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The Filmmaker's Apprentice and Other Stories

CORRECTIONS

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of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

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Abstract

Kira Schlesinger, February 2011

“The Filmmaker’s Apprentice and Other Stories” is a novella and six short stories set in a contemporary South Africa more complicated than ever, where people are constantly moving, young people are trying to forge identities and an older generation struggles to adapt to a radically altered reality. Characters struggle to relate meaningfully across socio-economic, gender, national and racial divisions, bumping up against their own prejudices and perceptions in a way that makes it difficult to really see each other. In this shifting, fractured world connections are made, but they are often only tenuous or fleeting.

The collection takes its name from the novella with which it opens. In *The Filmmaker’s Apprentice*, Jonah Gravett is an uncertain film school graduate interning for Arthur Silverman, a world-renowned documentary filmmaker. Jonah idealises Arthur, who is brave, bold and charismatic. But when Jonah discovers a scandal from Arthur’s past he is shaken. He needs to accept his mentor’s fallibility and move past disillusionment, or end up bitter and disappointed.

Love Letters is the story of the brief and unusual friendship of AK Van Diggelen, an embittered informal trader, and a lonely child he meets on the Seapoint Promenade.

Betterment is set in a picturesque Eastern Cape village. Emily Hughes is charmed by the welcoming community and the natural beauty of the landscape, but she’s suspicious of Ace, a patron of the local shebeen who claims to be an academic visiting from Rhodes University. When the exhumation ceremony Ace is in the village to observe ends in disaster Ace is devastated, and his harangue about failures in the age of democracy challenge’s Emily’s idealisation of rural life.

In *The Battle with Mr Vilakazi* young community service doctor Mpho Lekgoathi is frustrated by Mr Vilakazi, a member of the administrative staff at the hospital. He uses his position to belittle her in order to compensate for the disempowerment he feels in the face of a young, sophisticated woman from the city.

In *The Research Commons* we see the world through the eyes of a writer with an unusual way of relating to the multitude of details of everyday life. She attracts the attentions of a student in the library and he follows her into the most private spaces of her imagination.

In *Disrespect* a jaded policeman tells us about the event that made him decide to leave the force.

The Hitchhiker is the story of the love that develops between two refugees, Assumani and Matilde, as they cross the border into South Africa. But their time together is brief as the brutal realities of displacement necessitate that they both keep moving on.

This collection will be submitted to South African publishers to consider for publication. Any feedback that would prove helpful in improving the stories for that purpose would be greatly appreciated.

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In memory of Agnes Masikodi Msimanaga

24/07/1950 – 6/04/2009

University of Cape Town

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The Filmmaker's Apprentice

Jonah was excited by the print on the wall, which surprised him. It was the way the woman's body emerged, defiant, from the flat gold leaf of her clothes. Or perhaps it was the man's head pressed to her bare stomach, his eyes lowered – in submission? – her hand resting on his matted hair. She didn't look down at him, but casually out at the viewer, a lazy eyelid drooping over one eye.

Jonah wasn't often alone in Arthur's office. It was a guilty pleasure, like visiting an ancient holy site and posing for a tourist snapshot. On the opposite wall a series of images of raised fists and ravaged faces jogged his memory, something he'd heard about Arthur working on posters in the eighties. Beneath them hung a series of movie posters Arthur had brought back from India, large-eyed women weighed down in gold and fabric behind moustachioed men brandishing guns. The juxtaposition was classic Arthur.

Jonah walked over to the back wall and looked up at the vast store of knowledge categorised, labelled and shelved. He pulled out a book and turned to the imprint page. It was a first edition and personally inscribed, probably worth quite a bit, the kind of book his father would love for his collection.

An assortment of antique cameras was lined up on an eye-level shelf. Jonah picked up a piece he hadn't seen before, an intricately worked wooden box with a worn leather strap. He flicked open the latch and lowered one side; the leather bellows concertinaed out, pushing forward a lens mounted in a brass case. First half of the nineteenth century probably, but he wasn't sure.

“Arthur wants you.”

Jonah snapped the case shut so fast he was afraid he'd broken it, but it was only Tariq.

“He’s arguing with Lorna and Chris about the performance, and now Stanton’s taking their side. He says he needs someone who’s not drunk or stupid to back him up.”

Tariq left, walking on his toes in the annoying way he had. Jonah turned off the light and hurried downstairs.

The previous night they had been to a play directed by an old friend of Arthur’s; they’d been arguing about it for hours and now Arthur wanted Jonah’s contribution. He’d never really been part of a group before and no matter how much time he spent with them the novelty never wore off. As Arthur’s assistant he was in a special position: production assistant, secretary, confidant and protégé being groomed for greatness. Well, maybe he was getting ahead of himself, but he was learning.

When he’d first met Arthur at university he’d been in awe of his fame and of the activity that surrounded him. Arthur had a reputation for daring investigating and hard-hitting films that were technically and artistically outstanding. In Jonah’s second year he’d taken one of Arthur’s modules and he was surprised by the effort Arthur put into his students. He’d seen the documentary about John Vorster Square that had established Arthur’s career – everyone had – but he wanted to see more, so he borrowed some of Arthur’s films from the library and was blown away. He dug up interviews and articles that spanned more than twenty years. At some point he was invited to a screening at the house, then Arthur got him working on a project and soon he was absorbed into the scene.

Unlike Arthur’s private space at the top the ground floor was open to all the visitors who drifted in, and they came in a steady stream. Over the years the house had developed a reputation as a kind of meeting place where people came for debates, parties and scandals, unexpected conversations and the status it would confer on them. Ideas germinated over drinks and arguments were thrashed out amid the festivities. Film-makers, writers, artists and musicians moved through the rooms along with historians, journalists and the odd politician, employees, interns,

friends, lovers, tourists and admirers, those who made things happen and those who watched. Some were there to talk and some to learn, some to see and some to be seen, many to leave the banality of their lives for a moment.

At the centre was Arthur and all of them played to his script. He controlled who was granted access, he came up with the projects and he imbued the activities with excitement. He provided solace for broken hearts and guidance for young graduates; he knew what was important, funny or worthwhile. He was above them and at the centre of them, theirs and always just out of reach.

The house on Salisbury Street was the perfect setting for the world Arthur had created. It was Victorian, over a hundred years old, with the original oregon pine floorboards and restored fireplaces. The outside walls were white but the unrestrained pink of earlier years showed through in patches where the paint peeled.

Farid, Arthur's best friend and one-time lover, lived in a bedroom at the back that had its own small sitting room and enclosed stoep behind the main open-plan lounge-dining room. The other bedrooms were vacant for the moment except for the room nearest the street which had been occupied by Stanton, another old friend and associate, since his arrival from New York the day before. Across the passage was a string of interconnecting offices used by crew-members, interns, collaborators and whoever was working on Arthur's projects.

The lounge was full of people on couches and chairs and sprawled on the floor. Arthur was on the couch with Roscoe curled asleep on his lap.

"I won't have your relativist nonsense in this house," he said as Jonah walked in. He looked up and beckoned Jonah inside.

"Just because you can get away with that postmodern crap at the university doesn't mean you can do it here."

He was playing the provocative host already and it was still hours until the party.

“My dear,” Chris pushed his round glasses up to the bridge of his nose. “Mine is the best postmodern crap in the entire institution.”

Everyone laughed. Jonah sat down with his back against the wall next to the fireplace. Chris was also on the floor, a half-empty bottle of white wine next to his glass. An early charcoal of his hung in Arthur’s bedroom, *The Elliptical Lovers*, and in this position he looked like a model sitting for his own drawing. Behind him on the couch sat Suzie and Sarah – the Meaty Minions, Arthur called them – their vast legs in a row before them.

“Don’t take him seriously, Chris,” Lorna said from the other couch where she sat cross-legged on her feet. “He’s just bullying you because you would never sleep with him.”

Jonah loved the back and forth of these afternoons, from the serious to the absurd, everyone in the firing line.

Next to Lorna Hayden was sitting with an unfamiliar young man about Jonah’s age and his wrinkled fingers twitched among the strands of hair that brushed the stranger’s collar.

So Hayden had a new interest. What a relief that Jonah wouldn’t have to put up with the attention anymore.

The young man gently pushed Hayden’s hand away.

“It will take a firmer rejection than that to deter Hayden,” Arthur said.

Hayden pretended to laugh along with everyone but Jonah saw the resentment in his eyes.

“I agree with Chris about the historical abstraction of the play,” Stanton said from the couch he shared with Arthur and Thabang, one of the interns. “It focuses attention on the emotional realities of the character.”

That syrupy voice always surprised Jonah; one didn’t expect it from his blanched skin and angular features.

Jonah thought his analysis missed the point – the play wasn’t ahistorical at all – but he didn’t say anything. It wasn’t just the money that made Jonah clam up

around him, or even his family name and empire. It was something about his confidence. He was so completely sure of everything he said that even when you thought he was wrong you doubted yourself.

“And you?” Arthur said, looking at Jonah. “What’s your take?”

Jonah blushed. Arthur knew he disagreed – they’d spoken about it on the way home – and was forcing him to articulate his position. Jonah wished his mentor would put his education on hold when they were in social situations.

“Well, I – I guess that, I agree, you know, about the specificity of the narrative. It’s just a matter of – perspective.”

Arthur looked down at the dog on his lap, its head cradled in his arm. When he scratched behind its ears its left leg twitched.

Jonah had sounded like an idiot, he knew. Why didn’t he just have the courage to say what he thought? It would be better to make an arse of himself in front of everyone than to have Arthur think he was a coward.

“What I mean is,” he tried again, “they took out the political and economic conditions so that the audience was, you know, emotionally in the same position as the character.”

Arthur gave no clue as to what he thought. Jonah’s face was hot, would be going red too, but he kept going.

“But it’s all there in the story. So at another level you’re aware of the forces that the characters can’t make sense of. That’s what makes it hard to watch.”

Chris was nodding, a look of amused surprise on his face.

“I can’t relate to this obsession you have here with making everything political. It’s time to move on,” Stanton said. “Which reminds me, Chris, I got hold of the woman at HBO about that catalogue.”

Stanton and Chris chatted and people’s attention scattered into other conversations. Jonah waited for Arthur’s response, his heart beating in his throat. Arthur looked at him and inclined his head in acknowledgment. Jonah looked into his lap to hide his pleasure.

Tariq and Celeste came in from the garden where they'd been hanging paper lanterns with Suzie's children, who walked in behind them.

"Ma, Ben climbed the tree and I told him not to. And now he's itching."

"Let me see."

The boy scurried up to his mother, lips trembling. She rubbed the skin and said something softly to him. He started to cry.

"Ok, I think we're going to have to go home and put this one in a bath before we have a major fit of hypochondria. Robyn, go fetch mommy's handbag from the kitchen table."

The girl went out, her ponytail bobbing with importance. Suzie took Ben by the hand and said her goodbyes. The girl came back in with Farid behind her carrying a couple of ice trays.

"Robyn says you're off?"

"Ja, but I'll see you later."

He kissed her on the cheek and popped the cubes from their moulds.

"You can let yourself out?"

"Sure."

Suzie left the room and they heard the child whining down the passage.

"Ok, it's time to start the curry," Farid said, emptying the ice into the bucket on the coffee table. "Sarah, are you still going to do the veggie one?"

Arthur indicated with a movement of his head that he wanted Jonah to join him upstairs.

Arthur opened his laptop and motioned for Jonah to pull up a chair.

"You need to see this. It's by one of the guys from the Nairobi workshop."

Jonah sat down next to him to watch the twenty-minute clip. He had graduated the previous year and when he wasn't in the house on Salisbury Street he was trying to conceptualise a documentary that he wanted to complete before

leaving for Los Angeles in February. He was floundering, unable to come up with a good concept, and watching this clip stirred his anxiety.

It was a day-in-the-life piece following three friends in their late teens through a regular day. The first one worked in a meat-packing factory and the camera wasn't allowed inside, but he simulated slicing a carcass with a cleaver at home, smiling shyly. The camera followed the second on his rounds collecting scrap metal in a shopping trolley. He discovered a mass of old metal piping that had been dumped behind a factory and it earned him what would usually take weeks to collect. He whooped and danced in the street and there were shots of him and the meat-handler that night drinking beers to celebrate in a smoky back-room tavern. The third subject was a security guard for a family in the suburbs. He wore a military-green uniform with a beret and polished boots and stood at attention to salute at his employer driving through the gate behind tinted windows.

"What do you think?" Arthur asked when it ended, looking at Jonah like a child showing off a new toy.

"It's got potential," Jonah said, nodding to show his enthusiasm. "The footage is great. But it needs stronger character development, you know. The viewer should get to know more about one of them, identify with him as the protagonist, and the other two should be introduced as his friends."

"Excellent," Arthur replied. "I see my lectures paid off, Mr Gravett."

"I think I was busy that day," Jonah rolled his eyes, but for the second time that night felt the electric current of connection between them.

"The director is nineteen!" Arthur shook his head in amazement. "He's going to make such an impact. We have to get him down here, maybe with a few of the others, let them spend some time shooting with our people."

Our people. Jonah had gotten used to that kind of language.

Arthur stood and paced the short distance to the bookshelf.

“We should look into raising the money – maybe from the Jan Vrijman.” He turned and walked back to the desk. “We could see if there’s any university money still floating around for January.”

“We’ve probably missed the submissions,”

Jonah sat down at the computer and created a new Word document. Arthur kept up his stream of thoughts, still pacing. He flitted between topics and Jonah took them down, trying to bring some order to the flash flood of ideas. There were logistical concerns for the editing workshop, improvements to the third-year course, and Geoff wanted an answer about the date for the talk show, but it couldn’t be until late November. Arthur dictated some paragraphs for the opening of the workshop which sent him into a frenzy of ideas for a treatment for a new film.

Jonah shifted in the chair to correct his posture. Farid probably needed help with the preparations downstairs but he couldn’t miss a rush of productivity like this; Arthur needed him there to catch the ideas that bumped up against each other. He’d been working full-time as Arthur’s assistant for a couple of months. It was a kind of apprenticeship for him, a way of learning as much as he could from Arthur before going abroad to try make it as a film-maker. An opportunity like this didn’t come along often and he took it with both hands.

There had been a number of young men – once a woman – who’d worked as assistants for Arthur. Jonah had never met any of them but he didn’t like it when Arthur talked about them. Professor Fourie in Arthur’s department still called him Daniel – his immediate predecessor – and he couldn’t bear it. It brought up a strange kind of jealousy; Daniel’s claims on Arthur would always be prior to his and therefore more legitimate. It was absurd, he knew, and he would never have admitted it, but he felt it nonetheless.

By the time they finished and went downstairs guests were arriving. Celeste and Tariq passed by with a pile of jackets on their way to deposit them in one of the

empty rooms. Farid was in the kitchen taking bottles of wine from a high shelf and three enormous pots of curry simmered on the stove. Through the windows Jonah could see guests standing in small groups on the lawn. It was still too light and people were still too sober to mingle.

“You work him this hard, and you’ll lose this one too,” Farid said to Arthur with a stern look.

“If you’re expecting me to go soft in my old age, I’m going to disappoint you horribly,” Arthur replied, taking a handful of peanuts from a bowl on the table and dropping them into his mouth from his fist.

It was strange hearing him refer to his age like that; he was nearly sixty but he seemed younger. His hair was dark grey and flecked with silver but still thick, and he kept his beard short, not much more than stubble, which gave him a youthful appearance despite the softness that had crept over his body.

“I think I can handle it,” Jonah said, taking the bottles Farid handed him. “But thanks for the concern. That’s more than I get from Il Duce over here.”

“I hope you’re sufficiently fortified for some real work,” Arthur called as he walked out the door. “We should hear back from the Broadcaster early next week.”

Farid shook his head and sighed.

“Learning how to say no to Arthur is a prerequisite for working with him.”

“Thanks,” Jonah nodded. “But don’t worry about me – I won’t take on more than I can handle.”

“We’ll see.”

Jonah took a deep breath and went out the back door into the garden with the wine. He’d done the invitations and the guest list was a who’s who of the city. Parties weren’t easy for him at the best of times; tonight he didn’t think he’d have the courage to talk to anyone. He headed for a corner of the lawn where Thabang and Hayden’s new distraction were setting up the drinks.

“Where do you guys want these?”

“Thanks, just put them down on the table,” Thabang pointed to the trestle table draped with a printed cloth. “I’m going to pour some when the glasses arrive.”

“How did you get stuck with bar duty?”

“The guys Arthur hired are late. Their bakkie window was smashed and all their glassware was stolen. They’re getting more from somewhere now and we’re covering till they get here. We’ve only got twenty glasses until they arrive, so it’s beers only for the interns.”

“Glasses seem an unlikely thing to get stolen.”

“Tell me about it,” Thabang said and turned to talk to a woman waiting to order a drink.

“Hi,” Jonah said and put out his hand to Hayden’s date, who was emptying a bag of ice over a metal tub.

“I’m Jonah.”

He wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Michael.”

His handshake was limp; not meek, but half-hearted. Thabang leaned over and pulled a beer out the tub.

“So,” Jonah said. “You’re here with Hayden.”

Michael nodded.

“Have you known him long?”

“Not really. A little while.”

Jonah looked away. His attempt at being friendly was failing. Either Michael had a chip on his shoulder or he was even more uncomfortable at the party than Jonah. It didn’t make it any easier for him that the only person he knew was Hayden, who was probably drunk already.

“Can I get one?” he pointed at the ice tub.

“What do you want?”

“Got any Amstels?”

Michael leaned down to get one, opened it and handed it to Jonah.

“Thanks. Nice to meet you.”

He walked over to a fire that had been built in a metal drum on the lawn. The garden was filling up, people coming outside to get drinks and talking in twos and threes. He looked at the faces around the fire without seeing anyone he knew. There was a blonde woman who was vaguely familiar, maybe from TV. She had a wide mouth and a pleasant network of wrinkles around her eyes. Green stones in her earrings caught the light from the fire.

The man she was with noticed Jonah looking at her. Jonah looked away quickly and took a sip of his beer, his face flushing. He shifted the bottle to the other hand and pulled out his phone but there were no new messages. He put a cigarette between his lips but couldn't find a lighter. The women next to him were smoking and Jonah interrupted them to ask for a light. They waited for him to light the cigarette and step back before resuming their conversation.

Jonah stayed at the fire sipping his beer, awkward and self-conscious. He needed to speak to someone, couldn't stand around being pathetic the whole night. He finally saw someone he knew, the ballroom-dancer from Nyanga who'd made it to the championships in Prague. Arthur had done a great piece on it. The dancer noticed him and waved. Jonah went over and they exchanged greetings.

“So how'd you meet Arthur?” he asked. They'd seen each other at the house before but never really spoken.

“We've known each other for years – we were in the same queer rights circles in the early nineties – but we probably met at something like this,” he made a circular motion with his hand. “He used to be quite the player when he was younger, old Arthur. Not that you'd know it to see him now.”

Jonah had watched Arthur at parties before, moving through the clusters of people, flirting with the men and the women, getting people drinks and directing them towards the food. He looked for him now and saw him on the other side of the garden, his arm around a tall skinny man with a bald head.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind looking like that at his age.”

“Boy, you should have seen him a decade ago. I had a crush on him for years, but it was never the right time. Not that he didn’t try. There isn’t an honest woman or queer that doesn’t love watching a black man dancing in high-heeled shoes.”

Jonah laughed. The dancer held up his empty wine glass and went over to the bar.

A quartet from the club in Lansdowne – friends of Arthur and Farid’s – were playing from under the gazebo. It was an intriguing piece but not easy listening and it jarred with the party atmosphere. Jonah saw a group of people coming outside with bowls of food and went into the kitchen to get some.

Tariq and Celeste were in there with a handful of their friends.

“Jonah!”

“Pour him a one.”

“Thanks, I’m ok,” Jonah said, holding up his beer, now almost empty.

Celeste had already filled a shot glass with tequila and held it out for him. He took it, conscious of the older people on the other side of the room chatting softly over their wine glasses. Tariq shouted a toast and they drank. Jonah felt his face flush and put his glass down with the others. Someone knocked over the bottle and the liquid ran down the surface of the table and sank into the hairline cracks in the wood. Jonah took the opportunity to slip away in the chaos.

He filled a bowl with curry and went out into the passage. Arthur stood with some men in one of the offices and Jonah slowed as he passed but couldn’t delay long enough to catch any of the conversation without being conspicuous. In the lounge he scanned the faces but didn’t see anyone he knew. Unsure of what to do, his food steaming away its heat, Jonah went back out into the garden and ate standing up at the bar table, wishing he could move among the crowd with Arthur’s fluidity and strike up original conversations with interesting people.

Perhaps he should have invited Kelly after all. He'd thought about it but decided against it. It had gone badly when he'd brought her to the house before. She rubbed Arthur up the wrong way. She was Jonah's oldest friend – originally a girlfriend but their relationship had been more successful since becoming platonic. Things had been changing recently, though, and even more so since the award. Now that she was a *hot young artist* she could get away with saying anything; the more contrived and meaningless, the more blogs quoted it. Her art wasn't even very good, but he'd never said that out loud.

When he finished eating Jonah took a beer and walked over to the crowd in front of the gazebo. The music was lighter and more upbeat and people danced on the lawn. One couple stood out, the man in a creased linen shirt unbuttoned to reveal a well-built body. His partner was tall and not particularly graceful but he moved her and turned her with such confidence that she looked almost elegant.

When the music changed again he placed his hand on the small of her back, pulled her close and led her in a fast-paced series of spins. Their torsos were pressed together and their legs darted back and forth, somehow not tangling together. People came over to watch and soon the other dancers had stopped to look as well. The man's face was imperious, focused; the hair above his ears was wet with sweat. The woman grinned.

"Isn't this just something?" Arthur had emerged from the crowd unnoticed and stood at Jonah's elbow. "It's the trumpet."

He took a sip of his wine and looked at the dancers. Jonah stood and listened. He hoped Arthur hadn't seen him looking lost.

"Come. I want you to meet some people."

They went over to a group of people in a circle of couches and chairs brought outside for the night. Arthur's director of photography, Nick, was sitting with his cousin and Farid was talking with some people on the other side of the circle. Someone must have just told a joke and people laughed. Arthur sat down on

the arm of a couch and a tall man with light grey hair took Arthur's hand in both of his.

"This is Ernst," Arthur said to Jonah. "And this is Hege."

"Hello," Ernst's face crumpled into a smile. Jonah pulled up an empty chair and sat down.

They were from Europe but Jonah didn't establish exactly where. Ernst was a chemical engineer working in Cape Town and Hege was a cellist. They were warm people, full of nods and smiles. Hege's perfume was dark and musky and one of her eyes drooped. Arthur perched on the armrest, teasing her about her accent – still heavily foreign, at times difficult to understand.

"Are you a student of Arthur's?" Ernst asked.

"Initially, yes," Arthur answered for him. "But Jonah has been interning with me over the last few months, and he possesses certain talents and abilities."

Jonah blushed.

"That's quite a compliment coming from Arthur," Hege said.

"I'm just his assistant."

They wanted to know about his own work too, and what he was planning to do in L.A. He wasn't used to people being so interested in his personal work and he laboured through his embarrassment at discussing his paltry accomplishments. They were being kind, he thought, feigning interest to encourage him, but their questions kept coming and their faces – even Arthur's – suggested real interest, so he spoke on and found himself relaxing.

The conversation sailed from topic to topic. Ernst was developing software to create digital images of chemical reactions.

"For situations where you want to know what's happening inside a container with opaque walls."

He started explaining how it worked but Farid interrupted him.

"Ernst, you're bringing back nightmarish memories of university."

“What are you talking about?” Nick asked. “You’re a lawyer.”

“But I got a BSC first. My father was adamant his son would be a scientist.”

“He must be so disappointed.”

“No, after I told him I was an atheist, being a lawyer didn’t seem so bad.”

Everyone laughed. Jonah found a wine glass in his hand and drank. The quartet was still playing and the man on trumpet was doing a solo. The conversation turned into a debate between Arthur and Hege.

“How can you tell a story about a people if you can’t speak their language,” Hege asked. “Isn’t this another kind of cultural imperialism, a kind of opportunism?”

“So we can’t try to understand one another, try to make sense of others through narrative?” Arthur asked.

“Not that we can’t try to understand other people, but who says we need to tell their stories in order to understand them? We should be listening to them, not speaking for them.”

“So we should just ignore the groups with no access to media? We should wait for the last remaining Bushmen to make a movie about themselves before they’re extinct. And I suppose the tik-kops will write their autobiographies that give us a good perspective on the international drug trade and the social breakdown in their communities?”

“Arthur the dramatics don’t work on me.”

“Ok, maybe Hege is putting it too strongly,” Ernst intervened. “But can one say that it’s more appropriate to tell stories about one’s own community, as you’re less likely to misinterpret what people are saying and to miss crucial elements in the situation?”

“Good God. You’re saying I can make films only about middle-aged gay Jews for the rest of my career!”

The tension broke. Arthur knew just when and how to do that. Someone refilled Jonah's glass. He drank and smiled at nothing.

Hege had written music for a documentary of Arthur's and they discussed the final product, things Hege would have done differently in post-production. Arthur leaned forward, commenting where he agreed or disagreed. His eyes moved rapidly when he was focussing, as if his thoughts were spinning all around him and he was trying to keep track.

Jonah closed his eyes and listened to the music. He wasn't sure how long he sat like that. When he opened his eyes Arthur was still talking to Hege. He excused himself to go to the bathroom and Arthur nodded without breaking the flow of his words.

The toilet downstairs was occupied. On the landing half way up the stairs Jonah pulled out a Stephen Spender collection. He had to close one eye in order to read the blurb. He paged through a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, lingering on an engraving of the young Whitman from the first edition. The poet stood with his left hand in his pocket and his right on his hip, hat cocked to one side, the hint of a challenge in a raised eyebrow. He resembled Arthur in a certain mood: challenging, solemn, but also somehow playful. Was there some expression common to men of vision? Could it be identified and imitated? Jonah didn't have it; no one in the house did except for Arthur. Not even Farid, who was in many ways the most intelligent and the most serious.

At the top of the stairs he turned left and pushed open the door to the bathroom. The door hit up against something but Jonah was preoccupied with his thoughts and forced it open. When he realised there was someone was inside he was less than a metre from Hayden, who leaned over the bath and thrust himself against Michael with an expression of pitiful and desperate pleasure on his face. Hayden's eyes were closed but Michael looked up at Jonah with hard green eyes. He didn't seem ashamed by his exposure or even particularly surprised. He was utterly without interest in what was happening to him and in the fact that Jonah

was watching. Jonah backed out and closed the door behind him before Hayden even noticed he was there.

The sound of the vacuum cleaner woke Jonah. When he opened his eyes Tariq greeted him with a shrug of resignation as he pushed the machine listlessly over the carpet. Jonah felt the couch swaying under him as though it was buffeted by small waves. He looked out the window for the horizon but his line of sight was obscured by garden furniture and Arthur pacing at the far end of the lawn, shouting into his phone and punctuating each point with a hand thrown up into the air.

In the kitchen Celeste and Thabang had been put to work reloading the dishwasher. The morning light and sounds of people cleaning around him rushed at Jonah. He flipped the switch on the kettle, his eyes still half shut, but Farid swooped down on him and set him to work picking up plastic cups and cigarette butts in the garden before he could protest.

The clean-up operation finally finished around lunchtime and Jonah sat down on the couch to watch a movie. It was an obscure Danish film and Jonah found it difficult to concentrate, especially with Hayden fidgeting with on phone next to him. The second time it rang Arthur paused the movie.

“Hayden, if you can’t shut up then get out.”

Hayden glared at Arthur but said nothing.

He couldn’t make sense of their relationship. Arthur had a mean streak that was reserved only for Hayden, and Hayden seemed to do everything he could to provoke it. Unlike Tariq, though, Hayden wasn’t actually a fool: he was erudite and talented, and he’d been a writer on a TV show some years before that had been received well. But now he drank too much and his boyfriends got younger as he got older. His professional and artistic life had been a failure. For the last year he’d been directing a reality show that gave people large sums of money with absurd

restrictions on how they could spend it, the basis for inexhaustible ridicule at the house.

“Just go. Please, I’m not in the mood.”

“Art, that was a bit much,” Farid said gently when Hayden was gone.

“You can’t actually speak to people like that.”

Arthur pushed play and looked at the screen.

The Broadcaster confirmed the commission that week and Arthur’s enthusiasm rippled through the house. Jonah had been doing research for months and it would be the first big project he’d been involved in from the start.

It was ambitious and unlike anything Arthur had done before: a TV series tracing settlement at the Cape from the Khoi to the arrival of the Xhosa, the Dutch colonists, South East Asian slaves, British settlers and immigrants from all over Europe. There were episodes on the Frontier Wars and the Anglo-Boer Wars, the great road-builders of the early colony, the history of disease and the assimilation of languages, the arrival of Christianity and Islam, how forced removals changed population distribution and modern migration to Cape Town from the rural Eastern Cape – among other things.

Or that was what Arthur wanted; they’d need to shoot thousands of tapes to pack it all in. Arthur always wanted to fit in more than was possible, do more work than the time allowed, produce on a bigger scale than they had capacity for. His imagination ballooned out further than anyone else could go. He pushed the others and they brought him back down to earth. Jonah had to work hard to pare the plans down to a realistic thirteen episodes.

Writing the shooting script was a challenge as much of the material was too old for archive footage. They put together an intricate combination of stills, graphics, reconstructions and voice-overs with shots of present-day locations, and when the commission came through it still wasn’t finished.

Nick was DOP as always, Tariq was mixer and Celeste was boomswinger. Stanton had been liaising with the SABC and was taking some of the commercial responsibilities off Arthur's hands. Jonah practically moved into the house to work as fixer, production assistant and everything else Arthur needed. Arthur conjured up a new legion of interns who set up workstations for themselves wherever they could find space in the offices downstairs.

Jonah was in awe of Arthur's creativity, his ideas for what and how to shoot and the standards he demanded from his researchers. He never tired and hardly seemed to sleep, and his passion motivated the rest of the crew. But he was also notoriously disorganised and impulsive, and it was Jonah's job to keep the project running smoothly despite his last-minute demands for different interviewees and changes to the shooting script.

"Book a flight to Pretoria for tomorrow morning," Arthur said one night walking into the office downstairs. "The earliest available."

"You're going back to the Archive now?"

Jonah had spent two weeks up at the National Archive with Arthur collecting footage.

"No. You are."

"You're joking."

"I'm not happy with the material we've got on forced removals. I'll email you some notes on what I want in the morning."

Jonah went to Pretoria and was back in time for a planning meeting the next night.

Jonah was also in charge of the interns, which was a greater challenge for him. They were tasked with assessing and selecting sites for shooting, an enormous amount of work to be done in the few weeks before production, and it all had to be managed and coordinated by Jonah. The schedule was tight and they couldn't afford any major mistakes.

On the day of their first meeting Jonah woke early to prepare. He went up to Arthur's study to fetch a file he'd left there and found Arthur at his desk wearing the same tracksuit pants and T-shirt he'd been in when Jonah had left the room the night before. It was six-thirty.

"Have you been working all night?"

"Mr Gravett," Arthur said, looking up. "Come see where we're at."

Arthur jumped up, stretched his arms above his head and arched his back. He printed a copy of the voice-over he'd spent the night rewriting and passed it to Jonah.

"Come. Let's get some breakfast."

Jonah skimmed it walking behind Arthur down the stairs and into the kitchen. The original version had been too long for the footage they planned to shoot but Arthur had managed to cut it down without losing any of the content, and it was actually more fluid than the original.

"I found an interesting article online last night," Arthur said when Jonah had finished reading. "There's a myth that Karoo mountain pools are inhabited by a mermaid. *Water-auntie* actually."

"In the Karoo?"

"Indeed. It was an inland sea two hundred and fifty million years ago. They're vague on how she survived the millennia of dry rock."

Arthur filled the coffee maker with three heaped spoons of ground coffee and turned it on at the wall.

"There are Bushman paintings of fish-tailed creatures but some experts contend they're just swallows; the cause of a ferocious academic spat."

"You can't be serious."

"A filmmaker went up and interviewed a host of locals who swear they've seen the elusive black-haired siren. Or at least a waterborne tea-cup or their names spelled out in algae."

“We should get hold of the movie.”

“Maybe, but the article went downhill; it concluded that mermaids are the answer to environmental destruction and ended with photographs of sentient ice crystals.”

Arthur put bread in the toaster, halved a handful of cherry tomatoes and cut slices of cheese that crumbled on the plate.

“I’ve seen those,” Jonah said, getting the milk out the fridge. “Tariq once had a book of them – I’ve never seen Nick laugh so much. It’s some Japanese guy who sings to the water and it freezes into geometric patterns, but the water he swear at freezes into amoeba-like blobs.”

“I no longer have the patience to discuss Tariq’s penchant for pseudo-science.”

Arthur passed Jonah a plate and sat down on a high stool on the other side of the table.

“Now, when will I see my last set of edits marked up on the script?”

Arthur had given him the changes only two days before. When was he supposed to have done it? He would have to really push it today to fit everything in.

“You can have it by tonight, I think.”

“Excellent.” Arthur ate a third of his toast in one bite. “I’m working with the woman from Brown all morning, then Nick and I are going to meet those sweet little tech boys who are sourcing our additional equipment.”

Arthur stood up to go.

“Don’t let Hayden near the interns – he tried to get money out of Lorna yesterday and I won’t have him scaring the new people off.”

Before Jonah was finished eating Arthur had swept out the room. He certainly didn’t want for energy, Jonah thought, and got up to rinse their plates.

The last few weeks Jonah had felt excited and impatient for production to start, but now he was nervous, doubtful that he could handle his responsibilities. Arthur had a way of convincing people to step into roles that were beyond their abilities. They invariably drew themselves up to the task and found unexpected ingenuity.

Like Morné. Just after he'd finished his masters Arthur had convinced him to direct a short film of Arthur's. Everyone had said he was crazy, throwing away his work like that, but Morné had stepped up to the challenge and put together an impressive film – it had gone to Copenhagen, Chicago and Mexico City.

Jonah wasn't like that, though. He didn't handle stress well. He got anxious and clammed up when other people were looking to him for solutions.

“Morning.” Nick walked into the kitchen. “Getting an early start?”

Nick always looked ragged but at this time of the morning he looked especially grisly. A cigarette smoked from between his fingers and there was dried white spittle in the corners of his mouth. Jonah dried his hands on a dishcloth.

“I thought I was but Arthur was already in his office when I went up. I'm not sure he slept last night.”

Nick's laugh turned into a damp cough.

“So it's begun.”

He held his cigarette under the tap to extinguish it and tossed the wet butt in the bin.

“He's not going to come down until after post-production, and then he's going to hit the ground like a tonne of bricks.” He walked over to the coffee maker and filled a mug. “You'll get used to it.”

Jonah poured himself a second coffee and walked to the window.

Hearing Nick talk about Arthur like that made him uncomfortable. Without needing to say it Arthur demanded complete loyalty; that was the entry fee and the

price of being allowed to stay. Nick was closer to him than almost anyone – they’d been working together for fifteen years – but it still left Jonah feeling uneasy.

The coffee was too sweet so Jonah poured it down the drain. There were a thousand things to be done before lunch.

After a lengthy planning meeting Jonah and Nick assembled the interns and Nick made the introductions. He wasn’t at his best; his sense of humour wasn’t apparent in this context and he had none of Arthur’s charm, but he didn’t try to affect it and people responded well to his professionalism.

Jonah was sweating with nerves. He recognised some of the faces at the table. He’d tutored three of them at university; the girl with curly hair was Michelle but he couldn’t remember the others’ names. Raja was an MA student from Jordan doing research in Cape Town and Rebecca was an exchange student from the US. It was a relief that most of the interns were about his age. The only exception was a broad-shouldered man named Lyle, in his late thirties with chaotic black hair on his arms.

When it came time for Jonah to explain the instructions for the day he felt his face go red and the papers in his hand trembled. He put them on the table and hid his hands in his lap.

“So, as you know, we’re going to be scouting for locations today.”

He reached down for a box of folders at his feet.

“These information packs will tell you everything you need to know. Inside you’ll find maps, addresses and phone numbers, schedules and the criteria you’ll use to select the sites – Nick will tell you more about that.”

As he took them through the document his nerves settled. People listened, noted things down and asked questions. He was surprised by how confident he sounded. He spread a map out on the table and allocated districts to two-person teams. Michelle was afraid to drive into the area she’d been assigned so they spent

some time re-allocating the districts until everyone was satisfied. Thabang walked in while Nick was explaining the technical aspects of the assessment criteria – he'd been at a lecture – and joined the other students in a group. Hayden wandered past the doorway but, to Jonah's relief, didn't come inside.

When the interns had left Jonah sat down at his desk to work. He spent the rest of the day setting up interviews, corresponding with consultants on aspects of the research and marking up Arthur's edits to the script. Interns phoned throughout the day with queries and crises, but he managed to handle them without consulting Arthur or Nick.

In the evening he closed his computer and went into the lounge. Arthur, Stanton and Lorna were working at the dining room table.

"Productive day?" Arthur asked, looking up .

"Fairly. The script is waiting in your inbox."

"Good work."

Jonah pulled up a chair next to Stanton. He took a naartjie out the bowl on the table and pushed his thumb through the skin at the top. On the other side of the room Hayden and Chris were playing scrabble with the Minions, a few empty bottles of wine on the TV cabinet behind them.

"That's not even a word!" Hayden shouted. "You will not get one more point until I see it in a dictionary. You're cheating again and if you can't prove you're right, you're both disqualified."

"While this game is undoubtedly of the utmost importance," Arthur snapped, "we're actually doing some real work here, so kindly keep the volume down."

He shifted his chair so that his back was squarely facing them and they went back to their game.

"Lorna doesn't understand the importance of a lighting technician," Arthur said, looking at Jonah.

"Arthur, this has nothing to do with my film-making skills."

“Or lack thereof.”

Lorna was a corporate financial advisor and had never worked on a film before but she was looking over the budget as a favour to Arthur.

“You just don’t *have* the money. You’ve scratched together everything you’ve got, and it’s not enough.”

“That shouldn’t be our starting-point. The starting-point is what we need. We’ll work out the money afterwards.”

“You mean I’ll work it out afterwards.”

“Not at all. Mr Gravett will help you. He’s developed quite a knack for making our money stretch.”

“We might still have some of the money from the NFVF. I’ll look at the figures again and let you know tomorrow.”

This was crazy. He didn’t have time to go back into the budget at this point; all that had been wrapped up weeks before. Why did he always respond like this when Arthur gave him even the slightest compliment? It was like he couldn’t stop himself.

A commotion broke out at the other end of the room. Hayden had knocked over a bottle of wine and the Minions were scrambling to wipe it up before it stained the carpet.

“For fuck sake.”

Arthur collected his papers and stormed out the room.

It was late when Jonah finished the work. His back was stiff – he really needed to sit up straight at the computer. He went into out to the garden where Farid had set up the projector and screen under the gazebo and joined the dozen or so people seated cinema-style in front of the screen. He sat down and Farid passed him a bowl of popcorn.

The archive images on screen were from the eighties: big hair, big glasses, casspirs. That was an abbreviation or an anagram of something but Jonah couldn’t remember what. He was too tired to concentrate and it was hard to follow from

the middle but it didn't matter. He slouched down into the chair and put his head back. It was too cloudy for stars. He felt a bite on his ankle but by the time he slapped it the mosquito had flown away. Roscoe snored unevenly from somewhere. The bodies on either side of him were warm. His tongue went back and forth over a fragment of popcorn stuck between two teeth. His eyes closed and he was asleep.

The following three months were exhilarating, but it was the hardest Jonah had ever worked in his life. Ten-hour calls six days a week, meetings, interviews, interminable changes to the script and never-ending correspondence. Arthur's editor had already committed himself to another project and wouldn't be available for a few months. Instead of using someone else Arthur decided to shoot all thirteen back to back without breaking to cut the material.

When Arthur was focussed on a shoot it was Jonah's responsibility to deal with technical and practical things that went wrong, and he found that he was good at it. He lost his voice from speaking so much and his arms ached from carrying equipment. For weeks he didn't have time to eat a proper meal or to sit ~~down;~~late~~down;~~ late in the night he would collapse onto Arthur's couch for one beer and be asleep without taking off his shoes.

There were days when nothing went right. For the episode on slavery Arthur wanted to get to Greenmarket Square by sunrise so they were in the car by four-thirty. But they got a flat tyre on the way and by the time they'd set up their equipment it was raining. The interview Jonah had set up for midday on the cattle-killing movement didn't happen either. When they arrived at the man's house he wasn't home. The crew waited around with Stanton getting agitated about the money being wasted, and when Jonah eventually tracked the man down his secretary had mixed up the dates and he was out of Cape Town for the week. They

returned to Greenmarket Square in the afternoon but Nick's camera was getting dropout and by the time he'd sorted it out they had lost the light.

Arthur drove the crew hard and after six weeks they were exhausted and run down. The editor's schedule cleared and Nick convinced Arthur to take some time off to cut the tapes they had before shooting the rest.

On their last day of shooting Arthur had them all over for dinner. They ended the call early and at six o'clock he started preparing the cuttlefish – jellied rocket-shapes with tentacles trailing behind like ill-fitting skirts – for his black risotto. Jonah and Thabang watched him slit open the first one and peel back the hood. After gently removing the ink sac he pulled out the brain and guts in one movement. He supervised as Thabang sliced the flesh into strips.

“Oh, we're having a tutorial?” Hayden wandered in. “How to save the world one crème brûlée at a time.”

“Just entertaining ourselves. We all have our methods,” Arthur replied without looking up. “A little thicker, Thabang. You don't want them to burn in the pan.”

Hayden topped up his glass from a bottle of whisky in the cupboard. Jonah wasn't in the mood for the inevitable exchange of bitchy comments and he tried to lighten the mood.

“How's it going with the calendar?”

Years before Hayden had shot a series of images for a calendar and he was trying to get it republished. He complained incessantly about everyone he had to work with.

“I'm considering taking the job away from these printers altogether. They've got no understanding of the images as art. They're just pixels on a screen.”

Arthur rolled his eyes and gutted the second fish.

When the fish was on the stove Arthur handed Thabang and Jonah each a knife to open the ink sacs. Hayden came to see what they were doing and leaned over Jonah's shoulder; his breath reeked of alcohol.

Jonah held the sac down with one finger and eased in the tip of the knife. After a moment's resistance the membrane gave way; ink streamed into the bowl and over his fingers, which he quickly put into his mouth before the liquid could stain his skin.

"Bravo," said Arthur, laughing at his reaction to the bitter taste. "A minor casualty."

Jonah turned to the sink and bumped straight into Hayden, spilling his drink over them both.

"Jesus Christ."

"Sorry, I forgot you were there."

"I'm soaked."

"Why don't you put your shirt in the tumble dryer for a bit."

"That won't get rid of the smell."

Neither will changing your clothes, Jonah thought, but said nothing.

"Come," Arthur said irritably, "we need to start on the rice. It's going to burn if we don't do this quickly."

They turned back to the stove. Hayden poured himself another drink and wandered in and out while they cooked.

"Thabang, please call everyone," Arthur said when the table was set.

"They're in the back with Farid."

He looked at Hayden.

"Sorry. We're celebrating tonight. Crew only."

"I see. And since when was Farid part of the crew?"

“Spare us your self-pity. Having a dinner party without you doesn’t exactly constitute persecution. You put a bottle of whisky down your throat before eight o’clock and I’m not in the mood for you tonight.”

“No one would have minded,” Jonah said when Hayden had left.

“I would have.”

The awkward silence filled the room until the others arrived.

“I hear we’re in for a treat,” Stanton said walking in, followed by Thabang, Lorna, Tariq, Celeste, Nick, Farid and a few of the interns.

There was a festive atmosphere at the table but Jonah wasn’t in the mood after Arthur’s flare-up at Hayden. When the group went through to the lounge he stayed in the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Soon Arthur came back in and stood next to him with his back against the sink.

“Come, Mr Gravett. Put on some shoes.”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re going out.”

“What about everyone here?”

“Farid is entertaining them with embarrassing stories about me from university.”

“Thanks, but I’m exhausted. I’m going to finish here and get into bed.”

“Look, I’m sorry about earlier. I’m also worn out and Hayden knows how to get my back up.”

“Thanks. I guess it wasn’t really my place to get involved.”

“It’s ok.” He put his hand on Jonah’s shoulder. “Now get ready.”

“Seriously, I’m too tired to do anything.”

“We’ll wait for you in the car.”

“Ok,” Jonah smiled. He could never resist Arthur. “Give me two minutes”

In the car Nick and Arthur were in high spirits.

“Art, I know you like your old stuff, but I think it’s time to buy something made in the last decade,” Nick said as they pulled out of the driveway. “This song came out before Jonah was born.”

Jonah didn’t recognise the music. He tried to imagine himself calling Arthur ‘Art’, but couldn’t. Nick and Stanton could talk to Arthur like that, and obviously Farid.

“I’ve heard that stuff you listen to,” Arthur said. “*My nigger* this and *my bitch* that. You’ll never hear that garbage in my car.”

Arthur turned up the volume and sang with the chorus.

We’d go down to the ri-i-ver

And into the river we’d dive

On down to the river we did ride.

Soon they were on the highway curving round the city with the harbour crouched down below, and when they came over the nek they could see the lights of Camps Bay hugging Lion’s Head. On the main road local pop stars and second-rate European models overflowed onto the pavement. Jonah had been to some of those places with Kelly and regretted going every time, standing next to her like a shy younger brother while she talked and laughed with everyone who came in. He had nothing to say to those people.

Arthur pulled off the road and parked the car in a small alcove below the cliff.

“Where are we going?”

“Swimming.”

By the time they climbed out Arthur was already on the other side of the road and they ran across just as a four-by-four came round the curve. The driver held his hand down on the hooter.

“Take it easy, asshole,” Nick called.

They came to a break in the railing and descended a flight of concrete steps that cut through the bushes and was covered in a layer of rotting leaves. At the bottom was a beach that Jonah had never noticed before, a hundred metres across and sheltered between enormous boulders that separated it from a bigger beach on the right and the steep cliff on the left. They were less than a kilometre from the people at the cafés but they might have been in another universe.

“You’re not actually serious, Art?” Nick asked. Arthur was already unbuttoning his shirt. “We’re going swimming in the ocean, now?”

Arthur pulled the shirt over his head.

“Come on, get your kit off.”

Jonah would never work Arthur out. Whenever he thought he knew him he did something totally out of character; it was part of his appeal.

Arthur took off the rest of his clothes and left them in a neat pile on his shoes.

“See you there.”

He ran between the small boulders dotting the beach into the sea.

“My father used to call boys like you *incurable sissies*,” he called back.

“Mine preferred good, old-fashioned *moffie*,” Nick laughed, unbuttoning his jeans. He pulled off the rest of his clothes as he ran and left them where they fell on the sand.

It was cold on the beach with the wind coming off the water and heavy cloud blocked out the moonlight. The waves were high but rolled in as low white foam. Jonah could feel his heart knocking in his chest. Arthur and Nick were already far out; he could hear them calling to him but the words were muffled by the crashing of the waves. He breathed in a sharp salt breath, terrified, and pulled his shirt over his head.

When Jonah caught up with them they had climbed onto a huge wet rock. There were few crevices to place a hand or foot but Nick leaned down and pulled him up. The wind blew icy water into their faces and Jonah didn't know if he was shaking from cold or terror.

Without warning Arthur threw himself off into the dark. Nick followed a second later and Jonah was left alone on the rock, his legs rooted to the spot. He could see Arthur below but Nick's head hadn't come back up to the surface. What if something had happened? Maybe he'd hit a rock.

If he waited another second he'd be unable to do it. He struggled for a deep breath, bent his knees and jumped.

He hit the water quickly – the rock wasn't as high as it had seemed from the top – and pain shot up his limbs from the cold. When he came to the surface Arthur and Nick were laughing. Jonah tried to yell in triumph but he threw his head back too far and swallowed water.

They swept back in on a wave that dunked him hard onto the sand as it broke and sucked him back underneath. When he found the right way up and made it out he ran to where they were pulling on their clothes, laughing and shaking with cold. Arthur flashed him a brilliant smile and he felt the night charged with a clean, hard certainty.

The following day was the opening of Kelly's exhibition. It wasn't at one of the usual galleries. It fitted her image to hold it in an old industrial building a little further along Main Road in the part that hadn't yet been gentrified. That was how she'd described it.

Jonah saw a trendy furniture design shop across the road and there were at least three artists' studios in the same building. That was fairly gentrified, in his opinion. He wasn't sure that a halal corner café and a second-hand hardware store really gave the place the rough edge Kelly was so pleased with.

Upstairs Jonah sipped his wine. It was white – not what he'd usually go for – and room temperature. There had been some accident with a tipsy woman and a canvas at the last exhibition so it was white only. He took a handful of peanuts and raisins and drifted among the canvases.

“She’s deeply influenced by aboriginal art,” said a woman in heavy purple glasses. Her shoes were the same colour. They all seemed to be wearing outrageous glasses.

“I saw that in the review in the *Friday* section. Didn’t she live there?”

“I believe so. God, she’s young.”

What a joke. She’d been there on a three-week holiday. And most of her time had been spent on the back of a bike with Rozzo or Dazzo or whatever his name was. Jonah moved away from the conversation, looking for Kelly so he could say his congratulations and get out of there.

She was standing with a group of men, telling a story. Her circle of admirers laughed and clapped their hands like apes imitating the leader of their troop. Jonah walked up to the circle and stood for a few moments but she didn’t notice so he tapped her shoulder. She turned mid-sentence and threw her arms around him.

“Jo, I’m so glad you could make it! I don’t know half the people here and I was looking for you earlier but I couldn’t find you.”

“I suppose it was difficult, through the clouds of testosterone.”

“Jonah!” Kelly laughed and slapped his hand that she’d been holding in hers.

“Excuse me a moment,” she said to the men around her with a smile that was designed, Jonah thought, to reassure them that they were the most important people in the world to her and she would be back just as soon as she possibly could. She looped her arm through Jonah’s and walked them away.

“Thanks for saving me. I was about to fall into a boredom-induced coma.”

“Congratulations. It’s beautiful, obviously.”

“D’you think so? I was so worried about it. There was so much expectation after the last one, and I was terrified it would fall flat.”

“Not at all. I’ve been eavesdropping on people falling over themselves to praise you.”

“I hope I sell a few tonight!” She squeezed his arm. “I’m basically broke. There’s nothing in my kitchen but turps and I’ve seen a sensational dress that I need to own.”

“I’m confident the walls will be bare when you leave.”

“Where’ve you been lately? I’ve left you about a hundred messages. I even emailed you.”

“I’m sorry, Kel. The shoot has been hectic. But we’re doing – ”

A tall man in an expensive suit walked up to them.

“Kelly, I need you for an interview. There’s a journalist here from the *Review*.”

“Jonah, I’ve got to run. I’m so sorry.”

“No problem. I was going anyway.”

“Call me this week, ok? Let’s have a coffee or walk in the forest or something.”

She leaned forward and gave him a kiss on each cheek.

The hot evening hung in the room. Jonah was going through emails that had built up over the weeks that he’d been immersed in shooting. Most of them were group mails asking for signatures on petitions or advertising parties sponsored by energy drinks. How did all these people get his address? There was a whole network of people buying and selling email addresses and cell phone numbers like commodities.

Out on the small balcony he stood at the railing hoping for a breeze off the canal trickling behind the Pick 'n Pay. He often went to sit out there with a book when it was hot, but tonight the air was still. Unexpected music drifted out from his flat-mate's room. Ryan was usually so quiet he couldn't tell whether or not he was home.

When Jonah returned to the computer there was a Chat window open in the bottom right hand corner of the screen. It was Arthur.

Hi. Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c+5dxb-l86Gfp&doc>

You'll love it.

Arthur was cutting the footage at a post-production facility in town and they hadn't seen each other all week. They chatted for a while.

I have to go away on Thursday.

Where to?

Joburg. It's that DAC conference.

Jonah wondered, for the hundredth time, how Arthur kept working at this pace.

How long will you be to be away?

Just til Tuesday. Can you house sit for me?

Farid's cousin was meant to house-sit

but he just cancelled.

Arthur must have forgotten that he was going home that weekend. His parents had been begging him to come since his Christmas visit and he'd managed to brush them off, but it was his mother's birthday and they'd sent him a ticket.

You'll just have to look after the animals.

And water Farid's plants. He's at the

Pretoria office for a couple of weeks.

With each year away Jonah dreaded his trips home more – the obligatory round of golf with his father, his mother's investigations into his love life, the

dinners with their friends who would tell the same old jokes and talk about nothing in a hundred different ways. The boys he went to school with were mostly studying overseas or working in Johannesburg, not that he'd want to see any of them anyway.

And there was always the fear that he'd land up in a political discussion with his parents. They still assumed a common ground and he did his best to steer clear of the subject rather than confronting them, which didn't ever go well. It was best to stick to more immediate topics, how his mother's practice was doing, new clients at his father's agency, who was getting married and who was having children.

There's food in the freezer.

Farid's mother brought

a whole lot of stuff round last night.

Jonah, are you still there?"

Ja, I'm here. I'm meant to be going home this weekend.

His parents would be so disappointed. They'd planned a big dinner with all their friends. He'd never hear the end of it. But how could he say no to Arthur? He might not be asked again.

You can change the date of your flight and go next weekend – I'll pay the difference.

I don't know. I mean, thanks – that's generous of you. It's just, they'll be disappointed, you know.

Jonah, Mommy and Daddy have to learn to let go some time.

Jonah felt himself blush and looked down, then remembered Arthur couldn't see him.

Let me talk to them and see what

they say.

Ok.

Arthur had given him so much, things his parents wouldn't even understand. And now Arthur trusted him to look after his home. A whole weekend in that house, reading and watching whatever he wanted.

Would I have access to all your DVDs?

Of course. Well, almost all ☺

What about having people over?

As long as they don't break anything.

And obviously no one upstairs.

When would I need to be there?

You could come through Thursday afternoon.

I need to show you where the pet food is.

Ok. Let me speak to my parents and I'll

get back to you.

Thanks. I need to rush off

– got people arriving for a meeting.

Will discuss details on Thursday.

Cheers.

Jonah put the decision off until the following evening. His mother would take it as a personal rejection. But surely she'd get over it? It wasn't like she wanted *him* there anyway; she didn't even really know him anymore. She wanted the image of him there, the impressive, successful son, soon to be international film-maker, to show to all her friends.

No, that wasn't entirely fair – it was for her too. But there was something insincere in how she related to him. He imagined walking into his bedroom at the house; there would be a gift waiting for him on the bed – invariably the kind of crime thriller he read in high school – and he'd have to tell her how excited he was to read it. That image settled it, and he made the call.

He invented a major deadline that had been moved forward to Monday. Of course he couldn't explain the real reason he wasn't coming – how could they possibly understand the significance of looking after Arthur's house? He explained about his commitment to his work; it was preparing him for his career. No, he couldn't do the work from P.E.; he needed certain resources in Cape Town. He would make it up to her soon. No, not the following weekend, he already had arrangements, but soon, perhaps the one after that. No, he couldn't ask for an extension, delaying would hold up everyone else's work. He'd call on the day to wish her.

That weekend the warm weather held and Jonah kept all the doors and windows open. He stayed up late ploughing through Arthur's books and DVDs and woke up with Arthur's bedroom already draped in late-morning light. Downstairs he made coffee, chose a CD from the collection – a Keith Jarrett he'd never heard – and sat in the middle of the lawn, feeling the sun and the air on his skin.

On Friday night people came over to drink box wine and listen to music, Justin and Roy from university, Kelly and a few others. Jonah had been telling Roy about the book collection and gave him a tour of the house. Up in Arthur's office he felt a brief stab of guilt, but Arthur would never know.

Roy moved along the shelves, browsing the titles.

"There must be thousands here. Is there anything he's not interested in?"

"Not that I've discovered yet."

Jonah's email account was open on his laptop on the desk and he clicked on a mail from Arthur.

Things were going well, a few department hacks he had to deal with, but generally manageable; Jonah must remember to keep Athol's wet and dry food separate or he wouldn't eat it, and make sure to leave Roscoe's leash on until they were on the beach.

Jonah hadn't given the pets any attention. He would take Roscoe for a walk in the morning. He minimised his inbox and turned back to Roy, who was examining a photograph he'd found inside one of the books.

Jonah crossed the room towards him.

"Do you know them?" Roy asked and passed Jonah the photograph.

Two young men sat on a low wall in weak winter sunshine. The older one sat with his feet firmly planted on the ground and his elbows resting on his thighs, his hands hanging between his knees with a lit cigarette in fingers. Jonah had never seen him smoke. He looked up at the camera with a charming smile and a raised eye-brow, androgynous and beautiful.

The younger man – perhaps still a teenager – wore a checked shirt and his soft black curls stood high off his head. His face was also attractive, even more so for the attitude in his eyes and the straight lines of his mouth. His hand rested on the older man's leg with tenderness that seemed too gentle for the glare of a photograph. In his other hand was an open beer bottle.

"Do you know them?"

Jonah nodded.

"It's Arthur and Farid. They must have just gotten together. Who would have thought that Arthur was so good-looking?"

"Farid – you mean the guy whose bedroom we put Nina in?"

Justin's girlfriend had drunk too much and become weepy. Justin had had to lie with her until she fell asleep and had only just come back to the party.

"Ja."

"He's Arthur's partner?"

Jonah shook his head.

"Not for a long time now. They were together for ages though, ten or fifteen years."

"But Farid still lives here?"

“It’s hard to explain. They’ve got a set up that works.”

“Oh,” Roy nodded with a smile. “It’s that kind of set up.”

“Jesus, Roy,” Jonah snatched the book out of Roy’s hands, placed the photograph back in between the pages and snapped it shut.

“It’s not like that.”

“Ok. Just chill, man. It’s not a big deal. Sorry I asked.”

Jonah went to the shelf and put the book back in its place. He’d over-reacted but he felt fiercely protective over them.

“It’s cool. It’s just, I don’t know. It’s special, the household they’ve worked out. It’s not about the sex.”

“It’s always about sex, Jonah.”

“This is different. They meet on another level. Intellectually, ethically. In terms of what kind of contribution they want to make.”

“If their relationship was so great, why did it end?”

Jonah spotted a book in the wrong place and reshelfed it. Why did they break up? He wasn’t sure. Despite his unflagging, energy Arthur was getting older. That might have had something to do with it. Farid was still a relatively young man but Arthur was showing signs of age; he wore reading glasses now and the previous year he’d been diagnosed with diabetes.

That wasn’t the core issue, though. Jonah knew there was something else behind Farid’s decision to move downstairs. Hayden had made a comment about it once, about Arthur’s ego pushing even his lover into another part of the house. But that was just Hayden taking any opportunity he could to undermine Arthur.

“It was complicated,” Jonah turned around. “I don’t know all the details. They were going through all kinds of shit – detention, Arthur’s banning. I don’t know what kind of stresses they were under.”

They went back downstairs. People were playing poker and Jonah joined in, but he was annoyed by the conversation with Roy and was relieved when people started to leave.

He woke up early the next morning and drove Roscoe to the beach. As soon as his leash was off the dog ran out into the water, barking at the waves. Sun-hardened clumps of seaweed streaked the sand. Jonah broke off a long piece and threw it in a high arc towards the horizon. Roscoe leapt after it and raced back to Jonah to drop it at his feet. They kept the game going all the way down the beach. It was going to be a hot day but the breeze was cool and moist, and Jonah was full of energy. A few joggers were out already, and a handful of couples walking their dogs. Jonah ran to the rubbish bin fifty metres away, circled it and sprinted back.

When they got home Roscoe was wet and sandy and he jumped straight into the bath, pawing the warm water from the showerhead and turning in happy circles. Jonah rinsed off the soap and while he was rubbing a towel over the dog's back the doorbell rang. Roscoe jumped out the bath, shook himself off and ran out into the garden.

At the door was a boy in his late teens in faded grey denim shorts and a dirty T-shirt, the lettering on the front cracked and illegible. His light brown eyes scanned Jonah and shifted back into the hall behind him.

"Where's Arthur?" he asked.

He had a fever blister on his bottom lip and his voice was high-pitched but husky so his question came out a kind of breathless whine.

"He's not here."

"Where's he?"

Jonah was surprised. Beggars were usually servile as a matter of strategy.

"He's away."

Jonah pulled the door inwards so that his body was blocking the opening. The boy's familiarity, his lack of deference, was alarming. They looked at each other through the gate.

"Til when?"

"I'm looking after the house while he's away."

"Where did he go?"

"I'm sorry, I can't help you. Come back next week." Jonah moved back, about to swing the door closed.

"He's got something of mine."

The boy put a hand in his pocket. Jonah followed the hand with his eyes, but it didn't come out again.

"I'll tell him you came. You can see him next week."

"I need it now. It'll just take a minute."

He gave Jonah a licentious smile that revealed two missing teeth. Was he flirting?

He might have been telling the truth but what if he was making it up, and pulled a knife out as soon as he was in the house?

"It's in his bedroom upstairs. On the hook on the bathroom door. The broken one."

There was indeed a broken hook; Jonah had tried to hang his towel there the day before and the whole thing had come out the door, sending everything on it falling to the floor. He couldn't refute that kind of detail and slowly unlocked the gate, watching the boy watching him.

The visitor pushed past trailing a smell of stale sweat and Jonah followed him up the stairs in silence, scanning the banister for dirty finger marks. The canvas of the boy's right shoe was ripped down the side, revealing a sockless foot. He took the last few steps two at a time, his long skinny legs lifting and stretching like a spider's, and went straight into Arthur's bathroom.

Jonah tried to follow him in but he couldn't open the door; he must have been holding it shut. There was nothing he could do but wait outside to make sure he didn't pilfer anything from the shelves on the way down.

He paced the short length of space between the window and the bed. The boy had confused him with his intimate knowledge of the house and was now rifling through Arthur's things. Arthur would be furious. Jonah felt his ears grow hot with frustration. He strode back to the door and knocked rapidly twice.

"Come on. You've had enough time to get – whatever it is."

That was the kind of statement he would have rolled his eyes at if his father had made it. The door swung open and they were face to face, half a metre apart, the boy's breath foul and smoky. Jonah moved back but the boy stayed in the doorway leering at him. He had on a windbreaker that Jonah had seen hanging on the hook. There was nothing in his hands and there were no bulges in his pockets. Jonah pointed with an open hand to the door.

When they got to the entrance hall the boy went up close to the large rectangular mirror that hung opposite the front door and examined his face, tilting his head at an angle and running a finger down the side of his jaw. He looked at Jonah's reflection in the mirror, held his gaze for a few seconds, smiled – inviting or challenging? – turned and slammed the gate behind him.

Jonah checked the lock and walked back up the stairs, careful not to touch the banister. Everything in Arthur's bathroom looked normal: his face-wash and shampoo were in the shower caddy, his book was balanced on the cistern; in the cupboard were a collection of disposable razors with bits of hair caught between the blades, some condoms, two old toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste flattened carefully from the back so that it bulged near the cap.

In the office Jonah turned on his laptop and looked out the window; there were few pedestrians in the street and the boy wasn't among them. Unable to concentrate, he went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, but soon he was scanning the photo albums on Arthur's Facebook profile for the boy's face.

He'd been so brazen snooping through Arthur's private things. What made him think he had the right to intrude like that? He clearly knew Arthur, or at the very least he'd been to the house before. Perhaps he'd been hanging around the streets and Arthur had taken pity on him, given him work in the garden or something simple in the office like wiping dust from the shelves. Or maybe he was a relative of Farid's, a problem child taken to the streets and Arthur and Farid were the only ones that helped him out.

Jonah knew those explanations were ridiculous.

So what if Arthur had a private life he knew nothing about? It didn't change the way he felt about him. Arthur was his boss and this wasn't any of his business.

But the boy was obviously in a vulnerable situation. Any kind of relationship between them had to be based on exploitation, or at the very least a questionable use of the things Arthur could offer him. How old was he? Maybe sixteen. Was that even legal?

Throughout the day the image of the boy returned to his thoughts. Towards evening he went from room to room closing the doors and curtains and turning on the lights. The bulb in the lounge blew when he pressed the switch so he went down to the garage to get a new one.

Arthur's Golf was there next to the sleek bulk of Farid's four-by-four. Despite the size of the room there was little space in which to manoeuvre; the back wall was fitted with bookshelves from floor to ceiling and cardboard boxes were stacked along the other walls. The shelves were filled with files containing the paper records of everything that Arthur and Farid had ever worked on. A bicycle and two round pine bedside tables hung from brackets on the ceiling. On his way to the shelves Jonah tripped over a box. Arthur's hand-writing sprawled across the side: Recording equipment for repair. Aug 1996. He moved it to the back corner next to a case of used spray paint cans.

The files were arranged chronologically on the shelves starting with research for early reporting work, short films and the activist stuff, although much of the

latter had been destroyed years before. Rows and rows were dedicated to the long documentaries and the feature film; then there was educational and development material and miscellaneous projects, and last, labelled in Farid's hand-writing, the miscellany of everyday life: tax records, employment contracts, medical aid and insurance information.

Jonah flipped through some of the files. They were dusty and he wiped his hands on his jeans after each one. They were like strange archaeological artefacts from a time before computers. Multiple versions of a script were filed behind each other, every page scribbled over with new ideas and corrections, which made their way into the typed text of the subsequent version, only to be strewn with changes again in Arthur's careless hand. There was a long correspondence with the Archive. The original satiny facsimile paper had been cut at intervals to make A4 pages, each one curling at the bottom and the text faded. A series of grainy photocopied images showed harsh black faces staring out from what might have been bunk beds.

The file Jonah was holding slipped from his hands; the metal rings sprang open on impact and the papers inside slid to the floor. He picked them up and aligned the edges so he could slip the holes over the metal prongs of the file. When he pulled out a plastic sleeve to turn it the right way up its contents fell to the floor. He laid the file down on a shelf and gathered up the newspaper articles, letters and faxes. Staring up from the top page was Arthur's face. It was older than in the photograph Roy had found but much younger than it looked now; hardly any wrinkles, his hair almost long enough to make a pony tail, his crystal eyes clear even on the inky newsprint. The headline above read: "Banned film attracts more controversy".

Jonah spread the pages out on the dusty floor and sat down on a box to read them. The articles described a dispute between Arthur and Hayden over the John Vorster Square documentary. Hayden claimed that the original treatment for

the film had been his and that Arthur had stolen it after Hayden took it to him for advice. Arthur denied the accusations.

One article referred to unspecified hard evidence that was in the journalist's possession. Another gave a lengthy description of Arthur's activist history and hinted at questions about his sexuality. It wasn't stated simply but the message was that his homosexuality was equal to his activism, and both brought his credibility into question.

The rest of the articles contained no more real facts but layered the story with more and more conjecture and testimonies from people Jonah didn't know. Hayden gave hysterical interviews about Arthur that would have made Jonah laugh if they weren't printed in a national newspaper.

The tension must have been smouldering between them for twenty years. Why would Arthur allow Hayden to hang around his house after this, and why would Hayden even want to?

Jonah's mind reeled as he thought about the damage the scandal must have done to Arthur's career. Even if nothing had been proved it must have wrecked his credibility and put people off working with him. Why would Hayden set out to destroy Arthur? Jonah was ashamed that he'd ever felt sorry for him.

He flipped through some supportive notes from friends and Arthur's communication with his lawyer, and skimmed a photocopy of a letter on the lawyer's letterhead addressed to Hayden. It was an offer from Arthur to hand over a percentage of royalties on the movie if Hayden refrained from making any more accusations in the media. There were numerous letters negotiating the terms of the agreement. Hayden pushed for a higher percentage and Jonah was dismayed by how quickly Arthur gave in – surely a sign that he had something to hide? The final agreement was there, signed by both parties. After that there was a trickle of correspondence over the years regarding bank details and such, but nothing important.

The impossible was laid out clearly before him: Arthur was a sham. Jonah felt as betrayed as if it had been his script Arthur had stolen.

He slid the pages back into their folder and secured it along with the rest of the documents in the file. He fetched the bulb he'd come for, heated up some leftover pasta and sat down in the lounge to eat. Athol jumped onto the table and put his nose into the bowl. Jonah put the cat back on the floor and speared two pieces of penne on his fork. The hot sauce scalded his tongue.

It didn't make any sense that Arthur would steal someone else's work; he didn't need to. Anyone who'd ever worked with him knew how creative he was. He'd spent his life making films and his work was taught in universities around the world. What had Hayden produced? A handful of mildly successful things; nothing much in the last ten years.

The more Jonah thought about it, the less plausible the story seemed. He could see Hayden inventing the whole fantasy as an act of vengeance for some insignificant slight. Arthur was a sought-after man and it wasn't uncommon that he had to refuse a request for advice or a letter of recommendation. Perhaps he'd antagonised Hayden with some such slight and this was all Hayden's revenge? But there was the agreement to hand over royalties in exchange for Hayden's silence. Why would Arthur have signed something like that if he didn't have something to hide?

Justifications swirled round in Jonah's mind, combining and distorting as he dozed off on the couch after supper. Hayden came up the stairs in a police uniform looking for the bathroom but the strange boy was inside and had barricaded the door with boxes of film equipment. Arthur started laughing. It sounded like he was inside the bathroom too but Jonah knew he was downstairs in the garage. He came into the room and shook his head disapprovingly at the dirty dishes on the table.

Jonah woke up sweating and confused. He stumbled to bed without turning off the TV, and the noise kept his sleep light and distracted until morning.

The rest of his stay in the house passed without incident. He read, watered the plants and walked the dog. There were no more visitors or unexpected discoveries.

Arthur got back on Tuesday night, tired but full of anecdotes and brimming with creative energy.

“Have a glass of wine with me?”

Jonah was looking through some pamphlets Arthur had brought back so that he wouldn’t see how uncomfortable he was.

“Ok. But I can’t stay long.”

“No problem.”

Arthur took a bottle down from a rack above the cupboard and poured a glass for each of them. Jonah listened as he recounted his experiences. His warmth and exuberance spilled over onto Jonah and some of the weekend’s confusion receded. But later when he was out in the cool night air away from Arthur’s voice he felt cheated, like Arthur had somehow tricked him into reconciliation without even discovering there was a problem.

The following evening Jonah went over to the house to talk to Farid, hoping for some perspective on things. Arthur was up in his office with the editor, which was a relief – Jonah had been dreading an awkward greeting. He found Farid reading at the kitchen table.

“Hey you. I haven’t seen you in ages.” Farid put out an arm and embraced him warmly from where he was sitting.

“How was Pretoria?” Jonah asked, pulling out a chair.

“Fairly productive, actually.” He took off his reading glasses and laid them on the table. “But feels like years ago already. How are things?”

“Good,” Jonah nodded. “It’s been intense the last couple of months, so it’s been nice to have a bit of a break.”

“And when you looked after the place, everything was fine? Leni didn’t bring in any dead mice to show off?”

When Farid smiled the lines around his eyes crinkled and creased. Jonah tried to say something but wasn’t sure how to begin. He looked down at the table. Drops of candle wax had hardened on the wooden surface and he scratched one off with his thumb nail.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Absolutely.”

He folded the corner of his page to mark his place and closed the book.

“I found some newspaper articles in the garage. They make some accusations against Arthur. Pretty serious ones.”

“You’re talking about the thing with Hayden?”

“Ja.”

He clasped his hands together and pressed his forearms down on the table.

“Hayden is certainly the least stable person ever to enter this house – and there are a few in the running.”

Jonah smiled.

“We met him, must have been in the late seventies. No, I think it was later than that, just before the Emergency. Anyway, Arthur was besotted with him. There’s always meant to be something redeeming in these strays he brings home, some special quality that’ll shine with a bit of guidance and attention.”

Jonah thought of the boy from the weekend.

“Hayden is a complicated person. He has no confidence in himself and he tries to compensate with his booze and his,” Farid swirled his hand in a vague gesture, “over the top behaviour. You know what I mean?”

Jonah nodded. Hopefully Farid wasn’t going to try to justify Arthur’s actions on the basis of Hayden’s personality.

“It makes him feel worse about himself. He’s fundamentally self-destructive.”

Farid crossed one leg over the other and took a deep breath.

“He became possessive over Arthur, started eavesdropping on his phone calls. He was terribly jealous of me. I found things of mine he’d thrown out the window lying in the street. He started making scenes in front of our friends, temper tantrums if he didn’t get what he wanted. You can imagine.”

It was difficult to picture things getting so out of control.

“We tried reasoning with him, getting him into counselling. We even got his family involved but that was a disaster. Finally Arthur accepted that he had to cut Hayden out completely and he asked him to stop coming round. Hayden took it badly. The plagiarism accusation was his attempt to get back at us.”

There was a fluidity that made it sound like a story that had been told many times.

“What about the script?”

“It was Arthur’s of course. He was experimenting with a workshop style and Hayden was involved in some brain-storming sessions at the beginning. Nothing substantial.”

Jonah looked down at his hands, not sure what to make of the explanation.

“Look, Jonah, a man like Arthur is always going to attract attention. Much of it is exciting and valuable and great things come out of it. But he also pulls in lonely and insecure people who think that attaching themselves to him will substitute for building their own lives. Hayden wasn’t the first and he won’t be the last.”

Farid was right about the effect Arthur had on people, and the description of Hayden’s behaviour was quite plausible. He was the kind of person you usually felt you had to trust on everything. But Jonah couldn’t quite commit himself to believing the story.

“What about,” Jonah said and stopped.

He’d been about to ask about the deal Arthur cut with Hayden but what if Arthur had kept it secret even from Farid? Jonah couldn’t be the one to tell him. He probably wouldn’t believe it, and fetching the file was out of the question with Arthur upstairs. And even if he did believe it, was it worth bringing a crisis into their relationship? Jonah looked around the room, searching for something else to ask.

“What I don’t understand is why Hayden kept coming back here if he was angry enough with Arthur to destroy his career. And how can Arthur stand it?”

“For that you’ll have to ask Arthur. I don’t really understand it myself.”

Farid got up and went over to the sink.

“You thirsty?”

“Ja.”

“Hayden went away for a while,” Farid continued as he filled a glass with water for each of them. “We didn’t see him at our flat or at any of our regular places – we were somewhat less house-bound in those days. But at some point he found his way back in.”

Farid handed Jonah a glass and shrugged.

“I don’t know. It was like the more desperate and self-loathing he became, the more he depended on us. People accepted it and in time things just went back to normal. I wasn’t happy about it but it wasn’t my call to make. Arthur is more forgiving than I am, although their relationship has been more or less hostile ever since.”

Jonah watched Farid’s face carefully. There was no point in pushing him any further; either he was an excellent liar, or he really didn’t know the whole story.

“Ok, thanks for talking with me about this. I’m –”

“Of course. It’s not a big deal.”

“I’m sorry, you know, if it seemed like I was being suspicious or anything.”

“Not at all. I’m glad you asked instead of worrying about it.”

Jonah said goodbye and slipped out while Arthur was still in his office.

The media databases at the central library the next day didn’t turn up any information that Jonah hadn’t already learned from the folder in the garage. He watched the disputed documentary to look for something that could assure him it was Arthur’s, but nothing stood out. He considered confronting Arthur directly, but to do that he would have had to admit to going through his personal archives and talking to Farid about it behind his back.

Arthur was cutting at the post-production facility again all week but when Jonah arrived at the house for Chris’s fortieth birthday party Arthur opened the door.

“Welcome, Mr Gravett.”

“Ah, hi. Sorry I’m a bit late. Roadwork on the highway.”

He hoped he sounded casual.

“Not at all. I’m just about to open the champagne. Go on through. The others are at the back.”

In the garden people were sitting on a blanket on the grass. Thabang was playing his guitar and Farid was laying out a picnic. Suzie’s children were playing with a ball at the back.

Chris was thrilled with his gift, a set of pencils of various types: carbon, charcoal, grease, solid graphite.

“This is fantastic. I’m touched that you made such an effort.”

They chatted about Chris’s last exhibition and the new things he was working on. Chris had obtained a residency in Italy and would be leaving soon.

“You’re off soon as well, aren’t you?”

“No, still a couple of months until I leave.”

Jonah hadn't thought about his trip in a while. The initial excitement had turned to dread over the months as he'd become increasingly absorbed in Arthur's world. Now, though, he wasn't sure how he felt.

"Sorry – an old friend of mine just walked in and he doesn't know anyone else here. Will you excuse me? Help yourself to a drink inside – they're in the fridge."

Nick was in the kitchen taking a beer out the fridge.

"You ok, Jo? You seem a little out of sorts lately."

"I'm ok. Just tired, you know."

"Ja," Nick popped the cap off the bottle with the back of his lighter. "It's been an intense few months."

Jonah took a deep breath.

"What do you know about Arthur's relationship with Hayden?"

Nick let a low whistle out through his teeth.

"I wasn't around when all that happened."

"Have you never spoken with Arthur about it?"

"I think it's best to let it lie."

Out in the garden Hayden was chatting with Suzie and a striking woman whose husband, Jonah remembered, was a neurosurgeon who'd given up his career to write plays. Hayden sounded drunk already and Jonah avoided eye-contact.

Jonah wanted to avoid Arthur but Nick walked straight over to him. Jonah couldn't walk away without it being seen so he followed and sat down between Nick and Chris. Arthur was sitting next to a young man with white-blond hair that he wore pushed over to one side.

"Jonah, this is Graeme," Arthur said. "He was at the conference in Joburg."

"Pleased to meet you."

Graeme raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment but didn't put out his hand.

“Lucky for you,” Chris said, “you’ve made it back in time to catch Arthur’s history of the world, as captured on film.”

“Oh, I heard that one already.” He hoped he didn’t sound as self-conscious as he felt.

Arthur rolled his eyes and continued where he’d left off.

“So the 1978 remake picked up a cult following in Germany and Spain and a few other places in Europe. No one expected the kind of impact it had.”

Graeme sat with his eyes fixed on Arthur. When he spoke his elocution was painfully precise. His name-dropping was so blatant and his statements so pretentious that Nick kept having to hide his amusement by pretending to cough, and eventually went to sit somewhere else. Graeme talked vaguely about dialectics and used words like *extrospection*. Jonah would have expected Arthur to put someone like that in his place in a matter of minutes.

“What do you think of Arthur’s new pet?” Chris asked when he went to say goodbye.

“He’s clearly smitten.”

“Graeme or Arthur?”

He laughed along with Chris but the whole situation annoyed him more than he would have expected. Arthur had been editing non-stop since he’d got back from the conference. When had he found time to see Graeme?

Before leaving he found Arthur sitting upstairs at his computer.

“We should do something before shooting starts again,” Jonah said, trying to sound casual. “Go out one night this week.”

“That new institute at UCT’s launching and I might put in an appearance” Arthur replied, pushing his glasses to the end of his nose and looking over them. “Most of the panels will be waffle but there’s one on Thursday that might be vaguely interesting. About the history of South African vernacular in print.”

“Maybe we can go to the Bazaar for a bite afterwards.”

“Excellent.”

On Thursday Arthur wasn't there and his phone just rang. Jonah hung around eating cold samosas but Arthur didn't show. On the way home he wondered what more attractive plan had come up and whether it had involved Graeme.

Arthur was cutting for the rest of the week so Jonah didn't see him, but that weekend they all went to the Labia to see a film made by a Brazilian director Arthur knew. Before the film there were drinks downstairs on the patio and Arthur came to sit with Jonah on a low wall where he was drinking a glass of red wine.

“Sorry about the other night. We got caught up in work and didn't realise the time.”

“No problem,” Jonah said casually. Who was the ‘we’ Arthur was referring to?

“Was it any good?”

“It was alright.”

“How was Ashmore?”

“He did a great presentation. On the missionaries' printing press. They'd reject manuscripts written in the old –”

“Hang on a sec,” Arthur said, looking at his phone. “I've got to take this, it's Graeme.”

He walked onto the pavement to take the call. Jonah tried to hear what he was saying but there was too much noise from the traffic and the people at the bar.

“Sorry,” Arthur said when he was back. “What were we saying?”

“I can't remember. He's been around a lot lately.”

“Who, Graeme? He's going to be helping me with the course next year, managing the tutors and facilitating a module or two.”

It was like a physical blow. When had Graeme become such an important part of Arthur's working life? How had this happened without Jonah finding out?

"That's great, Arthur. Congratulations."

Arthur put his hand on Jonah's shoulder. When had he last felt that closeness between them?

"There's Joan. I hear she's flirting with the idea of funding a project in KZN and I must convince her not to."

Arthur dropped his hand and the feeling was gone.

"I'm spending the morning with Chris tomorrow," Arthur called as he walked away. "We'll chat afterwards."

The message was clear: somehow, at some unmarked moment, he had fallen out of favour and lost his place. Graeme, it seemed, had usurped him.

Jonah downed the rest of his wine and went to the bar for a refill. There was nothing he could do about Graeme. He just had to be patient. Arthur would realise eventually that he was not the real thing and the affair would run out of steam.

But that wouldn't bring back their old closeness because Graeme wasn't the real problem between them. As long as Jonah had doubts about Arthur's integrity, the distance between them would remain.

When Jonah arrived at the house the next morning Arthur was reading the newspaper in the kitchen.

"What are you working on today?"

"I'm weeks behind on your filing. Hopefully I'll put a good dent in it today."

"Alright." Arthur gathered up his glasses, wallet and phone from the table.

"Have a good day."

Jonah waited until he heard the car backing out of the garage, went upstairs to the study and locked the door behind him. He sat down at Arthur's desk and opened the drawers one by one, his hands shaking on the handles. He didn't know

exactly what he was looking for – anything that could lead him to the truth about what really happened with Hayden.

In the top drawers on both sides there was only stationery. The next drawer on the left contained business cards, envelopes and writing paper; on the right there were notebooks covered with Arthur's scribbles.

There was a noise outside the door. Jonah looked up and sat perfectly still. After a full minute of silence he relaxed and bent down to open the bottom drawers. They contained a random assortment of things but nothing relevant to his search. There was nothing useful in the cupboard against the wall either, or along the bookshelves. He sat down again at the desk and looked at Arthur's laptop. This would be taking things to a new level. He slowly lifted the screen and turned it on.

Arthur stayed permanently logged into Gmail and his inbox popped open. Jonah scanned the recent messages but found nothing relevant. He typed 'Hayden' in the search box and watched as hundreds of emails appeared on the screen. He scanned through the subjects but there were too many, so he refined the search to show oldest emails first, which went back to the early 2000s. Still there were too many, so he searched for the words 'agreement', 'lawyer' and 'money'. After a fruitless half hour of searching he concluded that if Arthur had corresponded with anyone about the deal in the twenty years since it had been made he'd been extremely careful to erase the trail.

Frustrated, Jonah closed the computer and went downstairs. He would need to speak to some people; it was risky but there was no way round it. As he reached the bottom of the stairs Farid appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Farid," Jonah said with a start. "I didn't realise you were still here."

"We've had the tech people sorting out a problem with our server, but I've just had a call to say they're finished so I'm going to go in. You ok?"

"Ja. Just doing some work for Arthur upstairs."

He turned right towards the kitchen instead of left to the garage where he'd been headed.

"You alright?"

"For sure. I've still got Arthur's spare keys. I can let myself out when I'm done."

"I mean, ok in general – after our talk the other day?"

"Absolutely," Jonah waved the issue away.

"Good."

Farid gave a crinkle-eyed smile.

When he left Jonah went down into the garage. It was dim but he didn't turn on the light. He took down the file, sifted through the newspaper clippings and wrote down the names of the journalists and the attorney who facilitated the agreement. He stuffed the papers back into their folder and hurried upstairs.

Jonah spent the rest of the morning trying to track down the journalist who had referred to 'hard evidence' that Arthur had stolen the treatment from Hayden. The newspaper said they didn't have information for old staff members on file, and even if they did, they didn't give out information like that. Some time spent online turned up one lead but it turned out to be a different person with the same name. An hour calling numbers from the telephone directory was equally unsuccessful.

Next Jonah tried to find Rosen, the attorney. The telephone number no longer existed but he found the firm's new number and, to his surprise, the man still worked there. His secretary said he was unavailable so Jonah left a message and his phone rang within half an hour.

"Hello. I got a message to call a Mr. Gravett."

"Yes, hi. Thanks for calling back. I'm assistant to Arthur Silverman, you might remember him from some –"

“We may both be getting old,” the man cut in, “but I’m sure I can remember someone who’s been a client for twenty-five years.”

Jonah hadn’t considered the possibility that he still did Arthur’s legal work. He paced the room nervously as he spoke.

“Yes, of course.”

“What can I do for you?”

“A geyser at his house burst and there’s been some water damage to the material stored in the garage.”

“Is it serious?”

“Not too bad but a number of files have been damaged. He’s asked me to put together replacements and I’m hoping you can send me some documents.”

“We’ve generated a considerable amount of data in the time he’s been a client.”

“Actually all I need from you is the correspondence and legal documentation in connection with Hayden Kirkman.”

Jonah held his breath while he waited for Rosen to respond.

“What did you say your name was again?”

Rosen was suspicious. What if he refused to send the documents without Arthur’s permission? Jonah didn’t want to start forging Arthur’s signature.

“Jonah Gravett. I’m Arthur’s personal assistant.”

“I see.”

This was becoming too dangerous. He considered hanging up.

“It will take some time to put together. Let me see what I can do and I’ll get back to you in the next few days.”

Jonah breathed out in relief and covered the phone so Rosen wouldn’t hear.

He spent the rest of the morning filing in case Arthur checked up on him. The recent papers were kept in a cardboard box in the cupboard in Arthur’s study

and every few weeks Jonah sorted and filed them in a series of box files on the shelf above.

He removed a misfiled letter and inserted it in the correct section. The assistant before him had filed things according to first name until Arthur found out and stopped him, by which time the chaos had spread throughout the system.

The phone rang around lunchtime.

“Hey, Jonah.” It was Nick. “Is Arthur not back yet? Ok, I’ve got to run, but just tell him I don’t think I’ll be able to join you guys for dinner tonight. I’ve got a shoot out in Franschoek and I won’t make it back by seven. Thanks.”

Jonah went back to his filing.

Why hadn’t Arthur said anything about dinner? It sounded like there was a group going and Nick had assumed Jonah was one of them. Could Arthur just have forgotten? It was unlikely, as they’d seen each other only that morning and Arthur hadn’t mentioned it.

Jonah put down the papers he was filing and called Nick back.

“Sorry, Nick. I just forgot where we’re meeting. The place in the Bo-Kaap? Ja, I remember it. Great, thanks.”

He put the phone down and dialled Kelly’s number.

Jonah opened the smoky glass door and took the three steps down into the room. The interior was unassuming – small square tables with straight-backed wooden chairs, beige table-cloths and artificial flowers.

Kelly was near the back talking to a small waitress whose tinted black eyebrows stood out on her face like wax crayon stripes. As he made his way over to the table Jonah kept his eyes on the view through the window, looking neither left nor right in case Arthur was already seated, terrified of the encounter now that he was there. Arthur’s voice stopped him halfway.

“Good evening, Mr Gravett.”

He was sitting with Farid, Stanton and Graeme, who was topping up their wine glasses.

“Oh. Hi.”

He felt like a child caught doing something against the rules.

“I didn’t realise you were coming,” Farid said, oblivious of the tension.

“Let’s move to a bigger table.”

“Thanks, but actually I’m meeting Kelly.”

He motioned towards the table. Kelly waved. Arthur peered in her direction and looked back without acknowledging her.

“Send her my regards.”

An awkward silence.

“Nice bottle of wine?”

“Excellent,” Arthur said stiffly.

At the table Kelly threw her arms around him.

“This place is brilliant, Jo. What a gem. Have you seen the old man at the till? I wish I had a camera here. Let’s walk around the area after dinner.”

For the rest of the evening Jonah couldn’t settle. He listened absently as Kelly talked, and kept looking over at Arthur’s table. None of them looked in his direction.

“What’s up with you tonight? You can hardly string a sentence together,” Kelly complained.

Jonah swapped seats with her but found himself checking the reflection in the window behind her.

Arthur had been so tense; perhaps work on the rough cut had gone badly? – but then he wouldn’t have come out for dinner. So the problem was specifically

between the two of them. Were they discussing him at the table? He felt his face flush with humiliation at the thought.

His foreboding grew when, on the way back from the toilet, he saw the debris of dinner at their empty table and realised they'd left without saying goodbye.

He blew Kelly off after dinner with a promise to see her again soon and drove to Woodstock. He was filled with apprehension, but they'd gone beyond the point of no return and he couldn't delay the confrontation any longer.

Once Jonah was inside the house panic mounted in a wave of nausea. He put an unsteady hand on the banister and pushed himself up the stairs one at a time. Graeme was probably sitting with Arthur watching the latest cut, discussing what worked and which scenes should be dropped.

At the top Jonah listened but couldn't hear any voices behind the closed door. He knocked on the door with his heart beating an irregular staccato against his chest. On hearing Arthur's 'come in', he stepped inside.

"A third visit today. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

There was a tone of sarcasm in his voice.

He was seated in an old yellow armchair in the corner of the room. It was in bad condition but he had refused all Farid's attempts to have it reupholstered.

"Can I come in?"

Arthur put down the book he'd been reading and laid his hands on the threadbare armrests.

"By all means, make yourself comfortable – you seem to have been doing a great deal of that lately."

Hands shaking, Jonah wheeled the chair from behind Arthur's desk.

"So you've spoken with Farid."

"Did you really think you could gain Farid's confidence at the expense of his loyalty to me? More than anything, that's an insult to Farid."

Jonah didn't know what to say.

"I've been waiting all these weeks for you to come to me to discuss the matter openly."

"I'm sorry, I found the file by accident. I was replacing a blown light –"

"By accident! Jonah, I am not the fool you take me for."

Jonah's mouth was dry and he swallowed with difficulty. Arthur pressed his hands together in a gesture similar to Farid's.

"I had a call from Mr Rosen this afternoon."

The room was silent for what seemed like minutes.

"Who else have you contacted? Which of my other relationships have you compromised?"

"No one. Oh, I asked Nick what he knew."

"And what did he tell you?"

"Basically to keep out of it."

Arthur walked over to the window.

"I don't suppose," he said, and Jonah was surprised to see a look of fear on his face, "there's any need for me to ask what you were trying to find out?"

"I saw the agreement with Hayden. It was in the file."

Arthur said nothing and turned to face the street.

"I don't think you realise the power you have over people," Jonah said to his back. "Over me."

It was a relief to think that everything was finally about to come out.

"You've had a huge influence on me, Arthur. Not just as a filmmaker; I've made decisions this year based on what's important for your work."

Jonah shook his head. It wasn't coming out right.

"No, it's more than that. I mean I've been thinking about things in terms of what you would say, of how you would act."

Arthur turned back from the window, his eyebrows raised.

“The way I’m articulating it makes it sound so servile. But I’ve really given everything to this whole thing you’ve created.” He circled his hand in a motion that incorporated the house and everyone in it. “And when I read those articles about you, I felt lost. I needed to know if it was real or if it was all just vanity.”

“On what basis do you think *you* can assess the authenticity of my life?”

His condescension destroyed what was left of Jonah’s natural reserve.

“I’m not a fucking prop, Arthur. Everything’s always got to be on your terms, and that was fine when it was based on something real. But if you stole Hayden’s work and paid him off so no one would know, then it’s all just bullshit.”

“What do you know? You know there was an accusation and you know we made a deal. You also know that Hayden is unstable and obviously incapable of producing anything serious. So now you play *detective-detective*,” his voice rose, “and think you’ve worked me out. How clever you must feel to have tripped me up.”

“Ok, Arthur. Tell me the truth then. What happened with Hayden?”

Arthur took a long breath and shook his head. He said nothing for a while, then went back to his chair. When he started speaking Jonah knew they were both on virgin ground.

“It was a crazy time. We were used to harassment, but not like that. Farid was in and out of jail, our flat was petrol-bombed. Money became a problem; we had nothing left and it became harder to find funders. When I was banned I was afraid I’d have to leave the country just to make a living.”

It was hard to imagine Arthur living a life like that.

“When I met Hayden he was a breath of fresh air. There was nothing political about him. He had a kind of naivety, an enjoyment of life that I hadn’t felt in so long. There’s not much left of it now, but he was beautiful.”

Arthur pushed his fingers through his hair. He looked tired.

“Farid hated him from the start. I thought he was jealous – Hayden had a spontaneity that he would never have. So when he warned me about him I didn’t believe him.”

Arthur looked away. The tone of victimhood struck a false note for Jonah. Arthur never spoke like that; he despised self-pity. What was he using it to conceal?

“What about the film?”

“He was involved in some conversations when I was writing the treatment, nothing more. It was pure fabrication as an act of revenge.”

The conversation too closely resembled the one with Farid. The story progressed along the same well-planned route. Jonah needed to take control if he was going to get any truth at all out of Arthur.

“Arthur, it doesn’t add up. The story had already broken in the papers, so why did you need to pay him off? If you had waited the media would have lost interest and he would have found some other crowd to follow.”

“Think about the position I was in: I was banned, I had no steady income and my professional reputation was being jeopardised. All I had left was my credibility – without that, my career and my activism were both finished.

“Hayden was vicious when he turned against me. I don’t know what he would have done next, but he would have stopped at nothing to ruin me. I think he’d built up so much resentment that he actually believed his own story. I couldn’t let everything fall apart because of him, so I made the problem go away. There wasn’t even that much money. I think Hayden just enjoys the satisfaction of a permanent hold over me.”

Arthur was telling the truth, that was undeniable, but he didn’t look like a man relieved to have made a confession. There was something missing from the story. Jonah took a gamble.

“Why doesn’t Farid know about the agreement?”

He wasn’t sure whether Farid knew or not, but Arthur’s reaction told him that it was the right question to ask. He got up, walked to the window again and leaned on the sill with his back to the glass.

“I was ashamed. I’d always been the one who took care of things, who knew what direction we were going in. He blamed me for the whole mess because I hadn’t taken his opinion of Hayden seriously.”

Arthur looked down.

“At the time I didn’t want him to know that I was taking the easy way out by paying Hayden off. He would have seen it as lacking in integrity. But it backfired on me; if I try to get rid of Hayden now he’ll tell Farid about our agreement and then Farid will know I’ve been lying to him for twenty years.”

That didn’t explain why Hayden had remained all these years, attaching himself to a man who couldn’t stand the sight of him.

Suddenly Jonah realised what the missing piece of the story was: Arthur and Hayden had been lovers. That was why Arthur had so much shame about the relationship, and why he was so afraid of Hayden. Hayden’s hold over him wasn’t only that he could destroy his professional reputation; it was that he could destroy his one lasting, meaningful relationship. Arthur paid him to keep quiet so that he wouldn’t talk about their affair. That was also why Arthur had been so angry with Jonah – he was terrified that Jonah would tell Farid about the agreement and that Farid would guess Arthur’s real reason for wanting it.

It occurred to Jonah that for the first time since they’d met he had power to do something that could really affect Arthur’s life. The thought of his mentor afraid of what he might do dissipated the anger he’d been holding onto for weeks and he was left with pity for Arthur that made him feel more alone than ever.

“I didn’t tell him.”

“What?” Arthur looked at him hesitantly.

“I didn’t mention the agreement.”

Arthur watched him in silence for some moments, weighing up his words, trying to work out how much Jonah guessed. He came back to his armchair and sat down.

“Thank you.”

By silent mutual agreement they both knew the other would never bring it up again.

Jonah returned to his old routine when shooting started again. The work went more smoothly this time but things with Arthur were different. The tension was no longer there, but neither was the magic. It was a strange, disorientating feeling. Jonah still consulted Arthur on professional matters and enjoyed his company; they discussed things they'd read and movies they'd watched. Arthur was intelligent, generous and capable, but Jonah was no long intoxicated by his affection, and his failings and insecurities emerged in sharp contrast with his former perfection.

He was over-bearing at times, or too deliberately self-assured. What uncertainty was concealed beneath that exuberance, which required so much adoration? Was that why he surrounded himself with young people, so that they wouldn't challenge him? No, that was unfair. He genuinely enjoyed the receptiveness and energy of youth. But there was, nevertheless, something sad about it, as though in his attempt to stay young Arthur had been left behind his by generation and was doomed always to be the old man in the room.

One afternoon Jonah went up to Arthur's office to get his advice on an opened piece he was writing. Arthur was walking back and forth and reading aloud from papers in his hand.

"Mr Gravett, come in. I'd like to enlist your help."

"What's up?"

"I'm polishing the speech for Chicago. Do you have ten minutes to spare?"

Arthur had been awarded an honorary doctorate and was going to accept it the following week.

"No problem."

Jonah sat down in the armchair and listened to him recite his speech, still pacing. The speech took the wrong tone. It was too ostentatiously gracious, too grand. Jonah tried not to let his thoughts show on his face.

“Your comments?” Arthur said sitting down at his desk.

Jonah wasn't sure what to say.

“I like it. Perhaps it could be a bit more practical? Limit the scope but make it more specific.”

Arthur looked at Jonah over his glasses.

“Find a particular experience you can draw on to make a point about the form or about why you choose to work in it, rather than an abstract discussion that's hard to follow if you're not familiar with the debates.”

“So I should dumb it down?” Arthur asked, his voice sharp.

Jonah had never seen his opinion have such a visible effect on Arthur before. He supposed he'd never given anything but unqualified praise before; his opinions had always been coloured by his blind adoration. He changed the subject quickly.

“No, don't pander to lazy listeners, but I don't know, maybe just allow people an entry point. You know what I really like? The discussion of the evolution of South African film.”

It was obvious but Arthur went with it. They both knew what had happened and Arthur was probably just as glad to divert the conversation as he was.

Now that Jonah had ceased to be a disciple he realised how much he'd enjoyed it, how full a feeling it had been to hang on someone's every word, to have always in the back of his mind an awareness of Arthur, evaluating things he saw according to what Arthur would think, remoulding himself according to how he'd react. Losing that fullness was a kind of grief, but not without its own satisfaction, like realising for the first time that he didn't have to agree with all his parents' opinions.

Jonah's first disagreement with his parents on anything fundamental happened when he was twelve. He was watching the trees on the pavement flash past on the way home from school and he realised God didn't exist. It was as simple as that; in one instant he knew it, and knew he'd never think otherwise

again. In that moment he felt a suffocating loneliness and alienation from his mother in the driver's seat and from his father who would come home from work that day as if everything was as it had been that morning. But that loneliness was joined by a rush of excitement at being his own person, being superior for knowing a truth that his parents never would. It was like that now: lonely but fuller, bigger, more self-sufficient, able for the first time to imagine moving on from Arthur.

It was difficult to tolerate Hayden now that he knew the whole story and he wondered how Arthur had managed to do it for so long. Everything Hayden did or said was irritating, his sulky way of speaking, his immature outbursts, his calculated dramas.

One night at the house they were eating dinner on their laps in the lounge after a long day and Arthur called for everyone's attention.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I have an announcement."

He stood and waited for them to quieten down.

"It is my pleasure to tell you that an individual in our midst" – he looked at Nick – "received some good news today. He's been short-listed for the prestigious Hartford-McKenzie award for *Abantu Abanxolayo*, the outstanding short documentary he somehow managed to make this year between all his commitments here. The competition is stiff, but I think it has a strong chance of winning. How about a round of applause for Mr Nick Botsis?"

Everyone clapped. People called out congratulations. Chris went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of champagne. Nick smiled and looked down at his plate. Jonah had never seen him so embarrassed.

"Nick is the most unassuming of us," Arthur continued, "something I think he works hard to cultivate. So it's all the more satisfying when his commitment, his prodigious artistic talent, and his integrity are recognised by those with the power to dispense the kudos and the media attention."

Everyone laughed. Lorna called for a speech.

“Nick, may this be only one small milestone in your path to world-wide renown and large sums of money.”

The champagne had been passed around and Arthur raised his glass. Nick tipped his in Arthur’s direction and everyone drank. Chris echoed the call for a speech.

“Thanks everyone. Ah, ja – thanks for the support. Working with you on our current project has been a good experience, as always, and I hope it’s well-received.”

“Well,” Hayden said to the man sitting next to him, who Jonah didn’t know. “I hope his movie has more finesse than his speech.”

Jonah looked at Hayden and felt equal parts revulsion and pity. Hayden was so jealous of Arthur’s praise for Nick that he immediately had to find a way to put Nick down.

Jonah himself fifteen years from now, aiming barbed comments at Graeme every time Arthur gave him some attention. He was relieved to be free of the kind of adoration that could turn to hatred so quickly.

That night the conversation over dinner seemed stale, the same old opinions and assertions reheated and served as new, the usual repetitive debates and reused jokes. What had seemed extraordinary when imbued with Arthur’s charisma now appeared like any other scene.

Seeing the conversation from outside, Jonah couldn’t find a way in. Unable to participate, he sat quietly wondering if Stanton had always sounded so pretentious and Chris so facile. When he stood to collect the empty plates Arthur caught his eye. Maybe it was just his own emotions he was projecting, but Arthur seemed lonely sitting there among his friends.

The melancholy mood stayed with Jonah for his last few weeks in Cape Town, and then out of nowhere it was time for him to leave. His preparations were made in a rush: farewells, last-minute shopping, packing up his things. The trip home to his

parents went as expected, although he surprised himself by feeling nostalgic. He didn't let himself think about what would happen once he got to LA. For now it was enough just to get there.

The day before his flight Jonah went to the house. Arthur was on the phone when he arrived so he wandered through the rooms while he waited. There was a jersey of his in the one of the bedrooms and some papers in the office that he hadn't finished sorting. He sat down and flipped through them: to-do lists, scratched out and added to many times, correspondence interesting articles he'd kept and a couple of Arthur's things that he slipped into the filing tray in the cupboard.

"Shall we walk?"

Arthur was at the door. Jonah couldn't read his face.

"Sure."

They walked down onto Roodebloem Road and wound through the side streets below Main Road where Muslim families sat out on their stoeps and children played cricket in the street. They passed a double-storey block of flats that had been home to squatters for years but recently cleared out, subdivided and rented out to families from Nigeria. A man and his son were walking out of the building and the father snapped shut the padlock through the heavy chain on the gate behind them.

"You ready to go?" Arthur asked.

Jonah shrugged.

"I'm not sure."

"Call Steven when you get there – I gave you his number, right?"

Jonah nodded. Arthur had given him a list of contacts to help him get some experience.

"Have you found a new assistant?"

“There’s an honours student I’m meeting this week, but I’m not overly hopeful. He’s got no work experience and he made two spelling mistakes in one email. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Jonah smiled. He wondered if Arthur would miss him, maybe even feel left behind? Young people came into his life, devoted themselves to him for a while and then moved on.

“So what’s the schedule looking like for the series?” he asked. “Have you received a date from SABC?”

“Oh, I’m having a nightmare with their programming department. They want to give us a three pm slot.”

“That’s not a viable option.”

“I know. I’ve got Peter Mosely working on it.”

“Farid told me they’re opening an office in Durban.”

“Yes, next month.” Arthur grinned. “He’s building himself an empire.”

Arthur talked and it was pleasant to walk through the emptying streets, but it was more like a memory of the past than an experience in the present.

When they got down to the station they turned around. It was getting dark and they walked briskly. Arthur’s breathing became shallower from the exertion uphill and Jonah slowed his steps.

“So, I guess I’ll see you in a while,” Jonah said when they got back to the house. “Come inside for a minute. I have something for you.”

Upstairs in the office Arthur rummaged around in his desk drawers and pulled out a parcel.

“Something small to take with you.”

Jonah tore off the brown paper. Inside were a book and an A4 folder. Jonah turned the book over. It was a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

“You told me once you’d never read it. I think it’s useful when you’re trying to make sense of the US. It doesn’t lose relevance.”

On the front page was an inscription from Arthur:

“It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning – So we beat on, boats against the current...”

We’ll miss you around here.

AS.

22/02/2010.

“Thanks, Arthur. It means a lot.”

Jonah had read the book since they’d discussed it but didn’t have the heart to tell him.

Inside the folder was a treatment for a film that Jonah had given Arthur months before. Arthur had promised him feedback within a few weeks but it had never come, and Jonah had assumed it was worthless.

“It needs a lot of work, but it’s going to be a good film.”

The pages were covered in comments and questions in Arthur’s unruly hand-writing and at the back were three pages of notes.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say,” Jonah shook his head. “This is incredible.”

“You’re welcome.”

They said goodbye with an awkward embrace. Jonah couldn’t imagine a relationship with Arthur via correspondence but he promised to be in touch. Arthur went into the house and Jonah turned to his car with thoughts, for the first time in a long time, of the future.

Love Letters

On hot summer weekends AK Van Diggelen would lean his bicycle against the railing overlooking the water and let the carnival of summer to come to him. Teenagers strutted, women beached in the shade chewed on biltong and chips, jumping bean bodies splashed in and out the water.

“Ma, look at this.”

“Wait man, it’s my turn I also want to go.”

“Come, I’m going to jump in at the deep end, Da.”

“Can I have a ice-cream candy floss hotdog?”

During the week he trawled up and down the promenade above the beach flanked on the landward side by a thick strip of grass.

“Candy, to make you sweeter. Candy floss jus’ ten rand. Does Madam want a bag for the girl?”

Informal trading, AK told Portia, had made him invisible. It wasn’t just that people didn’t want to buy what he was selling; they actually didn’t see him. But for every stuck-up little madam that looked through him, AK took his revenge. The first time he did it was spontaneous. A woman ignored his greeting and he followed her to the car and scribbled down the identifying details while she packed the kids and the dog into the back.

Thin woman. Red hair and braselets. White golf with GP plate.

The next time she was down on the promenade AK tested her – let no one accuse him of acting too hastily.

“Candy very handy. Floss for your boss. Would madam like a bag?”

She ignored him again and AK went into action: he secured his bike in the last toilet stall and searched the parking lot for the white Golf with the Gauteng registration.

He left his messages in different ways, depending on his mood. It could be a word scratched on the door with his key, or a sour-smelling trickle down the window pane; occasionally he inscribed his resentment with a pocket knife in all four tyres.

As summer receded the promenade emptied. One afternoon in autumn AK stood looking out over the ocean smoking an *entjie*. Scrappy waves dotted the dark surface of the ocean. Jets of foam sprayed into the air when the waves broke and settled on the black rocks. The next moment he was on the ground, tangled up with metal and rubber and limbs that weren't his own. When he extricated himself and stood up he saw a skinny girl in baggy shorts on the ground under her bicycle, shaking with sobs. He tried to get a look at her face but she kept it buried in the crook of her elbow.

AK decided on a temporary retreat and went to pick his bike off the floor. It had been knocked in the collision and he examined a v-shaped kink in the down tube. He was annoyed; the bike was his mode of transport, his livelihood, his freedom from Portia and a fine example of his ingenuity. He'd done the alteration himself: his father's old fishing rod chopped in half protruded from under the seat and dangled inflated bags of candy floss like overripe plastic fruit. Too bad the old man wasn't around to see it.

AK collected the packets of candy floss scattered across the walkway and went back to where the girl was huddled on the ground. Her left knee was grazed but other than that she seemed alright.

"You ok?" he said bending down and putting a hand on her shoulder.

She pulled away but got herself into a seated position.

"Come on. Stand up and let's see how you doing."

Still crying, she examined her knee and did a full inspection of her arms and legs.

"Listen here, you can't just sit in the middle of the path."

She continued to sit there. AK stood watching her and feeling like a fool, annoyed that she wouldn't co-operate.

A jogger stopped next to them and pulled an earphone out of one ear.

"You ok?"

The girl nodded.

"You must have gotten a fright?" She crouched down so her face was level with the girl's. "I'm Kate. What's your name?"

"Jana," she said and wiped the tears off her face with the palms of her hands.

"Come," the woman said, picking up the bicycle. "I'll drive you home."

The girl took her outstretched hand and walked away without so much as a glance in AK's direction.

By the time the bakkie dropped him off it was dark. His house was the last on a short dirt road that ended at a muddy riverbank. Portia sat at the table adding up a pile of receipts. Her blouse peeped open between her limp breasts and the fur on her upper lip showed starkly under the naked bulb.

"It's looking like we did well."

AK grunted a vague acknowledgement.

"What's for supper?"

"There's chicken in the microwave."

Apart from the bedroom there was only one room in the house and it served as kitchen, lounge and dining room. AK turned on the microwave and washed his hands at the sink while he waited for the food to warm up. Portia repeated each number aloud as she transferred it into an exercise book. When his food was ready he set it down opposite her at the table and opened the newspaper.

"We've got R639 already."

"Hm?" AK said, without looking up. A blob of gravy dropped off his fork onto the newspaper.

“I told them it was the right way to go. Chantal’s realising I’m someone to listen to.”

Portia kept up the monologue and AK turned on the TV. When she was finished with the receipts she went over to a basket of clean laundry and fished out a pair of slacks and a button-up shirt. She hummed tunelessly to herself while she ironed and folded them over a wire hanger, which she hooked through the fridge door handle.

“Don’t sit up too late, hear?”

“Aw’right.”

Top Billing was on. The skinny blonde presenter took the camera through a wedding reception. The bride and groom were from Joburg. He was a banker, and they drove to the wedding in a BMW. The whole thing annoyed AK, but he sat transfixed as the camera panned over the candle-lit tables, white roses stretching up at the centre of each one. Performers moved through the crowd on the dance floor, their faces covered with ornate designs, their wrists and ankles clinking as they pounded their feet onto the smooth parquet floor. He fell asleep on the couch and woke just as the sky was beginning to lighten.

AK stopped to take his shoes off in the parking lot at the south side of the promenade. It had rained and his socks were wet. The gulls waded in pools of rainwater that had collected on the tarmac. They dipped their black beaks in and out of the water, and scattered when a car drove in.

He sat for a while airing his feet and watching a workman swinging a sledgehammer at a damaged part of the seawall. Each time it hit it sprayed chips of concrete into the air, dusting the man’s hair white. He picked up a pneumatic drill and it crumbled the concrete in seconds. As its vibrations moved through the tarmac they sent concentric rings rippling through the water.

“I’m sorry. Um. You’re the guy from the other day, right?”

He looked down at her.

“I just wanted to say sorry, you know. About crashing into you.”

She pushed her hair out of her eyes. He was aware of the smell of his bare feet. She looked down at seagull on the ground near her.

“Your name’s Jana?”

“Yes.”

“AK.”

“Ok.”

“You stay near here?”

“Ja, up there.” She pointed to the strip of buildings lining the road behind them. “Just moved here.”

He offered her some candy floss, but she declined.

“You fixed your bike.”

“Ja.”

They watched the workman for a while. When it started to drizzle she left the parking lot and cycled up the promenade until the pavilion, where she turned into a street that ran up towards the mountain.

After that AK often saw her along the promenade. They’d wave or say hello and go their separate ways. Then one day she walked up to him, wheeling her bike next to her.

“I’ve got a flat.”

“Have you got a repair kit?”

“Ja. It’s at home.”

“So why don’t you get it?”

“I don’t know how to use it.”

“Is there someone at home that can show you?”

She shook her head.

“Ok. If you come back tomorrow I’ll show you how.”

The next day he saw her waiting for him under a tree and when he approached she handed him a small canvas bag.

“Ok,” he said, emptying its contents on the grass, “now you better look carefully so you know how to do it next time.”

She nodded and watched as he turned the bike upside down and removed the wheel, levered the outer tyre away from the rim and pulled out the inner tube through the gap. When he’d pumped it up he held it out to her.

“Put it next to your ear. Move it through your hands all the way, like this,” he threaded the tube through her hands, “and tell me when you hear the air.”

When they’d located the puncture he showed her how to sand the surface.

“Softly now, you don’t want to make it too thin.”

Together they squeezed on the rubber solution and smoothed down the patch.

“Now we need to put this on,” he sanded some chalk onto the patch. “It’s to soak up the glue so it doesn’t stick to the other parts when it’s back on.”

When he’d eased the tube back in, pumped it up and fixed the wheel back on she grinned.

“Thanks!”

Later that week he saw her sitting on the sand sorting through objects piled around her.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

There were shards of sea-smoothed beer bottle glass separated according to their colours, shells, rounded pebbles, dried leaves and seed pods.

“What’s all this?”

“I’m making a mobile for my bedroom. Look at this one.”

She held up a crab’s pincer.

“What’s it for?”

“Just.”

Jana was a reserved child and she opened up slowly, but over the weeks he started to find out more about her. She'd moved to the city a few months before and didn't have any friends. Her parents sounded dull. She liked her brothers but they were studying overseas. She was good at Maths and scared of her Geography teacher.

She told him jokes and interesting things she'd learned in class, and recited poems she'd memorised. One day she took him to see a dead gull on the grass.

He told her long rambling stories about fishwives and family feuds and storms from his childhood in Kalk Bay, and took her up to the observation platform at the lighthouse. He brought her a graphic novel from the library and she read it in an hour lying on her stomach on the grass, so he started to bring her a new one every week. He tried to teach her poker but she was more interested in card tricks.

He started seeing her in places where he knew she couldn't be. At the library he saw her looking through the low shelves of children's fiction. He went up to talk to her but when she turned around it was another girl. A dark pink birthmark obscured the left side of her face. He went back to his usual seat under the window.

At Portia's fundraising fair the same thing happened. Portia was selling raffle tickets for the cosmetics hamper and AK was browsing through the tables of junk on sale, key rings and cell phone covers, belt buckles and mugs. He saw Jana running towards the jumping castle but when she got on and started jumping it wasn't her.

One afternoon they went down onto the beach and walked between the municipal workers raking rubbish into a pile. A truck lifted its mechanical arm and thrust its claw into the mound, trailing seaweed through the air.

They climbed up onto one the wall of the tidal pool and walked out towards the horizon. The surface was dark and slick with algae. Jana's foot slipped and she lost her balance, but AK grabbed her arm to steady her before she fell.

At the far end they sat down, dangling their legs over the side into the pool.

The wall was covered in graffiti:

“Ramona 4 Shakeel”

“Oulik + Wakkie + Shortie + Babyboy.”

AK took out his pocket knife and scraped a patch clean in front of him. He flicked his wrist sharply for the diagonals of the “A”, and used a more fluid motion for the curve of the “J”. A flock of birds flew low over the water in single file.

A group of girls, about Jana's age, ran down the beach towards the pool. Each of them carried a miniature boat constructed from bits of junk – cardboard, tins and plastic bottles. A woman in a pale blue blouse stood on the promenade looking down at them.

“You've got an hour girls. I want you back at the car by half past four.”

When they got to the side of the pool they stripped off their shoes and socks, and prepared to set their boats afloat. They shouted to one another, bent down and stood up again, boats still in their hands, moved places, and prepared to launch again.

“I'm gonna go back. I've got a test tomorrow and I better study.”

“But it's early.”

“You can stay here if you want.”

AK followed her back along the wall and jumped down onto the sand. One of the girls ran over.

“Hey – Jana. Hi.”

“Hi.”

“What you doing?”

“Nothing. I was just going home.”

“Have you got your boat from art today? We're going to see if they work.”

“I left it on a bench just up there.” She pointed up at the promenade. “I can go get it.”

Jana ran up the stairs and reappeared a few minutes later with her boat, which she set on the water with the others. AK watched it hovering at the edge of the pool, its sails too flimsy to catch the wind. A large one made with two-litre Coke bottles for a hull and a stiff plastic sail caught a breeze and moved out into the centre of the pool. The girls squealed with pleasure.

He turned and went back up onto the promenade. The woman was standing at the railing smoking a cigarette and talking on her cell phone. He retrieved his bike from the toilet and waited on the grass across the walkway.

At half past four Jana came up with the others, clutching her shoes and boat against her chest. Her hair had come loose from its plait and hung around her face. The woman helped her get her bike into the back of the large four-by-four and she climbed.

AK pulled out his notebook and a pencil.

Land Rover. Silver. CA 955348

Betterment

“They’re exhuming the bones on Tuesday,” Ace said in an off-hand way. “You can come if you like.”

Emily was sitting among strangers in a dimly-lit one-roomed brick shebeen on the hillside, drinking a quart of Black Label at ~~four~~four in the afternoon. Outside goats grazed on the patch of grass between the tavern and the proprietor’s house. He was a wealthy man; he owned a car – although it was a skorokoro by his own admission – and his house was big for the village. Emily hadn’t seen the outhouse but there must have been one as there was no indoor plumbing in the village, even for a man of his means.

Ace, the man sitting across from Emily, was on his third whiskey since she’d arrived. He dressed differently from the others: a beige trench coat over a short-sleeved button-up shirt and floppy white hat pulled low over his forehead. Some kind of skin disease had removed the pigmentation from his lips in bubble-gum pink patches.

Ace liked to talk. The first thing he’d told her was that he wasn’t from the village; he was an academic at Rhodes and he was here doing anthropological research. He spoke about his car back in Grahamstown, his children who disobeyed him, his connection with the Party bigwigs in the province and his house just off campus; he showed her his cell phone and offered to buy her a beer, but didn’t. He spoke looking away into the distance, his beer in his hand resting on his belly.

Cherry, the owner’s daughter, entered through the back and appeared behind the floor-to-ceiling cage that sealed off the bar. She leaned on the counter and looked through the slot for money and bottles.

“Hayibo, sana. Kunjani namhlanje?” she laughed. “Unesidlamadlama?”

The familiarity of her greeting surprised Emily as they'd known each other only since the night before. They'd met in that very room when it was packed from wall to wall with the village's young people having one last party before getting back onto Quantums to East London, Cape Town and Joburg, to their shacks and schools, to hotel reception desks and the kitchens of rich white families.

Emily had woken up with a crushing hangover and fragmented memories of the night before: people laughing – but not unkindly – at her broken Xhosa, a group of girls trying to teach her to dance like them, and an emphatic man who insisted it was ok to have boyfriends in two provinces. She threw up in the bushes behind her rondavel after breakfast.

The morning was spent on her knees polishing the school floors with Nowethu, her home-stay host, and the other mothers in the village. Nowethu was a shrewd woman in her forties with a keen sense of humour that had helped her raise six children without an income.

By lunchtime Emily was queasy from the chemical polish and went down to the river to cool off, surrounded by the usual trail of children that followed her through the long grass. They couldn't swim but stripped off their clothes and plopped into the shallow water between the rocks.

The village spilled down three hillsides: rondavels painted in cloudy pastel colours with thatch roofs and mealie fields dotted in between. It had once ranged over a much larger area, over the many slopes facing each other across the narrow valley. That was long ago, before the *Betterment* which had seen homesteads demolished and grazing land expropriated for white farmers who never arrived.

Or rather, farmers who were never going to arrive, said the old men she'd asked at the tavern. They were an older generation home from thirty years in the mines and drinking up their pensions on Paarl Perlé in cups made from the bottoms of two-litre Coke bottles.

Betterment was just a way to force them into the mines, they said. They'd lost all their crops and weren't left with enough grazing to keep their animals alive.

Hundreds of cows had died and all around them were kilometres of untouchable land.

There were 'before' and 'after' maps hanging up at the community centre. 'Before' showed a dozen or so coloured splotches indicating loose clusters of homesteads separated by large pastures. 'After' was blank except for the three small, tightly-packed settlements that remained.

Emily looked up at the slopes around her from where she sat in the river. Sections were eroded from over-grazing but a forest covered a large part of the mountain slope on the other side. Somewhere in that forest was the waterfall she wanted to visit before leaving. She identified the house where she was staying; she could just make out its pink walls and the ramshackle structure of rusted metal sheeting for the pig.

Nowethu had assigned Emily the job of delivering the pig's daily meal of scraps in soapy dish water. The first time she'd done it the pig had run snorting towards her and she'd dumped the bowl in the mud and fled in terror. The children watching – Nowethu's youngest son and the niece who lived with them – had laughed so much that Emily repeated the performance every day for their amusement. There was something wrong with the niece; her right arm and leg wouldn't straighten and she couldn't talk properly.

The pig's ear had ripped on the fence that morning and was left dangling by a narrow strip of flesh. It stayed lying on its side and didn't look up when Emily came with the food. She wanted to ask Nowethu to do something to stop its human whimpering, but what was there to do?

Refreshed from the cool water but still queasy from her hangover, Emily accepted that she'd get no work done that day and made her way up to the tavern, hoping she'd at least make some interesting contacts she could interview in the week. That was when she'd met Ace.

When she asked him about his research he gave a vague answer about an interest in rituals, knotting his brows and waving his hand in a slow dismissive

gesture, perhaps meant to indicate that it was banal to discuss such details, or merely showing he was too drunk to remember what he did.

Not a usually suspicious person, Emily found herself doubting his boasts. There was something about the way he spoke, his reluctance to talk about his research topic. Academics she knew couldn't resist an opportunity to talk about their work but Ace sounded more like an undergraduate student who'd heard a few catch-phrases and was using them to create a persona that he didn't quite understand.

Eventually he got round to the exhumation ceremony he claimed he was there to observe. The whole thing started, he said, because one of the villagers had been having problems. He didn't specify what kind of problems she was having. Emily was getting used to hearing about vague and general ailments that consistently defied attempts at articulation.

The woman had decided that the root of her troubles lay underground, literally: if she dug up a body in one grave and moved it to another part of the hillside her luck would change.

Ace rolled his eyes and drained his glass.

So Tuesday was the day. This was a significant event, as nothing like it had ever happened in the village. No one would mind if Emily came along to watch.

The following day Emily happened to meet Phumeza, the very woman at whose behest the bones were being exhumed. She was out working with Nowethu in the vegetable garden. She brought the hoe down hard into on the ground in front of her feet, cutting into the dry earth and pulling up chunks of soil and weeds. The skin on her soft city hands was chafing against the wooden handle but the rhythmical motions were satisfying – lift, swing, pull and lift again – so she kept going down the rows, sweat running down her neck and back. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue and singing from the church drifted up the hillside filling

the air with music. In this mood she could almost – but never quite – feel the pull of the church with its perpetually, hauntingly, unfulfilled promises.

Nowethu was a large woman: her backside was three times the width of anyone Emily knew and she was convex all the way around, but she worked in the field with gusto. She had the best vegetables in the district, they said, and people came from nearby villages for her pumpkins and her spinach. The secret was her irrigation system: plastic barrels buried in the ground at the top end of the garden channelling rain water through underground pipes to different points in the field.

It was part of a project being piloted by the Rural Development Committee, the organisation that had helped the community secure a restitution settlement from the government, and which was behind all the development projects in the village. The RDC was also the reason Emily was there. They had advertised for a volunteer to collect oral histories for an online exhibition they were putting together and Emily had wanted something interesting to do with the month she had to spare before her new job started. She'd already conducted almost all the interviews she needed and was enjoying just spending time with people in the village.

Phumeza arrived mid-morning and waved to them from the gate, an ingenious homemade creation fashioned from a rusty metal bed and chicken wire. She was a lean woman in a doek with coils of grey hair on her chin and a look of perpetual oppression about her. Nowethu dropped her hoe and motioned for Emily to join her.

At the gate Phumeza's face broke into a smile. The women enquired after each other and when Emily put out her hand to introduce herself Phumeza stepped forward and embraced her.

"We are happy to have you," she said. "Really, we are so happy to have you in our village."

She held Emily's hand and repeated the welcoming sentiments as they made their way up to the main rondavel.

Inside Phumeza raised her eyebrows and laughed when Emily offered to make tea. Nowethu showed Emily where the teabags and sugar were and which cups to use – the “fancy” ones with saucers – even though Emily had been making tea every morning for three weeks. Emily didn’t mind Nowethu’s showing off and she played along.

The kitchen was set up on two small tables along the back wall of the room: a single-cylinder gas cooker, a microwave that doubled as storage space for dirty dishes and a cabinet displaying the full range of Nowethu’s dining utensils. Emily filled the kettle from a bucket of water Nowethu replenished every morning from the tap a hundred metres up the street.

“Ugalela iswekile engakanani, mama?” she asked the visitor, who broke into delighted laughter.

“Yho, wethu, uthetha kamnandi. Efour.”

She held up four fingers and Emily measured four spoons of sugar into her cup, five for Nowethu and one for herself. She went to the fridge for the milk. On the door was a photograph of Nowethu’s son at his graduation from crèche and another of his father shortly before his death. The faces were alike.

Nowethu flopped down on her bed and Phumeza perched on an upholstered chair with wooden arms, her eyes wandering off in the direction of the TV while they spoke. Emily served their tea and sat down on the other chair. She tried to pick up words in their conversation but they spoke too fast for her to make sense of much. Phumeza noticed her listening and turned to address her directly.

“Do you know the izinyanga?”

“The ancestors?”

“Eh’a-eh,” Phumeza nodded. “Our ancestaaaahs.”

She spoke in rapid Xhosa, looking alternately at Emily and Nowethu, her hands gesturing wildly in the air. When she finished Emily looked at Nowethu for a translation.

Phumeza's mother was buried far from her husband's grave, Nowethu explained. She lay at the old family homestead on a slope across the river, the one from before Betterment, but her husband had died after the move and was buried in the cemetery in the new settlement. It was not right for them to rest so far from each other and her mother's spirit was angry. If Phumeza moved the grave to lie by her father's, her restless spirit would be calmed and Phumeza's fortunes would change.

"How do you know that this will fix – things?" Emily asked. She hoped the question wasn't offensive.

"Because my mother", Phumeza said in English, "she told me."

Emily looked at her, not sure if this was a joke.

"She told you?"

Phumeza nodded.

"But if she died before Betterment you must have been a baby."

"Three or four years. Something like that."

"It's amazing that you remember that far back."

"I don't really remember her. Just from pictures."

"But you said–"

"Usile!" Nowethu said. "She came now, this month, to visit Phumeza to talk with her in her dream, not back then when she was alive."

The women laughed uproariously and Emily laughed with them at what was possibly the strangest conversation of her life.

Phumeza stayed for the rest of the morning. Emily gave her the standard information she'd learned in Xhosa – where she was born, where she was living and why she was not yet married.

The women traded gossip. A neighbour had lost six chickens in the storm. Phumeza's niece was having an affair with a policeman in town. Nowethu's oldest son was lazy; he spent his afternoons getting drunk at the tavern. When would he

start to contribute something to the family's income? They were all like that. Better to have girls.

Emily asked for the meaning of a few words and wrote them down in her notebook. "Yho. I like this" Phumeza said looking over her shoulder. "You are even spelling so nicely."

Emily hoped that she'd receive an invitation to the ceremony but Phumeza left without saying any more about it.

Emily wasn't sure what to do. She wanted to attend the ceremony – when in her life would she have another opportunity like this? Phumeza had seemed to like her but she hadn't explicitly invited her and things were always tricky when it came to death. Perhaps Ace was wrong about anyone being welcome?

That night after *Generations* – Nowethu watched it religiously like everyone else in the village – Emily asked her advice on the matter.

"Of course, ntombi yam. You are our guest. You can go where we go."

The assurance didn't mean much either way; Nowethu consistently expressed her hospitality by insisting to Emily that she could do anything she wanted.

In the end she decided on a compromise: she would go and watch from higher up the slope so she could see what was happening without being noticed.

When Emily woke up on Tuesday morning there were drums beating. She hastily made a cup of instant coffee with powdered milk, washed herself in the tub of water Nowethu had left for her and set off across the river. The path she took climbed up steeply towards the ruins of a demolished homestead then round in a wide arc around the small family cemetery. The sun was already blazing in the sky when she stopped and sat under a small tree.

On the slope below her, people milled around between the graves and huddled under umbrellas to escape the sun. Ace was there in his trench coat,

looking ridiculous on such a hot day. A bakkie was parked on the grass nearby and on the ground lay a hoe, a few shovels and some rope.

Emily swatted the flies that settled on her arms and legs.

Most of the graves were covered by metal frames a couple of metres high. At first Emily had thought they were cages intended – for some reason – to prevent bodies from escaping. Nowethu had explained that they were markers to help the ancestors find their way when it was time to return, although from where Emily was sitting they looked just as indistinguishable as the graves. The bars on the grave that was to be exhumed were already dismantled and lying on the grass next to the tools.

Emily took some pictures and waited an hour before anything else happened. When things did get underway she was surprised by how casual an affair it was: people chatted quietly while the men took turns shovelling out the soil. Progress was slow and the sun was high overhead before the diggers could stand in a substantial hole, and still the excavation continued.

Just as Emily was considering leaving, her water long-since finished and her skin burning despite the shade, she heard a single extended ululation and looked down to see a man's raised fist sticking out the hole, shovel held aloft. Other women joined the first and the sounds dispelled the daze that had settled on the party in the heat.

The women led Phumeza to the grave while two men pulled the digger out the hole. He wiped his face with a cloth and handed the shovel to another man who jumped down to clear the last dirt from the coffin. The morning's easy-going atmosphere was gone. Phumeza stood staring into the exposed grave, her face drawn and her body tense.

After a few minutes of silence the man called up to the party and things were shouted back and forth. The older men talked heatedly in a circle next to the grave, their backs to Phumeza. Someone brought forward a white-haired man in a

suit who leaned unsteadily on his stick and peered down into the hole. Emily could see his lips moving but couldn't hear anything from where she sat.

The largest man in the circle lost patience. He wore a gold chain around his neck and could easily have been a politician or a rapper. His voice boomed up the hill and he jabbed his finger in the old man's face as he shouted. To Emily's surprise the old man argued back, seemingly unintimidated. Eventually instructions were called down to the one in the hole. Emily wondered if they were going to attach the rope to the coffin to get it out of the ground but instead they pulled up the digger, passed the shovels around and refilled the hole with the earth they had spent the morning removing.

As the first shovel-load of soil landed on the grave, Phumeza wailed in despair. Her body crumpled and a stout woman came to her side to steady her. The men continued with their job.

It was much quicker to refill the hole than it had been to create it and soon the tools were loaded into the bakkie and the people drifted off.

Emily was hot and hungry, but curious. Perhaps they had omitted some crucial ritual and were forbidden from bringing up the coffin? Or was there a conflict between Church teachings and traditional beliefs, with which they were intertwined? Who was the old man in the suit? She headed straight for the tavern, the most likely place to find out what exactly had gone wrong.

Ace was already inside. The sweat was running down the sides of his face but at least the coat was off. He passed money through the slot in the cage and brought a quart back to the table.

"What happened?" Emily asked, sitting down without waiting to be invited.

"These fokken' people!" Ace used the side of the table to pop the cap off bottle and drank. When he spoke again beer sprayed from his lips.

"They're so backward. Such a bloody waste of my time!"

"What went wrong?"

“It was the wrong grave! The wrong body. They dug up the wrong fokken’ body!”

Emily was too taken aback to respond.

“Can you believe? I’ve been waiting here almost two weeks for them to do this, and now they bugger the whole thing up!”

“How could they choose the wrong grave? Did it have the wrong tombstone?”

“Tombstone! Please. There was no tombstone.”

“So how did they choose which one to dig up?”

“Phumeza’s older brother thought he remembered where their mother was buried.”

That must have been the old man, and it explained why the other one was so aggressive towards him.

“So now how do they know it wasn’t her?”

“Because there was someone else’s name on the coffin.” Ace took a long drink, his eyes closed and the bottle upright.

“Something as simple as putting up a tombstone, and that’s too much to ask of these idiots.”

“That’s a bit harsh, Ace.”

“Not nearly harsh enough.”

“Come on. They probably can’t afford to go all the way to town to get one. And even if they could, how would they transport it back here?”

“They could make a plan, instead of waiting for some whities to come from the city to do things for them. How do they expect to improve things here, to develop? When are they going to get *involved*!”

Emily wasn’t sure she was following the conversation anymore.

“But it was decades ago. She died before the move. How could she—”

“There’s no more time for excuses! No more time for reasons why they stay in these fokken’ places collecting dirt, waiting for another pay-out from the government for something that happened more than half a century ago!”

Ace’s bottle was almost empty already and he leaned belligerently over the table. Emily wondered if she should be feeling nervous or if this was just another part of his act: the sophisticate from the city looking down at the peasants who hadn’t pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t really understand what you’re getting at. Are you disregarding the whole history of what was done to this community? You think thirty thousand rand per family is really enough to repair the damage?”

“Thirty thousand? It could have been three hundred thousand and it wouldn’t have made any difference! Do you know what these people spent it on?” He stood up in his chair. “Ring tones!”

Emily looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

“Yes, ring tones. They subscribed to those services that send you ring tones and then phoned each other all day to make music. Everywhere you went those bloody ring tones were playing.”

He sat back down.

“Fifty years worth of restitution money gone.”

Emily could have attempted some justifications – the education system, a failure of leadership, lack of infrastructure – but she saw a look of such hopelessness on Ace’s face that she kept quiet.

Maybe she’d been wrong about him. He affected a pose but there were different kinds of poses. Maybe his wasn’t contempt, but despair. There was a kind of debased grandeur about his fervent aspiration for whatever it was he saw as progress.

Ace was slumped in his chair, looking at his empty beer bottle. Emily got up and walked back down the hill towards the house where Nowethu would be waiting with a hot meal. The sun flooded the hills with orange light in long strips

where it came over the mountain in the west but the other slopes were already in shadow. The houses, the goats trailing down the paths, the men walking up to the tavern for the night's festivities, all were drained of colour and their silhouettes blurred at the edges.

An old woman greeted her from a doorway.

“Molo, wethu.”

“Molo mama. Unjani?”

“Ndigrend. Unjani wena?”

“Ndiphilile nam, enkosi.”

So what if Ace was right and there was no future here, and the development was too little too late? Did that make what she'd experienced any less real? Did it make her presence here less genuine? Was it all just charity to assuage the white guilt?

Who was Ace to judge anyway? He would go back to his office and write papers about archaic rituals that he could present at symposia where he'd congratulate himself on his sophistication.

A girl ran down to the path to meet Emily with a gift: a strawberry sweet in a pink plastic wrapper. An infected wound on her chin oozed and a fly followed her. She held out the sweet and Emily was surprised by a feeling of desolation.

The vistas concealed a brutality no less horrific for its slow, quiet progression. Ace's apportion of blame was wrong but his indignation was about something real.

Emily carried on down the hill, cold now that the wind was up. She cut through the back of the school grounds and round a neighbour's mealie patch to avoid the dogs that skulked down the streets at night.

Inside, the Inside, the rondavel smelled of stew and Emily's stomach growled. Nowethu was washing the dishes in an enamel bowl in front of the TV. *Generations* had already started and the couple on the screen were arguing.

“Mnta’nam, ngena quickly,” Nowethu said, waving her enormous arm. “I was just wondering, Where is Emily? She won’t want to miss this episode. Khetiwe she is pregnant and the father is Khaphela!”

Nowethu flashed a mischievous smile and shifted her chair to make space.

The Battle with Mr Vilakazi

“Hello beautiful girl.”

Mpho hated how he pronounced “beautiful”, dragging out the last syllable, emphasizing how *full* she was of whatever he found attractive. It brought to mind ripe fruit bending branches with its weight. The heavy breasts of the woman she’d examined that morning, in labour all night and still pushing.

“Good morning,” she said through her teeth. Antagonising him wouldn’t help.

“I’ve come to fetch a bakkie.”

“Might be a little bit difficult today.” Mr Vilakazi raised his eyebrows and drew in a long breath, feigning concern. “The consultant from Durban, he came this morning, and he’s gone out to the clinic in Oliviersdale. He needed a vehicle.”

Mpho felt her resolve ebbing away from her. Resuscitating babies she could handle. Ambulances of mangled people from overturned taxis in the middle of the night she could cope with. But this ridiculous man in his dingy office had the power to drain all her strength in an instant.

“I handed in my form in on Tuesday.”

“Hmm. We will have to check.”

He lifted himself slowly out of his chair and went over to a tray on the desk behind him. He picked up each piece of paper and pretended to read it slowly, maddeningly slowly. He mimed expressions of interest at each one, and then shook his head as he placed it face down on the desk. She wanted to cry.

“I gave the form to you. Mpho Lekgoathi. I put it in your hand.”

Mpho raised her voice on ‘your’; she knew it was a mistake but couldn’t help it. He’d been through this act with her before. He knew she’d handed in the

necessary transport request form for her clinics today; he just enjoyed tormenting her, dangling the possibility of the bakkie in front of her and watching her squirm.

The previous week she'd forgotten to hand in her form on time and he'd refused to accept it. She'd had to drive to the clinic in her Tazz and the roads were bad, dirt tracks full of potholes and cows. It had rained the night before and her car had almost gotten stuck in a mud pool that had formed on the road thirty kilometres away from the hospital. She wasn't going to do it again.

He put down the pile of forms and smiled.

“Eish, but you looking healthy.”

He held his hands in the air next to his hips and outlined her feminine shape in the air.

“Getting nice and fat after just six months here. See – tell those people from Joburg. They must come see what it's like living in the rural area.”

She breathed in deeply and waited until he picked up the papers again, a self-satisfied smile spreading across his face.

Mr Vilakazi one hundred. Mpho zero.

“Ahhh. This looks like the one.” He shuffled back to the counter.

“Let's see what it says, Doctor.”

He rolled her title off his tongue slowly, sending it into the air as a weapon.

“Now I see a problem.”

He looked at her over the top of his glasses and leaned forward, closer than he needed to. His part of the office was raised a few steps and he was able to look down the V-neck of her top. She pulled it higher up and tried to focus on the paper. He was like her Maths teacher in primary school who used to get the girls to stand next to his chair to show him their sums. Mr Hennings. His fingers would snake down their backs and rest lightly over their skirts. He was eventually caught drinking in the storeroom and asked to leave the school. She felt now the same way she had then, naked and small.

“It says here you going to Bergvliet.”

“I meant Bergville.”

“There’s no clinic I know called Bergvliet.”

“It was a mistake. There’s a place in Cape Town called Bergvliet. I got mixed up.”

“I don’t know that place, and I can’t give you a vehicle for a place that has no clinic I know of. It’s procedure. You can only have hospital vehicles for clinics.”

“Come on, man. You can see it was a mistake. I’ve been doing these clinics since January. Jesus Christ.”

“Please do not speak like that about the Lord. It is not good behaviour.”

She let her breath out of her mouth very slowly.

“I apologise. But please, I have patients booked and I need a bakkie. You know that I meant Bergville. People are waiting for me. I’m asking you *nice*ly to give me a bakkie.”

She regretted the condescending tone of the last sentence as it escaped her mouth.

“Doctor.”

There, he’d done it again, used her title to mock her for everything – her age, her gender, her helplessness.

“I understand how important your job is. Without the community service doctors, what would we do here? We would have nothing.”

He took off his glasses.

“You know us rural people – we were just dying out here before you came to save us.”

She could feel the heat of his scorn.

“So we are very grateful to you. But I cannot give you a vehicle unless you are going to a clinic.”

He began to laugh, a loud rumble that came all the way up from his belly. He laughed and laughed and smacked his hand down on the counter.

“Bergvliet. Bergville.”

Ha ha. Mpho clenched her teeth and tried to keep the fake smile on her face. Mr Vilakazi disappeared into the office and came back with the keys. She reached for them, eager to get out of the room. But he held them back.

“I give you something, you should give me something back.”

“I’m going to be late for my clinic. Please.”

“It’s like my lobola. Now we have a contract.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Mr Vilakazi.”

“You don’t know lobola?”

He leaned back and raised an eyebrow.

“No. I mean yes, I know what lobola is. Please can I just have the keys?”

“It’s the red Toyota.”

He held them out and as she took them he ran his index finger over the back of her hand. She grabbed the keys and left.

Mpho found the bakkie in the yard behind the office, climbed in and threw the medicine kit onto the passenger seat. When the key was in the ignition she tried to put her left foot on the clutch but it couldn’t reach it. She pulled the lever to move the seat forward, but the seat wouldn’t move; it was stuck. Tears formed in her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks.

She could see Mr Vilakazi. He was standing with another man looking through a window at the back of the office, laughing at her. He’d done it on purpose. There was no point in asking for a different vehicle. She pretended to be looking for something under the seat and dried her face; she didn’t want him to know he’d won, even though he already knew. She sat lower in the seat and stretched her legs forward. Her toes just reached the bottom of the pedals but it would have to do. She put the car into reverse and started the engine.

Disrespect

It was a Friday, the night I decided to leave the force. Every Friday the gates of hell open and throw their filth on the township: drunken stabbings, girls raped, shacks burned. I'm telling you, it's as bad as the scenes my dominee describes if he's in a particular mood. But that I could deal with. I'm a large individual, if I may say so, being a farm boy. What had really started to get to me was the disrespect. I'm getting on a bit, and not the particular type of person that our commissioner wants anymore, if you understand my meaning. And the guys knew it. Like the laaitie Ashwell, the one who kept his hair stuck down with gel. The week before he'd come with some clever comments while I was giving a talk on report procedure, disrupting everything. In my day, people knew when to keep their mouths shut.

So I was telling you, Friday night. Me and Rashid, a ou from Bonteheuwel (and a damn good cop, if I may say so), we'd been tracking down a certain Mr Mdlangathi. We'd had a tip-off to get some information from the No-Else Tavern – a stinking pit of sin – but all it offered was a lady of the night, if you know what I mean. She was in a silky little number and her bosoms was popping out. A real jezebel. Now Rashid has a particular dislike for that sort of thing, being a Muslim. So I left it to him to sort her out with a good klap, while I went to answer nature's call in the outhouse round the back.

Khayelitsha at night is something straight from a movie, one of those old detective flicks: quiet, no street lights, and everything looking dusty and two-faced. While I was attending to business I heard something and looked through a rusted hole in the wall. A group of tsotsis, just kids, standing round a smart-looking old guy. His arms was held by a dik ou, neck like a Pit bull, and three more faced him, two with guns.

Now I was not in a good situation: no partner, no back-up; caught with my pants down. There was nothing I could do but watch.

“Please fajita. Senithatile everything.”

“Thula,” said the one breathing hard through his wide nostrils. He smashed the guy’s face with his gun. I swear I could hear his teeth crack.

“Mgobise.”

They pushed him down and he put his gun against the guy’s forehead and sent the bullet through it.

“Masihambe.”

They ran between the shacks and were gone.

I got into action. Got a whole lot of guys down there, searched the place, questioned every dog in the area. But, as usual, no one saw a thing. Of course, neither did I.

When I got back to the station I had forms to fill out and less than an hour to do it.

“Hey, Ashwell,” I called. “Go fetch us a Nescafe from the BP.”

“Jy’s vet, maar jy issie so vet dat jy nie oor die pad kan stap nie.”

I stood up and moved towards him; I was going to take his oily head and smash it against the wall. But he wasn’t even *looking* at me. He just carried on reading a magazine. And not a fokken thing I could do, if I may say so.

That’s when I realised I was done. These guys, barely out of their kortbroek. I filled out my forms and went home to my wife.

The Research Commons

There's a man in the library who wants to sleep with me. What is it about West African men that makes them want to have sex with every white woman they meet?

Now I know what you're thinking, but it's not in my head; I asked my sister about it and she's noticed it too. She says it's because they're from more conservative cultures where women don't wear such revealing clothing, so when they see half-naked white women in music videos and magazines they think all *we* want is sex.

I don't know if that applies to the DRC, but in India I swear every man I was nice to thought I was inviting him into my bed. One guy actually asked me if white women go without underwear so they can have sex in a hurry. The men in Brazil didn't mind much whether you wanted to have sex or not – it was all the same to them as long as you were within reach.

I write in the library most days. I can't get anything done in my office so I used to work at home but I started to go crazy sitting all alone at my computer thinking about characters I'd made up reacting to situations I was putting them in. It's better for me to be out in the world surrounded with real people and their actual comings and goings, and at the library there's the added bonus of feeling like some kind of collective academic effort is taking place. That's probably an illusion but I find it reassuring to hear people shifting in their chairs or getting up to go to the toilet.

I have a routine. Every morning at 8:45 I walk through the double doors, starting with my right foot, and up the eighteen steps to the turnstiles. I usually have to fidget in my bag to find my staff card but it's not unpleasant because they play classical music in the foyer. I never know what it is but it's a nice way to start

the day. I also like the security guards at the front desk, although there's one who's harder to crack than the others. I hoped he'd warm up after I complimented his new glasses but I've yet to get a smile out of him. I always make friends with people like that, the gate-keepers— and it really helps. A few times I've left my card at home and they've let me in anyway, all except the guy with the glasses; he won't budge.

The female guard has started calling me 'girl' as a term of endearment. (I don't look anywhere near my age.)

“Hello, girl.”

“Have a nice day, girl.”

“See you tomorrow, girl.”

She saw the bag Steve got me for my birthday and went wild over it. It's made from an old Sasko flour sack, just big enough for a laptop, with a couple of small pockets and a key hook inside. She said her grandmother made her something similar when she was at school in the Eastern Cape and all the kids wanted it. Steve suggested I buy her one as a Christmas present and I meant to, but never got around to it. Now I feel guilty every time I see her, which is ridiculous because she didn't even know that I was planning to buy her the damn thing.

Anyway; my routine. I climb thirty-three stairs to the third floor where they've got a few moderately interesting artworks. There's a sculpture of Saartjie Baartman made out of machine parts, and they recently installed a miniature diving board on the railing above the stairwell on which a miniature woman in a miniature swimming costume stands all day contemplating the depths below her. There's a drain in her bum (also miniature) which I don't get, but it's kind of a fun piece.

I walk all the way to the other side of the room in even strides; they've got that awful tiled carpeting and I don't like to step on the lines dividing the different squares. On the right hand side are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and on the left are

fifty-five study tables. Behind the tables are huge windows that let in natural light so it's quite pleasant, except around exams when it's crawling with under-grads. I like to play this game while I walk in which I read one full title and subtitle on every bookshelf without slowing my step. I've never managed to get a book on each shelf but I keep beating my records so I'm hoping to get there by the end of the year.

At the end of the room just next to the Humanities desk is a third staircase – exactly twenty steps – and at the top is The Research Commons where I sit every day and write a thousand words. It takes me two hundred steps to get from the double doors outside to The Research Commons, or the RC as the regulars like to call it. Well, actually on average it's one hundred and ninety-eight, but I add in a couple of small ones just before the door to make it a nice round number.

The RC is the business class lounge of the library. Apart from the twenty-eight computers with internet access, printers and scanning equipment, adjustable swivel-chairs, sound-proofed meeting room and carefully controlled temperature, it has its own lounge with the latest editions of the things I always want to read but never get around to buying: the *LRB*, the *NYRB*, *TLS*, *FM*, and *NS*. You can spend your breaks curled up on an armchair reading and sipping complementary coffee. The long-life milk almost destroys the ambiance, but not quite.

It's an interesting crowd in there too. People have really warmed up over the months and there are waves and smiles and whispered hello's in the morning. A couple of German students got the librarian flowers for her birthday and a middle-aged ecologist from Mozambique sometimes leaves little chocolates on my desk to cheer me up. I think he might be having an affair with the woman who sits at the desk behind him but I don't have any evidence.

I had one awkward moment in there with a chemical engineer from Nigeria. We were making small talk at the coffee station and I started talking about the difference between natural selection and sexual selection – it seemed like a good

ice-breaker at the time – and he turned out to be a devout Christian. He doesn't seem to hold it against me though; he even helped me the other day when my laptop wouldn't start, so I think we're fine.

There's an American who hates me, though, on account of my clumsiness. I'm that person who's always spilling my coffee and dropping my glasses, and sometimes I bump into things I'm walking past by mistake. To make matters worse I have this thing sometimes where if I touch something with my right hand I also have to touch it with my left, so it doubles up on the disturbances. This doesn't make me an ideal person to sit near in a library but everyone else seems to manage it. Not this guy – I kicked over a rubbish bin the other day (with my right foot, and then gently tapped it with my left) and you should have seen the look he gave me.

It's a strange thing, being clumsy. It's as if everyone else has a computer chip like the ones in expensive cars that beep if they get too close to other objects but I got made without one. When I was six the school principal called my parents in to discuss the bruises on my legs. They were mortified. I still bruise a lot but now I use it as a mental health barometer. Four bruises or more on each leg means I'm doing well because I've been active and preoccupied enough to bump into things. Two or three per leg is inconclusive either way, but if there's a lone bruise or nothing at all then I know I've had too much time in bed and we're heading for some turbulence.

So you've probably noticed how every person I've mentioned is from somewhere else. I made a pie chart. Approximately five percent are from Asia, eighteen percent from the Americas, twenty-one percent from Europe and forty-six percent are from other African countries. This leaves only twenty percent from South Africa, most of whom are from other cities.

At first I thought it was great, like what a multi-national bunch we are, what a cosmopolitan university. Etc, etc. But are you really telling me there's no one in Mitchell's Plein or Gugulethu who could do a post-graduate degree? What about

Khayelitsha? There must be close to a million people living there. Surely someone on the staff should have been looking a bit harder? All this money spent on people who are just going to take their skills back over the border at the end of two years makes me uncomfortable. I tried to quantify the wastage but the university wouldn't give me data for how much they spend on their doctoral students so I abandoned the project.

It was on the long stretch from the second set of stairs to the third that I met the Congolese man who wants to sleep with me. At least, I think he's Congolese. He's got a French accent, a warm liquid voice, very dark skin, large eyes, a wide mouth and his cheeks are stippled with acne scars. That's not a conclusive set of characteristics for any nationality but his clothes are a more compelling indicator: pin-stripe suits with waistcoats, brightly coloured shirts and pointy white leather shoes.

He's not often there in the mornings but he's always around in the afternoons when I come back from lunch. The first time I saw him I was writing a story about a refugee so I was noticing people who looked foreign all the time. That first day he looked up while I was scrutinising his face so I smiled. The next day we nodded to each other on my way up. Sometime that week we started to say hello as I walked past. Then one day he stopped me to chat.

What was I working on? Where was I from? Etc.

He was doing Sociology – a bachelors, he never had the opportunity to study when he was young. He was new in Cape Town – maybe we could spend some time? Etc, etc.

I politely told him that my husband (Steve was upgraded for the purpose) wouldn't approve, but it was a very nice offer and I had to get busy working, blah blah. Up in the RC I was grateful for the card-swipe system at the door.

After that I tried to avoid him. I would walk on the other side of the bookshelves or I'd cross on the bottom floor and climb both flights of stairs from

there. But he still managed to catch me a couple of times a week and he developed the annoying habit of putting out his hand for me to slap whenever I saw him. I couldn't refuse but it drove me mad being tricked into approaching his desk.

I bumped into him at Pick n Pay in Rondebosch one afternoon when Steve's parents were in town and I was picking up things for dinner: Balsamic Vinegar (R37.99), humus (R15.99), sundried tomato pesto (R27.99), olives (R12.49), red wine (R78.99), couscous (R23.59) and three different kinds of sprouts (R10.99).

"Ah, so we are neighbours," he said. He wanted to know where I lived but I wasn't going to fall for that. I gestured vaguely in the direction of town.

He had a bag of full cream milk and a packet of Marie biscuits in his hands. He looked into my trolley and I cringed.

It was shortly after that the stalking started. I'd be coming out of the ladies' bathroom and he'd be exiting the men's at precisely the same moment. I'd park my car and at some point in the walk up to the library he'd be waiting in my path. I tried changing parking lots – which added an extra seven hundred and fifty steps before I even got to the building – but still he found me. Sometimes he'd walk with me and try to chat; other times he just smiled and waved. I saw him outside a lecture theatre once but I didn't think he'd be bold enough to attend one of my lectures – then if anything ever happened there would be witnesses who could testify that he'd been in a class he wasn't registered for.

I realised how much it was bothering me when he found his way into my short story. He appeared in the form of a shifty character, not quite an antagonist, who popped up unexpectedly and whom I didn't know what to make of. He didn't have exactly the same life in the story – my character had never been to university for one thing, and he didn't even live in Cape Town – but it just *was* him, the way you know who someone is in a dream even if they don't look the way they do in real life.

The stalking intensified. He started to anticipate where I was going even if it was outside my normal routine. I spent a few days down in African Studies and by the third day he was there waiting when I arrived. I got away with a wave, but it left me feeling uneasy.

I was taking some time off the writing to do more research because I was having difficulty with the protagonist: I couldn't quite hear his voice and the dialogue wasn't coming out right. So I was plodding my way through a Canadian journal on xenophobia in Africa, hoping to come across some anecdote I could hook him onto. I'd been interrupted the afternoon before by a fire drill and I was determined to finish it before I left.

African Studies is a nice part of the library: it's a double volume room so it feels light and fresh and the old desks have a stately air. I collected the journal from the front desk and sat down to read. A lot of it was bad, the kind of writing that's full of neologisms that don't actually add anything to the sentence they're in, like 'integrated trans-nationalisms', whatever those may be. I kept finding myself looking at the man at the desk in front of me. His checked shirt had sixteen columns from left to right and twenty-four rows from top to bottom. The woman next to him was having an sms conversation with someone on her cell, and by my count she was typing at one hundred and eighty characters a minute.

Someone shrieked and I turned round to see. A pigeon had flown through an air vent and couldn't find its way out. It was getting hysterical, flying at the windows. I heard the librarian call campus maintenance and a couple of students got up onto their desks to catch it, but somehow the bird found its own way out.

I glanced around the room and there, sitting three rows behind me, was my stalker. He waved. It was too late to pretend I hadn't seen him so I waved back. I looked down at the text in front of me. He must have come in behind me after I'd seen him on the landing and had been sitting there the whole time. I couldn't concentrate with his eyes boring into my back, but I didn't want to leave the library

yet either. I decided to go to the toilet; the walk would clear my mind and I'd sit down at another table when I got back.

I played the book title game on the way to the toilet and back. I didn't break the previous day's record but it did make me feel more composed.

When I got back to African Studies he was skulking on the landing. He was in suit pants but he'd deviated from his usual style with a white zip-up hoodie with gold sleeves. He spread his arms wide and smiled.

"It's only three thirty. Are you going home early today?"

Sometimes when I'm nervous I convert the things people say into ten-letter phrases. I'm really fast – you wouldn't even know I was doing it. Like, for example if you said, *Hi how are things going?*, I'd convert it to, *H-o-w-'s t-h-i-n-g-s?* Ten letters. Or if you told me, *The weather forecast this morning predicted heavy thundershowers across the Western Cape*, I would think, *P-r-o-b-'l-y r-a-i-n*, before you even expected a reply.

Those are easy ones. So was this: *Y-o-u l-e-a-v-i-n-g?*

"Ja," I said, trying to sound casual. "I've got an appointment and I'm already so late."

I tried to turn back up the stairs but he stepped in front of me and blocked my escape route with his body.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye properly?"

S-a-y g-o-o-d-b-y-e.

His long arms closed in for a hug. I stepped backwards and he kept coming closer so my hand shot out automatically to block his advance, but then I felt rude so I pretended I was going for a handshake. He grasped my sweating palm in his bone-crushing fist.

"Ok, cheers." My voice still sounded remarkably calm. "Have a good evening."

I tried to let go of his hand but he clung on. I moved back, my hand still imprisoned in his, and he moved towards me again. My body went cold.

“Come on, just relax girl.”

R-e-l-a-x g-i-r-l-y.

“Please let go of me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to go. Please let me go.” My voice betrayed me on the ‘please’.

“I’m not gonna do anything to you.”

I w-o-n-'t h-u-r-t u.

“I’m sorry – please. Just let go.”

He weakened his grip and I tore my hand away with such vehemence that I stumbled back into the wall. He shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands to indicate he wasn’t going to do anything to stop me, so I rushed past him and climbed the sixty-one steps before he could change his mind. I ran as fast as I could out the library and through the parking lot to my car where I sat shaking for twenty minutes before I could drive.

The experience really shook me up. The university has been very understanding and they’ve given me some time off. I went to stay with my sister and the kids in Muizenberg, which was good for my nerves but not for my routine so I came home a day early.

Since I got back I’ve been working from home again – actually from bed. I wake up at 7am to feed the cats. I go for a brisk walk around the block (approximately one thousand three hundred steps) and have two slices of rye toast with half an avocado for breakfast. At 8:45 I get back into bed and start writing. It sounds crazy, but it actually works for me. It’s a contained space and there are no

distractions. When he can, Steve comes home in his lunch breaks to give me some contact time with a person who isn't in my head, and we eat together out on the stoep. The only trouble is the character I based on the guy from the library. I've been writing new scenes in the story, revising the plot and moving events around a bit, and he's becoming a real problem. I have to keep thinking about him all the time, imagining what he's going to say, how his voice sounds when he's telling a lie, how he looks when he feels undermined. His malevolence has become violent and I've started to suspect that he has some kind of unsavoury hold over my heroine.

I find this all very hard to deal with and sometimes I feel the panic rising in my throat. When that happens I count the keys on my laptop (eighty-seven) and I calm down a bit. But it's harder when I need to touch everything in even numbers, or do the same things with my left hand that I do with my right. It's impossible to write anything on those days because I'm constantly pushing keys twice and then having to delete the duplicates, but then I need to push delete twice so it removes the original as well and I have to start all over again.

Even worse are the days when I'm working on dialogue. If he's in the scene I hear his voice and my characters start thinking in ten-letter phrases – I can't get anything longer out of their mouths. I know what I want them to say but when I try to make them say it, it comes out truncated. I've tried composing the words in my head before going anywhere near the keyboard and saying their lines out loud to myself, but nothing works. It's turning me into a nervous wreck. I can't sleep. Last night I woke Steve up three times – he knows how to handle me when I get like this – and finally got a couple hours sleep before he went to work.

I've also found lately that it's difficult to work out which memories of him are real and which ones are from the story. Did he really wear a paisley shirt or did I write that? And did he go to Joburg for Christmas or was that in the story? How much had I actually written by the time I met him? Did the character exist already

and he slowly changed to look like the man, or did he walk fully formed into the story?

Something funny occurred to me last night while I was lying in bed. In order to escape this guy I stopped going in to the library, stopped going out all. I'm stuck here in this room trying to finish my goddamn story, my job's probably on the line, my boyfriend isn't getting any sleep and I'm not seeing or talking to anyone. All day I lie in bed thinking about him, following his every move and hanging on every word. I'm not sure if he's got much of a sense of humour, but if he does then he would certainly appreciate his victory.

University of Cape Town

*The Hitchhiker**

Picking up a hitchhiker is an outrageous thing to do and if you're on your own the risks are substantial. I'd never done it before but in that moment the prospect of being alone in my car all the way to Cape Town was even more terrifying. So I pulled over on the side of the N2 a few metres ahead of the man standing in the emergency lane looking uncomfortable in a heavy leather jacket.

The first hundred kilometres out of Durban I'd been crying so much I couldn't see the road. I'd pulled over at a petrol station and tried to calm myself with a Wimpy coffee and a cigarette. The sun wasn't up yet and the air was chilly. I called my brother but it went to voice mail.

Phillip and I had been up at his parents' holiday house in the Drakensberg under the illusion that a week in the mountains would give us a chance of to save the tattered remains of our relationship. It didn't work, and I was doing the drive back alone while he went up to Sodwana to dive with some friends.

The hitchhiker picked up his tog bag and walked to the passenger window where I got a proper look at him. His face was beautiful rather than handsome, with a sharply defined jaw, smooth cheeks and wide lips. His eyes bulged a little, not unpleasantly, but in a way that made him look attentive. He was too dark to be South African.

When the window was down I lost my nerve and didn't know what to say. He was suddenly so close, so physical. I could smell his skin and see the beads of sweat on his forehead. He kept looking straight at me and eventually I managed to

* Although it is not customary to reference texts consulted in researching fiction (and I have not generally done so in this collection), I would like to acknowledge one source without which I would have been unable to write this story:

Roelof J. Kloppers, "Border Crossings : Life in the Mozambique / South Africa Borderland since 1975" (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2005)

ask where he was headed. When he said Cape Town I wanted to drive off without another word but his face was through the window and I couldn't risk injuring him, so I unlocked the door.

I babble when I'm nervous, and for the first half hour I didn't stop talking. The scenery. What I did at the publishing company. A spurious story about my brother being a police-reservist, just in case. Apart from giving me his name, Assumani was silent through all this, looking out the window then across at me. His poppy eyes made me feel I could go on talking. When my verbal deluge stopped we drove in silence and I imagined newspaper articles reporting my murder. How the police found my body on the side of the road missing various parts and possessions.

After our lunch stop I worked up the courage to ask him where he was from.

"Congo," he said, looking straight out the windscreen. "Originally."

He pronounced the words not with the blunt vowels of the South African accent, but with an ornate 'o' that made them sound gentle and alluring.

"Which one?"

"DRC."

"Have you been here long?"

He shook his head.

"Four weeks and three days."

In an ordinary conversation the next question would have been about what he was doing here, but I didn't think that wasn't an option under the circumstances and the conversation fizzled out.

We chatted on and off about more mundane things: the weather, , my car's fuel consumption. He liked my shoes, leather pumps with the figure of a gymnast at each stage of a backflip embroidered over the toes – which Phillip thought I was ten years too old for.

“My uncle Pierre is in the shoe industry. He has a chain of stores in Kinshasa.”

We made it to King William’s Town that night and took two rooms at a cheap hotel. Assumani said he wasn’t hungry and went straight to his room. I got a toasted tuna mayo and sat on my bed trying to read, but I was anxious and kept getting up to check my door was locked. If he’d been planning to do anything to me, I reckoned he would already have done it by then, but on the other hand if he was really trying to get to Cape Town it made sense to get closer to the city first. I wondered if I should call Phillip so someone knew where I was but he was supposed to have called to let me know when he arrived and I couldn’t give him the satisfaction of calling first. I checked the lock on the door one more time and decided to sleep with the light on.

When I got to the car at seven Assumani was already waiting. He gave me a softly-spoken ‘Good morning’ and got into the car.

The rolling green hills dotted with rondavels and grazing cattle lulled me into a kind of daze as I watched the grey ribbon of road disappear under my bonnet hour after hour. Children ran alongside us with their hands out, yelling ‘Give me’ and ‘Five rand’. My anxieties about my passenger receded and I went back to agonising over Phillip. I tried to picture what he would be doing that day. Why hadn’t he called yet? Had he met someone already? Maybe there was a problem with reception up there.

We reached the top of a hill and turned with the road to face a series of small conical hills sloping down to an estuary, a couple of rondavels and a patch of mealies on each one. It was peaceful and perfect, the way you imagine rural life a hundred years ago. I made a mental note to look on a map when I got back to internet access to see where exactly it was.

When I looked back at the road there were three sheep in front of the car so close I couldn’t break in time to miss them. I put my foot down on the break

anyway and turned the steering wheel sharply to the right, then lost control of the wheels and the car went skidding off the road over a wide sandy strip on the side of the road. We came to rest on the grass near enough to five or six trees that the car could easily have collided with any one of them.

I sat immobilised for a few seconds, unable to work out what was happening. When I realised we'd stopped I burst into tears and couldn't get my breath back for the next fifteen minutes. I shook with sobs and tears kept pouring down my face. Assumani sat quiet throughout the hysteria, looking into his lap, probably wondering if I was insane.

Eventually I managed an apology. I didn't know why I was behaving this way, I said. It wasn't the accident; it was my boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend. I was just emotional, and needed a few minutes.

I got out and walked a little way from the car. The physical sensations of the grass on my feet and the breeze on my shoulders brought me out of myself a little and made me feel calmer. After a while Assumani came over with a strip of toilet paper and a bottle of water.

"His name's Phillip," I said. "We just broke up, the day before I picked you up. We were up in the mountains. Now he's having the best time of his life with his friends and I'm here alone. Well, not alone. But, you know what I mean – without him. I'm too old to be doing this, and I have to be at work on Monday and my eyes are still going to be puffy from crying."

I continued to babble and eventually he cut in.

"It's ok. Just take some time, so you don't kill us, ok?"

"Ok," I smiled and wiped my nose.

I joined him in the car a few minutes later and when we were back on the road he said, out of nowhere,

"I left someone."

"Sorry?"

I thought maybe he meant that he'd left something behind where we'd stopped off but his English was too good to mistake 'someone' for 'something'.

"I also left someone in Durban."

"Oh." I was astounded. I waited for him to say more but after that one short sentence he remained more or less silent the rest of the day. After a while I regained my composure behind the wheel; it's a beautiful part of the country and by the afternoon I was in that long-distance driving zone, where you feel you could drive on forever.

I'd planned to spend the night in Knysna but I didn't know what Assumani could afford so I drove straight through the town and continued along the highway, not sure where I was going. After passing a few upmarket places I saw a rundown guesthouse just off the main road in Sedgefield. I'd never been there before but it seemed far enough off the tourist track that it wasn't too pricey.

I left Assumani in his room and walked to the small supermarket on the corner. There's a particular smell about those old stores in small towns where they haven't yet been replaced by Pick n Pay; it's not really pleasant, but it conjures up memories of childhood Christmas holidays at the beach.

I bought bread, cheese, a couple of tomatoes, a bag of Salt and Vinegar chips and a carton of orange juice and invited Assumani to a picnic on the lawn. When we'd put together our sandwiches I asked Assumani who she was, the girl he'd left in Durban. It was an absurdly personal question to ask someone I didn't know and I doubted he'd answer me, but I was sick of thinking about Phillip and I had nothing to lose.

He shook his head, his mouth full of bread, and I thought I'd offended him.

"Matilde," he said, when he finished chewing.

"Is it French?"

He shook his head again.

"Portuguese."

He finished his sandwich in three bites and I suggested he make another. He sliced the cheese and laid it out on the bread, added two thick chunks of tomato, sprinkled some chips on top and closed it all with the second piece of bread.

When he began to tell me about the girl and how he'd met her it was as if every image and moment he'd experienced in her presence had been waiting to come out, and now that the gates were open he couldn't stop until every last detail had been told. I sat on the grass, astonished, and listened to his low, careful voice.

He'd been on the run for almost a year, he said. He'd fled the Congo when they started conscripting people from his university, arriving in trucks and filling them up at gunpoint as young men came out the lecture rooms. Since then he'd been moving down the continent trying to get to Cape Town.

A month before I picked him up he'd been sitting in a dirty hotel lobby in Maputo looking through a pile of books on the floor in the hope that he'd find something to help him pass the time, but they were all junk. The manager was dozing on the couch in front of the TV. On the wall above him hung a picture of the president and a wildlife calendar two years out of date. Assumani got up and went to the window. Across the street was a plot, empty except for a rubbish skip piled high with boxes and refuse. A man ferreted through it and pulled something out, tossed it into a shopping trolley and moved on.

A woman came in with a suitcase on her head, one arm raised to balance it and a film of sweat on her skin. She went straight up the stairs and two men followed, straining against the weight of their suitcases. Assumani heard the cases drop on the floor above him.

They came back down and waited at the reception desk for the manager who peeled himself off the couch and slunk towards them, his sleeveless vest pushed up above his protruding belly.

"Three Cola," said the larger of the two men.

He was mid-forties and had a broad, flat face and circles of sweat under each arm. He leaned against the desk and rolled up his shirt sleeves while he chatted to the man next to him. Assumani hadn't heard French in a while and it was nice to listen, even though they were only discussing the soccer. The big one noticed and silenced his companion, a fidgety man in his early twenties, with a click of his tongue. The young man looked at Assumani and rubbed his index finger over ridges of scar tissue that snaked across his scalp.

The manager slouched back in clutching three glass bottles and placed them on the counter, but wouldn't hand them over until he'd counted the coins.

"I want bottles back. You drink here."

They took the bottles to the entrance where the woman stood looking out at the street.

Assumani opened an English newspaper he'd found that morning and the other three chatted softly at the door. He couldn't make out what they were saying but soon the large man's voice rose and he waved a threatening finger at the woman, who lowered her face in a deferential gesture. When he thrust his bottle into her hands and stormed up the stairs she placed the bottles carefully down on the reception desk and followed after him. Assumani went back to his paper.

"B-b-bonjour."

The other man stood there fingering his scars.

"Excusez-moi, m-m-mon frère, mais t-tu n'es pas congolais?"

Assumani briefly entertained the notion of replying – it would have been good to talk to someone from home. But he was too close now to risk his plan for a bit of company. He shook his head and returned to the paper, and the man darted up the stairs.

The evening faded and he went up to his room, wishing it had a TV. He lay awake scratching his bites and turning things over in his mind, wondering what he'd do if he ran out of money before he got to Cape Town. The Tanzanian border had cost more than he'd expected and getting through Zambia without the

agent was expensive. He turned on the light and squashed the insect scuttling across the sheet; its swollen body burst with a spurt of his blood. He flushed it down the toilet, drank water from the tap to stop his stomach grumbling and turned off the light.

It was unbearably hot by nine the next morning and the city stank. Assumani found his way to the small square where a group of old men sat playing chess outside a kiosk that smelled of reused oil. Assumani was tired and his back hurt from the hotel bed. It was important that his anxiety about the meeting didn't show. One of the men looked up at him and he turned away before the man could start a conversation.

He recognised the low crumbling block of flats on the far side of the square from the directions he'd been given over the phone and walked towards it. Inside the lobby, watery green light filtered through the pot plants lined up against the windows and his eyes took a few moments to adjust.

“Mr Makanga? Good to meet you in person.”

The man wore a grey suit and glasses with heavy square frames; not what he'd expected.

“Masinga?”

“Yes. You got here without incident, I hope. Very comfortable where you are staying?”

“Where can we talk?”

“Upstairs.”

They went up a grubby carpeted staircase at the back of the foyer and into a flat on the third floor. The entire thing was one small room, not more than twenty or thirty square metres, with a closed door in the far right corner. A double bed was pushed against the back wall and some chipped turquoise cabinets formed a kitchenette next to the door.

“Please,” Masinga said, and gestured towards a couple of wooden chairs in the kitchenette.

“I’m fine standing.”

“Yes, alright. The photographs?”

Assumani passed him an envelope, from which he shook four small photographs into his palm.

“When will I get the passport?”

Masinga put the photographs back into the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. He spread his hands.

“We are having some difficulties at the moment. My superiors are being extra vigilant.”

It was the same kind of line they came up with all down the continent.

“Are you trying to get out of our agreement?”

“Of course not, Mr Makanga. I’m trying to make sure that the agreement works for both of us.”

Assumani breathed deeply and wondered what Masinga’s face would look like smashed against the wall.

“Ok how much do you need?”

“Well, yes. It’s not merely a case of my needing money. There are other people to be satisfied. Many hands work to produce a document like this.”

This was supposed to have been a good contact.

“How much?”

“It will have to be at least fifty percent more than we discussed on the phone, yes.”

They both knew Assumani had no choice. He’d been stranded since his passport had been stolen and he was running out of money.

“That’s not reasonable, Masinga.”

“Please, try to understand my position.”

“I understand your position perfectly.”

“Insulting me will not help to resolve this matter.”

Assumani walked to the window, knowing he had to give in. The next building was a few metres from his face across a narrow alley and the room felt like it was getting smaller. He clenched his fists and took a deep breath.

“I’ll give you half now and the rest when you come back.”

“And how do you expect me to pay off the many people this has to go through, yes?”

“And if I just walk out the door now?”

“I don’t believe you would do that. For one thing I am offering to help you, and you need it. For another, your photograph is in my pocket together with a copy of all our email correspondence.”

That was it; there was no way out of this.

“Do you have a bathroom here?”

Masinga smiled magnanimously and pointed to the door in the corner.

Inside Assumani splashed his face with water and dried his hands on his jeans. He stood up straight, dropped his shoulders and looked at himself in the mirror: he’d lost too much weight and was wearing the same creased jeans and shirt he’d had on the whole week. He opened the medicine cabinet hoping to find deodorant. On the shelf was a bottle of purple cough syrup, a disposable razor, aqueous cream and three toothbrushes. A photograph of a boy was taped to the back of the door. He wondered if he was Masinga’s son.

Assumani took off a scuffed leather shoe and pulled a wad of notes out his sock, counted the money and tucked the rest back into its place. Before opening the door he rubbed his shoes with wet toilet paper to shine them up.

“Yes, this is good,” Masinga said after he’d counted the notes. “Wait in the square downstairs. I will be back before lunch.”

He handed Assumani a business card.

“If you need to contact me, call on this number.”

Assumani memorised the number and threw the card on the paving downstairs. He sat down under a faded *Dois M* umbrella and tried to read his newspaper but he was nervous and couldn't concentrate, so he went over to the old men who acknowledged him with a few smiles. The man on the far side of the chessboard was a formidable player, careful and surprising, and his poorly-matched opponent soon lost. The old man looked up at Assumani and pointed an arthritic finger at the vacated chair. As Assumani sat down the others called out good-natured taunts; he was clearly being chosen as easy prey.

It was a tense game. They sat for long periods not moving; flies settled on the board and on the old man's hands and he did nothing to swat them away. As a matter of habit Assumani usually kept an eye on what was going on around him but he was tired and had to focus hard on the board. Without warning he heard shouting from the other side of the square and a chair falling to the ground, and when he looked up there were three heavy policemen running towards their table. When they were close one pointed his gun at Assumani and shouted something in Portuguese. Every cell in his body wanted to run but he forced himself to sit still.

In that moment an idea appeared fully formed; he pointed to his ear and shook his head, indicating that he couldn't hear. The policeman raised his voice so Assumani kept pointing at his ear, shaking his head furiously, and mouthed a few words without making a sound. The policemen realised what he was trying to say but looked unsure whether to believe it. They looked at each other, not moving, and everyone else waited in silence.

The policeman barked instructions and one of the others moved behind Assumani, lifted him up by his arms and forced his hands flat on the table, sticking his right hand into a blob of tomato sauce. A search through his pockets produced nothing so the policeman shot a sequence of questions at the old man, who answered in a slow, unhurried way, pointing at Assumani and at the chess board. They questioned some of the other men but evidently didn't get any more out of

them. After patting Assumani down another time the policemen abruptly turned and strode out of the square and down the alley that led onto the main road.

When they were out of sight the men went back to their conversations. One of them pulled up a chair at the table and they reset the board for a new game. No one looked at Assumani, who trembled in the aftermath of adrenalin. He wanted to get out of there immediately but he couldn't risk the possibility that the police were watching him from some vantage point. He sat down and tried to think things through.

Masinga wasn't going to return, that much was clear. He thought of the money he'd wasted, and now he'd lost the contact for a passport. After two years he should have known better than to trust a man like that.

After half an hour Assumani walked out of the square and onto the main road, affecting a nonchalance he didn't feel. Going back to the hotel wasn't a good idea in case they were following him, so he spent the rest of the morning wandering the streets of Maputo, trying to work out what to do. In other circumstances he would have loved to sketch the squalor and construction side by side on every street, the view of the bay, the ornate arches and balconies of the old railway station. But he was exhausted and hungry and he kept looking over his shoulder for the police. He bought some cassava chips from a woman on the side of the road who tried to short-change him, and ate them sitting on a low wall with a view of the sea. He needed to keep going to the border, he decided, even without a passport. There was no way he could get another one. He just needed to get to the border. He would work out a way to get across once he was there.

The sun was going down and I could already feel six or seven mosquito bites on my arms. Assumani had been speaking for over an hour but I was afraid to stop him in case it made him self-conscious and reluctant to continue. He must have noticed my distraction, though, because he looked at his watch.

“Sorry, I have been talking too much. I don't know—”

“No, not at all! This is one of the most amazing things I’ve ever heard. No, I don’t mean it’s amazing – it’s terrible.” I cringed. “Just, what I’m trying to say is I really want to hear the rest, if you’re comfortable to talk about it.”

Assumani laughed at my awkwardness.

“Ok, slow down. I’ll finish the story, but we must move inside, no?”

There was no lounge so we just sat in my room, me on the bed and him on the floor with his back against the wall, my fears from the previous night long gone.

The next day, Assumani continued, he packed up his things and headed for the station. He was scared but it felt good to be moving, knowing that this was the last leg and he would be over the border by nightfall, one way or another.

The station was a chaotic jumble of buses, taxis and hawkers selling fruit laid out on tarpaulins. When he found the correct bus he passed his bag up to a teenager on the roof who secured it to the luggage rack. Inside it smelled of damp and cigarette smoke so he left his jacket to reserve the seat and waited next to an ice-cream cart on the curb.

With nothing to do he started doubting his decision. It was crazy to try crossing without a passport. He’d heard the fence was electrified and he couldn’t risk deportation; if he got sent back they’d conscript him at the border. The longer he sat there the more terrified he became. He couldn’t do it. He decided to wait in Mozambique until he found a way to get a passport, and got up to retrieve his bag.

The woman and the smaller of the two men from the hotel were there. Besides the three suitcases he’d seen them carrying into the lobby, they had two large bundles wrapped in white plastic. The man was trying to pass one of the suitcases up to the boy on the roof but the handle had broken off and he was struggling to lift its weight above his head. He lifted it a few times but couldn’t get it higher than his chest before dropping it on the tar. Ordinarily Assumani wouldn’t have done anything to attract attention, but an opportunity was

presenting itself. He walked up to the man and lifted the suitcase; it was heavy but he got it up to the boys on the roof with ease and together they hauled it onto the rack.

By the time he finished passing the rest of their bags up the driver was hooting, and he quickly got back on the bus. His jacket had been thrown on the floor and all the seats were taken so he had to sit on the floor next to a crate of chickens. He put his head down on a sack of flour and dozed off. The bus lumbered through the traffic and dust came in through the windows but it was too hot to close them.

He woke with up a sore neck as the bus was pulling over on the side of the road. There was a problem with the engine and no one knew how long it would take to repair. The bus stank, so he got off and looked around. There was nothing to differentiate the landscape in any direction.

The group from the hotel were crouching in the shade of some low trees. He took a sip from the plastic bottle he'd filled at the last garage and went over to them.

"Hi," he said in English. It was simpler that way.

"Hello," said the bigger of the men and put out his hand. "Etienne Dibango."

His voice was deep and warm but Assumani didn't trust it.

"Assumani Makanga. Good to meet you."

"This is Serge Nguesso."

"Hi."

The small uncertain face flickered into a smile and the handshake was damp.

"And Matilde Fumo."

She smiled.

"Thank you for helping Serge with the bags," Etienne said.

"No, no. It was ok. This thing with the bus, I hope it doesn't take too long."

"Yes, this transport has deteriorated. Always these delays."

Etienne shook his head with a weariness that suggested he was used to better things.

“You travel this route often?”

“From time to time. Matilde’s mother,” he waved his hand in Matilde’s direction, “is in Maputo.”

She said nothing.

It was an unlikely story; why would they stay in a hotel if the girl’s mother was there?

“Ah, I see,” Assumani replied. “Beautiful city. It was my first time there.”

“It’s a beautiful city,” Etienne agreed. “Only problem is the lack of infrastructure.”

“Perhaps you have been away from home too long to know what it really means when things stop working.”

Etienne raised his eyebrows. It was too late to back out now so Assumani carried on.

“Look, I need your help. I need to get over the border. I have no passport and not much money.”

An old couple from the bus were walking by and he paused until they passed.

“I will send you money in a few weeks. You know this route. You can show me where is the place to get across without being seen.”

“I’m sorry,” Etienne said, shaking his head. “There is nothing we can do to help you.”

“I don’t care what’s in the suitcases.”

“This is not the problem.”

Etienne didn’t raise his voice but Assumani could tell he was irritated.

“I tell you, we cannot do anything for you.”

Etienne turned and started walking back to the bus with Serge just behind him.

“You can come with us.”

It was the first time Assumani had heard her voice. She spoke softly but with resolve.

“Matilde,” Etienne said through a clenched jaw.

“If he has not enough money,” she continued, still looking at Assumani, “he will not get across.”

“Then he can tap palm wine like everyone else.”

“No. He comes with us. He can help to get the bags over the fence.”

“Excuse us.”

Etienne grabbed the woman’s elbow and pulled her sharply. They stopped just out of earshot so that Assumani could hear the tension in Etienne’s voice but not make out their words. When they returned his smile was plastered back on his face.

“It seems, friend, that you have – how do you say? – *une bienfaitrice*.”

“Thank you,” Assumani said to the girl, trying not to let his relief show too much.

“You get off the bus with us at the border,” Etienne continued. “But once we’re across, you’re on your own.”

Just before the border the road climbed a hill and the whole post was spread out below. Two parallel fences wove through the trees ten metres apart, nothing more than wires strung between wooden posts. The South African side had a few brick buildings with tin roofs reflecting the midday sun, but the Mozambican side was just three pink prefabs and some square houses half a kilometre away.

The bus stopped for people to get out and Assumani looked at Matilde to see if he should leave. She shook her head. They continued another twenty minutes over a rough sandy track and stopped at a collection of reed-and-grass stalls constructed in a clearing right up against the fence. People were crossing freely in both directions at the gate while the soldiers looked on. The space was packed with

hundreds of people walking around or sitting at their stalls, their goods laid out on tables or on plastic sheets on the ground, trucks and bicycles facing each other across the fence.

An open truck was parked under the trees. Three men stood in the back holding up bundles of fish and taking bids from a swarm of women who shouted and pushed to get to the front. There was dance music playing and the women laughed and joked while they battled each other for the fish. They must have been buying to sell because many bought enough to fill plastic tubs that they balanced on their hips and heads.

Assumani and the others collected their bags and pushed their way through the bustle. Two women near Assumani grabbed at the same bundle of fish; the string ripped and the fish flopped to the ground at his feet. Everyone around him scrambled like a pack of wild dogs fighting over scraps from an over-turned rubbish bin, and it was all he could do to cling on to the suitcase and stay standing. A woman who managed to collect and hold on to the fish ran cheering in triumph out of the crowd.

Assumani managed to get through and followed the others into the bush behind the truck. You couldn't see the path until you were on it unless you knew what you were looking for, and as they walked the bush became denser; sisal grew like a wall concealing them entirely from the market place. Etienne set a fast pace despite the heat and the baggage.

They stopped at a clearing in the bush half an hour away and put their bags down on the ground. Assumani stood in the shade, getting his breath back.

"I'm going to call Seko," Etienne announced. "Matilde, you'll do first watch."

He strode back along the path and out of sight. Serge wandered away.

Assumani hadn't spoken since their conversation on the side of the road. He could feel that Etienne was angry that he was there and he didn't want to say anything that would make the girl regret bringing him along.

“Can you watch the things for an hour?” she asked when the men were out of earshot.

He studied her face for some sign of what was going on.

“No problem.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon.”

She headed off in the opposite direction away from the market. He looked at the bags and started to feel uneasy. What if it was a scam? They left him alone with the bags and tipped off the police, he’d get caught with whatever was in them and they’d get a percentage of the bribe. Was the tension with Etienne just an act? What was in the bags? Drugs? Stolen goods?

He pushed through the trees in the direction the girl had taken but the thick vegetation forced him back onto the path.

He heard Matilde’s singing before he saw her. He walked as softly as he could through the bush and spotted her kneeling in front of a mottled tree, holding dried herbs that burned with an acrid smoke. A dirty cloth hung from a branch overhead among the small leaves. She picked up a few pieces of garbage and stuffed them in a packet, replacing them with a bottle of beer and some biscuits. She stood up and dusted the earth off her skirt.

Assumani returned quickly to the clearing and lay down with his head on a suitcase, pretending to be asleep. When he opened his eyes Matilde was sitting next to him. Her smile showed a gap where one of her teeth was missing and she immediately lowered her top lip to cover it. She handed him a small green fruit.

“We call this *inkanyi*.”

He sat up and bit into the fruit. It was sour and inedible. She laughed at the face he pulled.

“I went to give respect to my ancestors.”

“Are they buried here?”

“No, but here is closer to the village than Durban.”

She took a small bite of her fruit and pursed her mouth.

“I made a – I don’t know the English word – *ingandelo*. So I can come back each time to bring them something.”

“Why?”

“So I don’t get sick.”

“You’d get sick if you forgot to leave a bottle of beer under a tree?”

“You don’t respect your ancestors?”

“I respect people who deserve my respect. Of course, it’s sometimes easier to respect them when they’re dead.”

She looked away.

“Sorry – that was unnecessary. How often do you come here?”

“Each month.”

“That’s a lot of travelling, especially with so much luggage.”

She shrugged.

“It’s my business. I’m an Edgars woman.”

“What’s?”

“That’s what they call it if you buy the clothes in Maputo and sell in KwaZulu.”

“You come to Mozambique to buy clothes?”

“They send them from overseas. Germany, Canada, all over.”

He looked at bundles next to them. One displayed a red cross and the other a Japanese flag.

“They’re cheaper here. Sometimes they’re good quality, but some are dirty or full of holes. You don’t know until you get back and open them.”

She undid the bottom button of her shirt and opened the left flap. A pocket had been hand-stitched on the inside and she pulled out a coin marked with unfamiliar characters.

“This was in a trouser from last month, in the pocket. Maybe it’s from China?”

She passed it to him and he turned it over in his fingers.

“Where do you sell the clothes?”

“In Durban. I was working in Manguzi but the police were wanting too much tax. I’m living with Serge and Etienne now and we travel together.”

“Are they in the Edgars trade as well?”

“Edgars is only for women. They do curios – cups and hats, statues. Also cigarettes.”

Assumani wanted to find out more but the men came back and sat down silently in the shade. A look passed between Matilde and Etienne.

“You want to go see the market?” Matilde asked.

“When will we cross?”

“When it’s dark. They only let locals over on market day, so we wait until night. You hungry?”

“Really hungry.”

“Come with me.”

The market was on the Mozambican side of the fence but it was used by people from both countries. The local women sold fresh produce – sweet potatoes, beans, coconuts – and from the other side they brought the processed goods that were hard to find in the depopulated southern parts of Mozambique.

Matilde bought them each a Fanta and pushed back the dollar bill Assumani tried to hand her.

“They like rands.”

She was shy with him now that they were out in public but as they walked among the stalls she chatted to people she knew. She bought a bundle of dried fish on a string that hung like pale leathery bats off the fence. While the vendor untied them she fingered a pair of earrings at the next stall.

“Matildane!” cried a large woman in a sleeveless floral dress.

She bore down on Matilde and threw her massive arms around Matilde's slender body. They spoke in rapid Portuguese, their faces animated and their hands flying as they talked.

While they chatted Assumani looked up and down the rows of goods: kangas, tubs of Vaseline, loose candles, sandwich bags of Skip powder and MTN starter-packs. Some young men were dancing inside a circle of onlookers by the sound system and a signboard in a nearby tree read, "Haircut – R10. Afghanistan – R13."

When he got back the large woman was still talking but the mood was different. She spoke softly and Matilde shook her head in disbelief or commiseration. Assumani hung around for a few minutes, hesitant to interrupt, until he caught Matilde's eye and she signalled for him to come over. Her friend's English didn't allow for much of an introduction but they shook hands and the woman hugged Matilde again before leaving.

Matilde led Assumani through the stalls to the restaurant, a one-room brick building behind which they slaughtered animals in the dust. The customers sat on wooden benches under the trees nearby drinking coconut beer, palm wine and quarts of Castle.

"Meat or fish?" Matilde asked.

"What kind of meat?"

"Depends on what they have. It can be small buck or monkey. Sometimes it's warthog."

"I'll have the fish."

The wooden benches were full so they sat down on the ground with their backs against a tree and ate the food with their hands, mopping up the peri-peri with pieces of soft round bread. Matilde didn't say anything and ate staring down into her plate.

"That woman. Is she a friend?"

"Rosalina? Yes."

“She looked upset.”

“She had some bad news about a friend of ours. The soldier that she stayed with last year, he was sent to another base but he come back this week and found her pregnant, so he beat her bad. The baby died. He’s gone now,” she gestured back towards Mozambique.

Assumani didn’t know how to respond.

“I’m sorry.”

Matilde shrugged, pushed Assumani’s empty fish bones onto her plate and slid his underneath.

Assumani looked at the men talking and laughing on the benches around them.

“Why are they all here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it a holiday?”

“It’s market day.”

“Which side are they from?”

“Both. During the war many people came across the border. Some have move back but everyone has family on both sides.”

“Is that why you came across?”

“I’ve been in South Africa a long time. I worked here a few years ago.”

“Selling things at the market?”

“No,” she said looking away. “With Rosalina.”

He was going to ask what they’d been doing, but the story about their friend and her vagueness made him hold his question.

Matilde took their plates inside and when she returned a couple of soldiers had stopped to chat with the men outside.

“Should we be doing something?” Assumani said softly, hoping she couldn’t hear the quiver of fear in his voice.

“They’re just here for a drink. That’s Luis Ngubande.” She pointed to a fat man sitting on the bench. “He always buys for them.”

“How did someone out here get so wealthy?”

“He gave his smallest son to the snake and now it brings him money every time.”

Assumani wanted to laugh despite his anxiety, but he was reluctant to hurt her feelings again so he kept quiet. Two of the men in Ngubande’s party got off the benches to make space for the soldiers and the waitress brought out more beers.

“Come,” Matilde said softly. “It’s time to go.”

I woke up on top of the duvet with my head at the foot of the bed. I was still in my jeans and I didn’t know if it was day or night until I opened the curtains.

“Good morning,” Assumani said when I knocked on his door.

He was sitting at the small desk next to the bed writing in a notebook. His legs were too long for the cramped space under the desk and they stuck out on either side of the chair.

“I’m, uh, sorry about last night. I think I fell asleep while we were talking. Can I buy you breakfast to make up for it?”

“That’s ok,” he grinned. “I was also tired. I woke up on the floor at four o’clock.”

We picked up some food at the Shell Ultra City and got back on the road.

“So where are you going when you get to Cape Town?” I asked.

“I have a friend there, Abigail. Actually she’s my mother’s friend, kind of an aunt. I can stay with her.”

“Ok. Whereabouts?”

“I’ve got the address written down.”

He took his notebook out his pocket and paged through it.

“Maitland. Do you know it?”

“Ja, it’s not too far from where I live.”

“Is it close to the university?”

“Reasonably.”

“And a train station?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Can I turn on the radio?”

“Sure.”

Assumani turned on the CD player.

“You known Malian music?”

“A little.”

I didn’t tell him that the Ali Farke Touré CD belonged to Phillip. Well, technically it was mine now.

They sat around in the clearing while the sun dropped below the horizon. Serge and Etienne played cards – some kind of poker – but didn’t invite Assumani to join. A light breeze cooled the air and the bush was full of the sound of insects. Just before ten Etienne flicked his cigarette into the bush and picked up a suitcase in each hand. He assigned Serge and Matilde the two bundles and Assumani the suitcase with the broken handle. He had to carry it against his chest using both arms, his tog bag slung over his shoulder.

Assumani fell into line behind the others. They moved in silence away from the market, the barely visible path winding roughly parallel with the fence, sometimes closer and sometimes further away. Their footsteps on the dirt were loud in the silence. There wasn’t much of a moon yet and Assumani kept close on Serge’s heels. Serge had a strange way of walking, moving his shoulders to the right and left each time he took a step. Assumani tried to copy him but it was impossible with the weight of the suitcase.

The moon had climbed by the time they reached the fence. Assumani stretched his arms above his head and felt his shoulders click. Matilde pulled the

top two wires of the fence upwards and Etienne slipped through the gap. She took one end of a suitcase and Serge the other and they passed it over the fence, then did the same with one of the bundles. Etienne disappeared into the darkness with the luggage and returned empty-handed ten minutes later to collect the next load.

“We’ll rest on the other side,” Matilde said softly, her lips close to Assumani’s ear. “There are no patrols there.”

He heard a noise in the trees nearby and started thinking about the predators that might live along the border. The Kruger Park was close and he’d heard stories of people who’d been dumped in the bush and told to hitchhike to Joburg.

Another noise, louder, came from the trees huddled on the far side of the path. It wasn’t a bird that time; it was something big.

He tried to keep calm, not to let his mind spin out of control but he could hear the blood pumping in his ears. He just had to get over the fence and it would be fine. He kept seeing images of feline shapes skulking under the trees.

“It’s nothing,” Matilde said. “Come on – Etienne’s back. Help me with this one.”

He stood and lifted the suitcase over the fence to Etienne.

“Now us,” Matilde said.

As she lifted the wires a torch flashed on in the trees to their left and soldiers came running out screaming commands.

Assumani bolted and two soldiers ran after him. He tore through the bush, scratching his face and hands and ripping his jacket, the soldiers following so close he could hear their boots hit the dirt. The land started to slope down and he moved fast, but he came through some thick brush onto the bank of a dry riverbed, lost his footing and went over the side. It wasn’t far but the bank was covered with bush and rock, and when he hit the bottom he came down hard on something sharp that cracked a rib and knocked the air out of his lungs. The soldiers came flying down into the river bed and were on him before he could even

sit up, kicking and yelling words he couldn't understand. A few of their kicks found their way into the broken rib. They got him up with a gun against his back and scrambled up the bank.

The soldiers chatted in Portuguese as they walked; the one with the gun was telling a story and the other, about Assumani's age but much taller, snorted his amusement. Assumani looked around for a place where he could slip off into the bush but the soldier made sure he felt the barrel of the gun and he didn't risk it.

The others were still at the fence when they got back. There were fewer soldiers than he'd thought – only seven, including his two, who pushed him towards Matilde and Serge. Serge's face was blank and Matilde avoided eye-contact.

"Passaporte," the commanding officer grunted at Assumani.

He looked at Matilde, who kept her eyes on the ground.

"Give me your passport."

The officer was a head shorter than Assumani and had the barrel-shaped torso that some men develop with age. He spat an instruction at Matilde in Portuguese.

"Answer him," she said without looking up.

"It was stolen. In Maputo."

He clearly didn't believe it.

"Country of origin?"

"The Congo. DRC"

"Your reason for visit Mozambique?"

"I'm travelling through. I was willing to pass through the border post but my passport was taken in Maputo."

Matilde said something in Portuguese and the officer slapped her across the face. He went up so close to her that their bodies were touching. She kept her face turned down.

"Explain your new boyfriend about penalty."

"Por favor, Matheus," she said softly, still not looking him at him.

He looked at Assumani.

“You must pay a tax. For being allowed to cross here.”

Assumani took his wallet out his back pocket and handed the man a five dollar bill, which left the wallet empty.

“You playing a game?”

Assumani showed him the wallet.

“You are not crossing the border with five dollars. If you don’t pay penalty, you are breaking the law and then I must give you to the border police.”

He shrugged as if it was all the same to him. Matilde kept her face down. He had his hand on her back and moved it slowly down onto her thigh, lifted the fabric of her skirt and slipped it underneath. Assumani wondered if this sort of thing had happened to his sisters on their way into Tanzania, or in the camp.

He kneeled down and took the last of the money out his sock. When he stood again he could feel blood coursing down the right side of his body where he’d fallen. He unfolded the notes and passed them to the officer, who stuffed them into his jacket pocket without checking the denominations.

When the soldiers had marched back up the path Matilde walked to the fence without a word and held up the wires. Serge and Assumani ducked through and held them up for her on the other side. No one spoke. The bush thickened as the path veered right and went down a gentler slope towards the riverbed.

Etienne was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree. He stood when he saw them but Matilde walked straight past him.

“Matilde.”

She turned. Etienne raised his shoulders and spread his hands, palms up.

“I wasn’t—”

“Don’t.”

She waved him away and walked on through the trees.

Assumani stood there for a few minutes, unsure what to do, too embarrassed to look at Etienne who stood staring into the darkness behind her.

Later Assumani found Matilde sitting on a mound of rock on the side of the riverbed. She didn't turn around when he approached.

"I'm sorry about running. That's how we have to do at home and when the soldiers appeared," he shrugged, "I just went."

She said nothing so he sat down behind her on the rocky protrusion.

From up close he realised it wasn't natural, as he'd assumed; it had been built up from compacted earth and rock.

"What is this place?"

"It was for weapons. They used to bring them in this way during the war." Matilde climbed down into the river bed and when Assumani followed her he saw that the structure extended all the way down. She moved some rocks at the foot of the pile and slithered forward until the top half of her body was inside. She emerged dragging one of the suitcases they'd brought with them and took out a grey fleece blanket, then pushed the suitcase back into its alcove.

"Come."

She spread the blanket out on the ground and crawled under it. Assumani winced when he lay on his right hand side to stop the blood from staining the blanket.

"What's wrong?"

"It's not serious. I fell when I was running."

"We'll look at it tomorrow."

She turned away, her head cradled in the crook of her elbow.

They got back on the path just after daybreak and followed it until it met up with the dirt road. Etienne hailed a bakkie and it pulled over in a cloud of dust. There

were two passengers in the cab and another two in the back, all women. The driver put his head out the window.

“Manguzi,” Etienne said.

He ran his eyes over their group and said something in Zulu. Etienne waited for Matilde to reply.

“Ok,” the driver said looking at Etienne. “Thirteen for the squeeze, thirty each for you.”

Assumani and Serge passed their bags up to the women in the back while Etienne paid the driver.

The journey was shorter than Assumani expected. It was the same grassland dotted with trees and bush as north of the border, but there were more houses and what looked like a school.

At the bus stop in Manguzi they crossed the road to a kombi with ‘I love Jesus’ painted in red letters on the sliding door. Etienne embraced the man leaning who climbed out the driver’s seat and loaded the bags into the back.

Etienne turned to face Assumani.

“This is us.”

Assumani took his outstretched hand.

“Ask around, there are always farms hiring piece-workers.”

“He’s coming with us.”

There was a stunned silence in which they all looked at Matilde, Assumani as shocked as everyone else.

“We’ve already done more than we agreed. The deal was only to the border.”

“That was before he spent all his money getting us over it,” she replied with her eyes lowered. “Oh, I forgot – you were too far to see any of that.”

He spat on the ground at her feet. She didn’t move.

“Where is he going to stay, Matilde? Maybe on the couch with Serge? Or in between Benoit and Seko?”

“We will find a plan. We’re not leaving him here.”

“Oh, it’s like that,” Etienne said slowly and, turning to Assumani with a smirk, “That was very fast, no?”

Assumani said nothing. Etienne got into the passenger seat.

“Are you ready?” Matilde smiled and lowered her top lip over the gap.

“But what about – ?”

“He’s agreed.”

Seko, who drove the taxi and later turned out to share their flat, picked people up along the highway and soon Assumani was crammed between a sweaty farm-worker and the speaker. He hadn’t expected it to be so humid this far south, and he was soon soaked in sweat and feeling dizzy. He slipped his hand under his T-shirt and felt the wound: it was bleeding through the crust of dried blood that had formed during the night, and the surrounding skin felt hot and swollen.

He tried to concentrate on what he’d do when he got to Durban. First he’d email Abigail; she could send him money through Western Union to get to Cape Town. Etienne wouldn’t stand his presence for long and he couldn’t do anything until he got money. He slept and when he woke the sun was setting but he was sweating more than ever. In a daze he saw the suburbs spread out over the hills followed by swathes of shacks, and finally the high-rise buildings of the city.

They stopped at a block of flats with three storeys of rounded pink balconies and eight storeys above of sharp lines and box-like windows, obviously added later on. The building was sandwiched between a glass-clad office block and a Tudor pub. On the same block were Chicken Licken, a turquoise mosque and a Lewis furniture store.

These details Assumani saw later. At the time he noticed nothing. He struggled to get out the car, tried to push his body up but his arms couldn’t hold his weight. Seko and Serge pulled him out when they were finished unloading the bags.

“From when you fell?” Matilde said, pointing at the blood on his T-shirt.

Assumani nodded.

“Wait here.”

They took the bags inside. Etienne and Serge didn't come out again but Matilde did two trips for her bundles. When she returned she draped one of Assumani's arms around her shoulders and helped him up, then led him into the dark lobby. The air was stale despite the missing window panes, tiles were torn up in places and graffiti was scrawled across the walls. The lift was broken so she dragged Assumani up six flights of stairs, through the flat and into a small room off the kitchen, not more than two by three metres, with a mattress on the floor and some cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other as shelves.

Matilde went out to the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with a tray that she placed on the crate next to the bed. She handed Assumani a glass of water. He drank and watched her pour salt into a bowl of warm water. She knelt on the floor and pulled off his shoes and stood to help him out of his clothes. His T-shirt was stuck to his skin with dried blood and he winced when she peeled it off. When he was in only his boxer shorts she eased him down to the pillow and covered his legs with a sheet. The ceiling sagged above him; he wondered how long it had been like that and whether it would fall with him under it.

Matilde sat down on the edge of the bed and dipped a dishcloth into the bowl. Assumani jerked away when he felt the salt-water on his skin, so she placed a hand firmly on his shoulder and worked her way around the wound in small, confident movements, rubbing away the blood that had dried. She dabbed his skin with the towel, placed the strip of material over the wound and unrolled it over his stomach. She got up and leaned over him to tuck the homemade bandage under his back, caught it with her other hand and brought it round over the top again. She repeated this twice more and secured the loose flap with a safety pin.

“You have other clothes?”

Assumani pointed to his bag at the foot of the mattress. He didn't remember bringing it up. She pulled out a white T-shirt, gathered the material up in her hands and pulled it down over his head.

"Drink," she said, handing him the glass again.

When he was finished she pulled the sheet up to his neck and left the room.

Assumani fell asleep immediately but woke up drenched with sweat a few times in the night, confused about where he was and how he'd got there. Once he thought saw someone standing at the door. It might have been Etienne but whoever it was left when he saw Assumani was awake.

When he woke up mid-morning his body was on fire. He unravelled the bandage to see if the wound had improved but it was inflamed and leaking pus. He tried to stand but his shaking legs wouldn't hold his weight and he had to sit back down on the bed.

Matilde appeared in the doorway.

"We're going to the doctor."

She helped him get his pants back on and led him through the flat to the front door. The lounge was about the same size as the kitchen and crammed with furniture. Clothes, newspapers and cigarette boxes were strewn everywhere and in the middle of the floor stood ten or fifteen wooden giraffes in various stages of sanding and staining. Etienne looked at them from the dirty green couch but said nothing.

Getting down the stairs was harder than it had been getting up the day before and Assumani leaned heavily on Matilde. Outside it was overcast and the sky was heavy with clouds. They walked to the corner and Matilde stopped a taxi. It was hot and crowded inside and Assumani could feel his wound pressing against Matilde. Each time they went over a pothole the pain in his side took his breath away.

They got out under a bridge with the highway above them.

"Only five minutes. Then we'll be there."

Matilde put his arm over her shoulders and led him between the buildings into a narrow alley. Most of the buildings were high-rises but a few old houses sat among them in faded colours. They went into a tall block of flats and up onto the first floor. The woman who opened the door looked blankly at Matilde. She lifted Assumani's T-shirt as if the woman couldn't see the blood on it anyway.

“Entre?”

She leaned back against the wall so they could pass, closed the door and went back into the house. Matilde and Assumani waited in the passage behind a boy with one arm strapped to his chest and a girl who sat on the floor with her swollen belly resting in her hands.

“I thought you said we were going to the hospital,”

“Dr. Washikala is fine.”

They waited for over an hour. The pregnant girl was out quickly but the boy took a long time to have his arm set and they heard him crying through the wall the whole time. When their turn came Matilde helped Assumani up and through the passage into an examination room that had once been a kitchen. A set of portable wooden steps had been placed in front of the table and a sheet was draped over it.

“Come in.”

Dr. Washikala sat on a stool, clipboard in hand. Assumani guessed he was around fifty but his hair was already speckled with white.

“Have we seen you before?”

He looked up and motioned for Assumani to climb onto the table. Assumani mounted the stairs and sat on the table, his legs dangling but not reaching the floor.

“No.”

“Name?”

He looked at Matilde, unsure which name to give. She nodded.

“Assumani Makanga.”

The doctor looked up and examined his face for a moment, then continued questioning him in French.

There was no anaesthetic injection before the stitches and Assumani bit down on his cheeks until they bled. The doctor poured pills out of a brown bottle with a hand-written label into a bank bag. When he was finished the assistant came in and told Matilde how much; there was no invoice. Matilde opened a plastic snake-skin purse and handed over the money.

Assumani didn't know how many days he spent drifting in and out of consciousness in the room off the kitchen. Matilde checked on him before leaving in the morning and when she returned in the late afternoon; she brought him dinner in bed and redressed his wound, which continued to seep. Neither of them spoke much. The only time he left the room was to walk, leaning on the furniture for support, through the lounge to the toilet.

One night on his way back he heard raised voices in one of the rooms off the passage and stopped to listen through the door.

"... how long this will... Matilde?"

It was Etienne. He was angry but he spoke so softly Assumani could catch only snatches of what he said.

"I don't know, until he's well enough to go... There's someone..... him money....."

"You believe that?"

"Yes."

"You always were naive. comfortable for him here."

Assumani couldn't hear Matilde's reply.

"... He's got a free bed and his own nurse!"

"What do.....? Throw him out with a fever and no money?"

When his fever broke he was still weak but he was able for the first time to get a sense of the place he was staying. It seemed that between eight and ten people shared the apartment but he could never quite work out who lived there and where everyone slept. People came and went and there were a few people away on buying trips at any one time. Everyone but Matilde was Congolese. Everyone was involved in informal trade – curios, shoe repairs, guarding cars. Two of the men had a small panel-beating shop and one ran a barber shop out of an awning on the pavement.

Matilde was the only woman in the flat. She left the house early with the men and spent the day trading, but stopped working a couple of hours before them to do the shopping, cooking and cleaning. She had a never-ending store of energy; not effervescent but a slow, steady supply that kept her moving gracefully and solidly through her chores. Sometimes Assumani heard her singing while she washed the men's clothes in a plastic tub in the kitchen.

As soon as he was well enough he walked down to an internet café to email Abigail, and checked for a reply every evening after that. In the mornings he accompanied Matilde to work at the Victoria Market, a large pink building with squat minarets jutting off the roof. They spread out a sheet of blue plastic on the paving in between a massive Malawian woman tending to heaps of oranges and potatoes on one side and a couple of rowdy Senegalese girls who braided hair under an umbrella on the other.

Assumani helped Matilde lay out her clothes. There were some dresses left over from the last parcel but the stock from the latest trip was all trousers. She folded each pair in half, deftly straightening out their creases with her long fingers, and laid them down. Each pair covered the bottom two-thirds of the one above it so they fanned downwards like a deck of cards. She colour-coded each row from dark at the top to lighter shades at the bottom of the display, blacks and blues in one column, browns and beiges in another, greys in a third.

The first day they waited over an hour before anyone approached, and then customers trickled in sporadically. Matilde's rapport with her customers was

unusual. She wasn't pushy like the hawkers around them; she watched men fingering through the trousers and left them alone for a while. Just when Assumani thought they'd lost one she'd approach him and talk softly, picking up a few pairs and showing him how strong the fabric was, how straight the zip. She had a knack for judging people's taste and a few men walked away with a new purchase.

Assumani made a sale too, but mainly he watched her.

"You're good at this," he said when a man walked away with a pair of pants and two T-shirts. Matilde smiled and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Did you do it at home as well?"

She shook her head.

"I was a child when I left – maybe nine or ten."

"Did you come with your family?"

"Raphael, my older brother."

"Your parents are still in Mozambique?"

She shook her head again. A woman approached their stand and Matilde tended to her. The woman was buying a birthday present for her son and wasn't sure about the size. She held up different pairs against her body, compared them and moved on to others. She walked away empty-handed.

"What did you do?" Matilde asked.

"When?"

"At home."

"I was a student."

"At a university?"

He nodded.

"What did you study?"

"Law. That's why I'm going to Cape Town; I'm hoping my aunt can help me while I finish my degree."

"How many years will it take?"

“I don’t know. It depends on whether they accept the credits I’ve got without documentation from the university.”

“How many years is it meant to take?”

“Here, I don’t know. At home it would have taken me five.”

Her eyes went big with surprise.

“Five years?”

Another customer approached and Matilde went over to help her.

By the afternoon the air hung like a blanket around them. Assumani was hungry and his lack of money weighed down on him. Accepting Matilde’s hospitality at home he could do; actually asking her for cash he couldn’t. He thought about looking through the bins around the building – he’d done it before – but the prospect of her seeing him dissuaded him from trying. His relief crowded out his shame when she handed him a twenty rand note and asked him to go into the market to buy some samosas for lunch.

“You’ll repay me when the money comes.”

The market inside was both familiar and strange. The smoky sweet smell of incense and spices mingled with the odours of fish from the seafood market on the bottom floor. Women in saris moved between the stalls bargaining hard over the Hindi music. There was a section of wholesale goods from China and another for African weaving and beading. Sari fabrics and scarves hung next to bright printed shirts.

He found a stall selling old recordings from all over Africa. He dug up a Ngoma Records compilation and a solo Sam Mangwana recording and hid them behind some gospel CDs in case he had a chance to come back when Abigail’s money came through. He moved on but quickly returned to reshelve the CDs in the correct place.

He and Matilde shared the food sitting next to the stock on their tarpaulin. The rest of the afternoon passed in a sleepy haze. School children appeared from

two o'clock and some boys started up a game of cricket on the paving in front of them. At five o'clock they packed up the goods and walked to some outdoor stalls where Matilde bought ingredients for dinner with her day's earnings. The rain started and by the time they got home they were soaked. .

We'd been driving for a few hours and I was tired, so we stopped for coffee at a quaint place that served scones.

On the way back from the bathroom I checked my phone and there was a message from Phillip:

All good here. Diving's superb. You ok?

I typed in: *Fine. I've been with a six foot Congolese man for three days*, but deleted it without sending.

The waitress looked us over before coming to our table and I made a mental note not to leave her a tip.

One evening after a trip to the internet café he returned to find the flat filled with people. Until then he'd had very little to do with the others who stayed there; when he was ill he was confined to his room off the kitchen and after that he spent the days out with Matilde. He was still weak and tired early, and they worked such long hours he was in bed before they got home. The few people he'd seen had been polite but wary; he wondered if Etienne had said something to them. Etienne himself seemed to be avoiding him and the only interaction he'd had with Serge was a nervous greeting one morning outside the toilet.

He went straight into the kitchen where a tall, strong-armed woman was scraping bones and bits of food into the bin and passing the plates to Matilde to stack on the counter. A third was washing dishes at the sink; she was short with a small frame but heavy around the hips and thighs and her hair was knotted into tight rosebuds on her scalp. The women were talking and laughing but when

Assumani entered they went quiet. Matilde retrieved a plate of food covered with a cloth and placed it on the small table.

“It’s cold now.”

“That’s ok. Thank you.”

She covered her smile with her hand and turned to the woman at the sink.

“Bonga, finish those glasses. We’re running out of clean ones.”

She picked up a tray and went out into the lounge.

Assumani introduced himself to the women and sat down to eat. They were shy at first but they warmed up as they chatted. Both were South African and their partners –in the lounge with the other men – were Congolese. They wanted to know how he’d met Matilde, how long he’d been staying there, what he was planning to do in South Africa. Obviously she hadn’t told them about him.

“Why didn’t you tell us what you were hiding?” said the tall one with a grin when Matilde came in with another round of dirty glasses. Matilde looked embarrassed so Assumani changed the subject.

“Is there a party tonight?” He pointed at the doorway.

“Family meeting later. They always have some drinks here before.”

“Family meeting?”

She cocked her head to the side and frowned.

“It’s a group. All from Congo, the same part. You don’t have it?”

He shook his head.

“It’s like a society, but not just for burying. They help you find a job or place to stay.”

“Can I go in?”

Matilde looked over her shoulder at the kitchen door.

“You from the same place in Congo as them?”

“Where are they from?”

“I don’t know.”

She shrugged.

The small living room was thick with smoke. Men were sitting on the couch and the chairs and on the floor drinking. Etienne was with a group in the middle of the room playing cards. He looked up when Assumani entered but didn't do anything to indicate that he knew him.

Assumani chatted with two men by the window. Papa had been studying metallurgy back home and Jean had been training in a hotel. They'd come to South Africa to finish their studies but neither of them had received their papers yet and they were working as car guards.

Jean hated South Africans.

"You'll see." His bushy eyebrows jumped as he spoke. "They're lazy and greedy."

"I don't care what they're like," Papa said. "They have stability. I have a family and I'm going to bring them over here as soon as I can afford it."

"Stability?" Jean's eyebrows twitched. "You're blind. My cousin went into a police station to report a burglary last week and you know what the officer did? He tore up his papers and locked him in a cell for the night. Where's your stability?"

The men continued to argue. Assumani excused himself and went over to the table.

"Hi."

Etienne looked up at him with irritation. The light overhead brought out the acne scars pock-marking his cheeks.

"May I join you at the meeting tonight?"

Etienne exchanged a look with the man seated next to him at the table, who stood up and put out his hand.

"*Bonjour. Zachery Essous.*"

He was tall and thin, and wore a moustache. He asked Assumani some questions about his family and background. When he heard which part of the country Assumani was from he shook his head.

"Then, no, it's not possible. I'm sorry but there are rules."

Etienne looked at him with a smirk of satisfaction and returned to his card game.

When everyone had left for the meeting Assumani and Matilde were alone in the flat. He helped her collect the beer bottles and empty the ashtrays.

“I’ve never seen a man doing women’s work before,” she with a smile and closed her lips.

They moved the chairs back into place and swept bits of chips off the rug. In the kitchen Matilde washed the last of the dirty glasses and passed them to Assumani to dry.

“Where do you want these?” he asked when they were finished, pointing to the crates of empty bottles on the table.

“You can stack them up in the corner. I’ll take them back next week.”

He took the rubbish downstairs and sat watching her sweep the kitchen. She put the broom back in the cupboard and sat down across the table from him.

“My aunt replied.”

Matilde smoothed her skirt over her thighs, giving no indication that she’d heard him.

“She can send the money by Friday.”

He’d been waiting for this for a year but now he felt only disappointed.

“That’s good news.”

“I’ll pay you back when it arrives. Just tell me what it comes to – the doctor, food, the transport here.”

Matilde shook her head and got up to wipe the counter. After a few minutes of silence he spoke hesitantly to her back.

“I’m not sure I’m going to go. I was thinking I could stay here and set up a leather goods business. I’ve got contacts back home.”

She hung the dishcloth over the tap and turned to face him.

“You can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“You need to finish your studies.”

“I can save up and do that later. There’s a university here.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Assumani.”

He couldn’t remember her ever saying his name before. He stood and moved towards her.

“Why did you help me at the border?”

“You were alone,” she shrugged, looking at her feet. “You had been kind to Serge.”

A drawer was open on the other side of the room and she ducked past him and pushed it closed. “You can’t stay here.”

“Then come with me.”

They stood looking at each other across the room.

“I can’t go to Cape Town. I’m sorry.”

“You can find another job there.”

“It’s not that.”

“What is it then? You want to carry on cooking and cleaning up after Etienne and his friends?”

Matilde said nothing.

“What is it between you and him?”

“It’s not like that.”

“How is it then?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

She sat, breathed deeply and rested her chin on her interlaced fingers, her elbows resting on the table.

“He looks after me. He makes sure I’m safe when we travel.”

“And in return?”

She looked up, her jaw clenched in resentment.

“In return I look after him, I take care of things here. He’s the reason I’m living here – he helped me at a time when I didn’t have things of my own. He’s not forcing me to stay.”

“So what did you do?”

“When the money came through I left.”

“You’re serious? You just left?”

Assumani nodded.

“I don’t understand. You just spent three days telling me this story and that’s the ending? You left? Did you at least get her number?”

Assumani laughed.

“I’m serious!”

He shook his head.

We found the house where Abigail was staying and I pulled over.

“Do you want me to wait in case she’s not there?”

“No thanks.”

Was I supposed to offer him a place to stay, or give him my number?

“Thank you for the lift.”

He got out the car and crossed the street without looking back.