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# 'LUCKY PACKET'

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## DECLARATION

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

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# **LUCKY PACKET**

**BY**

**TREVOR SACKS**

# PART ONE

University of Cape Town

## Spandau Ballet

No-one told me I'd been born on the first day of the war and I found this fact out for myself, looking it up in a book, trying to find some great event that resonated with my life, thereby proving that I would be great too. It didn't even occur to me until my thirtieth birthday, when the dates coincided for only the second time in my life, that I'd been born not just on the first day of the Yom Kippur War but on Yom Kippur itself. No-one had thought of mentioning it because we weren't that kind of family; we didn't go in for that sort of thing. And we certainly didn't fast.

I resent having to begin my life story this way, saying that I was born in that dusty far-northern-Transvaal town on the first day of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. But I suppose I have to say it, because it's the only thing I can think of that explains why my father was among several other Jews in town who sent money for the Israeli troops.

My father was, according to legend, an atheist and, I'd always assumed, an anti-Zionist too. They were two sides of the same coin, I believed. You can imagine my confusion, then, when I learnt only a few years ago about my father's donation to the Israelis.

Well, I tried to picture my father seeing me for the first time in hospital and then hearing the news report on the radio about the surprise attack. He may have thought it was a dirty trick, a bully pointing up and saying 'what's that?' and Israel, the skinny kid, actually looking up there and collecting a sucker punch in the solar plexus.

After all, all the Jews I knew, myself included, were the weaklings picked on in the playgrounds and sports halls of my youth. None were like Moshe Dayan, the Jew General with the eye patch.

I can only speculate that my father felt the adolescent socialist state of Israel deserved a little defending. I never got the chance to ask him, since he died when I was six, or maybe five (there's some dispute).

Nineteen days after my birth, the war was over and, while I'm sure my father's donation had nothing to do with the Israeli victory, I can't say it had no effect at all. For all I know, my father's gift to Israel was the reason why Ma, an atheist too, insisted on all three of her sons having their *bar mitzvahs*. She herself took part in many of the Zionist fund-raisers in town (except the Entebbe Cake Sale since she was terrible in the kitchen), enrolled us in *cheder* and kept a *mezuzah* on the door. But as far as I know, she stepped into the town's small *shul* on four

occasions only, for each of her son's *bar mitzvahs* and once more. None of us could be sure what my father would have wanted.

While I can speculate over several pages just how my father's death was the invisible hand on the tiller of my own life, it's mere procrastination and sooner or later I will have to face the man – the scoundrel, the fat rake – who thrust aboard my neat little boat shouting 'gangway', and sent it on a careless course of his own fancy. I speak, of course, of Leo Fein.



When I was twelve, I stole for the first time in my life. Surprisingly – because, of course, your mother and school and TV shows tell you stealing is wrong – I didn't have any trouble with it at all.

I was going to Meyer Levinson's sixtieth with my friend Joss and his family. I don't know if my family had been invited and if we had, we almost certainly would not have gone. It wasn't that we had anything against Meyer Levinson, it was just that we were forever on the outskirts of the Jewish community in that town in the Far Northern Transvaal.

All around me were concentric circles. There were the eccentric orbits of family around me, but there were others. I was a Jew among Christians, but among Jews I was something else, a boy from a family who resisted other Jews.

I spoke English in a town where Afrikaans ruled. I was white, I mean really white, untanned – a great sin among white of the Far Northern Transvaal. I didn't play enough in the dusty parks, and hated scratching my legs on thorns and the bites of red ants indignant of bare feet at their mounds of red sand, with no idea of rugby or cricket and no family interest in whether I played or not.

And of course, I was white in a town of whites surrounded on all sides by the double ox-horn homeland of a million blacks.

The only reason I was going to Meyer Levinson's birthday braai was because I was spending the weekend with Joss Dorfman, my only Jewish friend. His family had been invited to Meyer Levinson's sixtieth, and so I was too.

Joss was one of those kids who never got into fights because everyone liked him. I'm not saying he was perfect – those are *exactly* the kids who are preyed on by bullies, after all. But even the bullies liked Joss, and I counted him as a friend.

He wasn't one of the snivelling types of Jewish kids that gave Jews a bad name – the kids I'd look at with shame, I confess, and a fear that their reputation would stick to me too. They came with their sick notes and kept to their own, cutting themselves from the herd. I was forced to be among them when we were excused from Religious Instruction.

Joss was acceptable to me. He played tennis, mixed with non-Jewish kids at break time like I did, and possessed the ability to laugh at just about anything. This last talent made everything seem easy, even a stranger's sixtieth birthday party. It was only in the last year, in the run-up to my *bar mitzvah*, that I'd been introduced to the community of *shul*-going Jews in town. Besides the Dorfmans, I'd know very few at the sixtieth.

On the way there in the Dorfmans' VW Kombi, we passed Oost Street, where Dungeon Park lay, and further along, my own house. We turned right down Grobler Street and drove the seven or eight blocks to Schoeman Street, the intersection I always thought of as the centre of town. This was because Great North Diesel and Auto Electric, the business my father had started, was on this corner. Diagonally across lay the OK Bazaars, with the sweet containers near the entrance, where they'd let my grandfather pick sugared gums and put them in his pocket without paying.

Across Grobler Street stood the library with the monument of molten rifles from the Makgoba War. Throughout much of my childhood I thought of this memorial as an unexpected but welcome peace offering, until I read (possibly inside the library) that Chief Makgoba was beheaded by Swazi mercenaries hired by General 'Groot Freek' Grobler. With their chief lost, Makgoba's people were soon defeated and their weapons confiscated by the Boers. And so now, in an extra, cruel twist of History, the rifles sat there outside the library on a street named after 'Groot Freek' himself.

Where Makgoba's head landed no-one knows but it could have found a tranquil resting place inside the library. My own head was comforted by the place and I liked to walk along the cool brown stones that lined the hall, divided by a narrow pool of water, and look in long wooden drawers filled with cards.

The last corner at the centre of town held the Nedbank building. At sixteen storeys it was our only high-rise. It weighed down onto one of town's most fascinating spaces: an alleyway of stores under the high-rise, that led with light speckled paving from Schoeman Street to Landdros Maré Street. Perhaps I liked beginning in one place and ending up in another through a kind of shortcut or secret passage.

We turned into Marshall Street and finally arrived in the bright garden of Meyer Levinson in the afternoon. It was one of those houses so unlike Dungeon Park with its yellow grass patches

and dusty sidewalks with sharp brown stones. Instead, Meyer had a sweating green lawn and aloes, palms and a swimming pool.

All around were women arranged in carefully casual afternoon wear and their husbands in slacks and pomade, some of them in those boxes they called safari suits. The whole collection had been there long enough for the sexes to separate like curds and whey, by the time we arrived.

When the Dorfman were noticed, Joss was greeted with lipstick and backslaps, and questions about tennis and schoolwork. Predictably, my identity required a moment of stilted explanation with each group but at least the surname produced some recognition.

Meyer said hello and how happy he was to see us, in a voice that vibrated calm. He kept the same tone, no matter what he said. It wouldn't make a difference if he walked in on his wife with another man ("I'll kill you"), crushed a pinkie in a car door ("fuck") or quadrupled his money on the horses ("yes"), it would always have the same delivery. It was, in its own way, soothing and I imagined that instead of vocal cords he had in his larynx the kind of pebbles you find in rivers.

Joss's mother gave Meyer his wrapped present and we all wished him a happy birthday. Mrs Dorfman was a good-looking woman, who wore close-fitting skirts or pedal-pushers, and I admired her for her sly remarks.

Mr Dorfman was a gentle man, a draughtsman with a small halo of curly blonde hair.

"Oh, I'm very excited," said Meyer Levinson in his steady manner. The ice blocks rang inside his glass as he moved to glance across the scene in the garden. "Who knew anyone would come at all."

"With all this free food?" said Joss's mom. "Who're you kidding, Meyer?"

Jews were allowed to joke about Jews, but others were forbidden. Every Jew in town was vigilant against anti-Semitism. Even my mother, in her capacity as Jewess only to the degree of grudging progenitor of *bar mitzvah* boys, was on the lookout for it.

Out in the town, the old prejudices still sprang up if we weren't careful. Plugging the holes was something we didn't have enough fingers for, with a high school teacher making fun of a Jewish kid's nose, a bowling club member telling an anti-Semitic joke in a speech, and the ever-present goad 'don't be Jewish!' whenever a child (of any religious persuasion) was reluctant to share their sweets.

Here, though, among the cheeks and handshakes of fellows, it was safe enough for jokes. Mr and Mrs Dorfman joined the other adults coalescing in clumps, and Joss and I walked over to a group of kids I recognised from *shul*.

A skinny boy of about sixteen with embarrassing wire glasses was talking louder than necessary to another boy who was slightly overweight and carried the stink of cigarettes and peppermint gum. The skinny one, I knew, had teased my brother Elliot about his braces once and Elliot had taken revenge by throwing the boy's satchel into the school swimming pool. Elliot came off worst in that one, since the skinny kid went and reported the incident to the principal.

"They're anti-Semites and I heard if you go to one of their concerts and they find out you're a Jew, they fuck you up," the skinny one said now.

"Spandau Ballet are not anti-Semites," said the other one.

"Spandau was a concentration camp, man."

"I know – but they don't sing about anything Nazi."

"Ja, well, you don't know what they say to crowds at their concerts. And the fans – if they know you're a Jew..."

"Come on, how're they gonna know you're a Jew? I mean, for *sure*."

"What – you're gonna deny you're a Jew just so you can watch Spandau Ballet?"

I knew about Spandau Ballet from Elliot and about Nazis from my Uncle Victor, who'd been too young for the war but spoke as if he'd suffered it nevertheless. But I knew very little about being a Jew.

Would I have denied being a Jew at a Spandau Ballet concert? I feared the question was coming, but in the meantime Joss spoke.

"I didn't know you were into ballet, Gershon. Show us some moves."

"Ha-ha, Dorfman," said Gershon, the skinny one, although he only said it and wasn't laughing with the others. He tried to look tough and punched Joss on the arm, a skew, glancing blow.

"Anyway, Duran Duran is much cooler," said Joss and everyone agreed.

"Who do you like?" asked Gershon.

"A lot of stuff," I said. It was true. I had the benefit of two brothers with tastes in music that were opposed and wanted to rough each other up. Music, at least, was something I knew about.

"Like who?"

"I don't know. The Rolling Stones. Bruce Springsteen. Joy Division. Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Southern Death Cult."

"Who?" asked Gershon.

"David Bowie," I offered.

"Nazi," said Lee, the other one. "Fucking good, though."

"But Nazi," said Gershon. "And a homo. He admitted it."

I didn't know what to say to that and feared there'd be consequences for my answer. Instead, Joss started talking about a boy he met on *Habonim*, the Jewish summer camp, who had been born without a foreskin. The others said that that was bullshit and impossible and so, what – did he think that made him *moshiach* or Jesus or something? They talked about their last camps and I knew it was a conversation I'd never find a way into.

On one side of the garden, three braais had been set up and the fires already lit. On the other, by a steel folding table stacked with liquor, a rigid black man in a white dustcoat stood with his arms behind his back.

"I'm getting some juice," I said to Joss. I passed a table and had a look at the schmaltz, rolls, green salad, bean salad, potato salad, and the pink pate in the fish mould that accompanied every Jewish function.

I drifted through the garden. Circles of chatter had gathered and I skirted between them, magnetised against them. I went to where the braais lay, each one an oil-drum cut lengthways down the middle and propped on its side on a purpose-built frame. Two friends with bellies were in conversation, clipping meat tongs as they spoke. Their heads jutted out from their shoulders like gargoyles as they discussed P.W. and the state of emergency.

I knew about the government crackdown mostly from Elliot, who called it fascist. I didn't know the meaning of the word back then but Elliot said the government could lock black people up for no reason.

"They're saying there's curfews for them now," said one of the gargoyles.

"Fantastic," said the other, rolling his eyes. "Another excuse they can use not to pitch up at work."

I circled back towards the drinks table and waited to ask the man in the white dustcoat for a cola-tonic. Two men ran off their drinks orders to him, barely hiding their hostile impatience to get back to their own conversations, or at the downright insensitivity of having to fetch one's own drinks.

"Thanks, chief, that's enough," I heard someone say. "And what does the *baas* drink?"

"*Baas* Meyer drinks the screwdriver," said the man in the dustcoat.

"Ja, one of those."

I watched this man wait for his drinks. I must have seen him before in *shul*, talking business in the back rows with the other men, but had never really taken notice since there was still so much that was new to me in *shul*. He looked youthful, although the folds in his face gave away that he was in his early fifties.

The straight line of his lips was presided over by a proud and not unattractive nose through which he did virtually all of his breathing. Only the very ends of his mouth curved one way or the other and generally the lips seemed well tucked in. This straight line set off, by contrast, the curves and folds of his cheek, chin, neck and belly.

The brows would sometimes crouch together in the middle of his face. But by far the most striking feature was the hair, with that grey streak an inch wide shooting back from the hairline.

I shifted towards the man in the white coat and asked for my drink. The man with the white streak took up his drinks and raised an eyebrow when he noticed me, which served as a proxy smile for the aforementioned mouth. "You must be an Aronbach, hey?"

"Yes," I said.

"I knew it. Your father – he was a good man." He stood nodding for a moment then swaggered back to the men in the garden furniture. "Meyer – this is for you, my china. Don't say no."

My memories of my father were meagre and incidental: the clinking of change in a pocket from down the passage, and glimpses of holidays, reconstructed quite possibly, I'll admit, from photo albums. But this man had known him, it seemed.

You can count on family to say nice things about the departed but here was a stranger, unprompted, doing just that. It was too late to ask for more: he was leaning in and talking to Meyer Levinson, almost romantically close.

I didn't know then who Leo Fein was, but that he knew who I was made me feel more myself in that garden of strangers. I took my cola-tonic past the little groups, neutralised to their magnetic fields, walking so close to some it was through an aura of perfume and pomade.

Meyer Levinson's house was a face-brick palace hugging a lawn which rolled like the back of a giant. Sunk into the surface were a kidney-shaped swimming pool and a green concrete tennis court in a towering box fence.

Guests had no need for the inside of the house, the outside providing food and drink, warmth, shade, exercise and the company of others. On the lawn next to Joss, a girl shaped like a potato latke was doing the moonwalk. Her mother, Carol, had begun to give me lifts twice a week to *cheder* in her Mitsubishi Colt sedan, with its rust creeping almost unseen along the brown paint.

Potato Latke was teaching a younger girl to slide her feet and lift her heels at the right time. "You're quite good, hey, Shoshana," said Gershon. "You look just like a *shvartser* when you do that."

The other boy, Lee, laughed.

"At least I don't smell like one," said Potato Latke, holding her nose. Her little student copied her, both of them pinching their noses and moonwalking away from Gershon.

Gershon held up his middle finger but put it away quickly when Joss's mother approached our group to tell us to fetch our lunch.

We accumulated meat of our choosing from the gargoyles at the barrel fires and swarmed at the rolls and mielies on the side tables. While the adults settled into wire mesh garden chairs, which sieved the backs of their legs, we resumed our postures on the back of the green giant and bore down on our food.

Afterwards we lay on our own backs and sucked the grease off our fingers. As the afternoon sagged some of the men dozed and the women, talking softly with each other, stroked the heads of the small children at their feet.

Someone found an orange plastic ball and we decided to enter the cage of the tennis court. The girls soon bored of 'one bounce' and so it was just the four of us boys left playing together in a circle on the green tennis surface.

"I've seen it," said Joss. "At my cousin's house in Joburg."

"No you haven't," said Gershon.

"I have. It was a video and they showed everything."

"You should come to my house," said Lee. "I've got stacks of magazines. European."

"You mean your dad's magazines," said Gershon.

"Well, you don't have any," said Lee.

"Well, looking at it is one thing but doing it is a whole other story."

"As if *you* have. You didn't even kiss that one at *Habonim*."

"Ja I did." And then Gershon shut up and everyone turned to see Leo Fein at the fence.

"Does one of you want to help me with something?" he asked through the cage. He'd said 'one of you' but he was looking at me. No-one else said a word.

"Okay," I said. "I'll come."

"Good," he said.

"Just me?" I asked, jogging slowly to the gate.

"Should be enough. We just need to help Uncle Meyer with something, okay?"

I felt the others trying to pick up a conversation again, rolling the ball on the ground between each other while Leo Fein and I climbed the grass bank.

"Thanks, my boy. You're a big help, hey," said Leo Fein without looking back at me.

"No problem." I gave a last look to Joss and the others who were following us with their eyes.

“The party’s running out of booze,” said Leo Fein. “Meyer never gets enough. And a party should never run out of booze, hey boy? That’s a rule.”

We walked along the driveway to his car, a gold Mercedes coupé with a long nose and cream leather interior. The afternoon was darkening as we rolled through the streets, keeping a steady pace.

“So you’re an Aronbach, hey?”

I nodded.

“Hey! Your father was a good man, let me tell you.”

But he didn’t tell me. He just kept driving, his shoulder pressing comfortably against the cream leather seatback while I shuffled questions I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

I never liked to admit that I hadn’t known my father much – he was my father, after all, and boys are meant to know about their fathers. Should anyone demonstrate that there was a shortfall in my knowledge of him, I’d feel disconnected from my source, my progenitor, the prototype on which I’d been based.

Perhaps, also, I didn’t want to run the risk of being disappointed by what I heard, because reality is often such a letdown. Hearing that he was a good man was agreeable, and so I hesitated to press for more information.

We drifted through town and I began to wonder where we were going. He drove slowly down Market Street, past Roy’s ‘Uptown’ Liquor, craning to see in. Until then, I’d assumed we were going to Leo Fein’s house.

“Ag, no. Closed,” he said.

Of course it was closed – it was Sunday. Everyone knew it was illegal to buy alcohol on a Sunday. He must have forgotten.

We pulled around the back, into General Joubert Street, and reversed the Mercedes so that the rear bumper was close to the steel doors of the delivery entrance. Here we were hidden from what little traffic there was, on a street where the backs of many buildings lay.

“Listen, this is my friend Roy’s place. He’s not going to mind if we borrow a few things. Are you going to help me?”

I nodded.

“You think you can jump over? I mean, if there was someone inside I’d just ask them – they know me here.” He peered up at the gate through the Mercedes window.

“I get into my mom’s window from the roof sometimes, for fun.”

“Hey, what a bugger you are! Don’t you worry about it – Roy’s my old friend. I’ll make it up to him.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Let’s go.” We stepped out of the Mercedes and Leo Fein peered through a gap in the gate. “Look here,” he said, pulling me to the square hole where the bolt lay. Our faces were side by side and he held tight onto my shirtsleeve, keeping me at the gap. “See that window there? That’s where you get in. If you take those empty crates there, the beer crates, and put them on top of each other, you can stand on them and get up to the window.”

“Okay,” I said.

“When you’re inside you start bringing the booze to the big door.” He rumbled the words at me and his instructions drove my heart faster. “When you’ve got everything you wait there at the door and then you bang, three times, like this.” He tapped three slow gongs quietly on the metal gate with his knuckle. “Then I’ll come in and open up, and we load up and get out of here. That’s our plan.”

I nodded and turned to the gate to begin the climb.

“Don’t you want to ask me anything?” he said.

Yes: how did you know my father, were you friends, were you in business together, what made my father a good man, did my father ever do anything like this with you? I asked none of them and shrugged instead.

“Don’t you want to know what you must get?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Okay. You gonna remember this? Three cases of beer – you know, twenty-four cans – one of Lion, one of Ohlsson’s, one Castle. A bottle of Bells. One Campari and one Tia Maria if you can find them.” He asked for wine too, and then said, “Cognac. You must look for Remy Martin and it must say ‘cognac’ on it. Six bottles.”

He went over it again, making me repeat it back to him and getting me to spell ‘cognac’, too. Trying to keep it all in my head made me more nervous than the thought of the task ahead, driving out one kind of anxiety with another.

“Clever boy,” he said when I had the order right. “You get the cognac first, okay?” Leo Fein stooped a little and locked his fingers so that his hands formed a stirrup. “Come,” he said. It was a familiar pose to me but one I’d never seen an adult assume. I put my foot in his hands and he boosted me up.

Once my hands were on top of the gate, he lifted my legs further until I could roll my body over the top. I knew to bend my legs for the drop on the other side and I landed more easily than I thought I would. I was in the loading yard.

“Be quick. They’re waiting for us at Uncle Meyer’s.” I carried the crates up a ramp that led to the raised loading bay, where the steel roller door hung shut, and stacked them against the wall. Here I staggered them like steps up to the window – my own idea.

I hauled my body up and kneeled on the top crate, then raised myself to open the window, which was hinged at the top. I wormed through the window frame and the tower teetered but held as my foot came off it.

I was bent over the frame at my waist, trying to see in before swinging a leg over. Half of me was outside and half inside where things were much darker and the sounds of my efforts struck hard surfaces. Only here, at this halfway point, did I feel the clanging of the risks involved.

It was too painful to remain there like that but I couldn’t turn back and face Leo Fein, so I swung over inside, hanging off the frame from my fingers. I had no idea how far the drop was from the window or what lay beneath me in the dark.

It’s an odd feeling, giving yourself up to fall an uncertain distance. Even a suicide jumper must have an idea of just when he’ll hit the ground, but the raised delivery bay and the darkness confused my sense of depth.

I inhaled unsteadily and unhooked my hands. My bare arms slid against the cold enamel paint of the wall and my feet touched down with a shock, earlier than anticipated.

When my eyes adjusted, I got busy shopping. Well, what else could I do now? I knew which were the brandies, which the whiskies, liqueurs and wines, since I’d studied closely the bottles in the bar at home. I found the cognac without too much trouble.

The slabs of beer were heavy for my twelve-year-old arms but I was working for Leo Fein, a man who knew who to go to for anything in town, and who he’d gone to was me. Soon enough I had our consignment arranged neatly before the roller-door.

The three bangs came as a shock, even though it was my own fist on the steel. I worried first that the sound was loud enough to alert the police (why the police? Roy’s his friend, he’d said), and then I worried that they’d been too soft and that Leo Fein hadn’t heard me.

Then the sound was answered with the whine of an engine and a crash and a shudder. The car was near and I heard footsteps approaching, then violence at the base of the steel door. It made me think about running behind the boxes but all I did was freeze.

“The chain!” said Leo Fein on the other side. “Pull the chain!”

I groped along the wall and found it and pulled. The roller door began to rise. Leo Fein slid underneath, his hair really electrified now under his own power, and he began at once to carry the liquor out. The gold Mercedes stood vibrating serenely in the loading bay. The gates to the

yard, I was astonished to find, had imploded and a rear corner of the car had been crushed slightly under the impact.

Leo Fein already had some of the beer crates at the car and he struggled with the boot lid so much that the rear bounced up and down on the shock absorbers. He finally had it open and while I stood frozen, the man moved with more speed than I'd expected from someone his age and shape.

"The cognac – you get it?" he asked, sprinting up the steps. He answered his own question by scooping up four bottles.

I ran after him, helping him with the last few bits. After we'd slid most of it into the boot and put the rest on the back seats, Leo Fein slammed the lid down. It took several thrusts before the thing clung shut.

Once we were in the car, we sped through the gates. For three or four blocks my head was pushed against the leather seat and the engine emitted an alarmed howl. We said nothing. Thereafter we slowed to the same velocity with which we'd left the party.

Straight-lipped and gripping the wheel with both fists until then, he finally loosened a little. Calmly he said, "Well done, my boy. You were like a cat, hey?"

I was still reeling, riding high on the caper. "Is your car okay? What did you do?" I asked, and several other questions in a series, turning in my seat to face him.

"The car? A little scratch," he said coolly. And then, without holding back, "Smashed those doors like they weren't even there, my china! Bam!"

"How did you get the door open?"

But we both quietened down as we approached a red light and had to stop diligently right alongside another car. With the last blip of the brakes on the wheels, the boot popped open, revealing our haul.

I watched Leo Fein face front as if for an austere presidential photograph, or a mug shot. In the neighbouring car an upright couple in Sunday best gawked at the slightly tattered Mercedes, at the boot-load of shining bottles, and then at Leo Fein with the white streak and the twelve-year-old in the passenger seat next to him.

Leo Fein kept staring ahead and did the most peculiar thing. He began to pick his nose in earnest. How he dug and scraped in that fleshy pit. From my ringside seat I had a view of both Leo Fein and, across him through two sets of widows, the couple in the next car.

The whole incident happened in a flash and, as if to deny or excuse this private act in another human being, by some compulsion the couple turned their heads and faced front. We in the gold Mercedes turned left.

"Works every time," said Leo Fein. "Don't know why, but it works."

"What if we get caught?" I asked.

"Hey, no-one will mind. It's like a practical joke. You know – like when you all pretend there's a string across the doorway in class and climb over it. Or you put drawing pins on the teacher's chair, hey? You probably do that all the time."

"Ja," I lied.

"But that doesn't mean you go blabbing to everyone about where we got this, okay?"

"I know," I said.

"I don't want people to get the wrong idea."

We arrived back in the welcome garden of Meyer Levinson when the braai barrels had been cleared of their meat and served as torches for the guests. The fires lit up their long bodies, pin-erect on the back of the lawn. I called the other boys to help carry the liquor from the Mercedes and the man in the white dustcoat came too. "It really wasn't necessary, Leo," said Meyer Levinson. "All this drink."

"Don't mention it, Meyer. It's your birthday."

"The other thing, Leo..." said Meyer.

"Ah, I see my friends have arrived," said Leo Fein. While I placed the beers in the icy water of the tub on the grass, I watched him approach two men with very neat haircuts and moustaches. Leo Fein cradled two bottles of cognac in one arm and shook hands with the men, greeting them in Afrikaans and leading them inside Meyer Levinson's house.

The boys and I snuck a few beers as rewards and smuggled them around the side of the house. We popped the cans and let the aroma fizz out of the tops. The smell was always better than the taste, not as bitter, and in our haste to drink it down Joss and I let several burps rip from our throats. I began to feel the lightness rise up in me even before the end of one can.

"Where were you?" asked Gershon.

"Just went for a little cruise," I said.

"This is good stuff," said Lee, savouring a lengthy sip of Lion. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and blackened the end lighting it.

"What the hell happened to his car?" asked Joss.

"A scratch, my friend. Nothing more."

Joss crushed the empty can in his hand. "Oops! Just a scratch, old sport."

Someone came around the corner and we all hid our cans. "Fuck off, Shoshana," said Lee.

"I know what you're doing," said Potato Latke.

"So?" said Lee.

“So, you better give me some or I’ll tell your mom,” she said.

Lee gave her his can and she took a sip so small it barely wet her lips.

“So, where did you get it from?” Gershon asked me again.

“Let’s just say, a friend’s place. No big deal,” I said, adding what I thought to be layers of enigmatic overtone. How much more could I inflate the mystery before it collapsed?

“Oh, a friend,” said Lee unquestioning and blinking through the smoke.

“Yip, an old friend called Roy’s ‘Uptown’,” I said when no-one tried to pry it out of me.

“They’re not open on a Sunday,” said Potato Latke with scorn.

“No, they’re not,” I said and walked around the corner again. I wasn’t one of them but I’d found a kind of position among them.

Really I sought to share the feeling of victory with my accomplice, a feeling amplified by the beer, but he was inside with the new men and the cognac. Already many guests were leaving Meyer Levinson’s garden. Mrs Dorfman was walking towards me.

“Where’s Joss, Ben?” she asked. “We’re leaving now.”

“He’s coming. I just want to say goodbye to Uncle Leo.”

“Oh, I think he’s having some kind of meeting. I’m sure it’s fine if you don’t say ‘bye. It’s getting late.”

The others came out from around the side of the house and Joss joined me next to his mother. “Come on, boys,” she said, scanning us while we avoided her eyes.

We followed her towards Mr Dorfman who was standing next to Meyer Levinson as the guests were leaving. “Hope they don’t stay too long,” said Mr Dorfman.

“No, no. You know Leo – business-business-business. They can keep drinking their brandies-and-Cokes and I’ll go to bed.”

The Dorfman’s thanked Meyer and wished him a happy birthday once more, and I said to Meyer, a man to whom I’d only ever said ‘*Gut Shabbes*’, “Thank you for a marvellous evening.”

“Marvellous!” said Joss.

In the car, Joss’s father studied us both in the rear-view mirror. We’d driven several blocks before he spoke. “I saw you went to help Uncle Leo, Ben. That was nice of you,” he said. “Where did you guys go?”

“A friend of his,” I said.

“Oh, which friend was that?”

“I think his name was Roy.”

Joss and I made great efforts not to look at each other, not to laugh; besides not wanting to be caught out for anything, we wanted to save the moment up for later. Mr Dorfman's little nods faded off and there was silence again for a while.

"All that booze that he brought," said Mrs Dorfman quietly to her husband.

"Very generous," said Mr Dorfman, arching his eyebrows.

"We aren't Afrikaners, or Irish, starting to drink at ten in the morning and never stopping. Jews prefer eating to drinking," said Mrs Dorfman, turning her head in her husband's direction. "A nice dessert – that he could've brought."

That night in the darkness of Joss's room I went over the details. I told Joss about climbing the gate and dropping onto the storeroom floor. I said I was scared, ja, scared that we'd be caught, even if Leo Fein did know Roy, because how did it look? And with me alone in that room. I told him how easy it had been, actually, that we could probably break into any number of places in town if we wanted to.

"We must have been doing a hundred and fifty k's at the least," I said.

"I didn't know it could go that fast," said Joss. "I mean it *looks* fast."

"And it's strong."

"Jeez, doesn't he even care about his car?"

"He doesn't give a shit!"

"How did he know that thing about picking your nose?"

"I don't know but it's cool."

"Ja."

"Hey, next time you must come with."

"Ja, okay – ja!" said Joss.

We both agreed that Leo Fein was as cool as someone on TV.

## A History of the Aronbachs

Since every child believes himself the centre of space-time, I had collected the fragments of the stories that led up to the day I came into the world and arranged them into the patchwork of precursory events that conspired in my birth, rather than the real and individual lives of my parents. But here goes, anyway.

I must first say that the archival evidence was always mysterious. It was puzzling to me, trying to connect the woman I knew in the all-white uniform of the bowling club with the one in the black-and-white photograph who was wearing a skinny belt and a neat bob, carrying a patent leather handbag, smoking a cigarette in Spain.

I always knew she was different from my friends' mothers because she knew things – poetry and music, for instance – and because the books on our shelves were *her* books. In my friends' houses, if there were books around, they were the belongings of the fathers, and almost always spy novels or adventures. My house had historical books with stern covers, and ones on art and ceramics, and besides the books there were paintings (and not one of them a wildlife picture).

Despite all that, she was my mother now, doing the shopping in elasticated tracksuit pants, eating off TV trays, occasionally snoring in her La-Z-Boy. And that's what clashed with the photos.

She'd finished art college in Johannesburg, where she'd learnt pottery, and had taken work where she could get it. Among these occupations was window dressing for a department store in the city but she spent most of her free time at the studio of Dennis Haig, her former lecturer. Here she created her own works, some on commission, and taught a few evening classes a week.

It was Dennis Haig who was to become my eldest brother Will's father, although a sudden job offer at a college in Hampshire proved more attractive than raising my brother. This left my pregnant Ma somewhat expanded in the belly and reduced in prospects, having lost both the father of her unborn child and the pottery studio that was the source of her income and output.

It was possible to rent space in other studios but it cost more than she could afford and in any case her belly soon came between her and the wheel. She began to rely more heavily on her other means of income in the department store until my grandmother, Rose, had to come to Johannesburg to take her daughter down from the window display and put her feet up.

Will was born soon thereafter and grew up in the backyards of other people's homes. They stayed mainly in cottages attached and unattached to the houses of their landlords, whose wives and families had various attitudes to Margot's jilted condition.

Will was often left in the care of these families while Ma pinned dresses and twisted mannequins' limbs. Her brother Victor visited sometimes but couldn't offer much in the way of support besides an offer to curtail Dennis Haig's non-artistic creative capacity with a kick between the legs.

You may think, once I introduce my father Eddie Aronbach, that I mean to portray him as some kind of saviour to Ma, but I think that this would be an oversimplification of the facts and a misrepresentation of Ma's naivety which, since birthing Will, had waned. Of her cunning I can't be sure except to say, as my mother, she only ever displayed sincerity and kindness. But then, she was my mother.

My father had pleased my grandparents by studying business. It came as a relief for immigrants from Lithuania. (The *shtetls* remained close: when still a child, my Aunt Evie chased after the ice-cream man shouting 'stop' in Russian.) Why my father chose to put himself in danger on cricket pitches and rugby fields when my grandparents had done such a wonderful job in avoiding the pogroms was confounding. But a business degree – that was something they could understand.

Scholarship was important to the Aronbach line, which had produced several rabbis. As a family they were committed to ensuring an education for all their children. At least the boys.

But Eddie's road was not as straight as either his brother Frank the doctor's, or his cousin Leonard the rabbi's. At least the family could say 'Frank the doctor' and 'Leonard the rabbi' (although my father called him Leonard the Learned, sarcastically, after Leonard lost his parents' money in a scam in the fifties); but Eddie the what?

They waited for Eddie to show them what. Eddie signed up as a navigator in a rally through the Sahel, walked out of a holiday job ('a big opportunity') in his Uncle Bernard's butchery, and fixed cars with a friend, selling them for a profit.

He lived this way for years, as a bachelor, without casting around for an opportunity that would lead him in any particular direction, until his brother-in-law mentioned a venture that could see him in his own business in a small town in just a few years. It was while preparing for this undertaking that my father met my mother.

He was using his last few days in Johannesburg to accumulate a new wardrobe. If Eddie liked something, he generally bought six of them, which is why he ended up inside the shop window in Asper's asking my mother for the last black, size medium, long-sleeved polo shirt to add to the other five resting on his forearm.

There was only one Margot Hirsch and my father never tried to add another five to his inventory, to the best of my knowledge (for you can never be entirely sure of these things). Over

the course of a year and a half, my father's new business bloomed along with the entanglement, long-distance, with my mother.

It was over a long-distance call, while Ma's landlord-family listened in on their own entangled receiver, that my father proposed.

Ma packed up Will, her fettling knives, pottery needles and loops and moved to the town where my father had established himself and his business, Great North Diesel and Auto Electric. Here, Elliot and I were born. Will, meanwhile, took to his new father – the only one he'd known – exceedingly well. His confidence soared from the time he landed in my father's lap. Other boys in nursery school, every one beefier than Will, trembled at the sight of him simply because he told them all he was stronger than any child present or absent.

My father built his business beyond his brother-in-law's initial investment and the staff grew to over forty. He had a prime site near the town's great landmark, the red-and-white radio tower, and the business became a landmark itself. He was known for his helpfulness, repairing other people's botch-jobs free of charge on many occasions, and extended credit to farmers. The business was successful enough to sustain our family and build a new house with a pottery studio. A kiln was in the pipeline too, although Ma was too busy raising us to fold or fire much clay.

My father died when I was six, if you choose to believe me, or five, if you prefer my mother's version. I'd always correct her when we talked about it. There was no reason for me to know better than her but I pressed for the extension anyway. It was a heart attack that killed Eddie Aronbach.

Certainly as I grew older and I carried the knowledge that my father was dead, I sensed from my brothers that I'd missed a defining trauma. But losing a parent early in life means suffering two losses – I lost my father, but I also lost (or rather, never gained) an idea of what part he was meant to fill in my life. Except, that is, by comparison with the father-filled lives of friends.

I don't remember anyone telling me my father had died. I saw Elliot, who was eleven, thrash on the bed and cry rare tears, alarming me as they dropped. Even then I didn't know the cause of his distress. How could I? No-one was talking to me. They were pouring whiskey down poor Elliot's neck and getting him my father's gold watch to grip onto. Elliot bawled and flailed and nothing calmed him, and for many years he kept up the fight against whatever was going.

Some would call Ma lucky to have Elliot to keep her busy, too busy to go into mourning. How can you mourn when you're arresting the flying wrists and ankles of a son?

And where was Will during all this? In a pattern he'd never shake his whole life, Will was working. He worked at phoning relatives, he worked at arranging the funeral and, although still only sixteen, he worked at understanding the finances.

Well, I must have learnt from somewhere that Daddy was dead. I wish I had something to tell you. I wish I could say an aunt sat me down, or that I discovered my father's corpse stiff and unresponsive, or that I screamed at everyone to stop and tell me what the hell was happening. Simply, I knew he was dead by his absence, nothing more.

Although most of my early memories aren't substantial enough to grasp and examine in detail, I often return to my father's death. It's as if our relative positions in that tableau point to how our lives would be thereafter. Elliot bawling, Ma holding him by the wrists, Will in another room administering and transacting, and me between them all, watching.

Photographs of Elliot in the years after our father's death invariably show him scowling. His median demeanour was one of discontent. He had no time for the ideas of anyone in town, much less those of anyone in the family.

Ma used to say she bet Elliot would make a good long-distance runner. How she came to this assessment I don't know, since he was never interested in sport. What she was hinting at was some sort of hidden drive, a kind of internal combustion within Elliot, the effects of which we'd notice at points throughout his life.

That Ma succeeded in getting Elliot through his *bar mitzvah* two years later was her greatest victory. Although it was wrapped in the dogma, tradition, showiness and conventions Elliot hated so much, he knew not to refuse her, even if she was as dismissive of the religion as he was.

We regarded the *bar mitzvahs* as tribute to our father's side of the family, an unpleasant but compulsory procedure like lancing a boil. Because the rite was mixed up with our dead father (for the sake of his siblings' beliefs about what our father would have wanted, family unity and such), not even Elliot refused to do his. He mocked and complained, yes, skipped *cheder* lessons, to be sure, and even during the *bar mitzvah* we were all on tenterhooks, waiting for an outburst, a sub-machine spray of insults or a manifesto from the *bimah*. But they never came.

Though I never saw it, Ma must have felt resentment for having to be the controlling force, since she was a woman who had no small amount of rebellion inside her. She too couldn't help marking herself out, a five-foot-two bastion against the narrow-minded, the ungenerous, the racist, the religious in town, and voiced unpopular dissent with teachers, bowling club members and the rabbi.

Elliot, Ma would say, wished he was from a truly broken home. She meant a home not broken down by the death of our father but one consciously wrenched apart by violence and alcohol, tempers and cigarette burns.

Ma only wanted to keep Elliot from veering so far he would never be able to come back. "Just agree with the teachers, just once, Elliot, even if you know they're backwards and hypocrites and whatever else you say they are." She tried to keep him from being kicked out of school and struggled with him about not provoking adults with his clothing and hair and earrings and music and dagga, and in a town where folks were easily provoked.

It was as if he were trying to prove he wouldn't need a father at all, that he was tough enough to take on the town, the world, with what he had. As if he were trying to build a patina of hard living, a callus against life.

By the time of Elliot's *bar mitzvah*, Will was away at university. He would swoop in on weekends, causing alarm, rearranging lives and business. He had firm ideas of which direction to take and conducted, variously, Great North Diesel and Auto Electric, my school subject choices, Ma's spending, and family holidays. He had poor returns on investment with Elliot, since Elliot would never allow his life to be directed by anyone other than himself; or rather, Elliot conducted his life in reaction against the grids and plans of the town.

Will, in a way, was Ma's great hope. He argued, negotiated and demanded, sure, but he brought his girlfriends to meet Ma, he studied practical business subjects at university and, over and above the negotiations and demands, he worked holiday jobs for extra cash.

He had the idea in his head that we'd once had a vast family business empire or at least punched above our weight in town, and that it was his calling to rebuild and better it. Nobody dared tell him he wouldn't do it, either, not even Morgan the family accountant, whose predictions were a constantly descending black graph.

Everything Will acquired – the knowledge of his business degree, the ruthless charm of well-connected Johannesburg friends, the branded shirts and deck shoes paid for with holiday jobs – was amassed with the aim of expansion in mind; indeed, each was proof of growth.

Elliot rejected Will's ambitions so Will turned his efforts to influencing me and brought me some of the spoils from Joburg. I received T-shirts and toys you couldn't find in town and once he bought me a pellet gun.

To spend a precious and dedicated half hour together on a weekend when he was home from university made me feel like a shining recruit for Will's empire. Increasingly we'd gang up – us, the more reasonable, the more logical, incisive brothers – against Elliot, whose path we tried to colour as wayward or circuitous but was in fact straight, pure and (which is more than could be

said for mine) at least his own. And so Will and I would tease him together and make up nicknames for him.

During his holiday visits Will would strut through Great North Diesel and Auto Electric. They spoke behind his back there, behind alternators and generators and boxes of spares, and would have called him Napoleon had they known enough about the emperor; so they called him other things, but never to his face. And he knew they said insulting things about him – he delighted in it.

More than the talk, though, he savoured confrontation. He was after the chance to demonstrate his mettle and superior tactics. Disappointingly, just a few of his humiliating slashes in reply to anyone's challenge were enough to keep confrontation to a minimum at Great North; respect for authority was upheld in our town.

So in order to keep sharp he sought out confrontation elsewhere. Over the phone with travel agents, in shops with store assistants, even university staff – he made them all three-year-olds, out of their depth, eager to do his bidding just to escape his attentions.

What a guy to have on your side! I never felt cheated, never felt bullied, never felt I didn't have the right to be somewhere, as long as he was around.

But as soon as Will was away again at university, I'd go back to thinking Elliot was the coolest guy in town because what was this town, anyway, but a bundle of dull, uniform rods that sought out and beat anything unlike them?

I felt the animosity between Will and Elliot even though I don't remember many actual conflicts. But there is one episode that raises itself above the other stipples of those early memories. It started, like all the others, with teasing.

Will made it feel like a game to me, co-opting me onto his side. Elliot, dedicated as he was to being unusual, was an easy target, with his earrings, fringe, sharp shoes and sharper ideologies (it should be obvious there existed, among other divides, a capitalist-communist divide in our house).

Recently, he'd had to wear the humiliation of orthodontic headgear. As if he didn't have enough to bear up against, and besides the relentless torsion inside his mouth, there were those straps on his head; those straps that made any kid look as if he's so crazy he needs to be harnessed – like, what do they attach those straps to? A leash? Or is his head just strapped that tight so that the lunacy doesn't spill out?

He'd have to wear it for a whole year and when we got back to town from Johannesburg, where the orthodontist had fitted the thing, sitting there in the car while Ma picked up the post from the business, two boys passed by and stared, thinking maybe how deranged my brother

looked, and Elliot lashed out his middle finger at them, shouting, "Fuck you!" The boys skidded on, scared, but away from him, they laughed.

Before, it was the underbite, but now Will had latched onto those straps. Around the table at home while we waited for lunch, Will aimed a jibe at the twanging bit between Elliot's teeth. It may have been 'head-case' or just 'head' or Will might have tapped his own temple. Whatever the insult, Will knew it wouldn't have to be particularly sharp since the target was already tender, and that made the sport all the more enjoyable: to see just how light a strike would do it.

I'm ashamed to say I followed suit and copied whatever it was that Will said and did. I suppose it delighted me that something I did could draw such a strong reaction from my older brother. And I was rewarded further because Will thought it was hilarious that I'd taken up the idea, tapping my head and rolling my eyes, pretending I was in a straight-jacket.

I may have tripped the wire but I was not Elliot's target when he began his attack. He picked up the carving fork from the sideboard and started chasing Will around the dining room table. "No weapons, no weapons!" said Will and it took Elliot a while to finally respect this protocol and drop it, with Will still laughing.

Unarmed, Elliot launched himself at our older brother and the two wrestled. They each had a wrist of the other but Will was bending Elliot's arm behind his back. Ma was still in town so Shadrack, who prepared our lunch and took care of the house and garden, was the only adult around. I left to fetch him when Elliot's face started turning red but Shadrack was already coming into the dining room. He split the two of them and it was Will he gave a slap across the backside to, even though he must have been eighteen already. Elliot stormed to his room and Will left the house.

When he returned ten minutes later, the fight continued but now Will was the enraged one. Elliot had locked himself in his bedroom while Will kicked at the door.

"You're dead meat!" he yelled to Elliot. "I told you not to touch it!"

Will kicked until he put a foot through Elliot's door.

I crept past the door and saw into Will's room: his John McEnroe poster was torn from brow to right elbow.

The damage to Elliot's door didn't go unnoticed. In a windfall for Elliot, Ma made Will hang a new door and apologise. Elliot only had to save for a few weeks to buy Will another McEnroe poster.

Before Ma stepped in, I thought it'd be civil war right there in our house (brother against brother is what I'd always read of civil war) and I thought that would be it for the family.

Ma saw me close to tears after that fight. "What is it, my boy?" she asked, cradling my head in her arms.

"Elliot has to stay with Victor and where is Will going to go?" I bawled.

"What are you talking about? No-one's going anywhere. Not Elliot or Will or me. Least of all you."

Ma had a way out. She'd been worn out of hitting her boys so that by the time I came around she'd given up completely. It worked, her way, and kept us together that time. Yet the house, when it was full of brothers, was always on the brink of open hostilities and we can only wonder what a difference a father would have made.

I don't like to say I was Ma's favourite because it's not exactly right: Will collected the admiration of a first-born, natural-born go-getter, and Elliot, despite his obdurate opinions, was likeable for his spark and honesty. But because of my brothers' considerable demands upon our mother I tended to hang back, in sympathy for her.

And for her part, she was always much softer with me, indulging my indecisive aisle trawling, my cry-baby antics, my sulking, my laziness, my refusal to play with unfamiliar children just because they were children.

We were attached to each other, it's true, until I reached an age where I'd rather not show it and kept her at arm's length. Some might accuse me of being a mama's boy; to them I say, there are worse things.

Like the photographer who's only ever seen in reflection or not at all, I barely appear in these family portraits. Maybe it's because for so long I defined myself in relation to the others and held my position in the tableau according to theirs. It gave me a chance to see.



The particular chemistry of memory is mysterious. The week after the raid on Roy's 'Uptown' Liquor, the decoction from my encounter with Leo Fein dropped into the pool of thought and catalysed a memory from when I was five or six.

*For twenty minutes I'd been trawling the three short aisles of the Acropolis in my pyjamas. Although the Acropolis Café didn't actually serve coffee, in my town it was still a café. And although that was the word, everyone said 'CAFF-ie' and not 'caf-FAY'.*

*I picked up and put down one chocolate bar after another while Ma waited at the counter, her patience ebbing away from her.*

*"Can't I have a lucky packet?" I asked.*

*"I told you before, you can have anything except a lucky packet," she said.*

*From behind his counter Mr Georgiou offered my mother a light. Lucky packets were against the law. At least, they were on Sundays in 1979 since it was considered a form of gambling and un-Christian. Hardly a hanging offence but my mother would not want Mr Georgiou held responsible.*

*My hand hovered over the bars of Tex, Chocolate Log and Chomp, then drifted to a packet of tomato-sauce-flavour chips. The consequences of making the wrong choice were serious. I'd spend the rest of the evening – the last before an entire week of nursery school began – regretting it.*

*And I didn't even like sweets, particularly. I just never developed the craving for sugar that motivated friends my age. Indecision I developed, but a sweet tooth, no.*

*A lucky packet offered not only the most reward with its surprise gift but also a release from the responsibility of making the wrong choice. If you got a good one you had a toy to play with the entire week.*

*There was the fake plastic watch, the stickers, the dice, the plastic spider or the small puzzles – all nestled in a bed of doctor-and-nurse pills, the powdery pink musk sweets inside the bag. But most prized of all was the black plastic Lone Ranger mask.*

*It was so rare some of us doubted it was a prize from a lucky packet at all. When a kid brought one in to nursery school, swearing it was from the luckiest of all lucky packets, one he'd picked out with a technique he said he'd discovered but wouldn't share, he wore it all week.*

*"But I want a lucky packet," I said to the sweets, then took up a Tex with a sigh. A man I hadn't noticed, with curly dark hair and white at the forelock, swept behind me. He cradled chocolate slabs and chip packets on his belly and dumped his items on the counter.*

*Without stopping there he walked behind Mr Georgiou, who never once looked up at the man. Smoke blew sideways from the cigarette between Mr Georgiou's lips, driven by the fan. The mechanical gusts flicked the edges of the newspaper on which he had his elbows spread.*

*The man with the curly hair took two packets of John Player Special and placed all of his goods into a plastic bag he'd taken from under the counter. He reached under the counter again and brought something else from under it. He looked at the object for a moment, then at me.*

*"On me my boy," he said and as he walked towards the door he dropped the lucky packet into my arms. "Enjoy, hey."*

*"No!" said Ma to me. Her vehemence gave me a start. "I said no. Put it back."*

*Leo Fein looked at her from the door.*

*"It's Sunday," she said. "We can't. Thanks, but we can't."*

*"But it's always better when you're not supposed to have it," said Leo Fein. Then he left, sinking out of the white fluorescent light at the doorway of the Acropolis Café and into the night.*

*I was still holding the packet. Before Ma could take it from me Mr Georgiou said, "No, it's okay. I'll put it." He beckoned for it with wagging fingers and placed it in the plastic bag with our milk, the Tex and Ma's box of Craven 'A'. "It's okay. No-one sees."*

I never liked games of chance but I was drawn to the lucky packets. When Mr Georgiou had them on display on the shelves, Monday to Saturday, you'd go with a friend and do your best to choose. You could hold them up to the light, you could try to compare their weight, you could try to feel under the thick paper and around the hard pink sweets inside (until Mr Georgiou told you to stop ruining his merchandise because other people have to buy those) – but there was no way to tell what was inside, no matter what that kid in nursery school had said.

But you'd arrive home and your friend would have a better prize than you. You'd feel cheated; you'd hold it against your friend, even just a little. And if your prize was better, he'd do the same.

All this, even *though* you knew there was no way to tell what was inside them. Whatever the probabilities, it was the feeling that the other guy had something you didn't, and I don't mean just the prize.

No, he *must* have some kind of savvy, you secretly told yourself. He'd been astute, he'd known how to assess things in that private, internal moment when you'd both stood there making your choices. It meant he was more adult and you, more child. So you could blame him but, really, you blamed yourself the most.

But there I was with a lucky packet I hadn't chosen. The man in the Acropolis Café had. He was an adult, astute, savvy. So I didn't mind handing the choice to him because I was never a gambler anyway, and for me the act of choosing was fraught with anxious consequences. All I wanted was the best prize available and if he could choose it for me, let him.

If I'm honest, I can't be certain that it was Leo Fein in the shop that night. It's possible I only began to attach Leo Fein with the memory of that night much later. Maybe my mother pleaded with Mr Georgiou, maybe Mr Georgiou felt sorry for me or sorry for Ma, newly widowed and trying her best to treat a kid on a Sunday night.

At the end, my mother didn't remember the incident when I brought it up and, what's more, seemed confused about the apartheid-era gambling laws around lucky packets. In any case,

after what Leo Fein brought down upon our family, I can understand her reluctance to talk about him anymore.

I know I waited until I was cross-legged on the carpet in front of the TV before opening the lucky packet. And there, among the powdery pink sweets, I found my prize: the mask of the Lone Ranger.

University of Cape Town

## Black Jews

Whenever I thought about Roy's 'Uptown' Liquor it made me picture the town in a different way. As if there were a hidden town beneath the skin of the tiles and brick and iron. Until then, I'd always accepted the place just as it was because when you're done being a toddler, and trees, parks, streets, even gutters and lampposts cease being the novel objects of the world to you, you accept them as the anchors of the life you know.

The bakery is there, you can get milk here, the Acropolis Café there, Devenish Street with its jacarandas, the municipal swimming pool with the three diving boards, the disused Scout hall, the old steam engine up on a plinth on the traffic island, the red-and-white radio tower stretching up over every other building in town, all in their place.

But *now* who knew what lay under it all, behind the swing doors of the kitchen at Wagon Wheels coffee shop? Whether there was a passage I hadn't noticed in the cool arcade between the optician and the school outfitters. Where the trucks went, whose horns sounded late at night beyond the reservoir. What they kept under the mound in Dungeon Park.

To know this was treasure itself and, what's more, to know where to go in this town when you needed something, wasn't this what it was to be a man?

On Friday night the Dorfman's picked me up for *shul* – Ma would never go, of course, but they were kind enough to give me lifts, since Joss and I were friends.

Ma wanted her boys *bar mitzvahed* but didn't want to touch the religion with her own hands. Instead she had dinner at home alone while Elliot roamed, or she went to the Golden Egg, a franchise roadside diner at the end of town. Here she'd meet her friends Herman and Nick, and she knew the owner, Stan, a British expat with a faded anchor tattoo on his forearm.

Stan would only hire staff members who'd had some sort of disaster befall them. I remember one waiter who'd had his face badly burnt in a shack fire, another with a birth defect that caused him to have a shrunken right hand, and there was a cook with one eye. If a customer found any of it unappetising – the shrunken thumb on the edge of a plate, for instance – Stan would throw them out (and this in a town where, to many customers, the most unappetising feature of the Golden Egg's staff would be their dark skin).

I sat quietly with Joss in *shul* before the service, looking at the faces, many of them still strangers to me. I didn't see Leo Fein. I looked for him among the men who talked business in the back rows but he wasn't there.

Those first Friday nights the *shul* was a wondrous place for me. The stamped-out stars in the black lampshades glittered at us all, the velvet curtain emblazoned with lions in gold embroidery which hid the sliding cabinet wherein lay the rolls of parchment.

And the builders had used wood for the *bimah*, the pews, the floors, in a town where so much was tiled or welded.

I studied secretly the variety of velvet bags which held a further array of prayer shawls, some silken white-and-blue-striped, others devout, woollen and black-and-white striped. Which kinds of *yarmulke* were correct? The home-knitted variety or the gold-thread embroidered luxury models? The Rabbi even wore, unselfconsciously, a *girl's* hair clip to hold his black, crocheted disk to his wine-brown hair.

It never occurred to me the women's perch upstairs was a sort of relegation, because children are always thinking of climbing. Where better to sit – in a cinema, for instance – than so *high up*, over everyone? But I avoided looking there because I couldn't stand to see Potato Latke and because I imagined the women dropping judgement or pity upon me from up there. It was mere paranoia and I'm sure the separation gave them time to talk about each other's husbands.

Joss and I had begun a game a few weeks back and perhaps it was his thoughtful way of inducting me into the congregation. We made up nicknames for the characters we saw every Friday night and Saturday morning.

There were the obvious names, like Fats, which developed into Rolls and then, as an extension, Royce and finally his nicknames were discarded when Joss told me the man's real name, Julian Gross, which seemed altogether more apt than anything we could think up. The names grew in complexity, further away from the traits that suggested them.

We called another man Wheezy, then Lungs. Lungs became TB and then, in what was for us a quantum leap, he was The Boston Strangler because of his heavy breathing.

Other names presented themselves fully formed – Tennis Ball for the ever-present white dot of spittle on Abe Kotzen's lips. It moved from top lip to bottom lip and back again with each word he spoke so that you ended up following the ball and not the conversation.

Cruelly, Mrs Rabinowitz was called Auschwitz merely because she looked old enough to have survived and the blue veins that stuck out of her arms reminded us of emaciated prisoners.

Gershon was Guuhhh-shon and then just plain Guuhhh. The kid who thought Spandau Ballet were Nazis was an aspirant rabbi still in his teens, who tried his best to teach the Saturday morning bible classes after *shul* and punctuated every line with a long 'uuhhh'.

'Divine' is what Doreen Friedman called everything she admired so that's what we called her. She was what was known back then as a *kugel* and she wore consistently large quantities of make-up and animal print and went on shopping sprees in Joburg.

Jordache was the kid who overdid it with a deodorant by that name. But Leo Fein was always Leo Fein. No nickname and not even one name without the other. Both, in full, at all times.

The congregants were slowly becoming more familiar to me and I recognised a few of the regulars and the occasionals by face if not by name or nickname. As the service got under way I would sometimes look at them reading, or talking, listen to their voices booming in the hymns and Amens. There was one man there that night, though, who I was sure I'd never seen before; and neither had the congregation.

He must have entered while the service was already half-way through. When it came time for us to stand and sway in the *Aleinu* prayer he appeared near the door, somewhat behind the *bimah*, jerking in his own way back and forth and mouthing the words. I couldn't tell, being only semi-literate in Hebrew and not able to understand any word of it, whether he was saying something in another language, or pretending to say the words of the prayer, or saying the prayer itself, the beginning of which translates as:

It is our duty to praise the Master of all,  
To ascribe greatness to the Author of creation,  
Who has not made us like the nations of the lands  
Or placed us like the families of the earth  
Who has not made our portion like theirs,  
Nor our destiny like all their multitudes

By that time, everyone was *davening* but at the same time looking not at their *siddurs* but at this new man. Because he was a black man.

He was thin, perhaps in his fifties, dressed in old navy blue trousers with turn-ups, a white collared shirt and a cream cardigan. He was wearing a *yarmulke* atop his bony head and drew a wide, almost painful smile across his face as he jerked forwards and back.

"Who is that?" I whispered to Joss.

"I've never seen him before," he said.

"Is he Jewish?"

"I don't know," he whispered back to me.

With the prayers over we shuffled to the door to wish one another *Gut Shabbes*. The newcomer was eager to shake hands with those who would and as I moved towards the door I

took his hand and wished him *Shabbat Shalom*. He kept the smile stretched over his face. Others shook his hand too, not knowing what else to do, while more people slipped behind him, avoiding a meeting altogether.

Julian Gross pushed his way towards him and wrapped both hands around the man's. Julian didn't let go of it but pulled him a few steps back towards the pews.

Joss and I loitered at the doors to hear the conversation, Julian talking in a low drawl. "I am a Jew," I heard the new man say.

The Rabbi came down off the *bimah* and ushered a few stragglers out, wishing them *Gut Shabbes* and shutting us all out with the double doors.

Joss and I heard Julian raise his voice, although we couldn't hear the words he was using, and then we thought we heard the black man giggling.

"Now hang on, Julian," I heard the Rabbi say just before Joss's parents pulled us from the doors.

In the Kombi with the Dorfman, Joss asked his dad, "Is he Jewish?"

"No, Joss," said his father. "How can he be?"

"What about those Ethiopian Jews?" said Joss.

"Israel flew them out of Ethiopia when they were starving," I said.

"Well this isn't Ethiopia," said Joss's father.

"Or Israel," said Mrs Dorfman. "I think there's something wrong with him upstairs. Did you see him *davening*? I don't think he's normal. I was a bit scared when you shook hands with him, Ben. I don't think your mother would have liked that."

"My mother shakes hands with black people," I said. "Other people shook his hand."

"It's not that he's black," she said. "He might be dangerous. Not in control. Not everyone's well-adjusted and normal in this world."

"He's probably just a confused old man," said Mr Aronbach.

"Shame," said Mrs Aronbach sympathetically. "I hope Julian isn't too hard on him."



I had a dream that night of walking into my mother's bathroom. Identical, glossy, deep blue tiles ran along the walls as they did in the real bathroom. But as I approached one wall, the teeth of the interlocking tiles spread and I walked into a passage. I found myself, in that manner of dreams where journeys are omitted, beneath the bathroom I knew.

The tiles here were white and in the centre of the under-bathroom stood a barber's chair. The chair had the chrome fittings and deep, sprung, red leather seat of the ones I'd sat in in Hennie's Haarkappers, where I'd had all my boyhood haircuts. It was a room, this dream bathroom, made for shaving, with just the masculine implements of mirror and foam, stainless steel safety razor and double blade.

I craned to see around the chair because the bright red thing swivelled ever so slightly (or had it?), as if I'd just missed whoever had sat in it.

I awoke with the desire to go to the blue-tiled bathroom of my mother's (formerly, my father's too) to find the white room. But daylight scatters the scaffolding of dreams and I discarded the idea.

I looked out the window to make an assessment of the weather. It was summer but if I had a little luck it would be overcast and cooler than normal, allowing me to pull on long pants, socks and shoes.

Twenty-five degrees Celsius was the watershed. Below that and I could get away with covering my legs and feet, above and I ran the risk of being called soft by other boys, maybe even by their fathers.

Shorts made me look like a child, I reasoned, and besides, there was my pale skin to consider. My legs seldom saw sun, and so never tanned, making it too embarrassing to bare them in daylight, and so the cycle continued.

Shorts couldn't be avoided during the week but at least school uniform included long socks which made for a narrow corridor of white flesh between hem and sock-fold.

Socks aside, I was opposed to school uniform in principle. Civvies Day, which came along infrequently (although you could generally count on Spring Day), was to be savoured. I embraced this day not only with the joy of taking part in something out of the ordinary, a day when we could see each other transformed, but as an idealistic taste of freedom. More than any other, this was the day that resonated most with me, like a National Holiday that didn't show up on any calendar but stood for all of my principles.

I'd argue with classmates in the days before and after Civvies Day for dissolution of the rules of school uniform. I justified it with the cost savings for our parents, who wouldn't have to buy two sets of clothes for us, talked longingly of the freedom we saw in American schools in TV shows and movies, and dreamt of the individuality it would allow us.

I had some followers but the proposition had its detractors, too. Cathy Shepherd led the opposition debate with her views that school uniforms saved us from having to make onerous wardrobe choices and eliminated the anxiety some children would feel from competing with the

fashions of other children. She was a clear thinker, a far better debater than me, and a prissy little know-it-all, whose straw-like blonde hair I fantasised about scraping away with a scythe.

It was probably twenty-five degrees already that Saturday morning and not looking good for long pants. I picked a pair of jeans anyway and walked barefoot as a concession to comfort.

"I'm going to the shops," said Ma, looking for her keys by the telephone table. "Herman and Nick invited us for lunch later. Want to come? Otherwise there's stew in the freezer."

"Let me see – stew or gays? Well, gays cook better – "

"Ha-ha. See you later."

Ma left and the house was quiet. Will was away at university and Elliot could have been anywhere, probably at a friend's for the weekend but maybe even hitch-hiking to Joburg. I walked through the kitchen and out into the courtyard with the intention of practicing my climbing.

The pierced brick wall that separated the courtyard from the driveway was whitewashed and the holes offered easy grips to the top where it ran under the eaves of the garage. It was the same wall government men had climbed late one night to inspect whether any black people without the necessary passes were on the property. Ma had spotted them from the kitchen window by pure chance and chased them off, refusing to unlock the gate: they had to climb the same wall back out again.

Having reached the top, I dropped back down onto the courtyard and walked into the sun where the rough cement baked the soles of my feet. I drifted across it and in the middle found a ragged seam between the tectonic plates. I dragged a big toe along it. Tiny bits crumbled off the crack and I followed the little canyon to the wall.

At the base my older brothers had etched their names into the cement when the house was still being built. Despite the fact that I hadn't been born yet, and that there was clearly no fraternal accord between Elliot and Will, I felt annoyed at having been left out.

I traced my name with my big toe on the cement next to theirs then followed another crack running along the wall to Shadrack's door. It was open a little, enough to show the bar heater on the thin green carpet. I called for him; no-one was home, so I stepped inside.

The concrete was smoother and cooler than outside so that my feet throbbed from the heat of the courtyard while they were brought to room temperature. There was the old springy bed covered with the crocheted blanket; a *riempie* chair; a square battery hanging outside the carcass of a black radio, which sat on a plastic tablecloth with a print of colourful fruit; a black-and-white TV set on a wooden chair; and a wardrobe that looked fragile with age.

Beneath the wardrobe and under the *riempie* chair I could see the miniature yellow tins of shoe glue as well as the tri-corn cobbler's iron, which always stood with a leg in the air, and the ladylike hammer with the long neck.

Shadrack lived in this room across the courtyard from the kitchen. He worked for the family and had done for years, doing all the things live-in workers did in those days – childcare, cooking, gardening.

A childhood under the gaze of Shadrack also meant a childhood on the hip of Shadrack while he vacuumed, and on the handlebars of a *dikwiel* bicycle as he visited friends around town.

It seemed the occupiers of the back rooms of every house in town knew Shadrack and there was a steady stream of visitors to his door, behind which he'd repair shoes and who knows what else in the dark square room.

Since he wasn't in, I took the opportunity to study how he lived. The objects in the room were mostly familiar to me, as was the smell of glue, camphor and eucalyptus. But behind the radio, next to the large battery with the red and black wires, lay something I'd never seen before, something I had no idea Shadrack possessed.

It was a simple name badge of the kind salespeople wear. It was made from steel and had a mangled, wavy pin at the back and in black capital letters on the front, my father's name. Seeing his name there, in that week and among those other items that were so familiar to me, was a shock. I picked it up and squeezed it in my palm, turning it over to make sure the edges didn't protrude out the sides.

I can talk now about the reasons I took it then. Having just ridden the victorious two-man crime wave of the robbery of Roy's 'Uptown', I had the momentum of a bandit. I'd been thinking all week about thieving and getaways. But this was no ordinary treasure. My father's name, literally; an heirloom and me the rightful heir. And this, I think, was what prompted me to leave the room with the badge in my hand, walking fast enough to remove myself but not fast enough to arouse suspicion.

In my bedroom I opened the drawer that contained my collection of other badges, key-rings, stickers and patches and dropped it inside. I scrambled the collection and arranged a patch over my father's name.

My palm still felt the indent that the oblong object had made against my skin, when I went to lie on the thick brown carpet in the living room. Shadrack entered with a mug of milky, sweet tea for me and a few slices of white bread. Sitting on the carpet at the edge of the low round table, I sipped my tea while he straightened the furniture and dusted.

"Make *pap*," he said, not looking at me while he worked. It was one of my favourite methods of eating bread, one Shadrack had shown me. I nibbled all the way around the slice, taking off the crust. Then I tore a strip of the white bread and pushed it with the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other, into the imprint where the badge had lain. I pushed into it some more, obliterating the remaining delineating sensation of that object.

When it was right, I put the doughy lump in my mouth and followed immediately with a sip of sweet tea so that they'd mix. Shadrack would have made me anything I wanted for breakfast. Eggs and bacon, oats, toast and jam. But this was my breakfast and I'd been inducted into eating it that way by Shadrack himself.

On most Saturday mornings, this moment would be sweet comfort for me, but not this one. I hadn't quite rubbed away the impression of the badge. I could still feel it. I thought of the badge sitting among the others in my drawer. All the things I'd collected and then put away and hardly looked at again because once they are collected, they lose their magic. Even the Lone Ranger mask, once so precious to me, lay somewhere there, forgotten.

What could I do with it besides take it out and look upon it, in secret? I couldn't wear it without Shadrack knowing about it, or Ma asking about it, or Elliot freaking out about it. For all I knew, Ma may even have given it to Shadrack.

Oh Jesus! Why did I take it? Even if it was my father's name on the badge, Shadrack had known him better and longer and deserved it more.

I had all the things my father left behind: the whiskey tumblers, the tools in the cabinet, the dinner jacket, the gold watch in the round wall safe, the photos. And what did poor Shadrack own in this world?



Ma and I were on our way to Herman and Nick's place, a small-holding across the Sand River (which really was just sand and had been my whole life). We were still on Market Street, driving towards the front of Roy's 'Uptown' Liquor, when I decided this was the moment for confession of all my sins, beginning with Roy's itself.

There the sign was, looming towards us as we drove. I was running out of time to bring up the subject. I would just have to get it over with. She'd understand, I'd feel better. She'd devise some kind of punishment for me, no doubt, but that was the price, and I'd rather pay it than keep this to myself.

We were level with the entrance and I was relieved to see business was continuing as usual, thriving even, and that my crime hadn't crippled Roy's 'Uptown'. People were walking in and out past two figures at the door who were smoking and chatting. One of them had a shock of white hair among dark curls and my confession evaporated.

"Hey - Leo Fein," I blurted instead.

Ma looked in her rear-view mirror as the liquor store receded. "No, that's Roy Dos Santos," she said. She hadn't seen Leo Fein behind the traffic, only the man he was talking to.

University of Cape Town

## Yoshke Pandre

On Tuesday afternoon, Carol and the girl shaped like a potato latke fetched me for *cheder*. "I've got a miii-graine," said Potato Latke. She suffered attacks that felt as if her brains were being strangled, she said. I sat staring through the window of the car and thought about her condition. A *me-graine*. I could see how being afflicted with oneself could be debilitating, especially in her case.

Carol and her daughter lived across the road from my Uncle Victor. Carol's husband, Alon, had died two years earlier from a heart attack in the OK Bazaars supermarket. Victor always claimed that Alon was that desperate to escape his wife.

Besides the pain of the trip twice a week, there was also the notion that Will had had sex with Carol one afternoon after wiring her hi-fi. Whenever Will went to Victor's house, our uncle would ask him how Carol's hi-fi was running, whether he'd plugged everything in alright, and Will would go silent.

The Carol-Will connection, whether based in fact or not, produced a squirming, vicarious mortification in my vague twelve-year-old understanding of the situation.

"Mommy's also got a migraine, baby," said Carol, rubbing her temple.

"Did you see the black man in *shul* the other night?" I asked Carol.

"*Meshuge*," said Carol. "Must have thought he was somewhere else."

"But he said he was Jewish."

"How can he be Jewish? A black man? No, no," said Carol, "I don't know where they get these ideas. You know, Ben, some people just see an opportunity when they see Jews."

"What if he's Ethiopian?"

"Ask the Rabbi," said Carol. "He's no Ethiopian."

"Mommy, I've got a migraine," said Potato Latke.

"It's not a migraine," said Carol. The car pulled up outside the compact *shul*. "Aren't you forgetting?" Carol asked, her eyes pointing to a can of *Charlie* deodorant on the back seat. Potato Latke snatched at it and dropped it in her canvas satchel. Tears welled in her eyes and she massaged her temples as her mother drove away.

We joined the others in the small classroom attached to the *shul*. There were usually only four or five of us there, all children under the age of thirteen. Joss wasn't always there since, although his family wasn't observant to the point of a kosher kitchen with separate sinks and

utensils for milk and meat, he could read Hebrew and knew about the holidays. He'd also attended *cheder* at a much younger age, and in fact, I was the oldest in class.

Compared to me, the others were steeped in Judaism. They'd caught the kosher drippings of their Jewish home life. I, on the other hand, would have to learn Judaism the same way I was learning Hebrew.

I sat at one of the dark wooden desks, the old kind with the bench-seats attached and a waxy grime driven into the grain. The grime, I imagined, was the source of that sour smell that became associated with the depression of *cheder*.

My resistance to *cheder* came more from my bewilderment at the syllabus than antagonism towards the Rabbi. I liked our rabbi. In my household of unbelievers there'd often been a ready excuse to skip *cheder*, whether it was feigned illness, holidays or more pressing schoolwork, and the Rabbi never once used guilt to force my mother's hand, nor did he threaten, as he might have, to stop teaching us.

He'd said nothing though one brother and then another had deserted the *minyans* straight after their *bar mitzvahs*. He knew then what to expect from me, the third Aronbach, but I don't remember him ever trying to convince me of the religion beyond the bounds of the lessons.

It's not customary for Jews to make confession but I do so now. While my family was steadfastly atheist, I was a believer. At least, I tried to be. It's no fun growing up in a household of sensible thoughts, reasonableness, and reason too. Every kid wants to rebel and in the land of Secularism, it's the Believers who are the radicals.

This does not, however, suggest that I felt any sort of allegiance to my fellow *cheder*-goers. I felt disdain for them, for the way they kept themselves apart from the bulk of kids in school, but mostly for the disrespect and presumptuousness with which they treated the Rabbi.

The Rabbi was in his early thirties and what we would have called a spastic if our parents had let us. For the Rabbi, just turning a page meant a battle between opposing forces in his arms. With even the simplest of movements, his muscles strained and contorted his limbs. And I hated the other children more and more ferociously with every snigger they let slip at his scrawling handwriting up on the chalkboard.

I was desperate for the Rabbi to speak about the black man who'd been in *shul* on Friday night but he'd been talking about charity and discretion. None of the good deeds a man performs, none of the food nor money nor clothing nor shelter he gives, counts for anything if he tells another soul about them, he said. It's the only part of the lesson I caught, and it stuck with me, but I was still wondering about the black man in *shul*, where he'd come from, and why.

Had it been it a political act? A statement regarding the role of religion? An act of defiance during the state of emergency? Or was it possible he was from a lost tribe of Israel? A convert? How do you explain Sammy Davis, Jr.?

“So no owls tonight, Ben,” the Rabbi said.

“Huh?”

“In case you were thinking of eating one, it’s on the list.” He’d seen I was drifting off while he listed foods considered unclean for Jews to eat. The lesson had moved on to *kashrut*.

“Not even on my birthday?” I said, doing my best to rejoin it.

“Nope, not even then.”

The Rabbi’s kindness made me want to be a Jew, as much as my classmates made me want to be anything but one. I watched the boy in the Disney *yarmulke* draw the word ‘FUCK’ in deliberate wavy lines in his notebook.

“Why did that black man come to *shul* on Friday night?” asked Potato Latke.

I was annoyed that she’d asked the question, even though I wanted to know too.

“Well, I think there was some kind of misunderstanding, that’s all,” said the Rabbi.

“Is he Jewish?” she asked.

Disney Yarmulke honked a laugh.

“He thinks he’s Jewish,” said the Rabbi. “And who knows? Maybe he is, but I think it’s unlikely.”

“How do you know he’s not Jewish?” asked Potato Latke.

“Well, he doesn’t read Hebrew, or speak it. He knows some of the laws and customs, I think, but that’s not enough.”

“Ben doesn’t speak Hebrew,” she said.

“He’s learning, though, and we know where Ben comes from. But I think the man who came on Friday night is confused about things. Who knows, maybe at one time he worked for a Jewish family and now he misses those things, Jewish things, that remind him of them.”

When *cheder* ended, we went outside to wait for our lifts. Potato Latke, Disney Yarmulke and another younger boy were singing a Yiddish rhyme about Jesus.

*Yoshke Pandre likt in drerd*

*Oysgepeygert vi a ferd*

I had no idea what it meant except that it was somehow rude because whenever the Rabbi heard it he told the kids to stop singing, even though you could detect a suppressed grin on his

face. (It's a wonder he had control over the fine movements of facial expression but so little over the great sweeps of the limbs.)

I longed to know the song but because it was illicit, the Rabbi would never have taught me and because I kept my distance from the other kids, I never asked them.

Years later I learnt that '*Yoshke*' is the Yiddish equivalent of 'Joey', as in 'little Joseph'. '*Pandre*' is particularly erudite in its derivation and disparagement since it references the Talmud, which teaches that the father of Jesus was a pillaging Roman soldier called Pantera: Panther.

'*Oysgepeygart*', you could say, means 'dead', but that's not the whole story. Like the division of milk and meat, Yiddish has separate words for death when applied to humans or animals. '*Gepeygart*' is for animals, and the prefix '*oys-*' in this case means 'over-' or 'very', so the only way I can get the whole thing to work is like this:

Little Jesus lies in muck  
Died like a horse, he's dead as fuck

Christ is not the son of God, He is not risen. "Stop that, you kids," said the Rabbi, locking the *shul* doors. Carol's brown Colt clattered to a halt by the gate and Potato Latke and I got in.

When we arrived at our house in Oost Street, Ma and Elliot were just arriving home from town and Will came out to help them carry the shopping.

"Hello, William," said Carol out the window. "I didn't know you were in town. You must come visit - I'll make those biscuits you like. For you to take back to res."

"Oh - hi, Carol," said Will, darting inside with a shopping bag. "Nice to see you."

"Did you hear about the *shvartser* in *shul* the other night?" asked Carol.

"The what?" asked Ma.

"The gentleman," said Carol, "in *shul*." Adults, when trying to be polite, would say 'gentleman' instead of 'black', I noticed. "A black came on *Shabbes*." Now Carol whispered the word 'black' instead.

"That's very progressive," said Ma.

"*Meshuge*, I don't know about progressive."

"I might start coming to *shul* if this keeps up."

"Well, I keep asking you," said Carol.

"How are things?" said Ma, shifting a shopping bag to the other hand.

"I don't know how I'm going to get through, Margot," she said. "It's difficult without Alon around anymore. I don't have to tell you how hard it is without a man in the house."

"Mmm," said Ma. "Thanks for taking Ben – I know you're busy too."

"Oy, the shop. They're stealing me blind there, Margot. Alon wouldn't have stood for it, but what am I supposed to do? You have to watch them like a hawk. On top of that, my migraines. They're killing me."

"Mommy," said Potato Latke, "I've also got a migraine."

"And this one. Driving me mad. She's becoming a woman – it started early with me too, you know. But the troubles she causes! Oy, up and down."

Potato Latke bent over her knees in the car seat, hiding her face, and crunched her fingers to her temples.

"She'll be fine, Carol," said Ma. She bent to look through the car window at Potato Latke. "You'll be fine, Sweetie. We all go through it. Normal stuff for girls, I'm sure."

"Between you and me," said Carol in a whisper that poor Potato Latke, and poor me, could hear quite clearly, "I'm worried."

"Well, Carol," said Ma. "I'd better get my own troublemaker inside." Mercifully she gave me a grocery packet to carry.

"You know the Zionist League is doing a raffle this year?"

"No, I didn't. Well, good luck."

"Well, I wouldn't ask, Margot, but it's been a bit slow getting off the ground. If there's something you could help with from the business... a prize? You know, usually Ida Rabinowitz does it but she's getting on now. You've seen. So I'm filling in – like I don't have enough."

"Okay, I'll think about it," said Ma.

"That would be wonderful," said Carol. "I'll call you tomorrow."

They reversed back up the driveway, Potato Latke still pressing her fingers to her temples.

"Ben," said Ma once we were inside, "tell me I'm not like that. At least. As a mother, I mean."

"It's pretty close, Ma," I said.

"You've got it easy, boy. That poor daughter of hers."

"That your girlfriend?" asked Elliot when we were in the kitchen.

"No," I said. "Gross, man."

"Did you pray together?"

I showed him my middle finger.

"I think you did pray."

"It's *cheder*, not *shul*."

"Whatever. You pray to a big beardy man in the sky who's gonna make all your dreams come true."

"No, I don't."

"Oh please, Big Beardy Man, make my dreams come true, and make all the bad people go away, and make me get A's in all my subjects and make that girl in *cheder* fall in love with me.'"

"That's not what I pray."

"Oh, so you *do* pray."

"So what if I do?"

"So what? That fucker in *cheder* is brainwashing you, is what."

"Elliot, leave him alone," said Ma.

"Are you encouraging you son to believe in this shit?" said Elliot.

"No, I'm not encouraging him. He'll realise what's what in his own time."

"No I won't," I said.

"And the Rabbi is a very nice man, actually, Elliot," said Ma. "He had to be patient with you, didn't he? I get on very well with him."

Will entered the kitchen, which, as usual, drove Elliot out of it. He had his towel around his neck, home from university for a long weekend, and fetched the ice cream from the freezer to concoct a milkshake.

"He's easy about going on holiday and Ben skipping *shul*," continued Ma. "He's very nice. Better than the last one, at any rate."

"Last what?" asked Will.

"Last rabbi."

"Gittelson? He was a piece of work. You've got it lucky. Taught me the wrong *parsha* for six weeks and then made me learn the right one."

"I'm sure that was a mistake," said Ma.

"Well, there was plenty of other stuff," said Will. "Remember that thing with Larry Adelman and Woolf Morris? You can't trust rabbis."

"What was the thing?" I asked.

"He tried to buy the property at the back of Great North. The open lot."

"What happened?"

The story Will told while loading the blender went like this.

Rabbi Gittelson overhears a conversation between Larry Adelman and Woolf Morris. Larry is talking about Gert Boshoff, who owns The Rib Den grill-house in town.

"You know Gert – he's got that piece of land on Schoeman Street, behind Great North. Bought it six months ago," says Larry.

"Oh, ja?" says Woolf.

"Well, he thought he was being clever. Wanted to sell it to Braam van Jaarsveld."

"For the hotel?" asks Woolf. Braam van Jaarsveld already owned half the land in town and intended, everyone knew, to build a hotel.

"Of course for the hotel," says Larry.

"Braam's not stupid," says Woolf.

"No, Braam's not stupid. Look at him," says Larry, not that Braam is there to look at but his properties are everywhere, visible proof of his wiles. "Gert tried to sell the land to Braam at some price, too high."

"How much?"

"Telephone numbers."

"Braam's not stupid."

"No," says Larry. "So Braam said, 'what do I need this for? I'll wait.' "

"And so?" asks Woolf.

"Gert wants to sell," says Larry, shrugging. Then he leans in and in a knowing voice says, "That deadbeat son of his."

"What's he up to, Larry?"

"What's he up to? What's he not up to?" says Larry, enumerating on his fingers. "Drinking, gambling, stealing..."

"From his own father?"

"What does he care? His father, not-his-father... these *chatteisim*. So the restaurant now is suffering and if Gert doesn't get things right - "

"He could lose it. They'll take the franchise away."

"So I'm thinking, Gert has to sell now; and Braam wants that property, I happen to know. I might put in an offer of my own."

The two men stop talking when they see the grey-eyed Rabbi Gittelsohn approaching them. They hadn't noticed him, so engrossed were the two friends in their conversation. "This is not for *Shabbes*," says Rabbi Gittelsohn. "We don't talk business on this day. You should know better. What kind of example do you give for the *kinder*? Two big *machers* like you. *Gut Shabbes*."

"*Gut Shabbes*, Rabbi," say Larry and Woolf, like meek children themselves, embarrassed by their indiscretion. They decide to quit their conversation and Woolf, Larry's lawyer as well as his friend, promises to take up the matter first thing Monday.

So on Monday Woolf telephones Gert Boshoff at The Rib Den to discuss an offer on the property on Larry's behalf.

"Oh, I accepted already, Woolf," says Gert.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't that what you were phoning about? The Rabbi made me an offer and I accepted. You're not acting as his lawyer?"

"No," says Woolf. "Gert, when exactly did he make this offer?"

"On Saturday. Saturday afternoon."

Will tested his milkshake.

"Then what?" I asked.

"Well, Woolf wished Gert *mazel tov* and put down the phone. He knew Rabbi Gittelsohn didn't have the money for the property, because Woolf was on the *shul* board and Gittelsohn was always taking loans and asking for a raise. He had debts all around town, from the minute he arrived here he racked them up. Turned out he had problems with Israeli investments, borrowed from everyone in the community."

"Well, I was quite relieved when they got the new rabbi," said Ma. "He understands us better."

The new rabbi understood my family's flagrant heathenism and its need to convert thirteen-year-olds into *bar mitzvah*-boys purely for familial obligations. He approached the process with the necessary pragmatism, albeit from the opposite direction, with the aim of bolstering the number of Jews in the congregation.

"Anyway, your *bar mitzvah* will soon be over with and you can relax," said Will, sprinkling Milo onto the top of his shake. "Just think of the money. That's what I did to get through it. All those fat cheques, hey? And no more *shul*."

I said nothing and Ma looked at Will while packing the cupboard.

"What, are you gonna keep going to *shul* after your *barmy*?" asked Will.

"I don't know," I said. "Sometimes I like it. And I like the Rabbi."

"You believe in evolution, though, right?"

"Of course."

"Okay, that's a relief."

"Jeez, give me some credit."

"Carol said there was a black man in *shul* on Friday night," said Ma.

"Really?" asked Will.

"Really," I said. "He was old."

"Who was he there with? Did someone bring him?" asked Ma.

"No, he was there alone, I think."

"Why anyone would go when they don't have to beats me," said Will.

"The Rabbi said maybe he used to work for Jewish people and he missed them," I said. "He was confused or something."

“Senile, maybe.”

“So, what happened to Rabbi Gittelson in the end?” I asked.

“Woolf told him he’d better go back to Israel to sort out all his troubles,” said Will, pouring a glass of chocolate milkshake for me. “Had to boot him out. What a deadbeat. How can you have a guy like that teaching kids? Teaching them how to steal and con, maybe. *And* he made me learn the wrong thing for six weeks.”



Late in the afternoon, I came to Shadrack’s room with my fist clenched. I could hear soft rapping and scraping inside, and knocked after a hesitation. He answered and I opened the door.

Shadrack was tapping a nail into the heel of a yellowish boot with the slender hammer.

“*Thobela*,” I said.

“*Thobela. Le kae?*” he asked, not looking up for his work.

“*Ke gona, lena le kae?*” I said, using the few words of North Sotho I knew.

“*Ao, ke gona.*”

“I was looking for the ball,” I said, wandering with a counterfeit aimlessness in the cramped room.

“The orange one?” he asked.

I turned my back to him and ran a finger over the top of the radio. “No, the grey one. The soccer ball.” I leaned over and flattened my palm on the surface next to the square battery that hung out of the radio. Here the badge came unstuck from my hand and lay there on the table again.

“Maybe in the back garden,” he said.

I turned and peered over his work on the last. He didn’t look up from it.

“Okay, I’ll look there.” I turned for the door.

“You can steal from me,” he said.

“I didn’t,” I said, facing the door.

“Yes-thanks,” he said. It was his ultra-affirmative, I suppose, his catch-phrase. We don’t know where he got it, didn’t know exactly what it meant, or even if he did. But it was his and only his.

He still hadn’t looked up from the yellow boot. “Better you steal from me. I don’t care. Nobody else.”

“Yes-thanks, Shadrack.”

“Yes-thanks.”

My second crime hadn't been as glorious as the first. Roy's 'Uptown' had seemed like a prank but this crime had consequences. And I began to consider whether the other didn't too. I'd chosen to believe Leo Fein about Roy not minding, but why had he asked me to keep quiet about it? If it was just a bit of high jinks why wasn't I able to tell Mr and Mrs Dorfman about it? I should have known better.

We didn't see the black man in *shul* on the following *Shabbes*, or ever again. Whatever Julian Gross had said to him had been off-putting enough to send him away for good.

It was only years later that I learnt about the Lemba tribe, living a hundred kilometres to the north of town, who claimed for years to be Jews. They looked like their black Venda neighbours and spoke the same language but slaughtered their animals the kosher way, refrained from eating pork and worshipped one god. They passed on to their children a history that said they originated in Yemen, and took with them the ancient and holy Ark of the Covenant.

Within the Lemba is a priestly clan, whose DNA has been tested and found to contain the 'Cohen' strand. It suggests that their story is true, that they're Jews, the same as me.

## The Women's Zionist League Raffle

They were always raising funds for Israel in those days. There were always more trees to plant, more desert to reclaim, more settlements to settle, more terrorists to fight.

"Could be good for business," said Will when Ma told him about the Women's Zionist League Raffle. "Our name up there. I mean, Abe Kotzen's got a fleet of trucks, or if we could get in with Friedman – might be worth it."

Whether it was just Carol's persistent gnawing at my mother, or the already-mentioned donation my father made around the time of my birth, or Will's encouragement, I can't say, but when Carol phoned Ma and asked again for something to donate as a prize, she'd agreed.

Elliot, unable to form the words of objection, sat stiff and listened.

"What kind of thing, though?" asked Ma. "We can't give brake pads as a prize. Clutch kits?"

"No, we need something a bit more glitzy," said Will.

"We had those nice mechanic's lamps – we could order some of those."

"No, something big," said Will. "A generator. It's got to be a generator."

"No, Morgan will never agree to that," she said, mentioning our accountant.

"Morgan only knows how to cut costs. He doesn't think of the future. You have to spend money to make money. Trust me on this."

"Are you serious?" said Elliot. Ma and Will stared at him. He fled the room, when they didn't answer, leaving their shrugs in his trail. Ma and Will brushed off his huff as just another inexplicable revolt.

It was hard enough for Elliot to be understood in his own home, never mind out in the town. Some of Elliot's ideas were so extreme, I must explain, that most people in our town would not have known enough to be offended by them. They were clumped together and labelled under one banner to keep things simple. It was a town, after all, of simple tastes. Like steak-house dinners that bore 'Medium Rare' or 'Well Done' toothpick flags, Elliot's particular concoction would've emerged through the kitchen swing doors bearing the banner, '*kommunis*'.

Anything that wasn't instantly understood in town was labelled 'communist' and they would have stuck that toothpick in Elliot without a moment's hesitation. Slight in build, he nevertheless grew up tougher than most of the other Jewish kids thanks to all the kickings he took.

Afrikaners, and a few English boys too, objected to his communism, a kind which announced itself in rip-sleeved punk T-shirts, earrings, winkle-pickers, chains and studs. More than any of those, though, I think it was the black coat he sometimes wore, repudiating the Far Northern

Transvaal climate, that raised his critics' temperature highest; it turned them red, but only with rage, it must be said. The coat: this was the most communist of all.

With Elliot in his room, Ma and Will agreed on the generator as the prize with the biggest impact. It wasn't a glamorous prize, no, but it was valuable, and desirable for many who, for instance, owned weekend-getaway game farms beyond the stretch of electricity lines.

When our brother the capitalist oppressor went back to university in Joburg, Elliot was more able to express himself. And at lunch, while Ma handed me a booklet of raffle tickets, he did just that.

"I can't believe you would support the Zionist cause like this without asking us."

"What, I have to ask your permission to do things?" asked Ma.

"Well, it's coming from the business, the prize, isn't it? So it's like I'm donating it too. And I object."

"Well, it's done now."

"Zionism is a fascist cause and I won't support it."

"They're not fascists. The Women's Zionist League asked me to help out. What's wrong with helping out?"

"Why would you want to help them?"

"It's not just Israel. They raise funds for other things too."

"Like what?"

"Like the orphanage."

"The Jewish orphanage."

"Yes."

"What about Palestinian orphans?"

"Come on, Elliot."

"Oh, so just Jewish orphans then. And tanks, missiles, bombers, that sort of thing."

"Elliot, Carol asked me very nicely. Ida Rabinowitz from the League is sick and they need some help."

But Elliot was already heading to his bedroom, leaving me and Ma sitting at the table alone.

"I'm not selling these, anyway" I said, holding the booklet aloft.

"Don't tell me you have a political objection too," said Ma.

"Maybe."

"What do you know about Israel? Anyway, this isn't about Israel, it's about Carol Richler and the raffle. That's all."

"I hate Carol, and her stupid daughter. I don't know why I have to go to *cheder* – you don't believe in any of it."

"You just have to go. Don't be a brat. It's for your father's family. And Carol's doing me a big favour, taking you to *cheder*. You could be nicer to her, and that daughter of hers, poor thing. I mean, she has Carol for a mother."

I smiled against my will at that.

"I mean," continued Ma, "how would you like it if Carol was your mother? You'd also get migraines all the time. I don't ask for much, my boy, do I? Please. I let you get out of Shoshana's birthday party by lying that you were sick. Come on – I get enough grief from your brothers. Please."

"Okay."

"And I got you out of the swimming gala at school, remember?"

"Okay – I said okay."

"Thanks, my boy. You're the best."

I couldn't resist when she reminded me how my brothers pulled her in opposite directions. I went along with her requests as a kind of salve for her strains, and she indulged me in allowing me to skip many things other parents forced their children into.



Ma said I had to try to sell at least some of the tickets and suggested I walk door to door, which was safe enough in most parts of town. I roped my cousin Jackie into doing the rounds with me. She was fourteen, only half-Jewish but bored, so she agreed to come along.

We walked from her house in Compensatie Street past Dungeon Park with its dust and yellowing grass. We'd often come to this park together to ride the worn-out roundabout covered in thick paint that revealed in chips the previous years' primary colours, and we'd peer into blackness through the windows of the room under the mound.

Jackie preferred my side of town to hers, even though just a few blocks separated them. She didn't like the way the trees were, she said. I made fun of her but really I felt the same way. The trees were dark green with heavy branches in her street but in mine there were jacarandas and acacias through whose branches you could still see blue sky.

There were Spanish-style houses, like mine, and plain houses with wavy tiled roofs and the Assembly of God church whose eaves came down all the way to the ground like an afflicted bird.

Everyone had a garden, even if the brown sand came up in patches because there were always water restrictions.

Besides the foreboding trees on her side, Jackie pointed out households she hated and wouldn't sell tickets to. The house with the palm that stuck out over the grey concrete precast fence on Jorissen Street whose owner mistreated his dogs. The house next to *Kabouters* playschool with the wagon-wheel fence where the man of the house was an alcoholic who probably beat his wife.

She picked up these stories, I'd guess, from her father (my Uncle Victor) and repeated them even though her mother (my Aunty Bernice) would not have liked her talking about others.

We both passed my friend Roger Bastos's house and decided to keep going. "Markos said he once went there and Roger answered the door and he was naked," I told Jackie. "Then Roger's dad walked past and said 'Hi' and he was naked too. That's how they walk around the house."

"Gross," said Jackie.

So we went back past my house without stopping and down Rissik Street past the Acropolis Café, turning towards town again. We decided to try a few of the houses here, not the one with the little gate that bore the sign '*Hy byt / He bite*', like the 's' itself had been bitten off, but some of the others with no gates and square lawns and windows along the front.

At one house a domestic worker answered with a smell of potpourri and a ceramic heron standing inside the door. She didn't know about raffles and no-one was home so we said thank you and left.

We went across the road to another house and a boy of about fourteen answered the door, wearing rugby shorts and no shirt. His torso was very brown and lean. "Ja?" he said.

I asked in Afrikaans if we could speak to his mother.

"*Oor wat?*" he said.

I didn't know the word for 'raffle' in Afrikaans so I showed him the book.

His mouth pulled to the side in annoyance. '*Ma!*'

A woman came to the door and told us no thanks, they were with the *Nuwe Evangelies Gereformeerde* Church.

Nobody answered at the next house and we began to skip a few houses based on the scant evidence of possible rejection: they had people visiting and probably didn't want to be disturbed; the whine of a circular saw at the back of the house meant they would never hear the doorbell; their car had the born-again Christian fish badge on the boot.

We grew in shyness at the rows of houses, not even looking at the yards anymore, just walking. "Do you wanna go to the Indian Plaza with me?" asked Jackie. "I want to look for those reggae beads."

"Ja, okay." We walked down Devenish Street towards town and turned towards the Nedbank building, where the arcade lay. Jackie and I walked through it, escaping the heat for a few paces. Of course, I was in jeans while the rest of the town sported rugby shorts, but we've covered my outlook on clothing already.

We walked further along Landdros Maré Street, away from the Great North Inn (we weren't the only Great North in town) and the statue of the donkey, the park with the tank and the old bandstand and towards the side of town with the hospital and the SABC buildings.

Here were the repair shops and the old tea rooms, the predecessors of the cafés in town. It was also where Lucy the steam engine was displayed, on a traffic island, which Jackie and I would have explored if we'd had the time. But we were going to the Indian Plaza.

Less exotic and more utilitarian than the name promised, it was a relatively new sight in town. Strictly speaking, it was at the edge of town, towards the railway station and the industrial section. Most of the businesses moved there from the southern and western sections of town when the laws forced Indian shop owners out.

Jackie and I always knew it as just another part of town and it was only my older brothers who reminisced about the toys and radios for sale at Tilly's Cycles. For a while Tilly's and some of the shops continued to run with white 'fronts', since Indians couldn't lease in town. Some of those fronts were Jewish business owners; I'll never know if one of them was my father.

But eventually they had to move and it was to the Indian Plaza that they went. Two storeys sat in long rows around square parking lots. Standard-size metal signboards sat flush in a strip over the doorways of the shops. Weekday afternoons were never busy there and many of the shop owners stood outside their shops, chatting.

I suppose we were something of a novelty, two unaccompanied white kids walking around and so people greeted us. We felt welcome. One man even asked whether Jackie was Jewish (although only half-Jewish, she looked more Jewish than I did). They asked her surname – Hirsch – and the man was pleased to say he knew her father, my Uncle Victor. I wondered if he'd known mine.

I recognised one of the shops, Jada's Outfitters. Ma knew the owners, I remembered from tagging along years ago, and it was where Elliot – and probably Will before him – had come for his *bar mitzvah* getup.

"They might have beads," I said to Jackie.

We walked in, passing a man who was sitting on a low, cushioned seat at the doorway. Inside, two skinny boys, maybe fourteen and sixteen years old, were slouching against the counter. An elegant woman behind the counter, perhaps their mother, said, "Hello. Can I help you with anything at all?"

Jackie explained the plastic reggae beads – the red, the yellow, the green – but Mrs Jada didn't know anything about them. I was going to mention my mother to Mrs Jada but felt too shy, perhaps partly because Mrs Jada was beautiful, so beautiful I couldn't believe she hadn't been discovered and lauded somehow, but remained hidden behind that counter on the edges of town.

Jackie said thank you and we were at the threshold when my cousin had her idea. "Hey, do you want to buy one of our raffle tickets?" she said. "You can win a bakkie. What are the prizes, Ben?"

"A Nissan bakkie, a diesel generator, a TV, a hi-fi..."

"Good stuff," said Jackie. "And it's for charity."

"That's nice," said the man at the door who may have been Mr Jada. I noticed his long fingers, long enough to spool the material that was racked along the walls. "Did you hear, Zohra? These kids – selling for charity. Our boys don't do that."

The teenagers tried not to slouch so much and I immediately felt bad for the inaccurate comparison. I mean, they worked in the shop with their parents. Try getting me to do something like that for Ma.

Zohra Jada came from behind the counter and put a hand under Jackie's chin and smiled at her. "We'll take some tickets, see? How much are they?"

They were fifty cents each and Zohra wanted six. An old man, perhaps Grandfather Jada with the same long fingers but with joints like nodes, shuffled into the shop and, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, heard an explanation of our mission from his son. He said he'd take four. Jackie tore them off and the two Mr Jadas took them in their long fingers. I asked them to write their names on the sheet, hoping those were enough tickets to go back to Ma and say, "See? I tried."

Mr Jada the Younger looked at the Star of David and the letters W.Z.L. printed on the list.

"What kind of charity did you say?" he asked.

"What's it for again, Ben?" asked Jackie.

"What is W.Z.L.?" asked the gorgeous Zohra, coming around to read the form.

"Women's Zionist League," I said, happy to provide a smart answer and hoping to please lovely Zohra Jada with my cleverness.

"No," said Mr Jada. "For Israel?"

"Israel?" said Grandfather Jada, looking at his son as if he hadn't heard right.

Well, they all stood there looking at us. "And the orphans," I said, trying to retrieve more information for beautiful Mrs Zohra Jada.

"Give us our money back," said Mrs Jada.

"We don't support Israel here," said Mr Jada.

The skinny teenagers had come to the front and everyone was crowding the door now. Mr Jada beckoned twice with curled fingers and Jackie gave him back the money she was holding. We left the shop, stunned, and turned out onto the concrete parking area with them all looking at us still, then turned for the entrance.

We walked in silence together until we were back in the street. "Jeez, what was that all about?" I asked, feeling the ticket stubs and loose leaves in my pocket.

"And they say *we're* Jewish," said Jackie.

"Don't say that."

"But you are Jewish."

"Ja, but I always have to stop kids at school saying that when, like, someone grabs the bottom of the chip packet so the other one can't get enough. *Don't be so Jewish*," I said in a mock sing-song of those kids who thought 'Jewish' was like 'grumpy' or 'petulant' or 'touchy', a mild but regrettable trait. "And I always share my lunch if someone asks. Like if Sean forgets his sandwich or something, I always give him some of mine."

"I know, I was just saying, why do they have to be so mean? It's for charity, goddammit. *And* they could've got a colour TV."

"I know. I mean, what's their problem, right? What's fifty cents for them?"

That night we had dinner like we usually did, in the living room, me, Elliot and Ma, and afterwards I gave the tickets back. "I tried to sell them," I told Ma. "No-one wanted – I tried."

"Why are these ones torn already?" she asked.

"Because we almost sold them and then they didn't want them anymore."

"Who?"

"These people at the Indian Plaza."

"You tried to sell them to Muslims?" said Elliot, letting his fork fall on the plate. "You moron. You're lucky they didn't string you up. I would've."

"Elliot," said Ma.

“What?” said Elliot. “I mean, if I was Muslim. Ben, come on, don’t you watch TV? Muslims and Jews, fighting all the time? Israel? The war in Lebanon?”

“Ja but our Muslims aren’t like their Muslims,” I said.

“See what you’ve done?” said Elliot to Ma.

“What I’ve done?” said Ma.

“The political consciousness in this house is at an all-time low. Are you aware there’s a state of emergency in the country now? People can be arrested for nothing at all, put in jail for as long as the fascists want. They can search you. Black people have curfews, like children.”

“Don’t start on curfews. I let you go out till one,” said Ma to him.

“What are we doing about it?” asked Elliot, loudly. “Selling raffle tickets for fucking Israel? Your son is trying to get Muslims to pay for your filthy war. This is what you get for associating with Zionists.” He walked out the living room.

“Stop calling them ‘Zionists’,” she shouted after him. “It’s Carol and Auntie Phyllis and the rest of them. You know them.” Turning to me, she said, “Ben – don’t go to the Indian Plaza anymore unless you’re with me or Elliot, okay? Now I suppose I’ll have to buy the ones that have already been pulled out and give them away.”

“Jackie wanted to get reggae beads and we were there. I didn’t think.”

“Okay, we’ll sort it out. I’ll explain. Which shop was it?”

“I think it’s the one we went to for Elliot’s *bar mitzvah* outfit.”

“Jesus, Ben.”

When I saw Joss at school the next day, I didn’t tell him about what had happened at the Indian Plaza. He probably knew it wasn’t a good idea to sell Women’s Zionist League raffle tickets to Muslims.

“I can’t sell those fucking things. Nobody wants them,” I said.

“I got rid of mine at Friday night dinner. One shot.”

“Who am I gonna sell them to?”

“Hey, you know who you should try? Leo Fein.”

“I can’t just pitch up and ask him. He’s probably already got, anyway. And I don’t know where he lives.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Joss.

So after Joss’s mom dropped him off at my house that afternoon, we walked up Ireland Street, past the house with the half-built boat in the yard that had been half-built forever, past the reservoir, and over Potgieter Street, so long and straight it ended nowhere.

On the other side was Bendor, a newer section of town – or at least it seemed that way, because the face-brick here was brighter, rough red, and there were thickly-painted walls like slabs, smooth as plastic. The lawns were spongy and were sliced by driveways of interlocking paving stones leading to shaded entrances. Baby palms with brush-cuts and fan-tailed cycads were freshly deposited and each garden was edged with considerate, sloping kerbs.

We came to one of those face-brick houses, one with a kind of rounded tower that rose from a flower bed. We could hear voices and laughter from the back, men's voices. Joss rang the bell and the voices died. I heard a chair scrape and footsteps and could imagine Leo Fein walking through the house towards us. He opened the door.

"Boys," he said after looking from me to Joss and back again. "What can I do for you?"

I took the tickets from my pocket and said, "Would you like to buy some raffle tickets?"

"Raffle? For what?"

"For the Women's Zionist League," I said.

"For Israel," said Joss.

"For Israel, hey? Today might be your lucky day. Come with me, boys. Maybe you can do some business with some friends of mine." He led us into his house. "Just getting some ice. Hang on," he said. "Want some juice?"

"Ja, please," said Joss. We could hear the laughs of men who smoked coming from beyond the sliding doors to the patio. The tiled room where we stood had a high ceiling and the biggest TV I'd ever seen. To my right were double doors which led to a room, somewhat darkened. I pointed inside to Joss, who followed my finger with his eyes and nodded, impressed.

It was a study with a heavy desk and floating around it, like the recreation of a WWI dogfight, were stuffed birds – eagles and hawks and such, swooping and hovering, some perched. I almost sneezed at the thought of the dust and possible mites burrowing inside the feathers, although the house was immaculate.

"Here," said Leo Fein, propping a tray with our juices and an ice bucket on one arm and closing with his free hand the door to the study, that carnivore's capsule. "Let's go." We took our glasses and followed him to the patio.

Around a wrought-iron table sat three men, all tanned, all smoking. One was in his early sixties with grey hair at his temples and cleft chin, wearing Aviator glasses. The other two both wore sandals, one in a safari suit and the other, with curly hair almost to his shoulders, in denim shorts. A bottle of Johnnie Walker Black stood more than half-empty in the centre of the table.

"Gents," said Leo Fein to his guests, "these are some of our finest young Jewish men. Say hello."

We shook hands with each of them.

"Transvaal *Jode*," said the man with the sunglasses. "Just like you, hey? *Boerejode*. Glad to meet you, men."

The others barely spoke and when they did it was with accents I couldn't place. French, maybe.

"We're raising funds for Israel," Joss said. "With a raffle." The men with accents nodded.

"The Women's Zionist League," said Leo Fein, looking at the form in my hand. "The women in town raise funds for the troops in Israel. Very good thing," he said.

The men with accents said something in their language, but neither asked for a damn ticket.

The Afrikaans man with the cleft chin and sunglasses said, "It's very important we support our friends in Israel." (*Us-rrile* was how he said it.) "We're both fighting to protect our land and keep it safe for our people." He looked very serious, like we'd made him angry. "Here boys, give me some tickets." He took out a roll of cash from his trouser pocket. It was so thick with fifty-rand notes, he had to peel it open in his hand to find two twenties. He gave one note each to me and to Joss and I handed over the tickets.

"Good luck, my friend," said the man in sunglasses, as he presented the tickets to Leo Fein. "I hope you're a winner." He still looked angry, and held onto the tickets when Leo Fein put his fingers on them. Then he laughed a broad laugh and the other men joined in.

"Thank you, General," said Leo Fein. And then to us, "You've done some good business today, hey boys?"

"You boys –" said the General. "Next time I'll take you up in my Cessna, okay? Tell them, Leo."

Leo Fein walked us to the door.

"Is he really a general?" asked Joss.

"He'd better be, boykie," said Leo Fein, raising both eyebrows twice in quick succession.

"Thanks for coming, boys."

We were still holding our twenty rand notes when we walked into the cool garden.

"Fuck," I said.

"Twenty bucks," said Joss.

"Shhh, not so loud." We stuffed the notes into our pockets.

"The tickets are fifty cents and he took, what, twenty tickets? That's ten bucks."

"Do you think we need to get change?" I asked.

"Fuck that. Did you see the money he was flashing around?"

"I need to give ten bucks to my mom for the tickets."

“That’s still fifteen bucks each,” Joss said. “Or, I mean, we could give it to the Women’s Zionist League. As a donation.”

“Fuck that,” I said. “My brother says they’re fascists. Besides, he wanted us to have it.”

“He’s a general. We can’t say no.”

“What are you gonna buy?” I asked as we walked through the streets of Bendor.

“Sea Monkeys.”

“Wow.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll have to think about it. Sea Monkeys are a cool idea, though.”

And then Joss and I went to the Star Café, bought suckers and rationed a couple of games of Kung Fu Master so I could keep the ten rand aside.

It was easier explaining to Ma that it was Leo Fein who paid for tickets 210 to 230. And she seemed more impressed with Leo Fein’s largesse than with my work ethic, since, I supposed, I’d sold the whole consignment to one taker.

“Sold the whole lot,” I said.

“That was very nice of him to take them all,” said Ma. “Very generous.”



At school the next day Mr Groenewald, the headmaster, told us behind shut assembly hall doors, “This is a very serious job. That is why we have chosen you, because it is serious and we think you can be responsible.” I thought we’d been picked as additional prefects but the shortlist was too long for that.

“You might know that there are elements in our country who want to destabilise things. In a very violent way. There are terrorists who are trying to take away our country. That is why all of us must be vigilant. Do you all know what ‘vigilant’ means? It means we must use our eyes, we must use our ears, and if there is anything funny, you must always tell a teacher.”

There was a particular paranoia after bombs had been detonated in a bar and a restaurant in another town, in response to the countrywide state of emergency. Mr Groenewald showed us a kind of chart, which would become quite commonplace in schools and other government buildings. It was a three-dimensional moulded plastic poster that displayed full-colour representations of various explosives: a limpet mine, a hand grenade, a stick grenade, a landmine, a block of plastique.

“If you see anything strange, tell us immediately. Someone puts down a strange packet: you tell us. You hear people talking about something that could be dangerous to you, your friends, your family or the school: you tell us. I’m going to break you into groups now and I want you, every morning before class, to patrol your area. You are responsible for your area. And, you day-scholars, please tell your parents you’ll have to come into school fifteen minutes early from now on.”

Georgina and a boy named Barry were in my group, and our area of inspection included a passageway at one end of the school offices and the foyer of the school hall.

I was drawn to Georgina Melk instantly, since there were stories of her mother having tried to kill herself. This gave her a darkness, a hidden life, a complexity and a gravity that was rare and appealing.

I don’t know whether this story was true or not because neither I nor anyone I knew was brave enough to ask her. That she was beautiful was not even something I considered. She was unusual, and that, to me, was more important.

We did know that her parents were divorced, and even that was unusual in our town, or at least it seemed so to me at the time.

I liked the blackness of her hair, how boldly it had chosen its hue – not in an is-it-black-or-just-dark-brown way, but an extreme, definite, saturated black. You knew where you stood with that hair. And not only that, but Gina had a fine rasp to her voice which scared me but held a promise I couldn’t quite grasp at the time.

Every morning we looked behind pot plants, behind curtains and stood on tip-toes to see on window ledges. There weren’t many hiding places in the foyer, beneath the photographs of our prime ministers and presidents, past and present.

It was a drag getting on your hands and knees to look on the dusty floor behind things, and to have to be at school fifteen minutes before everyone else, but I looked forward to it because Gina was there, under a gloom. She glowered and pouted and sneered at the stupid, stupid job we’d been given.

Every day I made a show of hating the senseless assignment too, but the truth was that it was the first time in my existence I looked forward to coming to school. What made Gina Melk so attractive to me, besides the black hair and besides the mystique of suicide, was her hateful attitude towards authority; I read it as rebellion against conformity, rather than self-centred brattishness, and longed to be swept up in her dust-devil disgruntlement.



When the day of the raffle came, it seemed strange to me that Elliot would want to come along. I guess Ma didn't want to jinx a rapprochement (he'd been unusually quiet recently) so she didn't make a comment about his change of heart.

The *shul* hall was decked in blue and silvery-white ribbons and Meyer Levinson was at the microphone on the little stage. Besides the raffle, there was a cake sale, a jumble sale and a fund-raising dinner later, which I was grateful we'd be skipping.

We saw Carol and said hello.

"How's it going so far?" asked Ma.

"Oy, this migraine. It's murder."

"And the tickets?"

"Oh, not bad, not bad. Thank God we got that bakkie from Arnold as a prize or we'd be sunk. Oh, of course, and the generator. Thanks so much for that."

"I'm leaving," said Elliot, abruptly. "It's fine, I'll walk."

Ma, who was still talking to Carol, didn't have the patience to enquire why. "He can't stay five minutes," she said. "Guess it was too good to be true."

Non-Jews had been invited to the function too, and it was Karel Smit who won the bakkie. Leo Fein, as it happens, won the diesel generator we'd donated but hadn't shown up at the event, and neither had the General with the sunglasses.

After all the prize-winners had been announced Ma decided we'd done our time and we prepared to leave. We said goodbye to Aunty Phyllis and Carol and Meyer Levinson, congratulating them on a successful event, and walked out.

As we stepped through the gate, we noticed a few men spread around the low wall that surrounded the hall and the Rabbi's residence. On it had been spray-painted two blue horizontal lines and between them a cocked swastika, in the same blue paint. Ma didn't let me gawk too long. She pulled me by the sleeve and guided me to the car.

When we arrived home, Elliot had his winkle-pickers up on the little side table and was watching TV. "Elliot, I want to know – did you paint that swastika?" asked Ma. "Now you tell me, Elliot."

"What are you talking about?" he replied. Ma'd been so single-minded about confronting Elliot, she'd forgotten I was in the room and I relished the chance to be in on the clash.

"Why would you do that?" said Ma, not even hearing his denial and ploughing on. She'd already wound herself into that angry, pleading pitch she used whenever one of us (usually Elliot) did something she'd have to fix. "On the *shul* wall? You're just looking for trouble, aren't you?" She threw the car keys on her chair and remained standing.

"It's not a swastika. It's a modified Israeli flag."

"Elliot," said Ma, speaking more quietly now, "you painted a swastika on the *shul* wall."

"It's a modified Israeli flag."

This did nothing at all to downgrade Ma's spluttering rage and she went to her room, probably to phone Victor but I can't be sure. "It just looks like a swastika," I said to Elliot.

He made a sound, as if I'd just told him an interesting fact, like the Eiffel Tower has two-and-a-half million rivets holding it up, and went to his room.

No-one saw that it was a modified Israeli flag. People called it a swastika on a *shul* wall and theories were created as to who could have painted it. "There are a lot of Nazis in town," said Carol on the way to *cheder*. "Who do you think the Afrikaners supported in the war? There's even a street named after a Nazi-lover. Hans van Rensburg Street." She mock-spat after saying the name. "I don't even like driving on it."

I was afraid I'd crack open and expose what I knew about the swastika at any moment so I kept pretty quiet.

The Kisch brothers were standing at the *shul* gate when we arrived. They were both wearing dark glasses, the brothers Joel and Nathan, monstrous from lifting weights and serious about Zionism. Both had completed national service in the Israeli Defence Force just a couple of years back.

A black man in overalls was scrubbing at the graffiti with a stiff brush and a bucket of soapy water a few meters from the brothers. A blue smudge was growing around the swastika.

I was wracked with the anticipation of the subjects of Nazis and anti-Zionism coming up in *cheder*, or an interrogation from the Rabbi, but it wasn't he who brought it up.

"Do you really think it's safe for us to have our lessons here?" asked Potato Latke.

"I don't want you to worry about that," said the Rabbi. "That's my job, to worry about your safety, okay?"

"There could be a bomb," she said.

"There isn't a bomb. And Joel and Nathan are looking after us."

"They can't do anything about a bomb," said Disney Yarmulke. His little sister, sitting behind him, pulled her face into a shape in preparation to cry.

"There are no bombs here, Steven," said the Rabbi, with the firmest voice I'd heard him use. It smoothed the creases in the little girl's face. "I think it was just some kids playing a silly joke, and now everyone's worked up. We're just taking precautions, that's why Joel and Nathan are outside."

When the lesson ended, we waited for our lifts while Joel Kisch talked to Nathan Kisch and vice versa.

“I don’t think the Dutchmen are organised enough to be a real threat,” said Joel or Nathan.

“Could have been some punk,” said Nathan or Joel.

“To do something like that while a Zionist event is going on? That’s *chutzpah* my friend. No, the Muslims – they’re the danger.”

“Ja, but a Nazi sign?”

“Smokescreen – deflect attention away.” Joel or Nathan indicated ‘away’ with a divergent hand like a shark fin.

“Fuckers,” said Nathan or Joel.

*Jesus, I thought, first Jews try to sell Zionist raffle tickets to Muslims, next they’re being blamed for anti-Semitic vandalism. I’ve stoked a war.*

I looked over at the man in the overalls. He was still working away at the offending image. The arms of the symbol clung to the wall but the colour spread itself like the cancerous animation I’d seen on maps in ‘The World at War’, the Sunday-night documentary series that fascinated Uncle Victor. It always showed the advancing Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe in a spreading puddle over Europe, when Germany was still winning the war.

## Satanists

As a pursuit, photography was appealing because, while I liked to draw, Elliot pretty much had that covered. Of course, there was much I stole from Elliot – clothes, music, opinions – but I drew the line (excuse me) at drawing. It was his. So I took the next best thing I could think of, an artistic diversion that wasn't drawing, one that – hey! – didn't require any technique-based sort of skill. Photography!

Approaching photography with the attitude that you could take beautiful pictures without the necessity of fiddly discipline or theory, or understanding of concepts like composition or of, say, lighting, exposure, what those numbers mean on my mom's camera and so on, meant that virtually all of my pictures were total shit.

I needed a book. Not my mother, who'd been to art college, or Elliot who had a good eye himself, but a book because it was an indisputable authority and I wouldn't have to debase myself by asking for advice; books were where I derived much of my knowledge of the world, accounting for much of my naivety about it.

And the more I looked into it, the more I understood that I really needed a book. Because photography books contained not only the essential basics to take good photographs, but also nude pictures of ladies.

Nude pictures of ladies were becoming quite important to me, although I had only the vaguest idea why. I certainly hadn't experimented with looking at pictures of nude ladies and actually doing anything about it, certainly not with you know what. That only came later after the struggle between my moral-religious opposition to masturbation and the insistent, irrepressible jonesing for ejaculation.

(I don't even remember why I was opposed to wanking, which is surely an indication of who won that battle, but I do remember trying to resist the temptation of touching my penis. If it ejaculated on its own, surely God or whoever couldn't hold me responsible for spilling my seed. A wet dream, for instance, was acceptable. And I remember wondering whether mind power alone could cause an ejaculation, thus avoiding any immoral touching.

Trying to will your penis to ejaculate for any length of time, and probably just thinking about your penis for so long, cannot be good for you, doesn't work and inevitably leads to wanking, I can confirm.)

But I was obsessed with the Power of the Mind. I tried a few things. I attempted to communicate with Cindy, our long-haired miniature dachshund, with the mind. I tried to get her

to move, jump off the bed or something. I scaled down and tried blinking and to see whether she would blink, say, twice in succession if I did it first, and actually thought it worked once, but had to concede that it was probably chance.

I opened up Omni magazine from time to time, which had articles like 'China's Psychic Children' and 'How to Control Your Dreams'. I also took out a book from the library about meditation and tried it out one afternoon but it only led to a hard-on.

Perhaps my aversion to sex came from my early exposure to pornography. Anyone with older brothers is exposed to pornography at a younger age than their brothers' were: this is the rule. I felt it had been unnecessarily young, and that I'd been somehow lumped with the burden of knowledge, stunned with it, wise beyond my years to the sordid nature of the act and gratuitous use of wah-wah guitar.

Elliot had managed to borrow a VHS copy of a porno from an older part-time DJ friend of his. Will was home for the weekend and in a rare moment of cooperation between brothers, Elliot had invited him to watch with his friends. Of course, Ma was out somewhere (at the bowls club for the afternoon, perhaps) and the TV room was taken up with eight teenage boys and one girl with clearly dyed red hair.

No-one asked me whether I wanted to be there, or ordered me to go to my room or play outside, which I might have done, so I stayed. About fifteen minutes into one film (the first time I'd seen an ejaculation – what the hell *was* that stuff?) the girl with the dyed hair said, "Are you going to let him watch this?"

Elliot paused the tape.

"Are you okay watching this, Ben?" asked Will.

"Sure," I said, because you never admit to being too young for anything to your older brothers (another rule).

Everyone shrugged and rearranged the cushions on their laps while a pale American girl with long blonde hair slipped out of her denim bell-bottoms in the back of a van to some light funk music.

The red-haired girl in our living room got to her feet with an utterance of disgust to a guy who I presume was her boyfriend. She let herself out of the front door, slamming it in case anyone had overlooked her feelings on the matter. The boyfriend stayed.

So, as I was saying, photography was where it was at for me. I was in the CNA in the book section when I saw 'Photography Basics' on the shelf and had a quick flip through. Aperture, Exposure, ISO, Speed, Composition, Black and White, Filters and one nude and two semi-nudes.

It was the only book on the subject in the only bookshop (a newsagent, really) in town, so my options were limited anyway.

I took it and my savings plus the money from the General and headed to the checkout but on the way, passed the wildlife section. What caught my eye instantly was a Bataleur Eagle on the cover of 'Birds of Prey of Southern Africa'. I snatched it up too, and walked off towards the cashier.

My head rang with the thought of Leo Fein's study with its swooping bodies of sawdust clothed in feathers, the bird dog-fights and regal postures. I wanted to know what each of those fierce hunters was called, to know their tactics and tastes in prey; to have all that knowledge in common with him.

"You know this one's twenty-five, right?" she said, holding up the photography book. Fuck, I hadn't even looked at the prices. I only had twenty-eight and the wildlife one was fourteen rand.

"Okay, just this one, then," I said.

"Okay. Can you put it back for me?"

"Sure," I said.

She handed me the packet and I took the wildlife book back to its section. Then I had my idea. I already knew the security guard was at the magazine racks, telling kids not to take too long with the mags and comics (a frustrated sign said, in essence, 'no longer than five minutes or buy the bloody thing'), so I bent down and placed the wildlife book in the packet alongside the photography one.

I walked out quickly, easily, and was in the clear. On the way home I took a zigzagging route home, in case, and once in the privacy of my bedroom, I reached not for the photography one but for the 'Birds of Prey' book. It was for Leo Fein, or if not for him – because I'd taken the thing in a flash – then at least to show him, to share with him. An excuse, pathetic as it was, to go over to his house and page through it, talk about the birds, see his collection.

Over the course of about two weeks, I toyed with different approaches of how to broach the subject, or maybe just to shelve the thing altogether because it was stupid.

The swastika, meanwhile, hadn't gone away and I even heard it mentioned at school. One of my teachers, Mrs Verwey, called me aside after the Afrikaans lesson to ask what I knew about it.

"Nothing," I said, nervous at the insinuation that I might.

"Satanists," said Mrs Verwey. "They're dangerous and they're in this town, Ben. You tell your people to be careful." Finally she let go of my arm but repeated the word – "Satanists" – before I excused myself for break.

At home that afternoon, Ma decided the situation was becoming serious enough to warrant talking to Elliot in private, so I had to hover in the passage outside his bedroom, pretending to fetch things from my own.

"You've caused a lot of trouble," she said. "More than I think you knew you would."

"I know," said Elliot.

"People think it was Afrikaners – neo-Nazis or something. Do you know that? You could have stirred something up that's out of control now. I heard Julian Gross was thinking about getting the Jewish Board of Deputies from Joburg involved even. Julian was going to talk to the mayor."

"Damn."

"Well, I'm glad you realise it was a mistake."

"It *was* a mistake – it doesn't look like the Israeli flag. Nobody knows what it's supposed to be."

"Elliot, you have to take responsibility for it. There could be trouble because of this. People could get hurt."

"I'll take responsibility."

"So, okay," she said. He'd caught her off-guard. "So, should I call Julian now?"

"No, I'll do it. Just give me a little time."

"Don't take too long. It's the right thing." It sounded like she was starting to walk so I scooted further down the passage. "I'm proud of you," I think I heard her say.

Elliot spent most of the night in his room.

I didn't see it but apparently it was a three-by-two metre sheet that was hoisted up the flagpole at the *shul* that night. Elliot must have spent some time on it, making sure the stripes were parallel, that the swastika was even and tilted at just the right angle, and that the images were on both sides of the flag. There was no mistaking now, I believe, that this was a modified Israeli flag, the blue stripe above and below a cocked swastika in place of a Star of David.

For good measure, next to the blue smudge of his first attempt, he stencilled the other Israeli symbol – the *menorah* – with a swastika adorning the centre candlestick holder. Although the flag had been pulled down by the time I went to *shul* on Saturday morning, the *menorah* was still being spread by the black man in overalls with his brush.

This time, somehow, the high school had come by the intelligence that my brother was involved. Ma took a phone call from the headmaster, Mr Cullinan, saying that they'd found a can of blue spray-paint in his school bag. He asked whether, as a single mother, she'd prefer the school to punish him.

“Don’t you touch him,” she said down the phone. “Just send him home right away.”

Worried that Elliot would be expelled from school, she called her brother Victor, who’d been a supporter of Elliot’s since my brother was a baby. My uncle had already built up a store of antagonism towards Cullinan, too.

Uncle Victor had overheard the headmaster call Abe Kotzen a Jewboy at the Country Club some time back and although my uncle had a hatred for Abe Kotzen (after he fleeced old Tiffany Schultz in the sale of her property), he believed the remark was inexcusable.

When Abe thanked my uncle for defending him, Victor had told him, “Abe, you may not be a Jewboy but you’re still a fucking cunt.”

Uncle Victor was a one-man Anti-Defamation League in town, scouring it for anti-Semitism. This particular stance did not, in his view, preclude him from using other forms of bigotry himself, but in our town, that was more or less expected of everyone.

The point is that Cullinan had proved worthy of Victor’s hatred long before their phone conversation. He began by telling the headmaster what a coward he was. Then he took Cullinan’s sentiments through such twists and squirms until he believed that expelling Elliot would amount to an anti-Semitic act.

“But Julian Gross himself called me up to ask me to keep an eye on the boy,” said Cullinan.

“And who is Julian Gross?” demanded my uncle. “He doesn’t represent every Jew in town, let me tell you, Sir. Don’t you know about the Holocaust, Cullinan? About the fascists? There’s a lesson there, my boy. You want to tell a Jew where to live, where to work, to walk through the streets with a star on his arm?”

“Of course not.”

“Why did six million of us die? Do I need to remind you? So if a Jew wants to paint on the wall of a synagogue, what’s it to you? Or would you victimise a young boy for being Jewish? Do you think the other Jews in town are going to like that? Picking on Jews is not advisable, my friend. Not anymore. Not since ’45.”

Uncle Victor’s picture was far from accurate, though, because most Jews in town wanted nothing more than for Elliot to be victimised. We saw the Kisch brothers drive past our house several times that week during the night.

“We never talk about this to anyone,” said Ma after calling a family meeting with me and Elliot, something that I thought only happened in American sitcoms. It was never openly revealed outside the family that Elliot had been responsible. Elliot told Cullinan the spray-paint was for an art project and wouldn’t say any more to him.

The flag and *menorah* combo was something Ma wanted to keep a family secret. It was just too big and she was scared. Neither Elliot nor I liked to see her that way, fretting on the line to Victor. She used all she had to keep her grip on the family, and threatened Elliot. "If you ever do anything like that again," she said to him, "or if you ever talk about it at all, to anyone, I'll send you to boarding school and you can spray-paint *menorahs* on the headmaster's arse for all I care."

"Ben," she said, turning to me, "if anyone asks, at school, or *shul* – I don't care if it's a kid or a grownup, or a policeman – you say you don't know what they're talking about."

Will tried his best to get involved, siding against Elliot, and pushing for a full apology, and payment for the damage by working, under his instruction, at Great North Diesel and Auto Electric. So Ma had to keep Will in check too and instruct him to never speak a word of Elliot's transgressions to anyone outside the family, in fact, to shut up about it altogether right this minute.

It took a lot out of her, I think, and when I entered her bedroom to ask her to sign something for school and saw in her eyes the sting of redness, I began to cry too (I cried all too easily in those days, the tears only drying up a few years later whereafter almost nothing could induce them again). While I'd never really known home life with a father in the house, I bet she could have used one back then.

Of course, Elliot refused to speak to Will over the phone but I didn't escape. "You tell Elliot if he wants to ruin his own life that's fine but he's dragged us all into this and if the business suffers because of his actions, we're not going to support him," he said. "What are you going to tell him?"

I repeated it over the phone to Will but didn't dare pass it on to Elliot.

While my family was eager to shut up about the swastika, it was hard to ignore that other people were talking about it. Walking back from town one day, one of the Jewish kids, a boy two years older than me, pushed me over and called me a Nazi. I didn't fight back but I didn't cry either. If I'd done so it would have been an admission of guilt so in the end he left me there on the ground alone.

Later in the week at school (and possibly quite unrelated to the swastikas), another kid – a Christian this time – called me a Jew. Of course, I was a Jew, but something about the way he said it, and maybe the earlier Nazi-baiting attack that week, nudged me inside a little.

I swung a hand and it hit him on the side of the head, to my surprise. The boy was smaller than me but, it appeared, much more used to being hit than I was. He threw a straight punch

that landed to the right of my nose and left me slightly dazed. After that short and unsatisfying exchange, we went our separate ways.

Uncle Victor was the only one in the family who still wanted to talk about the swastika. “Do you know, that snake, Julian Gross, came into the shop the other day. ‘Just visiting’ he said. He says he has a ‘source’ that told him who was responsible for the swastika. I told him to stick his source up his arse. That Cullinan had better keep his trap shut or I’ll shut it for him.” He kept talking about ‘the swastika’ and each time I could sense Elliot straining to bottle up the urge to say ‘modified Israeli flag’. No-one got it.

Carol still took me to *cheder* with Potato Latke but her pity for me had grown deep. She’d study me as we walked out of the *shul* grounds to her car, as if the lesson were a dose of strong medicine and she was watching for its effect. The Dorfman’s still fetched me for *shul* and I still slept over at their place from time to time but I noticed that there was always an excuse when I invited Joss to mine.

Everyone still shook my hand and wished me *Gut Shabbes* in *shul* but I felt more than ever that I was allowed access only through their largesse.

With the Rabbi, however, I didn’t notice even the slightest change in attitude towards me. He still joked with me during *cheder* and explained patiently the things other kids already knew, like how to wear the *tallis* and how to recite *brochas* for the wine and the bread.

But even Disney Yarmulke started giving me a hard time one day. “My dad says you’re not going to have a *bar mitzvah*. They won’t allow it,” he told me after *cheder*.

I began to think it would be better if I didn’t have my *bar mitzvah*. I was just going to mess it up anyway. My Hebrew was unsteady and I was nervous in front of large groups as it was. And now the whole community hated us. More humiliating than performing in front of an audience – what if no-one came? Or worse, they came and – I don’t know – booed me, and threw things? Are you allowed to throw things on *Shabbes*? Is it considered work? Who knew?

I didn’t get into an argument with Disney Yarmulke because I thought it was quite possible he was telling the truth.

Then something happened to divert the darts meant for my family. Another swastika was found in another part of town. It wasn’t as neat as the stencilled ones outside *shul* but it was fresh to the eyes of vigilant Zionists. This one was on a wall near a reservoir. At school a few weeks later I heard that black candles and painted pentagrams were also discovered in the grounds of the reservoir one night during a police patrol.

It was the work of Satanists (AKA teenagers so bored and angry at their parents that they conjure up the most shocking rebellion they can think of in a Dutch Reformed town). Two

Afrikaans boys from the Technical School were arrested and caned by the police. This seemed to cap the matter off in everyone's heads. Carol said to me in the car, as if to square things with me, "Well, they caught those Nazis."

"Not Nazis," said Potato Latke, "Satanists, Mommy."

"Well, I hope those *chatteses* learnt their lesson: not to mess with Jews. Right, Ben?"

Everyone wanted to put the swastikas in the past. Everyone except Elliot. Ever since the falsely accused Satanists received their punishment, he wanted to come forward and take responsibility.

"Now you want to own up?" said Ma. "Oh no. Now you shut up, Elliot. We've managed our way out of this one, and only just. Don't mess things up now. Think of your brother – he still has to have his *bar mitzvah*. Or do you want to go to boarding school?"

That threat, that Ma poked at him judiciously, muzzled him and he was only rebellious in small ways, like brazenly pilfering her cigarettes.

Elliot was a little shaken after talking to Ma's accountant, Morgan. Ma thought Morgan might talk some sense into the boy. Morgan foretold of Elliot's financial demise if he didn't start achieving in school, stop smoking marijuana and start dressing appropriately for the heir of an electrical and motor spares business.

Elliot didn't value Morgan's advice, considering it came from a man who drank a bottle of whiskey a day and was on his third marriage. What's more, he said to Morgan, "Is that what you said to your daughter? I heard she was walking naked through Yeoville, fucked on acid or some shit."

Morgan smashed his whiskey tumbler on the ground and told Elliot to leave. Ever since my father's death, Morgan had told Ma the same thing at financial year-end: it was time to tighten our belts. But now he was clear that there would be enough funds for boarding school.

So Elliot's resistance was limited to long silences and stealing cigarettes, giving me the space to voice my own protest.

"Do I have to have a *bar mitzvah*?" I asked. While I still gripped secretly to belief, the idea of standing on the *bimah* and reading – singing – in a foreign language was terrifying. And I still had months of *cheder* ahead of me, with customs I'd never imagined and those children I was so unlike and I so disliked.

"Don't you start," said Ma.

"You don't even believe in religion. What's the point?"

"Once you've done the *bar mitzvah*, you can do whatever you like. You never have to go to *shul* again."

Later that day I made a brave sortie to Elliot's room. Solidarity, I thought. "It's so unfair I have to do a *bar mitzvah*. I mean, you don't go to *shul*. And nor does she. Who cares what Uncle Sherwin and Auntie Evie think? We never see them."

"Just do it and then it's over," said Elliot, working on a charcoal sketch. It wasn't often he tolerated me in his room.

"You hated yours. And now you hate Jews. I'm not gonna do mine."

"Don't you get it, stupid?" he said, pausing from his shading. "She makes us do it for us, not for her. She doesn't care about that bullshit and neither did Daddy. But what if something happens to her?"

"Like what?"

"Like she has an accident, dies."

"I don't know."

"Who's going to look after you then?"

"Not you. I don't know. I don't need anyone."

"Don't be stupid. Of course you do. She wants us to be able to go to Daddy's side of the family in case we're in trouble or something."

"I'd never go to them if I was in trouble."

"You don't know that. Fuck, you're stupid."



Elliot soon found more immediate and personal grounds for resistance. He heard that the boys of his year at school were to be locked into the auditorium and made to sign their Defence Force registration papers for National Service, with the teachers standing sentry.

He ducked out of school for the rest of the day, and the next day he evaded the male teachers for as long as he could. Many of the school's teachers were fresh returnees from the border themselves, and brought back with them a need to blood their wards in battle. It was a personal fulfilment for some of them, not just an official requirement, to put the sixteen-year-olds in their care on the military's register.

Finally, Mr Verwey, the Guidance teacher (who guided his wife with a hand across her face almost nightly, it was said), pulled Elliot out of History, brought him to Cullinan's office and made him sign the form with his fingers clamped around Elliot's neck.

Ma was disappointed when only two weeks later Elliot was expelled. Elliot was disappointed too, because the expulsion was for prosaic instead of political reasons. He'd been caught smoking a joint behind the squash courts. Not the sort of high-minded achievement he'd hoped for.

Officially, he was 'asked to leave' and not expelled but it amounted to the same thing, except that Cullinan, in between his gloating, was willing to write a reference letter for Elliot's next school: the arts college in Joburg.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Elliot had a talent for drawing. He applied his talent, as we've already seen, in the *shul* grounds quite skilfully. Whether the teachers supported his politics or not, they couldn't deny his technique and with the letter and a hurriedly assembled portfolio, he was easily accepted into the School of the Arts.

It happened so quickly. Will came home from Joburg to take Elliot back with him. "Well, you really fucked it up this time," said Will.

"What? You had to wait till you were finished school to get out of this dump," said Elliot. "Way I see it, I've been released early. Sentence reduced for good behaviour."

"Ja well, fuck up again and it'll be straight into the army for you, loser."

"What do you know? At art school, it's the teachers who smoke joints in class."

When I was younger, Elliot refused to hold my hand crossing roads if his friends were anywhere near, and I had to grip onto his shirt. The toughest guy I knew was leaving town. I hung close while he packed.

"So you'll probably want my room now," he said.

"Maybe."

"You gonna bring girls back here?"

"No."

"Got a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Come on, you can tell me."

"No," I said, bursting to tell him about Georgina Melk, but knowing that I ran the very real risk of being humiliated somehow for it.

"Do you have protection?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Really?" he said. "Condoms?"

"Oh. Then, no. Sis man."

"So no girls?"

"No."

"Cos you prefer boys. I thought so. You been hanging around with Herman and Nick again?" referring to Ma's friends on the small-holding past the Sand River.

"No, darling," I said through my nose.

"Are you sure, Cyril?" he asked through his nose. (Cyril was the gayest name we could come up with.)

"Oh, I'm fabulously sure, Cedric." (Cedric was the second-gayest name we could come up with.)

"But are you scintillatingly sure, Cyril?"

"Ooh, I think I'm titillatingly sure, Cedric."

"And are you vivaciously sure?"

"Dazzlingly sure."

"Deliciously sure?"

"Devilishly sure." (For some reason we imagined that gay men found extravagant modifiers irresistible in common speech.)

"Outrageously sure?"

"Vivaciously sure."

"We already had that one," said Elliot, reverting to his usual manner. "Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

In the living room, Ma and Will were talking about the raffle. "He still hasn't fetched the prize?" asked Will.

"Can't get hold of him," said Ma.

"We can still make an opportunity of this, Margot," said Will, calling Ma by her first name. "We'll get in the 'Review', call them up to take a photo and write up a story when we hand over the generator to him."

"Who wants to read about Leo Fein winning a generator?"

"It's the angles. You gotta work the angles. Maybe he really needs it for his business. Maybe it saves his business. There's a story in everything."

And then Will and Elliot were gone and it was just me and Ma. "Well," she said. "I suppose we can talk about you taking Elliot's room if you want it." She opened the door to his door and we stood at the threshold, looking in.

“Okay, I’ll think about it.” The room looked stark without his jeans and stud belts and rolled cardboard lying around.

Ma picked up a sketch Elliot had left on his desk. It was a heavily shaded charcoal picture of a Hasid at the Wailing Wall. The rugged stones must have crumbled from the stick as he drew it, and the Jew’s hat and coat sat thick on the page. Somehow he’d captured the wispieness of the beard quite well, and the sheen of a double lightning bolt SS logo on the lapel, and skull and crossbones on the hat of the old Jew.

“He’s very talented, isn’t he?” said Ma.

University of Cape Town

## Kaddish for Leo Fein

When I first learnt of Leo Fein's death, I assumed it was at the hands of some enemy. He was a man who had generals for friends, who busted through steel gates and stole lucky packets for kids. What could stop a man like that?

It was Carol who told us, me and Ma, after dropping me at home post-*cheder*. Ma would do her best always to avoid this contact with Carol because Carol had a nauseating effect on her. I could always see Ma turning slightly yellow after listening to Carol for, say, twenty minutes. It got right into Ma, Carol's misery, attacked like jaundice.

"Hang on, Carol," said Ma. "Forget the *Chevra Kadisha* stuff. Leo Fein is dead?"

"Yesterday. Heart attack, I heard."

Heart attack! – the same brutal phenomenon that took my father, whom I lost at five or six years of age.

"You know, I've been trying to get hold of him," said Ma. "He won the generator."

"Well, I wouldn't bother about that, Margot. He's not even having a funeral. Didn't want the *Chevra Kadisha* – too good for the *Chevra Kadisha*! And what about his son? The poor *schlemiel* is lost."

"He has a son?"

Leo Fein with a son. Well, where did this leave me, anyway? I would never rob another shop with the man, and he'd never tell me anything about my father now. He already had a son with whom he probably robbed and busted down doors in every town in the Far Northern Transvaal.

"Michael. At least he's sitting *shiva*. I'm going over this afternoon with some things. Phyllis and I usually bring the food but we didn't know what to do if there's no funeral. I said to Phyllis, because she's mad as a snake – ooh, Margot, Phyllis was angry – I said to Phyllis, 'Phyllis, we have to be the bigger person here.' And she agreed. 'You're right, Carol,' she said. 'It can't be helped what that man has done but he's left his son like a useless piece of flesh to *schlump* around the house.' "

"Well I have to do something with the generator," said Ma.

"No funeral, Margot. Have you ever?"

"No, but it's his choice, I suppose."

I felt a little lost inside my own house. I took out the bird book, as if in tribute to him. I wondered what would happen to the stuffed birds – would his son, Michael, take them? Could I have them?

I wandered back to the passage where Ma was on the phone to Will. "Well, that's a relief," he said.

"He's dead, Will. And left a son behind. You were at school with him."

"Like five years older than me, Margot."

"Well, in any case, he's been left all alone by his father. It's very sad."

"Look, I just mean, we weren't getting any mileage out of the raffle thing anyway. And Morgan would just love that, wouldn't he? A plan of mine failing."

"I'm going to have to give the generator to him, to the son. It's only right."

"What? But we're out of it. We're off on a technicality, surely. Unclaimed prize, Margot. Leave it alone."

"I'll think about it. How's Elliot?" asked Ma, changing the topic to one she knew Will couldn't resist.

"Who knows? I see the guy bunking school, bumming around Braamfontein. God knows what kind of an education he's getting."

"What?"

"Do they let him wear earrings at school?"

"Hang on, Will - is he not going to school?"

"Maybe he had a free period, I don't know. I saw him with some other dirty kids smoking and spitting in the street in tight pants. One of them looks like a cockroach."

"They're artists. And before you say anything funny, I was at art college, you know."

"I know."

"Is he coming to you this weekend?"

"He said he was coming to you."

"He's not coming here," said Ma. "How would he be coming here?"

"I don't know."

"Well, call him. He's your brother."

"He doesn't listen to me."

"Try at least. Take him to lunch - I'll pay."

Elliot, I suppose, gave me a sense of the possible, and we missed him, Ma and I. Even if you got kicked in the teeth for it, you could still do something out of bounds. That's what Elliot represented for me. Just being his brother gave me a sense of power, however small it was. He seemed, if not dangerous then at least ungovernable and unquantifiable to certain teachers and older kids. I could carry a little of that respect on my own back when I started high school.

Sure, he regarded me as naïve and ignorant and would let me know whenever he could, but he was also interesting and funny. He knew music no-one else did, collected comics, brought home artists and musicians (some of whom were black, and I was in awe of them – people who weren't supposed to be in our house unless they were cleaning it; and there they were, eating off our plates and listening to my brother's records, being *cool*, breaking the law, probably; and then they'd have to go before it was dark).

Ma decided the right thing to do was to go to the *shiva* house to 'show face' as she put it. "I just feel really bad. He was supposed to get the generator."

"Can I come?" I said.

"You don't have to, my boy. You didn't know him."

"I did," I said, and had to scramble a little to think how to explain. "From *shul*."

"Well, if you want."

"Did you know him?" I asked.

"Not really. We'd met, but never really spoke."

"Did Daddy know him?"

"I don't know. Probably. Everyone knew your father."

On the way there I grew fearful. I'd be meeting the son of Leo Fein. Was he my competition, in a way? Just who was good enough to be Leo Fein's son? And it was also then that the feeling of Leo Fein's death, not just the news of it, sank in. I suppose I'd been counting on some kind of relationship with him, and just as it had begun, it was taken away.

Michael Fein was sitting on a turquoise leather couch when we arrived, even though Ma had told me the bereaved sit on low chairs. It was late afternoon and while everyone spoke quietly, they more or less ignored Michael. Michael, whom I'd never met before but whose face I may have seen in *shul*, and then never with Leo Fein, sat alone and looked tired.

I tried to see Leo Fein in his son. He had the start of a good, heavy body going, and although he was maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, he seemed like a boy. Perhaps it was how his arms hung flaccid at his sides and his hair, also limp, was arranged in a middle parting (who wore middle partings?) Where were the steel curls of Leo Fein?

Even the house seemed more demure now without the General and the other men in sandals, and the bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. This was a quiet cocktail party without the cocktails but with the same formations of people standing and sitting in the cold, tiled room with the high ceiling and the silver ornaments – vases, platters, spoons; an oil painting of a rabbi, roughly executed, with *tefillin* strapped to his head; etchings of Prague or some other dark European

place; a bland watercolour landscape, more local; a gloopy wildlife oil painting, even more local. The double doors to the room with the birds were closed.

My mother and I approached Michael. "Long life," I said. I'd been coached by Ma that this was what Jews said to each other when one of us dies. I thought immediately of Star Trek, of course, being twelve, and it sounded silly. He placed his large hand in mine without gripping and mumbled the same words back to me.

"It's a terrible thing to lose a father," said Ma. I was glad she could think of something to say – a talent of adults, I thought. They build up enough of these moments and collect answers to questions and fillings for silences. "We're very sorry for your loss, Michael. Was he very ill?"

"Very ill. I mean, he must have been. Because I didn't know, you know?"

"Terrible," said Ma. "Were you with him?"

"With him? No. The lawyers – they told me."

"And no service, Michael?"

"No, they said he wanted cremation. Rabbi won't do cremation."

"We're very sorry for your loss, Michael," said Ma.

"Long life," I said.

It was someone else's turn to wish Michael a long life, so we shuffled along to a corner of the room and stood next to Carol.

"Can you believe it, Margot?" said Carol.

"Very sudden, wasn't it?" said Ma. "Always a shock."

"The cheek of him," said Carol in a hiss. "Do you know there isn't going to be a funeral? He's been cremated already! Well, they won't allow him into the Jewish cemetery like that."

"No?" said Ma.

"It's not Jewish, is it? You're supposed to be buried, simple as that. In the ground."

*Yoshke Pandre likt in drerd.* Even Jesus was Jewish enough to be buried in the ground.

"The son said there were instructions with the lawyers," said Ma.

"Michael? The poor *schlemiel* doesn't know if he's coming or going. Shame. He's sitting *shiva* at least."

"Well, it's his father's choice, though, isn't it?"

"Life is for the living, Margot. His poor son, thinking about his father burnt like a chop on the braai. It's an insult to us all."

"Not to me," said Ma, but Carol wouldn't have heard.

"These things are there for a reason," said Carol. "One has to grieve. And for your parents, the most. What chance does he have to say goodbye now? He'll have this hanging over his head for the rest of his life. Selfish, that's all it is."

I guess I didn't really feel much at the time except disappointment, an emptiness. You might expect me to be overwhelmed with the death of this man, having lost a father already. But I wasn't at my father's funeral, was too young to remember much of the grief at the time and understood little of it when it happened, too. And this, sitting *shiva* or whatever it was, was just so foreign to me, as foreign as the prayers and hymns in Hebrew – designed to fill you with great feelings (awe, sorrow, who knows?) but really just a series of actions that would remain arcane to me forever.

The doorbell rang and a wreath arrived. One of the women arranged it against the wall and everyone's attention was on the unwieldy ring of flowers. There were red and white flowers with red, white and blue ribbons, a small American flag and a South African flag poking out of the ring at ten and two o'clock.

"I wonder who sent that?" asked Ma.

"Not Jews," said Carol. "Jews don't do flowers for the dead. He had important friends," said Carol, placing, if she could, the last two words in inverted commas, as if to insult the dead man with the very punctuation of her sentences.

The Rabbi arrived and a few minutes later he'd gathered a few of the men around him. I avoided eye contact and tried to look sad by the plate of crackers in case I'd be called upon to take part.

It turned out the Rabbi didn't need me anyway, only the adult men. They stood facing the same direction (like standing-room on the bus) and the Rabbi began to recite *Kaddish* (I think). Michael just sat on the couch, looking ahead, looking unsure.

I'd forgotten the Michael of my imaginings, my competition for the position of partner to Leo Fein. I felt sorry for the guy. A *schlemiel* is what Carol called him. The sound of it seemed to fit the shape of him, cradled on the turquoise couch.

The men began swaying forward and back, responding to the Rabbi's voice with their own. Michael rose and came to the table with the crackers. Putting one in his mouth, then another, he spoke loudly, as if there were no men saying *Kaddish* in his house, as if there were no floury cracker bits in the pit of his mouth.

"What am I going to do now?" he said.

I wasn't one hundred per cent sure he was talking to me but figured one had to be very polite in such circumstances. "I don't know," I said softly, trying to remind him of the right level to speak at.

"I don't know how to do anything, really," he said loudly again.

"Your father was a good man," I whispered. It was obvious to me then that Leo Fein never took Michael on any escapades, never showed him how to break in to any place, never drove a getaway car from anything with him in the other seat. "I gotta go," I said.

I walked back over to Ma and then Michael started talking to Carol who shushed him angrily, then hugged him and patted him on the back.

Ma and I walked out the door. "I can't stand all the swaying and whining," she said. "Can't carry a tune, any of them."

"What's *Chevra Kadisha*?" I asked Ma in the car.

"It's the burial society. You pay a contribution every year and then when you die they come and clean the body. Prepare it for burial."

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

"No. I think I like Leo Fein's way, actually. No fuss. He probably didn't want all that stuff in there – the prayers and all that. A simple, clean exit. I like it."

"But he came to *shul*."

"Did he? I thought maybe he was an atheist like us."

"So if he went to *shul* then why didn't he want a proper Jewish burial?"

"There's no 'proper' anything. It's just people. People making up silly traditions. Plenty of people mix with other Jews and go to *shul* because they like, I don't know, the culture or something, I suppose. Or the contact. But maybe he didn't really believe in any of it."

"Isn't it good to say goodbye? Like, that's what funerals are for?"

"You never say goodbye, Ben. That's a myth. You miss them every day and you don't stop missing them, you just kind of deal with it."

I never witnessed Ma deal with it. Maybe even 'deal with it' was an impossibility, another myth in the pantheon of common self-deceptions as she saw it. She hid it away in her fretting over Will and Elliot and Great North, trying to mend the weak joins of our family with force or jokes or guilt, or whatever needles and thread she had for the job.

Perhaps she was the one who started that national sport of our family, whose only strict rule was to never show that what any one of them said or did had got to you. You were the winner if you could remain so firm in your self-confidence you could brush off an insult like you hadn't

even noticed it. Elliot was the consistent loser of that game because you always knew how he felt, but Will and I competed still.

“So you don’t want a funeral?” I asked Ma.

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“What if I want you to have one?”

“Well, I don’t want one and it’s my life – or death – isn’t it?” said Ma.

“Well, it’s my life too.”

“Don’t I get to choose how to finish up my business?”

“What do you care? You believe you won’t even see it. You’ll be matter or whatever. When you’re dead you’re dead, right? No ghosts or spirits. So what do you care if the Rabbi’s there or not? Or if you get buried or burnt?”

“When you’re dead, you’re dead. I do believe that,” said Ma. “And I don’t want my funeral to be used as propaganda for religion. Some rabbi is going to stand there and say things about me, about my spirit, that it’s gone to heaven or some bullshit, when in life I don’t believe any of it. It’s dishonest. And I don’t want to be remembered as someone who went in for that sentimental bullshit either. It’s not real. I shouldn’t have taken you along.”

“The Rabbi says souls can be reincarnated.”

“Come on, gimme a break. Listen, if everyone’s soul is reincarnated, how come the world’s population keeps growing? Where do all the extra souls come from?”

“Maybe you become cattle.”

“Or ants, I suppose they’ll say.”

“Amoebas.”

“Exactly. They can believe what they want but from what I’ve seen, there’s no coming back. What’s all this obsession Jews have with death, anyway?”

“What about Daddy’s funeral – he was buried, right?”

“Well, we had to have that, didn’t we. I don’t think it would have been his choice but we did it for the family – for his side.”

“Like the *bar mitzvahs*,” I said.

“Like the *bar mitzvahs*.”

The bar mitzvah I could have skipped, but funerals I wanted for everyone.



"This is stupid," Georgina would say in the morning at Bomb Squad, each word produced with that exquisite graininess in her voice. She said it most mornings, and I'd agree and laugh at whatever she said about the teachers. "What – are they scared? So they send us instead? I mean does nobody think it's weird that they send kids to look for bombs?"

"The teachers can't look everywhere," Barry would say. "They need us to be their eyes. You never know with terrorists."

Georgina would roll her eyes whenever Barry said something like this, and I'd hope (please!) that they'd roll in my direction so that we could sneer together; a coordinated sneer, united against... ah, who cares! United with Georgina!

After weeks of finding nothing except a school jersey, Gina began to lose interest. I saw her one morning by the tennis courts. I was late myself, which provided an opening to talk about something.

"You coming?" I asked.

"No, I don't feel like it."

"Me neither," I said. Well, it was true – I never *felt* like it, it's just that now, as well as not feeling like it, I wasn't feeling like it with Gina. We weren't feeling like it together.

"There's never anything to look for," she said.

"I know," I said. "We never ever find anything."

"I've got an idea. How about I do Monday and Wednesday and you do Tuesday and Thursday?" she suggested. "What do you think?"

I thought that was a terrible idea. Not only would I still be doing the thing I didn't feel like doing, I would be doing it without her. "I like it," I said. "The less I have to do, the better. What about Friday though?"

"Barry comes every day anyway, so he can just do Fridays."

I did two weeks of Tuesdays and Thursdays, just me and Barry. Barry didn't say much about it anyway and just picked up the slack from the missing kid, I guess. There wasn't much to do, but he did it with zeal. I did two weeks and then I stopped altogether.

I suspect Gina quit even sooner but I'm pretty sure from the glares Barry gave in the mornings that he continued his duties without wavering.

I'll always remember the History lesson Mr De Villiers gave us, maybe a week later. Not only because of the big scare, but because he was talking about Hitler. Mr De Villiers was one of those retired teachers who'd been called in as a substitute, and then he'd rattle off on whatever topic he felt like. He was saying that Hitler had not been a great speaker at all, contrary to what we

might've heard. But with passion and practice, he had risen above his shortcomings. He meant it as an inspirational anecdote.

It was then that the sirens sounded. De Villiers took a moment to adjust his hearing aid and it took one of the kids to explain to him what was going on. We filed out, in an orderly fashion but with a lightness, because drills always meant a good waste of time, and walked towards the rugby fields.

It was a Wednesday, Gina's day to inspect and I was reminded of this when I saw her two rows away in her class on the field. "Did you go this morning?" she mouthed across to me.

I shook my head. "Your day," I mouthed, pointing furtively towards her.

She shrugged, not a careless one; a shrug accompanied by some lip-biting: I don't know what's going on, it said.

"Barry?" I mouthed.

She shrugged and grimaced and we both scanned the rows of kids but Barry was nowhere.

A loudhailer screeched. "Alright everybody," said Mr Groenewald. "There's nothing to worry about. The school is safe. But a few minutes ago I received a call, saying there was a bomb in the school. We're sure now it was a prank. Not a very funny one if you ask me. In fact, this is very, very serious. The police might have to get involved. Now, if any of you have any information about it, come talk to me or one of your teachers."

Gina and I glanced at each other and quickly looked away again.

Groenewald continued. "Because the safety of the school is more important than anything. More important than what you might think is loyalty to your friends. I want you all to remember that. Go back to your classes, please." There was a general and almost unanimous 'aah' of disappointment.

Barry had been sick that day and as a result, for a time, he was the prime suspect. Gina went to Mr Groenewald and told him she was too scared to do the checks anymore, and a few other parents voiced their disapproval. The teachers took over the inspections and probably skipped quite a few themselves.

I, for one (maybe Barry too, although he was possibly injured by the accusations of plotting against the school), was disappointed in a small way that the bomb squad had been busted up. No more Georgina.

And with no Leo Fein, and no Elliot, it was a particularly hopeless time for me.



Leo Fein's demise and how it was affecting me wasn't something I could talk to Elliot about, or Ma or Will. It was important for me to believe that Leo Fein wasn't gone forever, because if he was, so was my father.

It was Joss to whom I could talk when it came to the possibilities, the malleability, of the rational known world. (The longing I felt for Georgina Melk, I kept to myself.) We had to have these discussions – at least I did – because as much as I wanted to make myself a believer, questions presented themselves. Joss was my fellow philosopher and through our Saturday examinations we could reason our way through any doubts.

First, there was bacon. Bacon was as popular in my house as it was in any other good Christian home, and if Joss was in my house, he'd be crunching down on a strip of crispy streaky with as much joy as me. *Kashrut* laws, we said, were about cleanliness. In the biblical era, pig farms were filthy but in modern times they were spotless places of industry. So bacon was just fine.

Hell, we said, if Moses were around today, he'd agree: 'Pigs? Pigs are fine!' he'd say. 'Farming methods have improved immeasurably since my day. No, no – those laws were written for a different era, not this one. Isn't the modern world a wonderful place? Pass the gammon, why don't you.' (I had to revise this view on a visit to a pig farm where a friend of Elliot's worked. I saw pigs hacking at each other's heels as they slipped in thick layers of pig shit, in pens barely larger than their pork bellies. And it stank all the way to the road, at least a kilometre away.)

We pondered, Joss and I, why it was that God appeared all the time to people in Bible stories, in person as it were, and performed miracles, but was largely absent today. That he could move oceans aside and spontaneously combust bushes, give clear instructions in dreams and waking life, appear on the scene like a friendly/wrathful neighbour in the biblical era but not in this one – all of this was simply a function of the times, we concluded.

In those days, see, some of the laws of physics and so on were suspended. Perhaps this explains why it took so long for Galileo, Newton *et al.* to 'discover' the universal principles governing movement etc., etc. The looseness of the laws back in Bible days, for some divine reason, was made firmer as we crept into the modern era and God retreated concurrently through the closing cracks to take up more of a neutral observer-type position.

"I think there's a heaven," said Joss one Saturday. "In heaven you get to hang out with everyone who's dead. If you want to speak to Einstein, you can. You can have a game of chess with him. In heaven everyone knows everything and they're all good at stuff."

"But if everyone knows everything, then why would I need to talk to Einstein?"

"He just seems like a cool guy."

"I suppose. Do you think Leo Fein's there too?"

"I'd want him there," said Joss.

"He'd be a hit in heaven."

"Busting through the pearly gates with his Mercedes-Benz SL450."

"Showing everybody the nose-picking thing."

"So I guess we're not going up in the Cessna with the General now," said Joss.

"Guess not."

Joss and I, one Friday afternoon, even cased out Radio-Rama. We wondered whether, with my heist experience, we could pull off a robbery of the place. Joss was the only one I told about the birds-of-prey book. He was impressed with that achievement, even though the book itself was a bitter reminder to me of the absence of Leo Fein.

Inside Radio-Rama, I was eyeing the tape player and some Commodore 64 games. Joss was into the tape player too, but also a Walkman and some pre-recorded cassettes of Juluka. So I added the Walkman to my list, wanting to travel light initially, but conceding that Walkmans were designed to be worn on the move anyway.

We didn't know where to begin. Joss looked at the Juluka tapes and put them down again. South African bands, no matter how good they were, were never going to be considered as good as even the second-rate shit from overseas. Other kids would judge you. To be seen with a South African band's music could ruin you.

There were CB radios on sale too. The craze had gone but I was reminded of my cousin Jackie's story of good buddies contacting spirits on the other side with their breaker-breakers and wondered if Leo Fein would be listening in and what his handle would be.

In the end, a robbery didn't seem right, anyway. The romance of it wasn't there the way it was with the booze from Roy's. And without the getaway car, what was the use?

"Let's get out of here," said Joss.

"Leo Fein would've known how to do it."

"Definitely," said Joss walking into the street again. "My dad was talking to Meyer Levinson and old Meyer said Leo Fein took the Americans for a ride."

"Those guys with the General?"

"No, they were Israelis."

"Oh. So the Americans. From NASA?"

"Must be." Every kid had heard the rumour that NASA wanted the silicon from Silicon Smelters outside town for the microchips in the Space Shuttle. I still don't know whether that's true or not, but I think we all wished it were.

"But why would Leo Fein rip them off? I mean, it's for the Space Shuttle," I said.

"I don't know. Just what I heard."

We walked through the arcade under the Nedbank building and I thought about the secret passages again, knowing that if there were anywhere in town with secret hiding places, Leo Fein would've known about them.

I was staying at Joss's house after *shul* that Friday night. Usually, Friday night dinner at the Dorfman's was an ordeal of half-remembered rituals on my part and half-remembered identities on the part of whomever was invited that night. 'And you are?' was the phrase most likely to be heard in connection with me.

On this night, the guests knew exactly who I was, which didn't make the prospect any more enjoyable, since the guests were Carol and her daughter, the girl so very like a potato latke.

"So, what's this I hear about Leo Fein?" Gail Dorfman asked Carol. Potato Latke tamped the chicken down with her jaws.

"What a thing this is, Gail," said Carol.

"What happened?"

"'What happened' was Michael found him alive and well in Joburg."

"No," said Gail Dorfman with exaggerated disbelief. She looked at Mr Dorfman, who shrugged.

*Leo Fein, alive!* Joss and I looked at each other.

"Michael went to Joburg – he's got cousins there, you know. He's never learnt how to look after himself. So he goes out while he's at the cousins, to buy cigarettes or who knows, and who does he see eating a big T-bone at MacRib but his flesh and blood, his father."

"No," said Gail.

"Ye-es. Well, Michael almost fell over, of course. Not that he and his father have the best relationship, but you don't see your dead relatives walking around every day, do you?"

"My God."

"So anyway, Michael goes up to his father. He says, 'Dad, you're alive!' Leo is still chewing his meat. He goes like this..." Carol, acting as Leo Fein now, stuck out her bottom lip and shrugged one shoulder.

"Carol, no!"

"Gail – yes. 'Dad, what happened?' Michael wants to know. 'Oh, you know,' his father says, like it's just one of those things, you know? 'You know'! It's all he says, Gail, and he carries on

eating his steak. He's back from the dead and he doesn't even invite the boy to come sit with him."

"Shame," she said in sympathy for Michael.

"Gail, he's been walking the city pretending to be a corpse – not even a corpse! Ashes, remember? – while his son mourns for him. Sits *shiva* even though – even though! – his father couldn't care less. It's a *mitzvah* to sit *shiva*. You know?"

"I don't believe it," said Mrs Dorfman, taking in every word in much the same way Potato Latke was absorbing the chicken. "And the cremation?"

"The cremation!" said Carol. "He couldn't have a nice Jewish burial? Well, no wonder he didn't want *Chevra Kadisha*."

"But why, Carol? Why would he do such a thing?"

"Money, Gail," said Carol softly, leaning her head forward over the table towards Mrs Dorfman. "What else?"

"From where?"

"Don't ask me. But it has to be." Carol helped Potato Latke to more chicken. While Gail Dorfman sat with her mouth still open, and Potato Latke too, I realised I had a smile on mine. The bird-book theft wasn't in vain! More escapades! More rides in the Mercedes-Benz! More buddy-buddy reminiscing about my father!

"What's Leo Fein involved in, Stephen?" Gail Dorfman asked her husband.

"Leo Fein? All kinds."

"What 'all kinds'? Why would he play dead?"

"Who knows – to get out of a deal, maybe."

"That's what I'm saying," said Gail Dorfman. "Wasn't he showing those Americans around Silicon Smelters? I think that's what I heard. Hey Carol? I heard he was showing them around. Where were they from, Love? NASA, I heard."

"If you believe that," said Mr Dorfman, watching the chicken disappear faster than he would've liked into Potato Latke's mouth. "Next thing Disney will be here looking for Mickey Mouse. What do you think about that, hey kids?"

We just looked at Mr Dorfman, not sure what kind of a joke he was making. "It's exactly the kind of thing that gives Jews a bad name in town," said Gail. "It's all we need them to say – 'Those dirty, scheming Jews. Dishonest to the last one. They don't care about anything but money' – that's what they say. 'Don't care about their family, not even their own religion or traditions when you dangle money in front of them.' They already think this, and what is this man doing? Playing right into their hands."

“Right into their hands,” said Carol.

“I tell you, I feel sorry for you, Carol. What people are going to say in this town. Hearing this kind of thing makes me glad to be going to Israel, away from these crooks.”

“It’s such a pity,” said Joss’s father. “What a waste – the man has a talent for business. Clever,” he said.

“Clever’s not good enough,” said Gail.

I didn’t see the same faults in Leo Fein that Gail Dorfman and Carol saw. He’d risen from the dead, reconstituted from the ashes, like death was nothing, a joke the others refused to get.

Michael had his father back and what in the world was wrong with that? I’d often imagined my own father ringing the doorbell one day after all those years. *I was a spy, Ben. I couldn’t say anything. Secret mission. But have I got some stories for you!*



The congregation wasn’t exactly pleased at the return of the Prodigal Son, nor the news of the Resurrection. Too New Testament for their tastes, perhaps.

Or perhaps Leo Fein had tangled with something too sacred to Jews – death. It wasn’t to be fooled with. There were deserving souls awaiting the pleas of *Kaddish*. Decent members of the community had wasted their petitions asking God to absolve and receive him.

I saw Leo Fein sitting in *shul*, at the back, looking the same as he had before. He’d come through death unscathed. The wavy forelock shock, the straight lips – all restored. I don’t know what I expected to see – perhaps that he’d changed in some way, come out of the harrowing of hell or something. Come out covered in pink ectoplasm like afterbirth, the way that little girl in the *Poltergeist* movies had. That would have been closer to my expectations, but he was just there, breathing through his nose, his usual silky scarf-like *tallis* around his neck, scratching an itch on his chin like a live human being.

While a few of the men downstairs were wary, soon they were talking business and Leo Fein was listening in again. But looks dropped from the gallery where the wives sat and the following week the men sat away from him.

The congregation’s displeasure with Leo Fein did not necessarily drive him towards my family but, since we were both on the outskirts anyway, it must have made it more natural for him to gravitate there.

Where else would he go? My family of atheists was a minority within the minority of Jews (while within my family I was a one-man resistance, a wannabe-believer). The Jews were a group who clung together within the English-speaking population in town, who in turn formed less than a quarter of the whites in an Afrikaner town, a stronghold surrounded on virtually all sides by a Bantu Homeland of over two million black residents.

In other words, my own situation could be represented: { Bantu Homeland { Town { English-speakers { Jews { Atheists of Jewish descent {Counter-atheist } Atheists of Jewish descent } Jews } English-speakers } Town } Bantu Homeland }, or if you prefer, collapsed: {{{{{{Ben}}}}}}.

(Note: I've disregarded All Parallel Universes, Our Universe, The Milky Way, The Solar System, Earth, Africa, South Africa, Transvaal, Northern Transvaal, and Far Northern Transvaal. Well, I want to avoid coming across as some kind of victim.)

My point is that, as much of a maverick Leo Fein was, he must have missed the men at the back of the *shul*, the invitations to *bar mitzvahs* and braais, even though his dealings took him beyond the confines of any of those concentric circles.

Of course many others went beyond their boundaries. English and Afrikaners did business together; Portuguese and Greeks, too; occasionally Jews acted as fronts for Indians to skirt the apartheid laws; and black domestic workers tended white children, but when the sun went down, more often than not, each dutifully returned to his own parentheses. Even if the white-boss parenthesis had been fucking the black-domestic-worker parenthesis during lunch-break.

## Tildes and Wishbones

My mother had come into the business out of necessity after my father died. She'd entered into it responsibly and bravely but somewhat like a blind person led by Morgan the accountant and Will.

Morgan was presenting his anaemic forecast for the year ahead to Ma, Will and Hans the sales manager. "Time to tighten our belts, I'm afraid," he said, closing his telescopic pointer in on itself, back to its pen-size. It was very impressive, this device, I thought, even though there were really no charts whatsoever for Morgan to point at.

"Is it bad, Morgan?" asked Ma.

"Not good."

"Oh, God."

"Yes, Margot. Have to cut."

"We'll have to cut then," she said. "Oh, God. I can't do that."

It could have gone on like this, working into a vortex of anxiety if Morgan had been left unfettered. Luckily, Will stepped in.

He'd learnt all about business and balance sheets and even before university he'd educated himself deeply in a scepticism for Morgan. "We're always tightening belts," said Will. He was home for the holidays and always sat in on Great North meetings when he could. "We're going to run out of belt at this rate. What about plans for expansion? Are we doing anything positive this year?" This was directed at Hans.

"We're getting in the new brake pads this month," he said. Hans's fringe was pasted to his forehead at an alarming stretch which gave him a tense look. "They're ceramic," he added hopefully.

"What about promotions?" asked Will.

"The golf day?" said Hans.

"Have to cancel the golf day this year," said Morgan. He'd often begin his sentences halfway in, as if the words were already running before his voice engaged them.

"We can't cancel the golf day," said Margot. "If only for the staff. We have to keep that going."

"Have to find somewhere else to cut then, Margot."

This line of conversation troubled me because the Standard Five Tour was imminent. What if it were the victim of budget cuts?

The Standard Five Tour was going to be the biggest event of my twelve-year old life and I didn't know that I'd be able to bear it if I were the only kid in my standard left off. It was to be a five-day trip, educational, via some of the most important sites of our country's history (as it pertained to Afrikaners and in accordance with the Christian National Education curriculum), ending on the Natal coast at Umdloti.

I was thinking about this still as we all sat down around the dining room table. Shadrack brought in the fried fish and brown chips, which had been cooking most of the morning. This was our regular Friday afternoon meal, and Shadrack was Catholic in his enforcement of this rule even though he belonged to the Zion Christian Church himself.

"Was at a party at the Steenkamps the other night," said Morgan, sending a hard-fried chip skating almost off his plate. "Guess who was asking about you?"

"About me?" said Ma. "Who?"

"Leo Fein," he said, at which Will sat upright.

"The dead man?" said Ma. I'd held back the news from her, not having quite settled yet my feelings over the talk of funerals, much less Leo Fein's return.

"Oh that. Big misunderstanding, I believe. Very much alive, I can assure you. Just the other night."

"A misunderstanding?" said Ma. "I went to commiserate with his son. He didn't tell his own son he was alive. Did you hear this, Will?"

I felt like defending the man, but rarely spoke when this group of adults was gathered. Hans was grateful the attention wasn't on him anymore, or his sales figures, and concentrated on his food.

"Son's an idiot," said Morgan. "Think that's where the misunderstanding comes into it."

"We have to talk about the generator," said Ma, putting a hand to her cheek.

"Oh, God," said Will, "don't start with that again."

"Every time I tried to contact the son about it, there was never anyone there. His father won it, fair and square."

"I think," said Morgan, probably thinking about the fall-out with Elliot when he smashed his whiskey tumbler in frustration, "enough's been said about the raffle. I'll contact him and congratulate him. Anyway, he was asking about you, Margot."

"Asking what?"

"If you've found someone else since Eddie. How's the business – all kinds of questions about the business. Really very interested in you, though, Margot."

“Come on, I’ve never spoken to the man,” she said, banging the bottom of the tomato sauce bottle. “Might’ve gone to his funeral, but never spoke to him.”

“Leo Fein,” said Will. “Interesting. He’s got a lot of property in town – not so, Morgan?”

“Mm. Property, investments. Lots of connections.”

“That would solve our problem, wouldn’t it?” said Will.

“That’d do it,” said Morgan, trying to skewer a varnished chip.

Solve our problems? Leo Fein had arisen and was coming after my mother? Did no-one have a problem with this but me? Where was Elliot when you needed him?

“Is there budget under that tight belt for a new dress for her?” said Will in a rare conspiratorial jest with Morgan.

Embarrassed, I smiled down at my plate. Hans stared at his too. What were they laughing at? I didn’t understand yet, or wouldn’t. Until then, the sound of Leo Fein’s name had always come with a rush of exhilaration, of pride at having been mixed up with him, of admiration at his swashbuckling return. It was only over the next few days that the name became cold with threat.



Ma dropped me off at Markos’s house that afternoon. Markos Markides was Greek. Greek-Cypriot, to be accurate. South African, to be even more accurate, but the few Greek families in town clung to their origin, language, food and passports regardless.

The Markideses had arrived in town only months before my father and they’d known each other well. They operated the Tattersall’s, where we placed our annual bet on the Durban July based on pictures of horses in the paper. Will worked a few holiday jobs at the Tattersall’s earning a bit of pocket money and a feel for the odds.

Markos and I had been friends since nursery school and spent every Friday afternoon at each other’s houses. We were looking at the jeroboam on the bar while the kudu, warthog, hartebeest, buffalo and impala heads peered down at us, their glass eyes always open. I sometimes liked to tap on the eyes to make sure they were hard and not dewy, the way they were manufactured to look.

I, like most twelve-year-olds I knew, was fascinated with guns. Many of my friends’ parents owned game farms and they’d often go to each other’s on the weekend. The fathers would take the boys and the rifles – each had their own – on the back of bakkies or they’d sometimes track

game on foot with farmhands. But for hunting one needed a father as much as one needed a rifle and, owning neither, I never went along.

We moved to Markos's bedroom because he wanted to show us the new issue of *Guns and Ammo* with the 357 Magnum on the cover. I only knew it was a 357 Magnum because it said so under the picture but Markos and Sean were having an argument about which was the best gun in the world – the one on the cover or the Desert Eagle.

It never resolved and we turned to the Commodore 64 for *Summer Games*. It was Sean and Markos versus Roger and me but there were only two joysticks so we took it in turns. Markos chose the USA as his team and I, because Roger didn't care, chose the Soviet Union. I always went for the underdog.

The Soviet national anthem, even played through the simplified orchestration of a computer programme, was solemn and proud. There was something secret or subversive about hearing this music because there was very little we heard about the Soviet Union besides the fact, as if this was sufficient condemnation, that it was an atheist state.

"They don't believe in a god," kids would say. I even defended the USSR on the playground once, saying I bet it wasn't as bad as they said in the movies – Elliot's influence, no doubt. The other kid said they weren't Christians, and I said, neither am I, which seemed to scare him. Engendering this kind of fear was a rarity for me, which is good enough reason to remember it, and to record it here.

Sean's athlete stopped and started and finally stood heaving in the coloured blocks that formed his rudimentary body. My Soviet Olympian clicked through the finish line. The anthem soared.

"Fuck, Sean. Are you pushing the right button?" asked Markos.

"Hey are you guys gonna take someone on Standard Five Tour?" asked Sean.

"You can do that?" asked Roger.

"Ja, stupid. I might ask Diane," said Markos. "And you?"

"I already asked Yolanda," said Sean. "She said no, she's going with Greg. I might ask Angelique."

"What about you, Ben?" asked Markos with the tic of the joystick, launching an American pole-vaulter over the bar.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think I'm gonna take anyone." But it was Georgina Melk I wanted to take more than anything. The Standard Five Tour, you see, was the first opportunity to 'take a girl' somewhere. Taking someone on Tour was the crux of the Tour, even more important than the Tour itself, and a rite of passage for anyone at our school. It was unclear to

me at the time whether this meant she'd be your girlfriend, or if it was a limited arrangement, but for the past few weeks I'd been occupied with the problem of asking Georgina.

"What, are you scared of girls?" said Markos.

"No, I just think it's stupid. It's childish."



I couldn't be sure about it, but I began to suspect that Ma was going out to meet Leo Fein. I became suspicious of her late afternoon movements. I bet she could tell I had an itch to interfere.

"Where are you going?" I asked on one of these afternoons.

"To the moon," she said.

"With who?"

"Don't you mean, 'with whom'?"

"Alright - with whom?"

"Don't you mean, 'with whom are you going to the moon'?"

"Yes, yes, that's what I mean."

"None of your business," she said and left.

There was a budding protectiveness in me, some kind of disgusting Oedipal thing I'd rather not get into. However, I think she played on all my insecurities - I guess she couldn't resist, and I can't blame her. So if she caught me straining to hear the voice on the other side of a phone call she was on, she'd pause the conversation mid-way, holding the receiver in both hands in her lap. "Yes?" she'd say. She delighted in it.

But it was my life too, dammit! And if it was going to have a snap, right-angle change in course, I should know about it.

And Leo Fein! I mean, Ma - the guy's an old man and he robs liquor stores with minors! Is this the kind of guy you want influencing your impressionable child?

But on the other hand, if it were Leo Fein she was setting up a future with, would I be in for a life of adventure, clandestine fun (the best kind), escapades, hilarity? Well, even if it were so, I didn't have to be happy about it.

Will was home again and we drove in his white GTS with the speed stripes (possibly the second-best car in the world, after the Mercedes 450SL, although the Mercedes' margin was

slipping), through town towards the bank. He was more patient with me than Elliot was, although much more persuasive with his own view.

But I could speak to him about things without him blowing up at me the way Elliot did.

“Do you think Ma will ever marry again?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, buddy. Do you want her to?”

“I don’t know. I guess if it was someone cool.”

“You didn’t really know Daddy, but I think it’ll be hard for her to find someone like that.”

“This guy – I didn’t even know him – came up to me and said he knew Daddy. He said Daddy was a good man.”

“Do you know how many times people have told me that? And he was. They don’t just say it.”

“What about Leo Fein? Do you want her to marry him?”

“Jeez, I was only joking about that. Why, has he called her?”

“I don’t know. I think maybe.”

“Listen. Actually, it’s none of our business. What about you?”

“What?”

“Well, you’re going on Standard Five Tour, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“A lot of boys take girls on Standard Five Tour.”

I gave a loud and deliberate, rasping sigh.

“Well? Are you taking someone?”

“Maybe,” I answered.

“Well you’d better not wait too long. The good ones are gonna get snapped up, buddy.”

“I know,” I said, defiant. “I will. Maybe.”

“Are your other friends taking girls? What about Markides?” All my friends were surnames to him, not old enough to have grown into their own names yet.

“I think he’s taking someone.”

“So there’s someone you like?”

“Maybe.”

“What’s her name?”

“Ah, Jesus,” I said. “Her name’s Georgina.”

“How are you gonna ask her?”

“How? I don’t know, I was just gonna ask her.”

“Hm. Interesting. You’re not gonna buy her something?”

“Like what?” I hadn’t thought about this at all.

"I don't know. A little gift – a flower or chocolate. Maybe we need a strategy."

"Look, I haven't decided yet. Just leave it."

"Okay." We drove in silence for a while, then Will cleared his throat. "So, let's say you take Georgina. And this is theoretical – I don't want you doing this, understand?" He kept his eyes on the road, even at the stop street.

"Doing what?"

"Well, in theory, you take this girl. Would you, in theory, know how to make a baby with this girl?"

"Jesus, man!" I was *not* going to talk about this.

"Well?"

"Yes! Just – Jesus, man!" I was not going to talk about that porn movie I watched at far too young an age, but yes, I guess I knew.

"Okay then," he said. We arrived at Great North Diesel and Auto Electric and parked. Inside, at reception we called Ma down from the office and she came in her flecked cream wool suit, ready for the meeting with the bank.

"Ben, are *you* coming, Darling?"

I looked at Will. "Yes, let's bring him. It's family business." Will didn't mind me coming along on family business. It was part of the empire-building, which Elliot had no wish to take part in. "He might take pity on us if he sees a child. Just look pathetic."

We walked the three blocks to Volkskas bank (Nedbank, though across the road from the business, wasn't our bank). We were greeted by a secretary with hair that looked as if it had been detonated and then hair-sprayed into a cloud of curls. We waited while she called him.

"Manager will see you now," she said, as if 'Manager' were his name, and she said it in hushed awe. It was still in the days when bank managers ranked with clergy. People feared their visits, confessed their lives to them; they gave over their money and their precious futures into the trusted hands of those men who sat with side partings behind their names on brass wedges.

The bank manager looked fine. His thinning dark hair was brushed over the scalp and was grey along the sides. He was in his fifties with only a little belly, a hump, that filled out a light blue-grey suit, and his office smelled of talcum powder. There were blocks of papers meticulously stacked on his desk, and there it was, his name on a brass wedge: Mr D. J. F. Beukes, Bank Manager, *Bank Bestuurder*.

He greeted us and asked the secretary to bring in tea. He was very polite, and so were Ma and Will, all three smiling those smiles that say *God, this is awful*. The bank manager ruffled my hair

and sat us all down at a little meeting table in the air-conditioned office of the only high-rise in town.

They were talking about something I didn't really understand – the conditions of credit, or bank charges, I suppose – and it started out pleasant enough. But then the bank manager said, "You know, times aren't like they used to be. We can't trust what the economy's going to do. I'm sure you can understand, we're all under pressure, and we have to operate under tighter constraints."

"I understand, Mr Beukes," said Ma.

"I understand too, Mr Beukes," said Will.

"Are we waiting for Mr Morgan?" asked the manager.

"He won't be joining us," said Will.

"Oh," said Mr Beukes. He began to talk again, orating into a space slightly above and between the heads of Ma and Will. "You are not unique, I must tell you. Every one of our clients – and the ones of other banks, I can assure you – will have to operate in a more tightly controlled manner. I'm a man who believes in numbers, you see. And if the numbers aren't there, action must be taken. There's no way around it. It's the numbers, you see. And – I wish Mr Morgan were here – it's all there, in the numbers."

"I understand your difficulties," said Will, "and the difficulties of many of the businesses in town. Inflation is putting great stress on the economy of this town."

"Ah, yes. Well. But that's not the whole story. In your case, in the case of your business, the numbers..."

"But I don't need to remind you," said Will, interrupting, "that we've been customers of this bank for twenty years."

"No, you don't." Mr Beukes was forced into sitting forward and looking at Will.

"It would be a shame if this... friendship... came to an end because of a little squeeze in the economy, a squeeze that is putting its hold on this whole town."

Mr Beukes was saved from this uncivil suggestion by the entrance of the secretary with the tea. He grappled with the secretary over the teapot, spilling some on a saucer.

"Look what you've done! Leave it!" he said to her.

"Yes, Mr Beukes," she said and hurried out of the office.

He caught hold of himself and softened his features like jelly babies for Will. "Sir, Great North Diesel and Auto Electric has been a customer of this bank for twenty years," he said. "When Mr Aronbach arrived in this town, no-one would lend him the money for the business. But we did."

"And we're grateful for that," said Ma.

"We are grateful for that," said Will. "All those years ago, none of the banks would lend to my father, you're right. But you did, and see how the business has grown."

"Beautifully. It's grown beautifully." And he said this rather sincerely, as if he were talking about his dahlias.

"Thank you," said Will. "We're a family business, as you know. And we do business with many other of the town's long-standing businesses. We talk with some of the owners of these businesses, so we know the strain they're under. And we've always said how wonderfully your bank has treated us. Ever since that day my father first stepped into this building with your predecessor."

"That's very kind," said the manager.

"And we talk, with our friends in business, about the difficulties of *doing* business," said Will. "And in talking to these friends – we talk a great deal with them, constantly – we all say, no-one wants the chief difficulty, among all the difficulties we discuss, to be our bank. No thank you. It's in no-one's interest, excuse the expression."

More of those smiles returned, the *God, I can't wait to be out of here* ones, for an encore.

Will continued. "We're partners. This is what all our friends in business say. You want your bank to be your partner. 'Is your bank your partner?' they ask us. 'Why, yes,' we say. 'Always has been. Always will.' "

The bank manager nodded. "Partners, yes."

"Mr Beukes, I really hope I can keep saying this to them. This is what I say to them. Mr Beukes and Volkskas bank, if you want a real partner in business. Not those high-and-mighty paper pushers in their high-rise at Nedbank. And a lot of them tell me they're with you too, anyway. I haven't spoken to them recently – Du Toit from the Toyota dealership, Karel at Motor Spares, the Donalds with the shops for the blacks, Boonzaier at KB Trucks. But I'm sure I will."

Will made it sound so threatening, without raising his voice, but not backing down, not smiling anymore at the jelly-features. Hearing him talk, I believed we were the most powerful business in town – in fact, the business around which the town had sprung; without us, the place would surely crumble. And the bank manager believed him, too.

All that nervous man with the side parting had to do was to recall the rickety results of a motor and spares business, whose debits and credits he knew, and he could keep us in check with these irrefutable numbers. But Will made him forget it all and tremble like a three-year-old.

This was the talent of William Aronbach. We could throw him the keys and let him drive this family wherever he thought best. He was our champion.



Around this time, Ma began suggesting I take Potato Latke on Standard Five Tour with me. “Just think about it, okay?” she said. “I’m not telling you to do it –”

“Good,” I said, cutting in.

“– I’m just saying it would be a nice thing to do.”

I was still fixed on Gina although I hadn’t worked up the nerve to ask her yet and cursed myself daily as I walked through the school gates, another day lost. I even bought a chocolate bar but there was never a good time to give it to her – there were always other kids around. I looked up her address in the phone book several times but never made it out the door. If Gina had already said yes to me, I would have an easy out from the Potato Latke scenario.

This had to be meddling from Carol. I owed the family something for the lifts to *cheder*. I saw it as pity, clear as children see these things. Who wants to sit on a bus to the Natal coast for hours, days, next to a girl shaped like that, whose brains were squeezed by migraines, squeezed that whine out her, who probably couldn’t swim, who couldn’t come up with anything funny to say about the teachers and who would probably cry the minute we were outside town?

“It’s just that that mother of hers gives her such a hard time, I don’t know how she’s going to grow up,” she continued. “You can ask anyone in your class but what chance does that poor girl have?” Ma was deluded about my popularity at school, based on a comment from Carol: I was the life and soul of some kid’s birthday party when we were seven, according to her. Things had slipped since then, and being different began to matter more – avoiding sport, being excused from Religious Instruction, having a weird brother. It all added up. “Not that she isn’t pretty, in her own way,” said Ma.

“She’ll be fine,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll leave it alone now.” That she backed down from this so easily spurred me on to take her up on that other matter.

“I don’t tell you who you can and can’t go out with,” I said.

“And I’m not telling you, either,” she said with eyebrows dangerously raised. “It was a suggestion.”

“Well, I’ve got a suggestion too.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. I suggest you stop going out with guys who pretend to be dead.”

“I thought you’d be happy he wasn’t dead. I thought you two were friends.”

And at once, it was confirmed. It was Leo Fein she was skulking around town with. "Well, he shouldn't pretend."

"Well, Ben, you don't know everything, do you? It was a misunderstanding. He said he was going away on business and when his son couldn't get hold of him, he panicked." She was talking to me almost as if to an adult now. "He's very sensitive, is Michael."

"What about that business deal he was trying to get out of?"

"I don't know where you hear these things. Actually, I do. Of course I do. From Carol. She doesn't think before she speaks. Leo Fein is a decent man. And we're just friends, if you must know, with your sneaking around and eavesdropping."

"Well, why's it such a big secret then?"

"I'm a grown woman, Ben. And I'm entitled to a little privacy now and then. You might understand that one day."

"I think I understand it now."

"Do you?" she said flatly.

"Yes. Like who I take on Standard Five Tour. If I take anyone. How about some privacy for that?"

"I won't say another word about it."

"Good."

"If you stay out of who I spend my time with."

Oh. Right. Hang on. "So, if I let you tell me who to take on Standard Five Tour, I can tell you who to be friends with?"

"No, you're right. I'm sorry, you're right," she said. And she seemed to mean it too, which was discouraging. "I've got no right to tell you who to go on Tour with."

Oh God, how confusing. I was so pleased at his return and now he was after my mother like a zombie. You can't trust the dead, dammit. And God – where the hell are you? I've been praying my arse off, going to *shul*, learning an ancient language and hiding it all from my family like a *converso*! And you can't even stop a guy muscling in on my mom? Are you laughing!? Are you laughing too, God?



On Saturday night, Markos's parents dropped Markos, Roger, Sean and me at the showgrounds outside town. The town show was an annual affair, a combination agricultural show, funfair,

military display, trade fair and flea market we looked forward to every year, and were disappointed by every year. We rode the big wheel and saw how the radio tower and the Nedbank block poked up above the rest of the town which hid beneath the treetops.

We floated up, elevated too by the promise of the ride, the familiar presented in such an unfamiliar form from up there. And then were brought low again as that view quickly became commonplace and you wanted to ask, 'is that all there is?'

When we came back down to the dust of the showgrounds, we strolled through the alleyways of steel tables with people selling their show-wares – knives, patchwork leather bags, biltong, wooden toys.

A man demonstrated the vast spectrum of bird warbles you could achieve by blowing over a coin-sized disc if you positioned it onto your palate just right. I bought one – quite something, I must tell you, since I've always been so indecisive with money, not wanting to flitter it away on just anything; this item, though, would be like a constant friend, once I had the technique. And this plastic-and-metal disc – I could surely squeeze YEARS of joy from this simple, relatively inexpensive item, instead of the short-lived pleasure of a sweet, for instance.

So I bought it and produced nothing but a series of hisses as I strolled, all the while the man continuing his kiewiets, barbets and doves behind us, receding as we walked on. I put the disc back into the plastic pouch, all spitty.

We came to the *raison d'être* of the show, the livestock. There stood a Brahman (or whatever) in his stall, morose and heavy in the mud, a string of transparent snot hanging from his nose.

"Hey, let's go get a seat on the stands," said Sean. "They're gonna do an explosives demo."

"I wanna see the army stuff first," said Markos.

"It's the same bullshit as every year," said Roger. "That old tank and a Casspir."

"My dad said there's a Ratel."

Sean and I followed the other two past the Defence Force's display. There was a tank that looked thirty years old, two armoured vehicles and a soldier in uniform, about seventeen with pock-marked skin, handing out glossy fliers about careers in the army.

Sean saluted him and I think the guy was about to salute back until Roger slowly flipped his palm over and cocked the middle finger at him. The pockmarked soldier glared at us and we ran over to the grandstand, hearing a voice come over the PA. It was getting dark and we took our seats just in time to see the flares launch into the sky.

The three 'terrorists' ran out from behind oil drums covered in camouflage netting. Our Defence Force boys emerged from another camouflage net that had been set up on the ground

and charged the 'terrorists'. The soldiers took cover behind various obstacles on the field but one by one each of the 'terrorists' was felled by one of our boys. All the while, the voice on the PA system explained each offensive and counter-offensive of the manoeuvre, which proved invaluable in understanding the scene.

This portion of the demo ended with a bayonet attack launched by a brave soldier (ours, of course), stabbing into the space between arm and torso of the only remaining enemy operative, completely incapacitating him.

The crowd clapped and whistled at the victory. I looked over the spectators and noticed a few rows down and to my left a glossy black head of hair reflecting the flare-light back up at me. Georgina Melk. Out of school, away from snickering girls of the playground, or the hovering boys who wanted to go with her too, this was my chance to ask Georgina on the Standard Five Tour with me.

There was a display of mortar fire (blanks) and then some hand-to-hand combat techniques – throws and such, accompanied by shouts. I sucked in as much air as I could and, leading with the left, shuffled along the row towards Georgina, leaving my friends in their seats. A large cannon was dragged onto the field too, but it only sat there and wasn't actually fired at any time. Two soldiers lit more flares and spaced them on the ground, the red light shining powerfully back up at us off the dry grass.

I stepped on toes and was almost pushed down into the row below as I blocked the view of some high school kids who refused to move their legs. Through the entrance of the little open-air arena came a Ratel armoured vehicle. Showing its dexterity and speed, it slalomed through the flares on the ground and swivelled its gun turret around, left and right. I tripped over a crutch and nearly landed on its owner, a glum woman with a cast jutting into the aisle.

I crossed over and started to work my way through the row Gina sat in. People began to stand up, blocking my passage. One of the flares on the ground had started a fire and the dry grass had carried it to a camouflage net. There was an area of longer grass to the side of the sports field that was beginning to smoke too, and the man on the PA system asked everyone to leave the stands in an orderly fashion. I found myself pressing against a crowd going in the direction from which I'd come, all of them tense and eager to leave.

The troops were very impressive. Even the terrorists were beating the flames out with whatever was at hand – branches, more camouflage nets – a real show of unified effort in the face of emergency. Unable to fight the evacuation, I was dragged along and turned my head to try to find Georgina several times, but she was gone.

"Where the hell did you go?" asked Markos, when I rejoined them.

“Wanted to get closer, that’s all,” I said.

Adding to the sodden feeling the failure to engage Georgina Melk produced was the sight of my mother. “Isn’t that your mom?” said Sean, pointing up at the big wheel. “Who’s that she’s with?”

“Come,” said Markos, sensing the catch in my breath, or my being, with that ability friends who’ve known each other since babes sometimes have. “Let’s get something to eat. There’s boerewors rolls.”

I turned and followed Markos and tried my hardest to not see Leo Fein’s arm around Ma.



In Standard Five there were still two obvious camps, boys and girls, and since most of us boys were skating around the perimeter of the girls’ bloc, it seemed dangerous to approach them head on. I heard Angelique wanted to go on Standard Five Tour with me through Sean.

“I heard from Karen,” he said. Sean had asked Karen a week before.

“Angelique Martins?”

“Ja.”

Angelique was a pretty girl, fragile, with thin brown hair, freckles and large eyes. She was the first girl whose genitals I almost saw. Sean and I showed her our five-year old penises and she was supposed to show us just what was in her panties but then refused. That was long ago and I held no grudges, but I was dead set on Georgina.

“Hey, can you ask Karen if she knows if Georgina’s going with anyone yet?”

“Okay, I’ll ask,” he said but I’d delayed for so long now that I’d waited till only a few days before we were to leave to launch this intelligence-gathering offensive.

Too late, in fact. “Georgina’s going with Brian,” said Sean a day later. “He asked her last week already.” It was a week before departure. I decided I’d better bite the bullet and ask Angelique or face going alone, or worse, with Potato Latke.

And as luck would have it I found myself alone with Angelique when Mrs Verwey asked us to fetch test papers from the Roneo room. “Sorry Ben,” said Angelique. “I wanted to but Joss already asked me this morning.”

I didn’t hold it against Joss, but blamed myself for being so slow. “Oh, no problem,” I said. “I’ll probably just go on my own. I think I want to, anyway.”

But I didn't want to go on my own, not now that everyone was going with someone. I didn't want to be the only guy sitting alone at the movies, no-one to talk to but Lance, whose father refused him TV and gave him potty haircuts and welded a BMX bike together for him that was heavier than my clunky Raleigh. I had to find someone, anyone, because anyone was better than no-one, right? Three days before the tour, I called Potato Latke.

"Are you going with anyone on the Standard Five Tour?"

"Why?" she asked. "Are you?"

"No."

"I heard you wanted to ask Gina Melk."

"No I didn't."

"She's already going with Brian," she said.

"Are you going with someone or not?"

"Maybe, maybe not. You have to ask me properly."

By now I was wishing she was already going with someone else. But if she were going with someone else, I could count on her to tell everyone that I'd asked her and she'd said no. I didn't want to go on the tour at all anymore.

"Would you like to go with me on the Standard Five Tour?" I said.

"You didn't say my name."

"Shoshana, do you want to go with me on the Standard Five Tour?"

"Okay, I'll go with you."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."



With my *bar mitzvah* approaching and probably because my Hebrew was stagnant, the Rabbi's voice entered our home. He'd provided me with a C90 cassette tape with the *parsha* I'd have to sing. The Rabbi had recorded his own voice so that I could practice in the afternoons when I didn't have *cheder*.

It was prudent, on the Rabbi's part, to have done this. I'd barely mastered the dots and shapes that indicated vowels when he inducted me into the further mysteries of cantillation. The new signs orbited the aleph-bet and were meant to push and pull the voice in various directions, if you knew how to read them.

After school I'd sit at my desk with the blue book whose name I didn't know but which contained all of the Torah, and the six-button, single-speaker, flat, black tape deck. The Rabbi's voice emerged to coax mine in the right direction, like a shepherd with a crook.

Whichever great sage of antiquity thought it would be a good idea to thrust a thirteen-year-old (at the very point in life when a boy's voice is skipping between registers several octaves apart) in front of his entire community, not just to be ogled at, but to sing, no less, must have been a bitter old soul.

The Rabbi's chanting seemed to go on forever and I was too scared to see just how much of the ninety-minute tape he'd filled. I hadn't reached the end of side one and he was still going strong.

The Rabbi's voice came at me through the speaker, boxed in the room where he'd recorded it. I sang above it, trying to anticipate the movement in the voice according to the symbols. None of them seemed to follow the contours of the melody. An upside-down Y like a wishbone should, you'd expect, slide up, perhaps perform some sort of manoeuvre at the peak then drop down again. It didn't. None of the tildes and swooshes did what you thought they'd do.

From the hallway my mother called. "I'm going to the shops! Do you want to come?"

I paused the Rabbi's voice, hovering over a syllable. "I have to learn this!" I shouted back.

"Nobody knows the tune, you know. Nobody listens in *shul*."

I sighed, not loud enough for her to hear in the passage, although she always knew when I was sighing.

"Okay," she said. "Suit yourself. You're probably doing the right thing."

I didn't want to stay at home and practice my *parsha*. But I also didn't want to go shopping for dinner because it would be dinner with Leo Fein.

It still didn't make sense to me, the two of them together. There was some kind of betrayal in the fact that I'd discovered him first, with the robbery of Roy's 'Uptown', but now he was closing in on my mother. So I returned to the tildes and wishbones of cantillation for the afternoon.

The gold Mercedes arrived at six-thirty and I was asked to open the front door. His presence, in a white shirt with lines that curved and disappeared under his belly, shrank my antagonism and I allowed him in, traitor to myself.

"Howzit, my china," he said to me, grabbing my hand in his own fleshy palm.

"Be there in a sec," said my mother from the kitchen. She wasn't cooking – Shadrack had done that – but she was spreading the snacks into the bowls with their maze-like prints on the sides: her handiwork.

“Okay, Sweetheart,” he said to Ma, sitting on the green velvet easy chair. While I perched on the arm of the brown couch, he leant back and popped out the footstool of the chair and said, “Almost your *barmy*, hey? You’ll be a man then, hey?”

How did *this* guy insert himself into my mother’s life? She’d always held up the virtues of a broad scope, the sophistication of the city. He was only going to drag us down, anchor us forever in this backwater.

Ma came into the room with a bowl of peanuts and another of sliced biltong. She gave Leo Fein a kiss on his straight lips as he rose to greet her.

“Some of your design?” he asked, raising the bowl level to his brow.

“Oh, they’re ancient,” said Ma.

“Stunning. Really. Hey, you should think about that gallery like I was saying. Your mother’s talented, hey boy?” He scooped up some biltong from the bowl.

“Whiskey?” asked Ma.

“Now you’re talking. Just with ice.”

“Ben, can you help Uncle Leo with a drink?” she asked. “Do you know which one is the whiskey?”

“I know,” I said, lifting myself and heading to the kitchen.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m getting the glasses.”

“Use the ones in the bar.” She sat down in the chair next to Leo Fein. “And I’ll have a whiskey and water, thanks.”

You must remember, I knew my father mostly through the physical objects he left behind. The photographs, of course, but also his jackets, his cufflinks, the workbench in the garage and the tools in the steel cupboard, the bar, and the crystal whiskey tumblers. I hadn’t wanted to use them for this man, or my mother now.

I returned with the drinks and they were still talking about pottery. “Is this Mayan, this design?” asked Leo Fein, grabbing the peanuts from the bowl.

“Well, Aztec I suppose.”

“You *must* do more, Margot. It’s just beautiful.”

“Oh, I’d like to. It’s just time, it takes time, you know.”

“You just need to get back into it. That’s all.”

“You’re right. I should,” she said.

“Not ‘should’. ‘Will’,” said Leo Fein.

“Alright – I *will*,” she said, taking the whiskey from me and tucking away a strand of hair.

I'd been trying to get Ma to go back to pottery for ages. Since her friend, Father Verhaeren the Catholic priest and a potter of some ability had left town, she'd not so much as touched clay.

I wanted a mother who could shape pots, who knew the difference between Aztec and Maya, and I wanted to divert her from all the small-town distractions she found herself in over the years of my childhood: bowls (along with the drunken latches at the bowling club bar), slot machines hundreds of kilometres away at Sun City or the Venda Sun, watching 'Thorn Birds'. All were practices which suggested to me that my mother, and therefore me, were here to stay, not upwardly mobile to more enlightened surrounds but trapped in the doldrums of my birthplace.

We sat down to dinner and I watched how he ate, and listened to his compliments on my mother's cooking, which wasn't her cooking. When you start to take a negative view of someone, everything they do becomes an act seemingly designed to terrorise and disgust you. It was how I felt when I watched Leo Fein chewing with his mouth open.

Yellow and brown rolled in the bucket of his mouth while he chewed and then as he spoke, the dollop just lay there naked and wet. Here was Leo Fein, accomplice, with knowledge of my father, circling my mother like one of his hawks. He hadn't used me to get to her but he may as well have, as betrayed as I felt. It was a bad lucky packet I'd opened at Meyer Levinson's braai, an unlucky packet.

As soon as I was done, I asked to be excused. It was the privilege of being still a boy: to remove yourself from company when it no longer interested you.

I found refuge between the covers of the Encyclopedia Americana. I found my seat in the safety of facts. I lost myself in the centre of a furious storm of information; I opened a volume and closed out the world, or rather entered another, a mirror world described a step removed from the real one but containing everything in it.

Those hardback volumes began in me the love of knowledge for its own sake. A subject would catch onto me, and there were days when I'd have eight or nine books spread out on the floor with their wings overlapping as I traced a path from one to the next.

I have my mother to thank, or curse, for this. She set the tone in our family for regarding intellect as the highest virtue. We pitied simple but good people, church-goers for instance. 'Shame,' we said, 'they mean so well but do they really think we came from Adam and Eve?'

As I've mentioned before, my great rebellion was the reclaiming of religion for myself and this wouldn't have sat well with my mother or brothers had I been brave enough to share my beliefs with them. But the Encyclopedia Americana was even-handed in its entries for Evolution and Genesis. In my mother's canon, though, Einstein ranked higher than Gandhi and certainly Darwin was exalted way above Mother Theresa.

I began by looking up 'Maya' and it could have ended anywhere at all. Maya led to Inca which led to Aztec which led to Cheyenne. Cheyenne to Sun Dance, Sun Dance to Iroquois, Iroquois to Mohawk, Mohawk to Empire State Building, Empire State Building to Steel. Steel to Broadsword to Vikings to Runes to Druids to Stonehenge to Sun to Hydrogen, and Hydrogen to Quantum Mechanics to Einstein to Violin to Standard Pitch to Well Temperament.

And so I journeyed through the night.

University of Cape Town

## Jerusalem gangers

My mother filled my suitcase with the requirements from the checklist and when the day came, packed me off with kisses when Carol came to fetch me in the brown Colt. Before we could go she insisted on taking a photograph of Potato Latke and me at the car.

I shook my head to myself in the back seat on the way to the school where the buses would be waiting for us. There was no escaping now.

To my relief I discovered that boys and girls would be travelling on separate buses. Mr Coetzee would be on ours and Mrs Verwey, a much more frightening prospect, was on the other. I wouldn't have to sit next to Potato Latke and I wouldn't have to see Brian and Georgina sitting together.

Potato Latke and I parted without saying a word. I entered the bus and sat in one of the few empty seats, next to Barry. While Mr Coetzee was outside the bus, smoking a Gunston, I could see Mrs Verwey already arranging everyone's seating and striding up and down, her simple wooden crucifix swaying against her bosom. It was a cross that eschewed fancy ornamentation or even bevelling and was perhaps constructed by her husband, the Guidance teacher at Elliot's school and a keen woodworker.

I watched Georgina arrive and Brian help her with her bag. She gave him a shy wave and stepped onto the bus. Brian stomped onto ours and found a seat.

So sitting there next to Barry I had difficulty swallowing my fate, that it was Brian who was with Georgina and not me. There was a feeling of longing that dripped inside my chest. Envy began to unwind in me. Perhaps worse than going alone, I'd chosen to go with someone who fairly repulsed me. I felt sorry for myself and had a whole tour to endure like this.

Mr Coetzee stepped onto the bus, standing at the front between the rows of seats. All eyes converged on the figure, on the moustache, which hardly moved as the bus lurched forward. There were some claps as we started to glide through the town, just beneath the canopy of leaves, away from the school.

From under that brush of a moustache Mr Coetzee painted for us the picture of the tour ahead of us. No-one, I think because none of us had discussed it, had thought as far as the tour itself beyond the pairing up of boys and girls. Now our programme was laid out for us and instead of the hayride of our imaginings we were told to open our exercise books and begin taking notes because our first stop was not far off and there was much to be learnt about the fierceness, strength and sacrifice of our country.

The bravado in Mr Coetzee's voice brought me down and scraped away the last deposits of joyful anticipation I had for the trip. It made me wish I'd never come, and that thought led me home, where Leo Fein was certainly stalking.

Barry was already writing in his book. The rest of the bus was electrified to have passed the 'welcome' sign, concrete cross-slabs in the dirt at the municipal border. We rode into the yellow bushveld that lay between towns. The flatness stretched up here and there to the skirts of protruding mountains. One in particular rose like a stud rivet. It was Kranskop, Mr Coetzee said to us, the inspiration for the Voortrekker Monument, which would be a sight we'd see further down the track.

He didn't go into the origins of the name of the adjacent town, Nylstroom, but we already knew it. English-speakers took the story like a sprinkling of sugar in their tea.

It went like this. The *Jerusalem gangers*, a group of pious Voortrekkers, left behind the Anti-Christ, AKA The British of the Cape, to search for the Holy Land to the north. With only the map at the back of a heavy bible to guide them, the sight of Kranskop from their approach (in cross-section like a ruined pyramid) and the northerly flow of the nearby stream, conspired to convince them they had reached Egypt. The stream became the Nile Stream, source of the great river, and a town was declared.

How could it be true, though? A few steps onward (and after all, they'd come this far) and they would have seen the squaring of the pyramid, as we did from our bus, and the curve of the fraudulent flow into a more conventional direction. In any case, if they really were aiming for the Promised Land and believed they'd reached Egypt, they were making good time – why didn't the *Jerusalem gangers* skip over it to Jerusalem instead of going to the trouble of founding a town?

Mr Coetzee didn't go into this. Rather, I was to learn in successive steps on the tour, the whole country was the Promised Land, given by the Heavenly Father to a people vying for status as Chosen: the Afrikaners.

Mr Coetzee also omitted the British concentration camp that had existed right next to the town of Nylstroom, where the British had rounded up and starved women and children. Perhaps because most of the children in the bus were from English-speaking families, this would have gone too far and obscured the unifying, edifying spirit of the tour. In the concentration camp would have been kept some of those *Jerusalem gangers* and their children and grandchildren.

We arrived at a hostel in Pretoria and took our uniformed bodies and various suitcases into the wide brick building. These places always had a smell of something I couldn't identify but imagined was boiled cabbage and it made me fearful of the food I'd be forced to eat.

There was no doubting this was a government building. I even thought of them as Afrikaans buildings, perhaps related in some way to Mr Coetzee – a cousin or aunty. There were the dark walkways to fear, the enclosed spaces at the end of long corridors where hostel masters punished children for not sleeping, or wetting their beds, or not lapping up their cabbage.

We were assigned our dormitories and gathered in the front again by the buses. There was a brief rendezvous where the boys could meet up with their girls; Potato Latke stood spare outside while the buses pulled around to the front. I stood in a sulk, an unwilling partner. The bus drivers opened the doors for us, the sexes separated and we were hurried on by the teachers. We had to get to Paul Kruger House.

I was glad to be among my friends again – Sean and Markos, Roger and Joss – and even forgot about the coupling I'd been forced into for a while. Inside the museum-house of the old president, we could scoff at the old pictures on the wall with their wide moustaches and unwieldy beards.

The thing that impressed our gang the most was the brass spittoon and we wondered what had changed so much in adults that they prohibited spitting when it had been venerated to such a degree that presidents practiced it; to such a degree that containers were designed for spittle containment. And the name: spittoon! I could hear the shot echo off the brass insides.

But generally I found the house disagreeable. I felt as if being tightened inside a vice. The same feeling sometimes hit me in my grandparents' house. Something to do with heavy, curled furniture and flaking walls and dust and the ping of corrugated iron above gave me the sense that the place was moving in upon me.

"President Paul Kruger," – Mr Coetzee said the first name like 'pole' and because of that I thought of the man as stiff, upright, cold steel and (why not?) waving a flag; the last name, Kruger, he said without the 'g', so that I wondered at first whether I'd misunderstood whose house we were really in – "President Paul Kruger was a great leader of our nation. A soldier, a hunter, and a president... four times." Mr Coetzee's hair formed tight waves on his head and they flashed under the low lamps as he shot a glance at the museum guide, in case he was about to be contradicted. Mrs Verwey stood in a shadow by the rope along the untouchable artefacts on display, her thick woollen skirt soaking up the dust.

The guide fixed her pinned grey hair and stood silent. "Listen to the lady. She's going to tell us about President Kruger," said Coetzee. The lady showed us the old harmonium, and the brass

eagle given to Kruger by Irish-Americans as congratulations for repelling the British in the Jameson Raid. She talked about a telegram from the Kaiser, also congratulating Kruger for teaching the British a lesson, even though the Kaiser was Victoria's grandson, which mixed us up a great deal, those who were listening. She told us about Paul Kruger's pipe and top hat and the signing of the Sand River Convention (another Sand River, not ours).

And then we were outside the house. That was all there was to it. It ended abruptly and it seemed then preposterous that a president lived in such a humble place like my grandparents' house, brass eagle or no. That Kaisers and Queens and Mark Twain mingled with this bearded man... what a small country we were in if the size of the president's house was anything to go by.

We ran around in the garden and drank from the garden tap while Mr Coetzee and the guide talked a little more. Georgina and I ended up at the tap together.

"My mom says Paul Kruger had an earring," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Brian bounded up and shouldered me away from the tap and bent down to drink. Now, I don't know whether he meant this as a friendly boyish butt or if he had a sudden jealous impulse. Maybe when Sean had asked Karen to ask Georgina, word had reached Brian that I wanted to take her on tour. It's possible he meant nothing at all by it or even that he was showing me we could be ordinary friends and shove and punch shoulders without it meaning anything. I didn't take time to consider any of this.

Back then, and even now, I'm not one to lose control of feelings – not to say I don't feel things as deeply as the next guy. But this was one of those times when anger rushed at me and I let it. Like fingers spreading at the back of my neck and raising the wolf-hairs there. I pushed him back and he almost fell over.

There was no talking between us or shouts of 'hey!', just grunts and the hunching of eyebrows. It was only then that fear had a chance to ebb back. I was in a fight. I'd never had one, not a real one, where there was the danger of broken bones, a bloody nose at least, and the very real possibility of discipline and more violence from a teacher.

Brian was bigger than me, ruddy-faced and shaped like a cask. His head seemed knocked onto his body like the stopcock. In later years his hair would go darker, showing up freckles even brighter and giving him a baby face which belied the manner he had of a full-grown man's manner and speech. This was how he seemed to me even as he was charging me again, leaning in with his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I said, expelling the words with the force of the blow. “What do you want?”

We both went over and rolled in the grit and dust. He got on top of me and I was quick enough to slip out and get a hold of his arms and pin a leg with my knee. There’s a time when you’re in the middle of a fight like this that you really believe your strength is enough, equally matched to your opponent, and that was what I felt then. At that moment it became a test, set for myself – an estimation of how much of my strength I’d have to use. I thought, ‘Hey, maybe I’ve got a chance here.’

When I had him on his back, he wouldn’t allow me to bend his arms and he’d managed to fold a knee and slip it between us.

“Stop it, you idiot!” I said.

“*You* stop it!” he said.

“Come on!” said someone in the little ring of kids that had formed around us now, “Hit, don’t wrestle!”

“Stop grabbing! Hit him!”

I didn’t know who they were talking to, both of us maybe. But neither one of us would undo our grips and we just grunted and rolled. He was more used to fights than I and knew a wriggle or two to switch himself around, and he was soon bouncing on my chest. This now was the moment to use all my strength – I was, and I still couldn’t budge him.

A part of me was surprised. My body was a great disappointment to me. Had my arms nothing more with which to push against him? Constricted like this I felt the air forced out of me.

And then the pressure was relieved and I was about to get up again when I saw Mr Coetzee had lifted Brian by the collar with a swipe, as if picking up a puppy or bending to pluck a daisy. I thought I’d been saved – I was excused from continuing the fight – but he hauled me off the ground with a similar technique.

We’d all seen, at times, a deepening of complexion come over Mr Coetzee’s face and it had never been a good omen. The museum guide was looking from the back door and that was the only thing that rescued us from his entire wrath. In a corner of Paul Kruger’s garden he told us, “This is the last fight or I leave you here in Pretoria and fetch you on the way back from Umdloti. Do you want that?”

No, Sir, we didn’t. I felt a wrong had been done me since I hadn’t started the fight. And that was how I saw it – that I hadn’t started it, because *he* brought on that anger. Besides that, I

hadn't even been winning at the time the fight was stopped. But there was no place in Mr Coetzee's proceedings for stating our cases or calling witnesses.

"Now shake hands. Like men," said Mr Coetzee.

Although we shook we didn't become friends, as they say boys often do after a fight. Rather, we kept away from each other and it kept me from Georgina too.

When it was all over and I thought back to Brian on top of my chest I was secretly grateful to Mr Coetzee for stopping it before its humiliating end. With the teacher breaking it up, it left open the chance, if anyone asked, that I might have won had it gone on.



A fight was no big deal in the greater context of school life, but we weren't at school, we were in the smaller community of the tour and the fight wasn't over name-calling or playground favouritism, it was over a girl. So at first, friends from Brian's camp and those from mine were tentative in making contact again. It was new territory.

It's not a pleasant thing for me to consider now, so many years later, how it made Potato Latke – Shoshana – feel, seeing the boy she came on tour with in a fight over another girl. As I remember it, she stood off to the side when we were finished at the house and waited for me, then walked silently, loyally, next to me until the bus doors.

In the respectful, untouchable space given those fresh with the shame of a scrap, I sat on the bus. The ride to the next sight gave the pallor a moment to leave my face and for me to steady myself. The Union Buildings were broader and more impressive, less stifling than the old president's house.

I was forgetting about the fight by the time we were loosed on the grounds and joined in with the irreverent running we took so much pleasure in at places of such importance.

That evening we received our food and sat at the oblong tables in the hostel dining hall. As I'd expected, the food did scare me and there were things on the plate I wasn't forced to eat at home.

Before we were allowed to start, Mr Coetzee told everyone to be silent and close their eyes for grace, which would be said by the head of the hostel, a man in forest-green polyester slacks and sideburns like boots. We held hands, too, a circle forming around every table top. The hostel head recited the prayer in Afrikaans and I kept my eyes open and saw it was only me, Shoshana and a boy called Torsten who weren't praying.

Torsten lived in hostel during the week and on a farm near Alldays on weekends and had already told me that the Bible was just fairy stories. Nobody took him up on this because he was one of the toughest kids in school, even though he wasn't nearly the biggest. He came in after weekends with thorn-bush scrapes and, once, the deep red scratches of a lynx he'd freed from a trap.

Shoshana looked like she was in particular pain. A migraine, I supposed at the time, although it is possible, thinking back on it today, that it was something else altogether, which may have been tied to me.

The head of the hostel was thanking God for the food and asking him to guide us during this tour so that we could learn about this country we'd been blessed with, and to guard us and keep us safe.

Mrs Verwey, who was holding the hand of Mr Coetzee and another woman from the hostel, looked as if the prayer was hurting her too, like a fever had come over her. I detected her mouth moving, also, and I thought perhaps she was saying a secret prayer on top of the one we could hear.

The two bus drivers were at a separate little table and had their eyes closed like the children and didn't hold hands but clasped their own together instead.

The food was a bony stew with great ladle-dollops of mashed vegetables which I wouldn't eat. One of the other boys took a bright orange lump of pumpkin off my plate as if he'd won a prize.

I slept deep despite the unwelcoming surfaces in the draughty dormitories and, after a more recognisable although still unsettling breakfast of greasy eggs and gristly bacon, we left Pretoria. There weren't any sights of national importance in Johannesburg so we rose over the city and curled around to the south-east. Elliot had told me the tour stopped there on the way back, for ice-skating and a movie, and it was the part of the trip I was looking forward to the most. By contrast, Mr Coetzee sat with arms crossed at the front of the bus and seemed to snarl at the city.

"I can't wait to go to Joburg," I said to Barry.

"Why?" he asked with a look on his face liked he'd smelt something horrible.

"Look how big it is." We'd left the valley presided over by Parktown Ridge, sedate under the fabric of trees, and then had the cluster of architecture of the city itself on our left. Everyone was looking out that side of the bus. But not Barry.

"There must be so many people there," I continued. "It looks fun. And interesting." I thought of all those people down on all those streets, and up those high-rises, passing each other at a

brisk pace, dodging in and out of record shops and coffee shops and no-one caring what you said or what you looked like. I felt like if they would only let me loose on the city I could be something bigger than I was.

“At my church they say it’s a Sodom and Gomorrah all in one.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s something bad.”

He wouldn’t say any more and I decided he probably didn’t know either. I read about Sodom and Gomorrah after I got back from the tour and was shocked at what those who were saved, Lot and his daughters, got up to after the destruction of the twin cities.

“One day God will punish them and destroy it,” continued Barry. “Like Warmbaths.”

“Warmbaths isn’t destroyed. We passed it yesterday on the way to Pretoria.”

“Ja but they have that nudist camp there, where men and women, and kids too, all go around naked all day. And now there’s been a drought there and none of the farmers can grow anything. It’s God punishing them, cos of the nudists.”

After this exchange I didn’t talk much to Barry and went to be with my friends until Mr Coetzee told us to sit down again.

I swapped with Lance, the boy with the potty haircut. “What do you guys reckon of Joburg?” I asked.

“Jeez, I can’t wait for Joburg,” said Joss.

“I heard we go ice-skating and there’s Wimpy,” said Sean.

“And the movie,” said Markos. “That’s where you sit with your girl and hold hands,” he said in a lowered voice.

“I’m gonna do more than hold hands,” said Brian from the row behind Markos. “I’m gonna kiss, like in the movies.”

“Ja, me too,” said Markos.

I said nothing. I didn’t want Brian kissing Georgina and I certainly didn’t want to kiss Potato Latke. But even if I were the one sitting next to Georgina I wasn’t sure I’d have the courage to kiss her. I felt very much like a child again.

We went over Van Reenen’s Pass and it was a close thing for some of the kids, whether they were going to be sick or not. Angelique, on the other bus, actually was sick eventually and we stopped at the little town of Van Reenen. Mrs Verwey helped Angelique with the vomit and they came out of the girls’ toilets with a wet circle on Angelique’s dress. Angelique’s tears were finally drying up. Joss stood around joking and trying to make her feel better.

We looked at the smallest church in the world with wonder. It was appreciated by us because of its record-holding status. We filed in and out of the little building, conducted by Mr Coetzee. Mrs Verwey didn't go inside on account of it being Catholic. "It's a sin to worship a man," she said and I thought she was referring to the Christ on the crucifix inside, not the Pope, and wondered if that was why her cross was bare.

The following leg to Blood River would be harrowing for me. I hadn't counted on the trip being so long and felt the pinch in my bladder harden. I strangled with all my might. The pressure landed in waves and Barry saw I was under stress (Lance had insisted I swap back again).

"What's wrong?" asked Barry.

"Should have gone to pee," I told him.

The bus had turned onto a dirt road and the bumps caught my muscles off guard so that they slackened, almost opening up their containment.

"You really need to go, hey?" said Barry and I held tight. "Why don't you ask Sir to stop?"

"I can't, no." By now I was bent double and embarrassed too. I wanted as little attention on me as possible, although if I leaked there would certainly be attention. With my face pulled and reddened and the tooth-gap inhalations, themselves sounding like a rushing stream, I didn't want anyone looking upon me. Also, I couldn't risk moving too much and who knew what standing up would do.

There was the additional embarrassment to consider that if we did stop, the girls' bus would stop too. Two bus-loads would have the opportunity to watch me pee and I was sure to succumb to stage-fright under so many eyes, especially so many rows of girls.

"I'll ask for you," said Barry. He went to the front to speak to Mr Coetzee and the bus driver. Coetzee and Barry looked back at me, Coetzee calm and Barry dutiful and obedient. The bus driver's eyes flashed in the mirror. Barry walked back and sat down. "They say they can't stop." He looked pleased he had conducted his business so efficiently.

There were moments – it had gone on so long – that I felt the pressure had reduced and I could sit up and let the tension drain from my face. But the contractions soon returned to remind me that the need was real. Finally we reached the site of the Battle of Blood River and as I stepped down off the bus my groin strained as if from a stitch. Without closing the door in the concrete stall, I let my fly down and let my own river flow out of me; a great release of pain and pleasure twisted in a single stream.

Every bus trip since, I won't step on without urinating first. So strong is that memory that even today if I'm somewhere with no place to urinate and I haven't relieved myself before, my

brain leans on my bladder, convincing it that it's full and I break into a cold sweat at the phantom pressure.

I didn't take in too much about what Mr Coetzee said about the Battle of Blood River. I was enjoying the feeling of being so light and unencumbered. I think I was even pleasant to Shoshana, greeting her with energy and walking around the laager with her. But I remember it being extremely important to Mr Coetzee.

Back on the bus, after my second, pre-emptive sprinkling, Barry seemed moved too. It was getting dark already and he was huddled close to his exercise book, swapping between three coloured pencils and working his tongue out the corner of his mouth.

"What are you writing?" I asked.

"Just what Mr Coetzee was saying about the battle. It's amazing. God was protecting them, you know."

"Oh?"

"Didn't you listen?"

"I was probably draining my pecker."

He looked annoyed, then took a deep breath. "460 Voortrekkers and 20 000 Zulus. Not one Voortrekker died because God was on their side."

"Ja, God and a whole bunch of guns. What did the Zulus have? Spears? That's not a fair fight."

"They made a vow to God and He protected them. That's why we have the Day of the Vow and the Church of the Vow."

"I thought you weren't supposed to make deals with God."

"Well, that only means the Voortrekkers were right, if you're not supposed to – cos He let them win anyway."

"I hate learning about that shit," I said. "It's all we do. It's not even *our* history."

"Well, it's important. There might be another Blood River and we need to know about it."

"What are you talking about?"

"My uncle said. There's these terrorists now, blowing up shopping centres and stuff. If we don't catch them, there'll be another Blood River."

I was confused by his reaction to the battlefield because mine was so removed and his so involved. His surname was Jennings and he was not Afrikaans; he was reacting by proxy for other Afrikaners, I guess. As for myself, I hadn't felt so good in the body in all my life like I did after Blood River.

We arrived at our destination for the evening, a farm outside a town I didn't take note of, perhaps Ladysmith. We had dinner and split off into boys and girls. The dorms were wooden cabins which slept six in bunk beds and we were lucky enough to be able to choose our roommates. It was Sean, Markos, Roger, Joss, Torsten and me.

Torsten knew how the gas lantern worked and was able to light it and turn it off for us when Mr Coetzee called for lights out. We heard him and Mrs Verwey walk past the other cabins and back up to the farm house.

I've always found it easier talking in the dark. There's something about speaking without having to decipher the faces of others. Torsten said I'd done well in the fight with Brian and that he didn't like the guy. I didn't let on that I knew I'd already lost by the time it was split up but I appreciated support from a guy like Torsten. "But he came with Georgina and you're with Shoshana, so what's his problem? I'm happy I didn't ask anyone on tour with me," he said.

Some of the others agreed. "Karen wants me to buy stuff for her all the time," said Sean.

"Diane's always sulking or wants to go talk to her friends all the time," said Markos. "I may as well have come on my own."

Joss said he liked Angelique. "I don't mind buying her ice-cream and stuff. And walking around with her."

"Hey, maybe we can swap girls some time, like halfway?" said Markos.

"Anyone want Shoshana?" I asked.

No-one let out a sound for a moment, which caused a laugh to erupt in the cabin. Torsten was slow to react, but finally added his lazy bellow to the noise.

From outside, Mr Coetzee said, "Shut up, *julle!* Sleep now!"

In the morning with our brown Maltabella porridge sitting in our guts, we rolled off towards the coast. We were impeded, though, by the might and gravity of Pietermaritzburg. How cruel to dangle the seaside in front of children then obscure it with the Largest Red-Brick Structure in the Southern Hemisphere. The pile was somehow less impressive than the smallest church in the world. The Church of the Vow was more to Mrs Verwey's taste, however, and she squeezed her frugal Instamatic at it several times.

I dragged myself around the Pietermaritzburg Voortrekker Museum with its artefacts of hardship and ascetic travel. They made me wonder whether there would be any kind of comfort or pleasure at the seaside.

Our tour had stumbled so to the coast that when we did reach Umdloti, I was surprised to be released onto the beach. I had to put aside my fear of things in the sea and the exposure of my

blank skin to the other, more outdoorsy children but between that and the great depression of the Great Trek there was no contest.

There were always the strict eyes of teachers on us but not even they could stop boys showing off for girls with handstands in the ocean, feet over waves. Someone shouted, "Look at Sir!" when Mr Coetzee removed his brown trousers with the matching fabric belt, to reveal floral-pattern Speedos. No-one had anticipated he owned anything of such good-humoured abandon in his wardrobe.

I noted that his entire body was of a uniform colour, like he'd been dunked in coffee. Mr Coetzee didn't react to our shouts and laughter but only folded his pants while tugging on a cigarette below his moustache.

Mrs Verwey arrived later, though, and she opposed our shouts and giggles with various shouts of her own. When none of it abated our good spirits she singled out Angelique for bringing a two-piece costume instead of a school-regulation one-piece. "What are people going to think of us, Angelique? We're representing our school and our town, you know."

Though our play was flattened slightly, it was only for a short time, and we quickly built up a head of steam again. Even Angelique forgot her embarrassment and joined in. "*Vroeg ryp, vroeg vrot,*" said Mrs Verwey to Mr Coetzee, who neither agreed nor disagreed but helped her spread her towel. I knew it translated as 'quick to ripen, quick to rot' but didn't understand the cruel meaning.

I saw Shoshana, with her belly stretched under the shiny blue of her swimming costume, standing with her toes curled in the sand and arms crossed under her little bun-breasts. I walked up to her. "Hey, you like to swim?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"Me neither," I said. "But we're only here for a bit, so come on. At least get your toes wet." She followed me in and both of us, I think, lost our funk for the tour in the ocean, crashing our bodies into the breakers.

We were learning to ride the waves and the boys all pulled their biceps at the lifeguards up on their chairs. Even Mr Coetzee and Mrs Verwey swam and seemed to enjoy themselves. A current would drag you to the side and beyond the line of the orange buoys, and you'd have to swim back in or back to shore to run again to the starting point. It was into this cycle of raucousness that an almost strangled, violently dipping yelp was released.

It came from just next to me and it was Georgina, tangled with the stinger of a bluebottle. I helped her onto the sand and waved for the lifeguards. One came running towards us and picked her up.

We followed them, me and a few others, to the lifeguard hut where whimpering Georgina was placed on a chair. She let out another scream when the lifeguard rushed at her with a pair of shining scissors. This time the teachers were there to reassure her. The lifeguard scraped the stuff off her arm with the blade then poured vinegar over it and she settled down.

I didn't want any more swimming after that and neither did the other kids who'd been near Georgina. The little group sat there, dripping on the sand. Shoshana was near me but my thoughts were with Gina and I felt a thrill at having been the one to help her first.

That night, we had a braai outside in the warm air and it was much more like a holiday than at any time on the tour. Mr Coetzee and Mrs Verwey seemed lighter than they'd been at the other overnight stops and the hostel chief shared his *brandewyn* with them.

"It was nice of you to help Georgina," said Shoshana when we were taking out plates back to the mess hall. "It was nice of you to take me on tour."

"That's okay," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"I like being on tour with someone so nice. I know you didn't want to."

I didn't feel nice at all. I felt like a shit now and had the sensation that I'd been found out, foolishly, because my feelings must have been so obvious. She didn't wait around for me to protest or agree to her assertion, which was a great kindness to me.

After my involvement in Georgina's emergency it was only natural that Brian was cross with me. I had almost expected it, even though he had no right to be, since I was merely the closest to her on the beach. I might've been upset too, had our roles had been reversed.

It was why, after we were already asleep, deep in the dormitories of the seaside, government hostel, that Brian and Vaughan and Wilson crept into our room, pulled me out of bed and threw my bag and clothes out the windows.

"Wrong hostel!" said Brian.

"You're supposed to be in the girl's hostel!" said Wilson.

"Ja, aren't you supposed to be in the girl's hostel?" said Vaughan.

"Let's help you move," said Brian, throwing my shoes out the window.

Sean was up and next to me in a flash, elbowing in my defence while the invading party tried to get my pyjamas off me too. Markos was late to react, sitting up in bed but eventually it was he who turned the light on and tried to pull Brian off me.

I don't know if it was the clothes flying out the window or the noise but something brought Mr Coetzee into the dorm. The light made him squint and gave Brian, Vaughan and Wilson time to stand up straight. "Tomorrow – jacks for all of you." He was pointing to each of us. "I don't

care about your stories. If this is not your dorm, get out. And if I see any one of you up again tonight, you won't sleep from the *klap* I'm going to give you."

The three infiltrators scrambled down the linoleum to their own dorm. While the others confined themselves to bed, I had to wrestle with Mr Coetzee's last threat and the thought of my clothes downstairs. I tried to ask Markos and Sean their advice but they'd been frightened into being quiet. After waiting some time, I decided I'd have to take the chance.

When I'd crept downstairs to the square of grass, I wished I'd waited longer because I heard Mrs Verwey crying and Mr Coetzee cooing in a voice so different from the one he'd threatened us with upstairs. They were in a room downstairs, together, and I had to pick up my clothes silently from the bushes and flower beds opposite their window.

My first confused idea was that they were Mr and Mrs to each other but then I remembered that there was a Mr Verwey already, the Guidance teacher at Elliot's old high school. I convinced myself logically, although not in deep truth, that Mrs Verwey was missing Mr Verwey and this was what Mr Coetzee was trying to comfort her about, saying, "*Dis okay, liefie*," it's okay, sweetie, it's okay.

I crept back to bed and didn't tell the others what I'd heard. We spent a difficult evening thinking independently of the punishment that would meet us in the morning. "I think he was drunk," said Sean as we dressed. "Smelt like brandy. Maybe he'll forget."

But Mr Coetzee was waiting for us at a table by the door of the dining room. We waited till the boys from the other dorm room arrived. Our eyes were all wide and the enmity between the two groups was swallowed deep down by then.

The head of the hostel unlocked his office door and let us all in, then left the six of us alone with our teacher. Mr Coetzee put the wooden bat, purpose-made for punishing youths and packed with him on tour for just such an event, on the desk.

"In a straight stripe," he said to us and we lined up. He pointed to a spot on the rug and Sean, first, stepped up to it. He took the strike – louder than I'd expected – with a grimace and rubbed his rear with both hands. We all followed and didn't mind showing to one another how it stung, since we all felt it just the same.

It's been my experience that when taking jacks in a group, the first recipient sets the tone. Some have too much pride to show they've been wounded and if that's how it goes, so the rest follow, flexing their jaws but not voicing or indicating their discomfort to the punisher.

If, like Sean, the first one feels that all who follow are going to experience the sting in the same way and, whether guilty or not, they're all going to get it, he accepts the fact and they all share in the brotherhood of suffering.

It should be noted that the tactic of admitting pain (and in even more extreme cases, crying and babbling) to somehow play on the sympathies of the punishing teacher, thereby mitigating the severity of the following strikes in a series of, say, six, was not one I ever witnessed working.

As to the effectiveness of this kind of punishment in general, it speaks badly of it that, on the whole, it was the same boys who most often returned for it over the course of our school careers. The violence against them grew more vicious in later years yet this way was always easier for a teacher than talking about the cause of all the trouble.

I was fourth in line to get the beating and it stung and stuck to me as I walked back down the corridor to the mess hall.

We sat down to breakfast and ate. "Fucking Coetzee," said Markos.

"Fucking asshole," said Sean.

"We didn't even do anything. It was those guys – they came into *our* room."

"He just likes hitting kids," I said.

"Fucking psycho."

I was more disturbed by what I'd overheard between Mr Coetzee and Mrs Verwey than the sting of the bat. If I thought of them as a man and a woman, not just two teachers, it brought to mind my mother and Leo Fein. If these unlikely creatures – fierce and inhuman teachers! – could find the tenderness to form a bond, well, what was stopping Leo Fein from ensnaring my mother?

I wanted to get back to them and felt this on the beach. We had another morning there but I didn't want to swim, partly because of the mood that had come over me and partly because of the bluebottles. Shoshana and I sat on the beach, watching the others.

Georgina was scared too. She sat with us and showed us the welt on her forearm. I showed her the triangular divot in my shin and told her I couldn't feel anything on the scar tissue.

"Mine's not sore anymore, either," she said.

Brian was swimming and looked back at us several times. Between him and Shoshana, I held back from saying too much to Georgina.



We stopped for snacks on the road and I saw Mrs Verwey step off the bus. Something had softened around the corners of her mouth that made her look mournful. Mr Coetzee bought some jam doughnuts and offered the pack to her, still encased in the cling-film-wrapped

polystyrene tray. She shook her head and walked back towards the bus, without a snack, her mouth firming once more.

It was a long drive back up to the Transvaal and slow-going in the buses. We had to, at Mr Coetzee's orders, keep up our diaries and fact-sheets and most of us tried to get bits done in the bus; although the ride was bumpy and made for skew lines, we'd enjoyed too much seaside time to bother with it at Umdloti.

Elliot hadn't lied. We stopped in Joburg for ice-skating and checked in our *takkies* for skates at the counter. Mine were a beaten old grey pair and it took me ten minutes before I had my first fall.

Mrs Verwey slipped and landed in a sitting position. Mr Coetzee tried to help her up but she called to a few of the girls to help her instead. He propped her up anyway but she waggled off without thanking him.

They played ABBA over the PA system and most everyone landed on the ice, even Georgina, who had told everyone she did ballet and that ice-skating was virtually the same. Shoshana was the only one who glided across the ice without a fall. It was nothing fancy but she kept her course smooth and even learnt to switch and skate backward.

A black man came on in older skates than I was wearing to pick up a discarded plastic bottle and jersey that had fallen onto the ice from the barrier. He was the best skater there that day, better even than the two kids in ice-hockey outfits and jet-black skates, from a Joburg high school. The man scooped down for the bottle and, looking rather bored, switched back and forth, bending down with one leg behind him to take up the jersey, then bringing himself low to the ice, hurtling along the barrier.

The little charge on the ice was at odds with the music but once he'd skipped through the doorway in the barrier once more, the action on the rink returned to its faltering motions.

It was while I was watching him that Brian must have bought the rose for Georgina. I saw them skating hand-in-hand after that and couldn't bare to look, or to skate anymore.

After the ice-skating we were treated to Wimpy burgers and then we were rushed through the city, because we were running late, to the cinema. It had six movies showing at once which was impressive in itself, compared to the single-screen Astra Cinema we were used to back home.

I don't remember what movie we saw, and probably not many of us would. It was over half-way through and I hadn't followed it at all, because Shoshana had taken my hand after ten-minutes. She curled her fingers around and we sat, sweaty palms and pins-and-needles until the end.

When we were outside waiting for the bus, boys and girls split instantly to compare notes. I didn't own up to having held Shoshana's hand. I tried to look for Georgina in the groups of girls, and with greater fear, for Brian, but when I did see them, separately, I couldn't read into either of their faces what they'd undergone in the cinema.

That night I noticed Mrs Verwey sitting at a table apart from Mr Coetzee, with the matrons and the bus drivers. While the others in the dorm talked about their hand-grabbing that night, all I could think about was how mine had been forced away from Georgina.

There was one last stop before home. Pretoria was close, so we had the whole morning to see the Voortrekker Monument. The granite block towered over us like a bully. Mr Coetzee described the Great Trek as the country's most important event, the one that shaped us into what we are. We all wrote this into our workbooks, even though, since we were an English-speaking school, most of the kids were from families that had not arrived with the Voortrekkers.

Mrs Verwey, her will reconstituted in the face of this strange and mystical building, explained all the messages contained in the figures of the mother and child, the stories captured in the frieze, the light from above that shone onto the cenotaph on that one sacred Day of the Vow, once a year.

There were messages in every corner of the construction. "These are the fathers of our nation," she said of the four sentinels at each corner of the square mass. "Great men like these don't come along every day." She shook her head.

It was an impressive building. Not in the same way that the smallest church had impressed us immediately. This was not just the monolith we saw from the highway. It had subtlety that took explaining. It was the major representation of a people many of us English kids spoke of as mongrels and blockheads, thickset dimwits. But here they had established a culture of their own and we were in the heart of it.

Mr Coetzee told us about dragging the wagons over the teeth of the Drakensberg, the same mountains we had travelled across to get from Natal yesterday, up Van Reenen's pass, into the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. "Young boys and girls like you, in ox wagons, carrying the ox wagons sometimes over the mountains."

I myself was beginning to feel the dreariness of the Trek. The stones of commemoration, so cold and drab and rough, left me feeling dry and bilious.

I wanted the monuments to fall away, even the mountains; especially the mountains, since it was important for nature to show people that nothing was permanent, that nature was stronger because she could change and sweep away history in a breath.

And these low feelings brought on the future that awaited me at home. An intruder in my house, perhaps. Leo Fein, thief of my mother, as I'd longed to be the thief of Georgina Melk and landed with Potato Latke. I didn't want to be there and I didn't want to go home.

Shoshana pulled me behind the statue of the Unknown Trekker. "I already had my *bat mitzvah*. I'm a woman, you know." She took my hand and placed it on her forming breast. "And you're only a boy because you're not even thirteen yet." Then she thrust my hand down again and skipped around the corner to return to the rest of the group.

She didn't try to stand next to me again, like she did at the other sights. She'd cut me loose, it was clear, right at the end of the Standard Five Tour. We stepped onto our separate buses and drove north back to our hometown. I felt lonelier on this homecoming leg than I had at any other time on the tour.



My mother was there to pick me up from the bus outside school. Who went with whom on tour was forgotten since we were all longing by then, some openly and some secretly, for our mothers. I was happy to see Ma.

After being away from her, I felt full with my unspoken account of the past five days but before any of it could unfurl, I caught sight of him. The white streak of hair, standing atop his head with its straight mouth.

"Welcome back, china," he said. He opened the boot of the Mercedes and let me drop my bag into it. The corner which had forced the doors of Roy's 'Uptown' open was smooth again and lacquered with gold paint like the rest of the shell.

I suppressed the story of the tour, not offering up any anecdotes and answering questions as briefly as I could, from the back of the gold Mercedes. Leo Fein let a hand rest on Ma's leg as the car slid up Grobler Street.

## Terrorists

Three days later I was waiting for Ma after school. It wasn't unusual for her to be a few minutes late but when some of the other kids had been picked up and the cars cleared, I saw the gold Mercedes standing there with its nose pointed at me.

Leo Fein opened the door and stood behind it, and I realised he was there for me.

"Howzit, boy," he said to me. "Come, your mother has something she had to do today."

I lingered at the front of the car. "I can walk home," I said.

"I'm not a stranger. Come, boy. Hop in."

I got in and sat into the angle of the seat, my feet floundering in the space ahead of them.

"Aren't we going to my house?" I asked as he kept driving up Grobler past my street.

"Your mother had to take the boy somewhere so there's no-one home." The 'boy', I knew, was Shadrack, a man closer in age to Leo Fein than to me. He called me 'boy' too, but that was perhaps a truncation of 'my boy' and I avoided thinking of the ramifications of such a title.

"I don't mind being at home by myself," I said.

"You can't get in, boy. It's locked."

"I know how to climb in through my mom's window."

"Hey, I know how well you can climb, don't you worry. Who do you think you're talking to here?" he said with a laugh for my benefit. "Hey, you don't say anything about that to your mother though, hey china? No, listen, she asked me to pick you up. And you're coming to mine for dinner anyway so you may as well just stay till then."

I tried to feel this ride in comparison to the one back from Roy's 'Uptown'. That day we had a boot full of liquor and I had a head full of questions about my father. I'd wondered how alike the two were; I'd wanted to know what he knew about him.

But Leo Fein was nothing like my family. I tried to learn the man through his mannerisms. He didn't squint when the sun hit his eyes like we did. He didn't sit the same way we did. His jaw jutted around, as if he were having an unspoken dialogue. The examination of Leo Fein left me with no further knowledge of the man.

We arrived at his house with its lawn so green he had to be breaking the water restrictions. "I came here before," I said. "When you were dead."

He didn't react to this at all but said, "Come in, boy." I followed him through the rough-hewn wooden door under the coolness of long-stemmed plants. I walked behind the ghost I'd come to pay respects to only months before.

Leo Fein called to the housekeeper for lunch and we sat down to eat in the cold room with enamel paint on the walls and a large framed picture in thick oils of two elephants and an acacia. He spread out two newspapers next to him, the local *Review* and *The Star* from the city. There were green beans and spinach and a hunk of very salty beef. He concentrated on the meat and left a large portion of the vegetables untouched.

"You got homework to do?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Okay. I've got work too," he said. Still looking at the newsprint he said to the maid, "Clear here. You make a space for him, okay?"

"Yes, *Baas*," said the woman in the spearmint work dress, coming in to take my plate.

Once the food was cleared, the housekeeper packed away the tablecloth and placemats. She worked quietly and I was anxious she'd call me '*kleinbaas*' as I'd had gardeners and maids do at other people's houses. Leo Fein, meanwhile, had gone to another room across the hall and I heard him lock the door behind him.

When the maid was done, she retreated to the backyard and left me under the wide ears of the elephants in oil paint. It didn't take me long to finish my work. If I'd been at home, I could have ridden my BMX to Sean's place or read something. In this house, what was there? Small statuettes in a cupboard, a TV guide magazine from the Sunday papers, Reader's Digests in a magazine rack. I got up to go to the toilet and heard Leo Fein on the phone behind the locked double doors of his study.

When I came out of the bathroom, I dragged my feet back to the insipid comforts of the lounge. Leo Fein opened the door at the moment I was passing it and we both stiffened. Behind him was the room with the birds.

"I have to go out now, china. Business." I could see a hovering kestrel, an owl on a perch and a Martial Eagle swooping down on a shrinking Duiker, frozen in action. He shuffled out the door so that I had to move back myself, then locked it. "You stay here, boy. I won't be long."

"Can't I come with?" I asked. That glimpse sparked again the buccaneering image I'd first had of Leo Fein. For that moment, I forgot the threat he presented, and saw him as I'd seen him the first day he spoke to me.

"No," he said, walking into the kitchen and lifting the keys off the counter. "No, it's just business. You'll be bored." He was by the door already when the pang of being left in that faceless house urged me to speak.

“My mom wouldn’t like it if she knew you left me alone all day.” I said. He paused at the door and I waited for him to turn and respond with an off-hand excuse, a threat even. Instead he walked through the door and left it open behind him. I followed.

There were no words in the gold Mercedes as we drifted into the part of town I knew least well, past Fauna Park and Flora Park. Riebok and Giraffe Street, Bosbok Avenue and into the birds, Pelican and Marabou. Flatland with low fences, a service road that allowed access to the squares and panhandles with their green-roofed houses and Mexican-style steeple walls and elongated pots out front. Family names in ceramic hung next to the front doors on some and dog-repellent two-litre plastic bottles lay on brush-cut lawns.

Then the road opened up outside town over a gentle hump and we seemed much higher up. I was settling into the hypnotic state the ride induced when we turned to the right, down a dirt road which led to some small-holdings outside town.

The road curved with a sandy bank and the Mercedes wagged its tail in the dirt but ultimately held its course. We passed small crops of sugarcane and mealies, squared-off, each to its own. Then we were at a driveway, a long one that led from a swing gate to a low house with a workshop to one side and a few other outbuildings with undulating roofs of dulled silver. Chickens chased each other away from the Mercedes.

“Stay here,” said Leo Fein, stepping on the footbrake.

A young black boy, barefoot and around my age, came from the side of the house, wiping his hands on his shorts and disappeared inside. Leo Fein stood outside the car. A moment later a black man appeared at the door. He was wearing faded blue overalls, baggy, with the sleeves and legs rolled up. Besides the work clothes he seemed very neat, his hair being closely cropped with flecks of grey here and there. He wore spectacles with heavy black rims.

Leo Fein stepped forward and shook the man’s hand and they were about to turn inside when the man with the glasses noticed me. He spoke some words to Leo Fein, who shook his head. Then he came over to the car. “Come,” he said.

I walked behind them to the front door, where the man with the glasses paused. “Do you want to help me?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You know how to use one of these?” He lifted a panga that leant against the door, its tip in the sand.

I nodded again.

“Go with him,” he said, glancing at the black kid. “Go get some sugarcane for us.” He said something in an African language to the kid and the boy nodded.

Leo Fein and Spectacles walked inside the house and I walked behind the black kid around the side. Behind the house was a small plantation, not big enough for anyone to make any money from, probably, but more of a sideline or a hobby. It was planted, nevertheless, in neat rows.

We hadn't said anything to each other. The time had elapsed for saying 'hello'. The black kid bent and picked up his own panga which lay on its side in a semi-circular clearing that had been hacked into the plantation.

Black kids I'd played with until the age of twelve numbered no more than a dozen. They were mostly the shy young nieces and nephews (or grandchildren – it was never clear) of Shadrack, who'd kick a ball with me in the backyard or watch cartoons in the lounge.

I remember, too, Jackie and I encountering four black kids on the far side of the Railways Bowling Club. We must have been about seven or eight years old and they were too, I would guess. They were chasing each other on the dry path that ran under seeping pine trees and Jackie and I were probably searching for the detritus that formed the centre of many of our games (a sandwich green with mould was as fascinating as a fallen pendant).

Both groups, us and them, stopped their activity and approached the barbed wire fence. Perhaps because they'd been warned by their parents, they came forward hesitantly. We looked at each other for a while before the nearest of them gave out a laugh and ran off, the others following in his dust.

There wasn't much communicating in any of these moments, language usually being a problem. But that meeting at the boundary of the bowling club grounds made an impression on us, and probably our imaginations filled in the details: how friendly, how gentle, how very much like us those children had been.

I watched the kid with the panga grab three plants, curling his arm around the stems which bent high over us, then swing the blade low down with his right. He struck a second time and all three long stems tipped in his hand. Throwing them off to the side, he nodded to me to do as he'd done.

I stepped in and took two of the stems in one hand and swung the blade. The first swing struck, the second one grazed the cane and I almost turned the blade back on my legs. It took me five or six cuts to take down the bruised plants.

The kid began chopping again, not looking at whether I was doing a good enough job or cutting my own legs off. He was much faster – the plants didn't hurt his grabbing hand the way they did mine and his cuts were precisely angled and powerful. This kid, though slightly smaller

than me, knew how to work. Cutting cane, for me, was a novel activity, an experience. But not for him. I decided to stop looking at him and concentrate on working the blade harder.

Eventually my shoulders tired and I had to quit. To excuse my break I tried to talk to the kid, even though we'd been in the field for so long without a word passing between us.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

The kid carried on swinging.

"What's your name? I'm Ben," I said, holding out a hand.

"Johannes," said the kid. He paused his work but stood with his panga hanging at his side and didn't even look at my hand.

"How did you learn to use the panga so well?" I asked him.

"Every day, this is what I do," he replied. "I know how to use it very well. I can cut this sugarcane, I can cut grass, I can cut wood. I can cut you too."

He pivoted and slashed at a cane stem at neck height and watched the head topple over. Then Johannes laughed and carried on his work.

A little shaken by the threat, I swung too, albeit with less vigour. Leo Fein approached, led by Spectacles and I discontinued my task while Johannes hacked away.

"Let's strip one," said Spectacles. "Hold on here, my man." He made me pick up one of the long stalks from the ground and hold it out in front of me. Then standing behind me, he gripped his hand over the one I had on the stalk and took the hand with the panga into his, too.

My heart quickened at being captured like this, literally in his grip. It made me call up a memory so diluted by time it was almost forgotten. I was sitting next to my father, in his car. He pushed the gear lever forwards, and he had my hand under his. It was the same happy pain.

Spectacles brought the blade down briskly, taking the end off. "Let's turn it around," he said, and without letting go we flipped the cane so that he could lob the other end off too. He worked quickly. The handle dug into my hand, inside his hand.

I fought back the burn of tears, from the pain of the panga handle, the nearness of the blade to my fingers, the ache of my shoulders, my hands trapped, all the while avoiding Johannes's eyes.

We had a short section of cane then and Spectacles rotated it in my hand and stripped the skin from it, working the blade away from us.

"Try it," he said. I stood frozen with the cane in my hand and Spectacles finally released me. I bit into the fibres and tasted the purity of its sweetness. Spectacles was carving a piece for himself and then bit into it, too. He pulled fibres out with his teeth, mashed them in his mouth, then spat out the pulp on the ground. "Good," he said.

I was happy to be back in the Mercedes again. The chickens parted in front of us and we mounted the dirt road once more. It was only once we were on the tar that I spoke to Leo Fein.

“Who were those guys?” I asked.

“Just some friends of mine, my boy. Doing some work for me.”

“And Johannes?” I asked.

“That boy?”

“Is the other guy his father?”

“No, he doesn’t have a father,” said Leo Fein. I was about to say, ‘like me’ but held back and then Leo Fein said, “He knows how to look after himself, though.”

“Is it the sugarcane? Is that the work they do for you?”

“Listen – Ben,” he said, and I hadn’t thought he knew my name until then. “You probably shouldn’t talk about these guys to anyone. It’s secret, okay? I’m just trying to help them. They’re our friends now, right? You and Johannes – you’re friends now, hey?”

“Ja.” It didn’t seem to me we were, but adults often refused to see that two kids of the same age might not get on – as if it were only the complications of adult life that interfered with two people forming a fellowship.

“And friends, they help each other,” he said, continuing. “If anyone knows they’re there, they could get into trouble.”

“For what?”

“You know things in this country are fucked up. I can say that to you.”

“Yes,” I said. Whether he meant he could swear or that he could talk politics with me, I didn’t know, but appreciated his effort on both points.

“Well, these guys are risking a lot. Very brave, some of them. They’ll be gone soon. But for now, you say nothing. Not to your other friends, not even to your mom. Okay, kemosabe?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Because they could be in big trouble. So you promise?”

“Promise.”

Ma arrived later at Leo Fein’s house. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to pick you up, my boy,” she said.

“I had to take Shadrack to the clinic for his eye. Did you have a nice time?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do your homework?” she asked.

“He’s a good boy,” said Leo Fein.

“He is,” said Ma. I pulled back as her hand went to touch my cheek, and looked at Leo Fein.

I hated always having to be the good boy, the one who didn’t get kicked out of school, or demand more of Ma, or ask for any damn thing except to be left alone once in a while.

All through dinner I thought about bringing up Spectacles and Johannes at the cane fields. But I felt a sort of affinity for them (for Spectacles, at least, if not the kid, who’d scared me somewhat), so even though I felt a spiteful urge to tell Ma about the clandestine meeting, I also couldn’t betray the other two. Besides, I really had very little idea what the meeting had been about.

Our supper was beef stroganoff and when we were done, the maid in peppermint green cleared away the dishes and Leo Fein and Ma searched for their cigarettes. I took up my sugarcane again. “Where did you get that?” asked Ma.

“He got it for me,” I said.

“He was a good boy today,” said Leo Fein. “Did all his homework.”

“He always is,” said Ma.

Leo Fein turned on the TV for me and I watched from the turquoise leather couch. He and Ma went outside to smoke in the courtyard.

I tried another bite of the sugarcane but I’ve never been able to eat things that are too sweet without them making me feel ill. I got up to throw the soggy stalk in the rubbish bin in the kitchen. All the while I could hear Leo Fein talk – not his words, just the voice, and his laugh that accelerated and burst through sporadically like machine-gun fire.

And Ma’s laugh, too, came through. They exchanged laughs, and the laughing subsided and then there was only the scrape of patio furniture on a tiled floor. What the day had done to repair my feelings towards Leo Fein, whatever gloss he’d added with the meeting at the cane fields, was scratched away by the sounds from beyond the sliding glass doors.



The drive to *cheder* was even more of a drag after the Standard Five Tour. Shoshana would pull the rear-view mirror to look at herself. A pimple or an application of lip gloss, then a nudge so that it angled towards me in the back seat. I averted my gaze, unwilling to enter into any kind of exchange with her, and I was sure she took this as a personal victory. She was exerting a new, more forceful version of herself on me.

“Ben’s going to be a man soon, Mommy,” she said in a voice more girly than was her normal register. Carol, inspired by the subject matter, overlooked the delivery.

“That’s right. Not long now, hey Ben?” said Carol, snapping the mirror back in place for the cars behind her on Jorissen Street. I’d had my thirteenth birthday but celebrations were postponed till the *bar mitzvah*. “The invitations are divine, you can tell your mother for me.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll tell her.” My voice tripped up the stairs on these last two words, landing higher than planned.

Shoshana pulled the mirror back onto my face.

In *cheder* in these last weeks I had the feeling of being propelled towards a target. Sometimes I’d have to stay on after the others and cram in all the things the other kids already knew. The letters on the Torah parchment looked different from the ones in the book the Rabbi had lent me; the members of the alphabet had sprouted growths in some of the scrolls and my eyes searched for signs of pronunciation everywhere. The Rabbi himself was rushing through as much as he could so that when he held my arm and guided the silver pointer to the correct line, I felt the spasms up his arm, firing off like a Stalin’s Organ.

The Rabbi’s voice droned from my bedroom every day and in *shul* I tried to pay careful attention to the order of the liturgy for the first time. I had developed a fear of singing the wrong section.

I’d have to lead both the Friday night and Saturday morning service. Friday night, if I had to choose, was more fun. The songs were better and the service was shorter, so it had a lot going for it.

Saturdays left me feeling lost and drained. The service was servitude, long and plodding, confusing because of the different Torah portions read each week, and I knew I’d never accumulate in two weeks the customs, traditions, processes and rituals that took a lifetime to imprint.

The swaying during prayer was an example of just such a quirk, and with so little time left, I felt embarrassed to be asking questions I should already have known the answers to. I tried to mimic the back-and-forth rocking and it felt strange, like I was trying to act out the involuntary movements of the dear Rabbi. It was, at least, the one time of the week when the Rabbi moved just like everyone else.

The crowning achievement of my faith was that I memorised *Sh’ma Yisrael*, the prayer Jews are supposed to say before sleep and upon waking. I recited it, hoping to earn popularity with the Lord and perhaps receive a transmission of Jewishness in return before my *bar mitzvah*.

Markos and Sean were interested, envious even, of the firm traditions of the faith – the ones I could remember, at least. We didn't keep kosher, not in my house, of course, and bacon, as I've mentioned, was as likely to be found in ours as in any other good Christian home.

What charmed my friends, and myself, were the minor customs, not the grand mechanics of the religion. Quaint ones like kissing the *mezuzah* or taking care not to put other books on top of the Bible or *chumash*, or whatever the name was of the blue book with the ribbon bookmark the Rabbi had lent me.

Elliot teased me about the Rabbi's tape when I spoke to him on the phone. He was fitting in with some of the other misfits who'd been shifted to art school and was drawing more than ever, he said. I heard him tugging on a cigarette throughout the conversation. "Forget that tuneless Hebrew shit. You should sing 'Anarchy in the UK' at your *bar mitzvah*."

Will tried to motivate me from an economical standpoint. "Think of all the presents, man. The money," he said to me over the phone one day. "That's what you need to focus on here."

I would try to focus.

"So how's Ma doing?" he asked.

"Okay, I suppose. Why?"

"Well, are things going well with Leo Fein?"

"I don't know."

"You must know something. Are they spending lots of time together? Does he sleep over there?"

"Why would he?"

"Well, why wouldn't he?"

"They're friends. I don't know. Do we have to talk about this?"

"Friends?"

Denial is a powerful drug, and reality (though you might know it) is buried by it; but the truth seeps up eventually, and there's no way to stop it. I wished they were just friends, I prayed without forming the words that they were just friends. But I knew they weren't just friends, even without seeing it. I knew with every scrape of the patio furniture.

I suppose Ma did try to talk to me but I would never let her tell me the full truth. Preparation for my *bar mitzvah* was a handy distraction at the time. Distasteful as it was, it was preferable to the contemplation of any kind of union between my mother and Leo Fein, because I was sure that meant a distortion of our current lives.

Would I move to the house in Bendor, the house without books? Would they go on holidays, leaving me alone in that tiled wasteland? I saw myself sitting on the blue couch again, becoming

steadily used to Leo Fein's body noises and smells, and imagined Ma growing more and more like him.

"Ben, they're not just friends," said Will.

"And you're so happy about it. What, are you trying to, like, sell her off to him?"

"Hang on, buddy. I'm just asking what's going on. Look, all I'm saying is: he's a successful guy; we could use some help; if they get together, it could be good for us. That's all I'm saying."

I shut up, but I could not abide it.



Leo Fein had handed me a poison lucky packet. If I could ride the parabola back to the start, I thought, I would cut off this arc at its root. Swipe aside Leo Fein's association with my mother, his resurrection, his death, take back his raffle tickets, un-meet his Israeli friends and the General, put back those bottles of booze and snub the fucker at Meyer Levinson's braai. If I'd known – but who knows where these things will land once they're set off?

I began my own cluster of explosive projections from my current position. I didn't like seeing myself in a household headed by Leo Fein, even with the restored empire of Will's longing because it would be swallowed by Leo Fein's own ambitions and schemes; I felt that whatever good he'd bring into our family, he would find a way to divert it to serve himself; and I hated seeing my mother happy at the hands of Leo Fein.

I returned to the present, to what I'd seen of Leo Fein's dealings, and now I wilfully imagined them as dangers, dangers to Ma specifically. That was it – he was a danger to Ma.

I had to prevent my mother being dragged into some business with terrorists. It could be dangerous to her. It was illegal, even if it were moral. She'd face danger from both sides – the terrorists her suitor was involved with and the authorities they were at war with. The kid with the panga could threaten her, or the men that had climbed our wall to check Shadrack's pass might lock Ma up.

I would have to do something, for *Ma*. I had to act. This was how my young brain, that squirming little organ of mine, with its furrows and bends, dog-legs and endless doubling back on itself worked.

And so the next morning before school, I undertook a composition, a note that took aim at the ballistic imminence of Leo Fein's future with my mother. It was written with my left hand, to

avoid identification, and in truth I meant it to be sinister. As I wrote, some of the anger and hate that had set my hand in motion gave way to pleasure.

*To whom it may concern,*

*This note serves to confirm that Leopold Fein of 18 Arnotha Drive, Bendor, is, if not a terrorist himself, then at least, in business and in league with terrorists, and if not, then at the very least associating with terrorists. The anonymous author of this note witnessed a meeting between Leopold Fein and said terrorists on a farm out on the Tzaneen road, although he (the author) can't be certain of the exact location. However, he is certain that terrorists were present, possibly planning terrorist activity IN OUR TOWN and that Leo Fein is, if not a mastermind of the group, then at least an essential part of it.*

*The anonymous author hopes this note finds the correct authorities and that they act with utmost swiftness to apprehend Leo Fein. Lives are in danger.*

*Anonymous*

I really wanted to use 'peril' instead of 'danger' but was aware that the note might end up in the hands of Afrikaans policemen and I had to rein myself in for the sake of clarity. I thought I'd been vague enough about the cane gang's whereabouts, and Leo Fein had said they'd be leaving in any case. It wasn't them I was after, even if that kid had threatened me with a panga.

I was unsure whether I needed to sign off 'Anonymous' or not, but did, and then regretted it (the final line I thought particularly strong and it might have been more convincing left on its own) but since I'd taken so long to put the thing together and I needed to get to school, I left it.

My heart ran like a pile driver throughout History class, and while Mr Coetzee smoked his Gunstons outside the door, instead of writing my paragraph on Griqualand, I wondered how I would get my note to him without revealing myself.

I'd chosen Mr Coetzee because I knew he was a member of the *Kommando*, the volunteer army reservists, and thought he'd be the best link to the police or military police or secret service. He was full of wonder and respect for the institutions of our government, the ingenious and Levitical construct of apartheid and, perhaps above all, the military. He told us on many occasions that the greatest honour any of us could achieve would be to serve in the Defence Force.

When class ended I lingered and, with Mr Coetzee nearing the filter of his Gunston, I slid the envelope onto his desk. Then as I walked towards the door I shuddered – he'd find it straight after class and know someone in 5A had written it; then it was only a matter of time before he'd figure out it was me.

I turned back inside. "What is it, Aronbach?" said Coetzee, coming into the class. "Want me to give you a haircut?"

"No, Sir."

"You'd better get that floppy mess cut soon, though. Before next inspection, hey?"

"Yes, Sir."

Mrs Verwey appeared at the door. "Can I get one?" she said, eyeing the Gunstons in Mr Coetzee's hand. He darted towards the door and splayed the cigarettes out the top hatch of the soft-pack. While Mrs Verwey selected a Gunston, with her head tilted down and her eyes raised to Mr Coetzee's, I slid the envelope in the side pocket of his briefcase.

I skirted past the teachers without either one paying me any attention and considered a career in espionage.

University of Cape Town

## Pink Fish Mould

Most afternoons now were spent singing along with the Rabbi, whose voice rang from the tape recorder's single speaker; or my new fearful work: practicing my *bar mitzvah* speech in front of the mirror.

Hebrew was one thing, and a thirteen-year-old could be forgiven for fluffing an ancient language, but the *bar mitzvah* speech would have to be in English. I'd have to thank the ladies of the Jewish Women's Guild for the luncheon, the Rabbi, the family and friends for attending, my mother; and do it wittily because everyone expects entertainment. I wasn't allowed to fuck it up.

At home I avoided talking about Leo Fein and steered conversations towards my impending doom in front of the Jewish community. "So the whole family's coming next week," said Ma. "All those people just for you."

I knew she was trying to make me feel important. I imagined aunts and uncles and newly-*bar-mitzvahed* cousins all on the edge of their seats shaking their heads at my cracked and stumbling chanting.

But because I knew Ma was trying to give me a boost I said, "Ja, it's pretty cool, hey?"

"Have you thought about what you want to wear?" she asked. "We'll go this week."

"Not burgundy," I said. There was a fashion for burgundy and that year two *bat mitzvah* girls had worn the colour, and I knew Joss was planning to wear a burgundy shirt at his, too.

"Anything you want. After Elliot, anything." My brother had refused a jacket and tie and my mother had hunted to find something that wasn't a suit but was smart enough to mark him out as the *bar mitzvah* boy; something acceptable to the family and something, I suppose, that would protect her from accusations that she hadn't bothered at all.

In the end, her friends the Jadas at the Indian Plaza helped Elliot by ordering some kind of smart-casual shell-suit. By then Ma had given in to Elliot's other demand for sneakers instead of proper shoes.

Will's *bar mitzvah* photograph was up in the passage and since his had taken place in the 70s, a wide cream tie was framed by a woolly chocolate-brown jacket.

I had no strong pull in either direction but didn't want to be seen as a total conformist so at the Jadas' store I chose, modestly, a smart shirt but no tie.

The Jadas were graceful in allowing me full access to their shop after I'd tried to sell them Zionist raffle tickets. "We're not Zionists anymore, are we Ben?" said Ma.

"No," I replied shyly.

Mrs Jada, so beautiful I couldn't think of her as a mother to the two teenagers slouching at the counter, put her hand under my chin and made me blush. It became more excruciating and at the same time intoxicating when she embraced my arms, my waist, and my inseam with the tape.

The shirt I first chose, I think, had light blue checks but I could be mistaken, so unexceptional was my outfit. There were new shoes, though, the side-lacing Jordans with the pin-prick pierced cream leather, like dance shoes, like older kids wore in Joburg, like in fashion, like on that ad I'd seen on TV.

Then Ma wanted to buy a jacket for me, and kept pressing me into the change room with various suits and shirts, snaking belts around my hips and asking whether I wanted sneakers too, not for the *bar mitzvah*, just for wearing, and maybe those Jordache jeans?

I hadn't seen her so excited, so willing, to spend on things we didn't *need*. This was a woman who only a few years before hadn't allowed me to wear the *nice* jersey just *anytime*, but made me save it for special occasions, so that I'd worn it exactly twice by the time I outgrew it.

I became the frugal one in the Jada's shop, unsure of buying *two* shirts, when one would surely do, and finally accepting the jeans and a new belt in the headiness of this process of being newly-fitted. We walked out with several bags but, quite literally, not a stitch of burgundy.

The family started arriving on Friday around lunchtime. Elliot and Will were there and the cousins and aunts and uncles from Joburg and Rustenburg, all for me. All for one important event in my life that my mother and brothers disregarded in developmental importance. Oh well, but we all forgot about those details because you always do when humans get to socialise, whatever the excuse, *bar mitzvah*, church service, voting. Smiles have been seen, even, at funerals.

My cousin Steven, fifteen years my senior (as were many of the cousins), couldn't wait to give me his present – a gold-plated ballpoint pen with my name engraved on the side in curly lettering. "Your dad would be proud today," he said to me.

Aunty Evie held me tight as she had when I was much younger. She grabbed me every chance she had and squeezed me or held my face and looked into it. "Oh, if your father were only here."

Uncle Frank, my father's brother, spoke to me without stooping from his upright stance, in adult tones, not the baby voices adults sometimes reserved for children. "Benjamin," he said to me, "tell me, what sport do you play at school?"

"I play soccer," I replied. "But not at the school – they only do rugby and cricket."

“Every soccer game looks the same to me,” he said, looking down at me from a stance inclined slightly backwards. “Same with pornos.”

“Hey, you little terrorist,” said my Uncle Victor, like he said to me whenever he saw me. I recoiled at the word, but everyone else seemed to take it for the light-hearted term of affection my uncle had meant, perhaps only registering a certain trait or two of my uncle to themselves, as if to say, ‘ah, he’s that kind of man – a little brash but harmless.’

Their laughter was a relief, not just because of my guilt over the letter, but because I knew Victor hadn’t had a *bar mitzvah* and you couldn’t count on him to act properly. Aunty Bernice had come too, much smaller in the shadow her husband cast, but self-possessed as always and coolly unimpressed by any of the visitors. Jackie and I sought each other out between the adults, and immediately fell to talking about the Standard Five Tour, and her high school year so far, since we hadn’t seen each other for two weeks now.

Then Will and Elliot pulled me aside and took me to my bedroom, telling Jackie to stay put. It was a rare moment when the three of us were together with no-one else around, and with Elliot and Will at peace. “You’re going to get a lot of shit for your *barmy*, and hopefully you’ll get some money,” said Will. “But we got you something.”

“At least you’ll have one cool present,” said Elliot. “Here.” He handed me two objects, wrapped. I opened the one – a double-tape deck that allowed you to copy one tape to another. It was the most revered present I’d ever received.

“That’s from Ma,” said Will.

The second one was an oblong too, and uncovering the paper revealed a case which unclipped. Under its cover lay ten cassettes in a row, all recorded from LPs and spanning both my brothers’ tastes in what they considered initiatory music.

There were names of bands and singers I didn’t know but would get close to over the following years in my bedroom. I shook hands with them both and thanked them. “This is fucking cool,” I said, which was as much emphasis as I could give anything I was enthusiastic about. “Fucking cool.”

While I hadn’t had a party to mark the transition into my teens, my family at least acknowledged the importance of this birthday, as well as the ordeal of the religious rite I was about to be put through.

I found Ma and thanked her in a whisper for the tape deck and she squeezed my shoulder. “You deserve it,” she said. And I felt then, in that room, with the family there all getting along, all for me, that I did deserve it.

I was swept up in this family friendliness all the way to *shul*. I wasn't even nervous on the way there, and being *on* the *bimah* instead of looking up at it felt comfortable. Seeing my family in their seats under the lights, I knew they were all rooting for me. There was nothing to be nervous about.

I sang – we sang – and the songs are better on a Friday night. The sound wove itself strongly around my ears and I listened for the unfamiliar voices of my uncles, singing for me. It was a triumph.

Between my duties I would look up and see the ladies in their evening wear. And during *Sh'ma Yisrael*, the prayer I knew so well from my night-time recitations, I could even make eye-contact with my Uncle Isaac, who had tears in his.

The Rabbi was complimentary about how I commanded the *bimah* and sang with strength. My aunts kissed me and uncles shook me by the hand.

If I've rushed over Friday night's service it's because that's how it all felt to me: over in the blast of a chorus.

Dinner at our house was more subdued with everyone tired from travelling and singing. Conversations were duller, and not centred around me anymore. I suppose the *bar mitzvah* boy can only generate so much discussion in a weekend.

And Leo Fein was there. Would Ma be talking to him if she knew the underhanded business of his life? Would any of the uncles around the table be listening to his anecdotes and assessments? It was too much to hope that the note would've had any effect. Whether Mr Coetzee had even found it in his briefcase, or whether he would have acted at all if he had found it, I'd left too much to chance.

So I'd been upstaged on my *bar mitzvah*. Only my Aunt Evie squeezed me or pulled me greedily onto her lap whenever I walked past, as if I were still six years old.

I watched Ma watch Leo Fein answer my uncles' questions about business in town. Her face, I had to concede, was like a rose. So trampled is that metaphor of beauty, mystery and the feminine that I hesitate to use it here, but I do because I suppose it was then that I understood why it had been grabbed at by so many hands.

I laid my Friday night outfit across the chair at my desk, recited *Sh'ma* and went to bed.



Whatever had carried me aloft into *shul* on Friday night was gone by Saturday morning. Perhaps it was because I didn't have the whole family around me, only my Uncles Isaac and Frank, accompanying me to *shul* before the congregation would arrive so that I could prepare. I knew not what I was supposed to prepare, but certainly felt unready by the time we reached the *shul*.

There in the empty *shul* on the plush red carpet, under the lights with the cut-out stars, the full weight of Sabbath solemnity bore down on me. Not so much a fear of the Lord as a general, undirected fear.

My uncles and the Rabbi were talking about the order of events again, who is called up when and which section follows after the last one; all the things I'd almost grasped in *cheder* frayed into confusion again. And I had the time to think of all the eyes that would be staring at me.

My family was no help to me now. Uncle Isaac lost himself in a reverie about the *shul* and how his father had donated the chairs. Uncle Frank was in long discussion with the Rabbi over an article they'd both read on Peres and Shamir.

By the time the congregation started to arrive my throat had shrivelled and seeing the Jewry's eyes on me in the light of a holy Saturday gave me a shudder that I was about to be judged; I was sure to be found unworthy and my uncles and aunts would side with them, not me, because we are Jews first, nephews second. I wondered then, quite seriously, had anyone ever failed a *bar mitzvah*?

Finally Ma arrived with Elliot and Will. Elliot looked grim at having to enter *shul* again and his *yarmulke* sat at an angle. He wore proper jackets in those days, the kind he'd refused to wear at his own *bar mitzvah*, but also earrings and hair that stood stiff in various directions. I guess it lifted his spirits to see me suffering so with anxiety because he joked with me. "Don't fuck up the tune. I'll know."

"Think of the cash," said Will.

"Good luck, Ben. It'll be over soon," said Ma. I was wishing she could stay downstairs a little longer but she went up to the balcony with my aunts.

Will and Elliot were talking to my uncles and I suppose I had a pleading look on my face. Elliot gave me a thumbs-up and a nod with his chin, and his *yarmulke* tipped over and fell to the floor. He gave it a little kick with his toe before scooping it up again. Uncle Isaac shook his head at Elliot, who rolled his eyes and went to slouch on a seat near the door.

I noticed with a panic that I wouldn't be able to see Elliot's face from the *bimah*. I looked for Ma and couldn't find her up in the balcony. No, there she was up to the left in the middle.

The rest of the congregation shuffled in, bringing their freshly soaped bodies and Saturday morning outfits. Some ladies wore hats, all had make-up. There were shiny patent leather

handbags and pearls and gold chains. The men had collared shirts but not all of them were long-sleeved and only about half had jackets. Boys and their fathers had their hair neatly arranged, except for that brother of mine.

Under the arms of the men were the plush velvet *tallis* bags and out of these they pulled their prayer shawls.

The Rabbi came to stand next to me and I knew I was accelerating to the beginning. "I have to go," I said to him.

"Go? You can't *go*."

"The toilet - I have to go." Never in my life had I known the shivering, vibratory grip-and-release a sphincter was capable of performing.

"Okay, but hurry up."

The toilet stall was cold but quiet at least; but that the toilet paper had been pre-torn into squares for *Shabbes* labours troubled me. My mind busied itself wondering whose hands had prepared this pitiable stack but I couldn't help but think that my nervous stomach was just a symptom, a message from my very being that I didn't know what I was doing here. I was a pretender to the *bimah* and was sure to be found out in this test of manhood.

There were more people inside the synagogue when I returned and there was no more waiting around to be done. Everything I'd tried to remember about the order of the liturgy fled from me as I walked up the stairs of the altar. I was left blank. The Rabbi may have cued me, I can't be certain, but almost without me knowing about it, I'd begun.

What is there to say about leading the service as a thirteen-year-old, except that it's excruciating? I couldn't look up into the women's faces or down at the men's for fear of losing my place. I felt the anxiety of not having the Rabbi next to me, guiding my voice and my hand with his own convulsing limb. To some extent it felt as if I were watching a movie of it all, entitled 'My Bar Mitzvah'.

Somehow, though, I was being dragged along by the insistent order of Saturday morning and there was some relief when my uncles were called to read from the Torah.

"*Mazel tov*, my boy," said Uncle Frank, shaking my hand. "You're doing well. Don't be a pussy - belt it out, hey?"

"Yes, Uncle Frank."

He wouldn't let go of my hand. " 'Yes, Uncle Frank,' " he repeated, disparagingly. "What did I tell you? Say it."

"Don't be a pussy," I repeated.

“That’s right.” He let go of my hand and tottered down the stairs of the *bimah*. Joss and I had always believed swearing in *shul* was doubly sinful, swearing in *shul* on *Shabbes*, double that again. I hoped it wouldn’t jinx my *bar mitzvah*.

When it was time for me to chant my *parsha*, the Rabbi’s tape unreeled in my head. Did I deliver it according to the cantillation, precisely, without missing a turn or a trill?

I found that I’d slipped into a comfortable monotone.

Whatever adrenalin I’d manufactured had time to dissipate. I noticed then that I was leaning on my hand, propped up by my elbow next to the scrolls. I had to lift my head to shake myself out of the stupor. This movie was dragging.

For the first time, I had the courage to look into the faces – women above, men below – and saw they were as bored as I was. Ma had been right: nobody listens. But the reading was done; somehow I was through it.

Then I was required to stand in front of the lectern and shift from foot to foot while the Rabbi gave his sermon, directed at me, advising how to continue to be a good Jew. Uncomfortable as it was, I knew I was in the home stretch. As a result, I don’t remember a word of the Rabbi’s advice.

The memory I have of walking out of the *shul*, although obviously inaccurate, is a wide shot of the double doors bursting open and releasing me, the congregation like a wave behind me. The relief was enormous.

I was flooded with aunties’ lipstick kisses and *mazel tovs*. Sean and Markos and Joss were there in their own smart clothes, shaking my hand. Besides the handshakes and kisses, men plied me with envelopes and women with wrapped gifts.

I walked down to the hall, surrounded by my friends, and Elliot and Will helped carry some of the presents. On placing my spoils on a table inside the hall, I had to face first one and then another person I would usually rather have avoided. But in that moment of release and elation, with the service behind me, it surprised me how welcoming and gracious I felt towards them both.

Shoshana was already at the table and made sure I was there to see her place a rectangular gift in shiny blue wrapping on top of the other boxes. “So you’re a man now,” she said.

“Well, at least it’s over with now.”

“You were average.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you still gonna come to *shul*?”

“Sure,” I said. Although, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. The *bar mitzvah* had been such a finite point.

“Well, see you around.” She walked past the buffet table with the pink fish mould, the gefilte fish, the salads and fanned slices of cucumber and carrot prepared by the ladies of the Jewish Women’s Guild. She walked to her table in the hall, decorated like all the others in blue and white and silver, and sat next to Carol, who blew me a kiss.

“That your girlfriend, my boy?” said Leo Fein, who appeared next to me.

“No,” I said.

“Watch out she’s not crazy like her mother,” he said, and I laughed, actually enjoying the exchange with him. “This is for you, china. *Mazel tov*, boy. You were excellent, hey?”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Enjoy it, my boy,” said Leo Fein and he walked through the hall, greeting a few people in that easy, almost sloppy, manner of his. Again, a little of the old admiration I’d felt for him at our first meeting returned.

But a new anxiety shot through me: the speech. It was as if none of what I’d just been through in the *shul* counted for anything. I’d achieved nothing at all, nothing that could help me deliver a speech in my own language to an attentive audience. All the goodwill that had swelled around me and held me aloft after the service broke up, was sucked away again, and I was left alone as if on a frigid empty beach.

I ate very little of the starter and felt in my pocket for the speech, written in full on two A4 sheets, and in point-form on reference cards.

Ma was always shy of speaking in front of an audience, so Will said he’d say a toast in my honour. I’m sure he said pleasant and encouraging things, probably made a joke even. I fiddled with the speech and the button on my jacket and smiled a lot. When it came time for everyone to toast me, I looked up at Ma. “Do I sit or stand?” Everyone else stood, I sat.

“Stay there. You stand up after, when you give your speech.”

“*L’chaim!*” they all said and set their glasses down.

I rose and took out the speech on the A4 sheets – the cards weren’t in the same pocket anymore.

“Rabbi Fischer, the Hebrew congregation, Mom, my family and friends,” I began. The order was important. “I’d like to thank you all for coming to my *bar mitzvah*.” Now that I’d started reading, I wasn’t going to stop. I heard shuffling, I heard coughing, but all I saw were the words. My eyes never moved from the page and up into the faces of the luncheon guests in the hall of blue and white and silver.

“The ladies of the Jewish Guild have done a wonderful job with the delicious food.” There were a few claps. My left hand twiddled my jacket button. The button seemed to have a plastic backing that felt like leather. “I’d like to thank my family for travelling from Johannesburg and Rustenburg.” A list of names followed. The button was attached with a metal loop and woolly thread to the jacket. “And especially my Uncle Victor who came all the way from Compensatie Street.”

There were a few laughs and my Uncle Victor shouted out, “Hey, you bloody rubbish!”

“It really means a lot to me to have you here.” The button was edged with the same kind of plastic-leather stuff but they’d worked in some fabric into the centre. “In Jewish tradition, thirteen is when a boy becomes a man. I’ve been a man for...” the page said [*look at watch*] and I made a show of looking at my watch, “...ten minutes now, and boy have things changed.” There was polite laughter.

In the brief moment when I glanced away from the words, I saw a few people looking off to the side in the direction of the door. “So if anyone wants to buy me a whiskey and a cigar, I’m ready. See me after the speech.” Muted laughter. “But seriously, I look forward to my new responsibilities as a Jewish man, and being a part of the community.”

I turned the page and looked up. Two men, one in a blue suit with a wide tie with an orange flower print, and another in a brown suit and brown tie, both with prominent moustaches, entered the hall and walked over to Leo Fein. They whispered something in his ear.

“I’d like to make a toast,” I said, skipping ahead to the end. People’s eyes were on Leo Fein but they all stood and took up their glasses. It was an Irish toast, for some reason – probably because that’s what I’d found in Will’s book of ‘Jokes, Toasts and Speeches’. No-one else remembers it either because, although one or two managed to say ‘cheers’ and drink and clap, their eyes and minds were on Leo Fein being escorted out of the *shul* hall by the men with moustaches.

I let go of the button. I no longer had to say things in front of people, or sing or chant or remember the order of the liturgy or remember to thank anyone. I stopped and watched, with everyone else, Leo Fein leaving.

The note had hit its target, was all I thought, and I wished it hadn’t. Ma looked scared and sent Will off to find out what he could. As everyone lined up for the gefilte fish and salads, the talk was about how those two men had lifted Leo Fein up under his armpits. Government men, they said.

How could a stupid little note be so powerful an instrument? And what a stupid little boy was I? I wasn’t a man at all. I was a coward, responsible for a most treacherous and cruel deed,

masquerading as petulant, prepubescent vengeance; a baby giant set loose in the city with clumsy, destructive limbs, toppling buildings and towers, strewing cars in its play.

I wanted to retract what power I had conjured with that note and hated the satisfaction I'd felt with myself over selecting those words.



No photograph exists to record my outfit or my expression, haggard or relieved, after the *bar mitzvah*. There was too much to think about besides the *bar mitzvah*, I suppose. Even though I was meant to be the main attraction, Leo Fein had stolen the show, and, as it turned out, a large part the family fortune.

University of Cape Town

## A Hundred Shekels

I was frightened at my mother's state after Leo Fein's disappearance. If I'd known how it would have affected her I would never have thought of intervening. The best I could do now would be to remain silent on the whole matter.

Over the days that followed, I hoped her sadness would abate but it only worsened and then transformed into fear. That desperation is not something I can bear to think about for too long but I have to face it in order to tell you the next stage in my family's history. It plays out like a dream in which your teeth crumble and fall out and there's nothing you can do about it.

There were so many phone calls and meetings between Ma and Will and Morgan in those days, one worse than the next in its news and effect. One of these took place on a Thursday evening. Will had returned from university especially for it and the three of them talked in the living room while I lay on the carpet writing my thank-yous.

In front of me I had the stack of cards, envelopes and presents so I'd know whom to thank and what for. Just when I thought all the punishments of a *bar mitzvah* were over, there was this last one.

Dear Mr and Mrs Markowitz (*or Kotzen or Friedman or Hirschowitz or Schultz – there were so many identical to the one below*),

Thank you so much for attending my Bar Mitzvah. It meant so much to have you there on my special day (*and so on and so forth*). Thanks also for your thoughtful present – that pen is going to come in very handy with all these Thank-You notes! (*Or whatever other semi-appropriate sign-off I could think of.*)

Yours sincerely,

Benjamin Aronbach

I had a clutch of pens – for some reason, the standard *bar mitzvah* present of the day. There were a few cheques and some cash, a book of quotations, and a Remington shaver which would have no use for another five years. Writing in a large hand so as to fill up the blue absorbent letter paper, I listened in on the conversation the adults were having.

"We'll find him, Margot," said Morgan.

"What if we don't?" said Will.

Morgan didn't answer, the optimism evidently having a draining effect on him.

“We have to be realistic,” said Will. “We have to look at what we’ve got, and where we can go from here. How do things stand with the property?”

“Van Jaarsveld will have the deed soon,” said Morgan. Ma looked at her hands. “Got connections at the council.”

“It wasn’t a fair price,” said Will.

“Your mother said she needed the money urgently. That’s the compromise – price had to come down.”

“I know, but come on.”

“Was *signed*, William. Can’t be reversed.”

“So we just lose our property, like that?”

“Afraid so. They’ve sent through a lease.”

“Already?”

“Short term.”

“How short?”

“Six months.”

“They want us out?”

“Have plans, I suppose.”

“Braam van Jaarsveld’s wanted that land for a long time.”

“Margot – have you heard from him? Leo Fein?”

“No, Morgan,” said Ma. “I haven’t.”

“Best bet is to try get it from him. Beast of a man.”

“Bloody crook,” said Will in a rare moment of unison with Morgan.

“Now he’s a beast and a crook?” said Ma. “You two were salivating when he came on the scene. No, I haven’t heard from him. I don’t expect you hear from people in exile. Or worse. We don’t know what he’s been through – it could be something more terrible than whatever we’re facing.”

“Ma, if you do you hear from him, though, we have to get it back. One way or another. Even if the business makes money – ”

“ – which it isn’t,” said Morgan.

“ – Van Jaarsveld won’t give us an extension and we’ll be out on our arses. Leo Fein has to give back the money. What did he tell you he was doing with it anyway?”

Ma folded her arms. “An investment, that’s all.”

There was a silent moment as everyone, I suppose, considered their own capacity for foolishness and credulity. My forearm ached from the cursive script but it was no match for the squeeze I felt over my chest.

"You're sure you haven't heard from him?" asked Will.

Ma folded her face into her hands.

"See if you can speak to Van Jaarsveld, Morgan."

"Won't do any good. But I'll try."

"God, Margot," said Will. "That was a really stupid thing."

"I know it was," said Ma. "I don't need to be reminded of it."

Will gave a great sigh, and this became his hallmark whenever he was thinking about the terrible foolishness with which our mother had acted. Ma wouldn't stand for any more head-on criticism, not from her son, and so Will resorted to this single mannerism, expressing in a breath how he felt about the whole affair.

I pulled the next gift envelope out to examine what I needed to write. This one, in a beautiful hand on Lion Brand letter paper, read:

*Dear Ben,*

*Mazel Tov!*

*Well done on your Bar Mitzvah!*

*Leo Fein*

Out fluttered two crisp fifty-Israeli shekels, which I hid under my stack of thank-yous. No more letters, I resolved and housed the point of my fourteen-carat gold-electroplated Sheaffer pen.



The information of the demise of our family fortune, such as it was, filled me drop by drop whenever I caught one of these discussions, and it wasn't long before I was heavy with it.

I never asked my mother to explain in detail what had happened and how our future was withering, for fear it might draw confession from me. I deduced that she'd given Leo Fein money and he'd promised to return it with a profit. My mother, for her part, never sat me down to tell me about it, I suppose because she wanted to protect me, or felt the situation could yet be saved, or she was heavy with her own feelings.

We generally gave her space since none of her sons were equipped to comfort her in that other loss she'd suffered. It must have hurt and embarrassed her to be left without the attentions of her suitor, but this she bore alone.

I speak for myself and Will because we were present. Elliot was concentrating on his final high school year in Johannesburg while the family's finances came apart. He'd never had the slightest interest in the business, or its money, or any money whatsoever, actually. All that mattered to him then was his portfolio and it was impressive enough by the end of that year to earn him a scholarship at a London art college. It cheered Ma up to hear it, although its effect was attenuated by the knowledge that we'd be losing him too.

I had my final exams to think about at that time. It was only primary school but it was the last year of it before I entered high school. In the selfish way of children, I was able to sequester myself to some degree in my own affairs.

But the information kept dripping in and exams didn't last forever. By the end Morgan had advised us starkly of our situation and we moved out of our house to a townhouse near the municipal swimming pools.

Our dachshund, Cindy, had to go to Victor and Bernice's house, since there were no dogs allowed in our new home. And we only saw Shadrack once a week now, when he came to help Ma with the house and the little garden. She couldn't afford to pay him much and he found work somewhere else.

"Yes-thanks," said Shadrack when Ma broke the news that he'd be losing his weekday home, the room behind our house on Oost Street.

"Do you understand, Shadrack?" she asked. "You'll have to find another place to stay, I'm afraid."

"Yes-thanks."

He found new accommodation at the back of a new employer's house and Victor gave him work when he could at the pre-cast wall business.

"They're using our old house for something," I told my friends when they came to visit. "It's just for a while and then we'll move back."

I only ever invited Markos and Sean to the townhouse once. Whether it was they who were uncomfortable in the small space or me is hard to judge but we went to the municipal pool together that afternoon instead. After that, we spent our Fridays at Markos's under the stuffed buck trophies or at Sean's with the tennis court.

As for Leo Fein, he hadn't been seen since my *bar mitzvah*. Only Uncle Victor talked about him. We went over to their house more often, sometimes twice a week for dinner, and Uncle Victor would say to Ma, "Jeez, that was a lucky escape you had with that Fein character, hey Sis?"

Ma's lips would tighten and she'd be quiet, hoping the moment would pass or that Aunty Bernice would change the topic.

"I mean, it could've been worse, hey?" he said. "He's in Tel Aviv now, I hear. His son even had to leave. 'Exiles', they're calling them." At this he let out a contemptuous puff of air. "I wonder what nonsense he's up to there."

Jackie and I would sit in her room, listening to records and looking at a map of the world to see where we'd rather be besides that town, or play in the garden. More than ever we wanted to be away from our parents, with Victor and Bernice in the final bitter stages of their unhappy marriage. Jackie and I were doing handstands out in the garden one evening in the glare of the square light that hung under the eaves.

"Did you get some cool stuff for your *bar mitzvah*?" she asked.

"Some. I got some books and the tape player. And a bit of money."

"What are you gonna buy with it?"

"I can't buy anything with it. It's in an investment."

"For what?"

"For the business. Will says I'll get it back when I'm eighteen."

"You can stay here if you want."

"Why would I want to stay here?"

"In case you don't like it at your new place."

"I like it there. It's cool."

"You don't have a pool. You can't even fit your stuff into the house."

"It's just temporary. Until things are okay at the business."

"My dad says you have to sell the business."

"Your dad's got a big mouth. And he doesn't know what he's talking about."

While Jackie was upside down I pulled on her arm, only to make her fall. She toppled over and there was an immediate change in the way her face reflected that garden light. She began crying and I ran inside to tell Aunty Bernice.

Bernice, a former nurse, had decided Jackie had a broken wrist and the x-ray at the hospital proved her right. I cried longer than Jackie that night, and the next day I came in timid and fragile to visit. I said sorry to Jackie, managing – just – to look her in the face. It came as some relief that no-one seemed quite as upset as I was, and they laughed at my sheepishness.

The break between Jackie and I didn't take long to heal, which was fortunate with our respective troubles. My family's worsening financial position has already been described, but my aunt and uncle's marriage was worsening daily too.

Victor and Bernice drifted from each other like ice sheets, Victor into the warming waters of a new relationship and Bernice floating increasingly into isolation.

Bernice grabbed the one thing she could, Jackie, and moved to Johannesburg. Eventually, with Victor's empty house and our empty pockets, it made sense that we move in with him.

This situation, like the townhouse and, indeed, the sale of Great North Diesel and Auto Electric, was always meant to be a staging point on the way to improvement. And it was easy to feel this was true under the spell of my brother Will. He always had a great, sweeping effect on our mood when he was home because he made us believe we'd been successful once and were worthy of it still. It was inevitable, in fact.

The property was gone and Will was in negotiations to sell the business off, although it was looking more and more likely that it would be sold piecemeal, the parts fetching a greater sum than the whole; our debts to the bank had not gone away and the business, as a going concern, wasn't what it used to be.

Increasingly, a legal pursuit to recover our lost money from Leo Fein became the only option for us. Ma was not willing to engage but Will took up the fight. He spent costly hours in lawyers' chambers. It settled into a long-running chase, the patterns of it emerging, becoming routine. It would be a lengthy process, the lawyers assured us.



The year after my *bar mitzvah*, Ma and I travelled to Joburg to see Elliot off to London. We met Will at the Turffontein racetrack, where he worked for a bookmaker named Skamandrios to pay for his studies, and the four of us went to the airport together. Elliot had an army-surplus rucksack leaning against him as we sat in the cafeteria overlooking the planes. We all ate chips with a glowing tomato sauce off a paper plate.

"You still going to *shul*, Jewboy?" asked Elliot.

"No."

"Knew it would wear off." It had worn off immediately after the *bar mitzvah*, in fact, as he'd said, as I'd sworn it wouldn't. It was a relief not to be bound to go to *cheder* and, especially, Saturday morning services (which were surely a sign of a vengeful God if He existed at all, to

take up such a valuable part of the week). I missed the Rabbi but not the religion and even the nightly recitation of *Sh'ma Yisrael* had slipped away.

God Himself had slipped away, and with surprising ease. He was on holiday after *shul* (or I was from Him), and while I still thought it possible that He was there, it was significant that He hadn't actually *been* there through my family's crisis.

I hadn't expected Him to show up, since my family's rationalism marinated me to the bone, whether I wanted it or not. The burden of belief had fallen to me to save my heathen relatives, to even out the points with the Great Scorekeeper on their behalf. But I gave up, and what a relief it was, since we were all damned together now anyway.

In any case, the question of whether He was there or not lost all importance for me, so He (or 'he' now) might as well not be.

"How are the lawyers?" asked Elliot.

"Stealing our money faster than Leo Fein," said Will.

Elliot sneered. "You going to keep going after him?"

"Fuck-yes, I'm keeping after him. It's our fucking money, Elliot."

"Shh, Will," said Ma, looking around at the other tables. She had never been one to worry over swearing but resorted to an act of prudishness now to avoid the conflict between her sons.

We ate our chips.

"Of course I'm going to go after it," said Will again, unable to quell the defence of his mission. "That's what needs to be done."

"Why don't we just let it go?" said Elliot.

"Yes," said Ma. "Just let it go."

"No, I mean the money. Let the money go, get on with our lives."

"So you're fine," said Will, "and so that's okay then, is it? What about us? And what about when you come back, with a useless degree and can't get a job? I'm not bailing you out."

"I'm not asking you to. And who says I'm coming back?" Elliot crossed his arms and quit the chips. "And I do care. That's why I'm saying, forget about it, it's only going to make you miserable and bitter. Just do something else."

"You're a baby," said Will. "You don't know what the real world is. But you'll find out eventually. I've got to get this off."

Rubbing the ketchup stains on his fingers with a thin paper napkin, Will left the table and strode in the direction of the men's.

"Sometimes I agree with you, Elliot," said Ma. "But Will's right too. It's our money."

"We made that money as the result of a system of inequality."

“We’re not Rand Lords, Elliot. We didn’t build a mining empire on the backs of black labour.”

“Maybe not directly, but you can bet things were easier for us than they could have been. Should have been. I’m glad we lost it.”

“And what about your brother here?” she said, indicating me. “Who’s going to feed him? How is he supposed to get to university?”

Never before had the implications of our fall slapped me in the face like they did then. I’d heard the conversations about the present, but no-one had come out and said anything about the future. It’s an indication of the level of agitation with Elliot my mother felt just then, too. She’d always tried to protect me.

“People in worse situations do it,” said Elliot. “It’ll be good for us.”

Will returned, his fingers still carrying the ketchup stains.

“Elliot, I’m proud of you and what you’re doing,” said Ma. “And I even envy you for how you feel. But don’t impose those feelings on us. At least give your brother here a chance to see for himself. To have the same things you had, growing up, let me remind you.”

“Why don’t you ask him what he wants?” said Elliot. “Ben?”

I didn’t think Ma would indulge this question from Elliot but she turned to me and waited. She’d always been the one who’d known how to fix things between us all but she’d lost something now and was looking at me, to me, for an answer. Will and Elliot waited too. In that moment, with that question hanging there, I didn’t think at all about what I wanted. I cravenly groped for the *right* answer, not even knowing what *my* answer was.

Without Leo Fein to hunt, there’d be no reminder of my part in the family’s ruin. And maybe Elliot was right and we’d adjust to a reduced way of life without too much consequence.

But nobody wants their options picked off like ducks at a shooting gallery and so, motivated by fear for myself, and for Will and Ma (because what would there be now, without the business, the house, the savings, the policies, and even without the hope of catching Leo Fein?), I said, “I think we should get the money back.”

# **PART 2**

University of Cape Town

## Karateka

Unspoken in our family, like so much, was the feeling that we were charity cases. Great North Diesel and Auto Electric had withered after the sale of the property. We couldn't afford to keep the place running and we couldn't get our money back from Leo Fein.

Victor promised us lawyers but after two meetings, Ma became disheartened, and Victor retracted his support for the cause. "I can't keep paying for these sharks," he said. "You know my money goes straight to Bernice. Or else I'd do it."

Sending a man into exile and, as a result, ruining my family, pulled at my insides for a long time after my *bar mitzvah*, and every small decline in our fortunes in the years thereafter tugged on the viscera further.

First, losing the business, then the house I grew up in, the family holidays reduced from Natal coast expanses of time and space to the hot springs at Tshipise, pee-temperature swimming pools shared with caravanning families.

I didn't get to talk much to Ma about our state of affairs since Uncle Victor and Nadine were always around. The affair had started when Nadine began to visit Victor's cement-fence business regularly, doing her rounds as a rep for a corporate gifts firm – branded mugs, key rings and so on.

They were married in a small ceremony and after a Mauritius honeymoon she moved into Victor's house, too. Having her around made it difficult for us to talk to Bernice and Jackie, living in Johannesburg now. Mostly Ma and I were in Nadine's way and I bet it troubled Victor to extend both a protective arm over his baby sister, and his heart, wallet and spirit to his second wife.

Though Ma and I didn't discuss Leo Fein, that's not to say the name didn't come up in Victor's house. Victor veered between a kind of misty-eyed admiration for the other man ("Not a lot of people would have the balls to pull off some of the things he did, hey Marg?") and an older-brother's tut-tutting for her choice in men ("What were you doing with a guy like that, hey Marg?"). I found both positions hurtful and I'm sure Ma did too but neither of us said anything. It was calculated in the debt we owed for being taken in.

And Will, after all the stratagems for rebuilding an empire – well, now he had his own fight with the fetters of his compulsions, which, also, we didn't talk about. Though Ma shut Victor up as best she could, I knew from the occasional gloating comment from him that Will had lost a large amount of money with his gambling. There was a lot we didn't talk about.

We didn't talk about the fact that Ma gave away her pottery implements when she couldn't sell them. Nor that she stopped seeing her friends, the few artists and musicians there were in town. In any case, Victor would not have been generous with his house if my mother had invited artists – black artists, sometimes! – into the house.

And I didn't escape Victor's haranguing either, usually over a lack of initiative and prospects. "Your father built that business without anyone's help, you know," he'd say, beginning a painful discourse. In the four years we'd been staying with him (we had almost one year alone, Ma and I, in the townhouse complex near the municipal pool before the savings dried up), the closest he came to directing any respect my way was when I placed second in a school General Knowledge quiz. It soon waned.

"What's the capital of Madagascar?" he asked me when I returned home with the results of the test. I didn't know and declined the second round of the quiz, which was to take place in Johannesburg against other schools.

Most of all, we didn't talk about my part in the Aronbachs' downfall, because I was the only one in the family who knew about it.

As for my prospects, they were limited. Ma's job at Doren's Outfitters wouldn't pay for my education past high school, and my marks weren't high enough for any sort of scholarship. I spent many hours over Victor's Encyclopaedia Britannica (and the black and white nudes I could find in Photographers Monthly, or if I was *sure* everyone was going to be out, over my uncle's collection of 'Scope' magazines and the odd contraband 'Club' or American 'Playboy'), yet none of that knowledge translated into school marks. It remained general knowledge instead of, I suppose, specific.

I could forget about Leo Fein for great stretches in the years after my *bar mitzvah* but there'd always be a pang, a stabbing reminder when I became frustrated at a lack of something, and I worked its eventual cause back to our loss of autonomy as a family, and beyond that, to my part in my family's diminished situation.



I was eighteen, a month out of school, and of an age that covets change. For someone about to grow into an adult, to leave home, to study something novel, the 1992 referendum and the

anticipation of change might have felt exhilarating, like the feeling of being pushed at the very edge of a wave. But if all around me was moving, I sank like a weight.

There'd been very little change at all for me. My release from school was a great anticlimax. I'd be staying in this town, not preparing myself for a new life, not learning anything new at a university; and all this while my friends each left to fall into their own futures.

I listened as they discussed after-school holidays I couldn't go on, I watched as they showed each other their university acceptance letters; I received my conscription papers. My male friends did too, of course, but they had the legitimate excuse of study and qualified automatically for deferment.

Markos was going to university in Johannesburg, Sean to a technikon in Pretoria, Joss to Israel. Even Potato Latke had been accepted into hotel school, and Jackie was with her mom in Johannesburg and set to begin university there in the new year.

I began to almost hate them since they were passing me by, leaving me behind. I resolved I *wouldn't* stay in contact, I *didn't* need them. But I also couldn't stand being in the great depression of Victor's sunken lounge. I longed to leave town.

On the one hand more and more people were ignoring conscription, but on the other the government needed more soldiers to police the townships. With no study deferment, I was meant to report to the Seventh SA Infantry at Phalaborwa. Instead, I hid.

While my friends were away on matric holidays in Margate and Southbroom for ten-day binges I couldn't afford, I took a bus to Pretoria to visit Will. I tried not to talk to a boy who may or may not have had some brain damage, who was motivated to give me a list of animals he'd killed and methods used to do so. He loved his dogs, though, he said, and delighted in how stupid the animals were.

Though by 1992 many people were tearing up their army call-up papers, Will had decided to go. It wasn't clear at the time why he'd done so, although he'd been vague about many things in the intervening years. He maintained he was still engaging with lawyers over the hunt for Leo Fein and he kept a job at Skamandrios's bookmakers.

Then he made the sudden decision to report for duty at Voortrekkerhoogte military base outside Pretoria. It didn't take long before he'd pried his way into a job selling advertising space in the officer's magazine. He skipped much of basic training by arranging sports leave to compete in karate tournaments (none of which he went to because he'd never done more than three lessons of karate). He spent most of his time off out of uniform, conducting unspecified business of his own, or in his girlfriend's Sunnyside flat.

When I arrived in Pretoria Will and his girlfriend, Angie, met me at the terminus and took me to their Sunnyside flat. Angie wore Indian skirts and Will was dressed like a business executive. For dinner we went to an Italian restaurant where Will flipped his tie over his shoulder as he ate, and we drank red wine together and Will told Angie and I about his ideas to haul me and Ma out of the town.

“How come you went to the army?” I asked. “Are they even serious about call-ups anymore?”

“Oh, ja,” he said. “You can get six years if you don’t show up. Plus with all the changes, and the trouble in the townships, they need the army.”

“You don’t go into the townships, do you?” asked Angie.

“No, not me.”

“I got my call-up,” I said. “Phalaborwa.”

“Ooh, that’s a shit one,” said Will.

“Six years? Really?” I said.

“Ag, you’ll be fine,” said Will, and he poured some more wine.

I froze when I thought about what I was going to do about my call-up. I didn’t want to go to prison but the thought of the army scared me just as much; there wasn’t much between them, in my understanding.

‘It’ll make you into a man’ is what the teachers always told us. They made it sound like a threat. It would be painful, a harrowing ordeal.

I pictured it like this: they would force you into a machine like a hand-cranked mincer, or some kind of extruding apparatus. They’d crank you through with brute force, and what was pushed out the other side once they were done with you? A moustache-wearing, violent, snarling, chauvinist, wife-beating, child-hating, racist, tanned hunk of meat (for this was the kind of man those teacher represented to me). Either that, or a minced-up, bloody, disintegrated version of your former self.

I didn’t want to serve the system but I was still in fear of it. I didn’t have Elliot’s bravery, and I didn’t have Will’s talent for negotiation.

The next day Will had to change into his brown uniform. “God, it always scares me,” said Angie. “Hey, Ben? Creepy, hey?” A naturally nervous person anyway, it was clear she was not used to seeing my brother in the uniform he was meant to serve in.

“I’ve got to report in,” he said. “Keeps the Kolonel happy. Hey, do you want to see a military base?”

“No fucking way – I’m supposed to be in the army.”

“They’ll never know. It’ll be fun. We’ll go for lunch in town afterwards.”

I was wary at first but Will had a way of recruiting hearts and minds I'm sure the army would've been envious of.

We drove to the base in Will's Toyota Conquest with a box of Klipdrift brandy bottles clinking in the boot. The guard at the gates of Voortrekkerhoogte military base greeted Will like a long-lost chum. The private opened the boot and took out the box of brandy, waved at me and opened the gate for us to pass through. "In a place like this," said Will, "you need as many friends as possible."

We parked by a red-brick government-issue building, walked between two tall palms at the entrance and down a corridor. A woman in uniform with a short brush of hair sat outside the Kolonel's office. She smiled sweetly at my brother and Will unclipped his briefcase. He took out a bottle of perfume and presented it to her in the palm of his hand.

"That's the one, isn't it, Elsa?" asked Will.

"That's it, Will. Thank you so much. My sister loves it. And who's this?"

"My brother, Ben – this is Elsa, the loveliest creature in Voortrekkerhoogte."

"Ag, Will," she said, turning her head on its side, then presenting a hand to me. She had an unusual mix of coyness and masculinity about her, with a man's jaw and dimples in her cheeks.

"Aronbach!" said a man of about fifty in stiff uniform at the door of the office: the Kolonel.

Will saluted. "This is my brother, Kolonel."

The Kolonel shook my hand and puffed out his lips contemptuously. "Are you in school?" he asked.

"No, Sir." He was a terrifying man and somehow the fear made me forget that I needed to lie.

"Why aren't you in the army?"

"He's studying this year, Kolonel," said Will. "But he wants to do his National Service straight afterwards, so he's coming to have a look." We followed the Kolonel into his office.

"Where was your call-up for?"

"Phalaborwa, Sir."

"Call the Kolonel 'Kolonel'," said Will softly to me.

"Kolonel," I said.

"Sewe-SAI?" said the Kolonel. "I started there too. Good man."

The Kolonel nodded. "So, Aronbach?" he said, turning to Will. He ignored me for the rest of the meeting while Will took him through the sales figures for the officers' magazine. The Kolonel looked with equanimity tending to boredom at Will's sales figures (which sounded impressive to me, the way Will presented them).

"What about your karate, Aronbach?" said the Kolonel. "How's that?"

"I don't like to brag, Kolonel," said Will, pulling out a rolled sheet of paper. He'd gone so far as to have karate certificates printed up and had a collection of gold-painted plastic trophies for all his 'victories' at competitions. All this was to impress Kolonel Nel.

The Kolonel was inspecting one of the little gold trophies in his great brown fingers when Will pulled out a bottle of Glenmorangie. The Kolonel put the trophy down forcefully onto the desk. His eyes fixed Will in their gaze and then the thick fingers curled around the bottle of single malt.

Perhaps the presentation of the bottle served to remind the Kolonel that Will was getting something out of this relationship too. It's understandable that a man in his position, who'd literally fought to attain his rank and level of respect, didn't want to be seen or even to feel that he was being taken advantage of.

He was a Kolonel, which meant he had the kind of power over Will a simple employer didn't. He could make him do things he didn't want to. That Will, a smooth-talking Jew kid, could saunter in here and exert influence over the Kolonel – this must have been hard to swallow.

"Ja, Aronbach," said Kolonel Nel, unfurling the freshly-inked 2<sup>nd</sup>-place SA Karate Championships certificate. "Very impressive."

"Thank you, Kolonel."

"How do you do it? What's the secret?"

"It's focus, Kolonel. It's all in the mind, actually. You have to centre your energies and then... release."

"Wonderful. You should give our boys a talk about it some day. Our hand-to-hand guys. You're a real asset to the SADF, having a chap like you. You proud of your brother?" asked the Kolonel in a bark.

"Yes," I said.

"I'm nothing special," said Will. "Anyone can learn, Kolonel."

"Really? Why don't you give us a demonstration?"

"A demo?"

"A demo, ja."

"Well, you know karate season's over now. My sensei – that's my master – he says I need some rest now. It's been a long one."

"No, come now, Aronbach. For your boys here – a demo. I think it's a fantastic idea."

"I'm not so sure, Kolonel."

"I am, Aronbach. Done. Consider it an order," said Kolonel Nel.

It was just for an instant, but Will's eyes engaged mine and communicated something, not anything specific, but just enough to establish a conspiracy.

"Great. Great idea, Kolonel," said Will with an enthusiasm that came all-too naturally to him. "I like it. Where should we do this demo?"

"The gymnasium?"

"We can only fit, maybe, two hundred in there, Kolonel. What about the fields? We can get the stands, invite the whole battalion, some of the wives," said Will, upping the ante. While Kolonel Nel was certainly above Will in the chain of command and had proved his worth as both a bush survival expert and a strategist in the Angolan conflict, Will had the advantage of a straight face.

"Well, alright," said Kolonel Nel, sounding for the first time a little unsure now of where this was going. "But this had better be some demonstration."

"I'll make sure of it, Kolonel. I'll bring in some of the other boys. We can make an event of it."

"Fine, speak to my secretary," he said, swivelling his chair away from him. He'd pushed Will into a corner, but not the one he'd aimed for. "You're dismissed, Aronbach." To me he said nothing.

"Fuck," said Will as we drove out of the base.

"Do you really do karate?" I asked.

"Of course not. Fuck!" He banged the steering wheel with his palm. "Why did he put himself in this position?"

"You mean, why did he put *you* in this position?"

"Well, me too. But *him*. We've got a good arrangement. I do plenty of business for him, and he let's me out of all the army stuff. He doesn't say so but he knows it. Now it's fucked, this beautiful relationship."

Will explained the position he'd been put in. If he failed, maybe even if he pulled it off, the arrangement, based as it was on an unspoken untruth, would fall apart. Perhaps Kolonel Nel was like a man out of control, swerving the car into a lamppost to stop the ride, to call attention to the lie and end it.

We sat down to lunch at a steak house in Pretoria central and Will started talking about what he'd have to do. "Well, we've got a show to put on, I suppose." The idea of competing in karate hadn't come from nowhere. Will's best friend in the army, Pete, actually was a black belt and Will had accompanied him to a few competitions in the beginning. "I'll ask Pete if the dojo will do a demo – they have to. It's not enough, though. This has to be big if it's going to work."

Our meals came and the restaurant owner, an advertiser in the officer's magazine, came to join us at our table. Will asked after the man's partner.

"Bastard ran away with my money," he said. "But he'll pay."

I looked at Will for some recognition that the man's story was like our own but there was none.

"How do you know?" asked Will.

"I've got a debt collector," said the restaurateur with a satisfied smirk. "You remember Mike Schutte?"

"The Tank?" said Will. "Everyone knows him. The wrestler."

"Before that he was heavyweight champ, you know? Boxing."

"Elliot used to love him," said Will to me. "What happened to him?"

"You know why they called him 'The Tank'? Because you needed somewhere large to keep all that beer." He gave out a great laugh at this.

"So what's he doing for you?" asked Will.

"He's going to nudge my friend a little bit. Get him to cough up. Hey, hey – do you know the one about Mike Schutte and Jimmy Abbot?"

"Who?" I asked Will.

Jimmy was the country's other great boxing failure, he explained to me. "How does it go?"

"Mike and Jimmy saw a dog licking its balls one day," said the restaurateur. "So Jimmy goes: 'Jeez, I'd like to try that, hey!'"

'Don't be stupid,' says Mike, 'he'll bite you!' " The restaurant manager laughed at this, repeating the last line again and again.

"Hey, can I get his number, do you think?" asked Will.

"You need him to nudge someone too?"

"Something like that," said Will. The man went to his office and came back with the number for Mike 'The Tank' Schutte and Will looked at it with a smile. Mike Schutte vs Leo Fein? This was something I didn't want to miss.

But, as I soon discovered, that wasn't the billing at all. Will ignored my questions and spent his time deep in thought or conversation, first with his friend Pete, then with Mike Schutte himself.

"You're a great hero," he said to him over the phone. "I've seen all your fights... No, not that one... No, not that one either, but – look, I don't care much for fights... You neither, hey? Well, this is a business opportunity. Sort of a fight, sort of a show. And I can guarantee two things – it'll pay, and it won't hurt a bit."

After the phone-call to The Tank, Will started scribbling something. "Listen," he said to me, "I need you to go to the printers on Church Street and get them to lay this out on A5 flyers. Two-hundred of them. And posters, big ones. Say, thirty of those."

The next day we collected the flyers and posters from the printers and drove back to the base. The same guard was on duty and Will handed him a stack of flyers and a poster:

**Martial Arts Demonstration**

featuring the SA National Karate Team (Springboks)

and **MIKE SCHUTTE!**

Only R20 entrance

With Prestik we affixed posters all over the base and handed out flyers in the mess hall. We were heading back to the car when a private ran over to us and told Will the Kolonel wanted to see him.

We went into the red-brick building, past the secretary who looked at us wide-eyed and stepped into the Kolonel's office.

"What the hell is this, Aronbach?" said the Kolonel flapping a poster over his desk.

"It's for the demo, Kolonel."

"This has got out of hand."

"I'll take care of everything. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about."

"We're the SADF. We're not in show business, Aronbach. You can't charge entrance. And where's the money going to?"

"After expenses I think we should make a tidy profit, all of which I will hand over to you to disperse."

"Can we just do that?" said the Kolonel in a rare moment of vulnerability.

"You could, for instance, give it to the MOTHS or the Legion of Veterans Association, or maybe it could go towards a regimental dinner or something else the base really needs. You decide."

"I decide?"

"You're the Kolonel, Kolonel."

I spent much of the following week going back to the printers and handing out flyers to people in town. All work seemed a drag to me but this especially so, since a person handing out flyers is generally spurned, treated with weariness, annoyance or regarded as obstructive furniture.

And I was supposed to be on holiday after finishing school. "You know what my friends are doing right now?" I asked, as Will handed me a fresh stack of flyers to place under windscreen wipers. "They're on a beach, or at a bar, or sleeping off a hangover, or finding girls."

"It's good work experience for you, buddy," said Will. "You can put it on your CV."

While I was being ignored over my flyers, Will busied himself with phoning equipment hire companies and show people.

The demo was to be held on my second-last day in Pretoria, and Will changed once more into his brown uniform. On the way to the base Will said, "Buddy, I need you to help out with the demo."

"Doing what?" I asked. I was sick of handing out flyers.

"Just help direct people at the back."

"But what are you going to be doing?"

"I'll be doing that too, but I can't when I'm on stage."

"I don't know how to do that."

"It's easy. It's mainly Mike Schutte you need to think about. You'll meet him – he's a professional. You don't have to worry. You just send him out when we get to the tiles."

"What tiles?"

"You'll see."

When we arrived at the base's sports fields, the national karate team was warming up and stretching on the field. A wooden stage had been set up, and behind a scrim I met a man in a tuxedo, a girl in an orange bathing suit and Mike 'The Tank' Schutte.

The Tank was drinking a beer and talking to the girl in the swimming costume, who had a rambunctious perm. She was laughing at his jokes and when I was introduced, his handshake was so gentle it was hard to imagine him as a heavyweight champion.

Will went over the programme with the man in the tuxedo, his friend Pete, another man in a karate *gi* who was captain of the squad, and Mike Schutte (although the last-mentioned was blowing kisses to the girl in the costume throughout the briefing, and pulling beer cans from a large cooler bag Will had brought him).

There was some nervous tension behind the scenes as the microphone was tested and the man in the tuxedo went over some notes. I looked from behind the scrim and saw people

starting to enter the field and take up seats on the stands. The officers and their wives with their large hats began to arrive and by the time the privates at the gate had collected the final tickets, there were over one-and-a-half thousand people there.

Will checked the stands from the behind the scrim continually. When there was only a trickle of additional troops and the stands were full, he gave a nod. The man in the tuxedo inserted a finger into his shirt collar – it was thirty degrees at least out there – pulled a smile up onto his face, and walked past the scrim and onto the stage with his microphone.

“*Dames en here*, ladies and gentlemen,” said the man in the tuxedo, “please welcome onto stage the South African National Karate Squad!”

Will sent the girl in the orange one-piece bathing costume onto stage with a pat on her behind. She sashayed onto the platform and held up a ‘number 1’ on a white board to the crowd. The troops cheered and whistled but when the karatekas arrived on stage, legs apart and rooted into the floor, fists clenched, and shouting their first martial cry, the audience shushed. Will watched, sweating a little and checking the time constantly.

The martial artists went through their strict *katas*. Thereafter, some staged demonstrations of attacks and counter-attacks. Kicks and parries, throws and rolls had the stiff white-pyjamaed warriors flopping and flying all over the stage. Applause followed each sequence, with whispers of “Jeez” and “*Eina*” and “*Yussie*” and “*Yuslaaik*.”

I found the Kolonel sitting in the front row with his wife, a woman with hair so white under her flying-saucer hat it reminded me of the chalky medicine I was made to swallow as a child. I looked around for Will to tell him I’d spotted his C.O. but he wasn’t in the same spot anymore. Then wild cheers for the curly blonde with the ‘number 2’ card and the karatekas left the stage.

Will emerged behind me, wearing a karate *gi* of his own. “Take care of The Tank,” he said to me. “I’m on.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, *dames en here*,” said the tuxedoed man, “I have been asked to request that the audience remains silent out of respect for the following practitioner of the ancient Japanese martial arts while he concentrates on this next amazing feat. It’s one that requires total mental focus. These almost-superhuman acts can be performed only after years of training, and only with complete concentration.”

“Hey, that’s Will,” I said to no-one in particular, although The Tank had come to stand next to me and watch. A warm breeze of beer rolled over me from the big man’s lips. The crowd settled and focused their own attention on the figure of Will, almost drowning in the crisp white of the karate *gi*. In front of him were two sets of planks clamped between bricks. Will stood in front of

one and closed his eyes, meditating while the Kolonel shifted uncomfortably in his first-row seat. The crowd obeyed the request for respectful silence.

“Haiii-ya!” said Will and he brought the edge of his palm down on the plank, snapping it in two. He followed up immediately after by splintering the second plank. Behind him, more karatekas brought onto stage more planks – double and triple sets. Will haiii-ya-ed through them, too. There was genuine awe in the crowd.

The final challenge arrived on stage. Will’s friend, Pete, invited the girl in the costume to examine one of the tiles that now formed a stack in front of Will. She tapped one tile with her knuckle, then held her hand, confirming that it was indeed rock-solid.

Pete went around the front and made a final adjustment to the stack and laid a folded white towel over the first tile. Will knelt before the tiles with his eyes closed. The crowd saw him take a deep breath in and exhale. He slowly lowered his forehead to the towel, testing the resistance of the tiles, then came back upright in preparation for the massive head strike required to shatter them.

I was so caught up in the anticipation, I almost forgot. I pushed Mike Schutte without any thought of safety for myself – he was the man who’d broken Gerrie Coetzee’s fists, remember. The Tank stormed onto stage.

With the tiles still intact, the stage reverberated under the heavy feet of a monster. “Aaaaaarrgh!” said the booming voice of Mike ‘The Tank’ Schutte and the crowd didn’t know whether to cheer or feel frightened for Will kneeling at the tiles. Mike kicked over the stack and pulled Will up onto his feet by his *gi*. “If you’re so strong, fight me, *jou sissie!*” boomed the giant.

Will ran from the giant. The crowd were on their feet, unsure of who to cheer for but cheering nevertheless. “Stop and fight!” said Mike, chasing Will around the small stage. I looked over at the SA National Karate Team sitting on the grass backstage, trying to gauge whether I should be worried. Some were yawning, sitting cross-legged, some massaging each other’s thighs.

Finally, Mike caught up with him and Will faced the man. Will tried a kind of chop – one he could only have garnered from watching action movies – and Mike caught it easily. The big man lifted Will up in his grip, then dumped him on the stage in a heap of white linen.

Facing the crowd, Mike lifted both hands in victory. I considered going on stage myself and tried to find Angie’s face in the crowd. But Will was up again.

He walked up behind the heavyweight and, showing his hand to the crowd, gripped between his thumb and two fingers the man’s neck at the crook with the shoulder. Mike ‘The Tank’ Schutte slopped on the floor in front of Will, out cold.

The crowd clapped their appreciation, but do you think the wise black-belt, Will Aronbach, breaker of planks, would-be breaker of tiles and now feller of heavyweights, would take the plaudits? No, steeped as he was in esoteric Zen, he bowed slowly and calmly turned and walked off stage. I found Angie's face in the crowd. She was weeping, her mouth frozen agape like a Greek mask. The crowd was all a-murmur.

Will was shaking with elation. He shushed me when I tried to ask him what had just happened, never taking his eyes off the action on stage. The curly blonde walked onto stage and tried to revive Mike Schutte, who finally shook off the pressure-point-induced stupor he was under, thanks to the gentle caresses of the girl. Confused at first, he got to his feet. Then the anger came back and in a fit of rage he looked around for my brother.

Will, still backstage with me, waved the karatekas on. They returned to the stage and one by one threw chops and kicks at the ex-boxer. He brushed them all off, leaving men in white pyjamas strewn like litter on the stage. Mike then directed his rage at the audience and ran at them, ran at Kolonel Nel, in fact.

The Kolonel looked startled and, to his credit, put an arm in front of his wife, knocking her flying saucer hat off. But Mike was after him, for some kind of unfettered, undirected revenge. He lifted Kolonel Nel in his smart dress uniform and carried him onto the stage. "Aronbach!" cried the Kolonel. "Aronbach, help me!"

Will ran onto stage and when Mike saw him, the big man released Kolonel Nel back onto the ground. Mike backed away from Will, tamed.

"*Dames en here,*" said the MC, "ladies and gentlemen, let's give a big round of applause to your very own Kolonel Nel, who put today's events together for your enjoyment!" The curly blonde girl came onto stage and kissed the stunned Kolonel on the cheek, handing him a lovely bouquet of strelitzias in the proud colours of our flag.

The crowd stood and whistled and cheered for the Kolonel who was actually smiling under that moustache, with the girl in the bathing suit on one side and Mike Schutte on the other, holding the Kolonel's hand up in the air like a champion fighter, like Kolonel Nel had just won the heavyweight title.

Mike Schutte shook Will's hand, crushing it slightly, and Will dropped almost to a kneel.

I waited a long time for Will to come back to me. In the meantime, I saw the girl in the costume leave with The Tank, but not before some of the karatekas had their photos taken with Mike. He was a good-natured guy, letting them pose in positions of victory: his head turned and eyes

closed from a knockout blow; prone on the ground with an elbow on his jaw; on the back of a karateka, mid-throw; his arm bent behind his back in an excruciating grip.

When Will came back it was with a stack of notes which he quickly stuffed inside his briefcase. "Let's get out of here," he said.

He told me how he'd worked on the sequence with his friend Pete, but that Mike Schutte had never arrived at the rehearsal, and completely improvised his entire part. "A real artist," he said. I was full of admiration.

When we walked into their flat, Angie was angrily packing all of Will's belongings haphazardly into an old cardboard suitcase. "Don't you even care about me?" she screamed. "I was worried you were going to be killed!"

"It was just for show, baby," said Will. "I told you."

"You said the boards were for show, not the fight!" She threw a belt at him, the buckle nearly catching his forehead.

"I thought it would be funny. A surprise. I planned with Mike before the show. Stop that!" A shoe came at him. "Ben, go buy a paper." From the large wad of cash, Will peeled off a ten rand note and gave it to me.

I went to find a paper, which was no easy task at ten at night in those days. I eventually found a late-night café and took a Pretoria News. When I returned to the flat, there were more of Will's clothes strewn on the floor but Will was cradling Angie's sobbing head in his arms, rocking back and forth. "Here," said Will, handing me a twenty. "Go get another paper."

When Will took me to the bus station the next day he made me swear not to tell Ma or Victor about the show he'd put on, even though I let him know how well I thought he'd done.

"Those idiots thought it was for real the whole way through," I said.

"Ma will worry if she knows," said Will. "And Victor, well, you know he'd love to tell Ma how badly I'm behaving."

"What are you going to do with the money?" I asked.

"What do you think we should do with it?"

"I don't know. What about Great North? Are you going to start it up again?"

"That's not a bad idea. I haven't forgotten about that *yifto*, Leo Fein. Don't think I have," he said.

*Yifto*. The word sounded as if he were spitting, and though I didn't know the meaning, I could guess. I can only think he stole it from Skamandrios at the bookmakers, and he enjoyed flinging it around in conversation whenever he could.

“But we’re going to need a lot more than what we made from the karate, buddy,” he said.

“Ja, obviously,” I said, feeling foolish at having made the suggestion. “I just meant eventually.”

“Here,” he said, peeling off a few notes. “Take this and buy something stupid with it. You’re always so sensible.”

University of Cape Town

## Moffies

My sadness at having to return home was tempered by the arrival of Elliot. He'd decided to return to South Africa almost as soon as he'd heard the news that the referendum to end apartheid was to be held. His stay wasn't permanent, he said, but it had been over four years since he'd been home, and he planned to spend the four weeks until voting day with us.

He was almost a new person to me and I admired him just as much, if not more, now. His hair was kept, if that's the right word, in a way I couldn't conceive an ordinary person could have it. It was cropped close to his head on the sides, almost respectable like the crew-cuts given out all over town but with a couple of short dreadlocks reaching back from a longer patch on top, like Red Indian war feathers. It was a showstopper. It was the hairstyle of an art-rock bass player, not an ordinary human being, and he'd kept the earrings and added a nose-ring.

After art college he took a job at a London newspaper doing illustrations. In his spare time he'd started up a comic book called 'Thunk', a realist, counter-culture publication which had strong anti-corporate messaging, and sex scenes, as well as one feature strip called 'Nuns with Guns'. He'd come away from his political friends and his squat and his ragtag comic to take part in the referendum.

Ma was at Doren's, Victor at his business, Nadine on her sales rounds, and my time was unoccupied, so Elliot and I decided to go to the town show, which happened to be on that week. We were about to open Victor's car in the driveway when we saw something move over the gravel and onto the sandy verge outside the wall. We left the car and stalked towards it. A lizard, a metre-and-a-half long with stout legs looked back at us suspiciously from his push-up position.

"Watch out for the tail!" I said.

The legavaan swaggered its thick midriff forward in slo-mo and drove a blue tongue at the air. I moved behind him, away from his stump head. Elliot went around the other side and crouched in his tight black jeans, edging nearer with outstretched arms. The legavaan's paranoid eyes took in Elliot.

"We'll put it in the back," he said. In our old house in Oost Street, we'd had a large old tortoise we called Buster, who'd made the back garden his home years before, trimming the grass and eating old lettuce. He'd come freely (or so I'd been told), and then a smaller one came later, all on his own (again, I never thought to question it). Now this massive reptile on the red sand sidewalk ahead of us had come into town from the desiccated veld.

The legavaan hissed at us and puffed itself out until its belly lay in the grit. "It *looks* like Victor, actually," I said, noticing the ballooning chin. The lizard began to writhe the muscled tail behind it, and it gave off a continuous sound like the hydraulics deep in the working parts of buses and sixteen-wheeler trucks.

Elliot made a lunge for the tail but before he could get anywhere near it, the tip whipped past his face and he had to jump back. Still in slo-mo, the legavaan made for the karee tree and used its claws to haul itself up the trunk. He opened his jaws and looked back at us from the low branch, his mottled flesh bellowing.

"Well, maybe we should just leave him," said Elliot.

He took the driver's side and I the passenger seat and we started down the road to the showgrounds on the outskirts of town. The referendum posters started right at the top of Grobler Street: the man in a stripy balaclava, the long barrel of a revolver close to his face, the three-legged swastika of the well-known right-wing party on a patch on his shoulder. YOU CAN STOP THIS MAN read the line over his head, and beneath it, VOTE YES.

The question to be posed in the referendum was whether we agreed with the reform process begun by the State President, with the aim of negotiating a new constitution.

Other posters alternated with the balaclava-clad gunman:

NO TO BLACK MAJORITY RULE

NO TO INVESTING IN CHAOS

NO TO COMMUNIST RULE

BELIEVE F.W. AGAIN? NEVER! VOTE NO!

STOP NAT SELLOUT TO ANC. VOTE NO!

"Do they really think they can stop things changing?" I said to Elliot, who had both hands tightly on the wheel of Victor's Audi 500. Victor never lent me the car but didn't hesitate tossing the keys to Elliot, even though my brother was an erratic driver at best.

"Doesn't matter, does it?" he said. "It's only whites who are voting. It's not representative."

"But who's going to be stupid enough to vote 'No'? The newspapers are telling people to vote 'Yes'. Even bosses of big companies are telling people to, otherwise millions of jobs are going to be lost."

“That’s a bullshit reason,” he said, almost veering into a Fiat Uno. “Actually I don’t care what people vote. What pisses me off is people voting for reasons other than what they really believe.” Jumping his turn at a four-way stop, Elliot steered Victor’s Audi 500 across the path of a lurching Honda Ballade.

“Strategic voters.” Horns blared at us

“Cowards.” Elliot raised a middle finger through the window. “They’ll vote ‘Yes’ because they want to play rugby against other countries again, or they’re worried about business.”

We parked among the other cars in the dust outside the gates and walked towards the showgrounds, a large plot of land where travelling funfairs used to come (all-too seldom for my liking when I was younger), consisting of dry grass pressed flat into the earth by feet and hooves, and the concrete arena which looked down on a scant sports field.

If we were living in a time when, whatever your opinion of it, you were about to be touched by change, you’d never sense it at the town show. Rugby shorts and raw *velskoene*. Beer and biltong. Patchwork leather items were still in fashion and On Sale.

In the enclosure, the prize bull, who looked like all the other prize bulls I’d seen over the years, stood dripping snot. The relegated little cluster of military vehicles was on display, as before, at the military exhibition. And whites, whites everywhere, except for the cleaners.

Not only were there South African flags for sale (the old kind because the new hadn’t been invented yet) but there were also the old Transvaal flags, the *vierkleur* of the old Boer Republic, which you saw more and more of in those days.

Elliot and I stood by a steel kiosk on wheels waiting to order a beer. Two policemen in their faded blues walked behind us. “Relax, man,” said Elliot. “No-one’s going to arrest you. They let me through, didn’t they?”

I’d let Elliot know that I was hesitant to leave the house since I’d ignored my army call-up. I’d hammed it up probably, exaggerating the risks to impress him, I suppose, and to drive home the point that I was objecting in my own small way.

We walked with the beers, past the two policemen with brush-cut moustaches, towards the top of the arena where I’d tried to ask Georgina Melk out years before. We sat level with the ground, on the top terrace, although this year there was nothing down on the sunken field below.

Behind us a group of Afrikaans boys were chatting and then one of them said something (in translation here for your benefit but originally in Afrikaans, which sounds so much more emphatic when swearing and getting your temper up): “Hey, what the hell? Is that a guy or a woman? Hey! Fucking fag. Nice earrings!”

“Leave it,” said Elliot. “Do you wanna go on the big wheel?”

Well, he would have to have been prepared for onslaughts like these, coming back to town with hair like that. Mine, grown long finally beyond school regulations, felt quaint in comparison.

We bought our stubs and entered the little gate. The rickety steel barely held us in our seat as we lurched, then sagged, then rose up. The Ferris wheel moved much faster than I would’ve liked; I was hoping for a languid sweep but it was neither that nor the kind of thrill you get from a rollercoaster.

The town sank before us, prostrating itself and exposing the furrows and tracts.

“I fucking hate this place,” I said.

“It’s not so bad,” said Elliot. We dipped again and the town closed up.

While we rose and were allowed that particular view of the town, it was easy to imagine that its blocks had been wrapped with ribbons or corralled into pens. There was none of the fractal mess of stony sidewalks, plastic packets, and violent opinion. You *could* almost start to like it.

And it was much greener from up there. The town was a dark patch, as if water had spilled onto the dry bushveld and a settlement had formed like moss, or mould. Our own Eiffel Tower, the red-and-white radio pylon, pierced the canopy of moss, and the Nedbank building was there too, still the only really high structures in town.

And then you were brought low again and the town was hidden by the rough bushes. The circle of motion brought you down amongst the shouts and carousing of children, and a father punishing the buttocks of a six-year-old with shorn hair.

“Hey, *moffies!*” shouted a teenage boy down on the ground. He was a thin kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen, who’d been standing with the others who’d hassled us earlier. ‘*Moffie*’, derived from ‘hermaphrodite’, was more or less equivalent to ‘faggot’. It was a term applied to anyone English-speaking and, especially, Jewish, in my experience. Those who didn’t play rugby, hate *kaffirs*, drink brandy, use physical violence to assert themselves, wear khaki, wear shorts, love their country, love their flag, hunt, or hit their children all qualified, and fitting any one of the aforementioned criteria would do.

The boy smiled up at us. From up there his blond cropped hair shone against his brown skinny face, innocent as a plush toy. Others were looking up now too.

Elliot showed him the finger as we rose away from him but we both became uncomfortable in our two-seater gondola. The Afrikaans boy puckered his lips down below and moved on.

I was still cooling off from this embarrassment when I noticed a girl waiting at the bottom with a friend. She was wearing mirror Aviator glasses and blew a bubble with her gum. It

popped. She followed us up with her mirrored sunglasses and I kept her position stable in my view as we rolled down once more.

Her head jibbed so gracefully, I thought, atop her brown neck. I smiled at her. She didn't smile back. Maybe she couldn't see me, maybe I was too high when I smiled. I smiled again, still wider. She looked. Only looked, and popped her gum between her lips and chewed down on it again.

Was she checking me out, behind her mirrors? Or was it Elliot she was watching?

"Have you been talking to Will?" asked Elliot.

"Not much. And you?" I asked, although I already knew that they never spoke, and knew about each other only through intermediaries, if at all.

"I went to visit him in Pretoria," I said. "He's in the army."

"I heard. Was that to run away from his gambling debts?"

"No. He works for the officer's magazine."

"What ever happened to his court case? Getting our money back and all that?"

"He's still working on it."

He gave a small upward nod and a smile at this. "Is that what he says? Still working on it. Five years later?"

"He is," I said.

"He's all bullshit, you know."

"You wouldn't say that if he was here."

"You still believe him, then?"

I did still believe him, whatever Uncle Victor thought about him. He was one of the few things I could believe in in the past few years. It never occurred to me to test this constant idea I had of him, to see how far it would stretch, but now that Elliot had raised the doubt, I pretended that Will's dependability didn't bother me, one way or the other. Growing up is a series of curtains falling.

I would have to tidy the loose implements of my former beliefs and rearrange them to hide my callowness before anyone noticed. "It doesn't matter," I said.

"No, it really doesn't."

"I don't care. We'll be okay," I said.

"Yes, you will."

"I mean, it's good you're back now."

"Ja, but I'm not staying. You know that, right?"

"Oh, ja. Of course."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Me?"

"You could go to the army too," said Elliot.

"You think I should go? I don't want to go."

"I don't think you should. I don't think *anyone* should. But you've got to do something, right?"

"Like what? I was supposed to report for duty in Phalaborwa in January. If they find me, it's six years in prison."

"Maybe."

"Maybe, but maybe yes."

"Fuck, Ben. You need to sort out your fucking life. You're eighteen already."

*I'm only eighteen*, I was thinking. "Don't worry about it," I said. "It's not your problem, I can take care of myself. It's Ma I'm worried about. *That's* why it would've been good if Will got us the money back."

"Don't use her as an excuse for you to sit on your arse and do nothing."

"You sound like Victor now."

"Sorry."

"Fuck, man," I said, growing in strength after his apology.

"Sorry. I guess I'm worried about her too. But I can't fucking stay here," he said blinking at the town on the horizon.

"Maybe I can come with you."

"Maybe," he said, then turned in his seat towards me. "Listen, Will's not going get any money, if there is any money to begin with. I predict Will is going to be nothing but a burden on Ma. The best we can do is to avoid being burdens ourselves. Everyone has to be self-sufficient. That girl," he said without a pause in his speech. "Is she looking at us?"

"I think so."

"Hard to tell with those check-me-check-you-backs she's wearing. Her friend's not bad."

We came down one last time and got out. I kept my eyes on the girl with glasses and she, I believe, turned hers away.

"Do you guys want to go for a spin?" asked Elliot without consulting me.

"Ja, okay," said the one with the glasses. Her friend, I think, was about to tell us to fuck off because she was the one Elliot had asked, actually, a tall girl in cowboy boots with brown hair that ran to the small of her back.

Elliot and I handed over our ticket stubs to the ride operator and when we turned towards the big wheel again, Mirror Glasses grabbed my wrist. She pulled it, me, onto the carriage, leaving Cowboy Boots and Elliot to figure out their own seating arrangements.

Mirror Glasses had blonde hair to her shoulders and a fringe which lay over the top of the glasses frames. Naturally I exploded a fantasy of this girl, and I don't mean a sexual one (although projections of her unclothed flashed inevitably, too). No, I had an unstoppable reel playing of our future together, her laughing, a tender moment, meeting families, sharing meals – the sort of embarrassing and uncontrolled ideas I would do anything to hide from my friends, and myself, in order to keep an outward appearance of hardness intact.

And then I immediately flooded with doubts, questioned whether I could stand to spend even the next five minutes of the ride with this person who was sure to coalesce into a palpable disappointment of the kind this town was expert in turning out.

But a blonde, I thought. I prided myself on standing apart, preferring dark-haired girls. But this blonde is alright, actually, I thought. I could get used to blonde. Not that I'd had much opportunity with girls with any sort of hair colour at all, so if it had been of any hue – any hair at all – I'd have had as much enthusiasm, and as much fear.

The cradle rose, lifting us up and, for a moment, away from the noise of the town show. At the top the quiet lingered and stuck us up there with nothing to say. "Where do you live?" she asked, almost belligerently, as we passed the apex.

I was about to point. "Oh, it's gone," I said as the town dipped beneath the treetops. "I'll show you next time. What's your name?"

"You don't ask that, stupid. It's not a good question."

"Oh." I was being educated already. Who knew what a good question or a bad one was when it came to girls, when the last sexual encounter you had – not even a kiss, not even with tongue – was squeezing Potato Latke's spud-breast at the end of primary school?

"I live that side," she said and pointed towards Fauna Park.

"I'm kind of there," I said. "Other side of the municipal pool."

"You like to swim a lot?"

"Not really."

"What a waste." Her arms were so brown and healthy-looking. She probably loved to swim, probably was one of the cruel kids who hogged the pool and goaded others onto and off of the diving board. It was a wonder to me that anyone so healthy would want to be with me.

I looked behind us at Elliot and Cowboy Boots. They were looking in opposite directions. She stole a glance at the war feather dreadlocks, crossed her arms and turned away again.

I scrambled for a new question. "So are you in school?"

"Bad question."

"Do you like to swim?" I tried.

"Are you in school?"

"I thought it was a bad question."

"Not if I ask."

"I finished last year," I said.

"Studying?"

"No."

"So you're going to the army?"

"Not if I can help it."

"*Goin' AWOL.*" She said it with an American accent, like the title of a Hollywood sequel.

"I suppose."

"Don't let my brother hear that. He'll turn you in to the military police."

"Is your brother in the army?"

"My brother wants to be in the army but my mom won't let him leave school yet. Thanks for the ride," she said, getting off the carriage at the bottom. Cowboy Boots stepped quickly to her friend's side.

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

They turned and walked, arm in arm. "Aren't you coming for a drink?"

Elliot and I hurried behind them towards the food and drinks tents. The two girls pushed their way through the crowd at the bar and we squeezed behind them, between bellies and beer breath, apologising with our looks.

"To say 'thank you'," said Mirrors, and she handed me and Elliot tequila shooters. She was almost elbowed off the bar but elbowed back and ordered more. We took a tray with tequilas and lagers in plastic cups to an upright table at the marquee wall.

"That's a lot of thank-yous," I said.

"Just say 'you're welcome'," – she did it in an American accent again, as if working a McDonald's counter – "and open your mouth." The sunglasses were betwixt strands of blonde hair now, pushed up onto her head. She poured another shot down my mouth.

"You're welcome too," said Elliot to Cowboy Boots but she smirked at him, kind of sarcastic, and took up her own tequila. "What's your name?" Elliot asked her.

"Don't ask them that," I said. "It's boring."

"Now you're getting it," said Mirrors.

“Well, thank you, whoever,” said Elliot and threw a tequila into his mouth.

Cowboy Boots took another. “You’re welcome.”

Thank you, you’re welcome, thank you, you’re welcome, thank you, you’re welcome, thank you, you’re welcome.

The boom-chick and alternating two-note bass-line of a song I’d heard a thousand times in passing cars, in shops, on radio and in the Action Bar, played loudly over the speakers. I watched Elliot and Cowboy Boots embark on a snide course of exchange as the tequila boosted us. “Worms,” she said of his dreadlocks. “Like those maggots you get in tequila in Mexico.” She poured back another shooter and threw the clear plastic glass at his dreads.

“So, Guns N’ Roses finally got here,” said Elliot, kicking the upturned sole of her boot.

“It got here in time for this,” she said, raising the tip of her boot to his crotch.

“Easy now,” said Elliot.

“Ag, what you worried about? Not like you’ve got anything there.”

I went to the bar and with Elliot’s money bought us some beers to dilute the tequilas. When I returned, Mirrors was sitting with her arms crossed and Elliot and Boots were half-perched on a stool, half-leaning into passing drinkers and locked together at the mouth.

A wide man in a khaki shirt pushed them both back when they careened into him, one of Elliot’s worms almost dipping into the man’s beer. The man called them both dirty and delivered his beers to a nearby table. A short while later, the man and two friends – brothers perhaps – in the same blue and khaki shirts – returned and stood by our table.

“You’re sitting on my seat,” said the one. His ankle-boots were very neatly laced and he had a fleshy forehead into which either a diagonal crease or a scar (I couldn’t tell which) lay embedded.

Elliot undocked his mouth from the girl’s and swung a stool in front of the man with the creased forehead. Elliot and the girl fell onto an unused one together.

“That one’s mine,” said the other khaki sibling, tapping his *velskoen* to an Erasure tune that had started playing. He had the same stamped-out body shape as his brother, though he was younger and training a strip of fluff on his lip into a moustache.

“And those,” said the first khaki.

“You’re sitting on all of them?” I asked.

“Our friends are,” said the second. “We were here first.”

“Oh, think I’ve heard this joke before,” said Elliot. “To the big wheel!” He led us out the tent, an arm around Cowboy Boots’ neck.

“The rollercoaster!” said the girls.

Our guts dragged behind us, above us, anywhere but in us and I knew I had to hold on to that bar because it wouldn't hold us, so old was the ride. I held on, trying not to look like I was scared, and Mirrors, right next to me, held onto me, unafraid to look afraid.

"This is my uncle's car," said Elliot as we left the showgrounds. "You can't be sick in it."

"No," said Cowboy Boots, a whimper in her voice, "I just wanna be sick out of it." She hung her head out the window of Victor's Audi while Mirrors and I sat so close our arms sweated onto each other. We went to Boots' house (her folks were at Ebenezer Dam for the weekend) and herded Boots towards a back door while an Alsatian and a Labrador-cross barked at us behind a diamond-mesh fence.

We entered through the kitchen and found an open-plan place, tiled on the floor in a toffee colour and with dark-wood fitted cupboards. Boots was propped on Elliot's shoulder and he took her to her bedroom. "Is she okay?" I asked.

"We'll find out in the morning," said Mirrors. We walked into the living room area and sat on a heavily padded fabric couch. I picked up a yellow glass ashtray in a stretched snot-like shape and put it back down again. Mirrors sat down on the orange rug on the ground and sighed.

Elliot walked back into the kitchen and started rifling through the cupboards. We watched him as he clattered through the objects. He stood again and briskly walked back to the bedroom with a roll of black dustbin bags and a plastic bucket.

"Hey, let's watch this one," said Mirrors. It was an old VHS of 'Back to the Future'. The movie began and here on a strange girl's friend's parents' couch, in front of a movie that was as familiar as my life thanks to repeated viewings, I kissed Mirrors, or rather she kissed me.

"I don't know," she said, which made me think, of course, that I was doing it wrong. "I don't know if I should let you."

"Hey," I said. "No. We don't have to."

"Well, I don't wanna waste my time."

"Sure."

"I wanna make sure you know what you're doing."

But I didn't know what I was doing. I was guessing. My life had been, through my entire school career, utterly devoid of sex. If you think that, for me, sex was a normal childhood function that I had discovered in the exciting years of my adolescence, think again. I was always ashamed that it was taking me so long to cross that particular threshold whenever I saw movies with American teenagers humping through high school, even the nerd getting it on after the prom.

I discovered what I knew about sex the same way I discovered everything else I knew about the world: from books. Well, magazines too, and the odd movie.

“Okay,” I said.

“Are you gonna touch me first?”

Um. “Yes.”

“How?”

“How?”

“Show me. Here.” She took my hand and placed it in the flesh of her thigh, the soft space behind the knee.

Come on, finger, you must know what to do. “Okay,” she said. I stroked, I circled, I gently squeezed the tendon while George McFly danced solo at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance. “Stop,” she said. “I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

She lay out on the couch and I lay behind her. “I’m tired,” she said. “Let’s sleep.”

I obeyed the girl and we lay down on the couch together. My arm lay across Mirrors’ side in a dip above her denim-skirted waist. We watched a mother try to French kiss a boy in a 50s automobile and Mirrors began to fade.

It was some time around when George socks Biff Tanner that Mirrors started rubbing against me. She took my hand and placed it in the soft depths under her denim mini skirt. She began to moan softly while Marty McFly played the prom.

It was a catalogue of new discoveries for me: just how smooth a girl’s thighs are, the modesty of her pubic hair so unlike my own bush, the solidity of the bones beneath that generous fleshiness and a sweet wetness forming. Conscious of all the new things my hands were doing, I became aware once again as she pressed into my body and I pressed back, that I was allowed some pleasure in the action, also. Meanwhile, Marty McFly’s hand looked see-through and he lost his guitar-playing ability.

“*Vok my,*” whispered Mirrors, turning her head towards me – ‘Fuck me’ in Afrikaans. Angry and sexy: two things Afrikaans does well.

‘It’s a blues riff in B,’ said Marty. ‘Watch me for the changes and try and keep up.’ Not entirely in rhythm to ‘Johnny B. Goode’ I writhed in that wetness that I found both surprising and familiar and by the time of the blazing solo I could contain myself no more.

Mirrors fell into a sleep right away. A hall filled with 1950s school kids watched with a kind of horror on their faces.

I awoke alone on the couch, just a cold space in front of me where the girl I'd lost my virginity to had been. She and her friend emerged shortly thereafter, Cowboy Boots wearing, confusingly, the mirror sunglasses of Mirror Sunglasses, and that girl squinting into the lounge. I zipped up and stood up immediately.

Elliot skulked behind them, carrying his jacket and gently smiling. He stood next to Boots, who moved closer to her friend and put her arm around her.

"You have to go," said Boots.

"Oh sure," I said.

"My parents, you know?"

"We have to go, anyway," said Elliot to the girls. "The car."

"Okay," I said.

"Aren't you even going to ask my name?" said Mirrors by the door.

"Oh, sure."

She turned and scanned the room for her bag, then scrambled inside it. When she stood, she presented me with a torn strip of paper – a phone number and 'Marieke'.

"And you are – ?"

"Ben."

"Bye, Ben."

Elliot and I didn't speak much in the car. We were both tired, I guess, and had our own thoughts to receive. The topic of girls was something I had no experience of talking about with Elliot anyway.

In the kitchen at Victor's house, Ma was finishing her coffee before work. "Nadine had to take Victor to work this morning," she said. "Where were you?"

"We didn't want to drive drunk," said Elliot. "We stayed at a friend."

"I suppose that's the safe thing. But Victor's going to get it from Nadine. He was already."

"What's wrong with that woman?"

"She's been very understanding," said Ma, "taking me and Ben in."

"Boy, doesn't she let you know it, though," I said.

"And she's got Victor right there," said Elliot squashing a thumb down on the kitchen counter.

"Makes him happy though, I suppose," said Ma.

"Got him so uptight he files his cigarettes," said Elliot.

"So uptight he alphabetises his ties," I said.

"He's so uptight he wipes his arse in triplicate," said Elliot.

"I'd better meet Carol," said Ma, looking at her watch.

"Right, I'm off to bed," said Elliot.

Ma often caught lifts to work with Carol in her new Daihatsu since she lived across the road from Victor's house. For the past two years Ma had been working at Doren's Outfitters in town. The shop was owned by Benny and Frieda Doren, a couple a few years older than Ma who'd had the store for about thirty years.

Benny was a neat, diminutive man who wore his pants high, and platform shoes to make him look taller. Frieda had been a beautiful woman in her youth, I believe, but had widened considerably in her later years. When they offered Ma the job in their shop, Victor suggested it was because Frieda kept returning their orders of women's wear as incorrectly-sized when there really was no problem with them at all.

Doren's was for many years the only place women could go to find a half-decent dress, and they still allowed their customers to take home items on approval. Ma herself must have bought dozens of skirts and belts and bags there over the years.

Many of the customers were friends or acquaintances or contemporaries at least, and she held down the shop well on her own whenever Benny had to go to the cardiologist or urologist, or Frieda visited family in Welkom.

It wasn't a bad job and Ma still remembered a few tricks from her time dressing windows at Asper's in Johannesburg, where my father had walked in and bagged her and six black polo shirts. Wary of straying from an old formula, the Dorens thought her use of fairy lights or mirrors quite avant garde.

One night Ma brought the mannequins home and, with a borrowed airbrush, repainted them and applied more contemporary make-up to the lady-dolls. The Dorens were very grateful and gave her more or less free reign thereafter.

Ma never complained about this job – or anything, really – even though they were stingy with their pay and their lunch, and rotated cheap compilation cassettes of questionable hits and Enya.

Ma looked at her watch again and took her second-last sip of coffee. Like the growth of a child that goes unnoticed by a parent until someone else points it out, Ma's development into her current passive form was something I might not have picked up had it not been for Elliot.

He was the one who noticed how quiet she was when Nadine remarked cruelly on her cooking or varicose veins. Or when Carol dragged her through the mire of her depression. Or when Will siphoned savings and hope from her.

She was staring into the bottom of the coffee cup and would have made a good subject, just then, for a study. Her eyes were wide, giving her a look of faint astonishment. She was wearing the light blue floral blouse the Dorens had given her, which she wore twice a week. Her eyes, which hovered between grey and amber so that you might at first glance think they were only blue, cut right through the mug and seemed to find a place not in the room, not in that time.

“I really have to go now,” she said, finally taking the last sip.

“You okay?” I asked as she rubbed her left arm.

“I feel numb sometimes, that’s all,” she said.

University of Cape Town

## Ten Men

I obsessively copied the numbers from the paper onto the keys of the cream-coloured phone. It rang through the speaker and a male voice, Afrikaans, answered with ornate politeness in his tone.

“Is Marieke there?” I asked.

A pause.

I tried again in Afrikaans.

“*Nee*,” said the voice, firmer than before. “She’s not here.”

“Okay,” I said and hesitated to leave my name but the phone came down on the other side anyway.

I replaced the receiver just before Uncle Victor and Nadine came in through the front door. Use of the phone always set off some tension. Calls weren’t charged but that arrangement might have been preferable to the fake oh-sorry-are-you-still-on-there and the snide is-that-thing-glued-to-your-ear.

Victor dropped his leather-bellied attaché case on the dining room table. Nadine swept past me without looking, which was her usual manner with me. She feigned politeness and interest when she first moved in with us but it faded fast, and actually, it suited me better.

“The Audi better not have any dings in it or *you*’ll be paying for it,” said Victor. “With what money, I don’t know. What *job*, I don’t know.” He wrung the tie from his neck with a crooked index finger.

“There’s no dings. Elliot drove, anyway.”

“You better not have been driving.”

“I told you – Elliot drove. I don’t have a licence anyway.”

“Where’s Elliot?”

“He’s gone out somewhere.”

“Next time you fucking call, okay?” he continued, since Elliot was out of the house. “This was a major thing, a major inconvenience, you hear?”

“Nadine pissed off because she had to take you to work?”

“Don’t you worry about that. That’s not your concern. It’s a major inconvenience. For her too.”

“She works, like, three blocks away from you.”

"We're independent people. We have different lives. Not different lives, but we have to go to meetings and such. Look, I don't have to stand here explaining to you, in my own house. All you need to remember is I'll break your neck if you take my car out all night again."

"Okay," I said, palms in the air.

He went over to the oak bar in the corner and unlocked the side cabinet door from where he removed a bottle of Viceroy brandy. "Okay?"

"Absolutely."

"Now I better make it up to her," said Victor. We heard Nadine coming through the kitchen. "How about dinner at Die Klause tonight, doll?" he called to her.

"The German place?" she said. "It's revolting."

"Didn't you like the baby chicken there? I thought I remembered you liked the baby chicken. Last time, remember?"

"No – I said the chicken was undercooked. Bloody." She kicked off her patent leather heels and curled her legs up on the couch.

"Oh, that was it, right. Okay, Villa Italia then."

"Every weekend, Villa Italia. No," she said, pulling at her stockings. "No, you can give me a foot massage."

Ma rescued me from the sight of Victor wavering between going to Nadine's feet and staying with his brandy. My pleasure at my mother's return, however, collapsed when Carol followed close by.

I noticed that Ma didn't even manage to roll her eyes like she used to do. "*Shabbat Shalom*," said Carol. "I know you people don't go in for that, but it's nice anyway, isn't it?"

"Hello, Carol," said Victor, still halfway between the bar and Nadine's feet. "Get you a drink?"

"No, I couldn't," she said.

"I'm going to make my mutton stew tonight," said Ma and she went to the kitchen.

Nadine muttered something and vengefully took up the TV guide.

"I actually just came in to ask Ben something," said Carol.

"Oh," I said.

"I hate to ask," said Carol. "I know you people don't go in for this but I would really appreciate it. So would the Rabbi. Meyer Levinson's sick and we can't make ten."

"For the *minyan*," I said.

"That's right," said Carol, delighted, I suppose, that I even knew the word.

That I was considering going to *shul* surprised even me. Since Elliot's return, his presence promised, if nothing else, at least another personality in the living room that had become my prison. But who knew when he'd come home?

Everything in that room of Victor's, from the corduroy couch to the carved African-market souvenir head to the oak bar with the smell of its old plastic ice bucket was just *there*, forced down the gullet of my soul every night. And not only that – if only it was just that! – the unchanging conversations, Nadine's impregnable stiffness and Ma (as I was now inescapably aware of, thanks to Elliot) with her threadbare spirit, gone from a shrew to mouse.

"Sure, Carol," I said. "I'll just get changed." She lit up, but then remembered to contain herself in case her enthusiasm spooked me, I guess.

The finger of nausea touched me at having done something pleasing for such a woman. But to scuttle from under the oppression of Victor's living room was an escape I couldn't pass up. So I put on a shirt with buttons and walked with her to the new Daihatsu.

"Can you drive?" she asked. It saved her from sinning on the Sabbath.

I considered the risks of driving without a licence, of being stopped by police and questioned. I was, after all, an absconding conscript, and wasn't too sure how tightly-linked government agencies were (they claimed to have a BIG computer that held information about everyone).

I thought we might look respectable enough to risk it, and agreed.

"Oh that would be nice," she said. "Shoshana's not driving yet."

I reversed the dinky car into Compensatie Street.

"How's tricks?" asked Carol.

"Oh, you know."

"Well, Shoshana's started at the hotel school."

"You said."

"She's missing home already. What a baby. Bet you miss her too, hey boy?"

"Sure," I said. After my *bar mitzvah*, Potato Latke and I had barely spoken. Moments between us – a chance meeting at break-time at school or forced interaction in class – contained the same frozen feeling I would get from some deep humiliation, although nothing terribly humiliating had actually happened between us.

"How's Will?" asked Carol melodiously while flipping down the vanity mirror to adjust her hair.

"He's in the army now, in Pretoria. He's got a girlfriend there," I added as casually as I could, although it felt starkly out of place as I said it.

She flipped the mirror back up. "Oh, yes. And the other one's back now?"

"Elliot. Yes, back from London."

"Can't believe you're not going *anywhere*, Ben. University or somewhere."

"Maybe next year, Carol."

"You're not going to the army, are you?"

"Not if I can help it."

"They hate Jews, you know."

I nodded, checking my mirrors with a sideways motion.

"It's because we're liberal," said Carol. "That's why. Oy, look that this." We were passing the Checkers centre where, in the last year, black street children had begun to cluster after sundown. "See what's happening here? They really aren't cleaning this town like they used to."

The brakes on the Daihatsu gave us a soft landing outside what was the new *shul*. They often had trouble making up a *minyan* now. It wasn't just that Meyer Levinson was sick. The Jews left in town were of the older stock. It was who was left – the parents and grandparents of the latest diaspora to Johannesburg, Canada and Australia.

And now that the Rabbi had found a wife there were rumours he was going to find a new community too. Who was there left to minister to?

They'd already moved the shul to the old hall next door and sold the synagogue building to Braam van Jaarsveld, who gave them a very generous price for it, I believe. Now filling the space in which I'd had my bar mitzvah and where my brothers before me had struggled with the heavy *aleph-bet* on parchment scrolls, was a stationery distributor.

We walked inside the hall, Carol going to the left with the other women. "That's nine," said Julian Gross instead of greeting me. "We'll have to wait."

"Hello, Ben," said the Rabbi.

"Is this it?" said Gershon, home from the Yeshiva College and almost a rabbi himself now. We'd lost the pews and it was now just the plastic-and-tube-steel chairs you could find in any school hall, arranged in four rows of twelve, separated by an aisle.

There were more than ten congregants if you counted the women there that night, but women don't count for the *minyan*. Sitting, waiting, were the Kisch brothers, Woolf Morris, and Attie Pollock, who spoke like an Afrikaner; as for the women, it was Ida Morris, the mother of the Kisch boys, Carol, and the Rabbi's new wife.

The Rabbi's wife sat in the front with her hands in her lap. She was a small woman of about twenty-five, and not at all what I imagined a rabbi's wife to look like, i.e. a sort of witch of very wide and low proportions dressed in black, cocooned in shawls, perhaps carrying a soup ladle. Our rabbi's wife blushed a lot and wore light blue or pastel yellow.

Gershon checked his watch, the Rabbi jerked a shoulder, and Julian Gross blew his nose on an oversize hankie. There was very little of the mystery and ritual architecture of the actual shul in this makeshift one. There was no more *bimah*, instead the Rabbi would deliver the service from a low square lectern.

If I missed anything from the old *shul* it was the star-studded light shades – black metal cones with light twinkling out the holes. My jaw quavered in sympathetic rhythm to the pulsing fluorescents above.

Then I heard the scrape of sand between soles and linoleum at the back of the hall.

“Ah,” said Julian as another member walked through the door. “Who is *this* now?” The latecomer walked a little slower than before but his hair still bounced atop his head. The grey streaks weren’t as prominent anymore and matched more closely the rest of the head.

“Well-well-well,” said Julian Gross, squinting.

“*Gut Shabbes*, everyone,” said Leo Fein.

“Welcome,” said the Rabbi. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Rabbi,” said Leo Fein. Gershon handed him a *siddur* and he took his seat behind me. In all my gefilte-fish-out-of-water pre-*bar mitzvah* years in *shul*, I never felt my heart run with such anxiety. It took me back, in fact, to the day of my coming of age. Leo Fein, the man I’d sent into exile, through a betrayal that ruined my family, sat at my back. He could do anything to me from there.

The other eight men and four women turned around periodically and nodded and smiled their welcomes to Leo Fein and because he was directly behind me their attention (or so it seemed) was on me too.

“Hello, hello,” said Leo Fein behind me, softly and almost into my neck. “Yes. Later, yes,” in response to what some of the congregants were mouthing to him – invitations to dinner or annoying enquiries as to his news.

How was I to greet the man I betrayed? Why did he choose to sit behind me of all people? The thought churned in me that he wanted something and, I suppose, I owed him something. Five years in exile is what I owed him. And not only him, my family too, because I’d driven them into their own kind of banishment.

I didn’t turn. And as the service began, the fear of turning around brought on a kind of automation in me. I remembered the songs, the responses, the standing and sitting – as if the primitive Hebrew part of my brain knew how to take over while the rest of it fired in more contemporary Jewish panic. I was an insect squeezed under a boot, unable to move. But each time I caught his voice in the hymns and Amens it jolted me.

As the service ended I folded the *tallis* more carefully than necessary, making sure not one fringe of the shawl caught in the zip of its velvet bag. Everyone greeted Leo Fein with handshakes behind me and moved towards the door of the hall. They lined up to say hello; I fled. I don't think anyone noticed me sweep past their backs, and I certainly didn't make eye contact with Leo Fein.

I still had Carol's keys and I opened the little Daihatsu. Without checking behind me to see whether she was outside the *shul* yet, I drove away.

I didn't think about being stopped by police until I arrived at Carol's house. I left the car there and walked across the road to Victor's. I cursed myself with every step, that I'd run away like that, that I'd left Carol there. That I'd left such a mess.

Inside the living room, Elliot was back, eating Ma's stew while Victor and Ma looked glumly at the carpet. Nadine had her face turned arbitrarily to an empty wall and her arms were folded. "What's going on?" I asked.

Everyone seemed reluctant to talk. Elliot finished chewing then said softly, "Victor and Nadine are emigrating."

I'm sure I looked shocked at the news but really it was Leo Fein I was thinking of still. I stared blankly for some time, then asked, "Where?"

"Australia," said Victor.

"Oh," I said. "When are you leaving?"

Ma looked at Victor for his reply then.

"Well, there's a lot of things to work out," said Victor. "Papers and lawyers. Probably end of May."

"But maybe sooner," said Nadine.

"Maybe," said Victor. Nadine rose and left the room.

"Is this her idea?" asked Ma in a whisper.

"We both want it," said Victor. "I don't think there's a future here, Margot. If we can get settled there, maybe you should come too. I mean, you need points to get in, to get citizenship and everything but maybe having family that side helps. You should think about getting out."

I looked at Elliot pulling a fatty, yellow strip from the square of meat in his mouth and placing it on the edge of the plate. I expected him to say something. *I have to find a way to tell Will*, I thought.

"What about Jackie?" I asked.

“Well, Jackie’s studying so she may as well finish the year and then we’ll talk. I don’t want her staying here. After this referendum this country’s going to shit. They’re going to fuck it up.”

Finally Elliot spoke. “It is fucked up.”

“Listen,” said Victor, “don’t start your bullshit. You went to London. I’m not talking politics here. Think what the schools are going to be like after. And the roads. You think they know how run anything? You think they can run the airports and the hospitals?”

“What about the house?” I asked. I had the sensation of becoming my own mother just then. These were the questions she should be asking, I thought.

“It’s going on the market,” said Victor. “Actually, someone’s interested already. Look, it’ll be a while till anything goes through so there’ll be time for you to find something else. You might have a job then, Ben. Or go to the army.”

“I’m not going to the army.”

“It could turn out to be the best thing for you,” said Victor. “If you prove yourself to them, you can get training, and they’ll pay. They’re just waiting for someone to show some ability, and then the sky’s the limit. You could be an engineer.”

“I’m not going,” I said.

“Suit yourself, but you need to start thinking about your future. You all do. I can’t keep this up, not with what Bernice is bleeding from me.” Victor stood and left the room. Elliot continued eating his stew and rice.

“Want some supper?” was all that Ma said.

“Okay,” I said. Ma went to the kitchen to heat a plate of food for me in the microwave and I sat thinking. Leo Fein’s return was not a matter I wanted talk to Elliot about but in order to deflect my thoughts from him, the primary cause of my perturbation, I brought up Victor’s news instead.

“So there’s a referendum to end apartheid and he runs away.”

“He’s just scared,” said Elliot.

“You don’t think he’s racist?”

“He is, but he’s Victor, you know?”

Victor and Elliot’s relationship was one that continually surprised me. I missed its germination, since it had started before I was born, but when Elliot was a boy the two would go to professional wrestling matches together. It’s hard to imagine Elliot enjoying such an event at any time of his life, but the fights cemented a mutual affection which lasted beyond Elliot’s childhood days.

Elliot's political ideals ran on different rails from Victor's entirely but this never seemed a problem. Victor was a skilled writer, a raconteur and an aficionado of classical music, especially lieder, but he valued monetary accomplishments above all others.

He'd regularly call me over to look at the stock prices in the newspaper, going over with impressive recall how many shares of each company he'd bought and sold, at what prices, and over what periods.

Victor rallied behind Elliot when my brother was expelled from school and championed his career overseas, even though Elliot was non-materialistic in his ambitions. Will, meanwhile, had overtly capitalist goals, had the gall and craft to be successful by Victor's measure, yet Victor rubbished his achievements at every turn, till Will finally proved him right.

The bell rang and Ma, having just set my plate of reheated mutton stew down on a TV tray for me, went to the door. Carol was entering hysteria. "I almost phoned the police!" I heard her say.

"Why, Carol?" said Ma. "What's wrong?"

"He took my car. I was this close to calling the police, Margot. And on *Shabbes*. Lucky Leo Fein talked me out of it. I might still call them, though."

I was at the door by this stage, as was Victor.

"I'm sorry, Carol," I said. "Here are your keys. I was just feeling sick. I had to come home."

"Sick my arse," said Victor. "You took my fucking car all night the other night."

"Elliot was driving, I told you," I said.

"Blame your brother but this shows us, doesn't it," he continued. "I never figured you for a bullshitter, Ben. Will maybe. But you?"

"I nearly called the police," repeated Carol.

"Maybe you should have," said Victor. "The army will get him. Teach him a few lessons."

"Did you say Leo Fein was back?" said Ma.

"Oh, yes," said Carol. "Waltzed into *shul* tonight, would you believe?"

Ma's face tightened and she rubbed her arm. "Is he staying?"

"He says he's doing business here. Staying in his old house in Bendor again."

"Another good reason to leave the country if rubbish like that comes back," said Victor, expelling the sentence on a weary breath.

"You're telling me," said Carol. "My sister's in Israel – I might join her."

"Oy, Israel," said Victor. The two spoke around Ma. I watched her collect thoughts and keep them tucked one by one in a deep, deep place.

"And what do you mean, 'Oy, Israel'?" said Carol, hands on hips.

"The problem with Israel, Carol," said Victor, "is it's full of Jews."

“Well, I always say, you can’t judge unless you live there.”

“Bullshit. I can judge it quite nicely. Biggest bunch of bullies I’ve ever seen.”

“Well I never. You people, you’ve forgotten who you are. You married *shikse* number one and ran off with *shikse* number two. Didn’t give your children a chance. This one,” she said, jutting her eyes at me, “he could’ve made a nice good Jew but you people wouldn’t allow it, I suppose. And now look at him, stealing cars in the night. Well, I guess with no father, this is what happens.”

“Get the fuck out of my house,” said a voice behind me, hard and flat as a steel beam. It was Nadine, and we were all amazed, Victor the most. Elliot was peering at the end of the entrance at the scene too. We made way for her. “You small-minded, know-nothing, bigmouth. You don’t know anything about anyone in this house. Leave now. And if you so much as look over this side of the road, I’ll show you what a *shikse* can do to your eyes.”

Carol took a step back. “I should have called the police. Maybe I will.”

“And as for that stupid fucking dinky car of yours,” Nadine continued, “I know how to cut brake lines, so just watch yourself.”

I could see Carol wanted to say something but she couldn’t form the words. She cast her eyes to the side and clasped her hands and turned. We watched her small square frame dip into the light from the streetlamp and out and in again as she crossed the road without turning around.

We moved as a group to the living room and all sat down. Victor poured out glasses of whiskey from his cabinet and we all sipped together. It was perhaps surprising that he’d attacked Israel as he had, since I’d heard him bash the PLO and Arabs generally, vehemently, before. I guess Victor just liked to pick a fight.

Elliot was brave enough to repeat some of Nadine’s phrases and we were brave enough to laugh. Until then I’d always thought of Nadine as an uncomplicated bitch of a woman – uncomplicated, I say, because her single-minded intent to squeeze every last drop of attention, finance and will from my uncle had been clearly laid out by her from fairly early on.

In some respects I can’t blame Nadine for the way she behaved towards us, since Ma and I had been living with them, relying on them, for four years now. At a time when Ma and I needed support, Uncle Victor came through, and it was plainly a burden on the newly-married couple.

Nadine barely spoke to me in the time we lived together, a woman in patent leather high-heels having little to say to an eighteen-year-old un-conscientious objector and general layabout (what, after all, could I *offer* her?); and when Ma took the job at Doren’s Outfitters, Nadine sulked for a week, finding it embarrassing to have to shop at a place where her sister-in-law worked as an assistant, and she’d be expected to exert an unnatural politeness. (Her mood

picked up significantly when she leaned on Victor for a budget that allowed shopping trips to Johannesburg.)

So it felt like a great boon that she'd swept Carol away so briskly in our defence. It occurs to me now that the void of feeling we always assumed Nadine had for us drew out a yearning in Ma and me to please her, and when she acted charitably in our favour, we were grateful.

I like to remember that night as perhaps the only occasion we were all happy at the same time in that house, but truly Ma was only half-happy, and sat kneading her numb arm, and I had a few discomforts of my own.

University of Cape Town

## Action Bar

Elliot had been out the house most of the week and I suspected it was Carlien – Cowboy Boots – he was spending his time with. I was used to an entire week indoors by now, out of the reach of military police. I was still registered with the army at the Oost Street address, although it wouldn't have taken much investigation to find me at Victor's. Victor himself might have handed me over given the chance.

I still liked the indoors more than the outdoors; hiding out suited me just fine. Victor had a set of Britannica so although the Encyclopedia Americanas were all gone with the rest of our Oost Street possessions, I had another source of knowledge. And Victor's records weren't bad – Handel, Bach, a large collection of Schubert and Schumann lieder, and, strangely amongst them, Simon and Garfunkel.

I considered what course to take should I have the opportunity to further myself. The priority was getting out of town. Studying was appealing since it would take place elsewhere and it would provide me with the knowledge I needed for a career. But what career?

Education was admired and encouraged in our family but never with the purpose of gaining knowledge for its own sake. It was merely the ticket that got you in. There was always an end goal in mind, so you can understand just how laden for me was the very first step, for who could say whether I'd be content where it led me?

It was important. I didn't want to settle for just anything and if it took laying low – and yes, laying about – to make the right choice, it was worth it.

I wasn't doing nothing, exactly. Divide the day up into nodes and it's easily filled. Like a drop of dye in the clear liquid of the morning hours, the node soon spreads.

A cup-of-tea node, for instance. Before the tea: boiling the kettle, placing the teabag, measuring the sugar. Waiting for the kettle to boil. Pouring the tea. Allowing the tea to brew, three minutes. The milk, stirring, fetching a rusk perhaps. And all this *before* you've even sat down to drink it. (I leave it to you to complete the post-node rituals.)

There's a certain discipline in doing it right. And so my day was easily filled with the nodes of routine.

This week was somewhat different, however, since I had something besides my draft-dodging and my future career path to fret over.

All week Leo Fein's return made me think back on our lives before I brought ruin upon us – when we had our own house, when we had our own business to provide us the life my father

had intended, a life that never required one to compare the prices of cabbage heads in supermarket broadsheet adverts, or asked me to live in my cousin's pink-walled room, or subsist on hand-me downs while friends consumed new fashions, and we never ran the car till it ran out of petrol, or had to rely on the timetables of others for lifts in cars which weren't ours.

Those were days when we could take two or three or four videos out at once! When Ma was at liberty to bring home buckets of take-aways instead of reckoning our share of food in her brother's house. When we bore the privilege of giving out charity instead of the insult of having to take it. And of being reminded of it.

Before you judge me too harshly, remember that poverty is relative. Besides that, it's when your future is whipped away from you that you feel truly impoverished. My lament at the loss of comforts and luxuries may amount to whingeing, I don't deny it, but there was a clear injustice felt by my family (Elliot excluded, perhaps). An injustice that went even deeper for me, since I knew that it might not have been so had it not been for my betrayal.

Then there was Marieke. She was adorable. I mean, she'd given me sex. How kind! How generous! How sweet. And she wasn't ugly, either, even Elliot had to concede. There was, admittedly, a certain amount of flabbiness around her midriff area but Elliot had delicately avoided talking about that and it was, in any event, incredible to me. It was the softest bit of flabbiness I'd ever laid hands on, satin-smooth. You could lay your fingers onto it and it would billow through them like warm clouds.

No, she wasn't ugly. Sure, not classically pretty either but actually not embarrassing. Maybe slutty-looking, but when was that ever a disadvantage to an eighteen-year-old? Her kind of sluttiness, it was adorable.

I had a 'she' to think about. 'I wonder if *she* likes the Rolling Stones?' 'I wonder what *she's* doing now?' Just the word – 'she' – was a marvel to me. That I had my own she to think about, and that she might be thinking of me, was astonishing.

I recalled all week every snippet of conversation, every look she gave me, the feel of her billowy skin and every sensation felt on the couch in front of 'Back to the Future'.

The phone-Marieke node had spread itself all over my week, although there'd been very little actual phoning and the node had dissipated due to cowardice. It was one of the afternoon nodes, since she was in school in the mornings (I was finally allowed to ask, in our single, brief phone conversation before her mom called her for dinner – she was in her final year). I sat by the phone, ready to call, when it rang of its own accord and Will said hello.

One side of me wanted to tell him Leo Fein was back so he could unleash whatever furies and mechanisms he'd had hidden for the day of his return, and we could reclaim our wealth.

The other side wanted to forget all about Leo Fein, never have his name mentioned again, for fear the confrontation would expose my cowardly betrayal and mark myself as the ultimate force behind my family's fall; even if it was Leo Fein who'd run away with our money, I was the one who'd kicked the chock from under the boulder.

I began instead with the news of the other returnee.

"Do you know Elliot's home?" I asked.

"Is he?" said Will.

"Want to speak to him?"

"Is he there? In the room with you?"

"No, he's sleeping."

"No, leave it. Let's just chat, you and me."

"Okay," I said.

"Have you got a girlfriend yet?"

"Maybe."

"Fucked her yet?"

"Is this what you wanted to talk about?"

"Actually, there's something I want you to do for me."

"Okay."

"We need a little cash injection," said Will.

"What about the money from the karate demo?"

"We didn't make much out of that, buddy. I had to pay Mike Schutte five grand, not including his beer expenses, and I had to hire that MC, the girl, the stage, the sound. Then there was a donation to the dojo, plus the printing. And the bulk of the profit goes to our friend the Kolonel, so not much left for us."

"So what's the cash injection for?"

"There's a fantastic opportunity for us, an investment opportunity. I can't say too much about it but I can get us in on the ground level. I have a little cash but I need you to ask Victor."

"Ask him what?"

"For a loan."

"No, I don't know. They're emigrating."

"Where?"

"Australia."

"Fuck!" said Will. "Are you serious?"

"I know – Australia, right?"

"Ben, I didn't want to worry you but this is serious. I need money fast." He'd said 'I' and not 'we' and he'd never done that before. It had always been our fight. The joke of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, up against a thousand Red Indians, came to mind.

*"Looks like we're done for, kemosabe," says the Lone Ranger. "We're surrounded by Indians."*

*"Who's 'we', paleface?" says Tonto.*

And where was that Lone Ranger mask now, I wondered.

"Ben, you still there? I need you to ask Victor. Say the money's for you."

"For me? For what?"

"Student loan."

"But I'm not studying."

"But you will be – when the investment matures."

"Is this for Leo Fein, or is this about gambling?" Talking to Elliot on the Ferris wheel had made me brave enough to raise the topic.

"Both," he said after a pause.

"You know he's back."

"Who?"

"Leo Fein."

"Yes, yes, of course. Look Ben, this is the situation. I lost money on the karate. I owe Mike Schutte. And some other guys – it's not important. I need to clear that. As long as I'm on the base, I'm okay. But we need a lot of money. Not for me, but for the legal guys, to go after Fein. My priority is getting The Tank off my back. If we raise enough, I've got a superb investment – we can make enough to clear everything *and* go after Fein. So, will you talk to Victor?"

"I don't know. He's always going on about how much he has to pay Bernice after the divorce. And Nadine isn't cheap. Now that he's moving, he says he can't help us out anymore."

"Just try," said Will.

"You ask him."

"Ja, right. I don't think so. You know what he thinks of me. Listen, there's one more thing."

"What?" I asked.

"This girl, did you fuck her?" Whatever strain Will found himself under, there was always enough reserve to probe and prod.

"I've got to go."

"I'll call you in a couple of days. I know how tight Victor is with the phone."

I put the phone down and heard Elliot shuffling down the passage.

"Who was that?" he asked, yawning.

"Someone for Nadine," I lied.

"Have you called Marieke yet?"

"Couldn't get hold of her."

"Well, you better get on it. Don't let her get away."

"Why is everyone so interested in my love life all of a sudden?"

"Call her now and set up a double date with her and Carlien."

"I see."

"You see nothing. Just do it."



Elliot and I sat in a booth on a vinyl bench in the San Antonio Spur, under a tomahawk and a peace pipe. We ordered beers and Elliot played with the spring-loaded lid of the BBQ sauce. Finally Marieke walked in, still wearing those mirror shades, chewing her gum and looking down on the plates of onion rings and surf-and-turf and thousand-island sauce and hot rocks and beef burgers as she went. I watched her round the Salad Valley and when she saw me, she took out her gum mid-step and placed it in the bean salad tub.

The acne-smearing Afrikaans kid who'd served us and refused to speak English seemed to know her and brought her a Coke-and-something without her having to ask. She sat next to me and took off her shades.

"Where's Carlien?" asked Elliot.

"She's not coming," said Marieke.

"Why not?"

"Her family's very strict. She can't just come out."

"They won't let her come to the phone either?" asked Elliot.

"She's going through a weird time at the moment. I think you should just drop it."

"Drop what?"

"The calling, and hanging around her front garden at night."

"So she knows it was me."

"Ja, *boet*, she knows. Just drop it, hey."

"But her parents are strict, you say?"

"Sure."

"See you later," said Elliot sliding out the booth.

"Hey, where are you going?" I said. "How am I supposed to get home?"

"Want the keys?" he asked, dangling them.

"After last time? No thanks. Go – I'll walk."

Marieke shook her head. "Won't do any good," she said, but he was already passing Salad Valley. "She's not interested."

"So it's not her parents?"

"Well, her parents don't like it that there's a Jew behind their bougainvillea at night. Ja, they know you're Jews," she said, wagging a forefinger like I'd just told a fib. "They've heard of you."

"They don't know what kind of Jews we are."

"Jew's a Jew, I'm sure. Anyway, that's not the problem. She's got a boyfriend, Tjoppa Mulder. He's in the Air Force now."

"I see."

"How come you don't want to go to the army?"

"School was enough like the army for me. Marching on Fridays in Cadets, Veldschool, haircuts, shooting, bivouacs, army tents. All our teachers were in the *Kommando*, some used to be Recces."

"Yussie, you'd never get away with not going to the army if you were Afrikaans."

"I'm sure some Afrikaners don't go either."

"Ja, but they lose their family."

"Well, it might all be over after the referendum anyway."

"My brother says there's going to be a civil war after the referendum."

"And how does your brother know this?"

"He hears it at the AWB meetings. Goes every weekend."

"Your brother's in the AWB?"

"Don't look at me like I'm something dirty you found in your salad, *boet*. Lots of people in this town go to the meetings. And he's my brother, it's not me. Are you like your brother?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know yet." The acne-afflicted waiter kid came back with another beer and another drink for her.

"No, I didn't order one," I said. Elliot said he'd pay and now he'd left me without any money.

"First round," said the kid.

"Don't worry about it," said Marieke. "They won't notice – we get free drinks here all the time. But you better drink fast. I still want to go to the Action Bar."

We finished our drinks quickly and walked out of the Checkers Centre onto Hans van Rensburg Street, the old site of Great North Diesel and Auto Electric behind us, subdivided now into a butchery (*VleisPaleis* – the Meat Palace) and a Video Den.

The hotel Van Jaarsveld dreamed of, for all his wrangling, hadn't been erected at all. It was going to be too costly. When he shelved that idea, they'd planned a high-rise office block eight floors taller than the Nedbank building. Then they shelved that too. What the town got instead was another strip mall.

We walked under the streetlights towards the Holiday Inn Action Bar, six or seven blocks away. Marieke seemed unchanged by the sex, I was thinking. Perhaps it was nothing to her. But she *was* there, walking next to me on a Saturday night, so I ventured to hold her hand.

"Ag!" she went and flapped it away, grimacing and stopping dead in her tracks. She smiled and took it again. "Only joking."

The Action Bar was still the only nightclub in town unless you counted the railway bar. I'd been going there on weekends since I was fifteen, when I looked about twelve. At eighteen I looked fifteen, but I'd never been asked for ID at the Action Bar.

There was only ever a disinterested bouncer at the door, not a beefy man but a very tall one with prominent bones, named Frik. Frik had girders for jaws, sunken eyes and a yellowish tone to his skin. He was always unshaven and sat on a bar stool by the entrance hunched over a straw in his drink. Under the UV light the blond little hairs on his jaw could be picked out and the drink in his skinny glass radiated a cloudy blue.

Frik patted me down and waved me in after I'd paid the cover charge with Marieke's money. We walked inside and looked around. It wasn't a smart place. You couldn't wear shorts or, for some reason, a cap but besides that there weren't many rules. The walls were carpeted and the floors linoleum. To the left of the entrance was a square space and then the bar.

Separating the bar area from the sunken dance-floor was a sticky balustrade of turned wood. Below it were a few tables and chairs, then the dance-floor and beyond the dancers, a little stage. "I'll get some drinks," said Marieke, and I went in the direction of the high stools by the balustrade.

A couple swept across the dance floor in a two-step *langarm* dance while AC/DC's 'Thunderstruck' cavorted out of the speakers. The woman's hand held the shoulder of the man's peach-coloured shirt in a surprisingly formal way, her elbow sticking out like a weapon. The other hand was in his and their conjoined arms pumped up and down energetically, although there was only seriousness and concentration on their faces. The pair mowed the dance-floor up while Angus Young broke into a solo.

When the song finished, the AC/DC couple walked up to me. "Get off our chairs," said the man in Afrikaans. I didn't argue, even though there were several empty stools right alongside.

"Fucking asshole," said Marieke, bringing the drinks.

"This place is full of them." I was wary of most people in the Action Bar, since there was often fighting. Only months before there'd been a full-blown bar brawl when visiting Northern Free State rugby players were in town for a game against our very own Far Northern Transvaal. Even Frik had been hurt in that one, losing an eye tooth in a prop's knuckle, and in a way I was sorry I'd missed the scrap, even with my great aversion to pain and humiliation.

We sat down further along the wall, talked a little and French-kissed at length. Bojo was on stage and the place was filling up. None of us knew whether 'Bojo' was his actual name, his stage name, or whether it was an over-all name for his performance – the aforementioned man with his already-receded hair pulled back into a ponytail, singing and playing guitar to backing tracks of whatever you like, as long as it's Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, Eddie Grant and Midnight Oil.

Women in high-rider jeans that pulled their buttocks up like hams in a butcher's window forced their men onto the dance-floor. "Hey, isn't that your friend?" I said, noticing first the cowboy boots and then the rest of Carlien. She was dancing to 'Jack & Diane', shaking her hair and stomping her boots, and riling up first a man on the left who danced surprisingly lithely for a guy of his size and then another who stood and smirked and gave his best James Dean against the balustrade.

"I tried to tell your brother," she said.

"Which one is Tjoppa?"

"Neither. I told you – Tjoppa is in the air force." Marieke waved to her friend and Carlien beckoned for us to dance with her.

"Oh right."

"She's just teasing. Ag, Tjoppa's a *doos*, anyway. Cheats on her all the time. Come on," said Marieke and led me by the hand to the dance floor. The three of us grouped together on the floor, Marieke and Carlien performing an obviously familiar routine with each other to 'I Got You Babe'. Bojo was off the stage now and working in his capacity as resident DJ. I tried to dance along but couldn't help but be aware of the two men on opposite sides of the dance floor watching Carlien out of the corners of their eyes.

The men in their individual capacities tried to up the vigorousness of their shoulder dips and foot shuffles, even the one who'd been playing it cool against the balustrade. Something plastic and cheap with a generic female vocal streamed out of the speakers. It was the kind of music that made you drink more, or vomit blue cocktails.

The more dancey of Carlien's admirers had her by the hand, although she quickly slipped away from the man and performed a turn in front of the non-dancer. The non-dancer was now forced into exposing his dance capabilities. You felt sorry for him and when Carlien returned to her other suitor, the non-dancer was clearly wounded and withdrew his smile and his floppy moves.

Instead, he went over to the other man and pushed him. The dancer fell into someone else and was pushed forwards, back into the non-dancer. This was when the first punches flew and we fled the dance-floor.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," I said but Frik had pushed his way into the little group and was putting his arms between the men. He had his giant hand over the dancer's face and shoved him back, like an athlete putting a shot. Then he bear-hugged the non-dancer and lifted him, even though this man was almost as tall as Frik himself, all the way to the entrance. Frik came back for the other man and did the same.

Marieke looked at her watch. "I have to go. My mom thinks I'm still at the Spur. She's picking me up at eleven-thirty."

Carlien wanted to stay. She was talking to another man at the bar, one with cavalier, spiky hair who was making her laugh. We left her there and headed out the front door. "Night, Frik," said Marieke. Frik gave the smallest of nods. He was adjusting his jersey-neck and gold chain and sitting back on his stool under the UV light. His pale fluorescent drink sat at the chair's base next to his brown leather shoes.

A little further along the outside wall, just five or six metres, the two men from before were still fighting. This time the non-dancer got a good hook right into the crook of the dancer's jaw. While the dancer was doubled over, the non-dancer took the opportunity to knee him in the face. We stopped watching when he dropped to the ground and the kicking began.

We had to run back to the Checkers Centre to make it in time for Marieke's mother. She arrived in a yellow Mazda 323 with a boy in the front I recognised from somewhere. He glared at me in the parking lot from the front passenger seat.

Marieke introduced me to her mother, Mrs De Bruin, in sweet, respectful church tones, and to her younger brother, Hannes. I recognised him then as the boy who'd called Elliot and me *moffies* from below the Ferris wheel.

Mrs De Bruin insisted on dropping me off, so I sat in the back with Marieke. Mrs De Bruin's red bouffant peeked above the headrest as we drove past the sleeping figures of the young black kids who'd made their home at the back of the Checkers Centre. Hannes turned his head to follow them and when he'd turned it fully to bring my face into view, he jerked it back.

We drove past the VleisPaleis and Video Den where Great North used to be. "Do you live at home, Ben?" asked Mrs De Bruin.

"We live with my uncle," I said.

"That's nice. Having family together like that."

"Sometimes."

"Well, you must come to visit our family for dinner soon, *nè* Marietjie?"

"Ja, Ma," said Marieke. She gave me a shy look, a look in her repertoire that was new to me. I took her hand in mine on the car seat.

"*Agge nee*," said Hannes, noticing this with annoyance.

"Hannes," said Mrs De Bruin in a clipped voice. The boy crossed his arms and looked out the window as we passed Doren's Outfitters.



I was awoken by the phone on Saturday morning. "Where is Elliot?" said Ma without saying hello first.

"Sleeping, I think."

"Get him now. Hurry up," she said.

I knocked on Elliot's door and went in. He was sound asleep and it took a few shakes to bring him into animation.

"Ma wants you on the phone."

He lumbered through and croaked a quizzical 'hello' into the receiver. I lingered since there was apparently about to be some kind of confrontation. It was the most forceful I'd heard Ma in many years. I could make out her voice quite clearly from a few steps away from the phone.

"Did you do this?" she asked.

"What?" said Elliot.

"I think you know, Elliot. I had to cover the whole window."

"I was going to come in this morning and put it back," said Elliot. "I just overslept. Don't freak out."

"So it was you," she said in a strangled shout. "I wouldn't quite believe it at first. You made a mess of the display window. Thank God the Dorens are away."

"You don't like it?"

"How did you get in here?"

"I took the shop keys last night. You were asleep, or I would've asked."

"Bullshit. You come here right now and help me clean it up. Immediately. I haven't been able to open up the shop today and I had to cover the window so no-one could see it. Jesus, Elliot! The mannequins!"

"You covered it? Why?"

"Elliot, this is a small town. People don't like seeing this kind of thing. Not when they're shopping, with their children. I saw a woman pull her child away from it and swore never to shop here. Someone else was taking photos – I just hope it doesn't get out to the Dorens. I could lose my job. Jesus Christ, Elliot."

"Okay, okay. I'm coming." He put down the phone and stretched his arms.

"So," I said, "how was *your* night last night?"

I had to weigh up the prospect of being put to work against a chance to see what Elliot had wrought in Doren's Outfitters. I decided it was worth the risk of labour.

When we arrived, a black sheet covered the window and the door was shut. Ma let us in when we knocked, locking the door again behind us.

She'd already started taking the scene apart but it was still impressive. How Elliot had managed to make a stream of glitter emerge from the mannequin's mouth, I don't know.

The girl mannequin had one hand on her hip, the other raised in benediction and her head tilted upwards. She was clothed in white and silver flowing fabric, combined from several Doren's outfits, and, significantly, cowboy boots.

Elliot had modified her features, widened her mouth so that the rivulet of multicoloured glitter arced from her lips, up into the air and down into a striated glitter pool on the floor, in which the man mannequin bathed.

He was lying back in the glitter pond, arms outstretched to the sides, his eyes closed, a look of total peace on his face. The lower half of his body really looked like it was beneath the surface of the pool and Elliot could only have achieved this illusion by sawing the torso diagonally from the solar plexus.

The torso was naked and the mannequin's hair had two dreadlocks, fashioned perhaps from a faux fur collar, which almost dipped into the holy pool of glitter below.

If Elliot had left for Doren's that morning to aid the dismantling of his installation, he changed his mind about it now. "You've ruined it," he shouted. "Do you know how difficult this was? Do you know how hard I worked? And you want to cover it? Who's going to see it now? Who?"

"Who did you want to bloody see it, Elliot?" said Ma, dropping her Stanley knife.

"She's not interested, Elliot," I said. "I swear."

Elliot glared at me and I said no more. He lowered his tone and spoke to Ma. "Just the rest of the day. Let it stay up the rest of the day, then I'll put it back on my own. I promise. Exactly like it was before. Come on – it's really something, isn't it?"

"Elliot, no. It's Saturday, it's our busy day. And I can't open the shop until this thing is out of here."

"Fine. Fucking destroy it," he said. "But don't expect my help." At that Elliot left the shop, leaving Ma and me to avoid each other's gazes.

Ah fuck, I thought. I'm definitely going to have to work now.

It took most of the day to clear the glitter from the base, and the mannequins were never the same after Elliot had violated them for his artistic-romantic purposes. By the time we'd finished, it was too late to open the shop.

"I don't understand him," said Ma, rubbing her numb spot. "You never do things like this."

"I'm sure I've done other stuff," I said.

"No. No, you haven't. And Will – he's caused trouble for himself. But you've always been sensible."

But neither Elliot nor Will, whatever the trouble they'd raised, had ever turned a man in and ruined their own family, I thought.

"I've got to go," I said.

"Thanks for helping, my boy. You know, you deserve the best. I wish you were going to varsity. You should do something. Correspondence, maybe. What would you like to be?"

"I don't know, Ma."

"You're not stupid, Ben, and you're dependable. Maybe something financial?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, we're figure it out."

I walked to the home industries shop where Marieke worked on Saturdays and arrived at the Middestad Centre just in time to find her closing up. The remaining cakes puffed out their plastic bag bubbles in neat rows along the walls of the narrow shop. Koeksisters lined up beneath them, alongside Swiss rolls and butter biscuits.

After locking the front door, Marieke took me by the hand and led me behind a concertina vinyl partition into a back room just big enough for a diminutive basin, a chair and a shelf with ribbons and tape and various other supplies. Here we had sex for the second time in my life.

Afterwards we sat behind the counter eating milk tart with tannin-stained teaspoons, my crotch still abuzz. We kept our fingers looped through each other throughout, scooping the sweet, cold, silken custard into our mouths.

When the foil base contained just crumbs, Marieke went to fetch another from the shelf. "Shame," she said, "Carlien is so hung-over she didn't even go into work today. I'll drop this one off for her."

It was only then I remembered to tell her about Elliot's shop window display of love and mania.

"He's been trying to see her all week," she said.

"So she's not interested?"

"It's Carlien – you never know. But she's never cheated on Tjoppa. Even when she's like she was last night."

"So she wouldn't even have seen Doren's?" I asked.

"No way – she was in bed. I spoke to her earlier."

"Poor Elliot."

"Ag shame. It's kind of sweet, I suppose."

"I've never seen him that way for anyone before. For art, or for a cause, but never a girl."



Even Victor took up a position against Elliot's mannequins. "Well, they've suffered a loss of business. It's unforgiveable."

Elliot showed his lack of concern with barely upraised palms and a shrug.

"Saturday morning's the top day for retail," continued Victor. "If I was in retail I'd rather *just* have Saturday morning and no weekdays, if I had to choose."

Elliot sipped his lentil-vegetable soup from the oversize mug.

"What'd you do it for, anyway?" asked Victor. Ma was silent during all this, not yet ready to engage her son, or just unwilling to, having returned to the cover of her meekness.

"I felt like it," said Elliot. "I had the idea."

"I know why he did it," I said.

"You shut up," said Elliot.

"It's obvious why he did it," said Nadine.

“Well, it might be obvious to you. Why am I the only one who doesn’t see it, then? I heard it was a woman giving a rainbow a blowjob. Is that true?”

Elliot didn’t answer.

“I don’t get art,” said Victor. “Your mom used to do some nice watercolours in art school. And that charcoal portrait of Jackie we still have. Why don’t you do something like that at least?”

“Maybe I will,” said Elliot.

The very next day Elliot went to the University of the North at Turfloop, just outside of town, and arranged to give free, informal art classes.

It was an apartheid-constructed ‘black’ university, a hodgepodge campus, with washed-up academics, radical-left student politics, and a dean dedicated to educating its non-white student population up to a level where they’d be useful to white society but no further.

Elliot found a loyal band of six art aspirants and, rousing foreign funding from his former college in London, began a course in the basics. The university had no Fine Art course of its own and since it cost the university nothing (and wasn’t preparing the students for employment at the expense of whites) the dean allowed it.

Perhaps it was a way for Elliot to escape the failure of his attempts to woo Carlien, to lick his wounds in a makeshift art studio.



The man mannequin was glued and taped together but no-one noticed his scarred torso under his shirts in the subsequent week. And the woman mannequin had her face scraped and reapplied so that she was fresh and timeless once more.

Ma had to explain the absence of takings on Saturday morning by saying she came down with a one-day bug and had to close the shop early. Benny Doren accepted this without too many questions but rumours and reports began to arrive at Benny’s ear during the week.

A pornographic scene, they said. Hallucinogenic. Satanic. Anti-Semitic. Anti-Christian. Communist. The Dorens undressed their mannequins and found the scars and the old glitter that wouldn’t come off. And then someone showed them a photograph of the scene.

Ma had to explain. At this point Ma took the advice she’d always given her sons – she told the truth. She explained that it was her son – her very artistic son, not the layabout or the gambler – who, in a spasm of artistic compulsion, created an artwork. It was without her approval and she’d rectified the situation herself. It would never happen again.

Benny Doren, that coward, had his accountant phone Ma one evening at Victor's to let her know she wouldn't be required to show up at work anymore, and to perhaps give up shopping at Doren's for, say, the next six months.

What made it worse was that the Dorens' accountant was our old accountant, Morgan. "Tried to talk them out of it, Margot," said Morgan, "but he insists, so..."

Ma was stony.

"That boy, Elliot," he continued, "needs something to keep him occupied. He'll come to no good."

She acquiesced and showed little concern, so I assumed she'd just find another job. When Ma began to spend her days at home with me, though, the situation revealed itself in its ugliness. Idleness wasn't solely my domain anymore. The nodes that filled my day became awkward because now Ma sat in their way. My lack of purpose was shown up more clearly, perhaps, when I recognised myself in Ma's new lethargy.

And then I began to worry. I began to worry because Ma had stopped worrying. She was out of work, we had no income and were sliding further and further into dependency on Victor, a dependency which would end with his emigration.

"Are you going to try to get another job, Ma?" I asked her one morning.

"I just need a break," she said. "That numbness is back."

I was beginning to form an unsympathetic scepticism of her strange sensations and dizzy spells.

"Do you think we can afford to wait?" I asked.

"I don't want to think about it now, okay?"

"Where are we going to get money?"

"We haven't been kicked out yet. Something will come up."

"Will it? Everyone says there aren't jobs anymore."

"I'll start looking soon," she said.

"When?"

"Soon," she said and sat in front of the TV for a taped episode of a murder mystery TV programme with a suspicious, aged sleuth.

In the evenings Victor would hint at places Ma might try to find work. One night, Nadine was far more direct. "Well, you'd better find something quick," she said. "Victor found a buyer for the business. We'll be leaving for Australia in just over a month."

Ma was shocked into inaction. If she'd been listless before, she was paralyzed now. This latest step in the decline of our fortune hit me when I asked for some pocket money to take Marieke to a movie and Ma had to lie down on the carpet in the lounge for some time, her fingers over her eyes.

I had to forget my pride and go across the road to Carol and fetch migraine tablets for Ma. Carol answered the door just a crack to talk to me and made me wait outside while she fetched the drugs.

"I don't know what to do," said Ma as she swallowed them down.

"It's okay, Ma," I said. "I spoke to Will the other day - he's going to get our money back from Leo Fein. He's close. He's going to get it back for us."

University of Cape Town

## Electrolux

Nadine began to pack up around us. At least, she directed staff seconded from Victor's business to do it. I was left with no cupboard and my clothes sat in piles on the floor. The reading lamp, which stayed only after a negotiation, lost the small chest of drawers on which it had rested and now had to direct its beam straight up into the ceiling for any light to fall on the page.

The guest dressing table – the one in Ma's room – also left and she had to clutter her bottles and brushes into the bathroom. Elliot was the only one unaffected by the riptide. He was used to living in a shambles, to a transient life, but he must have noticed the weakening effect it was having on Ma.

She began to lose things, or to believe they'd been lost, and accuse me or Elliot of taking them. A tortoise-shell hair comb, or a Wedgwood brooch, her mother's wedding band, an auction catalogue from an art sale, a volume of Heine's poetry, her toothpicks – it distressed her not to have these things within reach.

I came home one day to find her in tears and Nadine whisked out of the living room, shouting, "I haven't packed your things, Margot! Not by accident, certainly not on purpose. I know every little item that's been wrapped and sent off. What the hell would I want with your perfumes, anyway?"

Most of her things turned up when Elliot or I helped her look for them but she began to believe other things had been taken. Things like her pottery implements or wedding presents and tea sets, things she convinced herself she'd kept but in fact had sold or given away when we moved from Oost Street.

We had no money. One brother was lovelorn or rapt with his own creations, the other I didn't know whether I could trust anymore. We were losing our home for the second time and Ma showed no sign of bouncing back, of getting back out there in the workplace, of bringing home the bacon.

I needed Will. I tried phoning him at Voortrekkerhoogte army base but they told me there was no Aronbach registered. So I called Angie's. "Didn't he even tell you?" she said. "We broke up. That brother of yours is a liar. He's got some big problems... and I'm not even talking about the debts. Oh, he doesn't want you people to know about the debts, but I don't care. I'm not lying for him anymore. If there are people after him, they can have him. He says he isn't gambling anymore but he is. I know it. He was bad for me – all my friends said."

I didn't like hearing this about my brother so I hurried off the phone but not before Angie begged me to tell her where he was, then screamed at me when I said I didn't know. She called me a liar too and slammed the phone down.

So I tried Skamandrios's bookmakers at Turffontein but no-one would talk to me the first time. When I finally had Skamandrios on the line (at least, I think it was him – the name sounded different when he said it through the noise in the background) the man told me he hadn't seen my brother in months. In fact, Skamandrios (or his proxy) said, if I saw him first, he'd like to know just where Will is himself. He could make it worth my while if I gave him any information I came by.

Then I thought of phoning Kolonel Nel's office. Elsa, the Kolonel's assistant, answered. "We don't see him much," she said. "But I promise to get him to call you from here next time he comes to see the Kolonel."

I caught Elliot at home one day and thought I'd better instigate a conversation about Ma's future and, if I could work it in, mine too.

"I can't get hold of Will," I said, beginning the discourse by way of concern for our eldest brother. "I think people are after him."

Elliot merely raised both eyebrows and kept them there as if to say 'why does this surprise you?'

"I'm worried about Ma," I said. "She just lies there. She's not even *trying* to find a job."

"Hmm, that sounds familiar," he said sarcastically.

"I'm serious. She's, like, depressed or something. Victor's leaving us; Will – who knows? And you don't care."

His face darkened and took on an intensity I was wary of in him. "So," said Elliot, "what you're really saying is, what am *I* going to do about it?"

I swallowed.

"Did you notice," said Elliot, "the only one you left out of that little summary, the only one not mentioned, was you?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it? In a couple of weeks the referendum will be over and I'm going back to London. What are you going to do?" Elliot stood and left the room.

How had so much responsibility fallen to me, the least prepared to carry it? The walls screwed tighter on either side.

I walked into the lounge and took another look at my mother. She was sleeping with her mouth gaping like a baby on the La-Z-Boy.

However unlike my brothers Ma thought I was, I'd risen with ease from under the weight of religion and dropped it behind me. I fell in line with my brothers. I sat in the comfort of godlessness and I didn't give Him a second thought. So it certainly wasn't Him I beseeched in my hour of need.

I put on the smartest pair of pants I owned and walked towards my destiny, which was bound to be a kind of internal doom, no matter how successful it might turn out. My heart beat heavy at the contemplation of what I was about to do: I turned towards Bendor. I had no choice.

At a time in life when I needed an encouraging hand at my back, I found myself trudging against my will, my skull screaming No. The very pretence I was holding up, of actually possessing a future of my own choosing, was crumpling in my stomach with each step.

The man I was on my way to see, after all, was the man I'd sent into exile, the man my family believed had ruined them, and the man who, it's possible, could once have been my step-father. How much he knew of my part in his arrest, I couldn't say.

I walked in the road between the heavy gardens of Bendor and found the house. The face-brick tower with the porthole rose over it, set back behind a wax crayon lawn. A deep gong followed by a slightly higher one rang inside when I pressed the doorbell. The door opened, sweeping the heat from my face for a moment. "Is Mr Fein here?" I asked.

The woman in the peppermint apron sat me down at the light oak table in a tall-backed dining chair, saying that the *baas* was busy but that I, the *kleinbaas*, could wait. She set a highball of passion fruit squash mixed with water, and ice freshly dispensed from that mysterious orifice at the front of the double door fridge.

There are reflections of events and objects all around us if you're open to receiving them. The double doors of Leo Fein's study dispensed a pair of ice-cold eyes belonging to a hulk of a man with white hair and full Voortrekker beard.

"Howzit, my boy," said Leo Fein, warmly. "What a nice surprise. I'm just saying goodbye here and I'll be with you." I'd been about to introduce myself again but there'd been no need: again Leo Fein had known who I was.

The great white hulk with the blue eyes drove his shoulders round to me like yoked oxen. "How do you do?" he said in a voice thick with bass tones. His metacarpals were buried so deep in meat I couldn't feel them in the oversize handshake.

But it was the eyes that were truly engaging. They were a complex and delicate light blue, cool but almost too lovely to be engulfed as they were in thick, creased skin. Even amongst the gargantuan features scrumming together on that square face, they demanded to be noticed.

"Nice to meet you," I said automatically. It didn't seem quite real that I was suddenly face to face with the leader of the AWB, the right-wing militant organisation who'd been in the news so much. He was a new kind of Hitler to the country's Jews, though not to Leo Fein, it seemed.

"A very good meeting," said the hulk, back to Leo Fein.

"Very positive," said Leo Fein. "My grandfather fought in the Boer War, you know. On the side of the Boers."

"Is that so? He fought, you say?"

"Well, the commando leader made him look after the horses. He said to him, 'You're the only Jew we've got. We can't have you killed in action.'"

"He would have been what we call an *agterryer*. You have a chance to be more than just an *agterryer* in this, Meneer Fein. You'll be a hero to a nation." The hulk blocked out all light as he passed through the doorway and left the house. Leo Fein turned to me.

"Come into the study," he said.

I followed him through the double doors of the room he'd barred from me years before. The birds were still there, immortal and frozen in their murderous acts. The dassie still covered by the glazed rock on the ground, the black eagle still had its wings hunched forward, its talons spread and its beak agape, ready to shriek or rip.

There was a desk to the side with two columns of drawers and a green leather writing inset, but he didn't sit behind it. We took the two stern-looking chairs with the candy-striped silk seat instead and peered at each other.

"Carol Richler wanted to have you arrested the other night."

"It was a misunderstanding," I said.

"How is your mother?"

So, we'd begun. "My family has had a hard time of it since the last time you were in town," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"My mother lost a lot after you went."

"I see." He took up a torn envelope from the desk and began tapping the edge of it on the surface softly.

I wasn't a gambler. It was Will who should have been having this talk. I had no idea whether Leo Fein knew about the note I'd given Coetzee, that it was my hand that had betrayed him. Did I push now or did I humble myself? "We lost it all," I tried.

"I'm sorry. Especially for your mother. It was unavoidable. But if you've come here for money, don't think I have any to throw around. I lost everything too. I have to start from scratch."

"But you still have this place. We don't even have our house anymore."

"What are you? The tax man? You don't understand finances. The bank owns this." He gestured over the room, the birds, with the envelope in his hand. "I have nothing left."

"Whatever you are now, you're above us," I said. "I'm asking you for help. I know once you tried to help my family and you couldn't." There was a physical pain that tapped at my chest with these supplicating words.

He nodded and I continued. "My mother has nothing left. She lost the shit job she had. One of my brothers lives in a squat with no money, an artist. The other one I haven't heard from in weeks and he's in debt."

"We've all suffered," he said. It was a line that was on the face of it sympathetic, doled out perhaps to elicit sympathy, too, but it plainly conferred an unwillingness to help.

"Ma's sick. She needs a doctor."

"I suppose she needs an operation or she'll lose her sight," he said, turning his head away from me and playing with the edge of the envelope with the fingers of one hand. "I've heard that one before."

I'd extended too far. Where was Will, godammit? "Listen, my mother *is* sick. You can ask Carol Richler if you like." As I dug further I turned a new sod and found anger welling beneath. "The point is, you left with my family's money. You took advantage of my mother. You swindled her. Whatever hardships you've suffered, you've brought upon yourself. But us – you owe us."

"Now hang on. You don't know the situation. She invested in a business deal and it was never completed because I had to leave the country."

"So, what – you're going to give us nothing? I can't believe this." I'd switched from playfulness to aggression without trying any other angles, and I'd shown my weakness as a result.

"I lost all of my investments too, you know."

"Good." The anger had brought on a newly-charged petulance in me.

"Well, that doesn't help, does it?" he said with a smile.

"No. You know what helps? What helps is knowing that I was the one who turned you in."

"What are you talking about?"

"I wrote a note to my teacher, Mr Coetzee. He was in the *Kommandos*, the army volunteers, and he got you arrested."

"He got me arrested?"

"I did. I'm glad I did. I got you arrested. I sent you into exile, lost all your money."

"Lost your mom's money too."

"Well, that too."

"Now what did you come here for?" He took a new tone, the more even, victorious tone of higher ground, and he placed the envelope back on the desk. "To tell me that? Or to beg for money?"

"I don't know anymore. But I've said everything I can say, I suppose."

"Well I haven't, my boy. I'm not finished." He stood now and paced on the rug in front of the desk. "Now, let's see here. You say I owe you, but the way I see it, you owe me. You owe me five years. And you owe your family much more than that. Do they know all this? I bet they don't."

I got up to leave. I thought I'd better tell them before he did. I was choosing my words already, to come clean to Ma, when Leo Fein spoke again.

"Sit down. They don't need to know."

"I want to tell them. I'm going to."

"What'll it do?"

"It's the truth."

"Sometimes the truth doesn't solve anything. Sit down again, my boy. Sit down now," he ordered. "It seems to me we're bound together. I said I don't have money and I don't. But I'm starting a business. I could use you."

"No thanks. I'm finished."

"Do you need money or what? Listen, for someone in need you're bloody cheeky, let me tell you. And don't forget, you owe me. Hang on a moment, let me tell you *my* troubles now. At least do me that courtesy. I lost all my money. All my friends here. The government was after me. Over there I was like a beggar. Couldn't conduct my business. Family? At least you have some – worse for wear maybe, but you have them."

I remembered Leo Fein's son, weeping on the couch while *Kaddish* was performed. "What about your son?"

"Lost him too, yes," he said, and looked away from me. "But now – don't be so hasty, my boy. Don't be so hot and fast. There's a future for you. You come work for me for a little while. You get a salary, you help your mom, your brothers. And you and me – it's cleared."

I thought for a moment. "I can't wait for a cheque at the end of the month."

"You're bloody difficult when you want to be, hey?"

"Well, when do I get paid?"

“How about you do some work first? Here,” he said, getting up and going over to the desk. He opened a drawer and took out five hundred rand. “It’s an advance.”

“Are you in business with the AWB?” I asked.

“We’re talking.”

“What kind of business?”

“The future, my boy. We deal in the future, hey.”



I was met at the door by Marieke’s brother. He said not a word and actually looked frightened at first. His gaze narrowed when I asked for Marieke, however, and it was this sulky countenance that became familiar to me over the next few weeks.

He called for Marieke before storming his room, where he played Great Trek folk songs from the FAK songbook and Italian marching songs on a plastic turntable.

Marieke burst past her brother and pulled me into the living room where Mevrouw De Bruin, Marieke’s mother, was sitting with a *Rooi Rose* magazine in her lap, a leg folded under her like a girl.

In her mother’s presence Marieke was a much more demure version of herself, wary as she was of her mother’s careful criticism of dress and deportment. Mevrouw De Bruin was a shapely woman made six inches taller by her red bouffant. She plastered over her slightly pockmarked face with the makeup she sold, and was the kind of woman who squeezed her children’s pimples.

There was no more Meneer De Bruin, his demise having been brought on by alcoholism, and none of the children brought up the memory of their father, or felt the need to since Mrs De Bruin ruled with a strong enough hand. I think there was a general sense, on the part of Mrs De Bruin at any rate, that they had been blessed by the Lord with Mr De Bruin’s departure and the subsequent bestowal of his property upon the family.

At dinner I mentioned that I too had grown up without a father. A silence hung over the mashed vegetable *boerekos*.

“There’s a test for us in everything,” said Mrs De Bruin, cutting up Danie’s Vienna sausages.

I’ve saved the last De Bruin till now because he deserves his own paragraph (at the very least). Danie De Bruin was born somewhere towards the Asperger’s end of the autism spectrum, a place reserved for him and a deep, affectionate, intellectual, obsessive love affair with vacuum

cleaners. He was nine when I met him and it was clear that nothing made the child happier than being in the same room as one of those cleaning machines.

Mrs De Bruin had six – what she could afford on the household income. If she could've bought more she would've, since the whole family had given up a long time ago already the idea that they could resist the pull the machines had on young Danie's soul.

"So what do you do, Ben?" asked Mrs De Bruin.

"Ma-a – " said Marieke.

"Actually, I'm just starting a new job," I said. Marieke waited for me to speak on. "Just today, actually."

"Oh, congratulations," said Mrs De Bruin. "What kind of work is it, Ben?"

"It's a business thing," I said.

"What business?" asked Marieke.

"Deals, between business. Sort of a middleman."

"Aren't you supposed to cut out the middleman in business?" asked Mrs De Bruin.

"Not if you *are* the middleman," I said.

"Oh," said Mrs De Bruin. "I suppose I don't know much about business."

"I suppose I don't know too much yet, either. It's kind of confidential, these deals."

But Mrs De Bruin did know quite a lot about business. On subsequent visits she repeated as often as possible, "Not everyone can say they're consistently first- or second-place saleswoman in the *entire* Far Northern Transvaal region for the past seven years, consistently. Nobody else can say that."

There was a fierce rivalry with another woman, Mrs Vermeulen, over their performance representing the cosmetics range, and the only thing Mrs De Bruin was more protective over than her children was her sales position. The sales team's prize-giving evenings were treasured opportunities for revenge and Mrs De Bruin would have new nails sharpened, affixed and painted in ever-more bountiful colours for them.

While Marieke helped her mother in the kitchen after dinner, Hannes and I were left together watching over Danie who was arranging his nozzle attachments.

"Did you get your call-up?" asked Hannes.

"Sure," I said.

"Where to?"

"The last one said Phalaborwa."

"Ooh, Sewe-SAI," he said. There was respect and not a little surprise in his voice that I'd been called up to the 7<sup>th</sup> SA Infantry. This was unnecessary since call-ups were mostly random

assignments to regiments and, so, not based on any sort of manly military potential or killer instinct of might have possessed. He shook his head. "Yussie, you're lucky. That's one of the toughest. I wish I get a call-up like that."

"I don't think I'm lucky."

"What – are you chicken? Or a *moffie*?" It was all very well to be called '*moffie*' by older men or teachers. You didn't necessarily like it, but you could get used to it. But to be called '*moffie*' by a sixteen-year-old?

"You know I'm your sister's boyfriend, right?" I said.

He curled his lip and squinted down at it. Hannes sighed deeply then picked up one of Danie's nozzle attachments. "I can't wait to be called up."

"Stop talking," said Danie.

"I hope I get a good one," said Hannes. "I want to go before it's too late. Maybe its already too late."

"Shut up!" said Danie. He'd arranged his nozzles in rows and now pushed them aside. "I want the other one," he said.

Hannes handed him the one in his hand.

"The other one. I want the other one."

Hannes stood up and went to the cupboard in the passage. He returned with a box on which someone had written in black marker 'Electrolux'. He sat on the floor next to his little brother and opened the box. As Danie took out the new set of nozzles, Hannes brushed his brother's hair back. Danie swatted the hand away and locked his gaze onto the plastic attachments.

"So, what you up to this weekend?" I asked, eager to change the subject.

"Well... Ag, nothing."

"What?"

"No, you don't want to hear about it." He shook his head.

"Sure I do," I said, watching Danie run his finger over a brush attachment for the Miele.

"Okay," he said, giving me just enough trust. He sniffed and said, "Me and some friends, we're gonna drive around and any blacks we see in the street after dark... We've got baseball bats." He hoicked his eyebrows.

"Really?"

"Ja, my cousin went last weekend. They took out three guys who were looking for *kak*." I'd heard some things from Victor already but took them for his usual doomsday rumours. Victor said a cow had been painted with the right-wing emblem, the three-legged swastika, and that there'd been some sort of trouble, maybe looting or vandalism, at the Indian Plaza.

The swastika on the *shul* wall and the Women's Zionist League raffle tickets flashed in my memory. "Jeez," I said.

"Ja," said Hannes.

"Are you serious about this? Beating up black people?"

"Ja, off the back of this guy's bakkie," as if it were only that I'd not heard him correctly. "We gotta send a message out there. Otherwise it's civil war."

"But the thing on the bakkie – that's civil war."

For a brief moment he considered it. "Well if it is, it is," he said with a light shrug. "But if we get in first we can win it. Hey – do you know what the black man needs? The black man needs a hero."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"It's proven."

"Well, what about Mandela?"

"He won't last. Someone's gonna pick him off for sure. Probably one of their own. We won't even have to do it."

"So tell me, who are black people going to look up to?"

"Big Daddy White Man. It's the only way," he said seriously with the shake of his head.

"I don't believe you. You're really doing this on the weekend?"

"Why not? Somebody's gotta do something. Sure, you're a white guy and everything but you *souties* are never gonna do anything about it." He looked at me. "Am I right, *boetie*? It's up to the *boere*. And all this black-on-black violence – it's the best thing that could happen here. Less for us to do, hey?"

"Where are you guys gonna go? To look for black people, I mean?"

"I'm not telling you that. It's dangerous – for us; for you too if you say anything. But I will say, if you think it's not gonna affect you, just go look nearby the railway station. That's municipal land and there's already squatters there now. Nobody's doing anything. Soon they'll be in Annandale and the middle of town, and in your house. One day you'll thank us."

"What if the police come?"

"Don't worry about that. Some of the guys *are* the police."

"Does your mom know?"

He shrugged and looked away. "Hey, don't judge me, *boetie*. It's fine for you – you've got a country to run to. This is our land."

"What country?"

"Israel."

“Why the hell would I want to go there?”

“That’s your people. You *should* go.”

“They’re not my people,” I said. “I don’t even know them.”

“Well, who are your people then?”

Marieke and Mrs De Bruin came in with the coffee and condensed milk. Hannes put his finger to his lips.

University of Cape Town

## Knobkierie

A man in cheap acrylic glasses was at Leo Fein's house when I arrived. His eyes were tight behind the squared lenses and he had very neat hair parted low down on the side. The man wore a blue ribbed jersey with elbow pads and epaulets and either the jersey or the man himself emitted a sour smell in the air around him.

Leo Fein introduced him as Snor Snyman and me as his young apprentice. Although Leo Fein seemed amused by this epithet, Snor Snyman's face didn't register any sort of expression at all. The black dots of his eyes merely studied me. We all drank good coffee, real coffee that wasn't common in houses in those days, only in restaurants, and even then, in very few of the restaurants in our town.

Leo Fein seemed to be enjoying the moment, although the business part of the meeting was over and the man in the acrylic glasses seemed not to be engaging in the relaxed atmosphere his host was trying to create.

I thought it odd to see Leo Fein balanced informally, with all his heft, on the arm of his stuffed armchair, trying to make small talk with Snor Snyman. Snor got up to leave and smoothed his ribbed jersey.

"Won't you stay for breakfast?" said Leo Fein. The maid in the peppermint outfit came in with a large tray of cut fruit, strawberries and kiwis, melons of all colours, skinned orange slices and grapefruit, overlapping and spread in lines and rows as if copied from the pattern of an elaborate foreign flag.

"I've had breakfast," said Snor.

"Well, thanks for stopping by. We'll meet again soon."

"Will we?" asked Snor without irony.

Leo Fein held out his hand for shaking. "Well," he said.

I was left alone with the fruit tapestry for a moment while the man was seen to the door. "How's your Zulu?" asked Leo Fein of me when he returned.

"I don't know any," I said, chewing on the strawberry from the red line of the fruit flag.

"What do you kids do at school?"

"I'm out of school. But we did North Sotho till Standard Seven."

"Pity. I might need you to meet some gentlemen in the East Rand. They need our help. They're under a lot of pressure at the hostels."

Hostels were always places of great anxiety for me on a personal level, connected as they were with bullying and sodden cabbage behind closed doors, administered there with equal cruelty.

But the hostels I believe Leo Fein was talking of were of a different sort. They were for full-grown men, people who came from the far reaches of the country. They'd existed on our landscape for years to house migrant labourers for the mines, labourers kept migrant by the overcrowding, squalor, and the all-male environment.

I was aware of the violence in the hostels. You couldn't escape knowledge it. Every night the news on TV reported on 'politically motivated' attacks by hostel dwellers. "Let them kill each other," Victor would say. "Less of them to ruin the country."

'Black-on-black' violence was studied in editorials and around dinner tables. Panga wounds, traditional weapons, smuggled automatic rifles and explosives were mentioned.

"Who was that?" I asked Leo Fein, trying to change the subject.

"Snor? He's one of our men in the field."

"And where's he from?"

"Depends who you ask – Directorate of Special Tasks, Internal Stability Unit, Civil Cooperation Bureau, National Co-ordinating Mechanism."

Evidently I looked blank.

"Government," he said. "Or at least, the part of the government nobody in government wants to know about. Come, let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"The office."

I had no idea Leo Fein had an office in the Nedbank building. Across the road was the VleisPaleis and Video Den, on the site of Great North Diesel and Auto Electric. The office was on the twelfth floor, higher than the bank manager, and from up there you really felt a sense of power since there were few vantage points like that in town.

The office became my place of work and though there was only me and Leo Fein there we had a sign, stationery and mail delivered daily. Northern Horizons was Leo Fein's business and I was employee number one.

I'd told Ma I had a job at Nedbank and she was pleased for me. She even cried a little. "Morgan knows about banking," she said. "Maybe you should talk to him. It could boost your career."

"You working for Venter?" asked Victor. "He doesn't know what he's doing." My uncle mentioned other people he knew in the bank.

"I'm still learning everyone's names," I said.

Under Nadine's gaze I was sure my lies were transparent, but then that woman always had that effect on you.

Our space on floor twelve consisted of a front room where I sometimes sat answering the phone and opening mail; a large, mostly-empty space with a couch, a pot plant and a row of steel filing cabinets; Leo Fein's office with a desk and a small meeting table; and a boardroom which we never used.

I was given piecemeal tasks to do and kept busy enough that I had questions for the job at hand and no more. On the one hand it was a relief that submitting to Leo Fein's will had resulted only in office administration. But on the other, work was so new to me that it was somewhat of a shock to the system.

Used to sleeping till I wanted, an eight hour day was a marathon for me and by three o'clock I veritably ached for home. I assumed many of the tasks I was given I should already have known how to do and pretended in many cases that I did know.

I'd never written a cheque and although we received more than we sent out, at the end of the first week there was a batch I needed to write according to a list Leo Fein gave me.

I entered the amounts in a painstaking hand, far away from my usual scrawl, but thought a line in the backdrop design of the leaf was a border of some kind and squashed the numbers and words into the wrong spaces.

"You'll have to do these again," said Leo Fein without any criticism at all. "Like this," he said and showed me the correct method.

There was a lot of mail and there was a lot of filing to be done. We'd receive a large envelope from an address in Johannesburg, containing letter-size envelopes from all over the country. Inside these were cheques and I'd have to take them down to the bank for deposit.

Then there were statements to be drawn up for each of the clients and a kind of financial reconciliation done at the end of the week. Soon I allowed myself to feel a little pride. Someone had shown enough faith in me to give me a job – and I was actually capable of doing it, competent. The desire to tell Elliot what I'd achieved would rise in me, but then I'd remember who it was who'd given me the job and I've have to press it down again.

It was only when a man in his forties, Henry Conradie, from the small accounting firm on our floor made a comment, that I put together a vague understanding of what sort of business Northern Horizons was.

He'd often come by and say something like, "Where's it booming?"

I'd shrug, or laugh uncomfortably. Henry would come back the next day and ask the same thing or, "Got something good going today, hot shot?" And, "What's the big movers?"

I hated the guy and began to feel sure his banter was mockery. One morning he came in, blowing on his coffee, and said, "Why didn't you stay there, at Harvard?"

I dropped the letter opener with a loud bang on the desk. "Jeez, Henry, you come in here every morning with some comment. I don't know what you want from me. Fucking Harvard now. I don't know, Henry. Why don't you tell me, please? Why didn't I stay at Harvard?"

I was sure I was being made fun of but saw then how his face froze up, and he became quieter. "Sorry Ben. Just wondered what it was like being the youngest student there. Probably a lot of pressure. That's all. I know you must be very busy. I won't bother you again." He started for the passage in the direction of his own office but turned. "Look, I'm sorry. It's just – I know you don't deal with small fry like me but I'm struggling, Ben. It's the divorce, you know. If you can get me in, that'd be a big help. Amazing."

"In?"

"The fund. Or if I could just speak to him."

I sat silent, unable to answer.

"I'm sorry," said Henry. "I have no right to ask."

"I'm sorry, Henry."

"No, I'm sorry, Ben."

As soon as Leo Fein came in, I went into his office and closed the door. "Did you make up some story that I went to Harvard or something?"

"I heard that rumour too," he said without looking up from a letter.

"Henry asked about some fund. He wanted to talk to you, I think."

"If anyone wants to see me, I'm never available. Got it? Never."

"What do I say?"

"You say they've just missed me. Or I'm in a meeting, or on an overseas call. If they come back you say they just missed me again. I'm in Honduras. Make it up."

"Okay, I will. What's the fund Henry was asking about?"

He got up from his desk and rifled through some papers, found them and stuffed them roughly into a bag. "Northern Horizons. That's what this is – all the cheques you get, the statements et cetera. For investment."

"In what?"

"I don't have the time to explain. But we'll talk about it later, china. I've got to get going. Make sure the cheques are in before three."

At the end of the second week, I was making out another batch of cheques, reading off a list Leo Fein had written. Leo Fein's handwriting was startling in its precise beauty.

The fives were poetic, slightly bigger than the other numbers, the right angles of the bracket supported on the softest of springs below. And what a balance the four was, between curve and straight line. Who knew a four could show so much movement?

Below A & J Printers: R6239.00, I recognised my own name. Benjamin Aronbach: R3000. It was my first salary, for which I wrote out my own cheque.



Elliot was out all the time, Nadine and Victor were at work, and Ma was asleep, as was her state in these days, so it was I who answered the phone when Will rang.

"Where have you been?" I asked. "I've been trying to get hold of you."

"Sorry, buddy," he said. "I've been working behind the scenes. Setting things up with the lawyers. Did you ask Victor for the money?"

"He won't give us any. Are you really talking to lawyers?"

"Of course," he said. "But we need some tom to play with. We *have* to get some cash. I've got a great opportunity for us, a great investment."

"Well, I can maybe get some. I should be getting some soon."

"Where?"

"I'm helping a guy out."

"Hand jobs?"

"Business."

"You're very vague," said Will.

"So are you."

"Come on, give me a clue."

"I work at Nedbank."

"Oh for fuck's sakes," said Will. He inhaled and took a moment. "Ben, I'm happy you've got a holiday job. It'll teach you a lot, I'm sure. But we can't wait for a salary. I'm talking real money. That investment I was telling you about? It's ready to go – it's a real opportunity I've managed to set up for us here, buddy."

"I'm getting a bonus soon."

“Look, I’ll level with you. I can’t leave the base because The Tank’s still looking for me. And because I’m not making money, the Kolonel wants to send me to the townships. We don’t have long. Now, this is a good opportunity, but we need thirty grand – that’s the minimum.”

“I don’t know if I can get that,” I said.

“You have to, or we can forget about getting our money from that *yifto*. Did you ask Victor?”

“He said no.” I couldn’t bring myself to ask my uncle. I hadn’t even tried.

“Bastard. Doesn’t he care about your future? Okay, okay. This job of yours – what’s your boss like?”

The thought entered my mind that this was a trap. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve got a good relationship with him, though?”

“I suppose.”

“See if you can ask for a loan. An advance on your salary.”

“I’ll try.”

“Ben, we’re going to get that *yifto*. We’re going after him. Don’t forget.”

I wanted to believe Will but for the first time I felt that his words were bravado, a façade, and from the mouth of someone who had fewer options than me. Another curtain had dropped.



A creeping disgust had begun to come over me for having linked arms with Leo Fein. I was tied to him in so many ways already and couldn’t push him off without becoming more entangled. I dragged myself to work and was happy to find he wasn’t there.

I was becoming accustomed to the routine of sorting the mail and recording the cheques, and had begun reconciling the bank statements according to instruction. I didn’t hate work but there was the shameful reminder each day, when I passed the site of the family business, of how our lives had changed. From the twelfth floor I could see the roofs of the subdivided plots of VleisPaleis and Video Den.

Leo Fein came into the office in the afternoon just as I was about to phone Marieke on the company line. “We have a special job to do today,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked with the slightly crushing panic of a new function I didn’t know and probably should.

“Our annual report. Maybe you can help me write it.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Well, this is a marketing thing. You have to sell the company.”

“How?”

“You just talk about all we’ve achieved in the last year and all the great things we’re going to do in the year to come. You do the words, I do the numbers.”

We sat at the computer terminal and began to type. I was only slightly faster than Leo Fein at the keyboard but it was enough of an advantage to gain the position.

“So you write ‘Northern Horizons’ there,” he said, pointing at the screen. “Then you go on to a little blurb about the organisation.”

“Okay, what do I say?”

“Here,” he said, giving me the annual report of a firm called Span Investment Holdings, Ltd. “I want you to look at how they do it and do something similar for us.”

I flipped through the bland pages of the A4 booklet in the glossy cover. Leo Fein looked at his watch and stood. “Right – I’ve got to go now. We’ll look at it tomorrow. Just see what they’ve done in that report and do something similar.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I said, getting up to follow him with the Span Investment Holdings, Ltd book.

“Just write what they write but where it says ‘Span’, you write ‘Northern Horizons’.”

I was left holding the Span Investment book, which ran to eighty-four pages. It included several colour photographs of people at desks, often one of them bent over a workstation, pointing to something on a computer screen. There was another shot of a young couple together with their baby on the wooden floor of a house that didn’t look South African, and one of an old couple together on a beach. And lots of head shots of men in ties.

There were pie charts in pastel colours, graphs with keys and tables of figures. And in between were pages-long descriptions of mission statements, the chairman’s message, something called ‘Synergy’, another called ‘Integration’ and a small section at the back named ‘Social Responsibility’ with pictures of black children.

Copying the document was deadening to my mind, my fingers, my eyes and my arse. The next time Leo Fein looked at it he sat down next to me and gripped his chin beneath his straight mouth. “I think we need something special here, boy. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know – something that tells the world about us in one line.”

I flipped the Span Investments annual report to the front pages. “Like this thing in the front? ‘Creating growth opportunities through innovative relationship synergies’.”

“Something like that, ja. But better, hey? More imagination. Something about the future.”

“Your future... is safe with us?”

“Kind of.”

“Your future in good hands.”

“Keep going.”

“Shouldn’t it say what Northern Horizons actually does?”

“No,” he said. “It has to be bigger than that. It has to answer the dreams of every person out there.”

“Wow.”

“Ja, it has to ‘wow’.”

“Something with the name? Northern Horizons? The future just got closer. Or the future brought closer. Your future, now. The cutting edge. Take it to the edge. Beyond... beyond something.”

“I like where you’re going with it.”

“Beyond good investment?” I said.

“Northern Horizons. Beyond good investment.” He said it in a kind of whisper. “I love it. Type it up. And write a little intro piece about horizons and how we take you beyond that.”

Mrs De Bruin appeared before me in my thoughts. “Maybe we need something that nobody else can say. Like, is there something about us being the top something for so many years?”

“Oh, sure. We’ve been the top fund for five years now. Oh, we must put that in.”

“The best-performing fund of the past five years? Is that true?”

“Ja,” he said, nodding vigorously. “Absolutely. No-one can touch us.”

“So, something like – ” and I began to type:

It’s not often we look back, but Northern Horizons has been the best-performing fund for the past five years.

“It sounds good like that. What else you got?”

“I had this,” I said, pulling out a pad I’d done some rough work on. “‘We don’t only re-write history, we write our own future.’ And this – ‘Where other funds end, we begin.’ ”

“Yes,” said Leo Fein. “Where other funds end, we begin.”

“I’m not sure what it means,” I said.

“Me neither, but it’s good. It’s really good, Ben.”

More than at any time before, even during the raid on Roy's 'Uptown' Liquor, I was actually enjoying myself with Leo Fein.

"Hang on," I said. "What about this – "

**Where other funds end, we begin**

It's not often we look back, but Northern Horizons has been the best-performing fund for the past five years. With that said, we believe our best results are ahead of us.

Northern Horizons. Beyond good investment.

"Wow," said Leo Fein.

I craved his approval and was repulsed by it as soon as I'd earned it. I girded myself to broach the subject of money now. "If I wanted to start earning more money here, what would I have to do?"

"I like your initiative," he said after a moment.

I was relieved that he saw it that way and not as greed; or perhaps he admired greed.

"Well," he said, "Northern Horizons is good but we have other sidelines, you know. Growth industries. You could earn commission eventually."

"Okay," I said.

He nodded, rose, and patted my shoulder. "Let's see what comes up. We might have something."

After the satisfaction of completing the annual report to the liking of my mentor, I soured with the knowledge of another betrayal of the man. As I sat in the office, I made myself face the situation: that I was to use Leo Fein's own money to bring about his demise. It was mental self-harm to think what I was doing.



Victor glared at me as I spoke on the phone in the hallway even though it had rung for me. "I'd better go," I said to Marieke.

"Okay, so I'll see you for dinner. Bring your brother, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

"Ja, do it, okay?"

"Okay, I'll ask him, but I don't know if he'll come."

I went to sit with the others in the living room. On the TV news report, wax-like under the studio lights, the anchor presented details of a bomb blast at a school while a two-dimensional graphic of an explosion, a cartoon blast, sat in a box above his shoulder. Partly covering the flames of the looney tunes explosion was the three-legged swastika emblem of the AWB.

“Fucking morons,” said Victor to the TV, draining his first and pouring his second brandy-and-Coke. “Bombing schools now,” he half-spoke, half-belched.

Next was a report of violence at a men’s hostel in the East Rand of Johannesburg. The graphic in the square over the newsreader’s shoulder showed a cartoon panga and a knobkierie crossed over a lurid orange background.

Cutting to film footage of the aftermath, blood streamed from a man’s head as he walked across camera, oblivious to the police teargas.

“Killing each other,” said Victor. “They’re doing the morons a favour here. There’s going to be trouble next Friday with the referendum. Big time.”

I looked at Ma. Only a few years ago Victor’s comments would have elicited a reproach. Now her face had the strain of having heard terrible news but her stare went beyond the surface of the TV screen.

“Hey,” I said to Elliot as unobtrusively as possible, “do you want to come over to Marieke’s for dinner?”

“Sure,” said Elliot, about to remove himself anyway from Victor’s commentary. “Can we take your car, Victor?”

“Who’s driving?” asked Victor.

We stopped at the Acropolis Café for Elliot to pick up a slab of chocolate – he was always more thoughtful than me – and arrived outside the De Bruins’ house in Victor’s car. After introducing everyone, I sat next to Marieke, anxious of how to behave with a girl in front of my brother.

Elliot, meanwhile, settled in comfortably on the sofa and took a cool drink brought in on a tray by Hannes. Hannes couldn’t take his eyes off Elliot. Here were the two *moffies* sitting in his house, drinking his cream soda.

“So, Elliot,” said Mrs De Bruin, “that’s very interesting hair you have.”

“Thank you. And yours too,” said Elliot, taking a sip of his green drink.

“Do you want to see something?” said Hannes. Without waiting for anyone to agree, he headed off to his bedroom. Marieke rolled her eyes.

Hannes returned with a cardboard-covered folio and propped it on the dinner table. ‘Sunday School Attack’ read one headline above a story about a black church group that was assaulted by

farmers outside Louis Trichardt, a town north of ours. 'Bomb Rocks Radio Tower' read another that was about an incident in Lydenberg. Hannes smiled with particular pride as he turned the page to reveal 'Cow Vandal Still At Large'.

I skimmed the article that told of a couple of cows on a smallholding outside town that had been spray-painted with the three sevens of the AWB swastika. There were other ones about meetings, and pictures of the hulk I'd met in Leo Fein's house. The black and white dots that formed his face didn't come close to capturing the power of his eyes.

A vacuum cleaner adapter clicked under the fingers of little Danie beneath the coffee table while we looked at the clippings. The scrapbook, the collection, gave the events a form. It may or may not have existed yet. No-one knew how organised groups like the AWB were. There was certainly a feeling that they were a small minority but the events, placed as they were, together in the book, gave them substance and order.

I wondered how much of Leo Fein was in these acts; how much of myself would be in whatever plots were being devised and deployed by the hulk and his henchmen?

"Is this a joke?" asked Elliot.

Hannes stared blankly at him.

"I mean," he continued, "these guys are idiots, right?"

Hannes closed the book angrily.

"Come, put it away, Hannes," said Mrs De Bruin. The doorbell rang and Marieke shot up, first expanding her chest with an excited inhalation, then going to the door. She returned hand-in-hand with her friend Carlien.

I immediately looked to Elliot for his reaction. Elliot, always yanking at the lead, sure of where he was going, impervious to impediments; and now frozen.

Carlien moved stiffly and looked at Marieke every so often with a pleading look, like a skittish animal who might bolt at any second.

They were both saved from any interaction with each other by Mrs De Bruin. "Hello, my Carlien," she said, giving the girl a kiss on the cheek and an affectionate squeeze. "Come, let's eat."

We shuffled to the table and Elliot hung back next to me to make sure of his seating. He chose a place next to me but Danie, in his insistent way, inserted himself between us and took up that chair, so Elliot was forced next to Carlien after all.

"Do you want to say grace, Hannes?" said Mrs De Bruin. She took up Marieke's hand to her left and Hannes's to her right, as it was customary at the De Bruin dinner table to form a ring of clasped hands.

It might be too much to say that a moment of prayer opened the heart of an Aronbach brother, but I kept my eye on Elliot through Hannes's sweet recitation and noticed that Carlien's fingers lingered in Elliot's after the Amen.

What had drawn Carlien back to Elliot, it seems, was the display at Doren's Outfitters after all. Though she'd missed seeing the mannequins in the flesh, someone had handed a roll of film in at the CNA photo counter, where she worked on Saturdays.

Here among grainy shots of red-eyed, beer-bellied men around the braai and far-off buck in the yellow bushveld, she watched several shots emerge from the machine that showed a girl mannequin in cowboy boots and a man mannequin with Indian war-feather dreadlocks in a confusing but intriguing scene.

The image had appealed to her for reasons she didn't fully comprehend until she spoke to Marieke. Now, after dinner, she and Elliot sat together on the couch, touching knees, watching Danie vacuum their calves.

Hannes stared at them. "How's Tjoppa?" he asked.

Carlien folded her arms, made herself smaller on the couch next to Elliot.

"Is he flying the Cheetahs yet?" asked Hannes.

Two things worried me while we had our coffee and condensed milk. One, would Marieke expect grand romantic gestures, like the one Elliot had performed, from me now? Two, the AWB album of news clippings confirmed what a mistake I'd made in going to work for Leo Fein and his growth industry.

"I want to go away with you," said Marieke while her mother was in the kitchen.

"When?"

"This weekend."

"What about your mom?"

"I'll say I'm at Carlien's."

"Marieke, I'd like that but I don't have a lot of money."

"It's okay, I've saved from the job at the home industries'."

"Where do you want to go?"

"The Ranch Motel."

"And how will we get there?"

"Tjoppa lets Carlien borrow his car."

"You've thought of everything, hey?"

## Money in the Dustbin

Downstairs from the Nedbank building a new reptilian green Mercedes SL500 was humming. I pulled the door open and sank into the cream leather.

“What sort of business are you doing with the AWB?” I asked

He squinted in his rear-view mirror though there were hardly any cars on the road. “Army surplus.”

“Army surplus – like tents and boots? Or like guns and missiles?”

“Missiles? We can’t get missiles, china. It’s a regulated industry.”

“So it’s innocent?”

“Ja! Totally innocent. It’s going to be a good sideline for us. Less government work. Governments pay but who’s in charge now? There’s a lot of change happening. Which can be good or bad.”

“So, not guns?”

“These guys aren’t serious,” said Leo Fein. “They think they’re serious. Trust me – I know them.”

From Landdros Maré Street the green Mercedes turned left at the water tower and started down a long, straight road.

“Where are we going?” I asked but I knew already that the road on the outskirts of town, opening on both sides to wild, sparse bushveld, ended at a single destination and ran no further. Leo Fein smiled his straight-lipped smile at me and raised his eyebrows. Soon we could see reflected back at us the silver-spray-painted emblems on the heavy gate of the Air Force base. I was sure that I was being press-ganged, delivered into the jaws of the apartheid armed forces, as punishment for my repeated betrayal of Leo Fein.

A soldier came out of the guard hut and saluted when he saw the Mercedes. “I’ll tell the General you’re here, Sir.”

We drove through on the pristine road, past the squared-off little fields and parked at a prefab office building. “Take this,” said Leo Fein, reaching for a leather-bound folder on the back seat. “It’ll make you look more official.”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re seeing the General.”

“He’s a customer?”

“Supplier.”

"With the fund?" I asked.

"The other business. He's our principal backer. So be nice. In fact, just be quiet." For the second time, I was behind enemy lines, a draft-dodger on a military base.

The General, though retired and uniformed in golf shirts and chinos, commanded his way around the base as if he were still in charge. That's not exactly how it came across, to be fair. No, it was more as if the base were his Club Med. In fact, he met us at the prefab office, between the flagpole and the door, in a golf cart, and no sooner had he hailed us than we were whirring our way on the narrow concrete paths around the base in the warm bushveld air.

Air Force personnel had to give way quickly but shot up salutes without fail. It was a thrilling ride, all the more so because I was perched on the back of the cart so scenery and personnel surprised me from behind. It was in that manner that a cavernous black space engulfed me. We came to a stop inside the building and I rose to get off the cart.

"Stay put," said the General. I was sinking. We all were, by way of a hydraulic lift, being taken underground. "Don't move or you'll fall and break your neck."

"Where are we?" I asked at the bottom.

"The underground hangars," said the General. "We don't have the planes to fill them but it's a good place to talk."

"I see it's not exactly empty, though," said Leo Fein as the General threw a switch and a bank of fluorescents lit up crates stacked high.

"I still know how to work, my friend," said the General.

Embarrassment and fear prevented me from erasing my ignorance about the contents of the crates (we were on a Defence Force base, after all) by asking Leo Fein or the General. I clutched my leather folder and shut the fuck up.

"I've pulled my side," said the General, "now it's your turn. We can't hold this here forever. There's a referendum coming up, we have a schedule to keep. Someone has to stay on top of this. So when are things going to start turning over?"

"Next week. Things are getting hot over at the hostels."

"The Zulus?"

"Of course."

"Good. There's demand for this. Some of our own boys want to go vigilante."

"As I've said before, General, we should give equal opportunities to all."

"Let's stick to the programme for now, Fein. You can tell me about your opportunities another time."

“General, now’s the time. The right wing is motivated. And we should consider the left too. What if things don’t go our way after the referendum?”

“They *must*, Fein.”

“And if they don’t?”

“We’ll lose our funding. They’ll shut us down. Or worse.”

“That’s why I’m finding other funders, General. We’re going to an interesting meeting with an influential anti-communist religious leader – a *black* religious leader.”

“Who? The ZCC? Do you know they can pull a million-and-a-half people at Easter?”

“I know,” said Leo Fein.

“We’ll see. They don’t like commies, I’ll give them that. But if this whole thing doesn’t work out,” said the General sweeping a hand over the goods in the hangar, “there’s always the Serbs.” It was a warning.

In the car on the way back into town, without turning to him, in a flat voice I asked Leo Fein: “Are you the Third Force?”

The papers had been full of this term in the past weeks as the government denied any involvement in a programme to tilt the country into chaos. They were finding it increasingly difficult to disguise their fumbling hand in violent flashpoints that were springing up between Zulu IFP supporters and freshly-unbanned ANC supporters.

“Don’t you read the papers? There *is* no Third Force.” He sighed heavily and we turned again onto the long straight road that led to the heart of the town. “I’m doing you a favour here. This is a chance for you to make things up to me. Give me my five years back. Get your family back on its feet, too. You owe them that, you know. So stop thinking about yourself so much.”

“I didn’t know what business you were in.”

“Hey – you of all people should know. You turned me in, remember? If you want to lie to yourself then you do that, but save it for after hours. You know exactly what I buy and sell. Now get over it.”

I fell into a sulk which I found easy to do in the give of the cream leather padding of the seat.

“You have to approach this whole thing differently,” he said. “I provide a bloody good service, top quality products. I deliver on time, for a reasonable price. I like my customers and they know that. They can feel that. Don’t pull your face like that. Don’t be a fucking pansy. This is the real world.” His double chin ruffled out, then withdrew and he softened slightly. “You’re not a child anymore. I was at your *bar mitzvah*, so I know.”

“You were arrested at my *bar mitzvah*.”

“And you split on me, traitor, so zip it. If I stop my business, do you think these guys would stop what they’re doing? No, bloody right they wouldn’t. So, two things – one, I can provide them with the best equipment out there, that’s not going to blow up in their faces, and that’s more accurate, so no mistakes; and two, if I don’t do it, somebody else will. So it may as well be us running the show.”

“And you’ll sell to anyone?”

“No. Only those with money. That’s my principle. Money is the greatest equaliser there is. If there are two sides, it’s only fair they’ve got an equal chance.”

“Isn’t it better to talk?”

“What does talking solve? It just drags the whole affair out. When you were at school you’d much rather take jacks than detention, right? Over quickly; you knew your place again. Finish-and-*klaar*.”

“When does it stop?”

“God, never, I hope. It’s human nature. I didn’t invent that. People are going to try get what the other one has and not you or I can change that. So what do you do? Hide away from the world? Or fight a battle you can never win - against nature? Or do you love it, warts and all? Hmm? Listen, what do you believe in?”

“Nothing.”

“You know what I believe in? I believe in winners.”

“I thought you believed in making things equal.”

“But there’s always a winner. Today’s winner is tomorrow’s loser. And today’s loser could be our next customer. So give everybody a chance, I say.”

Where Victor saw the country going to ruin, Leo Fein saw opportunity for growth. He was positive about the future, he often said, but coming from him the words had a foreboding flavour to them.

“But people die because of what you do,” I said.

“People die, one way or another.”

“And that’s how I earn commission?”

“That’s the way – focus on the money, china. Come on – how much do you want to get out of this?”

“Fifty thousand,” I said.

He laughed, laughed actually for quite some time. “Well, that’s quite a starting salary. Listen, we’ll have to see how things pan out. The annual report – that was good. But you do something for me and we’ll talk big bonus. Heard of the ZCC?”

“The Zion Christian Church?”

“That’s right.”

The Zion Christian Church had its headquarters about twenty or thirty kilometres out of town. Every year at Easter a million people climb into minibus taxis around the country and like magnets are drawn through our town to the hill 25km to the east.

And every year hundreds of pilgrims are given up as offerings to the almighty single-carriageway that leads there, mangled in vans, dead on the tarmac. But nothing, not their deaths, not a revolution, upstages the Easter sermons, vigils, celebrations and consultations.

For the Easter weekend white homes emptied of their black staff, the ones who wear the stainless steel five-pointed star on black and green felt pinned to their breasts. No-one asked what went on at this million-man church – it was just the nuisance of being without the servants for Easter. But everyone knew about the family of bishops, the dynasty that founded and ruled over the Zion Christian Church.

Everyone had heard the stories of the Bishop (whites didn’t know or care which one: the father, the son, grandson or nephew) wearing a diamond ring in the back of a black limousine among a flotilla of bakkies descending on town. At the Nedbank building they’d stop and carry steel dustbins, full to the brim with cash, into the bank vaults. They’d arrive after banking hours, so arranged for the church to have the bank to itself.

“The Bishop won’t talk to me,” said Leo Fein. “I can’t get past his advisors. You need to find a way. I heard he likes Jews.”

“What kind of deal is it?”

“You don’t worry about that. You just tell him to it’s in his interest to meet with me. You tell him I have a way to double his Easter money in two weeks after the Easter weekend.”

“How?”

“You just get him to come see me next week.”

“Then I get a bonus?”

“Then you get a bonus.”

“How much?”

“We’ll see. So you need to find a way to get there this Sunday.”

“This Sunday?”

“That’s when they have their service.”

“It’s just, I was planning to go away this weekend.”

“Where?”

“The Ranch Motel.”

"Dirty weekend, hey? What's her name?"

"Marieke."

"Afrikaans girl? Are you corrupting her with your Jewish ways?"

"She planned for us to go away. I can't not go."

"That's not away – it's just outside town. You can go in the morning and be back in the afternoon."

"Can't I do it the Sunday after?"

"Business is all about timing, my boy. Just like lovemaking."

I wanted to get out of that car as quickly as possible at the thought of Leo Fein making love, and who he'd be making it with. Just seeing his face while talking about Marieke spoiled the thought of her.

"How do I get to the ZCC anyway?" I asked.

"Ask any garden boy in town. They all wear those stars – the badges, you know? Say you're sick and you need to see the Bishop to cure you. Or offer them some money to take you."

"And what do I tell the Bishop?"

"Tell him: we must never give in to communists."

"Right." Maybe I *could* do this, I thought. It's only a church. Harmless. I'll go, speak to this Bishop, earn my commission, take the money to Will and – only the next part choked me as it went down – take down Leo Fein.



For twenty-six years Victor worked for Henred Walls and Bricks, rising from foreman to sales to management. Then, at the age of fifty eight, he was shoved aside over a personal dispute of some kind. He never explained to any of us what had happened and if it was mentioned, he would only wipe his hands together briskly as if to indicate that he was clean and free of them now.

So, at an age when he would have preferred to be thinking of what major sports events he would be watching in his retirement days, he began his own precast cement wall manufacturer in town. They were building walls like crazy in those days – walls for Africa as Uncle Victor used to say. It must have made him somewhat bitter, though he never dared show it to Nadine, that when his business was finally becoming really successful he was giving it up to move to a new country.

When we sold the house on Oost Street, we'd had to let Shadrack go but Victor employed him when he started Capricorn Precast Walls. I found Shadrack in the half-covered workshop in the back which I knew how to access without Victor seeing me.

With all the urgency of pouring walls it was difficult for anyone to remove himself from his duties under the foreman's gaze, but Shadrack walked to me in his slow, self-possessed manner when he saw me. The foreman let it go.

"Hey, you're big now," said Shadrack in a familiar greeting, wiping his forehead with a hankie.

"Hello, Shadrack," I said (it had never been our habit to shake hands with each other).

"How is Mum?"

"Okay, thanks."

"Where is Elliot?"

"He's back in town now. I'll tell him to visit."

"William is married?"

"No, he's not."

"Where is he?"

"He's in the army."

"He's too naughty, that one. Elliot is a good boy. And you?"

"Yes?"

"You going to the army?"

"No."

"You've got a job now?"

"Yes I do."

"Yes-thanks. Where is your job?"

It was never clear how much Shadrack understood us or we him. You never quite knew whether questions found their mark with Shadrack. Though he lived with us for fifteen years there were many questions that went missing and answers which came back un-beckoned for. His English never improved and my North Sotho had never reached beyond greetings and how-are-yous.

So I told him about my job, secretly hoping for absolution, or damnation, or wisdom. "I work for Leo Fein. He's the man who stole our money."

"You've got a job. You're big now, yes-thanks."

People only pass on wisdom when you're not looking for it, so I left it at that. "What about you, Shadrack? How have you been?"

"My eye is a bugger-up." He blinked the red-veined orb at me.

"I'm sorry to hear that. How's the job here?"

"Uncle Victor is a bugger-up."

"I know."

"It's okay. I'm the same."

"Listen, Shadrack," I said, "do you still go to ZCC?"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you still go to it?"

"Yes, I know it, yes-thanks."

"Shadrack, I need to go to the church with you."

"Yes-thanks."

"Shadrack, can I go with you to ZCC? This weekend?"

"Why? Are you sick?"

"No. Maybe. I need to go for work."

"You've got a job now?"

"Yes, I've got a job."

"You're big now."

"Yes, I suppose. Can you take me with you?"

"I go Sunday."

"That's fine. Can I come? I need to speak to the Bishop there."

Shadrack laughed. "Yes-thanks."

"I'm serious," I said. "I have to go to speak to him."

"Who said you must go?"

"My boss," I said.

"Are you sick?"

"No, I'm not sick."

"It's better you come with me. In case."

"Yes, Shadrack. I'll come with you."



I hadn't found a way to tell Marieke yet. After she closed up the shop at lunchtime on Saturday, we went with Carlien to fetch Tjoppa's Nissan 1400 bakkie from his father's house. His father

was an elderly man who still wore thick polyester shorts and was cutting his nails with a heavy pen-knife – a biltong knife, he would have called it – when we walked in.

He greeted Carlien gently in a croaky voice and regarded Marieke and me more distantly. Once Carlien had reversed out of the driveway we drove to her house and I sat in the driver's seat.

I pretended I had no qualms about driving, even though we'd be travelling on the main road out of town where speed cops hid behind bushes. But Marieke didn't drive so there was no question of anyone else driving us to our dirty weekend but me.

Marieke and I were already half-way to the Ranch Motel, a sprawling property twenty kilometres south of town, when I mustered the courage to tell her about work.

"You have to work tomorrow?" she asked.

"Well, like you worked this morning, I have to work tomorrow morning."

"Can't it wait?"

"Look, I've just started this job. I can't really say no, can I?"

"But we've only got tonight and tomorrow night."

"I know, but it'll just be the morning and then I'll come back and we'll have the afternoon and the night."

"What are you going to do on a Sunday, anyway? Why can't it wait till Monday?"

"I have to go to the ZCC."

"The blacks' church?"

"That's the one."

"What are you doing *there*?"

I didn't like the emphasis. "*There's* as good a place as any."

"Ag," she said, crossing her arms and bouncing them on her chest.

"No, what do you mean by *there*? That I shouldn't be around black people?"

"I never said that."

"Well it sounded like it."

"I don't think like that."

"Well, I don't know."

"Come on – you know me."

"I don't. I don't really know you, Marieke. We don't actually know each other, I mean really."

"Well, maybe we shouldn't go to The Ranch then. Turn around."

We sat on the bench seat of the little Nissan, travelling past the old drive-in in silence.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I'm not my brother. He has his own ideas, which he gets from those idiots. I didn't mean that."

"I know."

"Ja, I suppose we don't know each other that well."

"But we're getting to know each other," I said. "And we'll have all of today and tonight. We'll wake up together tomorrow, then I'll head off and be back before you know it."

"Okay. I was just worried, that's all. It's not a black-white thing. But you *are* going to be the only whitey there, probably."

"Probably."

"So is someone going to be taking you?"

"Shadrack."

"Who's that?"

"He used to work for us. He's a member of the church."

"They, I mean all the garden boys – "

"He's in his fifties."

"So?"

"So, garden *boy*?"

"Fine, garden man."

"Gardener."

"Every gardener in town belongs to that church, and every maid. And not just here. All those taxis every year at Easter, and all those accidents. Ma always says she wonders if you go straight to heaven if you're in the Easter death toll."

"Are you wearing your seatbelt?"

"Yes," she said, clicking the buckle into its holster.

"You're not going to heaven," I said.

"No, I'm staying right here with you."

We walked into the reception of The Ranch Motel, passing the bar and the dining room. Inside the pine-panelled pub there were bullfighting posters on the walls and twisted wrought-iron candelabra and wineskins; a similar Spanish theme continued in the dining room with framed prints of watercolours of semi-nude water carriers and flamenco dancers.

"Ben?" said someone from the front desk. She wore a burgundy waistcoat as part of her uniform, on which rested straight black hair with an impressive sheen.

"Gina," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Working," she said. "Good to see you."

Georgina Melk came around the counter to kiss me on the cheek. I hadn't seen her since Standard Seven when she moved away with her mother.

"I thought you were in Joburg."

"We moved back here. I'm trying to save some cash to go travelling at the end of the year."

"Oh, amazing," I said. "I'd love to do that." Gina's manner had softened since I'd last seen her and she captivated me just as she had before.

"Hi," she said to Marieke.

"Oh, this is Marieke," I said. "Gina and I were at school together."

"Can we check in?" said Marieke.

"Sorry," said Gina, going back behind the desk. "Of course. Hey great to see you, man. We should have a drink in the bar later."

"Sure," I said. "Maybe later."

Marieke pretended to look at the pool with narrowed myopic eyes.

Gina handed us our room key, attached to a large Perspex rectangle with number 48 branded into its layers.

"Great to see you," she said again.

Marieke followed the porter without turning around.

The Ranch had rooms sprawling in clusters around a large swimming pool. Beyond it was a fenced-off bushveld area with buck and giraffe, which you could see through a heat haze, off in the distance.

We took to our room, which was air-conditioned against the outside sun and came with a closed-circuit movie channel (no porn, only old episodes of The Saint, Magnum PI and a few Bond movies).

"Want to go to the pool?" I asked. "Sip some cocktails?"

"Maybe later," she said.

## Well, Howdy Pilgrim

On Sunday morning I tried not to disturb Marieke, walked out the door past our room-service trays and down the path to the front desk. I was the only passenger in the motel shuttle and the driver, a black man in his forties who wore the Zion star on his breast, was surprised when I asked him to drop me at the newly-refurbished taxi ranks at the south end of town. Here I met Shadrack, as we'd arranged.

A few hundred people waited in collapsed and kinking lines to enter equally crinkled minibus taxis. Shadrack had on the peaked hat with the silver star badge on the front and it seemed as if the crowds stiffened his jaw.

He kept a smile on his face, spoke little and tried alternately to pretend I wasn't there and to protect me from the push of chests against us.

As for me it was, I'll admit, like being a tourist in my own town. It was a place I'd never come to before and here I witnessed some of the machinery that turned beneath the town I knew. It had taken me eighteen years to see it, or to allow myself to see it, because surely I knew it was here all along, or something like it? Where did the servants, maids and gardeners (the 'boys' and 'girls'), the road labourers, workshop assistants, office cleaners, messengers, heavy lifters, roofers, bathroom mop operators and kitchen staff come and go from? I registered a spike of shame thinking it had taken me so long to discover it.

There were eyes on me, to be sure – the only white face there. I heard the odd jovial comment ("Hey! White guy!"), saw some pointing and a laughing here and there, though I never felt any of it was malevolent. Of course, it's possible it was my own wish-perception of the experience that filtered the unsavoury flavours from the taxi rank. Either way, the taxi marshals, who wrangled us into awaiting minibuses, couldn't have cared less who I was. It was only where I was going they were concerned with.

Shadrack sheltered me against the crush in the cage of his arms and torso and we climbed into the battered awaiting cab with eleven other passengers. Some were women with their stars affixed to their felt berets and others men in khaki suits and white shoes. All of us were going to Zion City Moria.

Shadrack and I were shoulder to shoulder in the back seat with two others. Before we left we handed our money forward to the driver up front, a yellow-eyed forty-something in a very creased shirt. He started the engine and jerked the gear, then jerked the entire minibus into the

exit lane of the taxi rank, cutting off another two minibuses and bouncing us to a stop millimetres from another taxi's bumper.

Once out on Vorster Street, the minibus was quiet. An old man rustled a packet and pulled out his take-away meal, handing a piece to a young girl who seemed to be his granddaughter. The box filled the cabin with the esters of deep-fried foods.

Shadrack wiped his right eye with a hankie. "They must fix it," he said. "They must give me water."

"What does water do?"

"It heals. It's blessed."

We passed the overhead traffic light, amber, that marked the northerly border of town and cruised onto the open road. Here some of the women in the minibus began to sing a song in a warbling moan. The driver expelled a click of annoyance at this music and switched his sound system on to the fat bass of a mbaqanga track on a tape player.

"How far is it?" I asked Shadrack.

"I don't know," he replied. He didn't want to talk to me, a strange white kid, with the others in the taxi eavesdropping, though he must have known just how far it was. Outside, the trees and bushes flowered with discarded plastic bags.

In this direction the land grew greener. It appeared lush, like velvet, although I knew up close the green had gaps in it and the thorns and stones poked through the hard thin leaves of bushes and acacias.

The flat land of town was behind us and the thin ribbon of the road drew us up and down hills, past self-built homes where people still cooked outside, past starving cows, women walking back home from neighbouring hamlets. It was easy to imagine yourself in a different age.

The taxi stopped at the village of Boyne. We looked over a valley where thousands of people were already meandering around a few buildings, great marquees and open fields. High up on the hill opposite us were whitewashed stones that formed a giant five-pointed star and the words 'Zion City Moria'.

Shadrack and I walked down the path to the valley below. Down at the bottom were many smiling people, the respectable, dependable, honest people household employers knew the ZCC members to be.

How they welcomed me! A white face in the shadow of the mound of Zion! Perhaps the first white convert of the church. They wanted to shake my hand, ask me questions (was I from Holland, asked one – my pale skin suggested it, I suppose).

Shadrack led me past them all and wouldn't allow me to collect their goodwill and curiosity. When one group of women was particularly warm in their welcome, swaying and singing as we neared them, Shadrack said something to them in North Sotho and they lifted their heads with a collective, knowing 'Ohhh.'

We shifted past them. "What did you say to them?"

"I said you're sick."

The people were forming into orderly clumps like regiments in different garb. The women in canary yellow dresses, black cardigans and forest green berets, some men in overalls and others in peaked caps like Shadrack's. Presently we passed a small crowd around a line of men in khaki suits and white shoes, dancing. Shadrack didn't resist this time when I pulled him towards them.

The men in khaki danced, stamping and shuffling in the red dust, churning it into the air. Then, in line, they sprang up, lifting their white shoes high as they rose, and stomping down again on the earth. Their jumps were gymnastic, leaving spaces beneath them like pauses in time. Each time they brought those white shoes down again it was with enough force that I could feel it in my own shins.

By one of the smaller tents a woman was quivering. She snorted, it's fair to say, like an old bulldog. She was a woman in her fifties, her green jersey meeting her yellow skirt at the equator of her belly. She was quaking and grunting in my general direction and this caused some of the other churchgoers to encourage me to approach her. Shadrack neither encouraged nor discouraged it but held alongside me. The woman reached both hands out to me and bleated something. "She's speaking to the holy spirit," said Shadrack.

"She's going to heal you," offered someone next to us.

"She's a prophet," said another.

Shadrack pushed me forward and we entered the small tent, where a few plastic seats were arranged against the wall. People sat in them, like the doctor's waiting room. The woman continued to warble and kept her eyes closed. She said something and two men nodded.

"His knees," said Shadrack. "She knew there's something wrong with them."

The round prophet in yellow and green offered some advice, which Shadrack told me later had to do with river sand and needles; the woman took a curl of white paper and lit it with an ordinary Lion safety match then dropped the burning wisp into a man's cupped hands; someone else with glasses would have his eyes strengthened with blessed water in a plastic bottle.

Then the prophet hummed a note, a growling descending note, and gathered herself for the next cure. If I was becoming accustomed to her diagnoses and prescriptions, her next piece of drama came as a shock. She grabbed her guts, bent her head forward and threw it back, and

knelt on the ground before me. Then she pressed her hand into my own abdomen and twisted it around, forcing an ‘uhh’ out of me and impolite looks from all in the room.

Just then two men, both in business suits, came in. The one, a bald man, chided the prophet and she unsteadily got to her feet and smoothed her skirt. “Come, please,” said the bald man to me, and Shadrack and I followed them outside.

They talked to Shadrack and barely looked at me. As they spoke I noticed Shadrack’s already squeaky voice (surprising for a man of his size) become squeakier, and he fumbled with his jacket hem.

The older man, who seemed to be questioning Shadrack quite forcefully, had a perfectly smooth bald head like a spherical, chocolate-coated shortcake ball. You could actually make out reflections in it – the sky lay beautifully blue upon it and the tones complimented each other very well.

I smiled at the man then took in the possibility that Shadrack was explaining to him that there was something terribly wrong with me, and so I tried make the smile a meek one and sort of lower my head. “Is the Bishop here today?” I asked the bald one.

He looked at me.

“I’m sick,” I said. “It’s serious. I need to see him, please. Can you arrange it?”

“The Bishop will be at the service.” The men turned and walked away.

“You told them I was sick?” I asked Shadrack.

“Yes,” he said. “The woman there said your insides – they’re twisted.”

“Oh,” I said. “Is that serious?”

“It can be a spirit. A bad one inside you.”

“So if there’s really something serious do you see the Bishop?”

“You don’t think this is true, Ben.”

“If I don’t see the Bishop I’ll lose my job, Shadrack.”

“You’re a white. You’ll get another one.”

Just like in *shul*, men and women were separated. We were on a large field with dry flat grass. To our right was a block of thousands in khaki, opposite us were the women in yellow and next to them, women in blue dresses, like a rayon sea. An outdoor stage had been set up on the very start of the slope up the hill. We waited there, sitting on the dry grass, for a long time. There were songs from the women and sometimes the men.

To me it was a revelation and I almost forgot totally my mission. How had this existed, these gatherings of multitudes, so close but beyond anything I’d experienced? Every maid and

gardener I'd ever known in houses throughout town were steeped in it, and none of the homeowners were wise to the power of Zion.

A group climbed onto the stage from somewhere behind it and took up seats in the shade. It began with a prayer. The preacher raised his pleas in North Sotho and two men on stage with their own microphones translated it into what I think were Zulu and Venda. While the multilingual echo surged around us, all bowed their heads.

Thereafter they lifted them for a song. Shadrack sang too and we swayed left to right. The bald-headed man came to the microphone and began to shout into it but whatever it was he was saying he was greeted with approval. Shadrack nodded vigorously, angrily almost.

The bald man finished his speech and went to the end of the row of seats and sat down. I tried to see the reflection in his head, imagining how marvellous it would be now, more than just the top end of a human but encompassing the whole gathering: tents and pilgrims and baby blue sky all together.

The groups swelled at different times with the next chorus, a keening hymn that I tried to hum along with. When it ended, a man approached the microphone with his bible, an ordinary man, too skinny perhaps for his double-breasted brown suit.

"The Bishop," whispered Shadrack to me.

The Bishop had learnt, somewhere, that by moving the microphone close to his lips and speaking softly, he could extract all the deepest tones his voice could offer up. While the other preachers had screeched and cracked, he seduced like a late night DJ. It was his instrument, the microphone, and it even slowed down the panting translators. He transfixed us.

As the Bishop spoke, his Bible was open but never referred to. Some of us wept and others nodded, some stood and raised their hands, and still others fell on the dirt, and if they had chairs, off of those too.

I found myself craning to see the Bishop. I was smiling for no reason, intent, though I could understand none of his language nor those of the translators. Yet it was like a transmission directly to each one of us, intimate though universal.

The spell wasn't completely broken when the Bishop went to his seat again. The man with the sky in his head came back to the microphone. He spat imprecations at evildoers, brought down the wrath of the lord, actually pulling it from the sky (as reflected on his pate, no doubt) with grabbing hands and emptying it on the ground, bending at the waist to do so. All of it was interpreted and acted out in a physical echo by the translators so that thrice the good and the evil were poured down upon us from up there.

Then the man closed his eyes and the words spun from his mouth like a fishing reel running and running with a big one on the end of it. He was down on his knees now but the translators were standing with eyes wide and mouths wider, trying to keep up with the travelling words. The bald preacher swept his free arm, the other one clutching the microphone, over the faces below him, like a compass wavering under invisible and variable forces.

I swear that arm parted a sea of people and pointed – there was no doubt – at me, though I was maybe forty rows back from the stage. The only white face, a cartoon ghost amongst the living believers, I was easy to pick out and there was no hiding or any point in pretending the finger was for the guy behind me. Shadrack had a particularly strained look on his face and then wouldn't look anywhere but down. The man on my right gently urged me up by my upper arm.

As in a dream I found myself walking the path towards the stage, forgetting already the first steps I'd taken. A helper guided me onto the platform and there must have been some kind of dissociation on my part, I recognise now, to shield the thousands from my mind. I climbed onto that stage easier than I'd ascended the *bimah* at my *bar mitzvah*.

I hadn't seen him get up but the Bishop himself was there to welcome me. How he cradled my temples, how he cushioned my brow. The triplicate oration bayed and the bald preacher turned to point at me: whatever wrath or blessing being ripped out of the sky by him, I realised, was to be unleashed on me. The cerberus paused and the microphone was held, by an assistant, to the mouth of the Bishop as he lay me flat on my back on the stage.

"Your illness is the illness of the spirit," said the Bishop in English, and it was followed in breathy echo by the translations of the bald preacher and the other two. "I have heard the message of the Lord that there was a bad spirit amongst us here today."

The gathered congregants gave a gasp in unison.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I command this foreign object to leave you."

Where the great tank of water had come from, I don't know. I hadn't seen it before but soon I was being lifted by church helpers and moved over it. The Bishop smiled over me and then placed his hand on my forehead. I was immersed in the ice cold brown water.

I came up to "Hallelujah!" from the crowd and went in again.

"Hallelujah!" And down into the swishing, muted world beneath the surface.

"Hallelujah!" And some fantastic singing and clapping and swaying. I was weightless within the helpers' hands, though my clothes were heavy with water.

I was given a threadbare green towel and led off the back steps of the stage. “The Bishop will tell you what you must do to avoid this bad spirit again,” said the bald preacher. “He will meet you personally.”

I was taken to a building that, when I saw it, made me question whether I had indeed entered a new world. It was a church, too small to house the many thousands, and as I looked at it a muddle of déjà vu washed over me. So strong was my confusion I began to suspect there was something psychedelic in the brown baptismal water I’d swallowed by the mouthful. Still, I knew I’d seen the place before, and put it down to the surreal christening I’d just undergone.

I was led to a back room, the room where I was told to wait, still dripping and shivering, on a wood-and-vinyl chair. The water ran from my jeans, down the leg, into a thick red carpet. Pinned to a wall was a map of the region and a cabinet with the paraphernalia of service – green-and-gold robes, a mitre, the curled shell of a crozier’s head.

I recalled my conferences with Joss around the non-interventionist, modern-era God we explained away. Here was a place where God was expected to be hands-on, to cure outward and inward illness, to perform miracles in a most Biblical fashion and on a Biblical scale.

Pilgrims were drawn here in ever greater numbers, but in town the Jews had to scabble to find ten men. While these Zionists flourished, those dwindled.

I waited fifteen minutes until the Bishop came in. “I’m so sorry nobody gave you anything dry to wear,” he said, opening the door. There was still loud singing outside.

I stood up while the Bishop, flapping in his double-breasted suit, swept past me to sit at a heavy wooden desk.

“Well,” said the Bishop, “It’s been an honour to have you at our church.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And thank you for, you know, healing me.”

“You’re welcome, my son. You’re a student, I take it? Anthropology? ‘African-Initiated Pentecostal Churches’ or some such study, no? The church prefers if you apply for permission first. This way our officials can guide you through the proceedings and history of the church.”

“I must confess, Your Grace, I’m not a student.”

“We’re not Catholics, my son. You don’t have to call me that. But you didn’t come to be healed either though.”

“But you called me up anyway.”

“You didn’t come to be healed but that doesn’t mean you don’t have an illness of the spirit,” he said, bringing his hands together, as well as his brows. Then his mood lightened and he relaxed into his office chair. “We like to give the anthropologists a good cleansing. And it’s good

for the congregants to see that the Spirit has power over all, even the whites. But you say you're not a student."

"No. I'm here on business."

The Bishop arranged his fingertips neatly on the edge of the desk. "Perhaps you have the wrong impression. This is a church, my son. People come here to be touched by the Lord."

"And you do very important work here, I can see," I said. "What if you had the means to spread the word even further? To reach sinners who don't even know they need you yet?"

"Ah, we always try to help as many as we can. It's tiresome work. But a blessing as well."

"I work for a man who would like to discuss helping your church."

"Which man?"

"Leo Fein."

"I know the name. A Hebrew brother?"

"Yes."

"And you? You're Jewish?"

"I'm a Jew too."

"This place doesn't seem familiar to you?"

"Well, the name, of course – Zion."

"I meant the building."

Like a ton of bricks, it hit me. "The *shul*."

"My father built it," said the Bishop, "after seeing your own place of worship in the town. He requested the blueprints and your elders obliged. You're sitting in your synagogue."

"It's a replica?"

"Exactly."

"The place I had my *bar mitzvah*."

"*Mazel tov*," said the Bishop.

"Actually this is the *cheder* room where I learnt to read Hebrew. I've forgotten it now."

"I know who Leo Fein is. I know he's tried to make an appointment to see me before. But his past worries me. He was mixed up with communists, I believe, before he left the country?"

"Leo Fein told me to tell you, we must not give in to the communists."

"He said this?"

"Yes."

"We must never give in, my son," he said, with much more authority than he'd used before, even in the service. "We must not capitulate to communism, to godlessness."

"Yes."

“Our future depends on it. Now is a crucial time in this country.” He thought a moment. “Tell your Leo Fein I’ll come to see him,” said the Bishop, rising. He shook my hand in both of his like a politician. “Travel safe. I think it’s time you went home now, my son. *Shalom.*”

I left the building, still soaked and frigid but nowhere near as shaky as Shadrack. “You talked to the Bishop?” he asked.

“Talked to him? I’m in business with him.”

My elation subsided in the wait for a taxi. The minibuses only leave once they’re full and no-one was leaving Zion City. Shadrack was disappointed that I hadn’t introduced him to the Bishop, Shadrack with his glaucoma and itinerant internal ache, who actually needed healing.

When he said he wanted to go back and take part in the all-night vigil, I began to worry I wouldn’t get back to Marieke in time. I pleaded with him to find a way for me back into town.

“Come on, Shadrack. You’ve got to help me get back to town. I’ll pay you for it.”

Shadrack looked at me, then turned around and faced away from me. He wiped his right eye with his hankie, then his left. “And now, Benjamin?” he said. “What now? You’re not the same.”

It wasn’t the worst thing I’d done but letting Shadrack down in this way hurt me more than all of it. I’d revealed to the man whose feeling for me had always been so pure a shameful side of myself.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that, Shadrack.”

He walked to the roadside and I thought he would keep walking but he started waving at an approaching car. He flagged down an ancient blue Peugeot and without a word we climbed in the back with two others and set off. The driver, Alpheus, agreed to take me to The Ranch. But the Peugeot began to smoke before town and we had to pull over at a garage where the driver seemed to know people.

While we waited for someone to arrive to help us, I ambled and tried not to think about how I’d trodden on Shadrack’s heart.

Will would be proud of how I’d dealt with the Bishop, I thought. If only I could tell him. I tried to calculate how long it would take for a commission to filter down to me. Would I have to wait for the Bishop to come to town to see Leo Fein? Or until there’s some sort of deal? And then, what sort of deal? Did Leo Fein plan to arm the jumping me in khaki? Would they join forces with the khakis of the AWB, or would they square off?

I would take my commission and that would be the end of it, whatever happened next. I’d leave Leo Fein, return to Will and from the safety of my brother’s shadow, as if I knew nothing of it, let him attack Leo Fein to win back our fortune.

It was near eight in the evening. Whether the car was fixed or not I couldn't say but Alpheus insisted on having a sandwich – and two beers – with his friend at the garage.

We finally set off and then Alpheus broke the news that he couldn't take me as far as The Ranch since he was going to Zebediela and it was late.

Shadrack, tired and more silent even than usual, helped me find another taxi from the rank (I remind you that taxis were foreign to white people). "Thanks for today, Shadrack."

"Come to visit me," he said. He smiled a weak grin and walked towards another taxi.

"I will," I said.

The taxi I was in sat stationary for almost an hour while it filled up. I took the chance to sleep a bit, seeing that the other passengers were waiting patiently. It was a fitful sleep that left a heaviness on my face.

Finally arriving at The Ranch, I found the glass sliding door of our room, overlooking the pool, and tried it. It was locked so I knocked, softly at first, then louder when there was no answer.

"Marieke!" I whispered. And again, "Marieke! It's me!"

I walked to the front desk to ask for a key and found another girl in the burgundy waistcoat on duty. She told me Marieke had checked out around nine o'clock, over an hour before. The door to the office behind the desk opened and Gina emerged, putting on a suede jacket with fringed sleeves.

"Hey, Ben," she said. "I'm just getting off my shift – do you want to get a drink in the bar?"

I considered trying to get back into town but couldn't face it. And seeing Gina peel a strand of hair off her forehead, place it behind her ear to reveal a new, easier smile, my mind was made up.

There weren't many guests in the Bar Andalusia, just a table of three sales reps, a man at the bar with white hair and a very old blazer, and a boy of indeterminate age but with teeth too big for him, playing pool by himself.

Gina and I sat at a little round table together, with glasses of cheap red wine. Her voice still had that fine rasp it had had ever since I'd known her, and it still lent her an air of experience at odds with her fresh face. I found it irresistible. "I can't believe you're still in this town," she said.

"Where else would I go?"

"You should travel – that's what I'm going to do."

We talked about the places she was planning to go, the museums, cathedrals, hippy meccas, metropolises and beaches. Education, she said, could wait and besides, education came in many forms and she wasn't ready for the kind meted out by institutions.

She was as fascinating to me then as she had been in the bomb squad and on the Standard Five Tour, since I was experiencing the same awe I'd felt for her when we were twelve, a sense that she was more sophisticated, more experienced, more sure of herself than I could hope to be at this stage of life.

"It's just easy money, really," she said of her job at the hotel. "There's hotels everywhere in the world, so I get a bit of work experience here and I can definitely bullshit my way into a job. You could do it too."

"No," I said, although when she said it, I believed it.

"Yeah, of course." Gina said 'yeah', not 'ja'. "You should try for a job here, save some cash and get the fuck out of here, man."

"Maybe I should." This is a girl with a broad view, one who makes me feel I can do anything, who speaks my language, I thought.

"Only thing is you have to put up with the crunchies." That's what she called Afrikaners and she said it in a whisper and with a mischievous glance around at the other patrons. "But they're so fucking stupid you can get away with anything. Like the other day someone asked for the honeymoon *suit* – not suite, *suit* – and I say certainly and show them to a normal double. Didn't know the difference."

"Huh," I said.

"They fucking deserve it," she said, her lips clenched around a cigarette. "Fucking racist fucking morons."

"They can't all be bad."

"Where have you been? They fucked up this country, man."

"I suppose so."

"Fucking cunts. The sooner they're out, the better. And after the referendum next week, they will be."

"I suppose."

"Don't tell me you feel sorry for them. I hope they get a taste of their own poison."

"Well, not all Afrikaners are racist and stupid."

"Yeah. Just the majority. In all my time I spent here, in school and since I've worked here, all I've seen of them is stupid, beer-drinking, fat, disgusting, tasteless, *racist* fucking louts. And that's just the women."

I looked down at my wine glass.

"Oh fuck, that girl – is she your girlfriend? She's Afrikaans, right?"

"Marieke. Ja, she's Afrikaans."

“And she’s your girlfriend, yeah?”

“Well, we just kind of met – got together – recently.”

“No, I’m sorry. She seemed nice. She’s very pretty. Where’s she, anyway?”

“She had to go home.”

“Oh God, I’m sorry Ben. I say the stupidest things. Forgive me, yeah?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’m an idiot.”

It had been a nervy day, a drawn-out trek back to The Ranch, and Marieke’s absence both itched and stung me. I sank what was left of my glass and got up to get us another from the bar.

“No, you’re not an idiot,” I said, turning to her.

As I looked down at Gina, she threaded her hair behind her ear again. “I can’t believe you’re still in this place,” she said. “I mean, I thought you’d get out. I’m glad to see you, though.”

I went to the bar and ordered more wine. I can’t believe she left, I said over and over in my head of Marieke. And as I looked over at Gina back at the table, I began to think, *this* is a girl who fits my world.

The hotel grounds were quiet except for our giggles and shuffling, and we both stumbled on the brick path, falling over. I scraped the edge of my palm and Gina bumped her head on a paving stone but the wounds were negligible in our anaesthetised stupor.

Inside her room, we sat on a thin mattress on the pine frame of her bed and she told me her head was sore. “Rub it better,” she said, swaying somewhat, and I smoothed her fine black hair along her temple.

It was a moment I’d longed for, a kind of reward. Stroking her head had a soporific effect on us both, and as we kissed, her lips were slow, pushing sweetly into mine. It caused a spin and a pang of nausea and I had to pull away.

When we pulled off her leather jacket and her shirt, we knocked our heads together and exclaimed together, softly. I had my hand on her breast and kissed her neck. She lay on her back and gave a soft moan. Then I let my hand drift down to her jeans. I caressed over the seam of her trousers, over and over, and noticed then that Gina was asleep.

I tried more vigorously to massage the jeans crotch but she made sounds I could only take for sleep, not pleasure. I put my hand in the tight space afforded by the waistband of her jeans, under the silky panties and into the hair of her delta anyway. I’m not proud of that.

In the morning Gina rose quickly and dressed. “You can’t be here,” she said. “I can lose my job.”

"No, of course," I said. "I have to go to work."

"Listen, Ben, I don't want to be a bitch or anything," she said, putting her shirt on, "but I don't want to start anything with you, yeah?"

"Oh, yeah," I said.

"It's just, I think it was a mistake. And I'm leaving and it wouldn't be a good idea."

"Sure," I said. "I agree."

"Did we try fuck?"

"No. We were both too drunk."

"Good," she said, buttoning up her shirt. "We're friends. And we don't want to ruin that, yeah?"

"No, I don't want that either." I was insulted in a way that was still vague to me in the hazy morning, although I knew not to show it. "Jeez, I can't believe what happened."

"Yeah, you've got a girlfriend, yeah?"

"Ja," I said. "I've got a girlfriend." It wasn't something I was used to saying and the words felt unused to my mouth.

"Look, you'd better go. My bosses are crunchies. You know how stupid the Dutchmen are about morals and guys in your room, yeah?"

"Ja," I said.

It was a hollow, shameful morning. The thirst I'd felt for Georgina Melk all those years had culminated in awkward half-undress. Worse than that: I'd shown myself I was desperate and despicable enough to almost be capable of rape. Hadn't I?

In any case, whatever we'd spun together in the evening had instantly frayed in the morning. As I left The Ranch in the hotel shuttle I had the persistent sense I'd both debased myself and disappointed Marieke in the worst way, thoughtful Marieke, who was so good to me, so good for me. And the self-loathing doubled when I thought of Shadrack.

It would stick all day, this feeling: a bilious residue connected with too much drink but far, far worse than just physical illness; a nausea at my own self, and a me-graine to boot.

## Legavaan

I spent a ragged day at work at Northern Horizons and afterwards came home to Victor's house. Nadine was in the living room filling out a form for their immigration.

"Your mother's not well," she said.

"It's just a dizzy spell," I said, flopping into the couch. "She gets them."

"That's not like you," said Nadine.

I looked away from her, stifling the anger that this had fired: it was the second time I'd been told that, for no goddam reason.

"She's *your* mother," said Nadine, and she left the room.

Elliot entered and sat down.

"Ma okay?" I asked.

"She said she was feeling weird on one side," said Elliot. "She's sleeping now. You really fucked up, hey?"

I huffed through my nose.

"Carlien says Marieke's pissed off big-time."

"Fuck, man," I said. "I had to work. By the time I got back she was gone. What did she say?"

"Carlien says she's never seen her so fucked off. And she drove the bakkie into a gate – she can't drive properly."

"Fuck."

"And she was late for school and got into shit. You fucked up."

"Ah, Jesus," I said. "I didn't ask her to drive back. I would've taken her. Ah, Jesus."

"What kind of work are you doing on a Sunday anyway?"

"It was a meeting. I couldn't get out of it."

"You should've said no."

"It's a new job," I said. "I can't just say no, can I? Besides, *you* said I should try do something. I should try help Ma and do something for myself. I mean, *you're* not helping her, are you? You fucked up her job at Doren's."

Victor came in to watch the news and we stopped talking.

"Come, let's smoke," said Elliot.

"You can smoke inside, I told you," said Victor, although he'd never let me do it. I followed Elliot out and we walked over to the rotting, flaking bench by the cycad on the far side of the garden. "Here," he said, pulling out a Golden Virginia tobacco pouch.

"Can you roll it for me?" I said. "I can never get it right."

"Open it," he said. Inside was a thick stack of banknotes.

"What's this?"

"It's for you and Ma," said Elliot, pulling out another bag, this one an orange Boxer tobacco pouch, and two skins. A giddiness not unlike a tobacco headrush flooded my system.

"Where's this from?"

"Sold two paintings today." He licked the gum along the paper and handed me a skinny cigarette.

"Where?"

"Some guy, through the university. Not even my best ones – it's always like that, though."

"How much is it?"

"Ten grand," he laughed. "It was the first number that came out of my mouth. Listen, you hang on to it, though – Ma keeps losing things and I don't want it going missing. She's just not in the right frame of mind right now."

I drew in the smoke from the roll-up and it mingled with whatever chemicals the comfort of ten grand releases in the body.

"It's not for Will, though. It's for you and Ma. I mean it."

"Okay."

"But you really fucked up with Marieke."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You'd better make it up to her."

"I've been trying to phone her all day. She won't talk to me."

"Maybe you should try see her."

That evening I walked to the De Bruins, thinking along the way how I would apologise. My remorse flipped to anger, defensible by my duty to work, and flopped back to remorse. I tried to find a middle ground where she would see the light side and forgive me. And in between all of it, the guilt from Gina's room flooded me.

By the time I reached the house, I'd begun to imagine that Marieke had had enough time to cool down. She would surely have had a chance to think about her madcap drive back into town and be able to laugh at it. And I would never ever mention Gina.

The optimism swam out of me, as if under suction from one of Danie's nozzles, as I stood at their gate and readied myself to enter. I wavered, unwilling to allow myself to undergo the ordeal.

With the same somnambulant submission I use to jump into cold pools, I opened the gate and walked up to the front door. "She's not here," said Hannes, standing there with his arms crossed. "If you come here again the *Ystergarde* are going to come find you." He was referring to the Iron Guard, the AWB's elite bodyguard. I heard the whirring of the retractable power cord of the Hoover VacuMate from somewhere in the house behind him.

"Hannes!" said Mrs De Bruin, swatting her son aside. "Get inside. Hello, Ben. Marietjie's not here but she's very upset. I've never seen her like that. You can try get her at Carlien's. You know where it is?"

I said I did and began my walk to the house in which I lost my virginity. It was an edifice of dread for me now, and the memory of that first night of sex had a bitterness to it that came with this new feeling of loss. I wanted rid of it. I'd do anything to get her back, I was so desperate.

I girded myself for a difficult introduction in Afrikaans to Carlien's family but was grateful to see Carlien answer the door herself.

"Marieke doesn't want to see you," she said.

"I just want to say sorry," I said.

"Look, if it was me and you did that – left me alone in a room for a whole day, then make me drive when I can't even drive, get in an accident, get into trouble at school for being late..." She was enumerating each of my sins on her supple fingers.

"I know, I just want to say sorry."

"And look at that," she said, stepping out and pointing to Tjoppa's bakkie in the driveway. It was gouged along its length down to the quick of the raw steel. "You better pay for that or Tjoppa's going to be very angry."

"Me?"

"Who else?"

"Look, can I just see her to apologise?"

Marieke stepped out of the house, her arms crossed, just as Carlien's were now and Hannes's had been earlier.

"Just go away," said Marieke.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Can't you forgive me?"

"Just forgive you?" said Marieke. "Do you know what I went through?"

"I heard, and I'm really, really sorry. I tried to come back earlier. I had to wait for ages for a taxi, and a lift, and the car broke down. You were gone when I got back to the hotel."

"I can't drive, Ben. I could've died."

"I'm sorry. But if you'd waited – "

"I *did* wait! I waited all day and all night."

"Cut me some slack, for fuck's sakes," I said.

"Don't swear at me!"

"I'm not swearing at you, I'm just swearing. Look, I had to work, I tried to get back and I couldn't – actually I did, and I fucking had a horrible day trying to get back, so just cut me some slack. I think you're overreacting."

"Just go away."

"Oh, come on."

"Were you with that girl at the hotel?"

"Which one?" I said, almost swallowing the words.

"You know which one. The one at the front – 'Ooh Ben, it's been so long. We must have a drink. Or let's just skip the drink and just fuck.' The one who looked at me like a flap of useless... skin, or whatever."

"Oh, come on."

"So you didn't see her?"

"After I got back at, like, ten thirty and you weren't there. We had a drink, that's all."

"What?" She looked pale now.

"What?" My 'what' was weaker than hers.

"It's over," she said, walking towards the door. "I don't want to see you anymore, ever."

I called after her but it was no use.



Leo Fein came into the office the next day and wanted to talk about the Bishop. When he'd heard it had been successful, that I'd made contact and set up a meeting, he presented me with a box. Inside was a Tag Heuer watch with a green brushed steel face. I put it on at his insistence.

He asked after every detail and reacted with an extreme childlike amusement, incongruous with all previous experience of the man, to my baptism.

I, on the other hand, felt only anger and remorse. These two feelings swirled around like poisons in the gourd of my stomach. "What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"No, no," he said, pulling back his neck to look at me from an inch or two further away. His grey curls bounced as he hung his head to the side and inspected me. "Girl trouble, I bet."

I was sure not to react with even the slightest movement or expression to this, but he continued.

“Ah!” he said. “I’m right, hey?”

“I was supposed to spend Sunday with her and I was at the ZCC instead. I really fucked it up.”

“Well, you gotta do what you gotta do. You’ll make it up to her. Come, don’t look so miserable. I tell you what you’re going to do – you’re going to take her away on a luxury weekend. Oh, you don’t think it can be fixed? You’re still young – these things are never as serious as they first appear. You’re going to take her away to Joburg, the big city, Sandton. You’ll stay at the Sandton Sun – the best. You’ll go to the fanciest restaurants, the swankiest bars, nightclubs, whatever she wants.”

“She won’t even see me. The whole situation is just... fucked.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

“It is that bad.”

“Well, do you want to do something about it? You want to get her back?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You need to get her attention.”

“I’m not good at that big romantic stuff. My brother is, but not me.”

“I’m not talking ‘big romantic’ here. Not the movies. That usually backfires. No, you must use words. Write to her if she won’t see you.”

“What do I say?”

“Well, tell her how sorry you are and how much she means to you. Or you can steal, like I do. Get some poems out the library. Khalil Gibran is good.”

I must have sneered. Whether it was exhaustion from the past two days or if some change really *had* come about in me, I didn’t know. But I would not have been so outwardly disdainful before. Leo Fein didn’t flinch at it, though.

“Well, use your own words if that’s better. And then we take her to Joburg, impress her and make her forget all about it. And if it doesn’t work out,” he said cheerfully, “Snor and his boys run a brothel and we’ll make our own fun.”

“Why are we going to Joburg?”

“Little business trip. Snor wants us to meet some IFP Zulus at the hostels. Won’t take long – they’re stocking up, so it’ll be an easy sale.”

“Do you really need me to come along?”

“Well, it’s repeat business we’re after. I might not be able to go the next time so they need to meet you, my boy.”

“I don’t know if I’m the right guy for it. I’m fine with the office stuff, but AWB, IFP – I can’t do that.”

“My boy, business is business. You’re in it. Let’s not get all existential about it. You’re going to make a lot of money and forget about all that, and your girlfriend’s going to forget all about her troubles too. I guarantee it.”

“What about my bonus? For the ZCC.”

“Oh. Next week. It’s a cash-flow thing.”



It palpably hurt me to take Leo Fein’s advice and write a letter, but who else could help me? Elliot’s ideas were too grand, to talk about it with Will would make me squirm, Victor was out of the question.

I opened the pad of Basildon Bond writing paper I’d taken from my uncle’s drawer and sat down to think. Not since that treacherous note had I written so deliberately. There’d been the *bar mitzvah* thank-you letters and I’d written in school, including an excruciating sonnet I was made to read aloud in class, but I’d never felt the sustained raised pulse that choosing heavy words could bring, heavy because so much depended on them.

I finished late, and almost finished the pad of Basildon Bond, turning out the light after two in the morning. And then thought about my words and turned the light on to change them.

When I had done with it and put it aside for fear of bringing on insanity, my thoughts went to Leo Fein. All night in bed I played that damn two-man, drawing-room drama out in my head.

The voices were mumbled but Leo Fein looked fittingly bewildered and I sincere but confident. I believe I was explaining that I was grateful for the opportunity he’d given me but that it wasn’t the career path for me. It was while telling him of my plans to study History that the birds began to move. It was a signal, a twitch in his cheek followed by a single revolution of a raised index finger, that sent them swirling round my head.

I was able to call the action to a halt before my temples were carved and my nose severed. Would he come looking for me if I didn’t show up again? The other anxieties played out too. He could turn me in to the military for dodging my conscription; the General would see to it that I was placed in detention barracks and forgotten. Meanwhile, Ma would be on the street and Elliot would have to support her with a career in art.

Alternatively, Leo Fein could tell my family about my betrayal. He brought it up often enough that it would surely roll off the tongue easily if he had to repeat it in front of them. My family would turn against me, throw me to the wolves, or the army, at any rate.

No. The bare facts were that I had the money from Elliot in the tobacco pouch under my pillow, and a bonus coming soon. That would release the Will we knew years ago, free now to deploy his full energies against Leo Fein.

I fell asleep and dreamt Will was telling me what to do with the money. "I want you to go to the bookmakers, to Skamandrios, and put it all down on Troy Ounce in tomorrow's race at Turffontein," he said.

I found myself in the dim hall of the Tattersall's. In it, old black men shuffled around the floor in houndstooth jackets, hands behind their crooked backs, pipes in their mouths. Their smoke filled the place and made it difficult for me to see the details of the races on a sheet of newspaper like the pages of Victor's stocks.

I was anxious not to forget the name of the bookmaker I was to go to, repeating it over and over – Skamandrios, Skamandrios – so as not to forget. But there was no Skamandrios. There was only A. Skambonides. That's what the red Perspex sign with the letters in white relief said.

"Skamandrios?" I asked the man behind the bars at the counter.

"You mean Andreou Skambonides. Skambonides," he said again. "You want to place something?"

"Yes," I said. "Troy Ounce at Turffontein." Skambonides huffed and flipped the bone-dry pages of some guide or programme and skidded a heavy finger down a black list. He took up another programme and pulled the list back from his vision and looked back and forth between them.

I squinted to see the writing but it was too small for my eyes and smoke from the tobacco pipes gathered in front of the type. Skambonides said, "There's no Troy Ounce at Turffontein. There's Helen of Troy at Turffontein, and Troy Ounce at Newmarket."

I tried to look at the paper again and wanted to cry from the tiny writing, the smoke and the puzzle of it all.

"Look for yourself," he said. "There's lots of horses. Take your pick."

"Troy Ounce," I said and handed over Elliot's pouch. Skambonides took it from me wiggled and his fingers inside it. Panic buzzed through me and I stood on tip-toes to see into the packet.

"What's this?" said Skambonides, running his fingers through shreds in the pouch. The pipe smokers came forward to put their fingers in it too and placed some of its contents in their pipes.

"There's money in there!" I shouted, and strained to see whether they were shreds of tobacco or of paper money burning in their bowls.

"*Skelm!*" said one of the pipe smokers to me in a rasping voice.

"*Skebenga!*" said another.

"*Yifto!*" yelled Skamandrios or Skambonides, standing up and pointing an accusing finger at me.

All around me the money was burning into the air and then it was all gone.



In the morning Victor was to meet the new buyers of Capricorn Precast Walls and hoping to introduce Ma as part of the package, to try to secure her a position. What that position was, he hadn't settled on. The business already had a fine receptionist, Hettie, and while Ma's record in business was attractive (she steered an automotive and mechanical business for seven years), it didn't hold up (she lost Great North Diesel and Auto Electric in a matter of months).

So Victor, Nadine and Ma readied themselves and swept out the house to Victor's Audi 500, and were just closing their doors when the phone rang. Through the front room window I could see Victor reversing out the driveway, Nadine talking agitatedly at his ear from the back seat and Ma looking for her seat-belt buckle or perhaps something she dropped in the front.

"Tell me you have some good news," said Will on the line.

"Ja, well, Elliot gave me ten grand to give to you."

"Ten? Where'd he get that?"

Tyres shrieked, a car horn voiced discord, and Nadine blared out a honking moan of alarm. "Jesus," said Will. I pulled the lace curtain back and saw Victor's Audi, halted at an unusual angle in the middle of the street. Victor lurched out of his car and ran around to the other side.

He opened the door and I saw him help Ma out. There was blood coming from her forehead. "Will," I said over the phone, but there was no-one there. Instead I heard Will's voice from outside, in the road.

"Ma!" I heard him shout, then saw him running from Carol's yard into the street towards our mother. I went out the front door to join them all.

Nadine and Will were helping Ma into the house while Victor went round to the front of the car. Below him on the tar was the legavaan, hesitating provocatively. Victor shooed the lizard with both hands flapping in the air.

"Are you alright, Ma?" I asked.

"I was just stupid," she said. "Hit it on the dash board. Serves me right for sitting up front, hey Nadine? I always get car sick in the back though, that's the only reason."

"Shut up and lie down while I get the Savlon," said Nadine. As she walked off down the passage, she said to Will, "What are you doing here?"

Will and I helped Ma lie down on the couch. "I'm surprising you," said Will.

"You certainly are," I said.

"What a time to arrive," said Ma, patting his hand.

"A bloody legavaan," said Victor coming in from the driveway. "Almost smacked it with the Audi. Where did you come from?"

"Hi, Victor," said Will. "Just in the neighbourhood."

"Were you at Carol's?" asked Victor.

"Yes, Victor. Yes I was."

Nadine tended Ma's cut and we held our breaths to resolve the circumstances around Will's arrival. The cut wasn't serious and it was soon swabbed and stanced, although a lump was forming. "Well," said Victor, "I have to go – the buyers, you know. Maybe today's not such a good day after all, Marg. We'll do it another time."

Ma agreed she'd prefer to stay, after the shock of the blow and with Will's arrival, so Nadine and Victor left without her.

"What are you doing here, Will?" asked Ma.

"I need an excuse to see my mother?" he said.

"I'm glad you're back, Will," she said. "But what else?"

"Ben and I are going after Leo Fein," he said, including me as if we'd talked about it. Ma looked at me and I decided not to answer yet. "I meant to come to town to ask Victor for a loan for the lawyers, but when I heard he's emigrating –"

"That's bullshit," I said.

"It's not bullshit. Listen, I have some good news. Carol's lending us some money, and if we can get a little more, we can invest it. It's a great opportunity, really. Then we go after him."

"And then what, Will?" asked Ma, and there was pity in her voice for him.

"Then we get our money back. Put you back in Oost Street. Send Ben off to university."

"And you?" she asked.

"Well, I have a few expenses I ran up before that I need to take care of."

"Debts."

"Well, strictly speaking, yes."

"Gambling debts," I said.

"They're old debts. I don't gamble anymore. That's over." He punctuated the air with a horizontal arc of the hand. "There's a new plan now. You said Elliot had some money? And Carol's been very generous – she says she'll lend us some for the investment."

"What are you doing here?" said Elliot, walking in, wearing Victor's dressing gown.

"Well, nice to see you, too, *boet*."

"Jeez, what happened?"

"Victor almost hit that legavaan," I explained. "Ma was in the car."

"It's nothing," she said.

"So how long have you been across the road at Carol's?" I asked.

"A few days."

"She didn't say *anything*," said Ma.

"Well, she was pissed off at this little runt stealing her car," said Will. "I had a lot of making up to do."

"Oh really?" said Elliot, sitting on the chair next to the sofa arm on which Ma's head rested, and peering over her injury.

"She's not that bad," said Will. "She has a romantic idea that we should be together as a family. And that's not insane, is it?"

"Are you... involved with her?" asked Ma.

"No. God, no, it's not like that. Carol's known us for years and she wants to help. I mean, Ben – you went out with her daughter even, didn't you?"

"No," I said.

"The one that looks like a matzo ball."

"I never did."

"So what are you doing here?" asked Elliot.

"Taking Carol's money," I said.

"Oh, and what else is she giving him?" asked Elliot.

"*What else*," said Will in sing-song mimicry of Elliot. "Listen, morons, I'm talking about an investment that can take care of Ma when Victor goes and maybe give this loser an education if he's not too dumb to make it into varsity."

"You don't give him the money I gave you, you hear?" said Elliot turning sharply to me.

"What money?" said Ma.

"Elliot sold some paintings," I said.

"Really?" said Ma and Will together.

"He got ten grand," I said.

"Oh, you're all so surprised," said Elliot, smirking.

"Elliot," said Will, "if you have anything to spare, now's the time to invest. If you're worried about getting it back, make it a loan and I'll return it."

"There's no way you're getting it," said Elliot. "I didn't work my arse off for you to go gambling. Take your own money if you want to throw it away again."

"I'm not gambling anymore. For fuck's sakes, do you want to help or not? This is an investment – and it's not for me, it's for them."

"Investment, poker, horses, whatever."

"Fuck, Elliot," said Will, standing up now, "how long do you think your piddling ten grand is going to last? We need real money. Cos this is the real world, you fucking hippy."

"Fuck you!" said Elliot to me now, also rising to his feet. "You gave it to him already, didn't you? Give it back, Will." Elliot took a step towards Will.

"I don't have it," said Will.

"Liar!"

"You gave it to us," I said to Elliot, raising my voice. "To me and Ma. We should decide. Ma should decide."

We looked at Ma on the couch. She kneaded her left arm with the fingers of her right hand.

"Fine," said Elliot. "What do you want to do with it?"

"I don't know," said Ma. "Elliot – this money. Thank you. And Will – I don't know. What is this investment?"

Will sat down again, and after a pause, Elliot did too.

"It's a fund that's been incredibly successful in the last quarter. We need a certain minimum amount to invest but then the returns are very good."

"What fund?"

"It's called Northern Horizons."

I contracted internally at the pronouncement.

"Is it something safe, Will?" asked Ma.

"They have some of the biggest names in business investing with them."

Elliot crossed his arms.

"I need to think about it," said Ma. "Is there something I can read about it?"

"I have an annual report back at Carol's."

"I don't think it's a good idea," I said.

“What can you possibly know about it?” said Will. “I mean, Ben, with all due respect. I know you’re not a stupid guy. But you’ve sat in this house on your arse for God knows how long. You don’t know the first thing about making money.”

Elliot gave a snort of laughter at my expense.

“I have a job now,” I said.

“*Mazel tov*,” said Will. “Do you know *anything* about investments?”

To say I knew about this one would be admitting I knew more about Leo Fein than I was willing to.

“The guys at Nedbank were talking about it – it’s no good, they all say.”

“What do fucking bank tellers know about investments? Just stay out of it, do me a favour. Look, this is blue chip virtually. We’ll make enough to get back on our feet. Then from a position of strength, we can go after that *yifto* Leo Fein. Carol says he’s back in town.”

“Ben saw him in *shul*, didn’t you, Ben?” said Ma.

“I can’t believe the cheek of that,” said Will. “Coming back to town after pulling that shit on us. It takes a special kind of low-life to do that. When I heard his name again – after all this time, even – I was angry for two days. I can’t let it go; I don’t think we *should* let it go. We’re not going to let him get away with it. He stole from us, the *yifto*.”

## Lucky 7s

There was, I confess, a minor swell of pride at Will's mention of the document I'd helped produce, that had impressed him so. While he went across to Carol's to fetch the Northern Horizons prospectus, I called Elliot aside. I handed him the letter and made him promise he'd get it to Marieke via Carlien as soon as he could.

Then I left for work, a twenty-five minute walk which gave me time to wonder when the letter would arrive and how it would be received. If she'll take me back I'll leave this place, I said to myself. I'll keep Elliot's money and we'll go overseas.

Will, typically, had stormed back into our lives and rearranged them as if coming into our kitchen and telling us plates go up there now and glasses in the bottom cupboard, the dry goods in the broom closet and the dog food under the sink – a much better use of space, he always assured us.

I was stuck. To reveal what I knew about Northern Horizons meant confessing I worked for the *yifto*, the target of Will's wrath and the cause of Ma's misery. But to invest in Northern Horizons meant surely losing our money and Carol's. However many big investors it had attracted, it was bogus.

But was it bogus? Was there a possibility, a hope, that it was real? I mean, Will was right that I knew nothing about investments but I recognised names on the cheques that would come in – names that anybody would know from newspapers and magazines as the biggest in business.

So maybe there was something to it. I had to stick around, I decided, to see if it was legitimate or to pull the money out if I needed to.

Leo Fein was in an energetic state when he walked into the office. "I'm going to need you tonight," he said.

"What for?"

"There's a National Party meeting I want you to go to."

"And do what?"

"Well, we had a brainstorm, me and the AWB guys, and thought it would be a great platform for them to piggyback on. It'll make a big impact with the referendum coming up."

"No, I can't make it," I said.

"This is important. It's not going to take all night and you hardly have to get out the car. You won't be involved in the meeting. It's just driving, that's all. Then you can get back to your lady-friend."

"The Bishop was okay, okay?" I said. "But not the AWB."

"Ah, don't give me that. You need to start thinking like a businessman. Think about the money."

"Well, when am I going to get paid for the Bishop?"

"I told you, next week. In the meantime, you've got that watch to flash around, hey? You like it, hey? Looks good on you. And tell you what, if you do tonight – don't know why I'm doing this – but do tonight and I'll give you a little overtime bonus, too. Take your girlfriend to the Magoebaskloof Hotel for the weekend."

"Why can't *you* go tonight?" I asked.

"I've got to go to Joburg with Snor to meet the Zulus in the East Rand."

"The hostels?"

"Don't pull your nose up like that. Where do you think your bonus is coming from?"

I shrugged. "I don't want anything to do with the IFP. I've seen what's happening at the hostels."

"You think it'll just stop if *we* stop? There are a lot of weapons in South Africa, my boy," he said. "We can either make money off this or not."

"What about the AWB? Are we making any money off them?"

"No, this is a new venture. But with the referendum and the change happening, these guys are going to get more serious. They could become very, very important clients. They're talking about new uniforms at the least. Maybe some bigger things from there. For now we're just building the relationship. That's why I need you."

"For what?"

"Remember the man you met at my house? The first time – not Snor."

"I know who he is."

"Well, he's going to the AWB rally tonight. I want you to pick him up afterwards and bring him to my house. He's staying there tonight."

"And how am I supposed to pick this guy up?"

"You take the Mercedes."

"What about Northern Horizons?"

"What about it?"

"Does it make money? I mean, for the investors – do they make money?"

"Sure," said Leo Fein. "It's a bloody good investment."

"What is it?"

"Do the AWB thing and I'll tell you how it works. Deal?"

“Okay,” I said. I hoped spending an evening in the company of the AWB was worth having the secrets of Northern Horizons revealed to me.

“But you don’t go messing around with your girlfriend in the back seat of the Merc, hey? Have you two made up yet?”

“No.”

“Well, maybe I’ll let you take her out on a date in the Mercedes if you do the job nicely. How’s that?”



In the early evening I drove to the town hall and parked within sight of the entrance, just inside the palisade fencing of the parking lot. Ahead of me were two police cars and a few police officers strolling around. I almost wished they’d arrest me for driving without a licence so I could avoid the task I had ahead of me. I looked out the Mercedes window to the road leading to the hall.

Here they came, the men in khaki uniform with insignia, others in un-tucked office shirts or knitted snowflake jerseys and many with yellowing squarish glasses. Their route took them right past the car.

The phalanx of women supporters, the *Kappiekommando*, came alongside like mourners. As if only now arriving from the Great Trek, they wore their prim, sand-brown long skirts and their floppy bonnets, hanging like wilted poppy flowers.

A *vierkleur* flag of the old Transvaal Republic ruffled against the car window. There were other placards and banners carried by the marchers: Vote No and Save the Volk, Say No to Communists, Vote No or Don’t Vote at All, Reject the Antichrist – Vote No.

By the entrance of the hall, underneath the silky National Party banner, a few young policemen waited for the crowd to arrive. Over the hall’s PA system I could hear that the National Party meeting had just begun. The speaker thanked all the NP supporters for coming from the town, the neighbouring towns and farms, and gave a special welcome to the National Karate Team.

The speaker said they would begin with a prayer, as soon as the guest of honour, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, arrived in the hall.

Another flag, one with the three sevens like a crippled swastika, rippled into my peripheral vision, a final straggler arriving at the protest. I opened the window and could hear the last

words of the anthem, *'Die Stem'*, being sung inside the hall. The marchers were gathering at the doors.

The crowd outside the hall began chanting, "Aah, Veer, Beer! Aah, Veer, Beer!"

I could hear Casspirs vibrating to life at the edge of the scene. The men in khakis and women in *kappies* approached the policemen at the door of the hall and shouted the rhyme in their faces. "A.W.B.! A.W.B.!"

From the rear, the chanting crowd parted to let a bearded man with ice cold eyes and a three-piece, light grey suit through: the man I was to chauffeur. It was as if his laser blue eyes flung the people left and right and he and his small band of uniformed men in black walked straight to the front. The man in the three-piece spoke and shook a finger at one of the older policemen. The policeman sent a younger officer inside.

The crowd seemed to be waiting for something. In the meantime, the *Kappiekommando* women were handing out *vetkoek* and *koeksisters* to the policemen in the Casspirs who ate them up with their thank-yous. Only the chief at the front refused the treats.

The man with the ice-blue eyes had a loud-hailer. "The foreign minister is digging the white man's grave, I say to you!" he shouted over the megaphone, in Afrikaans. "He's not going to have his say tonight, though. We are!"

From inside the hall, there was some angry Afrikaans being hurled at the man in the suit with the sharp blue eyes. I couldn't see it or hear it too clearly but it registered in the faces of the crowd outside.

People around the man in the three-piece began pushing towards the doors and the policemen needed reinforcements badly. Only four new officers joined at the front. The man in the suit was now surrounded by his men in black uniforms adorned with the sevens and Bauhaus eagles, the *Ystergarde*.

The protesters shoved through the police and were now facing some resistance inside the hall, although I couldn't see it. There were shouts and crashes inside and swearing and scraping. I got out of the car and climbed atop a cement dustbin to try to see in but all I could make out were rapid shadows against the long windows on the flanks.

Then the incumbents emerged from the doors. Women ran out first, not the *Kappiekommandos*, who'd followed the AWB men in, but the NP wives, the *mevrou*s and *mevrou-dokters* of the town's politically connected, in summer dresses and ludicrous hats. A few men crawled and scrambled, helped by others, some with head wounds and limp arms. The din from inside rose.

"I've said we will speak tonight," said a voice over the PA system. It was the voice of the man with the ice-blue eyes. "And we speak for the white nation, because no-one else will!"

There was more crying and shouting and some fumbling over the microphone. "This is Afrikaner blood," said another voice over the microphone, "and it's on your hands!"

More fumbles and crashes and again the man with blue eyes: "*We* speak for the Afrikaners, not the NP anymore. And we will never give up the land given to us by the Almighty Lord."

It was then that the National Karate Team flew out the front door, their Springbok blazers split at the armpits and torn at the pockets, followed by more bloodied NP supporters. The senior police officer, a brigadier I believe, was taking orders from one of the NP men who had blood streaming from a gash in his bald patch down to his orange, white and blue rosette.

The policemen were fetching gasmasks from one of the vans and pulling them over their heads. Three young officers ran from the Casspirs, which had moved forward, opening up a space.

The policemen lobbed their teargas canisters into the hall. There were screams, not just from women, and a clatter louder than any that had come from the hall before.

The long windows on the side of the hall were smashed. The orange and black chairs crashed through them and bounced on the ground like poisoned insects. Even the doors were ripped away in the push as the people inside tried to burst out of the hall faster than the smoke. That's when I saw Hannes running and falling on his knees.

I hurried towards the hall, trying to shield my face from the smoke in the neck of my T-shirt. Khakis stepped on each other's heads to make it outside and even the men in black uniform couldn't keep from pulling faces like implacable babies. The blue-eyed leader in the three-piece had lost his jacket and came sputtering out the front, tears running from his blue, blue eyes into his big white beard.

I lost Hannes in the swarming of people but kept walking. The peppery gas clung in the air and dried my throat in an instant. I took off my shirt and wrapped it over my face. On the ground, khaki-clad men and women, and others in regular smart-casual wear, some with blue-and-orange NP rosettes and badges, crawled spluttering from the hall. I was sure I saw Barry among the scrambling bodies, the boy I'd sat next to on the Standard Five Tour bus, in a state of panic. I think he'd wet his pants.

More police vehicles arrived. Police dogs leapt out of the backs of the bakkies, one or two sneezing. Where the fumes had cleared men were rising once more and now there was a stand-off. The dogs were being held back by their handlers, straining at the collars, drool dripping from their incisors. The men in khaki wiped their eyes.

I saw Hannes's jersey and fuzzy hair on the ground in the space between the dogs and the mob. I kept low and reached next to a pair of legs in long socks belonging to a man who was choking, and grabbed the kid. He didn't put up a fight and we pushed until we were at the car. Neither of us could say anything and I could barely see.

We drove away with the dogs still growling. Just before our view was obscured by a Casspir, we saw the leader of the *Kappiekommandos* retching on the ground outside the hall, her *kappie* sagging down.

Our eyes and noses streamed and I blinked to see the road. When we both stopped coughing and sneezing, Hannes took stock of where he was and looked around the interior of Leo Fein's car cautiously.

We drove to the De Bruins' house in Fauna Park with the air-conditioning of the green Mercedes pumping hard but smooth. When we arrived at the door our eyes were bloodshot and my throat was dry and rough.

I can be sure there were real tears coming forth from Hannes, not just from the gas, because he sobbed and fell into his mother's arms when she opened the door. Whatever toughness he'd incubated in himself fell away now as his head lay to the side against his mother's shoulder, his mouth stretched into an open frown.

"What happened?" asked Mrs De Bruin.

Hannes couldn't talk yet and I only just managed to say there was fighting at the town hall.

And when I saw Marieke, the tears pooled in my eyes, too. I hadn't cried in so many years that I amazed myself that I still had the faculty for it. Whatever channels and vents needed opening opened, and Marieke wept too. It was a release of all that had occurred before. The betrayals, of Marieke, of Leo Fein, and of myself, the hurt I felt in her, the loneliness I'd felt from keeping so much hidden for so long.

"Why are you crying?" said Danie, wrapping the hose of the AEG vacuum cleaner around my foot.

I explained what had happened over condensed milk and coffee while Hannes shared a chair with his mother. It was difficult to talk since Marieke sat next to me on the couch, a palpable chink of air between us. She didn't touch me, not so much as to brush against me, all night. Hannes, worn from the riot and the escape, went to bed, hugging first his mother, then Danie, then Marieke, and then me.

When I arrived home, Victor was seeing a friend off in the driveway. I waited then gingerly rolled the Mercedes in. "Where'd you steal that?" asked Victor.

"It's my boss's."

"Venter from Nedbank?" asked Victor, mentioning again a name from the bank that was my cover story. I tried to smile in response.

"Does he know you've got it, or did you just take it?" said Victor.

I sighed heavily.

"Come," he said, putting an arm around my shoulder. I put my arm around his, too, and almost cried again.

"And this?" he said, eyeing the Tag Heuer watch on my wrist.

"A gift," I said. "Also from my boss."

"Hm!" said Victor. "Well, the car's for real but that's a fake."

I inspected the watch.

"Doesn't it feel a little light?" he said. "The genuine ones are real chunks, heavy. Look at the links on the bracelet – that's rolled metal, not solid steel. That Venter's a bit of a cheapskate."

"My boss is a *yifto*," I said.

"A what?"

"Never mind."

"Let's have a drink," he said.

Victor was celebrating the sale of the business with the Dimple Haig, the bottle Elliot and I were wary of touching. The success of the deal ignited a generosity in him, but after a few Haigs, he began to pick on Will. It was a habit he fell into easily.

Victor was saying, "But you know, Will, those containers you got me to sink my money into – that bombed out big-time, hey."

"I know, Uncle Victor," said Will. It was an old niggler. Years before, Victor had asked about a good investment and Will had given him the tip from something he'd heard in a meeting. Will maintained he hadn't stuck with it long enough, and Victor only saw the opportunity to criticise Will.

"It never made anything," continued Victor.

"You should've ridden it a little longer," said Will.

"And pissed more of my money away? No thanks."

"Well, I'm sorry it didn't work out for you."

"Oh! It was a piece of shit, that business. Let me show you something. Nadine – where's the paper?"

"You chucked it," said Nadine from the couch behind the rasping of an emery board.

"It's here somewhere," said Victor, standing up unsteadily. He got down on all fours in front of the magazine rack, his broad arse in the air, and rifled through the contents. "Let me show you a good investment, Will. J.D. Group – a real beauty. It's here somewhere. I want to show you. So you know what a good investment looks like. Where is the fucking thing?"

Will ground his teeth while Ma and Elliot sat on the couch with dead eyes. Elliot rolled a cigarette and Ma stared off into the infinity of TV land.

"What were you doing tonight?" asked Ma.

"I had to work late," I said.

"How come?"

"It's a busy time in the bank – lots of filing."

"Nadine, where is it?" said Victor.

"You threw it..." said Nadine ceasing her filing to lift her head and speak, "away."

Victor sat down heavily on the La-Z-Boy again with his drink. "Well anyway, it was a piece of shit, that thing you brought to me. So – what now about the money Carol's lending you?"

Will breathed in deeply and glanced at Ma. "We've got a fund we want to invest in."

"Not like the last thing, hey?" asked Victor with a little laugh.

"No."

"And not a donkey at Newmarket, hey?"

"No."

"Well – what is it?"

"Northern Horizons."

"Oh," said Victor, slowly now. He carefully poured another drink, not noticing the look Nadine was wearing of an assassin with a nail file. "I've heard some good things," he said with a sniff and a nod. "You need a minimum, though."

"Thirty thousand," said Will.

"Hm!" said Victor, impressed. "I would have helped, you know, but with us moving and everything..."

"I know," said Will. "Well, congratulations, Victor – on the sale of the business." He raised his glass in the air.

"Thank you," said Victor.



The following day I took my first cup of coffee and sat at my desk to sort the post. I'd been thinking about Victor's assessment of the fund all night and still wasn't sure about it. I looked at the watch and noticed a copper patch coming through where the silvery metal had rubbed away.

"So?" said Leo Fein, coming through the door. "You didn't pick him up?"

"It was chaos," I said. "I wasn't going to wait for him. There was teargas and they were fighting with police."

"So you didn't pick him up?"

"They were throwing chairs and kicking each other. They used police dogs." I handed him the Merc's keys.

"This is bad. This is not the kind of impression we want to leave. We're the ones he's supposed to rely on. This relationship is at a very crucial time."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't stay."

"What was going on there?"

"There was fighting. The police and the AWB were trying to kill each other. There was tear gas and rubber bullets."

"White-on-white violence," said Leo Fein thoughtfully. "This is something. But you should have waited for him. This is not good for your career development, let me just say. I need to be able to trust you, boy."

"How was the IFP?"

"Hard work, those guys. This for me?" he said, picking up the stack in the in-tray.

"Yes," I said. "From this morning."

"Here's the cheques," he said, handing me an A4 envelope filled with letters. "Let's get them in at the bank."

He went into his office and I tipped the letters out of the envelope. I sorted the cheques as I always did until I came across one from Carol Richler. It was for R30 000.

"Has the Bishop called yet?" said Leo Fein, returning to my desk. I placed a hand over Carol's cheque.

"Not yet."

He pulled a corner of his mouth up. "That's turning into a bit of a disappointment."

I walked down the corridor to the lifts. Henry was waiting for one too. We got in together and faced the door for the ride down to ground level. "That's quite a stack," he said, glancing at the cheques in my hand. "Northern Horizons, hey?"

I looked at him and, without saying anything, stuck my finger in my nostril and dug.

Henry looked ahead again.

I took Carol's cheque, folded it and put it in my pocket.

University of Cape Town

## The Last Shabbes

I decided I wasn't coming back to work for Leo Fein. I deposited the rest of the Northern Horizons cheques and walked out of the Nedbank building with Carol's still in my pocket. That evening we had a small braai at Victor's and Will invited Carol, a gesture Victor grudgingly approved and only because she'd helped the family with her savings.

"Are you pumping her again?" Victor had asked. "The years haven't been kind to her, hey?" Nadine, finding Victor's prodding intolerable, went over and fetched Carol herself.

"Tomorrow's a sad day," said Carol as we sat around the plastic table in the back garden.

"They *had* to call a referendum, Carol," said Victor. "The Nats lost the by-election in Potchefstroom. The country's going mad with the black-on-black violence, the right-wingers are out of control. I don't say it's going to change anything but they have to do it."

"Oh, I forgot," said Carol.

"And," said Victor, hitting his rhythm, "if you want any international sport, and if you want any chance of the economy getting better, you vote 'Yes', Carol."

"And those are the best reasons you can think of why we should vote 'Yes'?" said Elliot.

Victor looked bewildered, then said, "Well, I think it's all going to pot anyway. Not one good leader on this continent."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about the referendum," said Carol. "No, tomorrow night could be the last *Shabbes*. The Rabbi's leaving, and then Silberhaff will do the rounds, they say. Don't know if there are enough Jews for that – he's got to do from Louis Trichardt down to Warmbaths."

"Oh," said Victor.

Elliot hoisted his eyebrows sarcastically and chewed on his lamb chop.

Carol sighed. "We can only hope we can get a *minyán* together for it. It's been touch and go the last few months." She looked up at Will expectantly.

As if on cue, Will said, "Don't worry, Carol. We'll be there."

"Pshh," said Elliot.

"We'll *all* be there," said Will.

"That would be wonderful. At least finish things off respectfully," said Carol, a pleased look seeping into her face.

When we were clearing the plates, Elliot cornered Will in the kitchen. "What the hell did you say that for? I'm not going to *shul*."

"You will go to *shul*. And you too," said Will, pointing a fork at me.

“You can go but I’m not,” said Elliot. “If the community is dead, good. They’re a bunch of narrow-minded freaks who always hated us anyway.”

“That may be,” said Will, “but we owe Carol. This isn’t about *shul* or Jews. She helped us out – more than our own family has. And it’s important to her so stop being a selfish cunt and do something for someone else for once in your life.”

I expected a fight for a few seconds as both of them held their tongues. I thought maybe Eliot would take up a fork and begin to chase Will around the kitchen but he cleared his plate in silence.

Elliot went to the living room and turned on the TV to watch the news and I followed him.

“So you’re back together with Marieke?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Well, you know more than me, then.”

“Here,” he said, handing me an envelope. The letter inside read as follows:

Letters are fucking stupid. Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you for helping my brother. He’s a doos, but he’s still my brother, you know?

Are you going to vote tomorrow? See? I ask a question and you can’t even answer it. That’s letters for you... stupid.

So, if you’d like to see me, come to vote at Noordskool tomorrow at 2:30. By the drinking taps. Wear something sexy cos I will.

XXX

Marieke

“Good?” asked Elliot.

“Good,” I said, grinning. The news reader had the cartoon square over his shoulder in which sat the illustrations of a hand grenade and machine gun drawn with crude black lines and filled with flat colours.

The report spoke of a violent incident in an East Rand hostel where six people were killed and fourteen injured.



Noordskool was the Afrikaans primary school just beyond our old house. I walked there on that clear, warm afternoon and entered the gates along with a steady flow of white citizens.

They wore their best smart-casuals for the occasion. Ladies stabbed the sports field with their smooth high heels, weighed down by big hair and padded shoulders. The men swung gold chains between the V's of short-sleeve button-up shirts. There were old ladies in crisp summer dresses come to do their duty and younger ones representing their parties in jungle print dresses and slack suits, party-colour rosettes sitting proud of their breasts.

Along the fronts of the desks and bordering the edges of the tents of each of the political parties were the Yes/No posters. The orange, white and blue of the VOTE YES messages of the National Party, the wordy VOTE YES FOR A NEGOTIATED CONSTITUTION of the Democratic Party and the predictable NO TO THE ANC of the Conservatives.

I cut across the flow of people and headed to the drinking taps in a quadrangle to the left of the fields. I saw Marieke leaning against a wall and my breathing quickened. She looked sulky at first, her arms crossed, but didn't hold the expression for long and gave in with a smile as I neared her.

"Did you vote already?" I asked.

"Stupid question."

"Oh, I forgot. I'm not supposed to ask stupid questions."

"I mean, I can't vote yet. I'm seventeen."

"I forget."

"Thanks for the other day – with Hannes. He's an idiot."

"That's okay."

"You know, Carlien's mom was there too. She's in the *Kappiekommando*."

"They're hardcore."

"Ag, you think we're all like that."

"I don't think you're like that."

"What do you think I'm like?"

"You're hardcore in your own way."

"Do you hate Afrikaners?"

"Do you hate Jews?"

"They told Hannes at one of the meetings Jews control the world's gold supply."

"Yip, I've got mine."

"It would be just like a Jew to lock up his money and live like a *boemelaar*."

"A what?"

“A tramp.”

“That’s why I walk instead of driving my own Mercedes.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, you Nazi Afrikaans bitches can’t get enough of dirty Jews in their Mercedes-Benzes.”

“That’s me.”

“At least you’re not like one of those Pretoria Afrikaners with all their culture.”

“*Kultuur.*”

“Ja, *kultuur.* Even the way they say it, that in-between *u*-sound, like they’re French or something. Like an air-raid siren, it sounds like.”

“*Uu!*” she sang, voicing the vowel like an opera singer, somewhere between ‘oo’ and ‘ee’.

“And cabaret.”

“*Sies.*”

“It’s nice to see you,” I said. “About the Ranch – ”

“Ag, shut up,” she said. “Come, let’s go make a good citizen out of you.” She kissed me on the cheek and took my hand.

We walked towards the tents on the field. Each party had their tables covered in crisp white tablecloths, and flowers sat atop them splayed out in dome shapes from their green foam cores. Festive balloons in appropriate colours clung to the table legs.

People walked between the tables clutching their green ID books, allowing themselves to be directed to the voting booths in cordoned-off areas. Police patrolled with rifles slung on their shoulders.

Accompanying the Conservative Party stall was a brigade of AWB members, newly arrived. They were affixing some of their own posters and paraphernalia. One picture showed a flaming tyre around a charred human body in a township street. ‘YOUR FUTURE?’ read the text.

Was that the future Victor saw for us, the ones who were staying? And did it coincide with the positive, profitable future Leo Fein saw?

Another showed FW De Klerk, labelled ‘THE ANTICHRIST’. One of the khakis was trying to stack tyres next to the tent, to resonate with the poster, while another had a hand-written sign that read, ‘NO NEGOTIATIONS WITH TERRORISTS’.

As we walked towards the voting stations I saw Gina, and maybe she saw me, and I steered our steps in a different direction. “So, is Hannes here?” I asked.

“The whole family.”

“Mine too, I think.”

"I know. Hannes found Carlien and Elliot – he's following your brother around, copying him, the same way he used to with Tjoppa."

"So Elliot has some disciples."

"Hannes threw away his AWB book."

"Wow."

"I know."

"He should be into porn by now anyway," I said. "It's healthy for a boy his age."

"Sies. Go vote."

I walked to the desk and showed my ID book for the stamp, took a ballot and waited for a booth to open up.

Behind the screen it was me and the question:

Do you support the continuation of the reform process which the State President began on February 2, 1990, and which is aimed at a new constitution through negotiation?

I was so quick to tick 'Yes' that I felt I hadn't been given the requisite time to savour the importance of this personal act. Whether it was legitimate or not to ask this question of the ruling class, it was a chance to submit to the course of righteousness. Whether it brought change, whether it would be painful or complicated, it was right – there was never any question of that.

But to be given a chance to say so gave me a sense of might. We were never a family of the struggle and I suppose we benefited from apartheid in the way that so many other white families did, not in direct and obvious ways but in softer ways, ways that eased paths that may otherwise have been rough, that mollycoddled, that elevated.

As a family, we didn't support apartheid, we objected to racist comments, we talked with each other about equality and a non-racialist future. This was Ma's doing. Each one of us – Ma, Elliot, Will and me – cringed and fumed at Victor's, or anyone else's, use of the word *kaffir*.

If I heard the k-word, I'd speak out, unless – and this, I suppose, is the dividing line between activist and tacit collaborator – it put me in danger to do so.

At times, when you objected to a racist comment you tended to be treated like somebody who is emotionally fragile, as if others had to feel sorry for you, walk on eggshells for you. Then it was as if saying 'kaffir' in your presence was to be avoided in the same way people might avoid the name of a recently departed relative. They didn't want to upset you, which was only

infuriating, because the last thing you wanted to do was to make it about *you*. They missed the point.

But at least my friends knew not to make a racist comment in front of me. That had to count for something.

There was never any doubt that my family wished for fairness and freedom. I'd been tainted though, and subsumed into Leo Fein's system of indiscriminate deal-making. Sure, I'd done it for my family; but really it was the easiest way and there probably were other means if I'd tried.

By saying 'Yes' on the ballot, I was being given a chance to wipe all of that clean. It was a chance to protest against all that had gone on before. I wished then, as I stood over my cross, that it wasn't a secret ballot but an open one, so I could show my disapproval of all of it, of everything that went on in my name.

And besides that, having felt for so long that my future was not of my own choosing, here I was, finally having been given a choice, 'Yes' or 'No', this or that, a glimpse into the lucky packet.

I walked to the box and inserted the folded sheet, lingering there as my fingertips wagged the final corner into the slot. Then I looked up and found Marieke.

She was looking at a small woman in her fifties who was shouting angrily up at the block-like figure in khaki and his cohort of six or seven other young AWB men. The men all carried pistols in their side holsters and stood silently, a little aghast even, as she barked at them.

She was admonishing them like a mother. "This is disgraceful," she was saying, pointing up at the gruesome picture of the necklacing. "There are children walking around here. This is a school."

"That woman is ang-gry," said Marieke as I joined her.

"That's my mom," I said, hardly able to believe it. "She's not normally like this."

One of the young men in khaki dashed around the back of the pile of tyres, dousing them with petrol from a square plastic bottle.

"Don't you dare light that thing," said Ma. "You call yourselves Christian – is this Christian? To try to frighten people and intimidate them?"

"Vote 'Yes' and you'll have civil war," said the man in khaki, pointing up at the picture of the necklacing. "This is what they do to their own people. Imagine what they'll do to us."

"You're the ones we should be scared of," said Ma. "A future with you – that's scary."

The man told her to step back. '*Dame*', he called her – Madam – and *Tannie* or Aunty.

"I won't move," she said.

I left Marieke and stepped forward to try to pull Ma away from the scene while the men in khaki widened their circle and one of them took out a box of matches. I got there too late and I could feel the heat where I was, pushing out from the initial rush of flame.

I grabbed Ma at the same moment Elliot arrived with six policemen. Carlien came with two other police officers who were trotting with fire extinguishers they'd taken from the school corridors. The fire was dead before it had taken hold of the tyres themselves.

It was an unusual scene: Elliot was allied with cops; Ma was being loud and angry; also, Carlien had shaved her hair off completely, although the cowboy boots were still firmly on her feet, and her features were definite and characteristic enough to hold their beauty still.

Ma had singed eyelashes but was otherwise unharmed, except that she shook a little and her jaw was stiff. I returned to Marieke for a word. "Maybe you should meet my mom another time," I said to her.

"Where did that come from?" said Elliot to our mother as we walked her towards the school gates.

"Do you feel okay?" I asked Ma.

"I feel great," she said. "Let's go paint the *shul* wall."

"Okay, take it easy, Patty Hearst," said Elliot. "Wait till tonight at least."



For the first time since my *bar mitzvah*, all three Aronbach boys and our mother were back in *shul*. None of us wanted to be there, but it was for Carol. I had a particular ache to be with Marieke, now that I'd seen her again.

Gershon checked his watch, the Rabbi paced, the Rabbi's wife sat with her hands in her lap, and Carol looked with loving wonder to my brothers and me and back to Ma.

We'd been sitting for ten minutes, with Elliot taking two smoke breaks outside already. "It's getting late," said Gershon.

"Fein said he'd be here," said Julian Gross and Will snapped his head in the direction of those words. I looked over at Ma, rubbing her arm. Carol took her hand, and patted it, as if she'd suffered a shock, and perhaps she had.

It shocked me, too: Leo Fein was going to be here in the same room as Ma, me and my brothers. I should have confessed all my sins earlier.

"Even so, it'll only be eight," grumbled Meyer Levinson.

"I think we'd better call it quits," said the Rabbi.

"He said he was coming," said Gross.

"I'm going for a smoke," said Elliot.

"Stay put," said Will.

"I don't think it's going to happen," I said hopefully.

Joel and Nathan Kisch and their mother arrived and took their places. "Yes!" said Gershon, pulling a fist. "We only need one more."

"What about Woolf Morris?" said one of the Kisch brothers.

"In Canada already," said the other one.

"We may have to call it quits," said the Rabbi.

There were footsteps on the gravel outside and we all turned expectantly to face the door. I had the urge to hide somewhere but knew it was too late to avoid my fate.

"Here we go," said Gershon, bending to see through the doorway. "Eleven!"

Leo Fein nodded to everyone as he walked in, accompanied by a smiling man in his thirties whose head seemed dragged down by the weight of his belly. He was shaped, in short, like a distended bowling pin and though he looked familiar I didn't recognise him as one of the regulars from my *shul*-going period. I noticed Will fidgeting, working up to something.

"Right," said Gershon, running up to the makeshift *bimah*, "let's start."

"Last time I saw you in *shul* you were being arrested," said Will, turning around to talk to Leo Fein.

"Now, there's no need for that," said Julian Gross.

"You were there, Julian," said Will. "Don't you remember him being arrested for stealing money from a widow with three children?"

"That's not what happened exactly," said Leo Fein. "I never stole from your mother. And I certainly wasn't arrested for it."

"Come on," said Gershon from the *bimah*. "We have to start."

"Oh," said Will. "She just misplaced it, did she? You ripped off a vulnerable woman. She sold our property to invest in some scam with you, Fein."

"Hello, Margot," said Leo Fein, politely leaning into his greeting across the aisle to the women. "It's nice to see you."

Ma turned her head away from him.

"I was arrested," he said, continuing to Will. "For something unrelated. Political. And I lost everything too. I didn't scam anyone."

I was too tense to breathe even, watching the scene compress to a point of infinite density at the point in the room where I stood. I had to speak before he did.

"Please, let's stop this," said the Rabbi. "Now's not the right time. This could be the last *Shabbes* we have here."

"What kind of a *yifto* lowlife does that?" said Will, ignoring the Rabbi.

"It was out of my hands," said Leo Fein. "They were trumped-up charges. Hey, I didn't ask for that – I tried to help her. I was trying to help you, Margot."

"Help me, Leo?" said Ma, speaking to the man for the first time in five years. "You painted a very different picture back then. The money was the least of it. All those letters you sent. The poetry."

"It was a long time ago," said Leo Fein.

What the burning tyres had ignited in Ma was still smouldering. This was a fight that hurt more than the earlier one with the AWB men, I knew, but just that she'd had the courage to say something to him pleased me.

"Whatever the details," said Will, "the fact is you conned her out of our property and ran off with our money."

"And I lost my money too," he said and he slapped his chest. "Spent five years in exile."

"Exile!" said the bowling pin.

It was time to confess, here in *shul*, in front of the Rabbi, my family and everyone, before (at least) I was outed.

"I got him arrested," I said, slowly standing up.

"Stay out of this, Ben," said Will. "You've got nothing to do with this."

"I've been working for him."

No-one reacted for a while. "You're working for him?" said Ma. "Your job?"

"Ben!" said Carol in a whisper, her hand going up to her mouth.

"It was to try and get our money back," I said.

"Jeez, Ben," said Elliot. "I said you've got to do something but not work for him."

"Who else could I work for?" I said. "I'm supposed to be in the army."

"You could've gone to Israel," said one Kisch.

"You could be IDF," said the other Kisch.

"What about the plan, buddy?" said Will. "Getting the *yifto*?"

"Northern Horizons – it's him," I said, pointing to Leo Fein. "I didn't know if it was for real or a scam. I had to get our money out. And yours, Carol."

"What do you mean 'a scam'?" said Julian Gross.

"I'm in Northern Horizons," said Meyer Levinson, clutching his tie clip. "I'm deep in Northern Horizons."

"Northern Horizons is the best-performing fund of the past five years," said Leo Fein as if addressing a boardroom with the very lines I wrote for his annual report. "And we believe our best results are ahead of us."

"Can everyone settle down," said Gershon. "We'll discuss this afterwards. We have to start."

"Let's just go over something," said the bowling pin. "You say, *you* got him arrested?"

"I wrote a note to my teacher, Mr Coetzee," I replied. "It said that Leo Fein was involved with selling arms to terrorists. I was with him one day when – I don't even know what it was that happened, actually. But I wrote the note."

"That's why he was arrested?" asked Elliot.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Ma, I'm so sorry – it's my fault he was sent into exile and we lost all our money."

The way Ma looked at me then was as if she were seeing me for the first time; or as if she were seeing a thing, not her son, not even a person. A mother doesn't look her child over from head to foot and back again.

"I'm sorry," I said to Will and then to Elliot. Will was about to say something more to Leo Fein and sat down instead. Elliot pulled his eyes away from me and looked at Will, then at Ma.

"That's not why you were arrested," said the bowling pin. "Come on, Dad. You were arrested because you ripped off some government people – or you left them out of a deal, at least. And they didn't like it."

"You don't know anything," said Leo Fein, turning his head away and flapping a hand at the bowling pin. It was Michael Fein, the mourning son at Leo Fein's *shiva* house. "I don't know why you've come."

Michael Fein took on a blank, meek look, a benign smile that sought, perhaps, to alleviate the strong feelings in the room. Is this what it's like to be Leo Fein's real son, I thought. Leo Fein began to walk through the chairs towards the aisle.

"You know," said Ma, "I would have given you more than just money. You poor, poor man, Leo."

He kept on walking without turning back.

"Ben," said the bowling pin, "it's Ben, right? You didn't get him arrested. I don't know what happened to your note but that's not what got him arrested. He did business with the wrong people. That's what happened. We had to leave in a hurry."

"You're a great disappointment to me," said Leo Fein, heading to the door, and in my whirl of feelings from all I'd said, I neglected to determine whether he said those words to me or to Michael.

"What about the money, though, you *yifto*?" called Will after him.

"Have you been telling people we're political exiles?" asked Michael but Leo Fein was already outside. "I'd better go. Sorry." Michael followed his father out the hall, calling after him.

Julian Gross and Meyer Levinson were talking seriously with each other at the end of the row of chairs. It was about Northern Horizons.

"Well," said Gershon slapping his hands to his thighs. "We're down to nine now."

None of the rest of us said anything. None of us knew how to begin to approach each other, I suppose, or how to think about all we'd just heard and said, or what to do next.

"Well, at least there's no service," said Elliot, rising. The rest of us were frozen to our spots, the Rabbi looking at me with a worried expression, the Rabbi's wife looking at him with her mouth wide open, Ma looking straight ahead and Carol looking at her. Will chewed his pursed lips, calculating.

Then there was the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside the hall. "They're back!" said Gershon, stepping behind the lectern-*bimah* again.

But he cut off his words when he saw who entered. Not one but three men came through the doors. Two giants, black men in suits, and the dowdy figure of the Bishop ahead of them.

"*Shabbat Shalom*," said the Bishop.

"*Shabbat Shalom*," said the Rabbi. "Can we help you?"

The Bishop regarded the functional hall with its makeshift altar, the plastic-and-tube-steel chairs, the fluorescent lights, and its sparse congregation. His suit collar gaped at the back of his neck bringing to mind Buster the tortoise in our backyard in Oost Street.

"I believe," he said, "this is possibly the final Friday night service in your place of worship?"

"It was meant to be," said the Rabbi, "but we don't have our quorum so we can't hold the service."

"If it is not offensive to you, I would like to join in. And if that helps your quorum then, please, go ahead."

"You're not Jews," said Gershon. This new event, the arrival of the Bishop, allowed us a rest, a diversion from the larger one whose aura still hung around us all.

"Thank you for your offer. I'm afraid it has to be Jewish men to make up the numbers," said the Rabbi, motioning for Gershon to sit down. "We can't have our service tonight."

The Bishop glanced around the room and saw me between my brothers in the second row. He nodded then turned. From the door he looked back. "Good luck," he said and walked out with his two companions.

"Who does he think he is?" said Gershon.

"If he has to go," said Ma, standing up, "so do we. Come Carol."

"Maybe you should let them come," said Elliot. "You could keep it going."

We all rose and followed Ma out the *shul*.

"Again?" said Carol, mainly to herself. "The *shvartsers* are always trying to get in here, I tell you."



"I can't believe you made me go through that," said Elliot. We were all squeezed into Carol's Daihatsu.

"There wasn't even a service, Elliot," said Carol.

"I know but still."

Pressed between my brothers on the back seat, I tried to untangle my feelings. One was knotted upon another but at the forefront was fear. All my life I'd been on the outskirts: the white, the English-speaker, the Jew, the unbeliever. But I'd always had my family.

"You worked for him?" asked Ma.

"Yes."

"What sort of thing?" asked Will.

"Paperwork, answering phones, doing the mail."

"Sounds boring," said Elliot.

"Mostly."

"So, what about Northern Horizons?" asked Carol.

"I still don't know what it is exactly. But I have your cheque at home, Carol."

"Thank God for that," she said.

There was a hole in my stomach awaiting a blow from the weight of condemnation from my family. But the space persisted and the rebukes never arrived, the banishment never transpired.

I rode along, wedged between my family in that small cabin, unjustly unharmed. But such was my family.

The next day I asked Marieke if I could see her to tell her something serious. It's evident to me now that I craved punishment. She was nervous to talk to me, looking at me askance. When I made my confession about Leo Fein, the note to Mr Coetzee and the consequences it had had on my family, her shoulders dropped.

"Ah, fuck," she said with relief. "I thought you wanted to break up with me."

"Marieke, did you hear what I said, though?"

"Ja, but if no-one's upset or blaming you then what's the big deal? Let's go to a movie - I've got to look after Danie this afternoon."

"Am I the only one upset about this?"

So we took Danie into 'Silence of the Lambs'. The staff at the Astra Cinema didn't mind selling us a ticket for him, though he was underage, since they knew him as a regular cinema-goer and inattentive movie-watcher. While Marieke and I held sweaty hands, Danie curled himself over his Electrolux brochure.

He usually laughed in all the wrong places in movies and 'Silence' was no exception. The bloodier, the funnier. What a kid.

## Ja-Well-No-Fine

By the evening, the results were in. Over two-thirds of the country had voted 'Yes' in favour of negotiations and the end of apartheid. Our town, though – the only region in the country to do so – said 'No'.

We were all in the living room in Victor's house. I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV set as I'd done many times before as a boy returning from the Acropolis Café with a lucky packet. Marieke sat there with me, holding my hand. Victor held his tongue although I'm sure it was a struggle not to make me or Marieke squirm from an embarrassing comment. I suspect Nadine's intervention.

Ma was absorbed by the news reports and results. I hadn't seen her so involved in anything in a long time. She was joyous at the 'Yes' vote, ordering Victor to find her a good whiskey, and downright angry at the town's 'No'.

Our town aside, it was a confirmation that most white people in the country recognised the foolishness of continuing a false form of government, recognised and admitted the wrongdoing all around them. Whether, like Victor, they did it because they wanted to see their team compete, or didn't want to hide the fact they were white South Africans when they went on their overseas holidays, or it was just good for business, or because they really felt it, it didn't matter. Many more than expected had turned out and many more than expected had said 'Yes'.

It was a time of gratitude for me. Despite the shame of the result the town had produced, the rest of the country had been our saviour. I was lifted by a swell in the water and then taken higher still by a second: the reprieve given me by my family.

All week our town would be mentioned in newspapers and TV reports around the world, described as a conservative bastion, a stubborn right-wing outpost, the backward spoilsports of the world. We were finally on the map.

Ma had her first seizure the night the results came in. I'd just returned from dropping Marieke at home. To see Ma shaking and her eyes fluttering left us all vacant when it came to actually doing something. All except Nadine, who'd had the sense to call an ambulance.

We followed in Victor's car and Ma was asleep when we arrived at the hospital. The diagnosis of tumours didn't take long although the lab results confirming the melanoma only came two days later.

But we could all easily see on the X-rays the clouds in the lungs (thirteen) and the brain (four, as far as I could make out, but I didn't like to look too long). Metastases. It was a new word to me, one I couldn't look up in the Encyclopedia Americana because it was long gone with the family fortune, nor in the Encyclopaedia Britannica because Victor had packed it a week before.

Between visits to the doctor, Ma became weaker. Victor gave up his La-Z-Boy for her and she spent her days in front of murder-mystery TV series.

Victor and Nadine delayed their trip as long as they could and we stayed with them until the last items in the house had to be packed up and then we moved Ma across the road to Carol's.

Victor and Nadine stayed in the Holiday Inn and shifted their flights. When Bernice came up with Jackie from Johannesburg, the two sides split by the divorce were forced to meet. But Bernice and Nadine wouldn't be in the same room together and finally Victor and Nadine took their flight to Perth.

We'd almost run out of Carol's money and Elliot's with the medical bills. Will was working his old job at the Tattersall's in town again and doing clerical work at a small legal office. He used every spare moment to investigate a course for recourse against Leo Fein and promised to pay Carol back. He designed it so that he had almost no time to be in the room with Ma. He'd always been squeamish.

Elliot tried to secure a post at the university but there were administration difficulties. They allowed him to use their space to paint from and he did his best to sell what paintings he could through an agent.

To help with the expenses I did the only thing I could and returned to the Nedbank building, riding the lift to the twelfth floor. I found at my old desk a black kid about my age. He had sorted the post into the in-tray and was writing out the cheques for Leo Fein's signature.

"Is he here?" I asked.

"No. He's out."

"I'll wait," I said.

"He's not here. He's not coming in."

"It's fine," I said and took a seat. The kid went back to writing out the cheques, copying the totals from a sheet of paper.

"You're doing it wrong," I said.

He picked up the chequebook and turned his head to the side. "I thought you write here, in the lines."

"Can I show you?" I said.

He hesitated then pushed the book and the pen to me. I wrote the amount in words across the lines in the backdrop design.

"Isn't it *supposed* to go in the blocks?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I did it wrong the first time, too."

He shrugged.

A contingent of men, all black, walked out of Leo Fein's office. Some wore ties and lapel badges in the colours of the organisation that looked certain to be the next ruling party of the country.

A man with black-framed spectacles approached the kid at the desk and patted him on the shoulder. "Work hard, Johannes," he said to him.

The kid nodded

"Ah," said the man wearing spectacles as he saw me. "An old friend. You visited us on the farm. You still like sugarcane?"

Johannes, the kid with the chequebook looked up at me, surprised. I must have had an equally startled look on my face as the group of men stared at me.

"Too sweet for me," I said.

"You become accustomed to it," said Spectacles. "Then nothing's sweet enough."

"That's why I gave it up," said Leo Fein in the doorway of his office. He was patting his belly as he spoke.

The contingent of party representatives chortled.

Spectacles said goodbye and I turned to Leo Fein as the group walked out.

"Can I talk to you?" I said.

"Come inside."

We walked into his office and I was drawn immediately to two new pictures on the wall. They were collages of figures that looked like they could be from a hair metal band. They wore make-up and had low-slung automatic rifles hanging from their shoulders like flying-V guitars. The rock stars stood on arena stages lit up with pyrotechnics from grenades and claymores.

It was a small detail in one of the pictures but a figure in the crowd before the stage waved a modified Israeli flag, a cocked swastika between the blue stripes.

"Those are new," I said.

"Protest art. I don't like them but the dealer says it's a good investment." We sat down at the small meeting table. "Well?" said Leo Fein.

"I was hoping I could get my old job back."

He laughed grimly. "Northern Horizons isn't hiring. You see we've got a replacement."

"That was quick."

"You know – fast business. It's not for you anyway, this line of work. It's not an insult, it's just how it is. How's your mother?"

"Not so good."

"I heard. I'm sorry – please send her my best." Then he got up abruptly. "Come. Let me give you your bonus."

"I get a bonus?"

"Sure. Why not. Business has been good. But on one condition – you tell your brother to stop trying to go after me. It's for your own good. My lawyers are bigger than his lawyers, I can assure you. Deal?"

"Deal," I said, and shook his hand.

We walked back to the front desk and Leo Fein took the chequebook from the kid. In his meticulous hand he wrote out a cheque and gave it to me.

I was about to leave when two men came in with a long stiff object with protrusions, all covered in bubble-wrap. "Careful," said Leo Fein to them. I had to step out the way as he instructed the delivery men to set it down in the boardroom. "It's for my study at home," he said.

"What is it?"

"A legavaan," he said. "Just beautiful."

Leo Fein's money bought us a trip to Joburg and treatment in a private hospital. "He'd better not think that I'm giving up because of this," said Will. It didn't matter what I said, he quoted legal precedent and shut me down.

We stayed with Bernice and Jackie in their townhouse and Bernice drove us to the hospital for the consultation, scans, and radiation treatment.

I told Jackie all about Leo Fein and she was angry with me, not because of my conduct, but because I hadn't told her. "I would've told *you*," she said. "I thought about doing all kinds of harm to Nadine when she came on the scene. But fuck, she scares me. Hey, I understand why you did it, though. When it's your parents and you think that shit's under threat... We want them to love us and never stop."

It all scared Ma and I tried to be calm around her but the way she cried, without tears and sobbing, with a keening, stricken murmur, it scared me too. Will had stayed back in town, doing all he could to avoid the hospital, and Elliot and I tried what we could to boost Ma's spirits.

The doctor, a small stiff man with dark grey and silver hair oiled in a side-parting, was plain-speaking. "It's not worth it," he said. "You can keep coming here but she may as well go home."

"We've only started the treatment, though," said Elliot.

"She's come too late. If she'd have come earlier, then maybe. The treatment will help make her feel better but it's temporary. She's going to die, and soon. So go home."

Ma was losing her hair by now and we bought her a beret to wear for the trip back to town. The next time Elliot saw Carlien's bald head, he began to cry. "None the women in my life have hair," he sobbed.

When Will saw Ma without her hair, he tried to hide the fright in his face. He didn't argue when she said, "Now listen, my boy, you let Leo Fein alone. It's not important anyway."

For the next two months we took turns at her side and every day noticed another piece of her fall away. Our mother would have watched the accumulation of abilities in each of her sons in childhood and now we witnessed their daily diminution in our mother.

Her speech one day was slow, the next it was slurred on L's, and by the following week there were gaps in sentences as her tongue became more and more obstructive. The tingles down her left side turned into numbness and the numbness became near-paralysis. And then it swept over the right side.

Where her dizziness had begun, a weakness in the limbs took over. She walked, then stepped, then shuffled, then sat, then lay. Her fingers, once capable of the fine detail she etched into her pottery and an elegant calligraphy to rival Leo Fein's, became spongy in their grip.

By this time we'd moved her bed into Carol's living room so that if she *was* dying, at least she would have life around her. So it was that the furniture gave way to her decline. It was surely a signal that this was a one-way trip, though I pretended not to recognise it. She was able at first to move from there to the kitchen and to the bathroom, then she could only sit up, and finally she only lay flat.

Carol's maid didn't come to work for a week after seeing one of the seizures, saying she was sure my mother was possessed by evil spirits. Will told her to stay away.

My daytime nodes now were Ma's nodes and they filled my hours with her cups of tea, or soup, or hot Bovril (a throwback to her boarding school days, I can only think, because I'd never seen her drink the stuff before), or pills, or pillows, or TV. It was a strange time, a vigil and a duty, an occupation, but I kept at a distance the idea that each day was one of a finite series of appointments to *spend time* together.

I was successful at this self-deception and for the most part regarded my chores as chores and wiled away the time in bored conversation of things we'd covered before over the years. It was the kind of complacent relationship I'd had with her most of my teenage years. If I felt

ashamed at not *making the most of every moment together*, I suppressed it; Ma had always felt contemptuous of that kind of sentimentality.

“It’s important you spend time with your mother,” Carol would say, and I would agree to avoid coming off callous or insensible to Ma’s situation, but I would do nothing out of the ordinary. And for Ma’s part, when we spoke, it was mostly of the everyday things like breakfast or annoyance at each other’s habits or about Carol’s idiosyncrasies.

Though we were all grateful for Carol’s generosity, we were a family who could never resist talking behind someone’s back if there was something to talk about and Carol’s insistence on writing notes and labelling everything certainly qualified.

‘SWITCH OFF’ on the plate warmer, ‘THIS FREEZER DOESN’T CLOSE PROPERLY – PUSH HARD AND MAKE SURE’, ‘LOCK TWICE’ on the security gate, ‘GLASSES HERE’ on one of several kitchen bins. These notes were hand-made in different colours and were not meant just for us (since they existed before we arrived) but for *her*, mostly.

Carol’s whiney voice (‘ice’ and ‘arse’ were vocally identical) was another source of amusement for us, as were her conversations with Shoshana over the phone. Here the whining was more high-pitched and the questions and advice to the poor girl so invasive they made us cringe. “But what *kind* of discharge?” we heard her say once.

Between episodes of *Murder She Wrote*, Ma said to me, “I’m glad you’ve got a girlfriend, Ben.” I didn’t know what to say to it.

“I miss him, you know,” she continued.

“Leo Fein?” I asked.

“God, no. Your father.”

My entire childhood, I’d never heard her say that.

“I wish I could remember more of him,” I said.

“You missed out. It’s not fair. Oh, he wasn’t like fathers you see today, you know. He was only interested when children started to speak sense. But still.”

It gave me an idea of my father that I’d never had before, of a real person. I’d only heard about his steadfast honesty, his ethics, his warmth and lack of pretence. To hear of a fault of his humanised him for me, finally.

She told me I should look for work, at least part of the week. It didn’t make sense to stay all day with her. Before he left, Victor was able to secure me a clerical job at Capricorn Precast Walls and, with the experience I’d gained at Northern Horizons, I picked it up quickly enough.

In the evenings my brothers and I would be with Ma, and Carol would always be with us. We talked then about family holidays and the swastika, Will’s McEnroe poster, the Mike Schutte

fight. In the afterglow of nostalgia, and with Ma's weakened state, Will and Elliot became easier with each other.

I don't know whether it had come from Ma or Carol, but Carol told us we should all keep working, that she'd take time off and see to Ma's needs during the day. It had become more difficult for Ma to move at all and Carol said, "There are some things a son shouldn't see." There was a certain horror I felt when I connected what she was doing for Ma with her functions in the *Chevra Kadisha*.

I saw Marieke some nights and she wanted to see Ma for my sake, I suppose, but Ma asked for no visitors. She didn't want anyone told of her illness except close family.

I was disappointed in Ma and desperate for her to fight. The old fire we'd glimpsed at the referendum and at *shul* was out once more. If ever there was a time I wanted her to rekindle it, it was now.

I felt alone among my brothers in wanting this, although I can't be certain they didn't want her to fight, too. Ma let the cancer come to meet her.

She looked like someone forced to wait in a queue of indeterminate length for something she didn't want in the first place. But I could tell, also, she'd resolved that whatever she was waiting for was preferable to the wait itself. She didn't tell me but she'd said to Will with her lolling tongue, "I just want to die."

When she began to sleep more and talk less and when the misery really set into her mind and body, Will started to talk to us about helping her end it. Yet another curtain had dropped.

Her breathing was bad now, her lungs becoming useless, moth-eaten and creaky, and Will called us into Carol's bedroom to see if we all agreed we should find someone to help administer a lethal dose of morphine. Carol cried first, then Elliot and finally Will, whom I'd never seen shed tears.

Only I was left dry, unwilling to comprehend that we'd come to this point. "She wants to die," said Will. "She doesn't want to go on with the pain, and the discomfort, and suffering. She can't move, she can hardly breathe." In my reluctance to accept this I wondered whether he was promoting this course to avoid seeing Ma like this, whether some of the suffering of which he spoke was his own.

But we all agreed, even me, even Carol whose religious beliefs may not have approved of such a thing. Carol would make enquiries the next day with a doctor friend of hers. But she came back with the information that, although her friend was sympathetic, he would not take the risk of the illegal act of administering the dose, nor would any other doctor, he said, and nor would he supply us with the means to do it ourselves.

Ma fell completely unconscious one morning and remained that way into the evening. When her breathing took on a click and rattle, a sound unlike my mother's breath (because breathing is like the voice, connected uniquely with a person), Carol sent the three of us to bed and said she'd stay up with her.

Ma's body was still warm in the morning and Carol, who'd been sitting up with her until her death before 6 a.m., told me to spend some time with my mother. I could tell her goodbye, she said.

I could hold her soft hand. I could tell her I loved her. I could call her 'Mommy'. Like a stupid letter, I thought, that had no way to reply.

Ma had spoken to Will about her final arrangements, which were minimal. Just as she'd said after Leo Fein's *shiva*, she wanted no fuss. There was no service, a small notice in the paper and phone calls to Victor, Bernice, and her friends Herman and Nick, who lived in London now.



I met Shadrack at the taxi rank, which had become more dangerous in the months following my first visit there. Wars had broken out between route operators and Shadrack feared being caught in the crossfire.

We climbed into the taxi and waited on the back seat to leave. "Mom is gone," said Shadrack.

"Yes, Shadrack."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"Here," he said and uncurled his creased fingers. In his palm lay an oblong silver badge with a name: Eddie Aronbach. He wiped his eye with his hankie. "You're big now," he said. "You can give me money now. Yes-thanks."

"Now I don't have any," I said and for some reason he found this funny.

"Where is Elliot?"

"Elliot is in London again."

"How is William? Is he married?"

"No, I don't think so. He works in Joburg. He's going to be a lawyer."

"He's too naughty, that one."

"And you, Shadrack?"

"Me, I'm the same. Yes-thanks."

There were no incidents in the ongoing taxi war that day and we made the journey to Boyne safely, past the trees with the shopping bags in their branches.

Shadrack and I walked past the jumping men in khaki and the women in yellow and green and soon I was stopped by two men and told I wouldn't be able to go any further.

I handed them the note I had from the Bishop but they wouldn't read it. I was working up a lie about possession by spirits and wondering how far I could go in faking a seizure when the preacher with the reflective pate came striding up to us. He remembered me and looked at the note from the Bishop. "He has a few minutes now," he said.

I followed him to the replica *shul* and knocked on the door. "Please," said the Bishop. "Have a seat. Have you come to talk business?"

"Yes I have, Your Grace."

"You know, when you first came, I had the idea that Leo Fein was your father."

"I can see how you might have thought that," I said.

"Then I made some enquiries and I discovered you are the son of Eddie Aronbach."

"Yes."

"I knew your father."

"Did you?"

"Yes. When our buses broke down, he would fix them for us. I remember. He was a good man, your father."

"I never knew him," I said. "But you should have met my mother."

The Bishop brought his fingertips together. "Shall we talk business now?"

- END -