something on John Vorster Square, the confusion of corridors, bevelled glass doors - the glass eerily distorting what once went on behind it. And yet, in the waxy light of day as the camera crew had traipsed up the stairs, along the corridors and through the rooms, one couldn't help feeling that without history pressing down on it, it would be something ordinary, normal. That if you didn't know what had gone before - the Apartheid brutality, the tortures, the "suicide-murders" - it was so shamefully normal.

Her door is closed. I check the time, a minute before seven. Surely she must know that I'm out here, must have heard the regular tick-tocking of my feet down the snake belly?

At seven sharp, I knock.

"Come in."

I open the door hesitantly. Why did I phone her? Why did I want to come back? To tell her my side of the story? All my half lies? Because I certainly can't tell her the truth, or at least the whole truth. Perhaps I just wanted someone to talk to, really talk to. For a moment, before the door is fully opened I have that freaky flight feeling - I want to hurtle away from here, hearing my footsteps cascading through the corridor, feeling like an unlikely heroine in a horror film, the camera tracking backwards as I tear towards the exit, blood vessels bulging in my neck, and once out the door, stopping, panting, an unbelievable feeling of freedom.

Instead I push the door open, and Adele Simmons greets me wanly, "Hi Alice." She gets up from her desk, pressing something on her keyboard. I can't help thinking: she doesn't like me.

Once we're settled, she begins, "I've been thinking a lot about the last time we met, and I really have to apologise to you about what I said about magical thinking. It was very unprofessional of me to bring it up like that - I don't want you to feel that the things you tell me are pathologised." Her eyes wide, watching. "What I would like to work on is how you deal with the trauma that's occurred in your life, because there's no doubt about it, you've had a very

hard time of it.” She tilts her head to the side (a spiky jolt – Veronica: she did something like that sometimes), and says, “I’m sorry, psychologists are human too. We also make mistakes.”

Just like that. Nothing like kindness to blast through the defences. I should have run, right now I’d be at the door, liberated, getting my breath back, a sunset sky, pink clouds beyond the mountain. Instead I’m trapped by her kindness, undone, defenceless.

“Did you speak to Jeffrey September?” It’s about all I can ask.

“He phoned me,” she shrugged. “Why don’t you tell me about what happened between you and Jeffrey?”

Not trusting myself: “I would rather you tell me what he said.”

“You have to realise, Alice, that Jeffrey’s a legal man. Black and white, yes or no, right or wrong. For the most part, law is very specific about procedure. Jeffrey has very specific ideas about people. He’s also overworked, he doesn’t have the time to go into the intricacies of motivation, of fear. He’s got a job to do, and for the most part, he’s very good at it.”

Glumly: “I don’t think he wants to defend me anymore.”

“Want has nothing to do with it Alice. It’s his job to defend you, even if you deliberately drove that car into the tree, deliberately hoping that it would kill Veronica.” She sighs, “But I don’t think you did it deliberately. To be honest, I don’t think you did it at all.”

Mucky silence, not trusting myself – tears welling in my chest. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s not your style. Besides, I think you’re so afraid of getting hurt – physically hurt – that I believe you would do anything you could to avoid injury.” She looks up at the ceiling, as if trying to shape something, and then she looks at me, “Your brother. He was driving, wasn’t he?”

“No.”

“I’m not going to turn you in. This isn’t about the trial, this is about working through why you felt you had to take responsibility for something your brother did. Something your brother was doing to torment you. Because if I’ve got it right, I believe that your brother and his girlfriend took a great deal of pleasure in driving you out to some creepy forest, and driving you around at reckless speeds. They were trying to terrify you. But what I’m most interested in, is why you felt you had to take responsibility for your brother and his girlfriend’s bullying.”

After my father left, my mother became more. More bitter, more angry, more concerned about her looks, more irritable, more angry more often. It couldn’t have been easy, single working mom with two children - of this we were constantly reminded. She said my father never paid

maintenance, although Omi told me (in her lucid days) that she gave mom money monthly. Quite a sum it seemed, which I guess explained the luxurious clothes, the expensive cream bags and fault free leather shoes.

It's strange thinking of Omi's lucid days, for she was so present, so sharply focussed on Andrew and I. It only began about five years ago, and even then it was really hardly noticeable at first. At first she'd forget people's names, "Old age!" she'd chortle, but then she got lost, coming back from the shops, in a neighbourhood she'd lived in for fifteen years.

She was at the police station, in those days the police were kind to me, helpful. The benevolent peace-keepers who'd been alerted to an old lady muttering and stumbling through the streets – she didn't know where she lived. She'd been mugged – or perhaps she'd dropped her bag – we all thought that she'd been knocked on her head by a thief, or slipped. Some sort of head injury. I'd driven her to the hospital, had her head checked. Had her head read.

Eventually – after months of doctor's visits, brain scans, prodding, speculation, doubt - they told me with clinical certainty that she had senile dementia. That over the years her memories would dissolve, trickle out like a dripping tap. She would possibly remember her family, but perhaps only names, and then again, eventually, perhaps not.

It's not life threatening, the doctor had said, they can live like this for many years.

But what life?

Some days will be better than others, he'd said. A little like everyone's life, some days are better than others.

He'd told me that it was hereditary. I guess that's some consolation, one day I might be able to forget all this that's been happening, forget this incredibly painful world (all the wars and dying and starvation and evil) and slip slowly through my slushy grey matter, almost calmly. No longer guilty for my relative privilege in a poor world.

Half asleep in my head. Groggy.

Not that Omi's that bad yet. Some days (like the other day) she's alarmingly normal, and then she's not. I've often wondered about those early stages, if there's an horrific realisation that you're slowly seeping out of yourself? For what are we if we aren't our memories? Isn't that really all we are?

The smoking made it worse, the stroke, her weak heart, like an old clock – this spring snaps, that mechanism wears down, skimmed when it should be brittle, connecting. Instead it spins listlessly, the end of a record, crackling, crackling. Soft crackling into the silence. Until all that's left is the clock face, with the hands stuck on that eternal time that we're all heading to: death.

She's not dead yet. Only half dead, or half alive. Half-half, sitting on the see-saw.

Mottled shady park, creaking swing sets (once I'd seen one of the older boys wee onto the seat of one of the swings - I never sat in that one, always let Andrew sit there, spiteful inner laugh). Andrew and I on the see-saw, Omi on a bench watching, reading, watching.

I always thought that she loved Andrew more than she loved me - why this obsession with more? Surely parents, grandparents, love the children equally, differently?

I don't know.

Somehow I knew that he was the favoured one, the golden boy. The boy. The son and heir.

I think Freud called it penis envy.

I was still bigger than Andrew in those days. We were on the see-saw, up down up down. He was laughing, tickling in his tummy. I don't know why, but it made me bristle – his joyful laughing plops. As the see-saw went down, I pushed up hard - as hard as I could.

University of Cape Town

9.

"The best way to put an end to the bugs is to set fire to the bed."

Mexican Proverb

Lucy and Jack's mother. Somehow, in retrospect, it always seems like the same story, just a little different.

The bitter truth is that when it all finally fell apart with his mother it was astounding. He should have been the one to choose. It had taken time – many long painful years of struggle, rebellion, tiny victories – but he was getting ready to leave his devouring mother creature, to rid himself of her; to exact his revenge for all the terrible years of her tormented love captivity.

And then there was Ed.

Sudden Ed. As if he'd been beamed down from a foreign planet and into Jack's mother's life. In Jack's mind, Ed was a poor loser who clung to his mother's purse strings. Jack hated him – his incessant velvet trays of pinned butterflies and insects, his cowboy hat and his silly harmonica which was super-glued to his mouth. Even today when Jack hears the tinny wheezing sound of the harmonica, a wild rage bubbles up in him.

His mother and Ed dissipated into travelling - scouring the world on her money so that Ed could find rare insects to net and label and pin to velvet trays. Jack thought it was cruel, macabre. His mother thought it was eccentric, delightful.

And so, Jack was left alone, abandoned in the large villa (which had once been his mother's love prison) overlooking the sea with all the dead creatures around him – a giant insect morgue. Jack had to outdo Ed, he had to better him, he wanted to win his mother back - only so that he could abandon her this time. It was all out of sync: she was not supposed to be the one to discard him.

And so the dead creatures became his life. He became a dedicated insect man, obsessed with every microscopic detail of the earth's smallest creatures. He came to love them all, particularly the living creatures with their curiously logical insect ways, their simple lives. He came to understand

that they were at the heart of life, of everything. That without the insects there would be nothing.

This is where it began, his obsession with observing things, figuring them out and finally by virtue of his knowledge, owning them. He began to feel powerful in his knowledge, some sort of god in his understanding of the world.

He watched his creatures, he bided his time, he lay in wait.

One evening his mother and Ed returned, laughingly from yet another voyage, laden with more trays filled with the poor dead unfortunates, pinned tightly to the scarlet velvet.

“Ah,” remarked Jack, “I see that at long last you’ve managed to find one of the rare Death’s Head Hawk moths.” Jack leant forward to examine the huge moth, its brown wings spread out obscenely on the tray. “Fascinating creatures, the way they rob beehives for honey... A little like you, Ed, wouldn’t you say, milking my mother for her money?”

All hell broke loose that night.

When Jack thinks back to that night, it is always the *Night of Flight*.

But I’m ahead of myself again...

Back to here and now, where we have Lucy. Jack’s very own Death’s Head Hawk moth, his own rare find. Jack loved her at first, like he had loved no other woman. Perhaps it was because she was because she was pinned to her past like Ed’s poor velvet tray insects. She was a broken bird, wearing her scars on the outside, as if that would prevent him from looking in. But when he did look in, he saw that she was too wounded, too damaged, too far gone. The pins were in too deep, there was no extracting her from her maroon velvet grave. Even if he wanted to, he could never save Lucy from herself, from her past, from her haunted, haunting family...

The insects, Ralph’s past - details are exposed, for a moment I feel like that giant moth robbing the hive for honey, stealing the sweet-treats of Ralph’s past that were denied to me for so long – but I can’t trust it’s really honey, that it’s really the truth. If my story has been so twisted by Ralph, how accurate is this version of his life?

Always so slippery, Ralph’s trickery. Perhaps it’s easier to call him Walt (or even Jack), just like it would be easier to be Lucy than Alice. Lucy’s a character, she plays her pathetic

part, at the end of the book she possibly dies. The reader closes the book and she is gone – she'll wander, no doubt, through some readers' memories for a time, and then she'll dissipate, squeezed between the pages of her book, between other, better books on grimy shelves. Even after Lucy is read and forgotten a thousand times, I'll still be here, struggling through the days with my criminal record (a *fait accompli* now) doing a jail term or community service for a crime I didn't commit.

But perhaps that's too easy.

I bullied Andrew, he bullied me. And, in the end, Veronica paid the price... like Pluto? At times, a terrible thought breaks in: death was a lucky escape for her. Immediately ashamed of the thought, how can I even think that? Because I imagine that marriage to Andrew would have worn her. My vivid little mind again, because who knows what the future would really have brought? Just like the past. Who knows what ever really happened. Those hesitant versions of the truth. Ralph's version of my truths: *her haunted, haunting family*.

Perhaps Andrew was right. Perhaps I pushed Ralph away. I know he loved me at first, deeply, dearly. He followed me home, across the beguiling, bloody continent of Africa to a little Europe at the end of the world. We lived in this cosy flat in Vredehoek where we lay in my bed in the mornings – soft kisses amongst crumpled sheets.

Like something out of a bad Barbara Cartland novel: I was living a cliché.

Perhaps that's why I pushed him away – perhaps it didn't really fit with the life I had lived before.

After all I was *Bittergirl*, wasn't I? And can you really take the bitter out of the girl?

I know Ralph tried for a while, and for that I loved him.

My mother was inside, watching TV as usual: "E" Entertainment, something to do with the earnings of the top stars, a strident American accent: "He really took a knock this year, only made about twelve million dollars..."

Ralph had wanted to see where I grew up. It had been a few years since I had been to the Pinelands house. There was London in between and I didn't want to make a habit of visiting my mother – or the past, so directly. The house looked the same as I'd left it, and as I pulled the car up, I remember feeling so disappointed.

Nothing has changed.

I had been away for two years and the house was as it always was. The garden too tightly kept, the footpath to the front door, a beckoning invitation to suburban bliss.

"It's all bullshit," I had told Ralph.

“What?”

“The little fucking façade of normalcy.” I had stomped out of the car, half angry with him for making me come back here. He caught up with me at the gate as I pushed too long on the buzzer.

“Hello,” the dulcet tones of my mother the super-bitch.

“It’s me.”

Bzzzp. We were in, walking down the garden path toward the front door. I wonder now if we were holding hands, we did that a lot in the early days. And looking back now, reading Ralph / Walt’s book, I realise that, that visit, that walk down the little garden path to the front door was somehow perhaps the most significant thing that happened in our relationship. It’s strange how I lived that pivotal moment in my life without sensing its substance. And, of course, when I look back on it now, it feels so ambivalent, so simultaneously any other day and then not. It’s as if the present has imposed on the past, because I have Ralph’s version now, and it changes everything.

We had tea with my mother in the lounge, her pale blue china tea set. Sugar lumps and cupcakes.

I slouched back on the couch, “You didn’t need to go to all this trouble,” I had moaned, sensing that at some later stage all her effort would be used against me – no doubt to emotionally blackmail me into doing something I didn’t really want to do: *But Alice, dear, you remember that lovely tea I put on for you and Ralph...*

“Well,” she had smiled charmingly, “I was looking forward to meeting Ralph. Andrew and Veronica have told me so much about him.” She shot Ralph a super-smile. Was my mother flirting with him?

“They’ve only met him once,” I snapped.

“Well, Alice.” That tone. “Ralph made an impression. They both found him very affable.”

Affable. I wanted to get up, yell, “Fuck you!” and storm from the room like a petulant teenager, but instead I sipped my tea and marvelled at my superhuman abilities of impulse control.

Ralph was stirring his tea, the light clink, clink on the pale blue china.

Outside, I could see the swimming pool, so glassy on this summer day, so far from the raucous, shattering yells of childhood.

“You know, mom,” I frowned, “there’s something I never did figure out about you. You’re so sophisticated, wear all the right fashions and shoes and stuff, and here you are still living in Pinelands. I don’t get it. I mean, what’s that all about?”

Ralph tapped his teaspoon delicately on the edge of his cup. My mother’s brow tightened slightly. “I’ve never really thought about it, Alice. I like it here. It’s what I know. I have the garden, which I love, and I have the shops close by, and it’s home,” she shrugged, looking out of the window, “it’s the only home I’ve ever had, really.”

“But it’s just so not you.”

“Well,” she sighed, “what is me, Alice?”

After tea Ralph and I left her in the living room, with the TV and “E” Entertainment, and as we wandered out the lounge, the American accent: “He really took a knock this year, only made about twelve million dollars...”

Ralph and I were in the back garden, for a moment Pluto in the dark soil, the buried thought that always emerged out here.

“You know,” I said, “my brother and I found something pretty strange out here as children.”

“Hmm,” Ralph was distracted.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re quite hard on your mother.”

“I’m quite hard on my mother? I see. You feel that you have a right to walk into my life without really knowing anything, really, and tell me that I’m quite hard on my mother.”

“She was trying, Alice.”

“She was trying to impress you. It wasn’t about me.”

“She’s your mother.”

“Oh. I see, simply because she gave birth to me means that she automatically has all these maternal feelings.” I stomped off to the shed. “I don’t think so. I don’t want to talk about my mother. Please.”

I tugged at the bolt on the shed door, rusty. Swung the door open, almost whacking Ralph, “Whoa there Tiger.”

“I am not your fucking little pussycat.”

Musty, dark, that familiar comfort. The shed – the awnings where they always were. I reach beneath them, feeling for the suitcase, and tugging gently, pull it from its slumber. Resting it reverently on the floor of the shed, lifting its lid to reveal its cargo.

My father’s writings, his past, secreted away in an old suitcase.

I pick up a photograph. Dad as a boy, and somehow it's Andrew too, as if the present is super-imposed on the past. I pass it to Ralph. "Is this your dad?" I nod, too afraid of the tears that are itching, to speak. "He looks like Andrew."

I looked at Ralph holding that photograph, a silhouette at the door, his face a dark blob, and I thought that he could be Andrew, could be Dad. An uncomfortable familiarity. And then a tear landed on the papers in the open suitcase.

"Hey. You're crying," Ralph leaned over, hugging me, a corner of the daddy photograph pressing into my back.

I don't know why I cried that day. I think now that it was because somehow I knew, as I've always known, that I didn't really look like my father, that I never had, never could.

That I had lived all these years between my parent's terrible lies.

There were things in my father's suitcase that I never found. Or perhaps I didn't understand them as a child. Or perhaps I understood them, but only half. And half-truths are always dangerous.

Or perhaps I didn't want to know. There's always that. I think they call it repression.

Lucy's father was long gone. He had left her with her mother and her younger brother. You can hardly blame the father for abandoning the bitter legacy. He needed to make a clean break of it, Jack understood that, that need to run. It was Lucy's father that he came to understand. It took him a long time to find the man, but he'd eventually found him. It's not that he was exactly hiding; it's just that he was missing. Missing from the world. He had long since given up on anything that tied him to anything; he was like a red balloon released from the grip of a child, that has floated aimlessly through the sky – without Lucy and her diamonds.

Jack had found her father on a farm in the desert after he was done with Lucy. It was a pivotal part of his book - he had to find the man who Lucy longed for.

He found a little tragedy.

Her father had become a man who believed in very little, had no courage of his convictions – for he no longer had any convictions. He smoked too much pot, and lived life from day to day.

Of course Lucy's father had no idea who Jack really was. Perhaps Jack was just another drifter, like him. Someone who would drift in and out of towns and lives and responsibilities.

Lucy's father liked Jack, after all Jack bought him lots of weed, and, Jack was a chatty fellow, easy to talk to. He found himself telling Jack stories from his past. He might have even mentioned his daughter. But the next day he wasn't that sure anymore.

"Did I ever tell you about Lucy?" he'd asked Jack.

"Who's Lucy?"

"My ex-wife's kid. A bit of a sad story that."

"You never told me."

"Remind me to tell you sometime. I'd like to tell you that story. It's the story of why I'm here. Of why I'm tied to no-one anymore."

It was a bit of a sad story.

Remind me to tell it to you sometime.

Ralph was fascinated by the suitcase, spent hours that afternoon pouring over the diaries, the letters. It was as if he were trying to unearth a part of me through this porthole into the past. I felt flattered by his fascination of my father. Remember leaving him in the shed, going for a late afternoon swim, floating on my back in the icy water. Fabled dogs in the clouds.

Only when the twilight had settled the light and it was too dark to read, did he come and find me. I was lying on my belly on the slasto, trying to suck the last of the day's heat from the flat tiles, just like Andrew and I had done as children. He stroked my damp hair softly, for a while.

Finally he said, "Come."

He helped me to my feet, and then hugged me very tenderly.

"What?" I asked.

"Alice in Wonderland," he murmured, still hugging me close. "It's so very sad."

"What?" I asked pulling away.

He touched my face gently, "You know."

I didn't know.

Perhaps I suspected that there was something sinister between my mother and father – but how could I have known that it was me.

My ex-wife's kid.

Of course, if it's true, my entire life makes perfect sense.

Andrew is still gone. For some reason his absence is his victory. He has won, perhaps he had always won: he wasn't the broken one - broken before he was even born.

I miss him.

I walked down to the courthouse on the morning of my trial. It was a hot still Cape Town day. I had wanted it to be a blustery, angry day. That was how I imagined it. My toes ached in the heeled shoes, and my underarms were damp. I worried that I would smell, stopped in at the Pick n Pay in Gardens Centre and bought a can of deodorant, sprayed under my arms and on my clothes in the shopping centre's toilet. It had a cloying, cheap odour.

It was the first time I had seen Jeffrey September since the scene at his office. He had phoned me at work the day before, must have got my details from Adele.

"Miss Wolfe." So formal.

"Yes."

"The trial date is tomorrow. Adele Simons has given a written testimony. Very strong case for PTSD." A sharp pause. "I feel relatively confident that we can go for community service rather than a jail sentence, but let's see what happens. See you tomorrow. Be at the Cape Town Magistrates Court at eight-thirty am."

Click.

After that call, I had gone up to Mr Maudlin's office, and knocked softly on his door.

"Come in," he sounded distracted, was reading through a document on his desk. I stood at the door. These are the worst moments.

"Ah, Alice, come in, come in." He made a quick mark with a pencil on the page, and closed the file. "What is it?" he said, looking up, his smoky hair filtered with sunlight, a gauche halo.

I had been thinking about this for weeks. Waiting for the time that I would have to do it: "I have to quit my job."

He sat back in his chair, tapped his finger lightly on the armrest. "Well, this is a surprise. And you know me, not one easily surprised by too much."

"It's not that I want to. It's just that I have to. After tomorrow I will no longer be employable by your company."

"Very curious." He picked up his pencil, held the tip and the end between his index fingers – a bridge between his hands. "What is so terrible that you will be unemployable tomorrow and not today?"

I couldn't answer.

He continued: "I must say it's like a riddle. You certainly have me guessing."

Strewn around his room, the familiar clutter, files colonising new parts of his large mahogany table. In the distance, a regular jarring metallic hammering.

I had practiced this speech so many times, that it sounded flat, meaningless: "About two months ago, my brother's girlfriend was killed in a car accident. I have been charged with reckless and negligent driving and culpable homicide. The trial is tomorrow, and there is no doubt that I will be sentenced."

He put his pencil down, and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk.

"Well," he said slowly, "that's quite a tragedy."

Quite a tragedy.

I could feel the tears beginning to burn beneath my eyelids.

He continued, "I'm curious about what happened."

I looked away. I hadn't expected this, or perhaps this is what I had been afraid of. "It's a long story."

"Ah, well, I have time on my hands. Not that much time - I'm an old man, but certainly enough time to hear your story, Alice."

A breeze was blowing through the window, puffing up the cream curtain, "I don't know if I can tell the story."

"Is it too upsetting?"

"It's very complicated."

"I'm sure it is. Life is complicated."

"If I tell you what really happened, you probably won't believe me."

"You know, I have been in this business for fifty two years. I have heard countless stories over the years. Some are indeed stranger than fiction - and I've believed them. Simply because the one thing I can say that I do have is a finely developed intuition - and I'm a remarkably good judge of character. I do believe that I can tell when someone is telling the truth. So why don't you tell me your story, and I'll trust my finely developed intuition and decide whether you're spinning me a yarn or not."

I didn't say anything. "Alice, I can keep a secret. I'm in the business of secrets, remember? That's what we do here, we unearth secrets."

Pigeons in the garden, cooing. I thought of the ones on my roof, their wide red eyes, mating. Procreating for the sake of it: victims of evolution. Why such obscure thoughts now?

I didn't want to tell this story. Didn't know where to begin. Where is the beginning to all this?

I had to start somewhere: "It happened after my 30th birthday dinner."

Andrew and Veronica offered me a lift home (or rather Veronica did) we'd all been for dinner in Green Point. I still don't know why I had let my mother fetch me for dinner - she'd offered, said it was my thirtieth, that I should be spoiled a little.

After dinner, Andrew and Veronica were going for a drink in town, meeting some friends. It was Veronica's suggestion, "We'll give you a lift, Alice. It's less out of our way than it is out of your mother's way." My mother was grateful; we'd had a strained perfunctory conversation in the car when she'd fetched me:

"How's work?" I had asked.

"Busy. And you?"

"Busy too, thanks."

She had turned on the radio - SAFM, they were playing Sundowner Classics.

I was actually grateful for Veronica's offer. Isn't that an irony?

"Perhaps we should all go out together, it's your thirtieth, after all." It was Veronica who said it. I can still see her face, her beautiful angular features as she turned back in the passenger seat to look at me. She was being kind to me.

Or was she?

If I had taken my own car that night, none of this would have happened. I would have left them outside the Green Point restaurant, would have driven home to my empty flat. Would have felt the familiar ache of an absent Ralph - alone on my thirtieth. Would have washed my face, brushed my teeth, climbed into bed next to Ralph's book; I would have slept, scrappily, as I always do these days.

Veronica would still be alive.

"You can't live in the if-lys," Mr Maudlin said.

Had I said it?

"You're thinking it could have been different. If-lys are a dangerous game, it doesn't change the present. Here and now, in this room with your life falling about you is all we have. Certainly the past, the unalterable past, has brought us here. Perhaps in the future we can use the lessons we learn from our past, so as not to make the same mistakes in the present." Mr Maudlin leaned back, he seemed so old suddenly, his skin so delicate, age crumbling in on him. He continued slowly, choosing his words deliberately, "There's a saying that goes: 'History is a vast early warning system.' And we can apply that little anecdote to our lives in the present

– take the lessons from the past, but don't live there. Because we live now, here. Not in the future, and certainly not the if-only past. So, continue," he smiled, shrugged, almost apologising for his little deluge, "tell me about how we got here."

"They took me to Opium. Andrew paid for me to get in."

"A birthday gift," he'd cocked his head nonchalantly at the door. Probably knew I couldn't afford it.

Through the looking glass again - into another nonsensical world. Opulence, deep reds and browns, marble, long slick lights, carpets that squished beneath your feet. An open courtyard filled with people – women in plunging tops, men with slick hair, shiny shoes.

Their friends lounging back in the semi-dark, a collection of cardboard cut outs from GQ and Vogue, just a little sweatier. Noisy chatting, drunken laughter, hard house music. Veronica and Andrew squeezed into a couch, "Alice!" Andrew yelled, "Won't you get us some drinks? Triple Jack and Lime each for Vee and I." He handed me a R200 note, "And something for yourself."

When I returned Andrew and Veronica were gone.

"To the toilet," the guy on the left told me. "I'm Simon, by the way." Standard issue dark blue jeans and a black T-shirt. Short-back-and-sides light brown hair.

"Alice."

"Well, Alice, if you hurry, you may be able to catch them in there."

"Oh, um, no. It's OK." I took a sip of my drink. In the corner a couple were kissing. "So, do you come here often?"

"Yip. Can see it's not your kind of place though."

I smiled, "Do I look that out of place?"

"A bit, you know, you're a little more arty than this crowd." He had kind eyes, soft, brown.

"Probably not really. I work as a secretary, actually."

"Well, that dress is quite, you know, different."

"Second hand. Yes," I touched the dark red fabric on my leg, "I like second hand clothes."

"It looks lovely on you."

I didn't know what to say. For a moment I thought I might cry.

"You OK?" Simon asked.

I nodded, smiled, "Just been a long time since somebody's given me such a lovely compliment." I smiled at him, "Thank you."

“Oh, it wasn’t a big deal.”

He turned to his friend on his left, “You seen Muriel around?”

“Last time I saw her was on the dance floor.”

“Cool. Nice to meet you Alice.” And he was gone.

That strange, familiar sense of abandonment - of having scared him away.

Eventually Andrew and Veronica returned, they had a friend, Clint, with them. They were all hyper. Like grated teeth. Clint came and sat next to me, told me that he was sick to death of all these highly-strung Cape Town girls wanting to find rich husbands and breed:

“It’s all because of love. They all believe in this stupid little fantasy called love.” He sniffed, twitched his nose. He had dark hair, a pretty face, thin. Intense eyes - fat pupils, of course. “It’s just sad and pathetic the way everyone gets all hit up about love when it’s all just bullshit, a stupid nothing emotion, a western obsession. Its only function is procreation.” He was getting more and more animated, the coke really hitting. “All this crap about ‘*The One*’. Pass me a bucket. Most couples are fucking miserable. Love makes people more miserable than happy. It’s like everyone’s fucking brainwashed – especially women, they just want a little man to love them and marry them and have babies with them, that’s their only ambition in life. They’re just stupid, stupid, stupid. They should look around them, catch a wake up. The world’s a busy place, there’s more to life than love, love, love.”

Yip, like doing coke at Opium on a Wednesday night.

“Well, well.” I sipped on my drink. What to say to all that? “I see you’re a little bitter about love.” Stating the obvious - he’s just going to stick me straight into his “stupid chick” category. Wondered dimly why I cared.

“No, not bitter.” He leaned back. “Just sick of stupid chicks who just want to be loved. You’re probably one them.” Nice one.

“I think everybody wants to be loved and to love someone,” I argued, “I’ve been very happy in love before. It was really wonderful to be able to love someone, to be given that opportunity in life. It was a good experience for me, and even though it ended, I’m happy that I had that chance, those memories, those silly, pathetic feelings. It was fun.”

Was it really?

“Sentimental garbage.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re just speaking sentimental fucking garbage.”

I wondered if I was happy that I’d had that experience, those memories with Ralph. The price had been so high. If I knew how painful it was going to be, would I have gone there?

“You’re one of those silly women who just wants to be loved. Aren’t you?” Clint sniffed again, raising his eyebrows.

“Each to their own,” I said caustically, looking away.

“Ag. Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He patted his hand on my leg and left it there. And then he started stroking my leg.

Touch. A man was touching me – so softly at first, him hardly aware that his hand was there. I looked over to him, he was leaning back, his eyes closed. I don’t know why, but he seemed so fragile, this odd tenderness after his rubbishing love diatribe.

We sat like that for a while, silently, his hand a soft stroke. His fingers softly moving over my knee. Ever so gentle. For that moment, and just for that strange moment, I felt joy.

He opened his eyes, leaned forward. I smiled hesitantly at him. And as I did, he squeezed my leg hard, an aggressive stroke, he pushed his hand right up under my dress, leaned over and said, “How does this make you feel?” His eyes wide, mischievous, leering.

I couldn’t believe what had just happened. Shattered, as if Ralph had just left, my finger bitten off, a microcosm moment of my life: the eternal disappointment.

“It makes me feel disrespected,” I managed to say, lifting his hand from my leg.

“Hey, Andrew,” Clint yelled across the small table, “your sister’s a class act.” He stood up and motioned to the toilets with a quick nod of his head, “You guys coming? My turn.”

“Sure.” And they were all gone again.

I’ve never been very lucky with men. I thought all of that had changed when I met Ralph, but I was wrong. Hadn’t someone once told me that it was all a game and I just had to learn to play it?

On my thirtieth birthday I became a barmaid. Several more triple Jack and limes for the coked out couple and the dick-head groper, Clint.

I knew how drunk Andrew was. I shouldn’t have let him drive. In that I’m complicit.

Guilty.

I should have stopped him. I should have argued with him more.

Crossing the street outside Opium. A car-guard approaches us.

“These bloody guys,” Andrew mumbles, “they’re fucking everywhere.” To the car-guard, he says, “No way, man. I’ve got insurance.” Clicking open the car, everything at the touch of a button.

I dig in my bag, give the car-guard five bucks.

“Jesus, Alice!” Andrew roars, “I said ‘no’ to the guy. What’s fucking wrong with you?”

“Come off it Andrew, these guys have nothing,” I retort.

“Oh,” he slaps his forehead with his palm, “Duh, I forgot. My sister the bleeding heart fucking liberal. See how far it gets you in life, love.” He climbs into the car, starts the engine.

Veronica already in the passenger seat.

I hesitate at Andrew’s window, standing in the road, headlights bearing down.

“You’re going to get run over,” Andrew barks. “Get in the fucking car, Alice.”

“You shouldn’t drive, you’re drunk.”

“Oh, if it isn’t Miss Goody-Two-Shoes. Aren’t you just the good citizen? Well, I’m driving and if you want a lift home, get in. Now.” He revs the engine dramatically, and starts reversing out of the parking place. “Get in the car or get out of my way. I don’t want to have to drive over your feet.”

I should have refused to get in the car, but what was the alternative? A ride home with the love-exterminator, groping Clint who was very likely just as drunk? A taxi at that time of night? I should have taken a fucking taxi. Or even my chances with Clint.

Life in the very lonely if-only land.

They didn’t take me home. Andrew was pissed, in more ways than one. Furious about the car-guard, furious that I’d told him he was too drunk to drive. In retrospect, with Andrew in that mood, getting into the car was possibly the stupidest thing I ever did in my life.

Indeed, it was the stupidest thing I ever did in my life.

“Slow down, you’re going to get us killed.” Strange that I said that.

Whipping between traffic, slicing between lanes.

“Hear that Vee, a little sound in the back of the car?” Veronica laughed at this. Andrew continued in a mock baby voice: “Slow down, you’re going to get us killed.”

And then the deserted car park between the trees, them laughing. The last thing I remember of Veronica living, was her laugh.

And then through the chaos of her bright blood on the bonnet, my brother: “You have to say you were driving.”

I had to. I knew that. Besides, mother would never have forgiven me if I didn’t.

I was itchy inside, crunchy panic, dried leaves in the dark, everywhere. Andrew was incisive - from his dark, not telling face: “Say there was a dog.”

There was a dog.

So quiet, none of those night sounds. Or perhaps I’m just imagining an eerie silence. On the car - I can still hear her nothingness: a silenced, immobile bloodied Veronica on the bonnet. A ghoulish Barbie doll.

Clinical, clean: “It’s the only way, Alice. Say you swerved to avoid a dog.”

Mr Maudlin leant forward, rubbed his temple and sighed. Two flies buzzed about briskly above the desk, the one seemed to be chasing the other – uncharacteristic fly behaviour. I don't know why, but I've always thought of flies as a being a little languid, hovering about on something unsavoury: a turd or road-kill.

"Quite a pickle. Indeed," Mr Maudlin said eventually.

"There's nothing you can do. I'm on my own here, I made bad choices along the way and I'll pay the price. It might be a high price, or perhaps it's not really." I sighed, and said slowly, "I let him drive drunk; I made that choice to get in the car with him, knowing what he'd drunk, what he'd done. Knowing how angry he was," tears welled up in my eyes. "I'm guilty, I could have done more to stop him, and I didn't."

One of the flies rested on my left hand, a little below my missing finger.

"Alice, yes, you could have done more, but you weren't the driver. You shouldn't be going on trial for a crime you didn't commit. That's a travesty of justice."

I wiped the tears from my eyes with the back of my hands. "Is it? I don't know anymore what justice is, really." I looked down at my hand, the missing finger. "That's all academic anyway. This is how it is now, and there's no going back. Besides, Andrew is gone – he's on the run – I think, I hope. It's not like he's going to suddenly come forward and take responsibility. Besides, how would he explain it all? I said I was the driver and then he says he was? Who would believe that? No-one." I stroked the scar on my hand where my finger had been. "No. I can't turn back. There's no way back. Don't you think I've thought of going back a thousand times?"

The following day, that too bright day, I arrived at the courthouse in my pinching shoes, and I thought poignantly of Veronica and her toe devouring leopard skin stilettos.

I greeted Jeffrey September calmly, politely, "Hi Jeffrey."

"Miss Wolfe." Brusque. "Good, you can go through to the hall and wait for me outside Court 13."

I don't know why, but it felt OK: Mr Maudlin had listened, he had believed me.

10.

“Every fly has its shadow.”

Portuguese Proverb

I have come to live in the past. At the Tisca with Ralph - in my version of events, not his. There is no marriage between his story and mine. I am Lucy, but I am not Lucy, and my story is not his. How could two people share a time, a place - a space in their lives - and have such different versions of the same thing?

The Sea of Wise Insects

Part 3: The abdomen

“Camouflage is very important for the praying mantis' survival. Because they have so many enemies such as birds, they must blend in with their habitat to avoid being eaten.”

From www.insecta-inspecta.com

Where were we? Oh yes, Jack was in the Karoo with Lucy's father, piecing together her past. But before all that, they were falling in love. Well, the writer in Jack was falling in love with his muse. She was providing him with rich material for his novella. There was Lucy's past, her mother, her subsequent all-consuming love of the macabre, her scarred body that brought, or perhaps I should say, bought her attention. These things did not exactly endear her to Jack the writer – for him they were fabulous writing fodder. But, there was also Jack the man. And he was actually, horrifyingly for his writer self, becoming such a lovesick fool.

Indeed, if truth be told, Jack did really fall in love with Lucy. Or rather, he thought he did.

What he probably really felt was a mixture of horrible fear, of fetid anxiety: he was constantly afraid of losing her. She was a little distant, or perhaps, I should say, she was a little frightened, and that left a sticky residue of distance in her. I say sticky, because Jack was drawn in to that distance, it

was as if he had a permanent film of jam on his hands – everything he touched was sticky with her distance. Although Jack could understand her fear and her misty distance on one level, on another level, he couldn't forgive her for not falling as recklessly in love as he had. It disturbed him to watch her working, she was so innocently oblivious to his presence. It was the innocence in her obliviousness that bothered him.

For some reason it reminded Jack of his mother, and how she had behaved towards him when Ed was around: it was as if Jack was invisible, like he didn't exist. Even though he'd found being the centre of his mother's world a suffocating and tormenting ordeal, the sudden dismissal was so abrupt that he'd found it painfully disquieting.

Watching Lucy working at the hotel in those early times brought back all those anxious feelings and he was lured to her, like a moth to a flame. Like his mother, Lucy didn't seem to be aware that he was there. She was always busily dashing past him, pushing her trolley purposefully (almost comically, he thought fondly) down the grimy passages, as if her work was of the utmost importance. He would watch her through the doorways as she meticulously hoovered the rooms.

His favourite pastime was watching her with the phones. She was always very methodical about cleaning the dials. Every single one, wiped down every single day with such persistent dedication. She was never aware that he was there, mesmerised by her - her monotonous work absorbed her completely.

When Lucy was cleaning, he thought longingly as he observed her, she personified some sort of Zen tranquillity.

Of this he was certain: she would leave him before he could leave her. Just like his mother had done. And what then, what would become of him if his precious wounded bird, abandoned him?

Flies began to live inside him, incessantly buzzing, feeding on his rotting thoughts: he wanted her, but she didn't want him as much as he wanted her. Of that he convinced himself. She would leave him first. Yes, because he loved her more, he was the vulnerable one. These spiralling thoughts scared him. He was afraid of losing a woman, like he had lost his mother. He didn't understand why it was happening, or how it was happening. All he did know was that he was losing his confidence.

He couldn't allow her to leave him. He just wouldn't let her go. He couldn't leave either, he needed to write his book.

His book began to become a monstrous, bitchy mistress. The book wanted to devour Lucy, and Jack (the man, not the writer) wanted to love her, protect her, to give her his all.

He became torn, tormented. He would sit at his desk, and watch the cursor ticking agonizingly on the screen.

One day he even did *The Shining* on himself and spent the entire day typing frantically:

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

When Lucy asked him about the book he'd get annoyed, tell her to stay out of it. He desperately wanted her to stay out of it, but she was very much in it. He knew that he would eventually have to make that dreadful choice: Lucy or the book.

For a time, in those early days, he would have done anything for her. In fact he did everything for her – he abandoned his book. He even went so far as to become the man that he thought she would want. He was like the mantis in the leaves, blending in with his habitat, with what Lucy wanted him to be. In doing so, he thought he'd executed parts of himself, just like he'd executed his mother, his past. But, what he didn't know was that they weren't dead – not the parts of himself he'd thought he'd executed, not his past, nor his book. As for his mother, that's another story entirely.

Eventually, and I would say, inevitably, all his camouflages began to itch. A restless itch, in time, in time, winter came, and the green leaves that the mantis-Jack was hiding beneath came to their ends, drying, withering, floating to their ground beds, their open graves.

Gardeners would come, rake them up, and make mulch for new plants, and so the once green leaves - mantis-Jack's precious camouflage - lived on in other ways.

But I am ahead of myself, again. Because, up there in the leafy, lofty hidden heights of the tree, mantis-Jack spent the summer. And, I suppose -

much like the time he spent abandoned in the villa on the hill, waiting for his mother and Ed to return - it's not so easy spending the summer hidden.

When did autumn come? In its own good time, of course. I guess it was somewhere around the time when Jack wanted to marry her. Or, at least, he thought he did.

The silly fool. Marrying for what he thought was love! What a preposterous idea. Of course, it had seemed like a perfectly good idea at the time, and indeed, when he'd eventually asked her, he'd really meant it. But he hadn't known how much of himself he'd carved out and handed to Lucy. And of course Lucy, in her innocent oblivion had simply taken Jack's missing parts, somewhat cruelly I thought, all for granted.

She hadn't seen how much he'd sacrificed for her, that it had been too great a price to pay: himself for her.

His book for her.

Besides, of course, there was the small matter of the missing finger. A symbolic gesture from the universe, if ever there was one.

But that was later, after the leaves were gone, long after the peculiar little proposal...

It all happened one hesitant morning. For starters, even the day had overslept, and then there was the rain, running between the sun. Lucy had looked out of the window and said, "The weather is coming again, a little hesitantly, though, like a constipated old man." She'd laughed.

A constipated old man! Jack was annoyed. Lucy always had a habit of doing that, of personifying the strangest things. Things that ought not to have been personified at all. In the end this had irritated Jack. In the beginning he'd found it endearing.

Later that day, Lucy and Jack had gone to a market by the sea at the end of Africa. It was a place that had been plucked from the junkyards of their collective memories. He'd found something that reminded him so much of his mother - a beautiful Beatrix Potter bowl with tiny Peter Rabbits chasing each other on the rim. For a startling moment he'd felt sad, purposeless. He'd lost his mother. He'd killed her off, and yet here she was, creeping into the crevices of his memory, slicing into him with such fury again, through a bowl from a long lost childhood.

He'd felt sorry then that his mother was gone.

He'd glanced up to see Lucy, leaning over a table in the sun (the constipated rain-man had done a runner), turning over old books in her hands, in her mind. Always that jammy edge of distance, Jack the blurry bit, eternally on the edge of her vision: the rabbits on the rim.

He didn't want to be that anymore. He wanted more, he couldn't bear to be on her edge: he wanted to be the picture on the belly of the bowl, not the rabbits on the rim – all those identical rabbits running their eternal rings.

I loved Ralph so much, and he didn't see it, didn't know it. There is such rawness in *The Sea of Wise Insects* in his desire for the complicated, wounded Lucy, who never noticed him, who would rush past him in the passages, always in a hurry. He would see her through an open door, Hoovering the floor, or wiping the phones clean, he fell in love with her because she seemed so occupied by the mundane:

She personified some sort of Zen tranquillity.

I laughed when I read that bit.

Cleaning sucks, but I had to do it, and I did it, almost every day for two years. I think it's a lot like a long distance race: the beginning is always the worst, but eventually you get into a rhythm, a routine. It was almost therapeutic. There was something familiar and comforting about the different rooms, the peculiar pieces of furniture that had worn wearily. I loved the kitsch padded satin bedcovers; some had cigarette holes in them – most, actually. And the *his and hers* bedside lights: a figurine woman in a flowing pink dress, with a frayed light hat, and on the opposite side, a figurine man in a tight green jacket with his tatty light hat.

But I'd never say I reached a state of Zen fucking tranquillity cleaning. Please.

And, for all her "distance" he is drawn to her, *like a moth to a flame*. He actually uses that sad old cliché – as if he were the moth and I, the flame.

Strange that he sees it like that. Of course, in the end, I was the moth and he was the flame. Somewhere along the way it shifted. If his book is to be believed, the writer got the better of the man. But exactly when, how?

Perhaps it was my finger. My finger and the eccentric, impulsive engagement. Everything was raw after that. I've learnt to type without my ring finger, it took a while - it was the "s" and "w" that got me at first.

I sat one afternoon on Ralph's computer in his back room, a view over the city and the harbour cranes, the wound still throbbing and re-trained my hands. I think that was the hardest loss. Typing had always been something that came easily - I'd never had to think about it. It

was one of those skills I simply took for granted. Every time I got to an “s” or a “w” or the “x” (very rarely the “x”) the bone in my hand where my finger had been would move and pull at the stitches. I took two Nurofen, tried again. I could feel the wound weeping, clear fluid seeped through the bandage. It was as if my hand, my mind were in denial, the bone wouldn’t accept that its end was gone. I could hardly believe it. I took my fingers off the keyboard, and rubbed the tips of my fingers over my palms. Such a soft, tender sensation.

Through the window, ant-like traffic on the curve of the Eastern Boulevard, the buildings like giant termite mounds.

Typing: I [the w so hard, a dead letter, finally] Will do it, I [the dead w again]...

Tears down my cheeks, splatters on the desk; the world bleary as I carried on trying, slowly, painfully to find a way out of lost.

I suppose I blamed Ralph. And he knew it.

“I do want to marry you, but I just don’t know when.” That’s what he’d said.

Steel grip on my chest, that pang of fear: *he doesn’t want me anymore, doesn’t love me anymore.*

Swallowing hard. “What do you mean you don’t know when?” I’d asked.

The Sea of Wise Insects

Part 4: The Wings

“Sexual cannibalism is common among mantises in captivity, and under some circumstances may also be observed in the field. The female may start feeding by biting off the male’s head (as with any prey), and if mating had begun, the male’s movements may become even more vigorous in its delivery of sperm.”

From Wikipedia

When he thinks back on all of it, Jack realises that there was always a finger in the tale.

First of all there was his mother’s pointing finger.

Then there was the finger that floated out of the angry window the night that he met Lucy. Or at least it was a finger that existed within Lucy’s telling of the tale.

Then there was the wedding finger.

Then Lucy’s pointed missing finger.

And then, quite literally there was the middle finger – his middle finger.

The wedding finger was a surprise. Not the first part, but the persistent last part. Only Lucy could have orchestrated something as macabre as what transpired.

The first part was easy. Jack asked her to marry him. He had chosen her - he had to have her, and so he had buried the book. There was no other way. He had made his decision.

He was at the rabbits-on-the-brim-of-the-bowl-market when he saw it. The ring: two tiny butterflies, their wings holding up a clear, diamond-like crystal. There was something about the butterflies... a saying sprang to his mind: *The butterfly counts not days, but moments and has time enough.* With Lucy his life had always felt like something that flitted from moment to moment, something delightful. He had buried his judging writer; all that was left was the enchanted man who wanted more than anything in the world to possess lost little Lucy.

“Going for a song,” the skinny peddler with lank greasy hair had told Jack, “it’s a lucky charm that one.”

And so, Jack had bought the lucky ring for the lost Lucy.

“I, Jack in the beanstalk, have stolen this ring from the giant of fate,” Jack told Lucy once he’d found her – she had wandered quite a distance away from him and was examining some vitamin packages that were cluttering a trellis table. “Do you think that these are for real?” she’d asked him absently as he’d approached her, “I mean, they’re so damn cheap, they’ve probably fallen off a truck or something.”

Jack had ignored her, after all this was his moment – it was no time for stolen vitamins. And that is when he had held the ring up – right in the middle of her vision where she was forced to look at it, and he had said, “I, Jack in the beanstalk, have stolen this ring from the giant of fate, to give to you, my bride to be, I hope.”

She had laughed, “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’ve never been more serious in my life.” He had cocked his head, “So will you?”

“What?”

“Make my dreams come true?”

She had said yes, not realising that by making this dream come true, she had destroyed his other dreams – his book, his wandering existence.

No sooner was the ring on her finger than the doubts began to surface, to suffocate him.

The writer didn't want to die – his beloved book, how could she? How dare she take his treasures from him? She didn't even know him, what he dreamed of. How could he marry such an insensitive, treacherous woman? A woman who didn't know him or his dreams. A woman who only knew how to slice him into pieces that battled each other.

Just like his mother.

It was only once he had made the decision to marry her that he realised it.

He had made a terrible mistake.

We were driving back from Kalk Bay, the route over Boyes Drive - to the right the clean lines of the Muizenberg waves where he'd tried to teach me to surf so long ago. Surfer insects floating on the waves.

“I just don't know Alice,” a heavy sigh, deep ambivalence. “It's just that we've been fighting so much lately, and I don't want to get married and be fighting and fighting and fighting the whole time.”

“But all couples fight sometimes.” Begging, I feel like I'm begging.

“Maybe sometimes, but not all the time. We're fighting all the time, Alice, about stupid things, meaningless things.”

“They're not stupid, meaningless things.”

“They are. For the most part they are. You got irritated with me the other day because I didn't chop the fruit up properly before I put it in the blender.”

“I was grumpy, I'm sorry.” Begging again.

“You're grumpy a lot Alice.”

“Well, you're always working late in the evenings, the only time I ever have contact with you is when you saunter in to turn down the TV when I'm watching it.” On our left the scarred mountain - from the fire so many years before - some charred bushes remained, long black gnarly fingers stretching out. “You're withdrawing.”

“I'm not.”

"You are too. Ever since that stupid engagement at the Milnerton Market. I don't even think you meant that seriously."

"I did," Ralph shot. "I had been thinking about marrying you for a very long time."

"Everything changed after that. You didn't seem as interested in me as you were before."

"Yes, Alice, the relationship settled. That's what happens in relationships. You can't be in that silly smitten phase forever, eventually things have to settle down. When the falling in love phase is over then you settle into something deeper, a deeper kind of love," he sighed, looked out the window. "The relationship matures."

"Well, if that's what settling is, then I don't want a mature relationship that settles. It didn't feel deeper, or more mature, or a deeper kind of love. It just felt boring, like an old married couple that don't notice each other anymore. It felt like being taken for granted. If that's what settling is I couldn't imagine anything worse."

We'd left the views of Boyes Drive, turned into the Sunday afternoon traffic, inched towards the robots.

"You know, Alice, I don't think that you actually want to settle down. I actually think this is all about you," Ralph said finally. "That's why you have all those accidents, all this drama."

All those accidents, all this drama.

Somebody hooted for me to go, the green arrow was flashing left.

"I don't make those things happen to me," I said slowly, "they just do." Betrayed. Was this the same man who had so tenderly traced my scars, searching for the tale behind each one? As if each scar were a puzzle piece which would eventually reveal me. Perhaps it had revealed me, perhaps he didn't like what he'd found. That I was just an ordinary woman - that I wasn't that special after all. That I just had different scars.

"I wasn't saying that Alice. You've misunderstood."

"No. I haven't."

"You have. You don't listen to what I'm saying."

"The problem is that I do listen to what you're saying. I really do."

"You don't. You really don't." Juvenile. That's what we'd become.

He was looking out of the window, past Polsmoor Prison.

I had driven home too fast. "Slow down," he'd said.

"Yes, I guess that's a good way of putting it," I'd shot, carried on speeding, nipping between cars on the M3. Long grey leafless trees flicking by.

I pulled up outside the flat, plonked my handbag on his lap. "I'm going for a walk. Alone."

I knew it wasn't safe to walk on the mountain alone anymore. Perhaps Ralph was right, perhaps I did in some perverse way call these things to me.

Late afternoon, pink mountain, rumble of city traffic thinned by the forests. Alone, up, up, my breath lugging. Confused, angry, still fighting – only now with myself. Feet restless to get me away, away from myself, from my splintering relationship.

I had always found peace on the mountain. A Jack Russell ambled by, lost in smell.

Thought I was safe. My feet on the gravel, soft brown stones. The rhythmic crunch of my stride.

Strange that I didn't hear him coming. Perhaps he'd been hiding. He came from nowhere.

And then the knife.

He pushed me hard into bushes. Rape? As I began to fight, serrations pricking at my belly. Thin, gaunt face, his breath sour, putrid. Yellow T-shirt. "Money." Hot stench of breath on my face, in my ear. "Give me your money." His free hand already violating my pockets. A boy.

A boy.

"The ring, give me the ring."

He pulled. He pulled. He pulled. I could hear the ligaments tearing, a visceral sound. My finger loose, limp. He pushed the knife harder into my bleeding belly as he gnawed – my finger in his mouth, his wet tongue - prehistoric sharp teeth.

Red. My dark red blood dripping from his chin.

They say that someone heard me screaming. I don't remember screaming. I remember the dog, in his sniffing world. Just that. The dog.

There are some things a relationship can never heal from.

Ralph came to the hospital right away. I couldn't look at him. I had lost a lot of blood – from my finger and the stab wound in my stomach. A scowling nurse had given me an injection, "For the pain," the doctor had said. I was slipping in and out of this world and into fragments of memories, dreamlike: digging in the ground for Pluto, looking into Ingrid's blind eyes and seeing the quiet milky white, slicing my hand on a broken glass as I washed the dishes and watching the water seeping slowly to red...

Her clock says 11:42. I am too early again. It feels much later when I ask the stranger the time - he hardly stops: "Oh, it's 11:05." The weird thing is that it happens all day, as if time is teasing me (or maybe I *am* losing my mind). This must be a dream I decide, but I don't wake up.

I suppose I knew that my relationship with Ralph was already over. It was my ring finger after all – the irony not lost on either of us.

"You probably think I made this happen to me," I snapped in the car when he came to take me home a few days later.

He looked dishevelled, he hadn't shaved, his jersey - creased. He put his hand on my leg, rubbed it tenderly, "You know I don't think that."

"That's what you said." His hand still on my leg, soft strokes. "In the car, the other day. Before."

"I didn't mean it like that, Alice. I really love you." Past De Waal Park, people walking their dogs. A flash of the Jack Russell. "I'm devastated by what happened to you, it's just horrific, a kind of a ghoulish nightmare, really. I haven't been able to sleep since it happened. I never want to lose you, I really don't." We stopped at an intersection, he looked at me for a moment, his eyes so sad.

I could see he was sad.

I guess we tried, in our own oblique ways, to make it work. But we were both too damaged, too complicated.

Conversations slipped into the perfunctory:

"Are you going to the shops?"

"Yes."

"Won't you please get me a cupcake?"

"Sure."

And:

"How's the writing going?"

"OK."

"Just OK?"

"You know I don't like talking about it." And then, an afterthought, a word choked out: "Darling."

He'd never called me darling before. In the beginning he'd called me "Dragon" because of my fiery mouth. Now I'd been relegated to the regular: a good old "darling".

The magic was gone, the sweetness, the tenderness.

"You're angry with me," he said eventually one evening after we'd had supper on the balcony. He lit up a cigarette, a deep drag.

"What makes you say that?"

"I know you are."

A light breeze, a little chill. I pulled my cardigan tightly around me.

"I miss my finger," I said finally. "Never really took much notice of it until it was gone. And now it's all I can think of." I was still wearing the bandage, when it finally came off, the top of my hand was an awful, grisly blue for weeks. "And yes, I'm a bit freaked out by what happened, between us, and then with my finger." He didn't say anything, eventually I said, "I don't think you want to marry me anymore." I shrugged lightly, "Not that you can now, my ring finger's gone, so I guess you're off the hook." I laughed.

Make light of it, Alice. Make sense out of nonsense, nonsense out of sense. Turn seriousness into laughter and then mock the laughter for its flippancy.

"I do want to marry you," he insisted. "It's just that we need to sort out some stuff before that."

"Like what?"

"Like the fighting. The fighting freaks me out. I just can't do it."

"We're not fighting anymore." The thick night fragrance of *yesterday, today and tomorrow* seeped up - always loved that smell, so familiar. Somehow a scent of balmy nights; of contentment.

"I know." He looked out over the leaves to the city, his profile shadowy in the encroaching darkness. "But this weird..." he searched for the right word, "mechanical space is a form of fighting Alice. It's just that it's a cold war now."

"Who are you, Russia or America?" *Laugh, laugh. Please laugh at it.*

"It was the USSR then, not Russia."

Disappointed. "You know what I mean."

"You see, Alice. That's exactly what I mean. I correct you and you get defensive."

"I wasn't getting defensive."

"It was the way you said it."

"How did I say it?"

"Defensively."

I take a deep breath. Count to ten. Calm down. Eventually: "People fight. Couples fight. Sure, perhaps we need to learn how to do it properly..."

“I don’t want to fight properly, Alice.” Getting annoyed. “I just don’t want to fight.”

“Well, we aren’t ever going to stop fighting if you speak to me like that. You’re just as much at fault here as I am.”

“No, Alice. I’ve been in many relationships and I’ve never fought as much with anyone else as I’ve fought with you. I’ve never even fought in some of them.”

“So you’re saying all this fighting is my fault. It’s all my fault?”

“OK, so explain why this is the first relationship I’ve ever been in where there’s so much fighting? It can’t be me, it has to be you.”

“So you’re taking no responsibility for this?”

“Exactly, Alice. Because it’s not me,” sarcastically, “it’s you.” He stood up, “Look, I’m sorry about your finger, I really am. Perhaps I should have believed you in London when you said that the country was fucked, but...”

Interrupting him: “I never said that the country was fucked.”

“Yes, well, whatever. You said that the crime was out of control. I never imagined that something like this would happen.”

“This,” I said, lifting my bandaged hand, “is nothing Ralph.” I rested hand my hand (throbbing painfully again) back into my lap and looked out to the city lights. “There are worse things that happen in this country, everyday. A million times worse than me losing a finger. I’m still alive, I wasn’t raped. I suppose I would even go as far as to say that I was lucky.”

“You see, Alice. There’s my point exactly. I can’t even have a discussion with you about crime without you getting all defensive on me and turning it into a fight. We can’t talk anymore, everything ends up like this, with you bickering at me.”

“And you bickering at me,” I retorted. I picked up the plates and went inside.

These days I want to think only of the good times – of the Tisca times, when he still loved me, when he was still smitten. For some reason, our love affair flourished in that little oddball hotel in Hammersmith. Perhaps it was because it wasn’t real, really. Perhaps it was because it was another world, something alien, some sort of wonderland.

In my Tisca world I am happy. Ralph loves me. For the first time in my life I feel deeply contented.

In Ralph’s Taglio world Jack is completely agitated in his relationship with Lucy, he feels she doesn’t love him, is insecure, constantly fearful that she’ll leave him. Has never felt so vulnerable in his life. He writes about the flies inside him, the incessant buzzing, constantly

feeding on his rotting thoughts. It's as if he's sliding deeper and deeper into the vortex, endlessly spinning into the spiralling fear. He feels he has lost his confidence.

Lucy has taken it all.

There it is.

No intersection of the two realities.

It was bound to implode.

University of Cape Town

11.

“If you were to continue this experiment for months, the ants would be able to prove this fact thousands of times, but their behaviour never changes, until at last you will give them up as hopeless.”

From *The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugène Marais

The Sea of Wise Insects

Part 5: The legs

“Although mostly unnoticed by most humans, the most useful of all insects are insectivores, those that feed on other insects. Many insects, such as grasshoppers, can potentially reproduce so quickly that they could literally bury the earth in a single season. However, there are hundreds of other insect species that feed on grasshopper eggs, and some that feed on grasshopper adults. This role in ecology is usually assumed to be primarily one of birds, but insects, though less glamorous, are much more significant. For any pest insect one can name, there is a species of wasp that is either a parasitoid or predator upon that pest, and plays a significant role in controlling it.”

From Wikipedia

It was all a big blunder. And he needed to stop it.

She was in full flight – she spoke about a dress, a wedding, “Wouldn’t you rather that we just get it over and done with, rather sooner than later? After all, we love each other, there’s no point in waiting.”

He found these words horrifying, terrifying. He longed to shout at her: “Stop it! Shut the fuck up!” But instead he stared at her mutely when she spoke. His silence was taken as some sort of acquiescence.

Her mother came to visit, even she was excited about the wedding. It was as if she had never imagined her daughter capable of marrying.

“She isn’t capable!” Jack longed to shout out to the mother, “No, she’s culpable!”

He buried himself in his unburied book. He would un-write her and her silly wedding and her frivolous dress. How could the cool, scarred Lucy have turned into such a wedding obsessed caricature? He didn't want all that nuptial nonsense. He wanted to be a novelist, not some schmaltzy, stupid husband. What had he been thinking! Marrying her?

She was just a character that he'd used to write his book. He'd used her and now, as the story reached the end, he would have to discard her. It calmed him to think like this. It was the only way. It had always been the plan – the writer had set him up – to feel the pain, to make the writing feel real.

He had to strategise. There had to be a way out.

So, how did it all happen? How did Jack manage to escape the gargantuan dome-like wedding dress? He'd told Lucy that he'd stolen the ring from a giant, and now the wedding had become that angry giant.

How was he to escape?

It was a question that blundered about in Jack for a long time. It still comes, quite suddenly, sometimes and sits with him awhile – an uninvited guest: the proverbial gatecrasher. As if he hasn't really escaped at all. But he has.

He's free.

He's learnt to dismiss it easily: Lucy was mad. She was too far-gone. She was a lost cause.

And then he always landed up thinking: How did it happen? More importantly, how did Lucy become his mother? For she had become his mother. What sort of perverted metamorphosis occurred that turned his delicate butterfly into the stout, blind worm of his mother?

Perhaps it was always inevitable. Perhaps that was why he'd been drawn to her - subconsciously perhaps, he'd seen a flicker of his executed mother in Lucy. And he'd been drawn in, back into the womb, that place of warmth and nurture, a pre-everything place of red peace.

But that was long gone. Now it was Lucy, standing over him, large and monstrous, her milky teeth grinning as she was stretching him out and pinning him with wedding vows, onto a crimson velvet tray.

He realised that he had to get the butterfly ring off her finger.

It was the only way out. He began to fantasize about the ring being gone – wasn't there something about manifesting destiny? If he willed the ring to disappear, perhaps it would. And then, horrifyingly one day it miraculously vanished:

Her whole finger was gone – severed brutally from her hand, the lucky charm butterfly ring had gone with it.

Bitten off by the hand of fate.

Well, that's how Lucy had put it.

It is not a courtroom from the movies. It seems quite white, with bleak strip lighting.

I wonder if my mother came to court too, pregnant with me. I wonder if I'm even right about all that.

My ex-wife's kid.

And if I am right, there's some kind of sinister closure in me being here. Back then she would have sat on the other side of the court, me in her belly. Me, already a transgression. The unborn child sliding between guilt and innocence. Already then. My life a steady onslaught of irony. Or fate.

Perhaps it wasn't fate after all. All my strange accidents, my seemingly haphazard luck, perhaps it was as Ralph's book said it was.

Perhaps it was inevitable.

And then there's the question which keeps twisting round the truth: why would a man who wasn't really my father keep in touch with me after all these years?

My mother comes into the courtroom. She sits on the other side. The side she has always sat on, I suppose. I realise that Veronica's mother will be here too – between us a limp phone plug guiltily disconnected. No doubt she'll cry. For some reason it's the crying that scares me the most - not the magistrate or Jeffrey September or the guilt that will be bestowed upon me legally, heavily, but the certain guttural sobs of the grieving mother.

I try to catch my mother's eye, but she deliberately avoids me. Perhaps it's too hard for her, I realise. History repeating itself. And I wonder again, as I have wondered many times in the last few weeks, why she kept the baby. Why she kept me.

Perhaps it was for revenge.

When they arrive Veronica's mother and sister do not sit with my mother. My mother greets them, a little too enthusiastically given the unfamiliar glare of the situation. They respond wanly, inch further down their row, after all it's her spawn that has spawned their

misery. Unlike my mother, Veronica's mother and sister do look at me. Correction: vindictively stare at me. Ordinarily I would stare them down, stand my ground, hold onto an edge of dignity. But I can't. I look away, down at the grimy white floors of the Cape Town Magistrates' Court, knowing as I do that I must look guilty.

There are other people here. People I don't know. There's a young scruffy, bored looking woman doodling in a notebook; I suspect she's a reporter on the courtroom beat. My Andy Warhol fifteen minutes of fame, I realise. This is it, some sort of culmination of my life - and it's horrible.

I am alone. I wonder where Andrew would have sat had he been here. And then I wonder why I even bother to wonder. Of course, he would sit there, on that side. He always was a mask of innocence.

The courtroom fills up. We're the only white people here. Strange that I should have that thought again. That white, black, coloured thought that seems so un-New-South-African. I wonder what my father would say to that thought. Is it racist to be aware of race? Jeffrey September sits down next to me.

"Seven cases up before yours. I thought I told you to wait outside."

"I got cold."

"It's not exactly a hotbox in here." I can't decide whether he's trying to be nice. "Oh, by the way, when the magistrate asks you to plea, you should plead 'Not guilty'. It's pretty much standard procedure, unless we want to cut a deal with the prosecutor, but I don't know if this case calls for that."

Not guilty.

The window is open, city sounds, a car alarm momentarily breaks the traffic whine, the deep gurgle of a large truck going by. A world of people oblivious to this little spectacle of human tragedy playing out beneath the strip lights of Courtroom 13.

Guilty. Not guilty. Guilty. Not guilty.

Eventually the magistrate arrives, her Darth Vader gown flowing behind her - short, severe hair, a gaunt, pallid face, sea blue eyes - the colour of the water in Cape Town's harbour.

I can barely hear the proceedings of the other cases, the bored magistrate is hardly audible, there is a microphone, but it doesn't seem to work. Garbled words filter back - postponement after postponement. Many other cases are called, those accused make their way to the dock where they stand, their backs to the public, facing the magistrate. Here they nod, respectfully, when she addresses them in her impenetrable monotone. I can't hear what

crimes they stand accused of, and berate myself for not having read the roll outside the door. Most people are dressed neatly, like me. The criminals cleaned up, I think to myself – a silly joke. Anything, please, anything to distract me from the glaring deafness of the strip lighting court, of the criminal sausage machine squeezing out postponements and other unfathomably legal sentences.

And then it is me. I find myself facing the bored blue-eyed (so like the sea) magistrate. A court official stands, outlines the charges brought against me: "...Reckless and negligent driving..." pages turn over "... culpable homicide." I only manage to hear the muffled words because I know them.

I wait for her to speak to me. Sea eyes. I imagine her asking: "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty." Will I be able to say that?

The prosecutor is talking.

Statements. First the police report, I catch flickers of words: "... emergency call... cell-phone of the deceased... Defendant made the call... Custody... Victim Veronica Annabel Rowlands... perished as a result of injuries sustained... crime-scene contaminated, by the rain... uncertain speed... perpetrator interrogated... wrong turning... scared... swerved for a dog..."

The dog.

Say we got lost, Alice, and... say there was a dog.

There was a dog. Remember, there once was a dog, Andrew.

Fuck it, Alice. What the fuck is wrong with you?

What's wrong with you?

You have to listen to me. I know what I'm doing.

"Statement from Andrew Wolfe." Suddenly so clear: brittle words. I feel the eyes of my mother, turn to look, but she is looking down - at her hands? Andrew's statement is read. I fling the words that I catch into imaginary sentences – I can almost hear Andrew's cocky voice, his turn of phrase:

I've got to admit it, I was drunk. Alice offered to drive – she hadn't drunk anything, actually. And well, you know the old adage, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk..." Well, Alice insisted she drive, and you know, she also insisted that Veronica put on her seat-belt, but Veronica never did like wearing a seat-belt – said she felt claustrophobic with it on. She suffered from mild claustrophobia – you can check that with her mom, actually. So, if anything, Alice was doing a good deed. She's not a bad person, it was just helluva unlucky what happened that night – a terrible bloody accident. We took a wrong turn, and landed up in this

kinda forest. I didn't even know the bloody place was up there – there was no barrier or anything, so I don't know how we even got in there. To be honest, once we hit the dirt, it was pretty creepy up there and Veronica started panicking a bit, wanting Alice to turn around. Veronica didn't like the dark up there, you know, it probably made her feel a bit... claustrophobic. Anyway, Alice was turning around when blow me down there's this flipping dog running right in front of the car. Alice swerved to avoid it and hit the tree.

I didn't even know he'd given a statement. It was the story he'd fed to me in the forest before the paramedics arrived, Veronica's bloody body slapped across the bonnet, her thin pulse softening by the second. This, the backdrop to such lucidity of thought: his crisp, coke thinking.

And now I do remember phoning. I'd found Veronica's phone - a small, sleek, silver thing buried in her once white handbag.

I'd dusted off her handbag, I knew she wouldn't want it dirty.

Guilty for her bloodied body, guilty that it wasn't me.

Andrew watched me from a distance. I didn't know why he wasn't standing with her, why he wasn't holding her hand, why he wasn't trying to stem the slow trickle of blood.

At first I thought he was concussed.

"They're going to send an ambulance," I'd told him. He was still standing in the shadows, a black lump in the gloom.

"You have to listen to me Alice." He'd walked forward into the half-light. "We don't have much time to get our stories straight."

I hadn't replied.

"You have to say you were driving, Alice."

The smell of sand.

"Say we got lost, Alice, and... say there was a dog."

I should have hated him for that – for the story constructed so artfully, so neatly, while behind us, Veronica's blood dripped softly onto the night soil. Instead I felt sorry for him, guilty about the accident - all the malicious thoughts I'd ever had about Veronica. It was my fault after all, remember?

There was a dog...

Muddled.

Now Andrew's story is another lie to live. I don't know anymore where the lies end inside and the truth begins, for eventually the lies we all lived became some kind of truth.

Surely?

For a while the suitcase bound us. Secrets do that - by virtue of their very nature they are binding – the centre point of a secret is almost always shame. What was the shame in the case? Shame for intruding on my father’s privacy, his secret notes? Or perhaps we were ashamed to admit to our mother that we wanted parts of our father, that we longed for him. It was understood that we were to forget about him. We weren’t permitted to talk about *him*, as if the absence of dialogue about *him* would eradicate *him*. Instead, he became the forbidden fruit - the suitcase: the juiciest find.

At first mother had told us that he’d died. That was before Omi came around. They were in the kitchen one overcast afternoon when I’d come home from school, a sweaty, swift ride home. I was about push my bike against the wall when I’d heard raised voices through the window.

“How dare you, Anna. How dare you tell them that?”

Cutlery being shoved in to the drawer. “How dare he? Off with some bloody housewife. Must I tell them that?”

“No. Of course not, but you can’t just go around telling them he’s dead, for goodness sake Anna. What’s wrong with you? If he ever comes back...”

“He’ll never come back. You know that.” Slamming the drawer. My mother’s footsteps – the familiar click-click of her court shoes. She sits down, sighs.

“He might.”

Tapping her nails on the table irritably. “I was married to him.”

“You still are.”

“That’s a laugh.” A chair being pushed back, her footsteps again. “They’ll be back soon. So, Maureen, according to you, what should I be telling them?”

“Say that he’s gone off to join the struggle. Get creative, Anna. You always were.”

“Forget it. I’m not going to make a martyr of him. You just don’t want your precious philandering son to be badly remembered.”

“I’m warning you, I can cut you off, Anna.”

“They’re your grandchildren. You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would, Anna. I can take care of them in other ways – pay their school fees directly, buy them their books. And you know what that means. No more pretty dresses and lovely shoes.”

“You’re such a bitch.”

Silence.

“All I ask, is for some mutual respect Anna.”

“You call this mutual respect? I call it slavery. He didn’t respect me. He dumped me with the kids. I didn’t even want kids. He said that he’d be there for me. Well, he isn’t here. He lied, he cheated, he ran away.”

Behind me, the front gate slammed – Andrew. I pushed my bike noisily against the wall.

“When did you get home?” he demanded.

“Just before you,” I lied.

“I almost beat you then,” he sneered, as he shoved his bike in front of mine and strutted up the back stairs.

Inside, a smiling mother telling us the good news: “Omi’s here because she just found out that Daddy isn’t really dead. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I looked down at my mother’s shoes: dark green and shiny – like green slime on her feet. A green dress to match.

“You should have green lipstick,” I told her.

I didn’t know what else to say.

“You can’t get green lipstick, stupid,” Andrew spat.

“This is serious, Alice,” my mother glowered at me. “Your father isn’t dead.” Statue eyes staring, “All right?”

The dull, relentless ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. “All right.”

“Where is he?” Andrew asked.

“He went away,” her best sing-song voice, “to do a very secret job. And because he didn’t want any of us to be in danger, he pretended he’d been killed.”

“What kind of secret?” Andrew asked.

“It’s too dangerous for any of us to know,” mom continued, “that’s all I know, and that’s all Omi knows. It’s a secret. You can’t tell anyone at school that your dad’s gone away to do a very secret job. OK?”

We nodded. I looked over to Omi, who was looking out of the window over the back garden.

“Are you listening Alice?” Mom asked sharply.

“Yes.”

“Good. So not a word of this to anyone. OK?”

“When’s daddy coming back?” Andrew whined.

"I don't know," mom replied. "Maybe he won't be able to ever come back. That's why mommy's been so sad." She leaned down, took Andrew's hand, "You're the man of the house now, Andy. You have to look after me and Alice."

"Why do I have to look after Alice?"

"Because she's your sister," she stroked his head softly.

"But I don't like her."

"I don't like you either," I spat back, and then glaring at my mother, "I'm the oldest. Why does Andrew have to look after me?"

"You'll do what I say, Alice. Andrew is the man around here now, and as the man, he's the head of the family. That's just the way it is in life, and you'll just have to live with it."

And so we lived the big (in retrospect, somewhat ludicrous) "daddy's-on-a-secret-mission" lie. It was easy to live that lie – I wanted to believe it. Years afterwards, when I was much older, I'd wished that I'd never been outside the kitchen window on that overcast day. It would have been bliss to believe, really believe, that my father had been assigned to some clandestine job, that he was some kind of special agent – the James Bond of South Africa. The truth was more complicated, less heroic. Put plainly, it was what truth often is: rather ugly.

And so, for many reasons I felt that the suitcase was more mine than Andrew's. For starters, I had found the suitcase – I'd been the chief archaeologist on the job. Plus, I was the oldest – not that age had much bearing in our house after my mother's infamous: *you are the man of the house now* speech. But, perhaps most significantly, I felt the suitcase was more mine because I knew why dad had disappeared. Andrew had swallowed the lie, had lived it. Knowing the truth gave me a certain arrogant edge over him – I possessed something Andrew never would: a real part of my father's heart.

I was livid when I found that Andrew had been removing things from the suitcase.

Things that he wanted just for himself.

Our great rift was, ironically, caused by the wedding photograph. It was the only photograph I ever saw of my parents' wedding. It no longer exists. Mom burnt it.

I still remember when I first found it.

It hadn't taken Andrew long to lose interest in the suitcase – it was, in reality, a wad of notepad's bulging with my father's illegible scrawl; there were a few typed up articles which he'd never managed to publish, and plenty of newspaper cuttings – mainly from very left wing newspapers. In later years I came to realise why he'd buried the bloody thing - it was packed with illegal anti-Apartheid pamphlets and literature. Not exactly the kind of bounty to accompany you on your grand escape from suburbia with your new amour Mary Curtis -

housewife extraordinaire. It definitely wasn't something he'd want to drag around Apartheid South Africa, but it wasn't something that he'd been ready to part with either.

He always was a closet hoarder, my father.

I can imagine him deliberating over the suitcase. He would have been about to leave with Mary Curtis. From what I know now, they were in love - obsessively so. He would forsake his children, and she would leave behind her abusive husband and a 16-year-old son. I don't know how much Mary Curtis knew about my father's political leanings, but from what I imagine, probably very little.

Perhaps he was ashamed of the suitcase – his political baggage, after all politics is, in all fairness, not commonly the stuff of romance. He couldn't take it with – too risky, particularly if Mary Curtis didn't share his political passions. What if she was the nosy type, dug around in the case while he was away somewhere? No, that wouldn't work. He couldn't leave it at the house with my mother. He knew her too well – she'd destroy everything of his once she'd discovered the truth. He certainly couldn't leave it with his own mother, she'd also sift through it, destroying any liberalism she couldn't tolerate – which would have been most of the written material.

Besides, I suspect that he wanted to leave it for us.

So, he did the only thing he could do in a sticky situation. He took everything he could - all his memories, his writings, everything of value - and squeezed his world into an old suitcase, sealed that in plastic and buried it in the garden where no-one would find it, until he returned to claim it, or directed them to it.

I imagine that he buried it at night, the night before that misty Pinelands morning - the snapshot memory I have of him the last time I ever saw him: walking towards his red Cortina, seemingly without a care in the world. I imagine that after he buried it, that he'd gone inside, washed his hands in the porcelain square basin – black soil in the sink - and looked at himself in the mirror. I imagine he must have felt a great sense of relief – he'd buried the past. Shed a skin.

A skin that we would find, and a skin, that over the years I would try to climb into.

My father's suitcase was not exactly a child's treasure trove, it was only later that I discovered its intellectual depths. What drew us in initially were the photographs. Together Andrew and I scrounged for photographs. Most of them were on top. Fuzzy, yellowy far away photographs of dad as a boy on the farm framed by boundless wheat fields - a young Omi, laughing on a picnic blanket with a baby on her lap. Most clearly I remember the sheep photograph: standing alone, hunched in the middle of a muddy compound with an obscene

fluid filled sac hanging from its stomach. I spent a long time looking at that peculiar image – the forlorn sheep, the mysterious appendage on its stomach. I didn't understand why someone would take such a monstrous photograph – no doubt the sheep was terminally ill and its insides had fallen out. Reluctantly, almost fearfully, I had finally taken the photograph to Gladys, she was in the kitchen ironing, the radio crackling, stretching the endless whining of choral gospel songs – more than anything, these were the soundtrack of my childhood.

“Gladdy,” I'd handed her the photograph, “what's wrong this sick sheep?”

She'd laughed, “Eish, Alice, that sheep's not sick. It's having a baby.”

“What?”

“The baby is in the bag.” She pointed to the creepy sac hanging from the sheep's stomach.

“But how can it be having a baby when it looks so sad? I thought babies were supposed to make you happy.”

Gladys had laughed, pulled me in for one of her smothering hugs and said, “You're funny, Alice.” Releasing me she said, “Having a baby is very sore. Ai-ai-ai-ai! All my babies were very sore.” She handed the photograph back to me and resumed labouring on one of mother's dresses – spraying it incessantly, pressing the steaming iron so hard into the ironing board I thought it would crack – snapping the rigid, creaseless dress.

“How can something that's supposed to be happy be so sore?”

Gladys shrugged, “That's just the way life is. You get a bit of happiness, and then a bit of pain, and then there's happiness again, and pain again and so it goes.” She lifted up the iron briefly to examine some part of the dress she'd just crushed. “Sometimes they come together, happiness and sadness.” Her heaving ironing continued.

“But pain can't make you happy,” I'd argued.

“Sometimes, like when you have a baby, it's a happy pain.”

“But the sheep doesn't look happy.”

“But it is.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it just had a baby.”

“Maybe, for a sheep having a baby isn't a happy thing,” I observed. “That sheep looks very lonely there in that funny place... and sad.”

“Now don't you worry about that sheep, because it's just a sheep,” Gladys scolded, as she pulled the stiffened blue dress from the ironing board and examined it critically against the light, “and sheep are for eating, not to worry about.”

But I did worry. I worried then that the sheep had been eaten - for some reason it wasn't just a sheep. It was an important sheep, important enough for dad to have kept that photograph.

I worried about what would have happened to the strange sac baby if - as Gladys had so bluntly pointed out - its mother had been eaten.

I worried about why the photograph had been taken and why dad had kept it. Perhaps I felt that if my eleven-year-old self could solve these riddles, then I would understand my father, and in turn solve the mystery of his baffling, hasty elopement with the housewife.

Of course, it seems ridiculous now that, as a child, I obsessed about a sheep in a photograph. But, even now, the thought of that image - that strange sac creature emerging from that wretched, hunched sheep in that muddy compound - gives me the creeps. It's like something out of a warped science fiction film, where an alien incubates in another being; there is always some gruesome birth, the gooey alien bursting from the host, splattering blood and bile as it emerges, often killing its host (an excruciating death) in the process. Even now, as an adult, I can't grasp why someone would take a photograph of something so obscene, let alone keep the photograph as if it were some sort of memory to savour. Perhaps it was the first birth he ever saw, or perhaps it was the first lamb to be born on their farm, or perhaps he did have some special relationship with that sheep. It's all supposition, of course - a city person trying to find motivations for some strange country custom. For years I thought of asking Omi about the photograph, but it's sudden appearance would have raised questions, suspicions.

And, after the wedding photograph fiasco, I wasn't about to risk the suitcase to satisfy my sheep curiosity.

The wedding photograph was my great find. It was tucked tightly into a notebook - I couldn't decipher most of my father's knotty scrawl, but, nonetheless, I would still spend endless afternoons paging through his books, decoding odd splinters - desperately trying to construct meaning from words that had been strangled by his scribble. As with the sheep, I felt that if I could only penetrate some words, create fragments of sentences, that I would glean some sense of my father's world and I would finally understand why he'd left.

Why he had abandoned us.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Jack would abandon her as he had his mother.

Our present is written by the past, is it not? Lucy's father had abandoned Lucy on the scrap heap of memory. Of course, he'd left because he couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't live between the lies - a middleman

caught between a bitter wife and a vengeful daughter. His little Lucy was determined to punish them all through her terrible wounds, her stitched up body.

He'd spent hours nursing her wounds, carefully, gently cleaning the scabby muck around her stitches. He was terrified of blood – its metallic smell, the brutal redness. It had always horrified him. Always. Perhaps it was because he'd grown up on a farm, a farm where animals were regularly slaughtered. Blood was his earliest memory. The rivulets of blood in the slaughterhouse, streaming through the gutters, the thin, sick swishes of knives being sharpened, the way the workers viciously yanked the sheep's skin from its body. He'd called it a body once, but his father had scolded him, told him it was a carcass, not a body.

“What's the difference?” He'd asked his father.

“People have bodies, animals have carcasses.”

And so, for Lucy's father, the sight of blood, of wounds, evoked a primal terror. It was odd then that he volunteered himself up for the job of bathing Lucy's wounds. He could have left that to their char – she did most everything else as far as the children were concerned: cleaning, dressing, feeding, disciplining. He chose to subject himself to her blood, to her pain. No doubt the psychoanalysts would have a field day with him. Perhaps they would call him a masochist – her pain gave him pain. Perhaps there's some truth in that – familiar pain is a comfort to some. But I think he saw this job of washing down his daughter's wounds as some sort of payment, some sort of punishment. After all, she wouldn't be in this world if it weren't for him.

And so, night after night, he would sit her down on the toilet, next to the basin and gently with a warm wet cloth, would wash down her latest scabbing sin. It was a strange scene, no doubt equally painful for the daughter as it was for the father. She would sit there quietly in the crisp too white light of the bathroom while her father, pale and sweaty would remove her bandages and tenderly dab her pain, his pain.

There was no doubt about it, she loved these moments.

These were the times that she felt the most loved, for she knew how much her wounds pained her father, and yet he did it because he loved her.

These were the moments she sought in her calculated accidents, the time when, after all the scolding from her mother, she could retreat with her

father to the sanctuary of the stark white bathroom and he would touch her wounds.

Despite the pain blazing through her, someone was touching her. Gently.

She never cried during these times. These painful moments were her happiest childhood memories.

But how could he know that? Perhaps he did. I know he left because he felt his absence might stop it all.

I suppose there's always a moment when everything changes. Life can follow the same monotonous path for years and years. And so it was, in that ordinary little house in suburbia somewhere, that Lucy's father tried so desperately to pay for a decision he'd made many years before by punishing himself through the torturous task.

One evening, as he was filling the porcelain basin with steaming water, she said it: "I love you, Daddy."

He'd looked at her seated expectantly on the toilet, her wrist this time - the bandage was seeping, patches of dark blood expanding into the white, like those films where the invading country bleeds into the defeated one. It was as if her love was invading him, bleeding into him, seeping through him. All there was, was her blood. Her blood love.

And yet, it wasn't even his blood that he washed. But the blood of a terrible family secret.

That horrendous day so many years ago when he was late.

It was his fault. He was half an hour late. He was supposed to meet his girlfriend in the park, she was not there. He found her much later beneath a tree, bleeding and beaten. Raped.

Lucy's parents were both young, foolish. By the time they realised that she was pregnant, it was too late. He married her. What else was there to do? It was his fault. He had been late.

Lucy's father was late because he was plucking up the courage to break up with his girlfriend. He had realised that he didn't love her. He thought that if he came late, she would be angry with him, they would fight and she would break up with him.

Instead, there was blood, beating and then there was Lucy.

For years her father had tried to undo the past – a late meeting in the park that had altered his life irrevocably.

He had tried to love the child, tried to stitch up the family as quickly as little Lucy tore herself apart. But it was no use. The child was bleeding, perversely, to elicit love from him.

A bizarre form of blood love. Her twisted: *I love you, daddy*, was all the encouragement he needed.

He left the next day, he had to.

University of Cape Town

12.

"I like writing about the firefly, too, for the very reason that this little insect is still wrapped in intriguing mystery.

What is the motive of the light? What is the light? I must confess ignorance. I can tell you very well what it is not, but the opposite side of the balance sheet will remain blank."

From *The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugène Marais

I have never had many friends. Too freaky for friendships, I guess. Most people find my scars unsettling, the unasked questions floating silently beneath the silky surface of conversations. It is always their eyes that unmask them – no one can help stealing a glance at the hundreds of tiny scars that collect like pale twigs on my skin.

"Does she do to herself? Perhaps she's unhinged, some kind of psycho?"

"Do you know, her father did it to her, that's why he had to leave."

"No, you're all wrong, she's just very seriously accident prone. There are people like that you know. Their soul has chosen this path."

"Someone told me she was cursed."

I know them all. All the different versions of my life that live in others. Gossip loves the freaky. At school they called me Patch. It's a nickname I still loathe. Going into the shopping mall the other day, I heard someone shouting: "Patch, Patch!"

I hurried on, almost slipping down the stairs. Stumbled into the toilets, sticky hands fumbling with the lock. Leaning back against the door, that sick feeling from school constricting my stomach. I tried to breathe deeply: *It's OK, you're OK. It was probably just someone calling their dog. Breathe in, breathe in.*

Eventually someone knocked on the door, curt: "Other people need the toilet too."

I suppose every school has to have its little weirdo, and I was it. And school weirdoes aren't exactly friend magnets.

There was always Sylvie. A few other acquaintances hovered about like flies over a ripened turd, other misfits: those not good at sport, popularity or mediocrity. Natural selection happened in break-times, the in-crowd always playfully oblivious to the outsiders, and yet they needed us. Without us outsiders – their rejects - they were nowhere as powerful. Power tends

to breed a certain smug satisfaction and this was audible through their carefree days of laughter that echoed like hollow taunts through our scratchy school years.

Perhaps that's why I never liked Veronica – she'd certainly have been one of them. It was their pack instinct that was so chilling, they tended to move as a group, an amalgamated smouldering chunk – some kind of perverse creature - hissing through classrooms and corridors. They'd "Patch!" me in unison if I ever wandered past them, a messy war cry of sorts, followed by the odd snigger. I'd scurry by, not looking up, knowing instinctively that their sum was greater than any stitched up whole I could ever conjure.

I'm glad I wasn't like them. Being an outsider has certain benefits – it gives one the ability to see the distorted, infected underbelly of a system, its mechanical workings, its blind spots. For the most part, they lacked empathy – arguably a convenient emotive force to lack in an unequal society. They never cared about poverty or Apartheid or the struggle. Mostly, they were ordinary, well-off teenagers, fretting about parties, drinking and the opposite sex.

Not that I was much different. Not that I can really judge.

I am putting on lipstick, the phone rings. Andrew calls me: "It's a call for you."

My mother is watching TV in the lounge, the lights are off and the glow from the box glimmers through the room, I look through at her as I walk to the phone, her face pasty in the strange light.

"Hallo?"

It's Sylvie: "Alice, I'm leaving now, I'll meet you at the door in fifteen minutes."

"OK."

"But, um, Kathy might be there."

"What?"

"Yes, Rory told me she might come."

"Do you really think she'd have the guts to go?"

"Well, why not? She's one of them now, she's not afraid of what we might think."

"I just can't believe her. She's turned into such a bitch."

"Ja, well, I suppose it's easier being in the in-crowd than it is being a reject."

"Mom, she's gossiping again!" It's Andrew, silhouetted in the passage – I can't see his face.

"Just a second... Shut up Andrew!" I hiss.

My mother turns down the TV - a mans voice: "*But the Germans are coming...*" fades into silence. I don't have long to wait, when it comes, her voice is shrill and aggressive: "Stop gossiping on the phone!"

Andrew is now standing in the door watching me, "And she's wearing lipstick."

She is quick to respond, "I want you to finish your conversation and come here."

"But mom..."

"Don't you talk back to me my girl! Finish your conversation and come here. Otherwise I'll come and finish it for you."

In almost a whisper, "I've got to go. I'll see you later... I hope."

"Don't let her... you know."

"Easy for you to say. Cheers."

The light is now on in the lounge, I stand at the doorway, mom considers me for a while: "Is that what you want to be? A tart?" I don't answer her. "Only tarts wear lipstick like that. You're not going out like that. You're not going out looking like a tart. No daughter of mine is going out looking like a tart, do you hear me?" Her eyes are engorged, large shiny marbles.

"Yip. Sorry mom."

"Is that all you've got to say for yourself? '*Sorry mom?*'" she says it in a syrupy singsong voice, and then switching back to her vitriolic tone: "What are you, spineless or something? Where's your fight?"

"I don't know."

"You are really pathetic. Pathetic. Just get out. Get out of here. Take off that lipstick and get out of the house. Go."

I return to the bathroom, remove the lipstick with cotton wool, pick up my small backpack from my bedroom. It's cold outside, my breath makes a little bubble of smoke in front of me. I pick up my bicycle from the side of the house. As I'm turning to go I notice mom and Andrew watching me from the window.

They don't wave goodbye. Neither do I.

I ride down the quiet night road, watching my shadow follow me through beams of streetlights. Halfway there I stop, take the lipstick from my pocket and reapply it.

Sylvie is at the school hall already when I arrive. "You were so right about not rising to the bait," I tell her as I lock my bike to the pole.

"Your mom's just miffed at the moment. She's still pissed off with your dad, and so she vents on you."

"You've just got to become a shrink," I tell her.

"Nope, I'd much rather be a foreign correspondent. And you."

I think about it as we walk into the hall. "A ballet teacher."

"You don't even do ballet!"

"I know, don't you just love dead end dreams?"

It's dim in the hall, hot and sticky, pink doughnut shaped lights screech across the wall, a throb of bodies, "...*there's a rat in my kitchen, what am I...*" We head to the trestle table selling juice for R1 a cup.

Sylvie sees them first. "OK," she says slowly, "I just saw Mark with..."

I can't hear the rest of what she says, the music is too loud, but I already know what she means. I look into the knot of labels (right down to their branded briefs), and see them right away, not even five meters away. Mark and Kathy. My stomach feels gooey – a nauseating gooey. Mark and Kathy. Kathy and Mark. Of course. Of course, he'd like her. Of course. I can't say anything. I want to cry, but I won't. Not here, not now.

Instead I vomit in the bathroom. Not the first to either, it seems.

Sylvie knocks on the door, "Hey, you OK in there?"

I open the door. "Yip." I wash my mouth out in the basin. When I look in the mirror the lipstick is gone. We leave the bathroom. The door swings slowly closed behind us and we stand in the empty corridor, a muffled "...*everybody's looking for something...*" from the distant hall.

"You sure you're OK?" Sylvie asks again.

"Me? I'm just fantastic."

I was never the girl who got the guy. Ralph changed all that, I thought my luck had shifted with him. For the first time in the longest time, I had someone who cared for me, who touched me.

Tenderly.

Of course, I'd had men before Ralph – I think they call them *brief encounters* - I like the pun. Some of them were drawn to my scars – the oddball notch on their bedposts - I'm sure I was a great conversation piece; others were repulsed by my skin that teemed with history, with agonies. In retrospect they all had different names, but somehow seemed the same. There was always a time when the phone calls would stop.

I didn't think I could be loved: I was an aberration – the woman with the scars. My terrible skin such a curse.

It was different with Ralph - I was neither a conquest nor a repulsion. Of course, my scars intrigued him: he wanted to go beneath each scar, into its story. I suppose I thought that his gentle concern for my past was love. And I suppose in a strange way, it was: self-love. I was research. He charted our love affair through his book, milked me for aspects of his luckless Lucy. He chose me because he knew I'd make decent fiction: a scarred anti-heroine whose skin ultimately betrays her real motives. His affection wasn't real - it was calculated, manipulative. It was as if he were some kind of little god directing me, throwing me challenges, plotting my reactions. He must have felt incredibly powerful, watching me through the lens of his fiction, throwing his versions of me to a world that hungers for the freaky, the personality disordered.

Most of all, I suppose, I was his little puzzle. Some sort of psychological mystery to be solved. With surgical precision, he picked through the slices of my past to decode me. The suitcase must have been his greatest find too: the missing link, my father - so neatly packaged, was laid before him.

I suppose his book is to me what the suitcase was to him. It offers up a certain truth at a certain time. His book is a Ralph truth, packed with my memories that have been misappropriated, distorted. Of course I remember telling him about my father and the bathroom. We were still in London then, walking through Hyde Park on a silvery day. It must have been autumn, for crisp leaves populated the grasslands...

But I'm suddenly not sure, I could have told him on our day trip to Brighton in winter, when even the pebbles on the beach felt like frozen perils.

I think it was Brighton. We were on the shabby carnival pier, I'd tried to throw a ball through a hoop in one of the games stalls, but hadn't got it in once.

"Didn't your father ever play ball with you?" Ralph had laughed, as my fifth throw landed a good meter from its intended target.

"Nope," I'd shrugged, "dad wasn't much of a ball player. Guess it runs in the family." I thanked the crabby, scrawny old codger who was running the stand, he ignored me.

"So," Ralph continued, "what did your dad do with you when you were a kid?"

"I don't know." The sea was unsettled, flecks of white churning in the dank grey water.

"Didn't you play games and that sort of thing?" he pressed.

"Well, yes. He liked chess, but I wasn't much good. Andrew was better, had better strategy. Chess is mainly about strategy, you know, thinking ahead."

"You never really talk about him."

"Who?" I knew who.

“Your father.”

“Oh.”

“Does it hurt thinking about him?”

I leaned over the wooden railings, to our left, a painted wooden frieze of a beefy man in swimming jocks carrying a dainty woman in a blue polka dot bikini. Where their heads should have been, were large round holes. They remained empty until two kids ran behind and stuck their heads in the empty spaces - the girl was the man, the boy, the woman. Their father took a photograph, their mother laughed, her arm resting easily on her husband's shoulder. It was an unsettling scene: a normal family day out.

Ralph put his arm around me, I looked over into the sea – choppy, irritable.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you,” he said slowly, “it's just that, well, I feel so strongly for you Alice. I do. I really love you, like I've never loved anyone before. I don't think I ever really fell in love before I met you.”

Lies. Lies. All a pack of fucking lies. He does the same in his book, professes his desperate love for Lucy and yet... none of it was real, really. If it was, would he really have left? Could he have left?

But, back then I believed him, was drawn to his charismatic lies. Even his eyes seemed so earnest, “I just...” he touched my face, his blue woollen gloves cold on my skin, “I just want you to trust me, I want you to know that I'll always be here for you, no matter what. Nothing in this world is stronger than how I feel for you. You have to believe that.” He hugged me, a deep overwhelming embrace.

I still can't believe he was such a fucking sociopath - saying those things, looking adoringly into my eyes and sprouting such lies. It was Omi who always used to say: “Talk is cheap, but money buys the whiskey.” Wish I'd listened more to Omi when I was growing up. There's some wisdom to be had in age.

I don't know if Ralph really did love me or if he was just using me to further his ambitions of being a writer.

Perhaps it's as his book says – that he loved me, but that there are some love affairs that are doomed. Perhaps it was inevitable that our relationship would self-destruct - in his book, their love is some kind of map that leads through a maze of entropy into a slushy nothingness. In Ralph's horrid, cynical little tale, love is sinking sand – there's no way out, and the harder you flay and fight, the faster you slide into the suffocating muddiness of an inescapable ending. I'm beginning to think that it's not fate after all, but that it's the past that's to blame: cause and effect. The past was always going to lead here.

Where else could it have led?

And that wintry, glum Brighton day, as we walked amongst the washed out stalls on the creaky pier, where did that lead?

Back to my father and the bathroom: “He was the only person, apart from Gladys, when I was a child with whom I had any real physical contact.” Ralph took my gloved hand in his - always such uncomplicated affection. “He would wash my wounds, as if he were desperately trying to prove to me that I wasn’t untouchable. I sometimes felt like that, like no one wanted me...” It felt hard saying these things, exposing things - I was no longer a mystery, I was achingly human, ugly in my frailty. For a while we walked on, gloved hand in gloved hand, the wooden pier creaking as waves pounded against its supports.

“It’s OK,” he said, squeezing my hand.

I said nothing. Just the sea and his hand.

After a few minutes I continued, slowly: “I wasn’t popular at school because of the freaky things that were always happening to me. But he tried to make me feel normal. I know it hurt him to see me all cut up and stitched up.” I took a deep breath, “It was really hard when he left, I can’t explain, really. It was just such a horrific sense of loss.”

He hugged me then, stroking my hair. I remember it being so cold. What a crazy cold day to be by the sea.

I don’t know how that Ralph, that tender, sensitive Ralph, could have twisted my father and I into such warped little characters in his stark, white bathroom.

And it feels like my whole life has been like this.

Now I stand in a courtroom while a rotund prosecutor reads through statements that are nothing but another lie I’m being forced to live.

I never knew Andrew had given a statement. I thought he would have left before that - he was on the run, wary of the police. Detective-Sergeant Aucamp had taken his statement – the man from the strange pokey room, hair like Ralph’s.

A chilly breeze through the courtroom windows; unsettling after the still heat of the early morning - just like Cape Town to be so capricious. Statements filled with words I can’t hear – as if I’m a child again, in the shed, pouring over dad’s notebooks trying desperately to squeeze sentences and sense from the odd word I could read. Just like the real Alice from Wonderland, I’m in some kind of utterly ludicrous, absurdist courtroom. It’s surreal, standing in a dock in your very own court case and not being able to hear. Like a cell-phone conversation where the signal is interrupted and all you’re left with are fragments of words that you somehow

try to squeeze into sentences, like that hangman game where you fill in the missing letters, stick-body part by stick-body part. Sometimes you get it in time – most times I was hung.

The stenographer types, the magistrate writes, the prosecutor speaks, nobody hears. There's a listless resignation to their actions: just another deaf day in Courtroom 13. Outside, the clouds are on the march, again, I can feel them preparing to battle the mountain, they'll heave and heave against the crags – but the mountain always wins. That's just the way it is, the way it will always be.

There's a slight shuffle of papers, Jeffrey speaks, reading from notes in a pale yellow folder. Even his voice sounds distant – he's usually so articulate, loud. It's as if it's the place, the hollow courtroom itself that gobbles words, the walls absorbing all the lies, there's very little truth in places like this. The truth lives inside us unable to escape the Morse-code lies that stutter back from the front of the courtroom - the lies are written into law, into judgments, there they become hard, immovable mountains.

It seems like I've stood for hours, my feet have ballooned into the new blue court shoes I bought specially for today – I remember thinking they looked safe. But instead they have become monstrous, some kind of Veronica-esque shoe revenge, a living extension of her: first they blistered my ankles on the walk down here, and now they're maliciously strangling my toes. I want to tear them off, releasing my rapidly fattening feet, but I don't, I won't. For a while I amuse myself with inane imaginings: I remove my shoes, the stench is overpowering, groaning chaos ensues, the magistrate lifts her robe up to cover her nose - she is wearing nothing beneath her Darth Vader gown... Meanwhile the portly prosecutor, in a bid to escape the nauseating pong dashes towards the door, but he slips on the river of sweat that poured out of my shoes, and slides right out the door...

It's a court of law, I tell myself, you should behave.

But, your honour, I protest, it's not a court of law, it's a court of lies, of fantastical tales, of yarns that have been so quickly spun that nobody noticed the truth being buried.

Eventually everyone stands and the magistrate leaves.

I still don't know what has gone on - what is going on.

Just the other day I found a mole in the driveway of my block. It lay there in the sunlight, unburied, inert. I touched its soft fur to see if it was still alive – it gave a delicate, weary flinch.

Carefully, I picked it up in my red jersey - it didn't resist, it was beyond resisting - and I turned it over to see if it was wounded, perhaps one of the neighbourhood cats had attacked it. There was no blood, only its tiny teeth and small claw-like legs on its blob of a body. No eyes

either, only little blonde hair markings - like ancient tattoos - where eyes should have been, or where eyes once were. And then I noticed the strange clear yellow liquid that was coming from its anus - and already the ants. Even before the mole was dead, the insects were moving in, drawn to the half-dead, as if they could smell death: nature's cleaners, the best recyclers on the planet.

It was the first time I'd seen a mole. I've only ever seen the little mounds that zigzag through gardens, always an invisible culprit wreaking havoc - one of the gardener's many enemies. And yet, lying there, wrapped in my red jersey, it seemed so innocent, a wounded, dying creature. What to do with it? Take it to the vet? There's one down the road, but it only operates in the early evenings and it was midday when I found it. Besides, what would the vet do? Moles are considered a common pest - I've heard that people chop them in half with their spades if they manage to catch one burrowing under a snaking mound.

Perhaps it had been poisoned by some zealous gardener in the area.

For a while I stood there, the mole wrapped in my red cardigan, uncertain of what to do. I couldn't just leave it to die. But what would the vet do - it was half-dead anyway. I thought of Omi half-living, half-dead. Why do humans get to teeter on the edge? That settled it: I would take it to the vet later when it opened, and for the moment, would leave it under one of the empty plastic plant containers so the cats couldn't get it.

When I came back later, it was dead. I buried it - and my shame.

I had let it die - it was the easiest thing to do.

Again like a broken record, that recurring thought as I smoothed the sand over its little grave: *inaction has consequences too*.

Jeffrey September finds me in the courthouse's smokers courtyard, there's a bench and a sickly looking tree - too much second hand smoke no doubt. Only three others in the courtyard, lazily smoking on the bench - official looking types. I'm sitting on the steps, the malevolent shoes lying so innocently beside my inflamed feet.

"It went well," Jeffrey says, sitting down beside me, "you did well."

"I just stood there." I take a drag on my cigarette. "I couldn't hear anything. I don't even know what happened in there."

"You're a lucky lady," he smiles at me, always his enormous suits, "I think it was Adele's testimony - and your brother's." He's still all fired up from being in court - as if anyone could be excited by that sleepy circus.

“What did my brother say?” The cold front has settled in, ominous clouds, a bitter, blustery wind.

“That it was a terrible accident.”

It was a terrible accident. And then again, I guess it wasn't.

“Your brother’s testimony was...” He clasps his hands, an almost prayer position, “You know...”

“Supportive?” I finish my cigarette, stub it out on in the sand pot – a muddled colony of cigarette butts.

He nods, “I guess you can understand my job. There are always a lot of people in and out of my office. Most people have stories, elaborate lies,” he sighs, “most people are trying to hide the truth, get away with murder. That’s the way it is in my business, you get a bit mistrustful after a while. There’s so much bullshit, so many bullshitters. Sometimes you make a wrong judgement.”

So ironic.

Instead I say, “Didn’t you read Andrew’s testimony before?”

“To be honest, Alice, I didn’t have time. Too many cases, an overburdened system,” he sighs, “I’m not saying it’s right, but it’s the way things are running at the moment - things slip through the cracks here.”

“Oh.” I pull my jersey tighter. “What now?”

“It’s all over.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re free to go, Alice. You’re innocent.”

“Innocent?”

“Yes,” he nods enthusiastically, happily.

“But Veronica is dead.”

“Yes, but it was an accident. They dismissed the case.”

“But, what about doing community service? Something, you know?” Anything to atone for this profound feeling of remorse, shame.

“What for? You’ve been found to be innocent. You can get on with your life and forget about this whole thing.”

There are blotchy shadows on the courtyard from the dark clouds above. “I doubt I’ll ever be able to forget this.”

“People have short memories, Alice,” he stands up, brushing off the back of his oversized suit. “I’ve got to dash, got another court appearance this afternoon.” He stretches

out his hand. I feel my limp hand slip into his, he gives it a vigorous, victorious shake, "Cheers, Alice."

"Bye," I say. Looking up into his eyes, I feel that I'm already gone, Veronica too. The case is closed.

That's that.

Jeffrey September releases my flaccid hand and squeezes my shoulder, "Take care of yourself."

University of Cape Town

13.

"No flies get into a shut mouth."

Spanish Proverb

It's ludicrous. I shouldn't be here.

But I am.

"Hi," I say. Perhaps that's too casual I think suddenly, for the podgy policewoman sighs, cocks her head slightly, looks perturbed. I try again, smiling awkwardly: "Good morning." No response. "Um, I'm looking for Detective-Sergeant Aucamp."

"What for?" Nosily, impatient.

"In connection with one of his cases."

Cocky: "Do you have an appointment?"

"No." Shit.

"Your name." Perhaps she's so irritable because her uniform is squeezing her, it's as if it's a giant corset or a second skin, it's so tight.

"Alice Wolfe."

She picks up a grubby phone and dials a number. Testily: "There's somebody here to see you, she doesn't have an appointment." A muted voice responds. She slams down the receiver, to me, annoyed: "Room 304."

"Thanks." I turn to leave, realising suddenly that I don't know where to go, turn back, "Where is room..."

She looks directly at me, "Next!"

There's a door leading out of the charge office and down a face-brick corridor. I ask one of the policemen that I meet in the corridor, he looks familiar, freckled – the fierce one from the van? But it isn't him, his voice is different - deeper, gentle: "On the third floor, take the steps on the right."

Why do government buildings have to be so obscenely functional? Drab linoleum floors, sour face-brick walls, endless, echoey corridors, and everywhere, dark green notice boards swarming with fuzzy mugshots of wanted criminals who look more terrifying simply because they're so indistinct - they could be anyone.

His door is closed. I knock.

A bored, "Come."

“Good morning.” Politely.

He looks up, a little perplexed. Again, it’s his hair, something so Ralph about his hair – for a startling moment I wonder if I came just to see his hair, it’s the colour, or maybe the texture, a little soft, a little curly. For some reason his hair hurts - I can’t explain why - after all this time.

“Hi.” He pushes the cap onto his pen, and places it neatly into a wooden rest on his desk.

“I don’t know if you remember me...”

“Of course. Sit down.” His office is neat, a few files piled precisely on the left side of his table, it’s oddly homely compared to the stark corridors beyond – a few landscape watercolours on the walls, a worn rug, several bookshelves filled with legal looking books. I wonder if he has *Investigating for Dummies*. Always those renegade thoughts when I should be serious.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” I hear myself say, “I know you must be very busy.”

“It’s OK.” Kind, gentle. “I hear that you got off.”

“Yes.”

“Good for you.”

“Well. Yes.” And then, as if it’s the only reason why I’m here, I blurt: “I am working at Somerset Hospital, as a volunteer. In the oncology ward.”

He raises his eyebrows, “That can’t be too easy.”

“It’s very sad, obviously, but I feel like I’m doing something...” His Ralph hair is distracting, raw. I look out his window, a view of the building across the road - other offices, other lives. “You know, something valuable. Which is important.” I don’t know what else to say. “Obviously.”

“Of course.”

There’s a tender silence. “I’ve come to ask about my brother.”

“Ah, yes. Your brother.” It’s as if my visit suddenly makes sense. Quietly, knowingly: “What about your brother?”

You and your brother...

“I didn’t know...” What am I really trying to say? “I didn’t know that you’d taken his statement.”

“Yes, I did. He came to see me. I think it was a day or two after the accident.”

“Oh. I see.” Slowly. “I didn’t know that he’d come to see you.”

“If my memory serves me correctly, I think it was the same day that I called you.”

"I remember," I sigh and look out of the window - the drab building opposite, I wonder if he ever gets excited by the view. He's watching me, those silvery seeing eyes – there's something of that little room that day. Unnerved, I feel the words stumbling out, awkwardly, almost unformed, "It's just that he's gone missing, and um, I suppose I want to know if you know anything about that..."

Calculated: "What makes you think that I might know anything about that?"

"I don't know. I was just surprised in court when I found out that he'd come to see you. That he'd even given a testimony. And, guess I was just wondering if you knew anything about him," faltering again, "you know... About his life."

"You mean about his cocaine habits."

"There a lot of people in this city doing coke." So defensive. That sudden sibling thing - it even surprises me.

He raises his eyebrows, and then shrugs, "You know the reason why I think that things were so easy for you was because her family didn't want to push too hard on the case when they found about the coke. Large quantities I might add. I think her mother felt it would be..." he searches for the right word, "scandalous. They didn't want her to be remembered like that." His next words are considered: "Lucky for you, I guess."

Always the lucky thing.

He fiddles with a file on his desk, "I'm curious though. What do you think I might know about your brother's life?"

Ever the investigator.

"I don't know. I don't know at all, really." What am I doing here? "Don't you know anything?"

"About what?"

"It's just that he's gone missing, and it's been a long time, and I thought that you might know, sort of, if he's ever coming back..." I look down at my hands, it's always my missing finger I see. "My mother really misses him. He's all she's got." I nod - stupidly I think.

"Your mother still has you."

"It's not the same." It's definitely not the same. It never could have been the same, I know that now. "You know, mothers and sons, and all that..."

Fathers and sons too, I suppose. But I don't say that. Dad still phones – his regular three month phone call, but now it's Andrew who dominates the conversation. Even in his absence his presence. On the good days – the optimistic days - I think that maybe Andrew's done a dad – that the wanderer within him is roaming foreign lands, living foreign lives...

Detective Sergeant Aucamp looks out of his window, sighs, "I did talk to your brother - he gave me his statement about the accident. He wasn't prepared to talk about anything else, denied that he knew anything about the drugs in his girlfriend's blood."

"That was all?"

"That was all."

Silence.

"So you don't know what might have happened to him?"

"No, Alice, I'm afraid I don't. I really don't."

An abandoned key on the sidewalk. On the first day I leave it there, in case someone has dropped it, accidentally.

On the second day, I take it.

I place it on the low table in my lounge and look at it for a long time. It's like Andrew, Pluto, except in this case I have the key and not the bolted lock. I imagine myself stalking down lanes and up streets trying to find the key's home, squeezing it into locks, brutally trying to force a turn. I could spend the rest of my life trying to find it's fit and never succeed.

For some reason it brings me comfort, it's just like me: a half of something that's missing, lost.

Even old Mr Maudlin has tried to unlock Andrew. He tells me every now and then that he's "On it..."

I don't hold out much hope of ever knowing what has happened to my brother. All I do know is that in the end, he did right by me - in his own way. Of course that somehow makes it worse: he cared enough to give a statement that would absolve me.

I can't help thinking of the wedding photograph. I know now why he took it - he wanted it for the same reason I wanted it. He wanted a happy piece of them - in that frozen flash they did look happy. For us children that laughing wedding image was some kind of dream that we never got to live.

He tried to live it with Veronica: their engagement, the fat blood-diamond fairytale ring.

Except it all went wrong. Just like it had with the photograph. I remember when mom found it - he'd hidden it in his pillowcase and somehow it had fallen to the floor as she'd tenderly kissed him goodnight.

She'd picked it up and looked at it, astonished: an emotional slap.

"Where did you get this?" she'd demanded.

Andrew cowered, her fury was seldom directed at him; whimpering, "From Alice."

Her rage redirected to my side of the room, her voice crisp: "Alice." Seething. "Where did you get this?" She shook the photograph roughly.

I could barely make out the image, baffled by the sudden torrent of accusation, afraid, "What is it?"

"Don't play innocent with me, you little liar." She pushed the photograph towards me. A black-and-white image of my parents cutting a cake in a garden - my mother's gauze veil billowing behind her. Casually leaning against each other, laughing – such unaffected delight.

My mother's manicured thumb obscured the cake, the knife. Unsettling that behind the frozen happy couple my mother stood alone, furious in her bloodlike lipstick and uptight clothes.

Finally, I admitted, "I found it." It was the truth.

"Where?"

"It was in one of the books... On the bookshelf," I lied.

"You are never, ever to go through those books without my permission. Do you understand me?"

Later, as we heard her pulling the books from the shelves in the lounge, I'd asked Andrew why he'd taken it from the shed, "It wasn't yours to take," I'd hissed at him.

He was lying in the dark in the bedroom we shared. "I wanted it," he'd said. "I wanted to look at it."

"I also wanted to look at it. You can't just take things for yourself."

"Yes I can," he'd said evenly, determined.

"You can't," I'd snapped.

"I can do what I want. I'm the man around here."

I never did see that photograph again. I can only imagine she burnt it, watching her smiling past swallowed by the scorching flames of the present. In the sink the next morning, I could make out the black charred remains of what I suspected was all we'd had of our parents as a happy couple.

It was the end of the impasse between Andrew and I. The shed had brought us together and torn us apart again. The most cherished of my father's possessions was gone, and it was all Andrew's doing. I blamed him, I hated him. It was his fault that the smiling mother I had never known, was gone.

Looking back, I suppose Andrew took it because he cared. It's a strange word to associate with him: *cared*.

Strange because I always think of him now in the past tense - as if he's no longer here, although he always is - and strange because caring is never something I would have given Andrew credit for.

I'm not sentimental enough to think that if he waltzed back into my life, unharmed, whole – alive - that he and I would be the picture of sibling delight, it's just that I might think of him a little differently.

But then again, maybe I wouldn't.

I don't know how I feel about him... Sad that he's gone? Maybe. There's also a strange sense of envy now: he really was dad's child.

He had a father. I was, on the other hand, fathered brutally, like thousands before, like thousands after, by an unknown man.

Half of me, forever missing, forever a sin, that malevolent half that tore my mother from her happy life and turned her into something so terribly sad.

The Sea of wise Insects

Part 6: The velvet tray

“When I was five years old I saw an insect that had been eaten by ants and of which nothing remained except the shell. Through the holes in its anatomy one could see the sky.”

Salvador Dalí

When it came to finally leaving Lucy, Jack simply did it.

Of course the dream spurred him on. As usual, he was falling down the stairs and there at the bottom was Lucy's head on a velvet tray. She was no longer crying. Her eyes had the hard, cold gaze of his mother. He had run up to her, panicked, and looked into her eyes, which seemed no longer human, they were almost insect-like: large and round and disturbingly empty.

Shut out, abandoned, just like his mother had done to him.

It was only then that he noticed the severed finger coming out of Lucy's mouth. For some reason, Jack felt compelled to pull it out; he pinned it clumsily to the velvet tray. On it was the ominous butterfly ring.

Of course the dream terrified him. He could not sleep again.

Worse was when Lucy finally awoke. She lay quietly in the bed for a time, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Finally, she said, rather sadly, "I haven't been able to fly in my dreams for the longest time."

It was time to set them both free. Or so he thought. Just like he'd done on the *Night of Flight* from his mother's life: he'd taken Ed's trays, hundreds and hundreds of them down to the seashore and one by one he'd set them free to float out onto the moonlit sea.

There they had drifted out, the vile velvet coffins - his beloved insects free at last.

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Epilogue:

“Yet the interdependence of living things, from the lowest form of microscopic life through plants and the animal kingdom to man, is a vast and complex subject, and the more we know about it the more we realise how much remains to be discovered. In attempting to control one species of plant or animal, it is all too easy to disturb the whole balance of nature, of which our understanding is only partial or imperfect.”

From *Man and Insects* by L Hugh Newman

It's late afternoon when I arrive at her house. The garden is overgrown – nature reclaiming its territory from my mother's determined youth. It used to be important for her to have a beautiful garden. Appearances, always.

The front gate is broken, I push it open. The garden darker than it ever was before – more secret spots than in my childhood – more places to hide and discover. No doubt more spiders too. The leaves of the jacaranda tree that I fell from so many times have formed an impenetrable fog of green. Delicious monsters have eaten entire flowerbeds.

Lilac paint peels from the front door, under it I can see the red of my teenage years. I knock. There's no answer. I know she's here, her car is parked in front of the garage, and she never leaves the house unless she absolutely has to – which is usually on a Tuesday afternoon to do her weekly shopping. I knock again, a little louder this time. And, again I wait. The house is silent, the curtains facing the street are drawn. Anyone else would have left by now, but I know her game. I knock once more – it'll be the final one. After a suitably long wait, she answers.

“Hi mom.”

“What do you want?” Her jeans and shirt are grubby, her hair undyed, uncombed. She has finally abandoned all make up.

“I've come to say hi, and I've brought you some more books.” I squeeze past her through the entrance hall piled with old newspapers from the last year and into the lounge. Musty, the curtains are drawn in here too. I open some of them.

“I like them shut.” That tone in her voice. She's standing at the lounge door watching me in her watching way.

“You need a bit of light in here. Otherwise the dust mites will multiply.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” That tone again. I don’t reply, I’ve learnt.

I open the door to the back garden – it’s as chaotic as the front. Green clutter, green slimy pool, breeding lots of slippery green creatures no doubt. I can’t help thinking of her green dress and her green shoes – I wonder what happened to all those clothes.

“I like the garden now,” I say, half to her, half by way of making some kind of conversation with her, “I’m not being sarcastic either.” She doesn’t reply. “Just in case you thought I was.”

She ignores me, goes to the kitchen and comes back a few minutes later with a mug of milky tea for each of us. We sit facing each other. I’ve discarded my shoes, and have curled my legs up on the armchair, my hands wound round the mug. She looks absently through the books I’ve brought for her, and finally she asks it: “Any news of Andrew?”

“I’m working on it.”

“You say that every time.”

“I know I do.” Silence. She likes this game. We sit in it for a while. She watches me throughout, staring, unblinking insect eyes. I consider her for a while, then look out the window and sip my tea.

“I paid your phone bill,” I finally say.

She looks away, “I don’t know why you did that.”

“In case you need to use it.”

“I never need to use it.”

“You never know what could happen.”

“Like what?”

“Well... There’s an epidemic of crime in this country.”

“I haven’t got anything anyone would want to steal.”

“You’ve got a TV.”

“It’s so old. Who’d want to steal that?”

“As if a crappy TV isn’t worth stealing when you’ve got nothing.” My mother just doesn’t get it. “Anyway, it’s not only about stealing.” And then it slips out, slightly (surprisingly) viciously: “It’s about anger.”

Equally snappy: “Anger for what?”

“For the past.” It hangs there a moment, loaded. Finally I settle for the rhetoric of the present: “For Apartheid.”

“Oh.” She sips her tea thoughtfully, and then innocently, “Are people still angry about that? I thought that was all over now.”

I sigh, and fiddling with the frayed piping on the end the armchair, finally say, "You of all people should know that the past doesn't simply disintegrate because it's gone."

For some reason, I enjoy these strange, strained visits. I feel happy here. Perhaps it's comforting – it is after all the house of my childhood. Or perhaps it's because I know now, and I want to make some kind of peace.

The mug I'm drinking from is blue, a soft blue - almost the same colour as the delicate china tea set which she used that day so many years ago when Ralph and I came to visit.

"You know Ralph was writing a book," I say eventually.

"Yes."

"He had it published. Under a pseudonym."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, but I've left it for you to read. It's the one called *The Sea of Wise Insects*."

"How do you know it's his book?"

"Because we're all in it. You, me, Ralph, dad." It's all I can say really, it's the only way I can let her know that I know - that I really know now.

She sits in her scruffy chair sipping her tea. I wonder again, as I've wondered so many times, what keeps her alive. I can only think it's hope.

Eventually I go into the back garden, as I always do.

It's always Pluto out here. Pluto and Andrew, Andrew and Pluto, as if they're soldered together, flipsides of the same missing piece.

The shed is gone.

I came by the one day last year and it was no longer there: "What happened to the shed?" I'd asked, flustered - devastated.

"What shed?" she'd replied.

"The one in the garden," I'd insisted.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she shrugged.

"You know, where Winston used to keep the garden implements – it was full of old awnings..."

"You're imagining things, Alice. You always did have an active imagination."

I'd gone out to where the shed once was, you'd never have known it was ever there. There were no indents in the ground from where it had stood for so many years, indeed, for most of my life.

I had lent down, rubbed my hand along the ground, searching for some trace, some clue, but there was nothing. Nothing but the ants that crawled innocently, unknowingly across the dark earth.

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The End