

# **Fugues**

Seven short stories

Submitted in fulfilment for the requirements of the Masters degree in Creative Writing

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## Jungfrau

It was the virgin Jessica who taught me about wickedness.

I once asked her why she was called the virgin Jessica. She looked at me with strange eyes and said that it was because she was a special person, like the Blessed Mary.

“A virgin is someone who can do God’s work. And if you’re very, very clean and pure you can be one of the one hundred and forty-four virgins who will be carried in God’s bosom at the end of the world. And if you’re not –”

She leaned to me, placing her yellow teeth before my eye, I thought she could suck it out, she was so close. She whispered, “If you’re not, then God will toss you to the devil who will roast you with his horn. Like toasted marshmallows. You don’t want the devil’s evil horn to make a hole in your pretty skin, now do you?”

She kissed my nose - my little rabbit’s nose she called it - and walked away, her long white summer dress falling just above her high, high red heels. Her smell, cigarette smoke and last night’s perfume, lingered around my eyeball. I wanted to be like the virgin Jessica; I wanted a name like hers.

We called her Jez for short.

My mother was the virgin Jessica’s adopted sister. She was older and more tired. The virgin had no children while my mother had forty-three. She was a schoolteacher in one of those schools where the children wore threadbare jerseys and had hard green snot

crystallized around their noses and above their crusty lips that could say *poes* without tasting the bitterness of the word. Or feeling the secret relish that I received from forbidden language.

Sometimes my mother would have her other children, her little smelly children, over at our house. They would drape themselves around our furniture like dirty ornamental cherubs and drink hot pea soup. The steam melted the snot that then ran down into the soup. It did not matter to them because they ate their boogers anyway.

I hated my mother's other children. I glared at them to let them know but they only stared back without much expression. Their faces had nothing to say, I could read nothing there. Jessica found them amusing.

"Sweet little things," she mumbled and laughed into her coffee. Her shoulders shook like an epileptic's.

After the virgin told me how important it was to be clean, I tolerated them in the haze of my superiority. I was clean, I bathed every night and they were filthy, so obviously God wouldn't want to touch them. The virgin spent hours in the bathroom every evening. Naked she walked from the bathroom, so lovely and proud she seemed tall. She went to her bedroom and I followed faithfully to observe the ritual more awesome than church. With creams and powders she made herself even cleaner for God. How he must love her, I thought. She spread his love upon her as she rubbed her skin until it glowed and her smell spread through the house, covering us all with the strength of her devotion. Then she went off to work, just after my father came home, and stayed out until late.

The virgin Jessica had a cloud of charm twenty centimetres around her body. Strangers hated her because they thought that anyone that beautiful could only be mean. But it wasn't her pretty green eyes or mouth that made her beautiful. She was beautiful because she was wrapped in a cloud of charm. And when you breathed in the air from the cloud, you breathed in the charm and it went down your veins and into your heart and made you love her. If you came close enough, she would smile her skew smile, pretend to love you with her slitted eyes and the charm would ooze out, like fog from a sewer, grab you and sink into your heart and lungs. Even I who had known her all my life would feel the charm with a funny ache. She had a way of leaning forward when she spoke and, claiming the space around her with her smell, her charm. And my father, who didn't speak or laugh, he too would be conquered.

“What's the old man up to tonight?” she would lean to him, her eyes laughing as she winked and he would fold his newspaper and look pleased, even grunt with contentment.

I tried saying that to him once, leaning forward the way Jez did and he only looked at me coldly. So cold that my wink froze halfway and my laugh caught in my throat. Embarrassed, I transformed my laugh into a cough and rubbed my eyes like a tired little girl. I think it was then that I realised his love for me was bound to me as his tired little girl. And my love for him bound me to my little girl's world.

I took pains to keep my girl's world intact after that. When boys teased me at school, I felt the walls of my father's favour tremble. One of them phoned and sang a dirty song into my hot ear. My head burnt for days after that, I felt the fires of hell from

that foolish boy's phone call. I feared that the fires would start from inside me, catching my hair and eating the strands like candlewick, melting my skin like wax, dripping and staining mommy's carpets (she would be very cross). It would eat the horrid children in the schoolroom, then crawl towards my mother, burn her slowly and then finish with her chalk-stained fingers (her glasses shrivel up and her mouth creases with silent screams). Unsatisfied, the fire would move towards my father, crackling his newspaper, the smoke would cloud his glasses. And beneath them, his eyes would have that same cold look but would not be cold enough to douse the flames. The fire would then stagger towards the virgin. Leering it would grab her ankles, move beneath her white frock, turning it to soot. She would moan, then writhe, her head would toss back, her hair unravel and she would scream from the force of the flames. The virgin Jessica's screams in my head made me put a knife on the windowsill of her bedroom so that she could undo the burglar bars and escape.

The image of flames and screams resounded in my head for several days. They surged whenever the other girls in their shortened dresses lit cigarettes in the toilets. They could not see how the flames would get bigger. I checked all the stubs carelessly tossed into the sink and bin to make sure that the fire did not escape. The slight thrill I had once received from the boys teasing me in the safety of the schoolyard, away from my father's fearsome eyes, faded. I spent my intervals at the far end of the yard, eating butter sandwiches and talking to the dogs through the wire fence. I had to coax them

across the road with my milk and the ham from my bread. I was found one day, squatting on my haunches and telling Nina and Hildegarde about a garden of moss. I felt a shadow, it made me shiver and I looked up to see if God was angry. Instead I saw Ms Collins above me, her eyes made huge by her glasses. I was scared that she'd be cross. I wanted to pee, some dripped down my leg, so I crouched and shut my eyes tightly, praying fervently that I would not pee. She reached out and took my hand and asked me to make some charts for her in exchange for some biscuits and cooldrink. From then on I spent my breaks helping Ms Collins in her art room and she would give me yoghurt and fruit and sometimes chocolate. I never ate these. Instead I put them on the steps of the white Kirk on the way home. Ms Collins tried to ask me questions sometimes but I was shy and would only whisper, I don't know. Sometimes she would speak relentlessly. She told me about her baby daughter who tried to eat grass.

I preferred just to look at her. I liked looking at her big ugly eyes and her pretty hair. But I think she got tired of me, maybe my silence wore her down, maybe the sound of her own voice scared her for it must have been like talking to herself. She probably thought she was going mad, talking and talking to still brown eyes. But the day I went into her art room and found a boy from my class helping her with charts, I remembered the fires of hell and ran away. Maybe she wanted me to burn, maybe she wasn't a virgin either.

It must have been the sound of midnight that woke me. The house without my mother felt unguarded. It seemed her presence warded off a fury of demons. I sat upright in

my clean girl's bed, trying to feel the pulse of the night. I slipped my feet over the side of the bed and listened. The darkness is covered by a haze that makes the stillness move.

I knew that my mother had not returned. The wild child with snot streaming from his hands, his nose and eyes, he had her still. I sat at the lounge window, watching the sea, hating the wild child. He had come after supper, his little body panting like a steam engine. He ran up the hill in the rain, he had run all the way from the settlement. He sobbed, buried his head in my mother's trousers.

"Please, please, *asseblief*, please," his broken voice rasped.

I watched the boy cry, wishing so very hard that he hadn't come until my mother barked, Evelyn, get out of here.

I prayed that the wild child would leave, go back to your plague, I screamed silently. It was too late. He had brought his plague with him. It wandered about our house and muffled my cries to beware. So she did not hear me and let the child take her away.

Her trousers soiled with tears and mucus, she rushed into her bedroom where I was watching one of those endless sit-coms with silly teenagers. She rushed in and grabbed her car keys.

"Don't wait up for me."

I would not have waited for her. Even then, in the dark hour, I was not waiting for my mother.

I must have stayed at the window for at least an hour. I saw the sea roar smash roar against the rocks. I saw the stillness of the midnight road, the white line running

on towards the mountain. I saw no movement, but then I saw two people walking up the hill. They walked slowly and closely in their midnight world. The walk was a stagger. They fell pleasantly against each other. I saw them walk towards the house and only then did I see who they were.

When Jessica and my father entered the house, quietly and with the guilty grace of a burglar, they were glowing from the wind and walking and waves and wildness of midnight's beauty. The haze inherent in the darkness was centred upon them. I looked upon them with envy for I too wished to walk the empty night with them.

Jessica let out a startled sound when she saw me curled up on the window ledge.

"Look at you," she fussed, "hanging around dark windows like a mournful ghost."

Her face was close to mine and her breathing deep.

"Have you been watching for your mother? Has she come home yet?"

I shook my head, I had not been waiting for my mother.

She held my hands in her cold cold fingers. "Your hands are freezing," she said.

"You need some Milo. How long have you been sitting here? Long?"

"Your father and I went to see if your mother was coming along. I wish she'd phone but then they probably don't have one. I really don't understand why your mother involves herself in other people's business. But I suppose we should count our blessings. When we were small, Annette and me, we used to build fantasy worlds from scrap metal."

Jessica chattered on repeating the stories I had heard so many times.

Annette came home while I was clutching my Milo. I was playing the mournful ghost, the sick patient and all the while glowing in the attention of both my father and Jessica. Jessica chattered brightly, so bright that she made the darkness her own while I huddled in its shadows. My father was silent, his eyes as dark as mine. Jessica's words tripped out of her mouth and drew circles around us.

She came home and stepped into our enchanted circle. She asked for some tea. As Jessica made the tea her words stumbled then stopped. My father went to bed taking my hand as he left the kitchen. I did not want to go to bed. I wanted to be in the kitchen with just my father and Jessica and me.

I stood on a rock in the garden and stared down at the people watching my sea. They were dotted across the beach, the wind twisting their hair around their necks and forcing them closer into their jackets. They lifted their fingers to point, just like in a seaside painting. Their mouths were wide with laughter and their eyes bright yet all the while I knew that they were posing, as if for an invisible artist. Their minds could sometimes glimpse his black beret, his paint-splattered smock.

I went down to the sea to observe the desolate cry of the ocean, of the sand as it was trampled upon by flat feet with stubby toes. I sat down on my beloved sand, my desecrated temple. I glared at the fat children who clung to their parents, hanging on to their arms and legs.

"Beast with two backs," I muttered.

They smelt suburban. Their odour of white bread and Marmite drifted unpleasantly into the sea air. They huddled into their windbreakers and yawned at the ocean.

“It’s just a dark blob,” they whined, their winter paled faces cracking beneath the noon sun. Their bodies shivered from the wind nuzzling their necks.

I sat near the water’s edge and buried my pretty toes in the sand.

The crowd, the people who came to see the whales, they were noisy and their noise ate into my ears as they crunched their chips and the wrappers crackled in the wind.

“Go home,” I hissed to a solitary toddler who wandered near me.

I turned to see a woman scoop him up and pretend to eat his cute blonde curls. My coward’s face smiled at her. I was too shy to be truthful.

I stayed there for a while, watching the people watch the whales.

Then I noticed some of my mother’s children playing in the water on the other side of the beach. They shrieked and laughed, some played in their dirty clothes, others in varying stages of nakedness. They sang a ditty with filthy words while roughly shoving and splashing each other with the cold water. They knocked down their friends and made them eat sand. The suburban children’s parents shook their heads, pulled their young ones and walked away, still shaking their heads as though the shaking would dispel the image from their minds. They soon forgot all about those children who haunted the corners of my world, my mother’s chosen children.

She came to call me for lunch. She did not see her young ones who had moved towards the tidal pool and I did not tell her of them.

I sneaked my mother off the beach, chattering too brightly. We walked towards the hill; someone came running behind us. We carried on walking for my mother didn't seem to hear the footsteps, maybe I was too bright. I walked faster and we crossed the Main Road. When we reached the other side, I felt a light stronghard knock like a spirit just made solid. I turned to see the wild child hugging my mother. He gave her a flower and ran back across the road. But our quiet beach was not ours that day, the city people had transformed it. When the wild child ran back across the road, he was hit by a blue car. The driver got out, my mother ran to her child. The driver, annoyed and red, complained that he hadn't seen anyone, there was nobody there.

“Just a shadow flitted across my eyes,” his wife wailed. “Just a dark shadow.”

He said that he would fetch some help. He drove off in his blue car, the dent was slight, and he didn't come back. Perhaps to him there was nobody there, the dent was so very slight and those children are so thin, after all. The shadow which flitted across his wife's vision and fell, flitted through his mind, then fell. He did not come back.

My mother lifted the wild child in her arms. She waited and while she waited, her mouth got tighter and tighter and she wept. When one hundred blue cars had passed by, she slowly got up from the pavement, with the wild child in her arms and walked up the hill. She did not speak to me, her mouth was too tight and her hair unravelled from its pony tail. The wild child lay in her arms all the way up the hill. At our house she gave orders for Jessica to call the doctor from his Sunday lunch. Jessica and my father hovered awkwardly around her, their legs and arms looked wrong on their bodies, like they had taken them off and put them back the wrong way. They moved slowly and

clumsily like wound-down dolls. My mother lay her child on my clean girl's bed and stayed by his side.

I ate my Sunday roast ravenously. I paid little attention to the doctor's arrival or the child's crying or my mother's lost pacing. Her tight face had shut me out. I sat in the lounge and watched the sea, eating biscuits and picking at the chicken. When the violet hour came, the beach was empty, my room smelt of the wild child and the barest hint of my mother's love. But they were both gone.

I stayed in the lounge with my father and the virgin, who brought us tea. We played cards and laughed the soft, covered laughs of forbidden frivolity. We munched biscuits and watched the virgin's teasing eyes as she tried to cheat, as she toasted marshmallows over a candle flame, as she spoke, smiled, sighed. The wild child and my mother were forgotten. I did not think of the bruised bundle on my bed. Then the quiet beneath our laughter became too insistent and I was nudged off my chair to find them. It was guilt that sent me in search of her. It was the guilt of the betrayer for the betrayed because guilt is more binding than passion.

There was not a trace of my mother and the wild child in my bedroom. There was no mark of my mother's care staining the sheets with her chosen child's blood. There were no cup rings on my dressing table, no dent on the pillow. I looked for my mother in my bedroom. I hunted in every corner but could not find the slightest whisper of her smell.

I sat down on the floor, perplexed. I could find nothing of her in the lounge, that was my father's room. Their bedroom was green and clinical and did not contain either of them. The kitchen was heavy with the virgin's presence which smelt of rose water with a burny undertone.

I became agitated when I could find no trace of my mother in our house. It had been there before, it had always been there and now it was suddenly gone. Then I realised that I did not remember if her smell had been there yesterday. I did not think so, for I could not remember it. Nor last week. I went to the garage which she used as a schoolroom. As I opened the door, a fury of smells came screaming towards me. There were the wild children's smells of pain and fear and anger. And she was there, entangled in this foul mix. Nothing of her remained in the house because it was all concentrated here. Delicately it cushioned and enveloped the rawness of the children as it wove itself into them. The force of this beauty, this tenderness made me want to weep with jealousy. Such sadness, such terror. I went back to the house. I left the dim garage knowing that my mother had been gone for a long time. I had not noticed because I had been coveting the virgin.

Jessica tilted her head slightly and focussed her skew eyes on me. I had not seen her standing in the doorway, slim and graceful (she was so beautiful) watching me.

"What are you sniffing around for? Does something smell bad?"

She seemed anxious.

"Not in here," I replied, "I was just smelling. Smelling to see where my mother has gone."

“You funny funny child,” she said wrapping her precious arms around me. I pretended to squirm. “What else can that incredible nose of yours sniff out? Can you smell where your father is?”

I was surprised because she didn't understand me at all. I looked at her and saw an odd dullness beneath her pretty face.

“It doesn't happen with my nose,” I tried to explain. “It happens inside somewhere, same as when daddy and I go to the moss garden, I don't see it with my eyes.”

She regarded me with a slight frown shadowing her eyes and making her face sulky.

“What moss garden?”

“Secrets.”

I smiled sweetly at her and she lost her frown and said, “Don't you trouble your pretty little head about your inner eyes and ears, you are much too young for such worries.”

She coaxed me into helping her make sandwiches which was easy for I loved doing anything with her. But she did not know what I meant.

I sought out my mother after that. I lavished attention upon her for I felt that I had betrayed her. I betrayed her with my unholy, selfish love for the virgin. I placated her with tokens of love, with tea and wild flowers picked along the road to the beach. I feared that the Blessed Mary would not be pleased that in my heart of hearts I had

turned my love from my flesh mother to another. My guilt was augmented by my jealousy of her chosen children, that I denied her my love yet begrudged her theirs. As my guilt grew so her nocturnal visits to the township increased.

“It’s terrible, there’s so much fear out there, you couldn’t imagine it Evie. You’re a lucky lucky girl, I remember being so poor that my hunger nearly drove me insane.”

I resented her childhood poverty.

“You could so easily have been one of those children, look at Auntie Carmelita, the way her children run around, that’s the inmates ruling the asylum. So you just be grateful that you’re not like them. You think about that if it makes you sad when I go out at night.”

It did not make me sad when she went out at night. I was jealous but not sad because her absence set my nights free. I would stare at the midnight sea, I would walk the moss garden with my father.

I sought her greedily with endless cups of tea and awkwardly asked her how her day was, did she not think the weather was fine for this time of year? and smoothed her hair, kissed her cheek with my judas lips and fussed about her as much as Jessica did. And she would be propped in her chair, my mother, my failed heroine and I would talk and talk and she would say, not now, Evie, I’m tired tired, and my guilt would grow and I would leave unhappy yet relieved. Her eyes would hold mine and she would say, thanks Evie, and the guilt grew and grew because there was trust and affection in her eyes, doggy brown eyes that I did not want to love.

Those eyes changed one day and she became cross. Her breath was thin and tinny, like she did not want to take air in, let air out. The tedium of breathing seemed to offend her so she resisted it. That was when she started smoking cigarettes. She took some of Jessica's cigarettes, shrugged like Jessica and laughed.

"Makes breathing interesting," she tittered.

"Besides we're all going to die anyway," she cackled regarding the danger signs on the box. She laughed and laughed but it was a cross laugh.

It crept out of the silences, was born in the gaps of forlorn glances. This guilt would not be contained. It was in the air as plain as the tingling cold of sunny winter days. The restless sighing, the mournful pacing of a guilt so deep kept me awake those cold August nights. So cold that my fingers would ache as I lay awake, feeling the ice in the walls, the sleepless breathing of the house, the numbness of my mother's nocturnal absences. I sighed and turned the other cheek, hoping to find sleep with my back to the wall, then my face, then my back again.

There is no rest for the wicked.

"Be a good girl," my father had said as he kissed me that night. "Be a good girl for your old father."

He kissed me again and pulled the covers up to my chin. When he got up from the bed, the mattress raised as the weight lifted. I felt safe then, as the rain and wind struck down on the roof.

It was still raining as I lay staring at the ceiling in the small hours of the morning.

There is no rest for the wicked.

Sighing an old woman's sigh, I kicked my tired sore legs to the right, the side where I always raised myself from the bed. I wandered to the kitchen seeking leftovers from the virgin's dinner because I was famished. Trying to be the good child exhausted me and then left me sleepless. I could hear my father snoring. He sounded like a wailing wolf. I was surprised that he slept. When I wandered the house at night, I felt the alertness of a house that did not slumber nor sleep.

I found the virgin in her kitchen. She was eating. She stuck her fork into the mince and rammed it into her mouth before she finished the last bit. She stuffed forkfuls of mince into her mouth, sometimes pausing to mix it with spaghetti, her delicate fingers swiftly swirling the spaghetti around the fork. The apple pie dish lay empty before her.

When she looked up and saw me, spaghetti was hanging down the side of her mouth, those sweet red lips. She let go of the fork. She seemed embarrassed but she should not have because I knew that she had been fasting. The virgin often fasted to deny herself the pleasures of the flesh. I admired her for that because I could not fast no matter how hard I tried. But looking at her with spaghetti on her chin and mince on her white nightgown, I felt ill. Surely she would make herself sick, eating like that. And then I saw her face. She looked old. She looked up and when she saw me she frightened me because she looked old. The guilt had etched itself there too. I was frightened because I thought that the virgin was pure. I chased those forbidden thoughts

from my mind. I chased them until my beloved virgin seemed young again. Then unsummoned, the words came to my mouth.

“There’s no rest for the wicked,” I said.

My words hurt her, she placed her head in her hands. The guilt was what made me do it, the guilt, it made words come to my mouth. My secret joy at releasing suppressed words sank them into my flesh and I felt my skin tauten. My hands were wet so I wiped my mouth but it would not be clean. She did not forgive me. She left then. When she left, my mind screamed for her mercy, for forgiveness. She did not hear me, she took none of that with her. I sat in her chair and waited.

I longed for my mother then. I longed to place my burning face, my wet nose into her trousers and sob. I wanted her to leave her bed at night and come to me and to choose me as her child and I would choose her as my mother and the guilt would go away and we would be happy. I went to where I knew I would find some of her.

The schoolroom door creaked slightly and my white slippers upon the cold cement floor made a feather light crunch. I stood in the dark waiting to feel her and the children, waiting for sounds that were long gone. I listened for last week’s sighs, for yesterday’s laughter. I crossed my arms around myself in the cold dark room and waited. And then they came to me – the sighs, the hushed tinkles of laughter, the moans and the whimpers. The room was drenched in sorrow. I listened excitedly as the ghosts of yesterday came to me. The sounds grew less and less faint. They were calling to me. The shadows started taking shape and I saw that everything had fallen into a woven mass, a moving tapestry in the corner of the schoolroom. I saw my mother as a young animal, her hair tangled and glowing, licking her young ones, her tongue moving over

furry flesh. I wanted to join her pack and have her lick my sins away. I moved towards them, then stopped for the shadows changed again. My mother now had Jessica's face, an unfamiliar Jessica face with enormous slanted glowing eyes, feral biting teeth which dipped to the whimpering flesh beneath her. My mother was gone.

"Mommy?" I whispered. "Mommy?" It was shrill and anxious. I did not know what magic I had conjured.

"Mommy?"

Everything stopped moving. The tapestry froze and then unravelled.

And then I saw them. I had not imagined the moving tapestry in the corner of the schoolroom, nor had I imagined Jessica licking the furry flesh. As my eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light, I saw that it was my father with Jessica. They were clumsily covering their bodies, hiding themselves and I thought that was silly, I had seen it all before. But I had not known that he shared the moss garden with her. I left the garage, I heard them calling after me and I walked away.

## Jessica Without Detail

*(as told to Sean the furniture repossession man and artist by the virgin Jessica)*

Mr. Warlock's daughters breathed in tin and rust from the scrap metal in their backyard. The scrap fed them and clothed them so they did not complain. Their breath was thin and tinny but they remembered when there wasn't enough food, they weren't allowed to forget, so they inhaled corrosive dust every time they opened their windows and they did not complain. There were six of them, the Warlock girls. And they were lovely. At times they were seen with straight backs and keen eyes at the grey Church. Their ardour strained through each earnest hymn but the girls even spoke with the breathless wheeze of rusted scrap. Other times they were seen squashed in the primrose yellow Mercedes Benz with their flowered church hats hiding their faces. As the bulky yellow car bore the girls away, the neighbourhood children, orange from the unpaved roads, danced aside to avoid the flying gravel. The girls sat quietly in the backseat as they sailed through Greenpark.

There may have been a few tenacious weeds pushing through the cracks in the pavement, some errant Port Jackson trees in the sandy fields but Greenpark seemed an unkind name. The forlorn gardens bore mostly daisy bushes which (with the occasional arches) lent roundness to the square imagination of some apartheid architect. They drove past the no-good boys who always leaned against the wall of the Elite Supermarket. Sheila told her girls that they were up to no good, hanging around like that. All they ever did was get young girls pregnant and then not marry them. The boys whistled and bowed mockingly. The sisters averted their eyes as though they could be

impregnated simply by looking. But that was not their concern. What troubled them about the no-good boys was that they just stood and called out to girls all day long. The sisters never failed to close their windows when they drove past the rows of council flats, as if in fear of contagion. Even the graffiti was uninspired. Instead of the bold swirls of rebellion, the walls carried only sickly twists of black spray paint. Their own house, just on the other side, was curiously stacked. It had grown up in the last seven years to be a strange mix of metal and brick. The backyard was a forest of metal trees in a cement earth. Here iron clashed against iron as fantastic battles were enacted until Sheila would yell from an upstairs window, stop that or you'll poke out your eyes.

Sheila Warlock ruled her nest with hard nerves. She was a small woman who did not have child-bearing hips and her prune breasts hung askance on her skeletal chest. Her husband first loved her because he was then too poor and too Catholic to seek anything else. He thought himself clever when he wooed the emaciated Sheila for surely those hips could breed no more than one son. He discovered too late Sheila's appetite. She was as hungry as she looked. Sam gave her all that he could, and he didn't own much more than his two arms, his two legs and the clothes on his back, so he grew thinner and thinner. His young daughters' faces reflected his lean unhappy life.

When Annette, the youngest, was seven years old, he found her in the metal backyard, on the cold cement. She was trying to eat a picture that had been jaggedly torn from a magazine. Annette held the steaming beef casserole in her nail-bitten fingers, easily smelling the spicy warmth. She was incredulous when the promise of beef turned into the dull taste of paper. She chewed stubbornly until she finished almost an entire page. Sam roared when he found her. His skinny body drowned in his black

suit. The tiny man, old before his time, blazed before his daughter who chewed wads of glossy paper. He stuck his finger in her mouth and made her spit out the paper. He stuck his finger deep in her mouth until she choked and vomited. Then he rocked his little grey girl until her swollen belly numbed itself to her hunger pangs. There in the metal backyard Sam prayed to every god he knew, from the God who lived in the grey Church to those who skulked about the metal with cloven hooves. For a long time Annette believed that there was magic in the metal. When their fortune changed, and it did soon after, she believed even harder.

There was a slow whirlwind churning in the backyard as the metal poured in and out. No sooner had Sam brought the scrap in, it was sold again. He was not shrewd but through his good nature and best intentions he managed to build a kingdom out of scrap metal. By the time Annette was fourteen, her hunger pangs were restricted to fast days only.

I met them in the days before salmon and blue cheese, before they became lovely. I knew them before the little cottage grew up to be a fortress; I knew and loved Annette before she turned from grey to golden. The Warlocks were strangely coloured. Their hair, skin and eyes moved and melted in the sunshine of pine and caramel to the warmth of oak and honey. When Sheila first saw me, who brought that dirty Moslem in my house? she screamed.

“I’m only half Muslim,” I pacified her, “and more Catholic.”

My parents lived in the aloneness of an illicit passion; I lived in the loneliness of it. I had no sense of a family for their families treated them as dead. Because my parents were ghosts, I was an uncertain child. I fell in love with the Warlocks Sunday

roasts, with their squabbles, their games, the way Sheila shouted at them and brushed their hair, made them breakfast and packed sandwiches with cooldrink bottles. She tied their hair with matching bobbles and ribbons and made them polish their school shoes at night, otherwise the black nugget rubbed against their white socks. They had huge bowls of fruit in the dining room, big shiny apples and unblemished bananas with a glazed perfection that made them look unreal. They drank milk, never coffee, and Sheila baked cakes for afternoon teas with their grandmother. Ma Sasman would look at me from the other side of the chocolate eclairs and say viciously, "The food here is not halaal." And Sheila would say wearily, just leave the child alone.

Annette brought me home and made me her sister. I was her dark twin. We mirrored each other in many ways but where she was light and air, I was a mercurial ocean. We mirrored each other as the sky reflects the sea. When we faced one another, the same two braids snaked down each of our shoulders, the same moody eyes stared out with a mournful knowing. But her frowns were wispy clouds, the toss of her hair, the stamp of her little foot. My anger was the foam breaking against the rocks, a rupture. Her anger drove her to tantrums, mine to wickedness. She found me and because it is her nature to find things, I became hers. Because it is my nature to possess, I made her mine.

We met outside the grey-bricked Church. She was squinting at the sun watching the people go by when I sidled up to her. Sheila had sent Annette out for giggling during the sermon. She had slapped Annette's legs and told her to go outside until she pulled herself together. I had started out as Catholic that morning and then decided, when I heard the first off key hymn, that I was feeling Muslim instead. So I prowled

about the church parking area, idle. When she took me home with her, the sisters were playing with the metal in the backyard, dressed in broken sheets and towels. Bridgette and Bronwyn, the twins, were sprawled before a jagged iron stick. They were chanting in their horrible tinny voices. Annette took me to Carmelita, the elder and high priestess. I did not know what to make of them. Annette pushed me forward and I felt the frowns of the older girls branded on my forehead. They looked at me with the arrogance they later became known for. Even in their poor days, the Warlock sisters were proud. There was a silence while Carmelita regarded me with a prickly blankness.

“You can be the virgin sacrifice,” she said eventually.

So I became the virgin Jessica.

Here Jessica paused in her telling. She stood up, her legs stiff for want of movement. Sean looked up sharply but did not say anything. She moved painfully to the window. It was raining, the light dim, surely this was not the ideal light for painting? She began to feel the blood flowing in her legs again. Sean lay down his brush, told her not to peek, and made them some tea. Jessica could hear him looking for something to eat in her cupboards. The familiarity comforted her. Sean counted decent intervals between snacks out of a misguided sense of politeness. Whenever he visited her, he always behaved like a little boy with a schoolteacher. She looked down from her window. The road beneath was smooth with rain and there were no people in the road below but for one figure huddled into a raincoat. The lights were on in the flats across the way. The

ordinariness of this rainy Saturday afternoon made her feel that she may just be comfortable after all.

Jessica longed for Annette, she searched for her, but she had slipped to her own hidden place. Jessica felt caught on an analogous path to the one she was meant to have found. Annette sent her random letters but never included a return address. Jessica wrote back and lied to her even in the letters that she couldn't send. Why could she not see that everything Jessica had done was out of a deep love. Sean brought the tea in pretty cups and she drank it, standing, then he positioned her on the couch and they continued.

As the sisters drew me into their world, I started changing shape. My long wild hair was pulled and bundled with navy blue bobbles that matched the regulation school panties Sheila bought for me. I lost my scrawny rodent features and became rounder and softer. Sheila would tell me that I no longer had that wicked look, that evil eye. I had to bite my tongue not to tell her what the neighbours thought about their sudden wealth and her evil eye. She treated me as yet another of her numerous Christian duties, that by her careless charity she could save my soul and get a better seat in Heaven. She handed out neatly packaged affection with her chunky gold ringed fingers. Sheila seemed to think that feeding me good Catholic stews would push the devil out of me. It did not though, it could not. For as much as I played the good child, I was not. It was only ever playing at being good. Like pretending that the metal was a castle and I was a

princess, I pretended that I was a Warlock sister and that Jesus wanted me for a sunbeam. I was a darkling child, I did not belong with them.

The scrap metal in the yard changed constantly because Sam was always buying and selling more. He used the backyard as a temporary storage space until he moved them to the yard down the road. Then he bought more and put them back in different places so one day it could be an enchanted forest, another the land above the clouds. It did not matter to us that this was Sam's work. We hardly noticed him. He haunted the edges of our world. He was a long lean piece of scrap, waiting to be transformed into something useful. He did not take up much space and if he made any sounds, we did not listen. We would see traces of Sam rather than Sam himself. In the mornings, there would be an empty cup, a ringed coffee stain, a trail of crumbs leading from the kitchen table. At night, a hat hanging on the hooks next to the door, a thin presence at the supper table which was too easily crowded out by seven daughters and a wife with hard nerves. There seemed almost to be no Sam but for the remnants of him; and even quieter, more fragile, less effective was his adoring Annette.

Annette lived in torment. Not only was she picked on as the youngest, she suffered all kinds of persecution from me. I did not want to hurt her but could not help myself. I twisted the love she had for me with the easy lies that rolled off my tongue. There were little lies, like my mother giving birth to me on a plane from the Caribbean which meant that I was not really South African and the Government could come and take me away any day now. There were demonic lies about my father beating up my mother, my diabetes that made me writhe about the floor until she was in tears because she thought I was dying. The levels of deception I was immersed in confused what was

real and what was made up. I am still not sure for I have not become any more honest: maybe it was true, maybe my father did abuse my mother for I remember very little of them. But I remember clearly the thrill I would receive from deceiving Annette. I swore her to secrecy about my supposed diabetes. I said that they would take me to hospital if anyone else knew and then she would never see me again. She cried at the thought of me dying and then sobbed at the thought of never seeing me again. I hated seeing her cry. She would stay in her bedroom, refusing to eat so that God would hear her prayers. I did not mean to hurt Annette with these stories. I told them to her because that way I knew that she could inhabit my uncertain world. I wanted her to feel unsafe too. I just wanted her to be close to me.

Sometimes Sheila called me aside, crooking her thin witch finger. My blood ran cold thinking that she would send me away. But she just whispered cryptically, "A true gentleman always sleeps on the wet spots." Then she nodded as though she was dutifully preparing me for the future she predicted for me.

When I was fourteen, Mona came to work for the Warlocks. Mona was the sleep-in girl who slept in until ten every morning before she began cleaning. She was thinner than Sheila and quickly slipped through all hiding places and secrets. Sheila first locked Sam's drinks away but that was no problem for Mona whose needle fingers could pick any lock. Sheila then hid the bottles but the scent would draw Mona through tightly capped bottles and hidden cabinets. She listened at closed doors while the older girls whispered boy stories to each other and smoked cigarettes under the bed. Mona read diaries as part of her cleaning duties. She did not tell what she knew, rather, she gave them a bowl of vinegar to take the smell of smoke out of the bedroom. She once

sneaked Carmelita and Chriswin in through the window when they missed their curfew and Sam was pacing in the lounge after midnight. Another time, she set their bedroom clock back so that Sam and Sheila had no idea that their older girls were out dancing in the early hours of the morning. She did not do any of this out of the goodness of her heart: she demanded payment, sometimes in money, sometimes in clothes. She would take the clothes she liked out of their wardrobes, help herself to any little ornament she fancied and when they discovered their things missing, the older girls could do nothing. Mona had a particular way of walking, she swung her hips forward and sideways and moved as though this momentum would keep her going. Only when they saw her swaying in their favourite pieces did they realise that Mona had taken payment. When she tired of them, she would put the dresses and blouses back in their wardrobes with sweat rings under the armpits and smelling of parties.

I was cleverer than her. She had her quick eyes on a bracelet that I asked Annette to give me as a token of her love. Mona hovered around the doorways when Annette and I played. She swept the yard when we used the metal to pretend we were having picnics at Kirstenbosch gardens. We had never been there and our imaginations had allowed the trees and shrubs there to grow jewelled flowers. Mona sensed that there were secrets to find out but whenever she was ready to pounce, she would find a quiet Annette and sweetly innocent me. She waited and waited but I was too clever.

Annette asked her one day, "Mona, what does rape mean?" and Mona looked at me with glittering eyes.

"Rape is when a man stabs a woman," Mona explained, "Why do you want to know?"

“No reason,” my loyal Annette said. But Mona was persistent and Annette guileless, so while they chewed chocolate biscuits Mona baked for her, she prompted again and Annette said, “Just a story Jessica told me.”

The battleground between Mona and me was drawn. She stole the bracelet from our bedroom and then I stole it back from hers. She took it again and told me that unless I let her keep it, she would tell Annette’s mommy and daddy that I was telling her dirty stories. Mona knew that my position was precarious. I returned her flashing gaze and said that I would tell them that she was telling Annette dirty stories, after all, it was Mona who had explained rape to Annette’s clean catholic ears. Mona knew that Annette was faithful to me so she sourly put the bracelet back in my room. I was compelled to punish Annette for her disloyalty.

Jessica asked Sean for a shawl to cover her shoulders, the light was getting dimmer and the stillness was making her cold. He dropped it over her shoulders taking care not to disturb the cloths that were meant to fall around her in soft folds. He only just touched her, and she did not mind too much. She was fond of him and felt comfortable enough. But still she wondered how much of what she had told him was the truth. She was not sure of how she felt about Annette. It changed too often. She wanted to end the story there. Sean wanted to know how she punished Annette. Jessica looked at him for a while and wondered why she was telling him this story, what was it that she wanted him to know.

“Oh I don’t really remember,” she laughed. “I think that my anger was punishment enough, yes that’s what happened.”

Jessica felt unconvincing, she continued to explain, “Oh poor Annette, she was very upset to have upset me. Silly really, just little girls’ games.”

Sean was quiet as he continued painting, he probably only half listened to what she had said.

“I have no vivid memories, no detailed or precise moments, just vague impressions and an active imagination. I have probably misremembered everything.”

She was getting cross with herself for explaining too much, she was cross that he wanted to know.

“Maybe we should stop now.”

She got up and flicked on the lamps, first the big floor lamp that brightened Sean and then the other.

“You should go, I am tired, ” she snapped at his big moon face. He looked injured , all he wanted was to be her best friend, just like Annette. She softened and offered him some more tea and biscuits before he left. She put them before him and said with her eyes smiling gently, “Really, there isn’t anything more to tell.”

So easy, she mused, just like Annette.

A furious heat crept insidiously through the windows of the primrose yellow Mercedes Benz. The brown leather seats formed a wet glue against my scrawny thighs. The sisters, three on either side of me were moist and open-mouthed, a paedophile's fantasy. Our schooldresses clung to our backs as our arms and thighs clung to each

other, sticky with sweat. The door handle jabbed into Annette's rib. The air was too thick and angry to breathe. It pushed into my nostrils and stayed there, lazy and defiant. I tried swallowing the air with fast gulps. I crawled over the sisters, pushed the door handle further into Annette's side and tumbled out of the car. Leaning against the car door, I saw a man walk into the shade of the shopping centre. He seemed familiar but I knew that I did not know him. He was wearing a light summer jacket and walked with an insolent confidence. He leaned against a pole and called out to a woman walking on the other side of the road.

“Hey babes, light my fire,” he teased her. She pretended not to hear anything. A cigarette dangled limply in his mouth. His eyes followed her and his praises shot out like poisoned arrows. He stung her with the force of his words, of his stare and this impressed me. I looked back at Annette. Her head leaned against the window and she stared ahead of her. Her face was passive, like a doll waiting to be picked up and made to move. I wondered what she was thinking. It did not seem that she was thinking at all.

I was thinking about that other time she had lain inert. The details of her face were obscured by the barely lit dawn. Her backbones and head were hard and bare against the cold cement. The grey brown scrap hid us from the sleeping house. When I touched Annette, the gooseflesh pricked and crawled deeper into her skin.

The man walked further into the shadow of the shopping centre. He did not know that I was watching him. He had a silly smile on his face. He fiddled with his pants and looked around him. I remained outside the corner of his vision. I sat down in the empty driver's seat and watched. I knew that he did not sense me watching him.

Annette's foot listlessly kicked against the back of the seat. I wanted to turn around and hiss at her but I felt invisible. It seemed that to talk at all would be like clanging bells.

That cold morning, the metal was a temple, indifferently accepting Annette's bare skin. I had an unthought idea of how I could punish her. Rape is when a man stabs a woman, Mona had said. But what about a girl and another girl, I wondered. Did that count?

I remained still, unable to take my eyes off the man. He was now facing the wall. He placed his feet solidly on the ground, leaning back slightly as though the looming graffitied wall was pushing him down. He unzipped his pants and took out his penis. His head tilted slightly to the side as his pee trickled down the wall. I loved looking at his penis, I liked the way he held it. Annette kicked at the seat again. "Go and look for them, Jez," she whined. I stayed silent. "It's too hot. I can't bear it anymore."

"What's your problem?" she said rudely and then sighed, "It's too bright."

That morning, as the sun inched upwards the yard was slowly lit. My fingers were stiff, from the cold I think. I had found a small wedge of iron so rough that it cut my palm when I closed my hand around it. It was an unclean, lacerated cut, my skin unevenly torn. I did not want to use my ill fashioned knife. I felt too clumsy for that. Instead I just watched Annette as the sun slowly revealed her face. Her eyes remained shut. She felt only the merest tingle of iron against her skin. We stayed there forever. I looked up at the house until with relief, I saw first one light wink on and then another.

The man was moving his hand up and down, up and down. His face looked even sillier and his head bounced at the speed of his hands. His penis was big and red

and I stared. I liked watching him. I liked it that he did not know I was watching. The sisters' voices in the backseat were simply murmurs. I could see without being seen. I liked it so much.

I started drawing the line down her tummy, a thin trickle of blood appeared. I had to push hard to cut. The line curved at the bottom and then I drew the top of the J. There, I said, that can stand for Jessica and for Jesus. It's sore Jessica, I heard Annette say. It's just a scratch, I comforted her, now you know where you belong. Jagged streaks of blood ran from the J down her tummy. Then I saw the thin face with the white scarf tightly knotted around her head leaning out of the window. Hey, she shouted, hey what do you think you're doing. But by the time Mona came down to the corner of the yard, Annette was sitting up and dressed. She said almost sweetly, we're just playing, Mona.

He spilled white stuff out of his penis and my fingers reached out as if to feel it. His shoulders crumpled and I felt sorry for him. He stood bare before my unbroken gaze. I felt undescribed, untold. I was Jessica without detail.

Annette leaned over the seat, "What are you looking at that is so interesting?" In every sentence she spoke, one word was strongly emphasised. As she said "are" she breathed into my ear.

"*Sies!*" she leaned further forward. "That's disgusting. He's got his thing out. And you're watching!"

She placed her hand on the hooter and blasted. He turned around and saw the car. Without even zipping up, he scurried off. As he left, I felt everything returning again. The sisters were back and their chattering voices were no longer muted. Sam and

Sheila were coming along in the distance carrying parcels. I was just the virgin Jessica  
in a hot car.

## Like Flying

A stolen pen will bleed ink onto a thief's fingers. The stain will brand her as a thief. She may look at you with large eyes, eyes the size of innocence, but her guilt is coloured by her ink marked hands. The blue black bruise mirrors her black heart. They should warn you not to get too close, she scratched an officer of the Kirk, a deep long gash on his cheek. They say she stole the pen after he left it at her bedside table. He should not have left it there, he should not have been there.

Sitting in the bare room at the Kirk, she did not notice the stains on her fingers. Luke Loyola saw the curious marking there and thought it rather resembled a bird. That her hands were dirty did not cross her mind. She had not washed since they took her from her home. They had come early the previous morning while she was in bed, awake since three. She had not been expecting them. She was writing a letter when they came, forcing the tapered nib into tortured shapes as the ink leaked across the page. It was a letter she would not have sent. One of the kinder churchmen delivered it for her, thinking that he was lending a hand by taking the letter to her lover. She did not want her lover to have her words, to possess a part of her that lived outside of her. He had not earned that.

Luke Loyola was talking from across the room but she was not listening to him, she had stopped listening hours ago. He wore that tender look of love for all mankind, particularly weak erring women.

His smile was a slow needle advancing. "You know we love you, Andrea."

She could feel the smile hovering at the edges of her vision. There was hurt in his voice, and she looked up curious to see if it was true. She thought that she could bear it if only he did not tell her that it would hurt him more than it would hurt her. She knew the laws of the Kirk and knew for sure that her punishment would hurt her much more.

Luke's mouth had grown larger as his pitying smile cracked his face in half and his broken teeth moved closer to her eyes, her ears. Leaning over to whisper, very closely and very softly, he said, repent and I will ease the guilt that plagues you. He did not touch her. They were all careful to avoid that as if her sin was ingrained in her skin.

She looked up at him, like a supplicant in prayer, he thought and then she said, I have no guilt.

She blocked the force of his outrage with images of fucking. She thought of hot afternoon fucking with stones digging into her back. She concentrated on the details of her yellow dress with its fine sprigs of flowers, his hairy arms and the light inside when she shut her eyes. She remembered that one second when she had paused, it felt like forever, and then she was falling and it felt like flying. The grass creased her skin, imprinting their leaves on her arms, her legs. His hands traced the cryptic pattern as if to decipher the markings. Now, interpreted and well thumbed, she had been set aside.

Luke swallowed his smile back into his face and then spat it out even bigger. He paced about the room with its scarred wooden furniture. Her face was as impenetrable as a muddy river. Her eyes were Jezebel red for she had been questioned all night but her skin was cast in clay. It was too late for those eyes, those lips, her bony brown fingers, he could do no more. He left her then.

The steps were wooden and a woman's voice could be heard singing. It seemed there was an invitation to climb the stairs and inflect the song with the regular beat of his footsteps. She was possibly singing a hymn, he could not be sure. The sound rustled down the staircase light as a summer dress. There was no-one downstairs, he felt only the creaks and sighs of a house long settled. The sunlight spread itself down the stairs where the voice rang clear and solid. He looked around and because he saw no one (he had not been greeted at the door; it was open) he proceeded to climb the stairs.

“Hello,” a voice called out shyly from behind him.

He turned around, feeling like an intruder, and began to apologise.

But she was just a little girl and it seemed silly to beg the forgiveness of a child in a sundress. He stood on the second step, tall and formal in his suit and tie. Before he could ask her, she told him that her parents were outside. And Luke too.

Outside in the garden, Dr Eben Loyola reclined in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. The table on the veranda was bedecked with food. Sarah Loyola went inside the house and returned with a dish of roast chicken. Her body was hunched in deference to love and her hard hands clutched the back of her chair while Eben thanked God for the food.

Sarah raised her head but her shoulders would not straighten. She looked about perplexed and then moved in her bent way back into the house.

“We all work for God in the way that He gifted us,” Eben said biting into a chicken leg, “Sit down, sit down, Mr. Farmer, may I call you Sean? Thank you for joining us.”

Sean sat at the burdened table in the garden of the large house overlooking the sea. He rather suspected that there was money to be made in religion. He loosened his tie, removed his jacket and worked his knife and fork into the food.

Sean mumbled his appreciation between bites. The food seemed the same as what his grandmother used to cook for Sunday lunch but he knew little about his hosts. The little girl watched him shyly when she thought he wasn't looking and jerked her head away when he turned to wink. He had heard the Kirk had strange sexual practices and he was keen to find out more about this. He wondered if they were odd on the side of excess or restraint. He hoped it was excess. He hoped that his visit coincided with some especially kinky ceremony. Maybe that was why the old woman was bent out of shape. She kept going inside and then coming back with more food or drink. It did not look like she was going to sit down at all. He wondered if that was part of the way they approached food. Perhaps she was spicing his portions with mysterious drugs. There was a strangely rich red wine that went with the lunch. He noticed that neither Luke nor Eben drank very much. He loved wine, any wine, even Tassies, but this was especially nice.

“So,” he leaned his elbows on the table, “How would I become a member of your church, say I was interested in converting, in maybe finding my soul and all that, what would I do?”

“Then we would find you, Mr. Farmer,” Luke spoke. “We’re not a cult nor a business so we don’t try to lure people into our community simply to have large numbers. Those who are meant to learn the lessons of the Kumo Kirk will. Not everyone is.” He added with his sad slow intonation, “Our ways are not always easy to practise.”

Sean found Luke Loyola quite without charm. Eben in his loud shirt was easy going while Luke seemed rather a prophet of doom and gloom. His hair was thinning and greasy, his dark clothes jarred with the summer garden lunch. As he compared the two men, a young woman came out of the house. She looked and smelled clean and light, too light next to the preacher. Sean was reminded of the singing he heard earlier; both were curiously arresting and compelling. He hoped again to find out what made their sexual practices so interesting.

She looked at him excitedly and said, “is this the man who painted that picture? Is he going to do it for us?”

Eben smiled at her indulgently and said, “You should not be late for lunch and nor should you burst in while the men are talking.”

He turned his attention to Sean.

“My daughter, Clarissa, found one of your paintings in a second-hand shop some months ago. We would like to commission you to paint something for us, very much in the same style as that.”

When Sean was invited to the Kumo Kirk for lunch, the last thing he expected was to be asked to paint something. He had always been a second-rate painter and had dispelled all such desires years ago. The painting that the little Rebecca brought out

had been painted while at art school. The model was bored and chain-smoked. She was very beautiful, but her sense of tedium had made her difficult to paint. Eventually Sean used his imagination and transformed her from the struggling student to a cross between Venus and the cover of a romance novel. He had fallen in love with his bodiceripper beauty and had taken her out a few times. But she was nothing like he imagined her, she was very much the indifferent student. He had given the painting to her when she didn't live up to his dreams. Now Rebecca was holding the crudely romantic painting and Eben was asking if he could do another like it.

“I am surprised that your church would want anything as bad and as pornographic as that,” he remarked.

“We have been having some trouble lately, yes, we do want something as bad and pornographic as that. Can't think of a better way to get the message across.” He poured coffee and handed it to Sean.

“There is a legend in the Kirk, I can't say whether it is true or not, that tells of a young wife who fell in love with an older married man. They conducted a sordid clandestine affair, the tale differs with regard to the nature of the affair. Some say that he was besotted with her, that driven mad with desire he lured her away from her husband in a desperate attempt to have her for his own. The more likely version is that she, with the help of the darker forces of nature, planted this mad desire in his loins until eventually he submitted to her magic and fell like Lucifer at the beginning of time. There is a quaint aside in some versions which talks of a little cottage on a hill where they would make love, both inside and out. But no matter, this is more likely than not, the fanciful imagination of some young girl.

One day he came to his senses and found himself lying in the arms of this sloe-eyed tramp. He rushed off home to find his wife in tears of despair, thinking that her husband would desert her. He begged forgiveness, was ritually cleansed by the church and tried to rebuild his life from the ashes.

The young lover, in some versions she isn't married, was not able to recover herself from this madness. She wrote him letter after letter asking him to return to her, even claiming to bear his child. In the versions where she is married, her young husband starves himself to death. But no matter, he is not important to this tale, silly wimp, if he can't keep a wife, he deserves to die hungry, if you ask me.

Nonetheless, she wastes away with love, her hair grows matted, her body so thin that if there ever was a child, it too would have starved to death. But remember, this is just a legend, we don't know if it is true or not. Well then the Kirk had to intervene. She would not renounce her wicked ways. There was not much they could do. The church authorities held a meeting and decided that to punish her for her unrepentant adultery, they must sentence her to death by drowning. She was to carry a millstone around her neck, up a hill and they tossed her into the sea from there. Nasty business that. Of course one can't just go around tossing people from cliffs these days, damned unfortunate if you ask me.

She went one last time to her lover's house. His wife was cooking at home and you understand that we have fairly complicated cooking procedures which includes boiling all utensils to sterilise before use. The wife was boiling her utensils in the kitchen, about to start dinner. The young waif came into the house when her back was turned and picked up the pot of boiling water. She poured this over the poor wife who

was scarred badly forever. They then arrested her and sent her to the devil by tossing her into the sea, as planned.

Now, isn't that a horribly romantic little tale? Just the kind of story those whimsical young things with fluff on the brain and not much else inside absolutely love. Clarissa's favourite story, that one. But if it keeps them in line, then it can't be that bad. What we want is for you to paint a romantic heroine on a hill, maybe she's about to jump, maybe she has a millstone on her back, you're the artist. You think you can do that?" Eben took a great slurp of coffee.

Sean's imagination was captured by the story of the young lover. He found himself agreeing to paint something that would depict the scene Eben had described. Eben insisted that he looked outside the Kirk for a model which was a shame because he had thought this one way to get to know Clarissa better. But, as Eben said, no matter, there was someone else he had in mind. In between repossessing furniture, he could probably pull it off. He listed his expenses which included a substantial fee. Eben Loyola asked him if he needed an advance.

Andrea was asleep on the hard wooden bench when she heard a voice call her name. At first she thought that it might be God coming to reprimand her. Then she felt a hand stroke her hair with a painful familiarity. She did not think that God would stroke her hair in the same way he had. It must be him, she thought happily, he has come to share our punishment. She fought back her weariness and found Luke next to her chair. Her

disappointment brought tears to her eyes for the first time since they had taken her from home. Luke placed a bowl of food on the table and she could smell cold chicken.

“Now, now Andrea, you must not expect to see him here. He has foresworn his wickedness. He is with his wife, as he should be.”

She should not have expected anything else.

“What was his act of contrition?” she asked trying not to show how important the answer was to her.

“He has been washed by the men, he will impregnate his wife when she is fertile. He will never see you again, apart from our ceremonies. He will never speak to you again. He has admitted that he was seduced by the illusion of your flesh, the way man is wont to be led astray by woman. He has no concern for you other than for your soul, as one of God’s children.”

She was determined not to cry in front of Luke.

“Do you still persist in your foolishness,” he asked. “All the Kirk wants is for you to renounce your sins and perform an act of contrition.”

Andrea felt the beginnings of despair.

“Why will you not admit the error of your ways?”

“Because I cannot believe that love is wrong,” she said eventually.

“You are very foolish to think in such worn out and childish ways.”

“Then I must be punished.”

Andrea welcomed the idea of punishment. She wanted reprogram her body, to have it unlearn the discoveries together they had unfolded. She hoped that pain could rewrite pleasure more effectively than silence. Luke saw this and felt sorry for her, he

stayed with her and loved her with his sanitary pastoral care. She supposed that she appreciated his strange unyielding devotion to his beliefs. He attended fiercely to her, his hands no longer afraid to comfort her.

Sean was merry as he glided down the long passage of the Kumo Hall. This building did not inspire merriment, rather the high ceiling and gleaming glassy floors decreed reverence. The walls bore rows of photographs of disenchanted Kirk-goers, long frocked and neck-tied. Eben led him past doors labelled "Secretary", "Accountant" (so much for this not being a business, he thought, he rather suspected that all religions were businesses). They passed the Confessional and then stopped before a door that read "Counselling Room". Sean peered into the room. It was hardly comfortable for a counselling room. There were no couches and no tissue boxes. Instead he saw hard wooden furniture lining the walls. There was a prayer stool and some garden picked roses. The writing desk looked out to the sea, the other window faced the bald face of the hill behind the Hall. Luke -wearing a grey jacket and a mournful stare- stood next to a child asleep on one of the benches. He then realised his mistake, she was not asleep, nor was she a child.

"This is the room where your painting will hang. Here, just above the mantelpiece."

It took a while for Sean to follow Eben's pointing finger. He was caught by the figure on the bench. She was in a night-dress and her hair hung wildly about her face.

He wanted to paint her. His paperback romance imagination would not need to transform her. He relished the thought of translating her to canvas.

“Good evening, Miss.”

She turned her face from him, struck by the cruelty of the apparition. He stood before her with that same awkward grace, the arms that were too long for his body, the dejected shoulders and imposing frame. But his clown’s face was a rough parody of her lover’s. He looked at her with stupid eyes and continued to look until Eben called him away. Before they lead him out they room, he turned to her and nodded politely, “I look forward to seeing you again, Miss.”

It was not the stone that was heavy, that weight she could bear. And even though the blunt rope that bore the stone sliced into her neck, it was not the rope that held the stone against her back. Nor did the eyes upon her cause her steps to drag, it was not the hiss of the crowd that sank her feet into the mud.

The crowd had gathered from sunrise to get a good position. The grass was wet so the children could not sit down. Their legs hurt from standing for so long. They tugged at their mothers’ arms and skirts to whine that they wanted to leave but their mothers felt they should learn a lesson. So they stood on the muddy hill with the wet weeds slapping their boots. When the rain came, the children were wrapped in scarves and hats and bundled towards their parents. The rain did not diminish the crowd; instead it seemed to feed the prospect of pleasure.

Sean stood by sensing the excitement that hung densely in the air. He was not supposed to be there. It thrilled him to walk unknown amidst the Kirk-goers, all he ever wanted was to slip by unnoticed. He had returned to the Kirk Hall to look for Andrea that morning and discovered instead that a ceremony was starting on the hill. It was not hard to find the hillside gathering place of the Kirk. They were bunched together at the foot of the hill, animated with delight. He looked around for Andrea but he could not see her in the crowd. He saw Clarissa's lovely curls and Sarah's bent shoulders. He kept away from them. He feared that someone would realise that he was not meant to be there and who knows what might happen then. He shook that silliness out of his head, this was not *Rosemary's Baby*. He would simply tell anyone who asked that he needed to observe the Kirk before he could paint. Not that anyone seemed likely to ask, they were much more interested in what was about to happen to notice the stranger. Those who did realise his unfamiliarity just smiled with mild curiosity. He took out a sketch pad and began to draw the children in their red, blue and yellow Wellington boots. They ran about trampling the long grass, screeching with an excitement that seemed a discordant echo of the parents pleasure.

Sandwiches were shared at around breakfast time. The children were placated by munching the thickly cut bread. Sean was offered a sandwich with chicken mayonnaise and gherkins. He chewed happily, savouring the buttery bread, and again appreciated what the Kirk could do with food. The women laughed to each other, holding back the hair that whipped around their eyes. Colourful scarves blew and flowery skirts lifted gently. They caught their dresses as the wind teased, keeping one eye on their children, and another more eager eye on the path emerging from the forest.

He wondered at the benign scene before him, envying them their faith. He had not thought it possible to feel such content at a religious ceremony, perhaps he was meant to learn the lessons of the Kirk after all. He looked around for Andrea again but could not see her. He began daydreaming of them sharing a life in the Kirk, sharing sandwiches at the Sunday morning ceremonies with her wild hair dancing about her face. The more he thought about it, the more he ached to have it. He had heard about the strict rules of sex for procreation only but he was certain that could not be enforced. The women looked much too happy, he thought. Besides, Luke Loyola could hardly go around inspecting. He chuckled at the thought of Luke knocking on doors at night, like Wee Willy Winky, checking that everyone was chastely in bed after eight o'clock.

The catcalls started before the car emerged from the forest road. Sean felt a moment's panic at the robust reception and feared a loud evangelical service rather than the quiet appreciation of nature he expected. Luke Loyola seemed mild but appearances could be deceiving.

*Here she comes.*

When the shout sounded, the women rose to their tiptoes, their necks stretched to the furthest. The children peered through and around the legs of their parents. The husbands stared. They seemed indifferent.

She was thrust out of the car. She seemed bewildered rather than wicked.

"She's quite small, you'd think she'd be fairly harmless."

"The devil's clever when he chooses his agents, she looks all sugar and spice, but we know the truth."

Her dress was already stained with mud. She did not look down. She stared at an unknown point far in the distance. Her face showed no tears, her posture no remorse. Her hands were tied together. A woman in black stood close by.

When Sean first saw Andrea get out the car with Eben and Luke, he thought she was a priestess, someone important to the ceremony. But when he heard the women talk and registered her dishevelled appearance and tied hands, he began to understand.

Eben Loyola in a grey suit moved towards her.

“Your adultery demands its punishment. Do you even now resist, will you yet refuse to renounce your sins?” he spoke gently to her and the crowd felt deprived of a more dramatic confrontation. They had waited so long.

She looked at him and shook her head. She stood at the beginning of the path up the hill and waited. A man rolled over a large grey stone. Andrea could not meet his eye, she felt that to look at him would crack her resolve and shame her before these people. Her lover lifted the stone with difficulty. He held the smooth round stone against her back and wrapped thick rope around her. She could hear the silence of the crowd as they observed them together looking for clues to any intimacy. They must have been disappointed. He did not touch her more than necessary but neither did he avoid touching her at all. He was not afraid to look at her and took no special care to weave the rope around her. There was not any hatred nor dislike either. If only he hated her, she thought, that would be something. But the grey stone was not as hard as the man who tied it to her back. He treated her just like any man in the Kirk would have. All she could read was an indifference that was heavier to bear than the stone. She regarded those hairy arms she knew so well and watched them bind her. He twisted the

rope around her back and stomach and arms, making new patterns on her body. Her legs buckled the moment he let go. She concentrated on the pain of the burden on her back to distract her. She steadied herself and held out a hand to stop Luke who had anxiously stepped towards her. She shook her head again to something that he asked her very softly. She took a few steps forward, slowly and then without waiting to see if anyone was ready, she began her tedious journey up the hill. She moved slowly, like a snail making its slithery way with a stony house on its back.

Shouts of abuse followed her up the hill, shot past her and then bounced back to jeer. This was what most offended Sean. The clamour that arose from the crowd rang out as though it was a boxing match. He looked at the yelling people around him, their faces contorted with rage and glee. While the wind still played with the hair and dresses of the women, while they still laughed to each other, their smiles, the way they picked up the children was tinged with something sour. He watched them laugh at Andrea fall, he saw the dresses blow in the air and realised that some of the woman bore signs of disfigurement. First he noticed one woman with broken teeth which reminded him of Luke Loyola. Then he saw another and another and he wondered what in the Kirk's diet resulted in teeth rotting. Maybe dentists were against their religion. Then he noticed a burn mark as a woman grabbed her skirt from the wind. It was a long scar of melted flesh on her leg. He found this on the chest of another woman. The earlier idyll had shifted. He saw the lovely Clarissa shake a furious fist, her brow creased into a hideous frown. Sarah's hunched form was distorted even further and Rebecca clapped her hands with uncontrolled delight. It seemed that even those who weren't physically marked were misshapen by their strange passion for the pain of another. Sean

remembered his grandmother telling him that if he pulled faces, the wind would change and it would stay like that. He felt that the wild faces before him really were like that, that they had returned to their most true expression.

“Filth”

“Trashhhhhh”

“Whore”

Andrea followed the hiss of the crowd as she wound her way up the hill and they followed her. She wanted to walk proudly, she wanted them to think that she felt no remorse. She did not want their pleasure augmented by her weakness. The cries and howls of condemnation rained on her with the same force as the gentle drizzle that muddied her path. The ground was uncertain and she could not watch her step as carefully as she needed to. She concentrated on reaching the top and on bearing the load on her back. They cheered when she stumbled beneath the weight of the rock.

Closely behind Andrea walked the woman dressed in black. She did not leave more than two steps behind them. Her dark dress was streaked with mud from each time the adulteress fell. Her cheeks were red and her mouth moved as viciously as her hands which rubbed the beads they carried. Her face curdled as though she was chewing hard bitter sweets. Her lips were twisted with the force of her fervour. Her feet swallowed each step of the adulteress as she prayed without stopping. Her face contorted with each bitter prayer because each prayer tied the stone tighter around the adulteress’s neck.

It was not the stone that weighed her down. It was not the rope which tied a noose around her heart. It was the woman in black, the betrayed wife’s dark presence

that was heavy. It was the hurt and the hatred in the other woman's eyes, once her lover's beloved, that sank the stone into her back. She knew that it would not be carried long. As the snaking path grew shorter and steeper, she heard the breath of her torturer behind her grow sharper and angled. She saw the children watching her with an idle interest. She saw the colourful scarves blow in the wind. She knew the gleaming eyes of the women, she was paying for all their husbands' sins. She thought of pregnant bellies and her rock.

As she neared the end of her path, the shouts stopped and there seemed an angry silence. She had made it up the hill without enough stumbling and with no tears. They felt cheated. Luke came towards her and took the stone off her back. He felt an immeasurable grief at seeing her almost naked without it.

The children ran about obliviously happy. Andrea stood in the strong wind, her legs barely able to hold her. She felt as though she had left her body behind on the path and the rest of her hovered above everyone else .

From here she saw the women hold their children close to them and tell them, "This is what happens when you –"

This is what happens. High on the hill the wind was strong. Dresses blew wildly. Scarves flew to the edge of the cliff. Hair unravelled from tightly tied buns. The children broke free and screamed because when you ran fast enough, it felt like flying.

## The Moss Garden

*Tired? Depressed? Money problems? Impotent? Low sex drive? Lack of stimulation? Unlovable? No job? Bad Luck? Marriage troubles, divorce, health problems, lifting curses, housing difficulties, ghosts, spiritual attacks, theft, crime, rape, loss of hair, evil spirits, heart disease, kidney, liver, teeth, skin lightening, eczema, warts, boils, change of life, pregnancy, infertility, lottery, bad dreams, miscarriages, low self-esteem, suicide, legal problems, car trouble, circumcision, virginity testing and preserving, virility, insect invasions—*

WE CAN HELP YOU! Dr Ishmael Gordon (BA, MPhil, DLitt, DipHom,) has returned to Cape Town after an intensive training period with John Two Trees Romero in the arid South American plains. He has spoken with nature and learnt the secret of success through the way of the Masters. He has journeyed to the East and achieved Enlightenment. He has cured thousands all over the world. Dr Gordon wants to help you. He has found the new way. There is no need for suffering and tears. Open yourself to the healing powers of Dr Gordon and find the path to fulfilment and peace. Heal your soul. Commune with nature and the stars. You are a child of the universe. Also improve your finances, career, love and looks. For corporate functions, Dr Gordon is available to walk on hot coals.

That day Evie walked. She walked without knowing why she walked - just longing to feel her legs moving, her heart pumping just a bit faster. She walked because she was tired of being still. She walked because she wanted to walk alone.

Evie lives with Stephen in an old house on a hill near the sea. Each night as she goes to sleep in the upstairs room, she hears the sea and it comforts her. The house is draughty. In the summer it fills with insects that Evie has learnt to abide. Her chest tightens because of the damp and her sleep is often disturbed by a cough which falls into a rhythm with the waves crashing outside the house. Her upstairs room is so cold that even this late in summer she sleeps covered by sheets and blankets. The floors are stone and the cold makes her stomach cramp as she slips her feet over the side of the bed to fetch some water.

Stephen is asleep downstairs. He does not hear her moving about. He does not feel the damp as Evie does. He sleeps evenly, with light snores and no tossing. Shivering, Evie moves back to her wooden bed and turns about unhappily until she eventually falls asleep.

In the morning she wakes up to Stephen leaning over her. "Your cough was bad last night," he says fetching her slippers from the wardrobe. She glides her feet into the slippers, she dislikes them, and holds out her arms as he helps her into the blue dressing gown. Evie kisses him good morning and they go down for breakfast.

Stephen has made toast and tea. Evie likes her tea black in the morning, with lots of sugar, and milky with no sugar at night. They eat their toast in the kitchen and then move into the lounge with their tea. Stephen sits down with his newspaper and his morning cigarette. Evie looks out the window with the kitten on her knee. She pets it absent-mindedly. Stephen cleans the breakfast dishes while Evie washes and changes. After, he drives off to the office in his little car.

Evie goes to the beach and reads her book under the shade of a rock. She always sees the old woman with the shrivelled skin and black teeth. Evie wonders if she is shrivelled from an hour in the water every day or from age. The woman waves and strolls away with her dogs. When it rains, they are the only people who come to the beach. Evie sketches the rocks but she is not very good. She can't seem to add dimension to her pictures. She doesn't swim because she is afraid of the water and Stephen doesn't like her to go in alone. It's dangerous, he says. But she stands at the edge of the sea and feels the fresh cold against her toes.

Then she goes home to meet Stephen. He comes home for lunch, even though the drive is long, and makes sandwiches and salad for them. He tells her about his morning saying, "It's all so very tedious sweetheart, you wouldn't understand." He asks her what she's been doing and she tells him that she spent the morning drawing. He looks at the rocks and declares the picture beautiful. The sea is behind the rocks, almost invisible.

In the afternoon, when Stephen has gone back to work, Reza comes by. They go to the upstairs room and talk and love. Evie is happy when he visits. The room is not so cold because the afternoon sun brightens it making the pine furniture shine orange. She runs her hands over his young body, liking the feel of flesh and smooth skin. Reza's skin is as black as magic and soft to touch. Evie touches and absorbs all of the warmth and lightness she finds there. Then Reza must leave before Stephen comes home. She dusts the bed to empty it of Reza's long deep black Indian hairs. She collects the hairs and thinks of her hand streaking through his thick hair, of her fingers

clutching those hairs as he pulls himself to her. She falls asleep with the stray strands loose in her hands.

She wakes up with Stephen bringing her tea and biscuits. He leaves the tea, milky with no sugar, and goes down to prepare supper. An hour later he comes to fetch her. She is lying on her bed, not thinking, and they go down to eat. They dine as they do every evening at seven o'clock with candles and embroidered linen. Stephen likes embroidered linen. Evie is wearing a long summer dress that once belonged to someone else. She remembers the wearer of the dress turning a corner, the patterned edge just visible. But the memory is barely perceptible, just out of reach, like the figure just turning the corner.

After supper, they lock the house and go for a walk.

For as long as she can remember, Evie has walked the moss garden with Stephen. He has always told her of the fragile garden where moss grows in wild abundance and exists in the magic hours – twilight, midnight and dawn. They don't always find the garden, sometimes they just walk and walk in the cool quiet evening.

"The moss garden is a moment of pure beauty and magic," Stephen told her. "In our garden, and it is ours alone, we can't think of bad things. It will stay hidden if we threaten it with bad thoughts."

So Evie has learned not to think about sadness or loss. She has learned so well that all her memories are happy thoughts of Stephen and their cosy home.

They would start their walks in the forest or on the mountain and gradually they would feel the garden getting closer. The air would be sharper and Evie, out of breath, would find traces of moss. She would feel strong yet calm and the serenity could

sometimes lull her into asking the forbidden questions. Once, they were nearly there when she saw some jasmine growing.

“We should pick some for mommy,” she said.

Stephen turned to her sadly and she clapped her hand over her mouth.

“You know what you’ve done, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“What have you done?” he asked patiently.

“I’ve spoken about bad things so we won’t be able to find the garden tonight.”

And the lightness would disappear, the air would be dull again. They had to turn around and move back to the house, Evie feeling a weight on her shoulders because she had disappointed Stephen. He did not speak to her again that night. He never does when she disappoints him.

As they walk, they find a green patch and here Stephen kisses Evie and undresses her. Slowly he lays her down and loves her the way he always has in their moss garden.

On the day that Evie walks, Stephen leaves for work as usual, kisses her as usual and tells her not to eat too many sweets. She sets out for the beach and when she gets there, she walks on. She does not feel defiant, she just feels like walking. She walks to the bakery where she and Stephen have their Sunday morning croissants and buys a big sticky cinnamon bun. She eats this as she walks and wipes her cinnamon hands over her dress. She walks by all the tourist shops with their bells and shells and walks past

without entering even though they look so pretty because Stephen says that they are dishonest. She feels calm and controlled, as if she is going somewhere except that she has no idea where. The day is warm and the wind mild but presently she feels her dress cling to her armpits. Her hair is heavy and makes her back sweaty so she bundles it on top of her head. She carries on, her sandal strap beginning to chafe. She follows the railway line. The sea is moving away from her, it is not quite so close to the road anymore. Then, with an unexpected fizzle, her sense of purpose leaves her. She is hot and her legs are tired from walking. She wonders whether she should turn back and then sees the train in the station, the door wide open. She runs and jumps on just as the doors slam together, catching her back. She is breathing loudly and her face is shiny. There are not many people on the train, just some ladies wearing straw hats and checked shirts reading library books. She plonks herself on the seat and sees too late the darker blue outline of the previous occupant. She avoids leaning her head back on the headrest with the shiny patch. Her mouth is dry with thirst and she licks her lips, her spit thick and not enough. The woman across is drinking ginger beer and Evie cannot bear to watch her delicately greedy slurps.

Evie shuts her eyes, soothed by the regular beat of the train. They flicker open, she watches the electric cables run against the sky. Her eyes shut and her head falls back against the shiny patch making her jerk forward and open them again. She leans her elbows against the window and looks out, the sea has followed a different path and she sees dry dry grass, her eyes close again.

She awakes to find rows of houses flying past the window. Alarmed, she tries to decipher the landscape, then perceives a man standing next to her, bored. The woman

with the ginger beer is gone. He is looking at her, waiting for her to do or say something. He is in uniform and this makes her feel safe.

“I think I am lost, Mister, can you tell me what place is this?” She gestures to the flying houses.

“Your ticket, lady.”

He speaks in a loud bored voice. She remembers too late the ticket. She repeats, “my ticket?” and his eyes catch a little light.

“Your ticket, lady. You cannot ride on this train without a ticket.”

“Can I buy one?” she lifts her leather purse that hangs around her neck.

“No you may not buy one. It is too late to buy one. You should have bought one before you put your foot on this train.”

He writes out a fine of fifty rand and pushes it before her. Evie only has fifty rand in her purse and she does not want to spend it all on the train. She might need it later. She lies, feeling uncomfortable, she says, “I don’t have that much.”

The man in the uniform pulls her arm, it hurts but she is embarrassed and does not want to draw attention to herself. She stands with him at the door, the window is half open and she feels the wind hit her face, her hair flies back and the wheels sound loud against the track. They slow down, Evie sees a platform with lots of people standing expectantly, the train has arrived. The few cement benches are occupied. People are pushing against each other to get on the train. Evie floats by them and the train stops before a few people on the far side. He pushes her out the train, she is off balance when she stumbles onto the platform, and he smiles grimly calling, “Careful now.”

She is in Mowbray. It says so in big black letters on the yellow board. She doesn't think that she has ever been to Mowbray before and tries to place it on the line to Cape Town. Evie is not stupid, so she goes to the ticket office and asks about the next train to Simon's Town. He tells her and then she wonders how far it is to Rondebosch, that's where Stephen works. The ticket man is friendly, he smiles at her and tells her that it is not far, much much nearer than Simon's Town, she can even walk there. Just follow the road, he says.

It is hot outside the station, there is no sea breeze to cool the air. Instead, there are too many people thronging about; everyone is coming and going. She hears the sound of trains and their whistles, the taxis are unloading and loading and then driving off again, the buses are slow but big and wobbly and take up so much space. People are rushing about, moving from taxi to train. She sees women selling fruit on the side of the road. She buys some deep red plums and rests against the railing to eat them while everyone around her seems so frenzied. The plums are sweet, the skin tight and tasty. The juice squirts over her dress as she bites into them. They are warm from the sun and sweat inside the plastic bag. There is a sticky stain on her dress, browned by the specks of cinnamon. She steps into the road and forgets to look for cars so an oncoming taxi just misses her as she jumps back. The driver swears and spits on the ground next to her. Then another taxi is standing next to her, the driver saying, hey lady are you okay? And Evie wants to cry because no-one has ever spat on the ground next to her feet. She nods, bewildered and crosses the road to find Stephen.

"I'm just a little girl," she thinks to herself.

The pavement is dirty and the buildings are old and pretty but so very dirty and there are too many smells. Evie moves away from the station into one of the side roads where there is more shade and fewer people. There is a butchery on the corner with a fish shop next door. She looks at the chunks of pink flesh cushioned by white fat in the window and thinks of the delicious lamb chops Stephen cooked the night before. She sees whole dead fish, with eyes staring at the side of the glass cabinet. She passes a paint shop, a dry cleaner's and a hairdresser and her nose burns from all the smells that come at her. Some people are crouching in the shade, she wonders what they're doing, just sitting there like that. There are many vendors in the heat on the side of the road selling sunglasses, bags, cigarettes, second hand curtains, dirty old coats and jackets (in this weather? Evie thinks, wiping her forehead), curry spices, toys, wild herbs, clothes. Evie goes over to look at the things. She likes the sunglasses but they are melting from the sun, the bags have a greasy sheen from sweaty fingers touching. The fruit is beginning to smell just a bit too ripe. The owners look too hot to care. She asks a vendor, is it always this hot here? And he shakes his head, it's the end of the world, he tells her, have never felt the sun this strong.

Evie walks on. Just follow the road, the ticket man said. As she walks, a child thrusts a pamphlet at her. He is wearing a tattered green track top that says "Princeton University" and has a crust of snot around his nose. Another half-remembered image almost rises but recedes too quickly. Poor thing, she thinks, he will never go to Princeton University. She takes the pamphlet and is about to crumple it onto the pavement with all the other wrappings and flyers, when some words catch her eye. She reads the pamphlet and the world slows down. She feels as though Dr Gordon is talking

to her, that he alone feels her sorrows, that he alone can heal her. The pamphlet shows that his address is here in Mowbray. She looks up the name of the street she is in, Hare Street. That's is Dr Gordon's road. This must be fate, she thinks, why else should I come across this pamphlet just down the road from him? Around her, no-one else stops, only Evie and the boy are at rest. But for the boy's arm that extends lethargically to the passers by to share out one thousand flyers.

Evie walks down the street. The houses are hidden behind electric gates and barbed wire. They are pretty little cottages and too humble for such elaborate defence. She walks until she sees the red painted sign that lists the maladies Dr Gordon promises to cure. Outside the cottage sit some worn looking people. They are *bergies*. Stephen has told Evie not to look at them, to pretend they aren't there. But they are oblivious to her, they sit together and have no interest in Evie. She says, excuse me, please, because they are blocking the entrance and a man asks her if she has any skin lotion. The woman is not wearing a bra and Evie can see her nipples poking her dress, her breasts look heavy and sore, dangling like that. Evie's eyes linger too long and the woman raises an angrily pointed finger. A shrill noise escapes her throat but just in time, Evie slips through the gate. She walks up the garden path and the door is open but the security gate is locked. Evie rings the bell and a plump woman with lots of big heavy jewellery comes to unlock the gate.

"Sweetie, you really shouldn't walk around with your purse around your neck like that. It's not safe. These *skollies* will grab it. Put it under your dress, under, yes like that. Now that's better."

The purse is heavy and uncomfortable between her breasts. She feels it there, too big, like a witch's third tit suspended from her neck. It's bigger than her breasts. But the woman, Sonya as she introduces herself, has huge boobs that can nestle things, so she couldn't know Evie's discomfort.

"I am looking for Dr Gordon," she says, her voice soft with shyness. She is ashamed to admit that she needs healing. But Sonya cocks her head to the side and looks at her with chameleon eyes, "Many people are looking for Dr Gordon without even knowing it," she tilts her head to the other side, "Thank God you've found him."

Sonya holds out a plump arm that jingles with bangles. Her skin is freckled and her hair, beneath her straw hat, is raggedly cut and orange. "Come now, the doctor will see you when he can."

Sonya fusses about like an old lady. Her feet are bare and dirty, her old Indian print frock torn. But Evie likes the way she jingles; she follows the jingles into the waiting room where the plagued upon patiently kill time before they are healed.

The room is cool and dirty white with crystals, buddhas, angels, and other fierce looking creatures standing guard. The people waiting inside are creased and forlorn. Evie hopes that she does not look like that. But her dress is stained with fruit and cinnamon and there are rings of sweat beneath her armpits. She takes a number, twelve, and sits down on a wooden bench to wait. The man next to her is watery eyed and coughing. His cough comes from deep in his lungs and he doesn't cover his mouth. The woman on the other side of her is smoking a cigarette. She is staring distantly ahead and the smoke wafts over Evie. She has a child on the other side of her, wearing big shoes and kicking against the bench, repeating endlessly, two little dickie birds

sitting in a tree, one called Peter, the other called Paul, fly away Peter, fly away Paul, come back Peter, come back Paul. Her blonde Barbie walks in time to the recitation, up and down the arm of the bench, going nowhere. The mother just stares at the wall on the other side of the room.

Evie picks up a magazine and looks at the pictures of skinny models in trendy clothes. She reads the agony column and feels so sorry for these people with their miserable lives. She reads the letters and shakes her head in disagreement. She looks at the star gossip pages and wonders who cares. She looks up and sees that there are no fewer people in the room. The bench is getting hard beneath her. She picks up another magazine. The child is still repeating her recitation, Barbie is hopping like a bird and the miniature platform shoe continues to thud thud against the bench. A faint smell of urine becomes slowly more persistent. Evie hopes that it is not her. She looks to the coughing man and he gets up, shuffles with a bent head to the toilets. Her back hurts from the bench and the coughing man shuffles to the bench, sitting closer to her.

“Have I seen you here before?” he leans to her, his mouth is wet with spit.

“Oh no, this is my first time.”

“Your first time, huh? Well, what’s a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this? What’s your name?”

Evie tells him, worried that Stephen would not approve of her talking to strange men. Stephen! She forgot that she was on her way to meet him before he went home for lunch. It is too late for that now, he will be at home already and see that she is not there and he will be worried and furious. He will go to the beach to look for her and find that no-one has seen her all day. Evie does not know what to do. She has already waited an

hour. She imagines Stephen sick with worry, not going back to work until he finds her. Reza will sneak in through the window and Stephen will know that she is sharing the moss garden with him. Evie stands up to leave. She looks at the people around her and is filled with an intense longing to see Dr Gordon that paralyzes her. If she goes home now, then she will never see him, Stephen will never let her. She sits down again. Dr Gordon's promises echo in her head and it seems that Stephen's anger can't reach her here.

The man is talking away, telling Evie who is not listening, about his troubles and how Dr Gordon gave him herbs that helped chase the devils away. She does not want to hear about his devils. She nods at him every few seconds. She is very good at pretending to be interested and withdrawing into her own thoughts. Then Sonya comes to fetch the man with devils because Dr Gordon is ready to see him.

The child continues to chase away, call back Peter and Paul but now she is mixing the words and saying, two little dickie birds sitting in a tree, k-i- s-s-i-n-g, and somehow, Peter and Paul end up with a baby carriage. Barbie is now kissing the bench. The mother is smoking yet another cigarette. Barbie and the bench are getting more and more intimate. The mother looks down at Barbie having sex with the bench and the girl is making sound effects and the mother grabs Barbie out of the girl's hands. She hits her daughter with Barbie, the breasts against her arm. Barbie makes a whooshing noise as she comes down on the child. There are red welts on her arm and her face screws up and screams her pain. The mother lifts the girl into her arms, the girl's dress held above her knickers by her mother's arm. They leave the waiting room and as they reach the passage, the mother rants at the child until Sonya's loud voice drowns them

both. She is trying to soothe the child but succeeds in making her scream at the top of her voice.

Sonya comes to Evie with a red face.

“Dr Gordon can see you now,” she says out of breath. “What terrible energy those people have.” She shudders as she says this. Evie gets up and wipes her hands on her dress. She wishes she had gone to the toilet first. Evie tucks her hair behind her ears and follows Sonya nervously. Sonya leads her down a long passage. The doors are shut. Just as they reach the end, they turn left into the consulting room. Sonya opens the door, Evie enters, the door shuts with Sonya outside.

Evie looks around the consulting room. The walls are lined with shelves bearing dry animal bones. Padlocked glass cabinets hold tubes and jars containing leaves and powders. She hears a voice from behind her.

“This room is very auspiciously positioned for healing.”

She turns to see Dr Gordon. He is wearing a white coat, as doctors do, and has sad green eyes. She feels him looking into her soul, he is so beautiful. He looks long and hard into her eyes.

“You are not well,” he says after a silence, “I can see it by the dullness of your eyes.”

Evie’s heart leaps at his diagnosis. She is glad she stayed, prepared to pay whatever it costs. She realises suddenly that she doesn’t know how much this will cost. He sees the shadow pass her face and asks in that gentle bedside voice, “What is wrong?”

Evie's eyes burn, her throat hurts and she fears that she may cry. She wants to tell him everything that is wrong, that she cannot remember so many years, that there are so many things out of place. Instead she says, "I don't think I have enough money. I only just realised that now."

Dr Gordon asks her how much she has and says, "Hmmm, that is half the amount of a standard consultation, but who knows what extras you may need. And don't forget the medication."

She has waited so long, she thinks, almost all her life.

Dr Gordon smiles at her and says, "Don't worry." That cool peppermint voice, Evie can feel her worry seep away.

"I am sure that we can arrange something. How much do you want to be treated?"

"Anything," she says. "Whatever it costs, my father can send you the money, he has lots."

"Anything?"

She sits on the bed a while he presses cold equipment against her back and listens to her breathe. He puts a stick into her mouth, presses it about and says, "Good, good." He asks her questions about where it hurts and why and she tells him all the things she cannot speak of in the moss garden with Stephen. And as she speaks of them, it seems that she might remember, they are so close. She can feel the presence of people who have hovered in the shadows for years. But then Dr Gordon stops asking questions and tells her to pee into a jar. She goes into the cubicle in the corner of the office. She has too much pee, it continues after she has filled the jar and splashes all

over her fingers. There is no place to wash and dry them so she wipes her hands on her dress. She is shy when she returns to the beautiful doctor with dirty fingers and a cup of pee. He pours some powder into her pee and leaves the colour to slowly change. He tells her to unbutton her shirt and remove her bra so that he can smear the ointment onto her chest. She lays herself down on the bed wishing that the doctor had covered it with a fresh towel first. Who knows what germs may lurk there. He smears the ointment on her chest, his hands flitting across her breasts. He listens to her heartbeat with the cold equipment again and then pushes them aside, saying, "I can't hear anything". He puts his hand, palm spread flat, beneath her breast and puts his head down to listen. He listens like that for a minute, his head is heavy. Then he moves her smaller hand with his to feel her heartbeat and says, "Most irregular. Can you hear? It's leaping about, this is clearly a case of heartache."

He massages her heart with more ointment and she can feel his hands smoothing away the bumps. His hands are rubbing her breasts now and he smiles at her. He smears the ointment with the green minty smell on her tummy and turns to look at her pee which has now turned bright blue.

"Just as I thought. Your troubles are caused by lower chakra problems."

He takes another ointment from his cabinet and continues to rub her tummy.

"Can you feel that? And that? These are all energy points. It's good that you came, my girl because you would have been in such trouble otherwise. Such trouble."

He shakes his head to show how grave it could have been. He continues to rub her energy points. He slips his hand in her panties, saying, "The lower I go, the closer I am to the source of the bad vibrations, so the effect is more potent."

She can feel it, as his magic fingers move lower and lower, she can feel a stirring in her energy fields.

“The healing process takes time. You will need to return for more treatment.”

Evie nods, she can feel her lower chakra quivering.

As Evie dresses to leave, he says looking at some powders in the cabinet, “ You must come again. There is much healing to be done. I hardly even started penetrating your problems. You can give your fifty rand to Sonya on your way out.”

When she sees Sonya at the desk, she leaps forward to hug Evie. “You look wonderful, you’re positively glowing, my darling. Isn’t he fantastic?” Sonya lifts a finger to show a big sparkly ring. “Aren’t I lucky? Finally managed to get him to pop the question. Now there’s a man that you can’t let get away. You’re coming again then? Wonderful.”

As Evie steps into the street the sun is at three o’clock and less bright. The woman she saw earlier is stretched out, asleep on the pavement ringed by fallen Hibiscus flowers, some bright pink, some decayed. The others have left. She goes back to the station and waits for the train on the poor side. All the way home she is on guard for men in uniform for she has learnt to not trust them.

Stephen sits at the window waiting for Evie. She sees him there, leaning his head on his hands the way he tells her not to. He looks up when he hears the gate squeak open and stares at her through the window as though she is a ghost. She reaches

the front door at the same time he does and she sees that he has been crying. He pulls her very tightly to him and smells of too many cigarettes. He fusses about her, wants to fetch her tea, but his hands are shaking and he walks in circles, saying "Thank God, thank God."

"There, there," she says.

She boils the kettle for some tea and serves him and then sits with him crunching her chocolate biscuits, she is ravenous.

"Did you think that I was not coming back?"

He nods, hands shaking. "I thought that they fetched you away from me."

"Don't be silly, I'll stay with you." she says.

That evening, Evie and Stephen dine at seven at the table set with embroidered linen and candles, as they usually do. Evie cooks the dinner because Stephen is still not feeling well. She is surprised to find how easy it seems to her, that it is all familiar even though Stephen never lets her cook in case she burns herself. He has a migraine and is resting in his darkened bedroom with a cold cloth over his head and eyes. After supper, Evie props him on the couch in the lounge and says that they should not go walking, he is not well. She offers to read him a story instead. Evie curls up on the floor next to the couch and he strokes her hair fondly. She reaches for her bag to take the book out when Stephen speaks.

"Something odd happened today."

"Tell me."

"While I was waiting her for you, someone broke into the house. He didn't realise that I was here."

Evie looks at him with feigned shocked eyes and says, “Oh how dreadful. What did you do?”

“Chased him away and told him never to set his filthy hooligan feet in my house again.”

“Well, I am glad he didn’t hurt you and even more relieved that you were here instead of me. What luck.”

“The strange thing is that he didn’t seem too much like a hooligan, he seemed quite respectable. Suppose appearances can be deceiving. Maybe he was looking for drug money or something. You know these ungrateful children.” He kisses the top of her head. Evie pulls her book out of her bag and Dr Gordon’s flyer falls out.

“What’s that?” Stephen’s feeble voice and feeble eyes are quick.

“Just a flyer a child on the road handed to me, it’s nothing.”

Evie is only mildly alarmed at the deception she is practising. It is not too difficult. Stephen dangles his weak hand in front of her and Evie gives it to him.

“You shouldn’t read while lying down, it’s bad for your eyes.”

“Ha,” he snorts as he reads the pamphlet. “What rot. And some poor buggers will believe this nonsense. Humph! If he was that enlightened, he would be reading the corns on toes in Constantia, not looking at warts in Mowbray. Charlatans, the lot of them. What do you think, Evie?”

Evie looks up at Stephen, she adores him so, and says, “Yes, you’re absolutely right, charlatans, all of them.”

Stephen settles contentedly in the couch, he is smiling and his eyes are closed. He looks happy and relaxed and Evie's quiet voice comforts him as she reads him her story.

## Nightwatch

She found him out through what he was not. She was told that he was not tall, not thin, not dark and not young. She did not know how she could possibly know him if he was only a bundle of notes. And she grew to know him in his absence. She knew him best when he was not there.

He came to her first as a voice. A slow voice, not fast, not deep and a voice that had no body. She would hear the voice in the quiet hours of the morning. At three o'clock on the community radio station he would speak to her but not to her. A train went by at this time every morning. She wondered where it came from, who was on it, a quick rumbling sound. Then the radio presenter would say "And now for some words of inspiration from Luke Loyola".

She liked the sound of his name. The L's would wash over her gently after the quick rumbling train. She came to own these sounds, the train and the lulling name of Luke Loyola. He spoke quietly. He said no prayers and did not speak of God yet every word was a prayer, was the name of God. Or so she thought.

She thought too much there in the dark closed up theatre. There was not much else to do. Even when the building was active, there was not much to do but stand and watch. She thought that this was all right for her, she liked watching. But when everyone left and the building was hers alone, there was nothing to watch but the still brick walls. Or worse, to watch for the possibility of a presence. Alone at night, while on guard in the dimly lit theatre, she sometimes felt as though the building was watching her. The great brick walls, the glass windows that yielded no light but only

reflected the rough brick and dark irregular corners made her quite uneasy. It was a theatre after all and there remained that furtive bond between performer and spectator.

Alice dimmed the lights. It was disarming to emerge into the now shadowed building: the theatre was unthreatening until it hid its corners. There were still some stragglers in the bar, the light catching them part shaded, part pronounced. Alice felt both comforted by and resentful of them. A woman remained tightly perched on her stool while leaning forward to talk intimately. Alice knew this woman: she was Jessica Warlock, the personal assistant to the director. Alice watched Jessica. She often watched Jessica who spent many late nights in the bar. Her high heels were hooked against the steel bar of the stool and held her steady. She flapped her hands threateningly rather than flirtatiously and cackled when she should have giggled. Her partner's mouth loosely dangled a fag which stayed there like a careless comma even as he spoke. The barman offered last rounds and handed a double whisky to Alice. The music students decorated with their instruments, the couple at the corner table, they all seemed oblivious to her presence. The security uniform blotted her out like a magic cloak.

Alice seemed a caricature in her too big uniform. She played the same role almost every night and had all her movements marked out for her. She had no lines because she was a marginal character, an extra whose presence was necessary but only so far as it enhanced the mood. With her cap pulled low over her eyes and her hair bundled up, there was nothing to distinguish her from any other guard playing that role. And if the building was watching her, it was an indifferent gaze that simply marked the movement of a uniformed figure repeatedly performing an arbitrarily chosen sequence

around the building. Alice performed her part with the same shyness that accompanied her vigil when others were around. Perhaps that was why she made a good guard, she skulked in the shadows with thieves and cockroaches.

Alice downed her whisky quickly and turned to see the couple sway out of the bar. The man wrapped his arm around Jessica, his fingers trailing around her waist. The high heels wobbled. A burst of wild laughter made her turn to the students. There was always laughter: she seemed to move on the edges of other people's laughter. She drew out her cigarettes and leaned against the entrance to the theatre watching the students who did not even sense her stare. The pretty girls with their big titties, she'd always wanted big titties. The guys had funny green hair, messy like they didn't wash or brush it, and they were skinny and laughed so. Who's fucking who, Alice smirked and tried to read their bodies. They were draped in burgundy and green, velvet and crochet and Alice just wanted to reach out to touch. Their music cases were positioned so that they could be casually, lovingly brushed against. Another wild peal of laughter rang through the room. She propped herself against the entrance and listened shamelessly. She wondered what it could be like, going to the theatre in the evenings and having conversations instead of leaning against the wall by herself.

She felt the weight of his body before she knew he was there. The lanky awkwardness of the evening guard pinned her to the wall.

"Get off," she pushed at him. He dangled the keys above her and snatched them away as she reached out for them.

"You're supposed to be watching the building, not those moffies," he rubbed himself against her. His coarse pale pink face was touching hers and she was glad she could not see it nor his small piggy eyes.

"Oh, why don't you just give up," she said tiredly.

She slipped away from him and grabbed the theatre keys. The barman was standing crossly at the street exit. She nodded towards him and said kindly, "Go, Brian's waiting for you."

The students walked past him towards the cold outside air taking their noise and laughter with them. Their movements were marked by a discordant grace, some body part always jiggling or shaking. In her slow and precise way, Alice shut the door between the theatre and the bar, locked it and went down the stairs to the foyer to begin her nightwatch.

Every night she rehearsed her strange dance not quite knowing or understanding why she had to perform particular movements. The routine was orchestrated by an invisible puppeteer and it was for the guards to perform and sign. She mostly checked to see that all the locked doors remained locked. So every hour she had to walk up to the Arena and the bar, then check the office block, shine her torch on the sliding doors to keep an eye open for hooligans loitering in the amphitheatre. Then she checked to see that the basement parking door and backstage access door remained bolted. The lights for the outside area were turned off at one to cut the electricity costs. After each area she had to return to the foyer and shine her torch around for about three minutes. She had to sign the Occurrence Book after each check stating that each twenty minute walkabout had been perfectly performed. She was there mainly to deter any potential

thieves simply by her presence so she spent most of her time quietly positioned in the foyer. This had a view of all the entrances and exits so Alice could not understand all the fuss about checking to see that locked doors stayed locked because no-one could get into the building without her seeing them if she just stayed put. But she preferred walking about because she could not bear the idea of waiting for an intruder. And because it was so terribly dull to sit and wait. The chairs were not very comfortable either. So she listened to the radio and this was where she usually, but not always, heard the mysterious train and the voice of Luke Loyola.

She liked the thought of him awake with her at three in the morning. She would imagine him, a stocky little bundle, walking home in the dark. He would be hunched into his jacket with his hands in his pockets, thinking difficult thoughts. His path home was slow and careful but not because he feared crime, that would not bother him. Rather, he would be looking at the sea and pondering its mysteries. She could not imagine his face, she only ever thought of him from behind. She once pictured a rare flash of a straight strong nose and a curved lip but the details were obscured by his jacket collar. The radio broadcast from Simon's Town where Luke Loyola and his community lived.

There were similarities between them, she liked to think. She considered herself a creature of the night; her nightlife did not disguise the soft, calm voice of the night with noise, but endured this unbearable gentleness. She rather saw herself as a guardian of the night, she kept watch while everyone else slept. She thought that this was what priests did in some ways. Like a shepherd, the good shepherd who watched her flock, this sterile stone building.

Alice had tried to find out as much as she could about the Kumo Kirk, the community that Luke Loyola's father ran. But they were a quiet group and did not canvass for converts. A visit to the Kirk only ever happened by invitation. And Alice did not feel a likely candidate for an invitation. She had only completed her schooling until standard eight and had worked at a butchery, a bakery and a petrol station before joining Doubleday Security Services. Here she had climbed the security ladder as she moved from car guarding to day building watch to night building watch. She was studying the manual so that she could be promoted to people watching (she was already training but they thought her a bit shy, she didn't see what shy had to do with anything as all she had to do was watch quietly).

Still, the building was too quiet. This stillness ached and Alice longed for movement. Not just the shadows moving at the corners of her eyes but the creaks of real footsteps, known footsteps, a newspaper rustling, the taste of shared air. She wanted the room around her to be filled with another living presence. She did not care too much for chatter. She just wanted the burden of space to be shared. The building was cold. The stern brick walls and large sheets of frosty glass embraced her with their stony cold care. She felt as though she were alone in the pit of a great fish's belly, like Jonah or Pinocchio.

But quite unlike the belly of a great fish, the theatre walls were made of brick and glass. And after Alice turned out the outside lights, the foyer was lit up like a display case. For the man in the shadows outside, Alice was framed as if in a glass cage. It was not that he was very interested in watching her, there was not much of particular interest in watching a security guard in a sleeping theatre. But he was cold

and tired and that little corner in the amphitheatre sheltered him nicely from the wind. He looked down into the foyer and Alice was staring blankly ahead, her legs curled up in the plastic chair. Then she sighed and raised herself and began moving to each locked door once again. She came towards him as she walked up the stairs to the amphitheatre and shone her torch lazily. The beam of light fell uninspired into the middle of the ground and did not sweep the corners. Alice walked away, yawning and stretching her back and continued the rest of her dance. She returned to the foyer and positioned herself in the chair and fixed her eyes directly ahead. It bemused him to see her lacklustre steps as though she only walked because someone prodded her from behind. He regarded her sitting in the foyer, watching dully and thought that there did not seem to be much difference between guards and prisoners. Then he turned away and tried to sleep.

Alice was dreaming of Luke Loyola. Her morose stare veiled the less sedate scenes inside her. She stashed a set of stories in her mind and played them back like soap operas to entertain her while she watched the building. That night she was watching *The Great Rescue* where she saves him from an attack, he saves her from a life of drudgery and they talk about complicated things all through the night. Sometimes he was walking home in the dark, sometimes in an exotic garden but the end was always the same – they talked and talked. That was the sweet climax. She could picture the detail of the surroundings, of their clothes, but never their faces. She had not seen his and she could only ever remember a vague outline of her own. She thought she learned best through her still passive watching and she could not see her own face. She

knew the details of their conversation, the moments when she gently outwitted him and he would shake his head in disbelief and admiration.

It was not easy to sleep on the concrete bench outside. He would have preferred even the orange chair that Alice shifted uncomfortably in. His legs were too long and he had to keep them bent which gave him a knee cramp. He sat up in frustration and his eye caught the guard still sitting with both legs crossed and eyes shut. He thought he saw an idiot's smile linger about her lips and then disappear. He checked his time, it was two o'clock, and wondered if she would check the amphitheatre again. When he next saw her, she was walking up the stairs, even more listlessly than before. This time she didn't bother shining the torch at all. She seemed to be sleepwalking, she was oblivious to what she was doing. He ignored her for a while and then found her taking huge gulping sips from a hip flask. He smiled. Watching Alice was not riveting but he was enjoying her careless approach to her work. He had given up on trying to fall asleep. He wished that she was sexy. He would enjoy watching her then. Then he could imagine her unbuttoning that stiff heavy shirt. Now she was up again. She was unlocking a door and then he could not see her any more. That was a pity, he thought, she was better than nothing.

Alice had been telling Luke what she thought about God and the sea. He was listening carefully, his head cocked to the side. Then the smudge that was his face turned quickly away. Someone else had entered the fantasy. This face was defined and its sharpness amplified by the slanty eyes and strong cheekbones. Alice was furious that Jessica should dare. She was about to scream at her, get out of my dream, when Jessica said, "Well we aren't paying you to sit around thinking dirty thoughts," and

smiled triumphantly. Alice woke up startled. That was the first time that she had fallen asleep on duty. Her body temperature had dropped while she slept and she was freezing. She found her hip flask in her bag and took a few slugs of the whisky inside. She was tired and cross with herself for falling asleep and furious with Jessica for trespassing. Her one forty check was half an hour late, she would have to lie when she signed the walkabout in the occurrence book. She moved slowly through the building, not bothering to check anything, just walking the path, an abandoned puppet struggling to move by itself. She returned to the foyer and signed for one forty instead of two thirty and after briefly hesitating, she decided to sign for the two forty check as well, taking care to use a different pen. She went back to the foyer, turned her little radio on and walked about to keep herself warm. The community station was playing windy spiritual music. It just made Alice colder. Outside the wind was screaming in a way which unsettled Alice. When the wind touched the building it emitted a sharp long screech. The glass seemed unsteady against such force.

The cold came through the great glass walls and fingered her gently. The floor was made of stone slab and the building was cruel in winter. Alice was fed up with the uniform that wasn't warm enough and the stupid plastic chairs that nobody would comfortably spend a night in. But then she supposed that was the aim – to make the guards as uncomfortable as possible. Only the senior staff were allowed to be comfortable. They had a lounge with a mini-bar and television. She knew that it would not be quite as chilly in there. The cold forced its way through the brick and glass and the wind music howled. Again she looked longingly at the staff lounge. She was not allowed to go into the lounge, it was for senior staff only. But as the guard on duty, she

had a key. She thought she could just take a look. See maybe if they had some sherry and remind herself just how fucked up it all was that she stay in the dim foyer with a plastic chair and frozen nipples.

It was a nice room, she saw as she entered tentatively as though she feared there might be someone inside. There were big soft couches which promised to warm cold and tired little girls, “come to me my pretty and I will eat you up” and she found herself moving forward. Seduced by the promise of comfort, Alice made her way to a couch thinking take me, take me, aware that she should turn back but helpless in the face of such desire. Couch - the very word was a gulp. Her tumble into the iniquity of a great swallowing couch was abruptly halted as she found a cabinet that bore the name of Jessica Warlock. She opened the cabinet and found an old yellow bag. Alice took the bag, her heart was beating excitedly. She had never done this before. As a guard she always felt that she could possibly enter all locked doors and discover the secrets held inside. That was her particular power. She was only ever seen by staff as an extension of the building. As the magical mouthpiece that would scream when the building was penetrated. They did not realise that she too could enter. She opened the bag. Inside there was a pair of running shoes and some folded clothes. So much for penetrating secrets, she thought. Musty old clothes and dirty tackies. Oh yes, Jessica Warlock, I've got you now. They were gym clothes and they were crumpled and yellowed as though they had been in the cabinet for many months. Alice raised the sweat towel to her nose, it only smelt of the yellow bag. She unfolded the clothes to look at the labels, Jessica Warlock probably never bought her clothes at the Fashion Bin. She picked up a pair of panties and inhaled deeply. Still the same musty smell of bag vaguely tempered with a

smell of body. Her fingers trembled from holding Jessica's panties. She held them to her face, they were grey cotton and then, her body convulsing with ugliness, she spat into the crotch. She couldn't believe that she had dared. She stared at the spit and smeared it into the panties. The uninspired sporty grey was just a shade darker. Putting the bag away, she left the lounge feeling odd. Again, she looked into the still stony stare of the brick and glass. Her ears were ringing very loudly and she stepped on something soft. It shrieked and she saw the glinting eyes of a cat. She kicked the cat and it flew through the air, screaming in its shrill cat voice. The deep rumbling train accompanied the scream of the cat. Three o'clock. She turned on her little radio.

“... inspiration by Luke Loyola.”

The voice was thin and without accent.

“Brethren let us love one another. The true energy life force is love. Love moves through the wind, is the current that allows the water to flow, is the fire within the flame and the earth which sustains us. All around us in our daily lives these elements are present and in the same way love is present as it is the life force. We need to learn to connect with them. Harmony is the path to love.”

They were similar, Alice and Luke. Both were driven by their passions in the small hours of the morning. As Luke spread his message of love, Alice was immersed in the pettiness of her dislike. The smallness of her passion stunned her as she listened. Luke's words came through the little radio and she looked for the cat so that she could love it and take away her horror of herself. Then the reality of its presence struck her: how did the cat get in? Afraid, she patted her baton and walked slowly through the foyer. At the entrance to the offices, glass lay shattered on the polished stone floor.

Doubleday Security Services did not require their security guards to catch criminals, they just needed them to watch out for them. Between the watching and the evidence there was an unmapped distance. Alice had never been faced with this before and she was not quite sure what to do. Her hands fumbled at her waist trying to release the baton there. She could not remember the instructions in the manual. She moved slowly towards her bag, baton raised. She pulled the manual from her bag and found it under section 6.2. "In the event of a break- in," she read, relieved. "ensure you keep a steady eye open" . Not easy, Alice thought, when you have to read the manual at the same time. "Ensure you have a means of inflicting harm." She was pleased she had that much. "Have eyes behind your back at all times" not too useful, that one. The final point, 6.2.4, stated "proceed to the reception area, raise the phone handset, dial 0 and call Bill Doubleday on his cellphone immediately." Beneath this, in imperative capitals it shouted, "Do not, do not at any point attempt to pursue the offender(s) without any back-up!".

Bill Doubleday was a grumpy bear when woken up at three in the morning and she did not know how she could explain what had happened. He slept with his hand on his gun, his pretty wife had complained, and jumped up ready for blood when he received a midnight call. Alice would rather wait until morning with a possible intruder than call beefy Bill with a bloodlust. She skimmed through the manual and found "In the event of an accidental confrontation with offender(s)" under 7.1. 7.1.1 Read "Don't look the offender(s) in the eye. This will aggravate him/her". This reeked of Polly's thin prettiness.

The shards of glass at the office door were trampled and crushed. Alice hoped this meant that the offender(s) had left the building. She went towards the offices and nervously peeped her head around the door. There was no-one there. The accountants' desks were lined up neatly but in their usual papery mess; the theatre's financial records lay in piles and heaps of paper on the floor but that was their filing system and not a result of the break-in; the lock on the safe was damaged but not broken. Alice left the office and went to check the entrances.

The staff exit was wide open. There were no cars or people outside, just the dark outline of the trees and gently almost imperceptibly swaying leaves. The cold air stung her cheeks and she retreated. She forced herself to do a walkabout, with a cautious stiffness. As she danced the dance the movements brought her some relief. This time they were over-precise, exaggerated so that her sense of the normal could return. The ritualised steps brought its own magic. The doors were all locked, the shadows were where they belonged, neither smaller nor bigger than usual and everything was as it should be. She went to the amphitheatre and that was where she found him.

Alice stood before the glass doors of the amphitheatre and felt the insubstantial gnawing of inadequacy. She would have preferred to battle real villains with gold-capped teeth and guns than her own carelessness. She stood before the doors and the blackness beyond and was faced with an image of herself entrapped within the glass. Alice stared back at Alice with the reflection of the light fittings obscuring her eyes. She thought of the amphitheatre in the summer when it was filled with happy children who delighted over and over again at same old stories that were so poorly performed for them and thought it all so bleak, so desolate. Where would she go now, what would

she do? It wasn't fair, she thought angrily. It wasn't fair that she was a failed security guard, it wasn't her fault. She felt a victim of a far greater crime, greater than this, greater than apartheid, the slow stupid beast, it was as great as fate itself. There, she thought, there, I lay the sodding bundle at your door, God, you sort it out.

She thumped her hand against the door to punctuate her words and saw the shadow in the corner stir. It moved its head like a giant slug feeling its way. She regarded it, her incurious face lit with rare interest. He did not sense her as she unlocked the door. It was only when she stood above him that he waded through the confusion and recognised the guard he had watched earlier. She had broken out of her gilded cage and looked down on him with mad eyes. He put his hands up behind his head and said, "Hello girl, come share a little, where's that drink?"

She silently examined him, trailing over his body, his face and dirty brown clothes.

"You must be so cold," she said, her head shaking from side to side.

He thought that maybe he was right, she looked a bit like an idiot. It was unnerving to have her stare and stare. He wanted her to tell him to leave, not this strange sympathy.

"Come and get some," she said and walked away. She waited for him at the door and he followed. He wanted a smoke and the thought of the whisky dispelled his wariness. When inside, she locked the door and said, "Come into the foyer".

She kept a few steps ahead of him and when they reached the foyer she nodded at the plastic chair. "Sit".

She gave him the hip flask and said, "There's more, just wait here".

She went to the door that she disappeared through earlier and took her baton and jammed it against the lock until the padlock broke. She smiled and said that she had locked the key inside. When she came out, she had rope and a bottle of brandy. He was savouring his cigarette when he felt her behind him.

“What are you doing?” he shouted as he felt the rope cutting through his jacket into his abdomen.

“Apprehending criminals,” she said sweetly. She held out the brandy and sloshed it over his jacket. “Hey, fuck, this is my work jacket.”

“Oops,” she smiled, “must have missed your mouth.”

“There, have some more,” she held the bottle to his mouth and poured it down his throat. Then she took a swig and said, “I am so happy to have found you, I could kiss you.” She put her drink flavoured mouth to his and kissed him, long and hard, like a movie hero. The brandy burned in his chest and he struggled to breathe as she pushed her tongue into his mouth.

“Mmmmmm,” she said, “tastes like brandy.”

“So,” she clapped her hands together, “I’m Alice, what’s your name? what do you do? where are you from? why the fuck were you outside my building, you know, and all that. We have another two hours together so we can talk.”

Each question was asked with the cadence of a child pondering great mysteries. He was enraged. “You let me go right now, this is illegal.”

She loved the way his face revealed his frustration. The skin around his eyes wrinkled just the way she liked it, she wanted to trace the lines with her fingers.

“I think what you’ve done is illegal, but then I don’t know that much about the law. What I do know is retribution and justice, God gives you what you deserve. Or maybe not. I don’t know, what do you think?”

Bradley did not quite feel that he could answer this. It seemed outrageous to discuss God while tied up and drenched in brandy.

He was silent for a while and then she leaned forward, “Why don’t you answer me?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “Please just let me go. I will leave now, really, I missed the last train and just needed to get out of that wind. I’m sorry I slept outside your building, really, just let me go home.”

“You missed your train,” she leaned forward. “Do you mean the three o’clock train that goes by every morning?”

He did not mean that at all, no passenger train went by at three in the morning but there was something about the way she leaned to him that made him tell the lie.

“Yes, the three in the morning train, that’s the one I usually take.”

“Does it go all the way to Simon’s Town?”

He wasn’t sure what answer she wanted so he tentatively ventured a guess, “Yes?”

She threw her fists in the air and echoed his “yes” but this time with a glee he couldn’t possibly summon.

“So this train gets to Fish Hoek at 3h39, doesn’t it? Does anyone get on the train in Fish Hoek at 3h39?”

He knew that she desperately wanted someone to get on this train.

“There are some people who get on in Fish Hoek, yes. A woman, a man...”

“What does the man look like, do they get on together?” she was excited now.

“No they’re not together. It’s very difficult to tell what he looks like because he is always bundled up in his jacket,” he lied desperately.

“I knew it, I knew it!”

She moved away from him and sat down quietly. He was relieved by the silence for a while when she said, “Please talk to me, I would really like it if you talked to me.”

He remembered those FBI agents on tv who, when kidnapped by maniacs, used psychological tricks to get themselves free.

“Well, if we’re going to chat then you must give me another cigarette, because that always makes me feel more sociable, maybe some more of that brandy, and you need to take this rope off me, because how can we chat if I’m all tied up?” He shrugged his shoulders in what felt like a charming way.

She shook her head, “My job comes first.”

He asked her to reach into his pocket for his pills, he needed to take them for his ulcer, he said. She found the yellow plastic packet that the poor clinics used to dispense drugs and was reminded of her grandfather. The smell of the man, the way he twisted the yellow bag in his hands was marked with the same tired care. She almost felt sorry for him then, she would have hated for this to happen to her grandfather. His eyes were so brown that it spilt out onto the white bits. His heavy jacket and trousers were stained from years of public transport, from the hard benches of Coloured Affairs, free clinics and other government sitting rooms. In some way her recognition of this made his

arrest the next day more bearable. She smiled at him in a way that seemed so lonely, so lost and said, "Please tell me about Luke Loyola on the train."

Bradley started telling stories that he didn't know. He told her how the man always sat in the same seat and stared out of the window and looked at the sea. He never spoke, he dealt with the drunks with great dignity and he was light of step, with the grace of a dancer.

"He's not a moffie," she said indignantly. "Besides he's hardly built like a dancer."

With Alice dropping clues, Bradley was able to tell her about how Luke Loyola comforted a sobbing woman on the train, how he spoke to the poor and broken-hearted and healed the imaginary people on what must have been a goods train that passed by the theatre at three every morning.

When Beefy Bill Doubleday arrived at five o'clock with the day guard, he found an oddly satisfied Alice in the foyer with an oldish man tied to the plastic orange chair.

The tedium of work sustained Mr Kapp. Sorting papers into piles neatly bound by paper clips and arranging them into files allowed him several hours of silence. There were pages and pages of numbers written in his own neat handwriting on A4 sheets torn from a note book. He understood numbers better than words. All day he filled his head with numbers which obliterated words from his head and made him distrust them. This made him uncertain about whether he could communicate through the vague sums and equations of letters and words. They simply weren't viable, not the way numbers were,

he thought. He spoke slowly and cautiously, with a tendency to repeat himself. When he uttered a sentence, the blankness he perceived on his audiences' faces made him panic that he wasn't understood, that people would not hear him fumble with words. He feared that this was extended to his presence, that if he wasn't heard, then he wasn't seen. That the only way he was realised was by his pages of figures which functioned as the great cogs of the theatre's dwindling finances. Before he could be snuffed out by untrustworthy words and lazy ears, he doubled his efforts by echoing everything that he uttered.

“Good morning, good day,” he boomed from his big lungs and tall thick body. He did not stop to see if anyone had heard before he went through to the director's office.

Michael Crane, on the other hand, had a short circuit between his brain and speech. He thought fast and his mouth could not keep up with the speed of his mind. What emerged from his mouth were very quick sentences which often missed a word or two as they tripped out. Jessica Warlock's duties included interpreting the often garbled speech of Mr Kapp and Mr Crane. Indeed, more often than not, she spoke for them.

Alice had never really seen the office from this perspective. For the first time she noticed details like the paintings on the wall, the plants on the windowsill and the books on the shelves. The rows of books lined the walls and she wondered if Michael Crane had really read them.

She was sitting down on a soft leathery couch, she had never been allowed to sit before. A tray of coffee and biscuits was placed next to her. She wished she was standing. Mr. Crane was standing above her just near enough for her to feel his

presence. Bill from Doubleday was on the other side, his hairy hands rubbing his bald head. But Mr. God and beefy Bill were dwarfed by the small woman taking notes in the corner. Alice helped herself to a biscuit, feeling her stomach twist as she bit into it.

“Alice, padlock broken?” Michael Crane’s small face hovered above hers as though he could read the answer there more quickly than hearing her speak it.

“Excuse me sir?” Alice said through a mouth filled with biscuit, she wished she hadn’t taken it.

“Mr. Crane is enquiring about how the padlock to the staff room was broken,” Jessica said, also looking at her intently. There were lines beneath Jessica’s eyes and Alice thought about her drunken departure from the bar. Alice launched into her prepared explanation, “The three damaged doors were broken into in a period of twenty minutes. This must have occurred just after I began the building check at 2h40. I assume that while I was upstairs, he broke into the staff lounge. When I returned to the foyer, I found the door open. I went inside but saw no-one. I then went to check the staff entrance which was the only door I hadn’t yet checked. I found this door open and damaged. I went outside to make sure that no-one was lurking there. When I returned to the foyer, I found that the offices had been broken into. I found him in there, trying to break into the safe.”

It seemed too easy, too flawless.

Mr Kapp was nodding his head, “ Why didn’t you call for help, my girl, why didn’t you get your boss on the scene of the crime? Dangerous, dangerous, a little thing like you.”

This was the weak point. She had disobeyed orders by not calling Bill.

“I think that Mr Kapp has a good point there but more importantly, had you called for help, as you were supposed to, the minute you saw the damage to the staff lounge, we might have avoided the damage to the offices. It’s going to cost us a fortune to have the damaged doors replaced, especially the office glass doors and safe.”

Alice regarded Jessica with her practised look of dumb insolence.

“I’m sorry, I just followed my instincts,” she said. Let Jessica think her slow and bestial, incapable of thought.

Alice caught a hint of her perfume. But for Alice, the smell of musty once worn panties would forever linger beneath the expensive scent. The thought of this allowed Alice to look Jessica firmly in the eye. Jessica could not know how intimately Alice knew her. She was certain that Jessica did not remember her, why should she, they had had no interaction but in Alice's imagination. The relationship was one-sided. Jessica did not know Alice while Alice watching the building and the people inside had built up a relationship with Jessica. And in this unreal relationship, Jessica was the enemy, except that she did not know this.

Alice looked up at Jessica who was staring at her unashamedly. Jessica shuffled the papers in front of her.

“Your criminal,” she said, “Bradley Thomas, claims that he did not break into the building at all. He says that he simply missed the last train home and fell asleep outside the building.”

Alice was ready for this, “Well do you expect him to simply confess? He was drunk, you can see that he is a dirty thief. I was just doing my job.”

“Jessica, he was reeking of alcohol,” Bill said tiredly.

“Well, his version is that Alice poured the drink down his throat.”

At this, all three men burst into laughter. “Yes, that’s what I sometimes tell my wife,” Michael Crane said and they all laughed again. This time Alice joined in and as the sound echoed around the room she knew that everything was all right. Only Jessica did not laugh.

“Bradley Thomas will be handed over to the police this morning, they will take care of things from here on. Thank you Alice for a superb performance, good job girl, we’re pleased to have you on our team, very pleased. You will reward her, Bill, make sure she gets what she deserves.”

Jessica was silent as she watched Alice leave the office, grabbing another biscuit as she did. Alice walked out to the foyer almost singing aloud. She went to the security office to write her report and found Bradley in an orange chair. There was a woman with him, her eyes thick and tired.

“I don’t know, Bradley, I don’t know what to believe,” she was saying as Alice entered the room. She cowered as Bill and Alice walked inside. Both Bradley and his wife had years of learning to be silent. There was a moment where Alice felt deeply sorry that Bradley had been so ill-treated by fate. She leaned to him and said, “God does give you what you deserve, just wait and see, it will be okay.”

She caught a glimpse of the Occurrence Book on the table. She remembered that she had signed in the 2h40 check saying that everything was in order. She felt her hair on her arms stand on edge. But then she let it go. That was easy to get around. Besides, they would not notice anything that they did not want to.

She left the room then, left the building. She moved along the now bright staircase. The daylight was streaming into the building and that familiar cold stoniness disappeared. There were people moving about, performing their own sequences and the building did not watch. There were too many of them now. The staff lounge door was open and had lost all air of sacred space. She did not care so much about her bad behaviour now. She thought of her self proclaimed status as guardian of the night and laughed because it all seemed silly now. At the doors to the amphitheatre, she paused and went outside. On the concrete bench where she had found Bradley, she saw a yellow plastic bag with some pills inside. She was right, they did not notice anything they did not want to. Alice picked up the bag and folded it into a tiny square. Then she pushed it deep into her pocket and went home to sleep. They had given her the night off and she planned to be at the train station in Fish Hoek at 3h39. She needed her rest.

## House Call

The glass door to number fifteen was frosted and this chilled Sean whenever he inserted the key in his own lock. His door faced number fifteen in a bare brick and cement block of flats. Each time he stooped before his door, his back to the mountain, he felt his skin harden with goosepimples.

The door itself was not offensive. It was a fairly ordinary panelled door with dust heavy on the wooden frame. There was a barely discernible design etched into the frosted glass. A deep red and gold curtain suspended behind the door veiled any further view of the flat inside. The dust, glass and thin material formed a barrier only his imagination could penetrate. His own door held no dust and the striped glass refracted a distorted orange blob that was his couch. He had once seen inside number fifteen when the door stood wide open with no-one around. He was allowed a jagged angle of the flat that pieced together a rich blue couch framed by a red wall and dark heavy drapes. He wondered at the textured warmth that his illicit glimpse suggested.

He did not know his neighbour from number fifteen. She wore her hair long and hid behind large dark sunglasses. He imagined that her eyes were brown. Often she wore brown. She smiled politely and greeted him but that same cold which emanated from her doorway froze her smile. He usually saw her walking down the stairs to the garages and dirt bins with a small black bag banging on the steps. Once the bag had split open and cotton wool and leftover food spilled down the stairs. She had cursed, then stopped to collect the fruit peels and take-away cartons, her hands scraping the mess together. The long plum red nails on thin ringed fingers scooped the mango and

melon peels into the empty Steers containers. He'd offered his help but she had chased him away, saying that it was fine. His eager eyes scanned the contents falling down the stairs hoping to find out who she was through what she had discarded.

Sometimes he heard her out on her balcony. He would hear the sounds of a chair scraping or sighing as she sat down. Late at night he could hear the heavy groaning of the ancient pipes as she coaxed water from her taps. His room would vibrate when she turned the tap at a particular angle and it screamed through the building. He liked the thought of the pipes running from his flat to hers, a hidden network ingrained deep in the walls, forming an invisible cage that held them together. When he heard her shower spray, he would think of her behind the thin wall between them. He imagined that she could hear him and it was vaguely pleasing to him to think that they should take their showers together. But her door remained cold and did not welcome him.

He shut his door behind him, relieved by the warmth of the flat. They were on the third and top floor of the building so it was always piss hot in summer. It was a stuffy warmth with the distinct smell of a room badly in need of airing. He took a beer from the fridge, faxed an invoice to the furniture store and allowed himself to feel some satisfaction at having paid the phone bill. Sean paid his way by repossessing furniture and household appliances. The company faxed him the details of the non-payments and he collected the furniture from the poor unhappy people who couldn't afford televisions and fridges. It was not pleasant work, but he did not dwell on this. Too often they looked tired and relieved to have the burden removed from them. They could just then go to another furniture store and get another free appliance for a few months, he

reasoned. Sometimes they shouted at him when he arrived, other times they pleaded with him, just till the end of the week, mister, I can get the money then, just let me see what happens on Saturday with the races, and then there is the Lotto draw and you know, I dreamt of bees and my dead grandfather and that always means I'm getting money. Sean had learned not to listen to them, to just walk by. He was very tall and could easily carry the smaller goods on his shoulder while they yapped at his heels and their words got lost before they reached his ears. He stored the goods in a garage under the block of flats and drove out to the store in Mitchells Plain once a month. The equipment sat unused in his garage for weeks on end. He liked it that he spent more time at home or watching movies than actually working.

He checked his messages and relieved to find none, he went out to the balcony with his beer. He leaned over the edge looking at the flats across the way. It was a more expensive looking block. He often watched the two balconies and the windows to observe the movements of his neighbours. There was a man who stretched out naked at seven every morning, his penis just hidden by the wall of the balcony and a woman who went away for days on end. Sean wondered if, when beyond his little stage, if they ever talked to each other, maybe even loved each other. Today no-one was home. The windows and doors were shut. He leaned over so that he could see the balcony of number fifteen. There were some thirsty plants on her balcony and a faded green deck chair. Her drying rack was covered with underwear bleached to pastel by too many washes. Like the browned leaves, they waved dryly in the breeze. He went back inside feeling rather lonely. He liked having the other people who lived alone around him. No

more faxes arrived that day. He swallowed beer after beer outside in the sun until he was officially off duty at five o'clock.

He heard her coming home. Her heels clattered up the stairs and then paused. He heard the key inserted in the lock and the door squeaked open. As she moved about inside, her heels were hard against the parquet floor and resounded through his flat. He wondered what she was doing, walking up and down like that.

He played some music, hoping she would hear and bang on the wall or something. He fried some sausage, eggs and chips which he ate while reading *Men's Health*. He was singing in the shower when he decided to spend his evening going back for a collection that hadn't been home for several days. He was feeling rather cheerful and thought that putting in a bit of overtime wouldn't hurt. Otherwise, he would just stay in and watch tv. Frowning, he realised that the water had become cold. He opened his eyes and saw that the water had a reddish tinge. He shut the taps wondering if something was wrong with the pipes. Rather than a dead rat stuck in the tubes. The phone rang and he fell out of the shower, then cursed the thin walls of the flat when he realised that it was next door.

Jessica was thinking that she would not bear it were it not for that tree across the way when the phone rang. She did not know the names of flowers or plants, she could never really remember them, but she understood their textures. She loved that tree with its finger thin leaves falling all over itself. In the evenings, she sat on her balcony and stared out at her tree against the sky, framed as a postcard by the walls of

the building. She loved flowers too but couldn't grow any herself. She reached the phone on the second ring and without thinking, she paused until it had rung five times, her eye catching her hand resting on the receiver. The voice on the other side, when she heard it, was registered with mild disappointment, as though she had hoped for something she wasn't entirely aware of. Her mind was attending to half acknowledged images of the colour of her nails, the shape of her fingers, the long leaves of her tree and the angles of her building. Immersing herself in these very ordinary details distracted her from herself but also from the phone ringing beneath her hand. She did not remember to put on the other Jessica. Her shoes lay across the room where she had kicked them off. She stood short and unready.

The voice belonged to a man and Jessica could not place race, region or class from the quick hello that he breathed into her ear. She was not ready for the silence on the other side. She spoke into the handset, her voice feeling hollow and ridiculous, unnerved by the aggressive quiet. The other Jessica would have had the sense to put the phone down immediately, thinking what nonsense, but she was curiously suspended, unable to be sensible. So she listened to the person listening to her, saying hello, hello, who is this, wondering if it was a prank and feeling uneasy. The phone clicked to silence and she cursed herself. If that was a prankster dialling a random number, he had found a delicious target. That must be what they wanted, the inability to put the receiver down, being held by the stranger's voice and the silence. She was angry with herself for allowing him that. She pictured him, giggling to himself and happily dialling another random number. The other possibility she pushed from her mind, she did not

want to think that perhaps this was someone who knew her. That the unseen caller perhaps had a sense of her, knew where she worked, what she looked like.

Music burst into her flat, through the walls, the open windows and balcony door. It was loud music with not so many words as beat. The wave of discordance further unravelled her sense of calm. Jessica did not own a television or music system, instead she comforted herself on the rare nights she stayed in by reading thrillers. She did not like to keep still for too long. Jessica was propelled by an unidentifiable fear. It seemed that she would be safe only if she kept moving. The seclusion of her flat hid her for a while but she could not remain at rest. She gathered the threads of her solitary calm by running her bath water and choosing a dress. The dresses and suits hung neatly with rows of shoes beneath them. She stood before her wardrobe, looking for a colour and fabric to suit her mood. First she tried on the short black dress and then peeled it off with discomfort. She tried the green silk which glinted wickedly with her eyes. But then she remembered who she was meeting and shrugged it off. Layers of dresses piled up on her bed, Jessica could not find who she wanted to be that night. She bathed with oils and bubbles, then creamed and perfumed herself; slowly she was released from her disquiet. By the time she stood before her long mirror in her red dress and high heeled sandals, she felt fine. She drew a line beneath one eye, then above, thinking only of the evening ahead. She coloured in her lips, stretched her eyelashes and looked at herself with a raised eyebrow. Pretty, she thought. Jessica left then, she was fifteen minutes late, but she always thought it best to keep them waiting just a little bit.

He heard her heels clacking down the stairs and thought, almost as regular as clockwork. She often left in the evenings at seven fifteen. He looked down over the balcony ledge and saw her thin dress blowing in the wind. She held on to it with one hand, the other unlocking the garage door. So simple, he thought, to see people doing their things in moments they felt alone. It made him almost feel sorry for her, exposed to his inquisitive eyes.

He tidied his supper dishes and forgot about her then. He set out to collect a television and microwave from a Mr Fortuin in Greenpark. Sean knew Greenpark well enough. He had spent a dismal two years living there while growing up.

He could not remember exactly which one of the doleful council flats was the place he had lived with his grandmother. They all looked the same to him, uniform in their ugliness. They rose out of the dry land, the monstrous offering of this defective soil. They had sprung up like weeds, but without the whimsy of the unwanted plants. The high columns dwarfed the people who lived inside them and easily sheltered hundreds. Sean imagined the flats opened up like a printer's tray and how they would all be huddled inside their tiny compartments, their most private moments neatly squared into the government recommended allowance. The roads were further narrowed by the height of the buildings that stood out like maze walls. Each block was dully identified by an alphabet letter but the road names were flashes of English gardens. E2, Honeysuckle Avenue, Greenpark, this was the label of Sean's experience as a maze rat when the only flowers he knew were the sun dulled plastic carnations in his grandmother's flat. Colour came from the graffiti on the walls and the washing that was perpetually suspended on wire outside the windows. Even this late in the evening,

Sean could see blue collared shirts flapping in the wind. Sean's longing for colour was tantalised by the painting classes he took at the community arts centre. He was inspired by the creation of colours, that it took only three to make all the rest. It showed him that he didn't need much to make more, wasn't that what Jesus said, he mused. But it had frustrated him that he had lived in black and white when it was so easy to make colours. He drove down the gravel roads, eyeing the teenagers wandering the streets in the twilight hours. Remembering those pleasures, he saw the café where he would lean against the wall and smoke and call out to the girls walking by. They would play on the game machines inside the shop when they had the money, but usually they didn't.

He passed by the church hall where he had performed in countless Sunday School plays. He saw the church itself where he had first encountered the seemingly endless ritual of kneeling and standing. He thought of the rows and rows of hard benches and thin blue cushions. His impression then of the magnitude of the church was bound to his sense of being a son of Abraham, one of innumerable grains of sand. It was his first remembered understanding of God and remained with him still. Being one of so many, he hoped that he could slip by unnoticed. Kneeling on those cushions, he was struck by how very big the church was, how very high the sky and how it could be possible to hide in this vastness. His adult view was the disappointing image of a glorified school hall with a very big table and some rather nice candlesticks which were bolted to the altar as they had been stolen a few times. But his childhood memory of a magnificent and solemn resting place of God lingered.

It was the third time that Sean had come to Mr Fortuin's house. He went once on a weekday and then on a Saturday and both times he was left with the impression

that the house was not unoccupied. There was something about the thick patterned Terylene that suggested a presence hidden in the folds. He had knocked with his loud hard balled fist but the door would not open. A small window had been left open just a crack and the Terylene swayed sweetly. Sean was used to people pretending to be out when he came by but this house made him feel uncomfortable. Some houses that he visited were filled with pleasant warm feelings mingled with the smell of bredies and others nurtured a sense of defeat, which manifested itself to Sean as the smell of too much Jik. Most times the houses just reflected a bundle of different senses and the presence of a furniture repossession man carried its own disturbing sorrow. There was nothing strange about the house itself even though it filled Sean with a eerie sense of being watched. It looked much like the house next door, like most of the houses in that area apart from the bizarre built up mix of metal and brick down the road. All that varied were the ways in which poverty revealed its decay. Two yellow squares shone out, lighting up the dry and tangled garden; the wire gate could not shut. How Sean had longed to live in one of these houses as a child. He walked to the front door and knocked.

Sean listened for the muted sounds of voices, for the scuffling of feet. He strained for the monotonous hum, lifted by the occasional sound of canned laughter, of the unpaid television. He could hear none of these yet the house felt curiously awake. He knocked at the door as he had done before and again there was no answer. Sean walked around the side of the house, hesitating only briefly at the thought of the thin wild dogs he had seen previously. The dogs were not there, he had guessed this because there was no avalanche of barking on his arrival. Maybe the owners were taking the

dogs for a moonlight stroll. There were chickens at the back. When Sean was a child, he never met any neighbours who owned chickens yet a cock always crowed at dawn, and he regarded them as strange pets. Light beamed into the backyard from the half open kitchen door. Just outside the door lay a dirt bag with a foul smell coming from it. He stepped over the bag into something soft.

He pushed the door and entered the kitchen. Dishes were stacked on the sink. His grandmother had taught him always to wash the dishes before leaving the house in case it burnt down while he was away. Pots and pans cluttered the surfaces. The stove was covered in a dark liquid that had boiled over; flies buzzed around the mess and a fierce stench assaulted him. In the centre of the kitchen floor was a pile of chicken feathers.

Sean tried to tell himself that there was nothing sinister about killing chickens. Just cost effective, he repeated to himself. Fetch the tv and get out of here. He walked around the feathers and stepped into the silent hallway. At the end of the passage way stood an old woman with white hair. Her hair was long and knotted and she wore an orange overall. She raised her eyes and called plaintively, "Who's there, is that you, hey? who is that?". Her hands fretfully tugged at her hem. She strained her neck towards Sean as though she could not see very clearly in the dim light. But her eyes, they were a startling green, shining all the way down the passage like a cat's eyes gleaming in the dark. Incandescent, Sean thought. He was unnerved by the apparition, he willed himself to walk forward. Instead, when the house made one of those sounds that houses make, he ran.

Some people might have considered Jessica too old for casual dating but she preferred to think of it as a complex economic system. Working as Mr Crane's personal assistant could not afford her the luxuries she so loved but introduced her to men who could. Her currency was her looks and charm, she had plenty of that, so she invested her secretarial wages here. The return on this included meals at good restaurants with someone to talk to instead of solitary sandwiches. This also fulfilled Jessica's most basic need, her aching to be noticed. So these dinner companions, sometimes married, she never asked, satisfied her vanity by attending to her and commenting on how she was the loveliest. That comforted her. The threat to this happy arrangement was the danger of attachment so Jessica never saw any man for more than two months and not fewer than three men at a time. There was another more subtly encroaching danger. Jessica believed that food cooked without love lacked nourishment so she was always just a little bit hungry.

She leaned her arms across the table thinking that this will hold me up. He was talking about clever things again and this bored Jessica. She disliked clever people, they used words in ways that tricked and pushed boundaries. Cleverness was by nature devious and immoral so she did not trust him at all. Jessica like to think in clear shapes and angles.

The waiter interrupted his monologue and poured more wine in Jessica's glass. She was bored. She went out because she hated being by herself, she could not bear to have to notice herself and to keep moving meant that she could dodge her unmade face in mirror. But talking and eating and listening bored her. She often felt a desire to be

somewhere else, to do something else, no more wine and cigarettes and food and talk. But what else was there to do? It comforted her, was what she knew best. Her body ached from sitting in the same position and she thought shut up shut up, but smiled sweetly instead. She thought of the too soft kisses he would fire from his puckered lips and his too soft fingers touching her bony shoulders. She thought of his peasant penis relentlessly nudge nudging towards her and opened her mouth to say, I must go now, when he pushed a pretty parcel across the table. Her jewelled arms greedily reached for it, oh how gorgeous, is that for me? and decided to stay a little longer.

Sean lumbered up the stairs feeling stupid. He would go back the next day, he said to himself as he lifted his big heavy legs up and down until he reached the top. And in the clear light of day, he comforted himself as the chill from number fifteen brushed his neck, everything would be alright. To be frightened by somebody's grandmother! Already the old woman had transformed into a dear little old lady. He found it difficult to not feel a sense of defeat, maybe that was why he kept his eyes to the ground which was where he found the small square of paper. He often picked up bits of paper, eager to know where people had been and what they did. All he ever found was the easily discarded, like receipts and junk mail. But even the receipts interested him. He would skim the fine print to see what had been purchased, where and at what time, and most importantly, in what combination. From this, he would file away the scraps of detail until he could form a character sketch pieced together by

leftovers. He thought that he should have studied psychology instead of fine art. So, it was habit that made him bend for the piece of paper outside number fifteen.

There was a curious churning in his stomach when he realised that this was no receipt but the thin flowered page of a letter. He unfolded the page and read.

*... to move on. If she was that unhappy, surely she would have found me by now? I do not have the strength nor goodness to pursue any sense of higher purpose. You know me well enough. You do whatever you feel necessary, I think I am done with this. Let's not allow anxiety to delude us into a false sense of affection. Nevertheless, I wish you well.*

The letter was signed "Jessica". He felt no guilt at reading her letter. He believed that anything left lying about was meant to be read, an inadvertent cry for an audience. She should have been more careful if she wanted to keep secrets. He wondered if the letter was to or from his neighbour. He rather thought that she looked like a Jessica. He knocked at number fifteen and waited. She was probably out, he thought. It was just after ten and she didn't usually get home until ten thirty or later. He had just turned to his own door when the deep red curtain swayed and a cross looking face peeped out.

Wearily Jessica moved towards the door, ready to tell the pinched little schoolgirl from downstairs exactly what she thought of her ailing mother. The girl knocked at Jessica's door several times a month, saying please can you not wear heels inside, they make my mom's headaches worse and please can you not shower twice a day, the water leaks from our ceiling and please can you not vacuum so often and do

you sew? I need someone to make a dress for me. Jessica felt as though she had become the repository for all their hopes and tears. She supposed that it had something to do with living above them, that God was too far and they didn't have the energy to think any higher than one floor up. They had even presented her with a gift of ugly slippers sold on the pavement for ten rand as a way of consoling the forces that leaked water onto clean bedspreads and kept them up at night with the grinding noise of the taps. She had never met the sick mother, only the teenaged daughter with her cheap awkward clothes who served as a intermediary negotiating with the higher plane. She swore that if it was the girl knocking at her door again, she would brush her hair, wipe off that hideous make-up and tell her a thing or two about wilfully wearing sacks with fake fur. But the girl from downstairs with her odd requests was the only person who ever knocked at her door. There was something binding about that. She looked through the curtain expecting the thin white face with its shocked wide eyes to stare back at her. Instead she saw the massive figure of the man next door. She groaned, thinking that the reason one moved into flats in the city was so that the neighbours didn't come knocking for cups of sugar.

“I thought you weren't home,” he smiled.

His attention was caught behind the figure in the red dress by the richly textured room beyond. Swirls of vividly coloured materials draped the walls and windows. Sean wanted to touch. There were ornately carved statues and tapestries depicting merry frolics adorning the walls. But the flat was too small for such lush tastes and the effect was a closeness that was as cloying as too much cream.

“Oh ho!” he exclaimed. “This looks like Ali Baba's Den or a harem or something. What a lot of brass! You Indian, Muslim?”

Jessica maintained her graciousness. “What was it that you were looking for?”

He turned to her and saw that she did not look quite as he had imagined her. Her eyes were green and too bright which reminded him of the old woman. He remembered the letter resting illicitly in his pocket. She writes in whispers and speaks in italics; Sean later believed that these words refrained through his mind when he first heard her speak.

“Sorry, just got caught up by all those colours.”

He scratched his head and assumed a look of confusion.

“I was just wondering if there was something wrong with your water.”

“My water?”

“Ja, I took a shower earlier and the water was tinged with red. I thought, you know, that maybe there was a rat stuck in the pipes or something.”

“What an unpleasant thought. Goodness me, I can't say that I've noticed anything myself. Well, I hope that it clears up soon. Good night then.”

She started closing the door when Sean stuck out his hand and cried, “Wait!” She was quite startled by his vehemence and even more determined to shut the door. He wanted her to stop talking in that Postman Pat voice and not look beyond his head while talking to him.

“Yes?” she said coolly.

“Can we perhaps test your pipes?”

“Certainly. I can do that. I'll let you know if there is an oddish tinge.”

A Postman Pat on ice. She started closing the door again while Sean wondered if oddish was really a word and what kind of people used it.

“Wait,” he said again which made her eyes glitter. “One more thing,” he used a much humbler tone. “I have something that probably belongs to you. I picked it up outside, between our doors.”

He stood before her, big and clumsy, vulnerable in his desire to speak with her. Jessica was not without compassion but she was tired and she had been tricked by that clever man so she just wanted him to leave. He was like a child fascinated by the rainbow in a prism as he stood before her door, trying to peek in to see her pretty things. Before she could think of a kind way to make him hand over what he had picked up (probably a cheap bauble like the one the clever man had given her this evening), he had put one big booted foot over her threshold and she was stepping back to avoid proximity. He was commenting on the flat and loving her colours and fabrics and she was affronted because they were hers and she did not want to share them with anyone.

“I don’t usually entertain visitors,” she said tentatively, she was almost shy about insisting upon her privacy.

“Oh what a shame, you should, you should,” he nodded appreciatively as his thick soled boots trod over her fine rugs. He rubbed his hands together and walked around the lounge inspecting the flat. Her place, beneath all the lavish décor, was a mirror image of his except the built in cupboards were on the wrong side.

“What was it that you found?” she wanted to know. Jessica was possessed by an unfamiliar timidity. He dwarfed her with his height but kept his head bent and his eyes to the ground, staring at her bare feet. She backed on to the couch as if to ward him off

and folded her legs away. He sat down on her blue couch, eyed her glass on the coffee table and said, “Mmmm, a little drink wouldn’t be a bad idea. I had an awful experience this evening, climbed up all those stairs with jelly legs and a pounding heart.”

Reluctantly Jessica fetched a glass from the kitchen and served her unwelcome guest. He kept rubbing his hands together and blowing on them like he was cold. He couldn’t keep still for one moment, he was constantly swinging his arms or tapping his foot. He shook his knees together, then he crossed and uncrossed his ankles, jingled his keys and through all of this his tongue moved, talking, slurping, munching chips. He related his experience of the mysterious Fortuin house in Greenpark while she listened intently.

“Man, I ran like a schoolgirl in wet panties,” he laughed at himself, safely distanced from his fear. The carved statue on the mantelpiece had its face twisted in a perpetual grimace that Jessica restrained herself from copying.

“Greenpark, you said? I used to live in Greenpark.”

Her visitor leapt to his feet and said, “No ways, so did I!” He was overjoyed by the coincidence. “Now we have even more in common,” he said happily.

“In fact, some of my family still live there,” she spoke in a quietly dramatic voice.

Eventually he stood up and stretched his back saying, “it was a pleasure getting to know you ma’am, we must do this again sometime. Obviously we were meant to meet.” He put out a huge red hand like a dog raising its paw.

Jessica marvelled at his lack of artifice and cringed at the ma’am but instead asked, “You have something of mine?”

“Well, I don't know if it means anything to you, but I found this scrap of paper just outside here.” He handed the letter to her. He left then and she shut the door relieved to see that her lounge had grown back to its normal size.

Sean looked out for Jessica after that. He would stop her on the stairs and chatter inanely and Jessica was too well-mannered not to listen. She would move to escape but Sean's big body was hard to slip by. He had a loud voice and a silly laugh that made her forgive him just a bit more each time she saw him. As he spoke at her relentlessly, she appreciated his plainness, she liked the way in which he sorted the world into manageable chunks. He did not seem to notice that she did not elaborate too much on his monologues, that she answered his questions politely but without embellishment.

Jessica loved Sunday mornings. She stayed in bed reading thrillers and eating fruit and the sticky juices spilled down her throat, onto the sheets. She did not mind because she always changed them on Sundays. Then she had chocolate biscuits and coffee, again the crumbs beaded into the folds of her bed linen. She did not mind that either. That morning she awoke with a headache beneath her eyes and was cross that she should be sick during her best hours of the week. She made her way to the kitchen, holding her eye with one hand, her other arm reaching ahead of her as if already groping for the painkillers. She moaned out loud, performing her pain even though she had no audience. It was only once she had left the kitchen that she turned and became aware of the wriggling white on the floor, like Basmati rice just coming to life. She noticed the

trampled centre and was astounded that her skin was too thick to sense such insistent movement beneath it. Then Jessica registered the crawling mess that she had walked on and clapped her hand over her mouth because she did not know how else to respond to such horror. She hobbled to the bathroom to wash her feet, not wanting to put them down on any of her magical carpets. She fretted about how to approach the invasion while scrubbing her feet with Dettol. First she poisoned the maggots until her headache throbbed from the fumes but still they would not die. They just shrunk into themselves and then stretched out again when they were ready. Jessica wondered at their consciousness. Were they aware of a threat to their lives or did they simply perceive minor discomfort? Did they want this to be their home, or were they innocent of territory and just want to be? She leaned closely over them as she sprayed more poison even though she could feel it at the back of her throat. Were those little black eyes she saw? She was overcome with revulsion which ran through her body and made her leap out of the kitchen. She returned with buckets of water to drown them; this was marginally successful but for the backwash that forced her to jump away with dread. When the water petered away, the little maggots shook themselves dry and soldiered on. She stood in the kitchen with her nightgown raised above her legs with white corpses floating near her feet and sobbed.

Jessica paused before the door to number fourteen, her skin prickling with cold. She wrapped her arms around herself as she waited. She imagined how Sean would see her on the other side, her body sliced by the striped glass into a discontinuous form. He opened the door sleepily, the flat was dark and the curtains unopened. His hair was plastered to his head on the side where he had slept and his eyes were unfamiliar in this

quietly domestic setting. The flat was dominated by the brown wooden cupboards and her eye was caught by the unimaginative tidiness. She recognised her own home in his; the same built in shelves and corners were tucked into the opposite side here. She turned to him, suddenly fearing that he misunderstood her intentions. She was conscious of her nightdress, his sleep-smelling body. But he paid no attention this, she need not have worried. Instead, his skin was creased on his forehead and he was concerned about her. She was surprised, she was not used to this. But she liked it, she liked more than she would have thought. He went with her to her kitchen.

It was with something that vaguely resembled love that Jessica came to regard Sean. Not love as she understood it, not the love that she avoided but a certain familiarity and comfort in the ordinariness of another person. It was certain in that it was neither grand nor illusive, just a steadily plodding knowing. His large awkward hands, the face that exploded into teeth, his drearily clear eyes – all of these repulsed her still. She did not want to touch his hulking shoulders but she liked looking at them. She liked having them near her. And she did not mind too much when he came to visit, she did not mind because he filled the room with his burly body and laughed loudly, from deep in his belly.

## Endpiece

They wanted to tell their story but did not know where to start. It seemed there could be no beginning that was not founded on some other beginning. Otherwise, all sources seemed too remote. This story could not be told without footnotes, endnotes, little asterisks inserted between every word to point to another, to carry their story the way the stars carried the sky. Their story wanted a map to trace each stop visited and revisited, to wind through every destination only to reveal it as the place where they started. Each stop punctuated their tale with the arbitrary deliberation of a rusty nail puncturing a tyre. Any of these stops could be the start. They had to decide then on a beginning. They decided to start here.

They drove along the grey road towards the setting sun. Luke's arm rested lazily on the steering wheel, its fine brown hairs lit by the late afternoon. They had passed fields with young crops, others with animals grazing, driven by great stony hills and crossed deep green mountain byways. For all that, Eve could not discern much difference between here and there. All brown hills seemed vaguely the same to her; in every field there were new plants tied to wooden poles. Yet, each time she saw these features repeat themselves, she delighted in their beauty. The snaking road seemed to eat its tail as she saw yet another distant cottage, and wondered yet again who lived there and what they did all day. As they drove, she left her thoughts on the scenes before her only to have them fly back and weave themselves into her when it seemed that they had simply

returned instead of going forward. She hoped that she could leave them behind, that as they drove, she could simply empty her mind as though emptying a litter bag, that it would be whipped up by the wind and lodged into the trees, sail past startled cows and leave her be. But on that ring road which curved cunningly without her noticing, they just hovered in the trees waiting for her return.

She would have liked to not return, to find new places. But by trying to get lost, they somehow kept finding the road home. Eve looked at Luke's arm almost imperceptibly steering the car, at ease on the wheel after so many months of driving in circles. Did it begin when at last they accepted the necessity of their return?

Or it could have started with that painting. Luke could not say for certain if that was where the questions began, but that was when he first noticed them. It hovered above the mantelpiece, a bold cry in apocalyptic white, crowding the simple room. A wooden desk stood in the corner, bearing a vase of garden picked flowers and concealing generations of bored schoolboys in its etched surface. The painting might have saved the desk from further desecration as the fiddling fingers of the Kirk boys slacked in favour of their keen eyes. The weekly scripture lessons (and more) were succinctly depicted in that one picture. This was a good thing; it certainly made a deeper impression than Luke's thin unimpassioned ramblings. Heaven and all its angels were there, but in not quite as much detail as hell. This was dominated by the Whore of Babylon, Jezebel herself, her hair whipping about her face. Her diaphanous robes, lifted by the wind, swirled around her. She stood at the top of a hill, overlooking the sea,

overlooking the room. But instead of appearing wicked and remorseful, she seemed rather nice. She seemed a normal, friendly kind of girl, one that you wouldn't mind living next door. She seemed to have not quite registered her fate and looked out with a sensible if slightly uncertain stare.

Luke had found it increasingly difficult to work at the desk when preparing his sermons. He used to like working there, he found a deep delight in the warmth of the morning sun and the blue of the sea. They had called him from that room, from his meditation, the artist and Jezebel, the day they delivered the painting. It was all wrapped up and Mr. Farmer had not cared to linger. The woman who was with him, the woman in the painting, had stood by quiet and ordinary in the dark reception passage. She was hardly noticeable next to the big man who filled the room. He perceived only that she wore trousers, an unpleasant trait in women and one which the Kirk did not encourage. He put the painting aside and continued his work until Clarissa came in and cooed with delight. The wrapping paper was torn into shreds as if she were enraged, as if it were a present and Clarissa gasped and sighed her pleasure. Clarissa was as pretty as a dolly: if he lay her down, would her eyes shut and would she go to sleep?

He wished he had not seen her, the woman in trousers, for now he could not look at the picture without thinking of her. It was unnerving to have a demon wear the face of an ordinary woman. This is what he first thought. Every now and then, he was struck with the knowledge that somewhere this Jezebel was eating, sleeping and doing undemonic things. He began to wonder if the painting had affected her in any way. She was forever entrapped in this image of Jezebel before her demise, she did not deserve that.

The painting became a shrine to Clarissa and her girl friends who would visit religiously, their glossed mouths gaping. Eben encouraged her, saying, that's why we commissioned the painting, we want these silly young things to learn. Luke looked up from his desk in the corner as they paraded through the room. He looked at them sternly from beneath his glasses so that the tentative giggles would taper off. He had a vague suspicion that it was not so much the religious lesson that appealed to Clarissa and her friends, though they would never admit it. Indeed, they probably did not even know it. He suspected that it was not entirely disapproval that informed their desire to visit. He wondered if it was desire itself that drew them there. He could not voice these blasphemous fears to Eben. But when those girls stood before the painting and shook their heads with disparagement, he sensed something stronger, something forbidden, something resembling awe in their muted appraisal.

Luke disapproved of the visits and he disapproved of the painting. He tried not to look at it but found himself, like the silly young girls, drawn to the picture. When he wrote his sermons at the desk, she would be waiting for him if he looked up while pausing to think. He could now read exasperation in her eyes, why do I have to endure this idiocy? she wanted to say. But she couldn't because she was frozen in one unfortunate moment, a moment that perpetually held her as an object of derision and scorn. And unarticulated desire. He felt sorry for her, he wanted to undo the ropes that bound her hands. He wanted to tell her that his Kirk would never really hurt anyone, they just threatened to hurt them. But a feather thin tear appeared in his reasoning, what was the difference even if Jezebel lived? Even if they unbound her hands and sent her home, it was too late. Jezebel looked down from the painting, he could determine no

terror in that expression. And how could that woman who smiled so nicely and wore trousers without a second thought, how could she continue a nice ordinary unfettered life if there was forever an image of her as enslaved by evil, about to be punished by good? It was that moment of suspension that most offended Luke, if only it was just after, at least then she would be released. But instead she had to always anticipate the dreaded moment. He willed the figure to run away. "Go on then, defy them," he said aloud, "Don't let those fools bully you, you look infinitely more sensible than they do."

But she just stood there, mildly bemused. Even if she could run, she would probably trip over those ridiculous robes and hurt herself. Luke took to writing on the green velvet chair beneath the painting so that he did not have to look up at her. But he could feel her above him, as if she were gently alive and softly breathing. His sermon became a fragmented reflection on freedom and discipline. Eben was displeased when he read it, saying that they questioned some of the cornerstones of their faith. He rewrote the sermon and took the picture off the wall. He was beginning to wonder about graven images and feared that there may be a danger in the image of a demon woman. He put it in a closet, face to the wall but Clarissa complained sweetly that she needed to be reminded of evil and its punishment. Luke felt that they were doubling her misery by shutting her up in the closet. Eben told Luke to pull himself together and not behave like some wet behind the ears schoolboy. He decided that the best place to hang the picture was in the Kirk itself, in consecrated space, just in case. So when Luke stood up to recite the rewritten sermon, he found himself facing Jezebel who hung demurely at the back of the Kirk. He faltered as he spoke and then without realising that he remembered, the original sermon came to his mouth and delivered itself.

- But that wasn't exactly how it happened, Eve objected. You're remembering just what you want to remember, the fall of the great messenger of God, how Luke Loyola lost his religion.

- You mean that it didn't start with the picture?

- It started with a picture but not that one, it simply continued with that one. Besides, it was hardly as powerful as you make it out to be. It was quite poor, really.

- But it attracted gaggles of girls to ogle at it daily.

- Oh no, my sweet, it was you who drew the girls.

There was another picture, a humble attempt to capture some rocks hiding the sea, that marks a different beginning. Every morning on the beach, Eve struggled to translate the rockiness of the huge boulders to her book of drawings. She sketched them in pencil and charcoal, tried watercolours and pastels but she could not eke the substance from the rock onto her paper. She was determined to capture these rocks that moved her so, so she did not do the sensible thing and move on to something else. But they remained elusive, she only ever managed big sandy brown lumps. It was possibly the elusiveness that compelled her to continue. That it was not so much the rocks that drew her, but a desire for precision, to apprehend the elusions. Whatever her reason, she worked doggedly on the beach.

There were people who walked that beach regularly, like the old woman with the golden retrievers and the skin shrivelled from her morning swims. There were people who walked the beach occasionally, like the old man with heavily veined legs and a walking stick. There were people who Eve had never seen before and then some who seemed familiar but she could not say why. The girl with the pretty brown curls and the hand knitted cardigan was one of these. She approached Eve timidly, asking if she was an artist.

“Not really,” Eve replied, “I just try.”

The girl, her name was Clarissa, confessed that her greatest desire in life was to be an artist, but she would never be allowed to attend the art school because her father said that they were filled with subversive types. And she was called to a different path. Eve felt a certain mutuality between them, that perhaps Clarissa could understand why it was the rocks that were so important to Eve, and not the sea, nor the sky nor birds nor sand nor anything else. They spoke all morning and then Eve had to return home because it was lunch time. The next day, Clarissa came to the beach again, wearing another awful hand knitted cardigan.

It was after Clarissa started painting the rocks that Eve realised she would never get them right. This was because the rocks themselves were wrong and resistant to being captured. This was apparent from Clarissa’s flat attempts. Instead they found different stretches of beaches, went for hikes up the hill, looking for the right rocks. There was some recognition of the possibility that perhaps it wasn’t the fault of the rocks, that maybe they weren’t very good at drawing but it gave them an excuse to meet everyday with a light-hearted mission. Each felt that she had to pretend to think of

herself as an artist even if secretly she felt she wasn't very good in order for the other to be interested.

It was Clarissa's most enduring proof that in her brother's workroom, there was a painting of extraordinary merit. Somehow the possession of this work lent credibility to her less extravagant attempts. She spoke of it with great reverence and eventually clutched Eve's arm and said in a low voice, "you must come and see it, you must." It was not simply the fine artistry that appealed to her; she felt it spoke to something inside her that she could not pinpoint.

Eve was sneaked into the Kirk hall along with some other girls in dowdy cardigans. She stood amidst them in the upstairs room and felt the same sense of awe as they regarded the picture. The image of Jezebel invoked a vague recognition but it was a discordant sense that remained just out of reach. But Jezebel in all her finery did not command Eve's attention as much as the quiet man on the other side of the room. Luke Loyola sat in the corner of the room at a wooden desk. He looked at them sternly from beneath his glasses that made Eve want to giggle. Because it was not the garish religious decorations that caught her eye, it was the preacher himself that she found inspiring.

But meeting each other was not what they considered to be their story, that fell between words. And if it was a love story, that was incidental. They wanted a happy ending, they insisted upon it. They were almost home now. The road had been curbed into one dull line, dutifully bearing its travellers home without any sly twists. Eve was beginning

to recognise familiar features: the dry, shadeless land, then the huge salt and pepper pots, the black, black river then oh, the mountain coming closer and closer. This mountain she knew, it had long nestled her like a protective dragon. Entering the shadow of the mountain, they felt some relief at their return. When they reached the mountain, they turned with it and drove along the winding road, tucked in its folds.

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