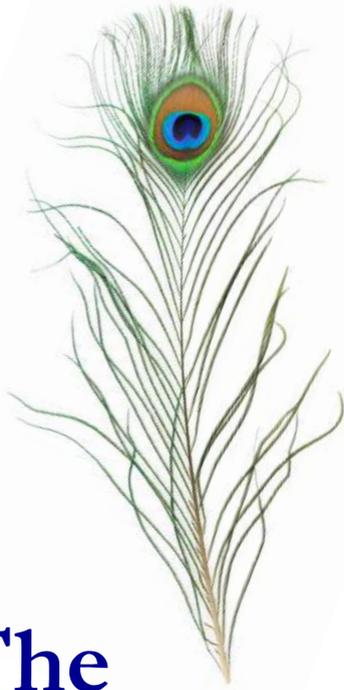


Edited by
Jo-Anne Richards and Richard Beynon



The
Eleventh
Month
an anthology

The Eleventh Month

The Eleventh Month

Edited by
Richard Beynon and Jo-Anne Richards

all about writing 

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One weekend in the eleventh month...

The stories in this volume were largely the product of a single weekend in November 2016, spent at Temenos, in the Victorian village of McGregor in the Western Cape.

The weather was hot and still. Peacocks cried and posed, and writers could be found alone and palely loitering in the shrubbery while contemplating their beginnings, middles and ends.

In addition to the writers at Temenos, others were tethered to the proceedings via email and the internet.

We presented them with ten story “seeds” – ideas that they were free to elaborate on, or ignore altogether. We’ve included all ten of these for your interest at the end of this volume. Not all were equally inspiring – only three appear to have been the trigger for stories.

We gave short workshops on some of the skills and techniques involved in writing short stories, and then set our writers free to compose, frantically, in the buzzing Karoo heat. While they were busy, we communicated advice to, and answered questions from, our online contingent.

By afternoon tea on Sunday afternoon, their first drafts were complete. Over the next few weeks, we gave notes, and they edited and revised their stories.

In addition, to fill out what promised to be a slim volume, we invited members of the All About Writing community to submit short stories, promising to include the three or four best in the collection.

What you'll find here, then, are the fruits of all this labour.

You'll also find the notes we prepared, the basis for the mini-workshops we gave to the participants, in the hope that they'll help equip you to take up your own pen – or whip out your own laptop.

Jo-Anne Richards
Richard Beynon

Saved

Christelle Connor

All of them, lost. Matthew slipped into the alley and leaned against the lamp post. He directed his torch into the shadows. All of them had chosen the darkness, offering their souls and hearts to hell. One of his leaflets blew past into the gutter.

“Hey, holy man, why don’t you bring some of that light over here and see what life’s all about.” The group of youngsters snickered and taunted him. The light flickered and his nose burned as acidic fumes spiraled around him.

“Life is more than instant gratification or sinful pleasure.” He pulled his tie straight, lifted his chin and strode into their midst, the leaflet offered as a passage to eternal life. “You can be saved tonight, it is not too late.”

The snickers became to a chorus of “Fuck you”, which faded as they were swallowed by the darkness. He looked up at the starless sky and for a second felt the emptiness of all the lost souls.

The sign outside the bar hissed and spat, struggling to stay alive. A Smirnoff bottle, half burnt out, splashed green across the sidewalk. The crash of a door caught his attention and a waiflike figure hurtled into his path. The girl fell at his feet, covered in very little. Two men towered over her and pulled her up by the hair.

“Not so nice to be on the receiving end, mmm?” one of them growled. Matthew reacted instinctively. He pushed into

the light, announcing himself. The girl was young, with dark pools for eyes. He averted his eyes from her shivering body.

“This is not the way to treat a lady, guys.”

“What a fucking joke. Mister self-righteous himself. Love to see you save this one.” The slick one sneered and threw the girl at him. Matthew shied away as her vodka breath hit him. She laughed as he tried to avoid touching her and he felt bare. He straightened his shoulders. His aim was righteous, after all. “Come on, let’s get you somewhere safe.”

“Are you here to protect me?” Her tone was mocking, her voice husky. He felt her eyes trying to draw him into her soul and its darkness.

“We should get you home and off this street. It’s not too late to turn your back on this.” His collar chafed and his tie felt too tight. He took off his jacket and held it out to her, a peace offering. “You look cold.”

“This is my playground.” She ignored the jacket and her words gave him pause, but what was faith without obstacles in its way?

“Address please. I won’t leave you here with those men still lurking around.”

“Kimberley Hotel, around the block.” She marched ahead of him. Following, he caught sight of a glint on the sidewalk. The broken chain felt small and slippery in his hand and he dropped it in his pocket. He caught up with her on the corner and she turned suddenly, throwing him off-balance. Her face did not yet have the deep telling lines of life on the streets and he felt hopeful. He held a leaflet between them until she grasped it and opened the hotel door.

She took a step towards him and he could feel her breath against his throat. “I have all you need upstairs,” she whispered. “Room 61. Don’t forget.”

“I’ll pray for you. Be safe.” He closed his eyes and let go of the door.

He had forgotten to ask her about the chain. It had to be hers. A stab of pain brought him back to the moment. He glanced down. A sliver of glass protruded from his thumb, glinting in the light from the bar. It must have happened when he bent for the chain. He drew it out slowly, savouring the pain. Blood oozed from the cut, a reminder of absolved sin.

The hotel’s bar sign flashed hot-red and yellow, the walls coloured by piss and vomit. The acidic smell of mind-altering drugs lodged in the back of his throat. His unease over tonight’s mission was unfamiliar. It had something to do with her eyes, which had stayed with him – empty, yet demanding. But surely he’d seen need there too? She was just another soul to save, as important as the next one.

He shifted the Bible to his other hand. His fingers had left imprints in the leather. He had forgotten to ask her name, in order to pray for her – or to enable him to ask for her now. He rubbed at his throat where her breath had marked him. He felt hot. Thrusting his spare hand into his pocket, he felt the chain between his fingers.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there before he spotted her. She was walking towards the bar, heels clicking in time to the thumping sounds from a nearby club. She was wearing a little more than she had on their last encounter ... but that’s not something he should be noticing. He should put that out of his mind.

“Good evening. We met the other night.”

“Well, if it ain’t my hero.” Her voice was honey running over his nerves. “Are you gonna tell me your name or are we playing the guessing game?”

A spattering of freckles ran over her nose, a reminder of blameless childhood, surely. Of innocence and fun. “I’m Matthew.”

“Eva.” She looked him straight in the eyes.

“Do you mind if we sit down for a few minutes?” Her dress made her blend in with the darkness beyond the reach of the light spilling from the bar. He feared she might simply disappear into it and the thought made him uncomfortable. He remembered the chain and drew it out. It slid through his fingers and fell to the pavement. As he bent to retrieve it, her heel pinned his hand to the ground. The pain was a welcome sensation. It was something he understood, something he could focus on.

“Sure sitting is all you want to do?”

“Did you read the leaflet?” Delicate angel wings were tattooed around her ankle. There was hope, he had known it. She abruptly released him and he felt strangely weak.

“I have work waiting, so make it quick.” But she nonetheless crossed to an empty table outside the bar, and sat.

“I want to pray with you, for you...”

He usually found the hum of conversation cheery and comforting, but tonight it sounded false. He felt trapped inside the little white blocks on the red-checked table cloth. The scab on his thumb had broken open. He had an urge to pick at it, and to continue picking until his whole body hurt. He felt like the rope in a tug of war between his

faith and her soul. Matthew's eyes jerked with the second hand on the clock. He needed her to arrive. Never had it felt so important. With just a little more support, he knew he could turn her around.

A piercing shriek became a wail as an ambulance left the emergency exit across from the coffee shop. The midnight hour madness had begun.

"Still waiting for her?" John was one of the older religious brothers, a smattering of grey in his hair and beard. Matthew gave a curt nod. He had never liked John, seeing the deep lines scored across his cheeks and the reddened nose as witness to the weakness of a younger self.

He had hoped the bottomless coffee and free wi-fi would entice her, as it did many of their lost souls. His gaze strayed outside ... and there she was, leaning against the pillar, bright light spilling over her.

He paid and left the warmth of the coffee shop, aware of John's eyes following him. He felt inexplicable guilt, as though he were doing something wrong, which was absurd. He wasn't like John. He had always been strong in his faith. He had never felt tempted the way the older man must have been.

"Hi there." A shadow danced between her breasts. The royal blue dress shone like the skin of a snake, ready to shed. He plucked at his shirt, which felt tight across his chest.

"Hi," she breathed.

"I'm so glad you came. Let's go inside and get some coffee." He turned back to the lighted window.

"No. Stop wasting my time." Her fingers closed like steel cuffs around his arm as she yanked him back against the pillar. Her eyes were on fire and, when she cupped him, his body jolted.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” He couldn’t stop staring at her face, the small scar on her nose, her pale lower lip caught between her teeth. He tasted blood. Then a wailing siren split the night, the emergency light pulsing red across her face.

No. He was strong. He thrust her from him. He could resist this one small temptation. His faith was eternal.

“You know where to find me, holy man, when you need more.”

He turned and stumbled back towards the coffee shop. He didn’t feel like a saviour. He felt diminished. He couldn’t lose her now; allow evil to triumph. He had to show her that strength of spirit would win in the end. If she wouldn’t follow him into the light, perhaps he was meant to fetch her from her darkness. It was a test of his strength, that’s what it was. In saving one everlasting soul, you saved the whole world. Wasn’t that what they said? Wasn’t that what he believed?

The smell of stale polish and reused oil clung to the passageway. Smoke curled lazily from the open door of room 61. The band around his chest pulled tighter and his heart fluttered against his ribs.

Her back was to him, the black leather dress wrapped around her thin waist. Knee high PVC boots fitted her tightly, so shiny he could see the lightbulb reflecting off them. A whip dangled loosely from her hand. He inhaled sharply, keeping his body still. When he’d chosen this path, he’d known it would be filled with tests, each one making him stronger.

Her startled black doe eyes focused on his lips. Wisps of blue black hair curled loosely against her neck, her braid reminding him of a long lost childhood.

“You came,” she breathed.

The bare bulb hung low, the corners of the room hiding in darkness. A bed and chair were the only furniture. Feeling confident now, he took a step towards her. He had never noticed how delicate her collarbones were, like the wings of a tiny sunbird. He would take her away from all this. How wonderful it would be to carry her into the light. His mind was made up. His faith made him strong.

Her skin felt warm as he took her hand. The memory of her fingers, and where they had touched him, almost made him drop her hand again.

“You are coming with me tonight. This place is not good for you.”

She yanked at his hand, pressing it against her. He’d forgotten the strength packed in her small body. He felt a shock of pleasure at the warmth and softness of her breast, allowing his hand to linger before he wrenched it away. This was a test. The devil was trying him. He had to be strong.

“Stop pretending, Matthew. You want to touch me. You like it.” She sounded hurt. A pulse fluttered in her neck. His flesh would not be weak. She touched a nipple and traced the outline of his left leg with the whip. A tear of sweat trickled between her breasts. The roaring in his ears grew louder.

The sudden push against his chest surprised him. He stumbled backward against the chair, landing on his knees. He could not lift his eyes from the four-inch heels beside him. He felt the searing sting of the whip. He reared up, but then sank back again.

No, it felt right. It was the least he deserved for his moments of weakness. It felt good. The scourge of the Lord absolving the sins of the flesh...

“Again,” he croaked. “Hit me again.” He could feel himself being purified. He could feel the holy ecstasy overcoming him. “Oh yes...”

The whipping stopped. She had spoken, but he hadn’t heard, or hadn’t understood. He struggled to his feet.

“What did you say?”

“I said that will be R750.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Face it, Matthew. You’re just another john. No different from all the other punters. You got what you came for, getting off on my lash. Just like all those before you, and those still to come...”

I Did What I Could

Darryl Boswell

May 17, 1891. The farm *Rietvlei*, eastern highlands, ZAR.

Susara almost tripped over her own feet as she shuffled to latch the shutters of the kliphuisje against the chilly autumn wind.

“Ai, toggie,” she scolded the children clinging to her skirt, “skoert!” But she paused for a moment as she took in their wide-eyed stares and wet little cheeks. She didn’t have time to weep for him.

She nudged the toddlers, Nella and Sannie and three-year-old Cassie Annie, Lenie and Sarie, who sat huddled in a corner.

“Wat sit julle drietjies daar en ginnegaap? Help asseblief vir Mamma met die kleintjies.” Then she eyed Jan Johannes – at nine, the new man of the house – drifting about the room aimlessly, no doubt itching to be outside with Sibijaan and the other little farm boys. Susara contemplated her brood fearfully: in five months’ time there would be another mouth to feed...

September 22, 1926. Supreme Court, Witwatersrand Local Division.

“We had five children. When my wife deserted me, she took one child with her and left four in the house. I got this child back later.”

Susara shifted about on the hard bench in the public gallery, then turned and leaned slightly forward to stare at her daughter in the dock. Annie jutted out her chin defiantly. Susara closed her eyes. Where had she gone wrong?

Admit it, Susara. It was a huge mistake to abandon your children.

Please don't use that word, it's not nice and it's not accurate. I did not *abandon* my children.

I think it's time to call a spade a spade, don't you? How else can you explain giving away Annie, Lenie and Sannie, and deserting Jan Johannes also?

It was the hardest thing I've ever done. It broke my heart. I was still so young ... seven children, and four months' pregnant. What choice did I have? I couldn't care for them all. They deserved better than I could offer at the time. It was for the best. Maybe if Nicolaas hadn't sold his inheritance...

Susara removed a crumpled hanky from her cardigan sleeve and blew her nose. But the voices wouldn't leave her alone.

Making Nicolaas the scapegoat is cowardly.

He should never have sold *Tweefontein* to his brother ... it was against the wishes in his parents' will.

Let's face it – you would never have coped.

My faith is strong.

Then you should have known that God would never have given you a load that He knew you would not have been able to carry.

Like the woman at Bethany, I did what I could.

Be honest, it was Gert, wasn't it? You knew you wouldn't find another husband with such a large family. You chose another man rather than try to keep your family together.

I always put my family first. I did it out of necessity. God will be my judge.

Look what it did to them: just as you abandoned Annie, so she abandoned her children – walked out on them, not one yet a teenager. You heard the evidence: ten years later she married another unlawfully, only to desert him after nine months. You were her role model, Susara, you're culpable.

Susara was back in the courtroom. She took a deep breath and focused her gaze on Annie: that rough face, red, with spider legs – *ja-nee*, a sure sign of you know what. She shook her head. Poor Annie ... Yet again, her thoughts distracted her...

I don't condone what she did, but I feel desperately sorry for her ... bigamy ... who knows what drove her to it. Now she'll pay for her choices.

And you for yours?

I don't regret the decision I made. I learned to forgive myself – it has helped – but we do pay for our choices. I felt the loss. The pain and grief lasted a very long time.

She must've felt unwanted, worthless when you gave her away. So much resentment and anger.

Spare a thought for me, too. I was also left scarred. The loss of my children was the most painful thing any mother could experience, yet you refuse to show me any sympathy.

You had a choice.

I don't know why you enjoy humiliating me, or why I put up with it.

I'm not under your control, Susara. But let's not stray. Why single out Annie, Lenie and Sannie?

I singled out no one – I thought I could cope with the youngest, they needed their mother most. Little Sannie was an exception – she had an opportunity I couldn't ignore. My decision was the correct one. Now she's happily married ...

You betrayed all your older children, not only Annie. Look what happened to Jan Johannes – accusing Sophia of adultery then not

turning up for the court case. Now he lives in sin with that Van der Sandt woman. How shameful. And Lenie, deserted by her second husband – why? Do you still say you did nothing wrong?

If Jan Johannes could take up arms against the Kakies, he can look after himself. Why blame me?

You didn't really care, did you, Susara? Out of sight, out of mind.

We kept in touch.

We?

Well, it was difficult for me. I had to go wherever Gert went with my new family ... but Sarie kept in touch with her sisters, even named two daughters after them. She visited Sannie...

There wasn't much effort on your part, though, was there?

Knowing what happened after I gave up my children, how can I regret my decision? Our *Watervalsboek* farmhouse burnt down by the Kakies, a year in the Merebank concentration camp with my young ones ... losing baby Johanna...

Her hand instinctively crept up her sleeve.

Wipe away those crocodile tears, Susara.

I'm not crying. I've no more tears to shed. At least Annie and Lenie and Sannie were spared all of this. I know about pain and loss and grief. I only ask that my children understand ... and forgive me.

You can't just let it go. You do not answer, Susara...

Enough, please ... You keep rubbing my nose in it. Why must you torment me so? I hear your voice in my head all the time.

Those who do evil will suffer ... God will judge you according to your deeds.

I'm not guilty, not guilty!

Susara uttered a muffled cry as she jolted upright. The court orderly eased his grip on her shoulder. She had lost her

bearings. Where was she? She shook her head, looked about, and then remembered. The accused was found guilty ... the marriage declared null and void ... the bigamist committed to Germiston gaol...

Judge Solomon flounced from the courtroom. Annie didn't even glance in her direction as she was led to the holding cells.

Susara began to cry.

Porsche Spyder

Gabi Thulkanam

“Tell me about mom, Oom. Ouma says you were her hero. Tell me about when she was young. Do I look like her?”

Oom’s knuckles turned white on the steering wheel, and I had to lean over to hear his answer.

“No, Jemiena, you’re not like her. You’re a good girl.”

I braced myself against the next thud of the tyres over a pot-hole. Normally he navigated the two kilometres of gravel to the gate without ever hitting one, but the rains had filled up the holes, so it was hard to know when the next one was coming.

Thud, thud.

“Ouch! All this bouncing is hurting my boobies.”

“Jemiena!”

The truck veered to the side of the road, spewing gravel over the verge. I grabbed hold of the dashboard as we swerved back on the road, sending guinea fowls scattering into the vineyards.

“Sorry, Oom Dewaldt.”

The silence in the truck made the crunch of tyres sound like thunder. I held onto my seat belt and noticed that his wasn’t fastened. Something he never allowed me to forget. I watched him from the corner of my eye, waiting for the red in his neck and face drain away. I knew how much he hated me talking about boobies and such. He was such a pussycat, my uncle.

“Oom, do you want chocolate cake for your birthday?”

“No.”

“Oom, really Oom, it will be genuine chocolate cake, with butter and lots of cream.”

“Okay then, if you insist.”

“Well, if you call me Gem, not Jemiena, I’ll make you the biggest one you’ve ever seen. I’ll use my mom’s recipe. I found it in a recipe book with her name on in the attic. Could my mother bake well, Oom?”

Thud, thud, thud. I had to brace myself a few times before we reached the tar road.

We pulled up at the gates just as the school bus from down-town stopped ahead of us.

Sue had her head out the back window. She stuck her finger in her throat, pretending to vomit. She was such a clown. I laughed and did the same but nearly really choked when I saw my uncle’s face.

“Jemiena! Young ladies do not behave like that.”

“Sorry, Oom.”

“Don’t they have a problem with short skirts at this school?” He nodded his head towards Marieke, who was swinging her hips to her iPod. I gave him a quick kiss and ran to join her at the gates.

“Hi Gem ... chauffeured by your weirdo uncle again,” she muttered under her breath. I cringed as Uncle Dewaldt pulled away, leaving a cloud of dust behind him. He was such an old softie, underneath it all. But people didn’t always see that about him.

Ouma didn’t notice the snippets of green beans flying all over the stoep. Her silver blade flashed rays of light across

her face. Tannie Maria, Ouma's house-keeper, did everything now, but as long as Ouma cleaned the vegetables, she believed that she was still doing all the cooking. Ouma had been known all over district for her cooking and baking. People used to drive from the other side of town for her koeksisters. I remember how Oom Dewaldt and I used to slip our share from the sideboard into our "loot bag" under the sink.

I loved spending my afternoons with Ouma on the stoep, she "cooking" and me sewing or reading.

"Hold the scissors at an angle *kind*, that way it will cut through the hard denim."

"Do you think I should cut it a bit shorter? I could use these bits as patchwork on my tee-shirt. I can make it look like a bra on the outside, like Lady Gaga."

"Who's Lady Gaga?"

"She took over where Madonna left off."

"Yes, I know her. She's the Virgin Mary."

"No, Ouma, not that Madonna. The one who sang *Like a Virgin*."

"That's what I said. She's the Virgin Mary." Ouma had a twinkle in her eye.

I pulled the half-finished shorts on under my dress and danced in front of Ouma, to show her how well the shorts fitted over my bum.

"*Aag, Gem, jy is so verspot, kind.*"

Just then Oom strolled up the path with a bucket brimming with ripe prickly pears. He dumped them on the table, sending my sewing basket flying across the stoep.

"Ma, stop encouraging her. Stop gyrating and take off that ridiculous thing, Jemiena."

I stopped dancing at once. I didn't like to make Oom cross.

“Here.” He pulled the thorns from a prickly pear with his teeth, without so much as a flinch, and pushed one into my mouth.

“Wow Oom, doesn’t that hurt?”

“Your oom has the skin of rhinoceros and the strength of an elephant.” Ouma beamed up at him. “Remember that time you took me under one arm and Elisabet under the other and carried us all the way to *dominee*?”

“No, really, Ouma? I’ve never heard that one.”

“Yes, *my kind*. He thought the *dominee* should throw holy water over us for our sins.”

“Los *daai ou stories, ma*. Give that blade here, before you stab yourself.” He picked up the scissors from under the table and put them, with Ouma’s blade, in his pocket. “Come, come, I’m hungry, let’s go inside.”

Marieke sat with me while I waited for Oom. Me waiting and her killing time before she went home to help in her mom’s hairdressing salon.

We were sitting on the rugby field, Marieke with a cigarette between her fingers as usual, when this boy from the technikon came over to ask for a light. He didn’t really ask. With the cigarette in his mouth, he sort of sidled over. Then he put his face close to mine and lifted his chin towards Marieke.

“Didn’t you read the warning on the pack that says smoking’s bad for baby girls?”

Before I could come back with a wisecrack, Marieke, who’s never at a loss for words, let rip. “Who do you think you are? Excuse me, Mr-I-have-just-started-driving-my-daddy’s-truck. Do you even have a licence?”

“My name’s Harry Summers and I’m pleased to meet you too.” He raised a cap at Marieke, winking at me.

Marieke moved up to make space. He slipped past her and squeezed himself onto the ledge next to me. It was the first time a boy had ever given me a second glance in the presence of Marieke’s long legs and boobies.

“I’m Marieke du Toit and this is my friend.”

“So friend, what’s your name?”

“Je ... Gem, Gem Liebenberg.”

Just then, Marieke’s younger brother, Henkie, and his friends come running towards us. “Hey Marieke, Pa’s looking for you.”

“Oh hell, let me go before Pa sends the police force after me again. Anyways, I can see I’m a third wheel here. Bye, love-birds.”

Marieke’s dad was a police sergeant and she’d never forgiven him for once sending two policemen to fetch her from a party she’d sneaked out to. In fact, she’d never forgiven her father for being a policeman.

“See you tomorrow, Gem. Bye, Prince Harry. Keep your hands off our Gem, see?” she said in a posh English accent.

Ten Pinotage, twenty Pinotage, thirty, forty ... The closer we got to school, the more nervous I was getting. I carried on counting the rows of grape vines in my head. I wished I could just blurt the question out. I’d practised for this moment. I’d checked out my expressions in the bathroom mirror. I’d got the tone of my voice just right: casual, matter of fact, ordinary. But now all that went out the window. Sauvignon blanc ten rows, twenty rows ... I would tell him when we get to row fifty. Row sixty, row seventy.

“Oom...”

I sighed with relief when he didn't hear my croaky whisper. One hundred and ten, one hundred and twenty. Marieke said I should first ask him a question about my mother. That would shut him up from cross-questioning me.

“I don't like that girl,” Oom said as we pulled up alongside Marieke, who was leaning on the gate. “Don't bang the door, child. Here, you left your lunch on the seat.”

“Sorry, Oom, thank you, Oom. Oom, you don't need to pick me up this afternoon.”

There, I said it. I nearly peed in my pants when he switched the engine off. “I don't *need* to pick you up, I *want* to pick up. And why must I *not* pick you up?”

“I'm getting a lift from a friend.”

Mr Lewis, the deputy head, stuck his hand through the window just then to give Oom one of his fund-raising handshakes. I made a silent vow to volunteer for all his many collection drives in future.

“Bye, Oom.”

So, did you do it yet? I read Marieke's note under my desk. Ole Stinky was busy with a map on the board. Other than Johannes Swartz, no-one else was paying attention to his equinoxes and whatnots. Anyway, he was the class captain so he didn't count.

Stop being vulgar. Harry's coming home with me today and we're going swimming in the dam. She read my note and made a rude hand gesture and kissy noises.

Ole Stinky turned around and glared at me. I threw the note under the desk and nodded at him as if I was in complete agreement with his views on whatever it was he

was saying. All the while, I was hoping he wouldn't ask me a question or come to look at my notes. I had nothing, other than pages full of "Mrs Gem Summers".

"Jemiena, please pay attention."

"Yes, Mr van Wyk. Sorry, Mr van Wyk."

I knew that Ouma was going to like him. He looked like James Dean in that picture she kept in her album with the torn pages. He even had the cigarette and leather jacket.

Ouma must have told me a million times that my mother had been in love with James Dean and that she'd gone off with him in his Porsche Spyder. I don't know why they didn't take me. I was only a baby and wouldn't have been any trouble. Ouma told me once that James Dean had wanted to marry her when she got pregnant, but Ouma's pa had sent her to Bloemfontein.

The trouble was, you couldn't always believe what Ouma said. She also told me Oom Dewaldt was first her brother, but after her pa died, she was allowed to say he was her son. Ouma's stories did not always make sense.

"Jemiena, are you still with us?"

"Yes, Mr van Wyk. Sorry, Mr van Wyk."

"I dare you to jump in."

"Are you sure there's no crocodiles or hippos hiding in those reeds?"

I laughed at him. "No, town mouse, don't tell me you're scared. Race you to the island."

I'd been relieved not to see Oom's truck in the driveway when Harry and I pulled up earlier. Harry had been looking forward to meeting my family, but I think he was also secretly happy that my Oom wasn't home. Ouma got Maria

to serve bottomless milk tart, with loads of fresh cream and a jug of ginger beer. She liked him. She even sent a small picnic basket with us to the dam: “For you and James.” I winked at Harry to play along.

“Brrrrr, the water’s ice cold. Let’s go lay in the sun.”

The willow trees formed a canopy over most of the island. Sarel and Siena, Maria’s grandchildren and I, had spent many afternoons playing castaways under the branches and in the small cave. I was twelve when they were sent to a boarding school. Oom paid for it. Maria baked him a chocolate cake as a thank you. We were very sad to be parted. Ouma was confused about them leaving but she didn’t say anything to me. They never came back to the farm again. Tannie Maria said it was better that way.

“Hey, Harry did you hear that?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I thought I heard something.” I wasn’t sure what I’d heard. It was like something was moving on the opposite bank. A rustling sound, then branches cracking.

“Must be my hippos and crocs coming to join us.”

“No man, I’m serious. I swear there’s someone there, behind the reeds.”

Harry scanned the bank. “Nothing there. Who’s a town mouse now? You think maybe it’s Kosie? I saw how he looked at you at the Ice Cream Shoppe last week, like you were a Peach Sundae, just waiting to be gobbled up.”

“Hahaha, funny.”

“Race you back to the jetty.”

I heard Ouma shuffling into the kitchen. I was just about to call out when I heard Oom’s angry voice following Ouma

inside. Oom does sometimes get impatient with Ouma, but this didn't sound like impatience, this was something else. I was most definitely not going to climb down the ladder and leave the pantry now, especially when I heard him mention my name.

“But Dewaldjie, she was...”

“It was your fault that Elisabet turned out the way she did, and now you're doing the same with this one.”

I felt my heart pounding in my ears. They were talking about me and my mother. I could hardly breathe. The pantry door stood slightly open. I tried to kick the door shut, but I was too high up on the step ladder to reach.

I imagined Ouma at the stove and Oom somewhere near the sink. My legs were beginning to cramp and I wondered how long I was going to have to stay trapped in there. Kitt-Katt came stalking into the pantry, tail in the air. She jumped onto the opposite shelf and sat staring at me. I quietly passed her a piece of the biltong I'd come in to get for the school bazaar. She stayed for more, eating each piece slowly as if she was daring to tell on me if I stopped feeding her.

“But we can't keep her under lock and key ... Look what happened to your sister.”

“You're all the same, all of you. A long line of b...”

Before Oom could finish his sentence, I heard a loud crash. I could only imagine that Ouma had dropped the pot of stew. I wanted to run out and help her, but I couldn't. If Oom found out I'd been eavesdropping, he'd be really upset and embarrassed. He always wanted to set a good example for me.

“I don't want to see that English boy on the farm or anywhere near her again.”

“But it's James Dean.”

The whole house vibrated as Oom slammed the door. It was only when I heard him start the truck that I crept out of the pantry and helped Ouma save what we could of the stew spread all over the floor.

I watched Ouma furiously folding and unfolding the little lap blanket she used when she sat on the stoep. It was a good thing Oom wasn't back from the cellars yet. He hated it when she fidgeted.

We were just about to go inside when we saw Mr du Toit and his deputy driving up to the house. I hoped Marieke hadn't gone off to who knows where again. I hated when her dad came to question me about her whereabouts.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Liebenberg. Would you mind if we ask Jemiena a few questions? Gem, do you mind?"

"Come inside, Fred. Maria, please bring some coffee and melktert. How is your mother, my dear?"

I was thankful to Ouma. Maybe I could nip off to try and call Marieke ... But to my horror, Mr du Toit declined the offer and said they needed to talk to me very urgently. Even deputy Janse, who had a very sweet tooth, declined Ouma's offer and asked me to sit down. I was going to kill Marieke.

"Gem, do you know Harry?"

Harry! Mr du Toit was here to talk about Harry. I felt the blush spread across my face and neck. I answered so softly that Mr du Toit had to lean in to hear me.

"Harry? *My* Harry, I mean, Harry Summers?"

"Yes, Gem. Harry Summers. Do you perhaps know where he is?"

"Harry's gone? Where's he gone to?"

“That’s what we’re hoping to find out, Gem. When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last Friday. Is he okay?” I started picking at my cuticles. It drove Oom mad when I did that, but I just couldn’t help it.

“Where did you see him, Gem?”

“He picked me up after school and we came home to swim in the dam.” I’d made my finger bleed now. I put it in my mouth and sucked it.

Ouma looked up then and smiled. “I packed a picnic basket for them. Nice boy. He loved the milk tart. Do you want some milk tart and coffee?”

“No, thank you, Mrs Liebenberg.” Mr du Toit stood up and started pacing the room.

“What time did he leave?”

“Just after Dewaldjie come home. Did you say you wanted some milk tart?”

He turned and paced back to where I was sitting. “Did he say where he was going?”

“He mentioned something about picking up a spare part for his motor bike, but we didn’t talk about it any further.”

“What else?” He stood in front of me now, staring into my eyes. I tried to look away, but I couldn’t. It felt like I’d done something wrong, but I didn’t know what.

“He promised to pick me up after school on Monday, but he didn’t arrive. I was ... I just thought he’d found something better...”

“Was that the last time you saw or heard from him?”

I didn’t like to talk about this stuff with Mr du Toit. I wished he’d stop. “I didn’t see him after Friday...” I could feel my face and neck getting hot again. “...but he did text me on Saturday morning.”

Mr du Toit got down on his haunches beside my chair. I stared at my finger and watched the thin rim of blood ooze up around the edge of the nail. Mr du Toit put a hand on my arm. "What did he say?"

"Just stuff." I felt my face heat up. My mind raced through our last few chats. I tried to remember when it was I sent him pictures of my kissy mouth. I so hoped they'd never see it.

"Nothing about his whereabouts or what he was doing?"

"No, Mr du Toit, nothing like that."

I wanted to scream at Marieke's father. I wanted to tell him I'd been doing nothing but think about Harry for the past week: where he'd gone, what he was doing, who he was with. I'd stood waiting for over an hour on Monday. If it wasn't that Oom happened to come by, I would've had to walk the seven kilometres home. I should've known he wasn't really interested in me.

"Gem is a good girl," Ouma said. "I told Dewaldt she wasn't going to run off with the boy like the other one."

"What do you mean, Mrs Liebenberg?"

Just then, Wagter got up from under Ouma's feet and hobbled towards the side door where he tried hard to sound fierce.

Oom appeared at the door. He glanced between Ouma and the two men and smiled. "She's senile," he said as he stepped over Wagter, sending him hobbling back to his place next to Ouma. "She rambles."

"Her or the dog," Deputy Janse muttered under his breath.

"Hello, Dewaldt," said Mr du Toit. "We're here to talk to your niece about Harry Summers. Did you notice anything strange about him on Friday?"

"I wasn't home on Friday. I didn't meet the boy."

“Oh? I thought your mother said you arrived before he left?”

“I told you she’s senile. She rambles. Is there anything else we can help you with, Fred? As you can see, you’re upsetting my mother and niece. I can’t see that we can help you anymore. The child doesn’t know where the boy’s run off to.”

Heard my dad come to see you about Harry 😞

Yes – did you tell him about us?

No choice. He asked me if I knew him.

Do you think he’s run away because he’s tired of me?

Dad doesn’t think he’s run away.

What does he think?

Don’t know. Sorry must go – talk later 😊

I shot upright when I heard the phone ring. It was two in the morning. I fumbled on the floor next to the bed where I'd dropped my phone last night, hoping it was Harry. I was still searching when it stopped ringing.

I heard another noise and almost jumped out of my skin. Oom was standing in my doorway, my phone in his hand. It rang again. He tossed it at me.

“Answer it, and put it on speaker.”

“Gem, it's me.” Marieke was speaking in a very croaky voice “They found his truck.”

Oom walked in. He'd never before set foot in my room. He sat down at the foot of my bed, all the while listening to Marieke.

“Gem, are you there?” I didn't reply. All I could hear was the sound of Oom's breathing close to my face and the sight of his bloodshot eyes boring into my head.

“Didn't you hear me, Gem? I said they found Harry's truck. They found it in the old quarry.”

“Can't be, that's on our farm. No one goes to the quarry anymore.”

“My dad and his whole posse are on their way to your farm,” she said. “I heard him saying they'd found what looked like the wreck of an old yellow sports car deeper into the gully.”

“A Porsche Spyder?”

“Yes, that's right, that's what my dad said. “Wasn't that the car your Ouma keeps talking about? The one she says your mom and her boyfriend left in?”

“Yes, my mom and James Dean.”

Oom leaned across and pressed the red button. Then he pocketed the phone. I edged closer to the door, but he stuck out his hand and pushed me back onto the bed.

“You are just like her.” His fingers closed around my throat. “You are just like your mother.”

Behind him, Ouma appeared in the doorway in her white nightie. She was carrying the old rifle she kept under the bed. All I heard before I blacked out was Ouma saying: “No Dewaldt, not this one too.”

He's Not Your Father

Gail Gilbride

Dad was carving the turkey and Mum was dishing up vegetables.

Granny pursed her lips. "You shouldn't let Piet carve, Lynn timer."

"Mom! Just pass the gravy."

Dad's shoulders tensed up, but he went on sawing a thick piece from the bone. Mike was spearing the best roast potatoes.

"The turkey's delicious, Mum."

Mike kicked my ankle. "You're such a suck-up."

Mum gave him a little squeeze on the arm. She didn't look at me, but tapped her glass. "I'll have a little more of that bubbly, thanks."

She held it out to Mike but he wasn't looking. He was too busy Chinese-bangling my arm.

"I hope you all liked your presents," Granny said. "The librarian recommended..."

Mike shifted in his chair. "Granny, could you give us something other than books next Christmas?"

I turned quickly. Granny's eyes had misted up, but she chewed and swallowed.

"I love books," I said, which was true and made her feel better.

Mike flashed a sickly smile at me. "Of course you do, loser. You should try growing up some time."

“We’re all bookworms, Mike. Maybe when you stop resisting it so much...” Mum was patting Granny’s arm and staring at Mike. Dad shook his head slightly when Granny reached for the champagne bottle and poured herself another full glass.

“Maybe Mike’s dad wasn’t a bookworm,” she mumbled into the bubbles. That was silly, of course. Granny was joking. Everyone knew Dad loved books.

I looked over at Mike, but he wasn’t laughing. He’d stopped chewing. Then he turned very slowly and stared at Granny. Mum fumbled with the plates. A fork clattered to the floor and I bent to pick it up. Dad yanked me back into my seat. “Just leave it.”

I was only trying to help. Jeez, my family had all gone weird.

“Serve the dessert, Lynne. Not for Ella. She hasn’t finished her dinner.” Dad’s voice had gone all quiet. The grandfather clock gonged two o’clock.

Mum’s eyes were fixed on Mike. He was staring down at his plate now. She cleared her throat. “I need to say...”

Mike jerked his chair back. “I’m going...”

“And where do you think you’re going, son?” Dad leaned towards him.

“To my room, *Dad!*”

I couldn’t understand it. Mike always liked to snatch the biggest serving of pudding so he could collect most of the tickeys. “But there’s pudding Mike. Don’t you want to have...?”

“Just shut up. You have no idea ... When the hell are you going to grow up?”

Dad folded his serviette into a neat square. Mum whisked my dinner away and a bowl of tickey pudding and custard was put in front of me. I crumbled it carefully to find the tickeys. Last Christmas I'd swallowed one. Spoons pinged against the sides of the bowls.

"This is nice, Granny."

She smiled at me and pushed her chair back. I hoped at least she'd tell me what was going on.

"I'll come and help with the dishes."

Granny passed the bowls. I filled the sink and squirted Sunlight into the lukewarm water. Mom and Dad were talking very quietly in the dining room. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but then a chair scraped back. Dad hated it when we scraped the chairs on the floor. "I need to say..."

"There's been enough said already. Let's just leave it at that."

I could see Mum had been crying. I crouched down and pulled my skirt back behind the door. Dad had forgotten my bedtime and I hadn't reminded him. Mom kept saying something about a "prem baby" and then Dad's voice went all ugly and he said: "Only two days in an incubator..."

Mum was beating her hands against Dad's chest now. Why was Dad being so mean? It was Christmas time. I loved Christmas. Soon it would be my birthday. The whole class was coming. Mum always made the best chocolate cake. There'd be a treasure hunt and presents. Mum said she'd even make hot dogs for later ... Why were they fighting now?

I put my hand over my mouth to stop the cough, but I must've made a noise because they stopped and Dad came to the door.

“Ella! What have I told you about eaves-dropping?”

My ear was burning and I twisted away. “You’re hurting me, Dad.”

I dodged his hand and took the stairs three at a time.

Granny allowed me to creep under her duvet. She patted my cheek and whispered in my ear: “It’ll all be all right, my poppet. It’ll all be all right in the end.”

She pulled me into her and we lay there for a bit until I heard Mike bellowing across the corridor.

“Close the door, sweetie. We don’t want to hear that, now do we?” I did though. I wanted to hear why Mike was screaming at Mum. She kept saying it wasn’t true. He said he didn’t believe her. What didn’t he believe? What was he talking about? Granny covered my ears with her hands.

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s not worry about things we can’t change.”

Now even she was being weird. I pulled back the covers and put my feet on the floor.

“And now, poppet?”

“Night, Granny. I have to sleep in my own bed.”

I waited in the passage until there was no more noise from Mike’s room. Then I crept across and pushed the door open. His bed was empty and the window wide open.

I drew the curtains as soon as the first lightning came. Black clouds covered the sky and Mum pulled her shawl around her shoulders. Hopscotch shivered at the door and wagged his tail at me. I let him sneak under the table without anyone else noticing.

“He still hasn’t come home.”

Aunty Grace took another piece of chocolate cake. Mum’s eyes were puffy and she sank into the sofa. I put the teapot on the table and went back to the kitchen. Hopscotch was scratching to go out again. I pushed the door open and Mike stepped out of the dark. He put his finger to his lips.

“You have to see her,” I whispered.

He shook raindrops onto the kitchen floor.

“Please. Mum can’t stop crying.”

Puddles were gathering around his feet. His shoulders shook under his wet shirt. “Fetch me my jeans and a tee-shirt. They’re on the chair in the bedroom.”

I shook my head at him. “Please, sis,” he whispered. He knew I would. I pushed the swing door and crept along the passage.

“Ella?”

Mum jumped up. Her tea cup toppled off the table but she didn’t try to catch it. Aunty Grace glared at me for not being quick enough. Mike was already halfway down the path. Mum was running barefoot through the sloshy red mud. She clutched onto the gate and called after him.

“My boy, let me explain. Please. Just give me a chance.”

He hesitated for a moment before he sped up. “No. Not anytime soon,” he shouted over his shoulder.

“He’ll have to apologise first.”

Mum stirred the soup and didn’t look at Dad. I took the potatoes off the coals and pulled back the foil.

“Yes, obviously.”

I checked the knives and forks and put them on the table, then I hung the dishcloth back on its hook. Granny didn’t look up from her knitting. I knew she was listening because she always turned her good ear to whatever she was trying to hear.

“You won’t take the belt to him? We agreed you wouldn’t do that anymore.”

Dad gave her one of his scary looks. Mum carried the lamb to the table and waved her hand to show we should sit down. We joined hands and Granny said grace.

“Bring Mike home safely,” I added quickly. Granny’s loud “Amen” stopped Dad from saying anything. I wiped my hand on my serviette. Granny’s hands were always damp. Mike was probably scared to come home.

“Don’t be so hard on the boy,” Mum said.

“Just let this kind of behaviour go? Is that what you want?”

Mum started fiddling with the jar of daisies I’d arranged. They looked perfect to me. I took a deep breath. “Is it okay if I fetch something from Shelly’s house?”

“Now?” Mum looked at me suspiciously.

“I really need it for school. My pencil crayons. I lent them to her...”

I didn’t wait for a second nod. If I ran, I could get there and back before anyone noticed. Mike had to be at Sara’s. He just had to.

“What the hell?”

Mike pushed past Sara and grabbed my arm.

“What’re you doing here, pipsqueak?”

“You have to come home. Please.”

Sara drew me into the room and closed the door. She poured some coke and pointed at it. “Have some. Ignore him. He’s just being horrible.”

She rubbed her mouth against his cheek. I didn’t want her to be nice to me. I wanted to talk to Mike. But she sat on the end of her meringue bed and grinned at me.

“We need to go.”

Mike shook my shoulders until I couldn’t breathe.

“Stop it, you idiot. You’re really hurting her.” Sara shoved him aside and put her arms around me. “You’d both better go.”

Mike slammed his fist into her pillow. “I don’t want to. Can’t you see?”

Sara threw his corduroy jacket at him and pulled the door open. “Just go.”

I tried to keep up with him, but he marched ahead much too fast for me. “Wait for me.”

“You shouldn’t have come to Sara’s, you little twerp.” He went even faster. I ran as fast as I could but he was already pushing the gate open when I turned the corner into our street.

Mum ran into Mike’s arms. She said, “I’m so, so sorry,” about ten times over. Mike was patting her back, as if she were Hopscotch. She led him towards the lounge. Dad had

his back to the entrance. He was smoking his pipe and re-arranging the photographs on the mantelpiece.

“I’m going up to my room.” Mike was up the stairs before she could stop him.

“Me too.” His door slammed as I reached it but I pushed it open. I sat on the edge of his unmade bed and he dug his toes into my ribs.

“So, are you happy now, you idiot?”

I tried to move his feet away from me. “Stop calling me horrible names.” He put his hand under the mattress and pulled out a box of Camels.

“Or what? You gonna tell Dad, hmmm? I bet that’s just what you’re going to do.”

I was going to. Mike wasn’t being very nice to me. And he hadn’t said a word to Dad. “You’re still not talking to Daddy.”

Mike lit a cigarette and puffed the smoke out of the window. I pinched his leg as hard as I could. “You didn’t answer me.”

He jerked his leg away and sprang off the bed. “You don’t understand. You just don’t get it, do you?”

“I do.” Just because I was the smallest didn’t mean I couldn’t know things. Even Granny treated me as if I didn’t understand anything. “Are you going to live with your real dad now?”

There. I said it. What did it matter anyway? Christmas was spoilt and I didn’t even care about my birthday. Nothing would ever be the same.

“What did you just say?”

I didn’t want to say it again. Mike picked up his Star Wars pillow and squashed it between his hands. “You’re growing up too fast.”

The Shed

Ian Cameron-Clarke

Activist Group Demonstration turns Violent.

Pictures below the headline showed a large group of demonstrators, banners and fists raised, shaking the gates of the pharmaceutical factory outside the town. Their placards cried out: *Drug trials on animals are cruel; Stop animal abuse; Profits from pain are criminal.*

The protest had become violent. Arrests had been made. He'd brought the paper from the door when he'd come in. No-one had stopped the delivery since Dad had gone and Dawa no longer bothered to fetch it. Now he just stayed curled up tightly in the middle of Dad's bed.

As he closed the door, a thump upstairs was followed by drumming paws as Dawa bounded down the stairs, rope-like tail wagging in frenzied greeting. He stooped and patted Dawa's head. Together they went into the small living area. Egg-smearing plates and a few greasy chips drew flies on the small dining table. Through the kitchen door he could see the dishes overflowing the sink on to the work tops. Un-ironed shirts draped haphazardly over one of the kitchen chairs. It didn't use to be like this before. Now Mum had to leave early every morning, and she never had time for anything.

The TV flickered in the background. A late news flash caught his attention. Several of the protestors had managed to escape and the public were being warned about one man

in particular. He was thought to be injured. He claimed to have definite proof of animal cruelty, but had been previously charged for circulating false information. He was described as being of medium height, middle to late twenties, bearded and wearing a heavy overcoat. They didn't say what kind of injury. The company had offered a small reward for information leading to an arrest. The public were encouraged to contact the police if they knew anything.

He slumped down into the couch. The smell of Dad's pipe tobacco was long gone now. All he could pick up were traces of last night's broccoli. Dawa jumped up next him.

They had all always been so close, Dawa part of everything, hovering and concerned when Dad had carried him back to his bed when he had woken during the night. He had scampered along while he rode on Dad's shoulders on their park rambles, napped between them, huddled back to back, and sat alongside them watching their favourite movies.

The boy stood, unravelling his arms and legs. Yawning widely, he pushed his spectacles up his nose. Dawa looked up expectantly, tongue lolling and tail quivering in anticipation. It was a good day to go to the shed. Mum wouldn't disturb him there. She had her own loneliness to bear.

Rummaging through the untidy kitchen cupboards, he took some biscuits to ward off hunger pangs until dinner, found his jersey beneath the scattered pages of the

newspaper and headed off down the garden, Dawa snuffing eagerly ahead.

Every bit of that shed reminded him. The packing case planks he'd got for his "reaching the teens present". That nail near the door, still slightly skew, which Dad had helped him with when he'd hit it at an angle and split the wood. And the wobbly door, which had made them both laugh.

When it was finished, furnished with a soft chair and shelves, an electric point for a kettle and lighting, and an old rug, his dad had stood back, arm around his shoulders admiring their handiwork. "There you are, my boy, a place of your own. Almost a man now, you need your own private den."

It had become his personal hideaway to which he went regularly, to think and be alone with Dawa, but always ready for the soft footsteps and gentle tap on the door.

"Hi anyone at home?"

But now there would be no footfalls. No quiet knock. All he would hear were the cars on the highway and Dawa snoring softly.

Head down, he shuffled through the overgrown grass. The shed was partly hidden by the growth of the hedge that separated the garden from the adjoining fields. He paused. Something wasn't right. The grass around the entrance to the shed seemed ... flattened? Only slightly. A cat or dog perhaps? It would need to be quite large though. Dawa's tail quivered, hackles slightly raised.

Vaguely puzzled, he turned the handle. It wasn't firmly on the latch. Perhaps he hadn't closed it properly yesterday. That was the only explanation. If an animal had sneaked in, the door would be ajar. A prickly feeling scurried up his spine. The door swung open slowly under his hesitant push. A faint smell of pipe tobacco wafted out. Dawa's hackles

subsided, his tail relaxed and waved gently. Heart thumping wildly, the boy slid his hand over to the light switch and, as he turned it on, he pushed the door wide open. Dawa rushed in expectantly.

A small, bearded man, eyes closed, slumped in the chair, wrapped in a heavy coat. His trousers were muddied and torn. His left foot was bent unnaturally to the side.

The man's eyes opened, startled and confused. They stared at each other. The boy felt briefly dizzy. He covered his mouth with both hands, knocking his spectacles askew. The man jerked upright and tried to stand but collapsed back with a grunt of pain.

"What ... what are you doing here?" He restrained the urge to turn and run. Dawa stopped uncertainly.

"Resting for a short while," the man whispered. "Don't worry, I'll go soon."

The man subsided, wincing as his foot touched the floor. The boy didn't know how long they sat like that, but it seemed like hours. Neither moved.

He looked the man over. Of course. The beard, the overcoat, the injury...

"Are you ... were you one of the protesters? The ones I saw on the news?"

"Er ... The news...?"

"Yes, it was on the news but it's okay, I know you guys were only trying to stop the cruelty."

"The cruelty, yes. That's right. I'm ..."

"Are you the guy that got the proof?"

"The..."

“The proof. That they definitely were experimenting on the animals. You got the proof?”

The man reached out and scratched Dawa’s head. “Proof. Yes, I got pictures. If I can get away, I’ll release them to the public and it’ll never happen again. The animals will be safe.” Dawa half-closed his eyes like he used to do when dad tickled him.

The boy smiled. “Dawa knows. Funny how animals can always tell? If someone’s okay, I mean.”

The man smiled, but said nothing.

“I’ll make you some tea if you like. I also have some biscuits.”

“Thank you. That will be very nice.” The man raised his head briefly, his face white and drawn.

The boy busied himself with making the tea. His hands had almost stopped shaking now. The smell of pipe tobacco made the shed feel homely again. He handed the mug to the man, offering him the bag of broken biscuits. Dawa sat and edged forward expectantly, drooling slightly.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. “Dawa, stop begging. It’s bad manners.”

“I’m not sure, but if I’m going to get those pictures out, I’m going to have to be able to walk. Perhaps you could help me? Perhaps you could find something to help me strap my ankle. And something I can use as a crutch? That would help a lot.” He sipped noisily at the hot tea, taking a few biscuits with a mud-smearred hand. Dawa was waiting for his treat. Funny, the man didn’t seem to notice him.

The man handed his mug back. With a painful smile, he put a hand on the boy’s arm and looked into his eyes. “Thank you. I really need your help, if we’re going to stop those animals being hurt.”

Images of thin, mangy dogs and cats in cages flooded his mind. “Where’s your camera? Can I see the photos?”

The man patted his pocket. “Er ... no, I don’t think that would be a good idea.” They’re really very disturbing, better you don’t see them.” The same smile crossed his face and he touched the boy’s arm again.

“Okay. I need to go to the house to find things to strap your ankle, and something you can use for a crutch. I won’t be long. No-one else ever comes here so it’ll be fine.”

The man drew in his breath. “Well, don’t be too long then.” He tried to rise, reaching out to steady himself against the boy’s shoulder. The boy turned to the door. “A few aspirin would help as well if you could find some perhaps.”

The boy drew the door closed behind him. He had to be quick if the man was to get away. Dad would have approved. He always said you should follow your conscience. If he hurried, he could find what he needed before Mum got home.

Wooden slats from an empty tomato box, several worn school ties, a discarded broom languishing forlornly in the broom cupboard, old rags, the aspirin, a plastic bottle which he filled with water, and an old canvas sling bag that he guessed must have belonged to Mum. He was being a good Samaritan, and helping to save the animals too. That thought pleased him.

The sound of the gate, followed by a key in the front door alerted him to his mother’s return. He gently closed the door to the garden and hurried back to the shed.

The man was slumped back in the chair but had removed his overcoat and his left boot. His shirt was crumpled and stained, his ankle swollen.

Relief flooded the man's face as he entered. After swallowing several aspirin, he pulled up the leg of his trousers. Uncertain what to do, the boy stepped back, but the man gestured that he should come closer. He let the man pull hard on his arm as he struggled to draw himself into a more upright position. Between them, they fashioned a make-shift splint around the top of the boot, stopping whenever the man sucked in a sharp breath. The man leaned heavily against the boy as each bout of pain struck him. Dawa lay, eyes following the boy's movements.

His face now even more drawn and grey, the man drew himself into a standing position. The up-ended broom, wrapped in old rags, had become a crutch, and the water bottle was placed in the sling bag. Turning to the boy, his voice barely above a whisper, he said: "Thank you so very much. You are a very kind young man."

"No, I'm ... I mean, thank you for saving the animals."

The man turned. Dragging his leg, he hopped uncertainly along the hedge bounding the field towards the road.

The boy watched the man slowly disappear. He bent to touch Dawa. Straightening the bench, he puffed up the chair cushions, happy that he had shared his shed with someone so worthy. Dad would have been pleased.

Closing the door firmly, he walked purposefully towards the house and his dinner.

His mum was sitting at the kitchen table. The room was still a mess. The TV was on. The broadcaster was giving an update on the protest. He was ... oh jeez, what was he saying? How could that be true?

“...missing protester was apprehended several hours ago and has been taken into custody.”

A choking feeling rose in the boy’s throat. It couldn’t be. They must’ve arrested the wrong man. The man had said ... he’d had proof. He’d even seen the camera ... hadn’t he? He was sure he had. It had been in his pocket anyway.

They were talking about something else on the news now, but he didn’t want ... he wanted to hear more about the protester.

“...issued a warning about a man who has escaped from police custody. The man is a suspected paedophile and faces charges of molesting young boys. The police should be notified of any strangers seeking assistance.”

Happily Evan After

Ingrid van den Berg

Delia shook out the umpteenth damask tablecloth of the morning, turning her nose up once more at the whiff of mothballs. She wasn't sure if her shoulders ached from the unexpected activity of the morning, or the cramped sleep she'd managed on her twelve-hour flight the day before.

"So good of you to help out, Delia ... especially after such a tiring day yesterday." Mary Fraser looked up at Delia from the growing pile of stiffly folded serviettes at her elbow and – with a long, scarlet fingernail – tucked a lock of salon-silver hair back behind her ear.

To Delia she was still the undeniable queen of style, an opinion that hadn't changed in the twenty-odd years she'd known the family. But, this morning, her outfit showed signs of distraction: a pale mauve silk shirt that clashed ever so slightly with her dark grey pants, and earrings that didn't match her necklace.

"You must tell me more about Justine's man-to-be ... apparently there're a few things worrying you all?" Flicking imagined flecks of dust from one of the tablecloths, Delia stole a sideways glance at Mary. The soft flesh along the older woman's jawline had tensed perceptibly.

"Let's just say, I wish they'd waited longer ... they've only known each other four months ... how on earth can you get to know a person in that time?"

"But how did they meet?" Delia's curiosity was ratcheting up by the minute. When she'd received news of the

engagement and, a mere month later, the wedding, she had been too caught up in an all-consuming research project to ask for details. But, at twenty-three, Justine was surely old enough to know what she wanted in a man?

“Oh, I’ll leave Justine to give you all the details ... I mean, he’s a nice chap, very polite ... seems to treat Jussie well ... but I just have this funny feeling. Can’t put my finger on it.”

Justine was flicking through the latest bridal glossy on her bed. Her head snapped up as Delia entered the room. “Whew, it’s you. I’m sneaking a break ... I swear mom’s going to wipe me out with wedding tasks before I even make it to the church tomorrow.”

Delia settled into the wing-backed chair in the corner, her bottom sinking comfortably into the familiar curves of the age-softened cushion. She hoped they never got that chair resprung.

Justine had turned back to flicking through her magazine, leaving Delia to study her quietly: the slightly furrowed brow, the pink-tipped ears that still peeked out from the, now longer, dark blonde hair, and the occasional sniff that gave away the allergies which clearly still plagued her.

Delia had a flashback to the little blonde running around behind her and Angela ... Angela always turning back to wait for her when they got too far ahead. She felt the familiar stab. Twenty years might have passed, but the tragedy of her loss remained raw... and Delia still hadn’t the courage to swim out beyond the breakers.

Justine suddenly whooped. “Here it is! Knew it was in one of these mags.” She held up a centre-spread of beach

umbrellas silhouetted black against an inflamed sky. The classic Mauritian tourist brochure shot. “This is where I want our honeymoon ... don’t you think it’s spectacular?”

“Haven’t you booked that yet? I thought the honeymoon was what made the marriage worth it.”

“Ha ha, Delia, just because you’ve never met Mr Right. But Evan’s dead set against a beach honeymoon ... keeps going on about looking yuk in a costume. But you should see his bod... I mean I haven’t seen it all, but his peccs sure say a lot. Our kids are gonna look great.”

“So he’s a hotty, is he? Better warn him that Catholic brides become haggard mothers awfully quickly.” Grinning, Delia got up from the chair and joined Justine on the bed, propping herself against a continental cushion that could’ve done with a couple of handfuls more stuffing. “You know, you’ve still got to tell me how you guys met ... it must’ve been quite mind-blowing?”

The late morning sun streamed through closed windows, driving up the room’s temperature. Justine pushed up the sleeve on her left arm. Pausing a moment, she looked down at the delicate diamond winking up at her. “It was on a varsity hockey tour to Jo’burg. Our coach had organised a trip to a Sports Rehab centre, and Evan was working there as a physio.”

Delia jolted upright. “He’s a physio, you say?”

“Yeah, probably how he got his hot bod. And why I can’t wait for our honeymoon night ...oops, probably shouldn’t say that ... but, between us, my Catholic resistance is starting to take strain.”

Delia gave a half-smile, but her mind was at least eight years away. “How old did you say he was?”

“Gee, Delia, what’s with all the sudden interest? Not going to grab him from under me are you ... oops, that also

came out badly.” She giggled and scrunched up her face, giving Delia a brief flash of the gawky teenager she’d hugged good-bye at Durban International Airport seven years earlier.

“No, no, not at all ... just sounds like someone I may’ve known in the past.

“What did you say his surname was?”

“Guthrie.”

“Oh my God, it is him!”

Delia sank back against the cushion. Jeez, the Frasers were clearly a lot more open-minded than she’d ever given them credit for. But Justine? She was the bigger surprise, considering her closeted convent upbringing. The times they certainly were a-changing.

Justine was staring at her now, mouth a perfect “o”, her irises all pupil. “Wow, you know Evan? But this is amazing? How? Where? Oh I must tell mom ... I’m sure she’ll think better of him then.”

Delia wasn’t sure how her knowing Evan years ago was going to change anything. She watched, lips slightly pursed, as the young woman bounded out of the room.

Delia crossed the expanse of lawn as gracefully as her sinking heels would allow, snaking her way between tables and stacked chairs. A small terrier darted out of the marquee, narrowly missing being debrained by a crate of cutlery dumped by one of the numerous helpers.

Entering the relative cool of the marquee, she blinked a couple of times, adjusting to the low light. A figure gesticulating towards the back of the marquee came into sharper focus: Neville was clearly giving his minions a

rundown on everything that hadn't been done to spec. Delia often wondered how Mary stayed so calm with such a man ... could be why her devotion to yoga approached that of a religious fundamentalist.

"Oh, Delia ... come over here, love. Haven't had a proper chat with you since you flew in." He turned back and hurled a few last instructions at a cowering young man before striding towards Delia. She, in turn, started across, meeting him where the marquee's central pole impaled the earth at their feet. A shaft of light through an opening in the tent above them reflected sharply off Neville's pate. He'd once sported a crowning glory – now he'd make the perfect monk.

"So, my little Justine's just told us you apparently know her beau? That's a stroke of luck."

Delia swallowed. She hadn't thought Neville would be the first one to ask about Evan. This was going to be uncomfortable. Oh well, best just answer any questions and get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Yes, we were in first year physio together at Wits."

"Ah, he must've been quite popular with the girls in your class. Not many chaps, I imagine?"

"Well, he hadn't ..." Delia paused. Did she really want to go into all of this with Neville? Now? She changed tack. "Probably. Anyway, I left physio after first year for medicine, if you remember?"

"Of course, silly me." Neville leaned a little closer. "So what can you tell us about our young man? How well did you know him at varsity?"

"We were also both in res, so I got to see a lot of him there."

"In the women's res? Hmm, quite the playboy then?"

Delia laughed uncomfortably. "I mean, I knew him best

in first year when we also had lectures together, but after that we'd always see each other at dinner times."

While she'd been talking, Neville's face had grown progressively darker, his face now the suffused puce of someone who had died fighting for breath. "He was at dinner with you girls every evening? But was this allowed?"

"Well, he obviously wasn't a ..."

But Neville didn't give her a chance to finish. "I think Mary should hear this. Sounds a right gigolo. Certainly not the man for our Justine."

Before Delia had a chance to say another word, Neville turned and strode off across the lawn, knocking into the occasional table and gesticulating furiously each time he did so.

By now a creeping doubt had started to enter Delia's head. She decided it might well be a good time to go for a stroll around the neighbourhood.

Delia saw no sign of Neville but, through the sitting room sliding doors, she caught sight of a flash of blonde hair. She stepped hesitantly out onto the veranda and found Justine and Mary sitting side-by-side on the rattan couch, hands clasped in their respective laps.

Justine sniffed and raised a partially disintegrated tissue to her nose. "Dad's told me." Without raising her head, she held out her hand to Delia, who took it and squeezed in next to her on the couch. Justine shuffled closer to her mother, and the three of them sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Well, I suppose he wouldn't be the first young man to sow his wild oats when young." Witnessing Justine's traumatic reaction to her husband's news, Mary had clearly

now taken on the role of peacemaker: the concerns she'd intimidated earlier had seemingly all evaporated.

What the hell to say now? She had clearly misinterpreted how much the family knew.

"Justine, out of interest, how much has Evan told you about his past? I mean not just his varsity days."

Justine sniffed again and cleared her throat. "He had a very unhappy childhood so he never said much about it, and I never pushed him. Felt he'd talk about it when he felt ready to do so. And anyway, I love him for the man he is now."

And therein lay the problem: up until eight years ago, Evan had been Elaine.

Delia could still picture Elaine roaring around on her 750 Kawasaki, black leathers glinting. She'd even risked accepting a lift home from varsity a couple of times, attached like a limpet to Elaine's back as they zigzagged wildly through the traffic.

But she'd never thought Elaine would want to marry.

Delia awoke feeling like a dog, a bleary-eyed, knocked-about old bloodhound to be exact. Her dreams had been disturbingly vivid: zombies with scarred bodies descending on her in the Jubilee Hall dining room, Mary assailing Evan at the altar with a volley of missals from the front pew, not to mention best left unnamed body parts doing ... Oh God, she couldn't even think about it.

She dragged herself out of bed, avoiding the bedroom mirror, and made straight for the bathroom. Swilling her face with cool water revived her enough to risk a glance in the cabinet mirror. Sweet Jesus. She'd need an hour at least to get herself human for the wedding. And that was just her

face.

An hour and a half later she emerged surreptitiously from her room. She glanced down at her dress; she should probably have asked for a quick ironing, but the way she felt, wrinkled fabric was the least of her worries. And no one would be looking at her in any case.

She heard muffled voices coming from the sitting room, and imagined a Gallic chorus in full swing, Neville leading the pack. The family's Irish blood had always surged to the fore when there was a party to plan.

But right now she had to clear her tangled mind. Decide what she was going to do, going to say.

She owed Ethan her silence. She'd been the one he'd wanted at his ... her ... side before going into surgery. The first person to hug him around his newly flat chest. And probably the only friend brave enough to point out to him his first four-o'clock shadow. Their friendship had run deeper and survived more extraordinary circumstances than most.

But then she'd known Justine for so much longer, seen her grow up, become the older sister Jussie had cried so desperately for all those years ago. And she knew how much becoming a mother meant to her.

So why hadn't Ethan said anything?

It felt as though the entire congregation were holding its breath.

The priest stepped forward, lightly laying his hand on the two outstretched arms in front of him: one luminous in ivory lace, the other a subdued dark grey. Each hand glinted with a symbol of a shared belief in the future.

A pink light stream from the stained glass window to Father Danson's left skipped briefly along his spectacles frame and then away. He cleared his throat and looked out over the faces eagerly trained on his own.

“As a formality I must now ask if anyone present can show just cause why Justine and Ethan may not lawfully be wed. Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Heads swivelled left and right, a myriad whispers ran back and forth through the pews. A couple of young women to Delia's right giggled before being silenced with a glare from the greyhead in front of them.

Delia turned her face up to the soaring vaulted ceiling, and sighed softly before lowering her gaze once more to the small group at the altar.

She knew she was doing the right thing.

Seasons of the Heart

Jane D'Abbs

I'll break open the story and tell you what is there. Then, like the others that have fallen out onto the sand, I will finish with it, and the wind will take it away

– *Nisa !Kung Kalabari Woman*

Melbourne, Australia August 2002

She comes to me in waking sleep. She is younger than the day she died and there is a spring in her step. She is smiling and holding out a package. It's a bundle of papers, wrapped in a white cloth and tied with string.

“I wanted you to know that I am happy. So you needn't worry about me, I'm fine. Here, this is for you. I'm sure you'll find it interesting.”

She holds out the bundle.

“What is it?” But as I look up into her eyes I find that, as quickly as she arrived, she has evaporated.

Léopoldville, Belgian Congo November 1950

The tip of his tongue tickles. Penny squirms, wriggling from him and giggling. The day was hot, still and muggy but now, as the dying sun bleeds into the river, a light breeze helps relieve the humidity. The frenetic drum and thrum of the cicadas provides a fitting counterpoint to the grumble and rumble of the Congo River as it gathers speed, thrusting

its way through the narrowing riverbanks, then over the cataracts and rapids towards Matadi and the open sea.

“Do you know how some tribes in Africa used to punish adultery?”

He begins caressing her. Very softly. Very gently. His voice comes from such a long way away.

“The village elders would meet and confront the couple. If it was decided they had engaged in adultery, they were stripped naked and taken deep into the jungle. There the elders would find a natural clearing, or make one. Next, they would tie lianas around the woman’s wrists and ankles. They would lie her face up on the bare ground. The lianas would then be attached to stakes driven into the ground. The elders would ensure that they were tightened so that the woman’s arms and legs were set wide apart. No wriggle room.”

All the while he is talking, he continues stroking her body.

“They would then repeat the process with the man. But they would lie him face down on top of the woman. Arms and legs also spread wide apart and tethered. Once both were secured, they would leave them there. Alone, with the elements. The daytime heat. The nighttime cold. No water. No food. Do you have any idea what happens when lianas dry out? ... No? ... They tighten and shrink. The elders wouldn’t return for a week. Imagine the heat, the lack of water, the *fourmi* and possibly worse crawling over them, in them and around them.”

He pinches the soft white skin of her inner thigh.

“Ouch! That hurts.”

“Without water the only way they could slake their thirst was to starting licking the perspiration from each other’s bodies. I’m sure I don’t have to explain how they managed their hunger, if they didn’t die first.”

He nibbles her earlobe.

“Jack, stop. Just stop. What a dreadful story. Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because, ‘Penny One’, I’m afraid. For You. For Us. Léopoldville is full of petty suburban-bourgeois colonials who are already having a field day. Their poison will eventually destroy our love. And if that doesn’t happen, you will learn that the aim of loving is to kill the object of one’s love.”

She twists away from him and, feeling suddenly vulnerable, reaches for the sheet to cover herself. “Oh, I don’t believe that...”

“This can be achieved in a number of ways. Either slowly through the hum-drum of domesticity or suddenly by brutal separation. Ours is to be the second. I learned yesterday that I’ve been transferred to Luluaberg. I leave in two weeks.”

Retrieving her clothes and her pride, she scrambles to the car, refusing to say one word to him on the way back. She slams the car door when he drops her off at the gate. The lights are on. René is home. She sprints up the steps, pausing as she reaches the verandah.

“Hello, darling. You’re back.”

The news is crackling through the airwaves. BBC World Service. He seems engrossed, yet there’s a tautness in the jut of his jaw and a tightness in his grip on the whisky glass. Her heart constricts. She doesn’t stop to kiss him, afraid that he might smell her betrayal.

Dakar, Senegal December 1951

This morning she has carefully chosen and dressed Jane in a blue and white hand-smocked gingham sundress. She has also taken time and care with her own appearance. Because of the humidity her hair is curlier than usual and shines with vitality. Her skin is lightly tanned and her eyes flash and sparkle with excitement and anticipation. A dash of red lipstick and she is ready. Ready as she will ever be.

The clock hands trawl around the dial. Slowly. Inexorably whittling away at the seconds, minutes and then the hours. The hour of Jack's arrival comes and goes. Then the time that might be explained by flight delays, unexpected problems. The ashtray is full to overflowing. Finally, even his departure time comes and goes. She picks up the ashtray and dumps the contents in the bin.

She now knows that Jack isn't going to come and probably had no intention of doing so. Not even a phone call.

The humiliation is all-consuming. How could he do this to her? The apartment is suddenly oppressive and stifling. Quite suffocating. She feels grubby. As unclean as the cockroaches that plague them each night with the rustle and scratch of their hairy legs across the tiled floors. No amount of scrubbing or spraying makes the least difference. Each night they make a mockery of her best efforts to eliminate them. She snatches Jane from her crib and dumps her into the pram, slamming and locking the front door behind her.

She walks and walks. The sandy field is strewn with rubbish, discarded cardboard, rotting food, broken glass and goat droppings. It provides the perfect backdrop to her misery. In the distance, a group of small boys play, their dark skins glistening in the heat of the late afternoon sun. Despite her distress, she is pulled from her reverie by their high-

pitched shrieks and gales of laughter. The source of their amusement is a seagull, tethered by one leg to a long piece of frayed and greying string. Each time the distressed bird makes a bid for freedom a small hand yanks hard on the string, catapulting it to the ground, all wings and squawks and one leg already broken.

Nearby, an enormous baobab, barrel-chested and hairy arm-pitted, thrashes angrily in the wind in a vain attempt to uproot itself and rescue the bird from its plight. She feels as tethered and as broken as the bird.

Léopoldville, Belgian Congo October 1958

The whisperers are gleeful. They cannot believe Denise was so stupid and indiscreet as to put pen to paper. Nor can they understand why Jack didn't burn the incriminating evidence immediately after he received it. But, of course, it's always easier to be wise after the event.

When Janine found the letter she was furious and, letter in hand, drove straight down to see Denise's unsuspecting husband. Albert was in his office when she marched in. Oblivious of the fact that she was interrupting a meeting with a client, she slapped the *billet doux* on his desk.

The letter told him all he needed to know, but she articulated it anyway, confirming any suspicions he may have had about Jack and Denise. Denise, her best friend. His precious wife. Albert did what any self-respecting Belge would do. He went home, beat Denise, then put her on the first northbound aircraft to Brussels. He cited Jack as correspondent, for Denise's letter had stated unequivocally that her last child, his darling Sophie, was not his at all.

Janine left two days later, also for Brussels, taking her two children with her and swearing that she too would begin divorce proceedings.

Penny is heard to say: “Jack is now holed up in the Memling Hotel with his tail between his legs, have you heard?” Her mouth tightens in distaste. “This time both his feet are well and truly in *merde*.”

Shaking her head with the rest of the whisperers, she adds: “He’s a fool. Not only has he lost what little good name he had, but his wife and family and probably his job as well. I can’t imagine Congolese Tobacco Company will put up with such an unsavoury scandal from one of their employees.”

Melbourne, Australia 2014

Saturday, November 01

Hello Hugh,

This is probably going to be the oddest mail you’ve ever had. I’m wondering whether you lived in Léopoldville and whether your father was Jack. I lived in the Belgian Congo as a child and my mother was Penny.

If this isn’t you, I apologise. If this is you I would like to make some contact with you.

Kind regards,

Jane

Cranbrook, England 2014

Sunday, November 02

Hello Jane,

It is I, indeed. How odd and extraordinary.

Well, I had better wait for you to give me a little bit more information as I am intrigued by the reference to my father, bearing in mind that hardly anyone who knew me in the Congo would have known my father.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Hugh

Brisbane, Queensland 2014

Sunday, November 02

Oh, wow!

I'm on holiday in Queensland at the moment so it's a bit hard to gather my thoughts and send you a coherent response. I live in Melbourne and have done for the past 33 years. We were refugees from the Belgian Congo in 1960 when we moved to South Africa and then later London, Addis Ababa, and then back to South Africa.

Jack was my godfather (before you were born). I had no contact with him after I was about six - and in those first six years, it was only very short and spasmodic, so I was surprised when he telephoned me about a year before he died. We corresponded by letter for that year.

He sent me a picture of you and him (you must have been about three or four at the time). I googled your name because I am interested in knowing more about Jack. I saw an adult photo of you and figured you just had to be the adult version of that small boy in the photo. Plus you bear more than a passing resemblance to your father, particularly round the eyes.

The story about Jack is a long and complicated one and probably best done via Skype or telephone, if you are interested.

Thank you for responding to my email so quickly. It's much appreciated.

Kind regards,
Jane

Cranbrook, Kent, England 2014

Sunday, November 02

Hello Jane,

The synchronicity of this is intriguing as I was talking to my youngest daughter about my father only the day before I got your original email.

I am very interested in joining up a few more dots and the fact that my father chose to send you a photograph of me and him must mean that you have something to say that he wished me to hear.

I can do Skype so look forward to you telling me when would be a workable time for a session.

I very much look forward to what is in store.

Hugh.

Cranbrook, England October 2015

The call of a peacock wakes me in the middle of the night. The soft rustle of the poplars outside the window whispers reassurance. The dark night is studded with stars and I am in the house of a stranger, who is also my brother.

Only a few hours ago, I met my “new” half-brother, Hugh, face-to-face at Tonbridge Wells station. I am not sure how the enormity of this journey to this place should be processed, having never been down this path before. However, I suspect my feelings must be similar to those of adopted children who seek out and find their biological parents – a mixture of excitement, apprehension and a longing to belong and know what has been missed.

Hugh has seemed quite familiar, right from the first time we talked on Skype. I feel quite comfortable and at home with him and did so right from the start. Meeting him in person is an affirmation of these feelings. It's as if there is part of us which has always known the other. My father is your father.

Dying embers flicker puppet shadows on the walls. In the soft whisper of the poplars it's as if Penny has sashayed into my room as she used to all those years ago in the Congo. Then she would have been returning from one of their many late-night parties. The clickety-clack of high heels on the stone tiles, a momentary pause at the bedroom door followed by the swish of her skirts as she entered the room and bent to my pillow. Soft perfumed skin, coupled with the faint sweet-sour smell of gin on her breath as her lips gently brushed my cheeks and eyelids.

“Goodnight, sweetheart. Sleep tight and don't let the fleas bite.”

Were she still alive, I wonder how she'd feel about my being here. I have no memory of René ever coming to our room to kiss us goodnight. Perhaps it just wasn't a René thing. Or perhaps he had his own good reasons. I wonder whether Jack ever kissed Hugh and Dominique goodnight and tucked them up in bed. I must remember to ask Hugh. He was so young when Jack left them: no more than four years old and Dominique barely six months. Jack was good at leaving. He was so good at leaving that he was barely in my life at all, other than at my conception.

I have no visual memory of him. I know him through the letters and photographs he sent me before the cancer killed him. That's how I found Hugh, of course, through a black and white photo of Jack sitting in a garden, back pressed hard up against a tree, dressed in sandals, shorts and a short-

sleeved shirt. To his right is a small boy with dark hair, dressed only in bathing trunks. He is leaning towards Jack with both arms resting on his shoulders. The sun shines on their faces and they smile directly at the camera. Jack's smile is amused and wry, Hugh's pensive and wistful. The photograph has been cropped and on the back Jack has written in ink, *My Hugh & I in our garden in Léopoldville about 1955/56*. I wondered who had been cut out of the picture.

After Penny died, I dreamed of her again and again. But it was the dream of the bundle of papers wrapped in white cloth that intrigued me and brought me solace. After that, I never dreamed of her again.

Later, going through her effects back in Africa, I learned how oblivious I had been of the subtle and not so subtle adult undercurrents and nuances that were part of the world of my childhood. Through her letters and diaries, and Jack's letters to me, I came to know myself.

The siblings with whom I spent my formative years are in fact half-siblings. As are Hugh and Dominique, and of course Sophie, all fathered by Jack.

I'd like to think that the spirits of our joint father and different mothers might smile kindly upon us, knowing that the hurt they undoubtedly caused each other has been somewhat ameliorated by their offspring taking time to get to know their shared history as well as each other.

The Wedding Troll

Jane Vink

Tracey shuffled her feet in the tight new shoes. They were so her mother. She remembered how Carol had been when she'd spotted them in the window of the wedding shop:

“Those are so stylish, just the thing for your gown.”

Tracey hated how her mother said that word, “gown”, as if she were genuflecting to some floating statue of Mary ascended, so unlike her real daughter. Tracey thought of herself as tall and athletic, not neat and pretty. She sighed, smoothed her dress down over her too prominent hips, then looked up at her father, so tall and military beside her. He felt her gaze, looked down at her.

“All right? Are you ready for this?” He smoothed his beard.

She grimaced up at him: “I think so. Is anyone ever ready?”

He took her arm, drew it through his: “You’ll be all right, girl, takes a while to get used to but the Lord will bless you. You’ll see.”

Was that a wink? Tracey nevertheless felt reassured. He must know what he was talking about, right? After forty-odd years of marriage? And knowing the Lord. She looked down at her opalescent shoes, then turned her foot and deliberately scuffed one. That’s where the light gets in, she thought as she walked beside her father through the church door into the vestibule. A movement in the shadow of the

main door. Someone stepped out just as they approached. Tracey felt a hand on her arm, a voice in her ear:

“Tracey.”

Tracey stopped. Her father hesitated, looked down uncomprehendingly. Tracey couldn't believe her eyes, she was right there, breathing in her ear: “Lucy, what are you doing here?”

“You can't do this, don't you remember?”

Tracey stared at the woman, no longer a girl, and pulled back instinctively. On her other side, her father said abruptly: “You should be in the church with the other guests.” He blinked rapidly: “Who are you?”

“Dad, it's alright this is Lucy – from school. I invited her.”

Her father nodded: “Oh yes, eh welcome, Lucy. Better take your seat. It's bad luck to come in after the bride, don't you think?” He attempted a half-smile.

Lucy stepped back, stared at Tracey. Tracey smiled reassuringly, then turned and followed her father through the door and up the aisle. The faces of friends and family were ranged on either side, all glancing at her like rows of sunflowers turning toward the sun. She didn't see her mother, who had no doubt already registered the scuffed shoe as it peeped from beneath the flowing silk of her carefully draped dress. A shaft of light and Mathew's face emerged from the dust motes., rubbing his chin. He wore his anxious frown, the one that could so easily clear if she cracked a joke. She pictured the wry smile which would light up his face. The toasty smell of him in the mornings, a warm blanket around her heart. Tracey felt her heart beating under the push-up bra her mother had thought would show off her “décolleté”. The light spilled through the stained glass windows, tracing red and blue pinpricks through the

dancing dust motes. Her heart felt light, not constricted. Tracey's father stepped back and there was Mathew, so tall, with his military bearing.

Tracey shook her head slightly. Such a feeling of déjà vu. Where had that come from? She stretched her lips in a smile. Rigor mortis smile came to mind. What was wrong with her? Mathew didn't seem to notice, his smile warmly familiar and right in place. The priest stood between them, his white cassock glowing like a flock of doves.

"We are gathered here today to join this man and this woman..."

She could picture Lucy's face, her questioning frown. She used to bite her lip like that when what she felt was at war with the reaction she was getting. And that was often. The memory of her small face, framed by wispy hair, was vivid in her mind's eye. Lucy hadn't changed much. A ghost from the past.

"Tracey Anne, do you take this man...?"

The silence stretched. A cough sounded behind them, then a rustle, and finally a general shuffling. Tracey looked round. Were those tears in her mother's eyes? She turned back and saw the secret smile playing at the corners of Mathew's lips and joy filled the space where her heart was. On the wings of doves, their children would flourish.

"I do."

After forty odd years of marriage and knowing the Lord, what did he know about happiness? He forgot, she'd been there. She looked down at her opalescent shoes, then turned her foot and deliberately scuffed one, then the other. At least

they matched. Her mother would be pleased, Tracey's lips twitched.

That was where the light got in, but what did her mother know about Leonard Cohen? Too Jewish for her Catholic soul. She walked slowly beside her father through the church door into the vestibule. There was a figure in the shadow of the main door. Someone stepped out as they approached. Tracey felt a hand on her arm, a voice in her ear:

"Tracey." The light smell of lemons caused a cascade of memories, breath on her cheek, excitement in her loins.

Tracey stopped, her father hesitated, looked down uncomprehendingly. Tracey couldn't believe her eyes, she was right there. She breathed her in: "Lucy, you came."

Lucy's eyes filled. "You can't do this."

Tracey stared, grasped Lucy's hands: "I knew you would come." On her other side, her father said abruptly:

"What are you doing? You should be in the church. Do we know you?"

Lucy dropped Tracey's hands, couldn't hold her dad's challenging gaze.

"Dad, it's alright, this is Lucy – from school. I invited her."

"I remember her. Tracey's marrying Mathew," he told Lucy without meeting her eyes.

Lucy stepped back.

"You'd better go in. It's not polite to enter after the bride." Dad's deep voice boomed through the vestibule. People in the last aisle turned around and stood up when they saw them. The whole church followed, the music swelled. Tracey found herself swept up the aisle, standing face to face with Mathew. He looked down at her, his eyes shiny with love and ... relief? Tracey hesitated then smiled back. How could she not?

Father Tom intoned the greeting. “We are gathered here today...”

A picture of Mathew stooped, gathering creatures from a rock pool, gentle hands cupping a sea anemone, his pretty blue eyes gazing up at her, full of wonder.

“Tracey Anne, do you take this man...?”

There was a shuffling in the body of the church. Tracey felt a weight on her chest pressing her down, a tickle in her throat. She coughed loudly. Mathew looked at her. Father Tom looked concerned.

“I can’t do it.”

“What? Are you all right, my dear?” Father Tom put a hand on her shoulder.

Mathew frowned. “What’s going on, Tracey?” A furious whisper.

Tracey put a hand on his arm: “I don’t know if I can do this. It doesn’t suit me.”

“What do you mean?” Mathew sputtered, his words like bullets. “You must, it’s too late.” He looked at Father Tom. “Carry on, you must carry on.”

Father Tom looked at her doubtfully. “Tracey?”

“No. This isn’t what I want. We have to stop.” She looked at Mathew. “I know what I want and it isn’t you. This isn’t me, I’m sorry, Mathew.”

Murmurs swept through the church, waves of consternation.

The weight lifted from Tracey’s chest, she could move. She turned around. She walked back, scanning the faces to each side of her. Then she found her, sitting in the very last aisle. She reached across the lap of Mathew’s cousin – Janet, wasn’t it? – and grabbed Lucy’s arm, pulling her into the aisle.

“I do, I do to you.”

Gasps echoed off the high walls as they embraced.

There they were, outside the church door.

“Are you ready for this?” Her father smoothed his beard.

She grimaced at him. “Is anyone ever ready?”

He took her arm and firmly drew it through his. “The Lord will bless you.”

Tracey felt that tightness in her chest. Her father had lasted forty years in an unhappy marriage – and knowing the Lord.

She looked down at her opalescent shoes, then turned a foot and deliberately scuffed it in the stony sand, then the other. A perfumed breeze embraced them and Tracey closed her eyes. The scent of jasmine mingled with the musty bottom notes of her father’s Old Spice. She breathed them in slowly, in, count to five, breath out. She could hear the birds, chirruping in the tall trees bordering the driveway. A face came to mind, a tousled head, a hesitant smile. Someone stepped out from behind the church door. Tracey felt a hand on her arm, a voice in her ear:

“Tracey.”

Tracey stopped. Her father hesitated, looked down uncomprehendingly. Tracey couldn’t believe her eyes, she was right there, breathing in her ear: “You came.”

“You remembered.”

Tracey stared, then stepped forward instinctively into Lucy’s jasmine embrace.

“What are you doing? Who is this?” her father said abruptly, on her other side.

Tracey took Lucy’s hand, drew her forward.

“Dad, it’s Lucy – from school. I invited her.”

Her father nodded: “Oh yes, eh, welcome Lucy. You’d better take your seat. It’s bad luck to come in after the bride, don’t you know?” He attempted a half-smile.

Lucy stepped back, stared at Tracey. Tracey turned and followed her father through the door and up the aisle. Red and blue pinpricks sparkled through the dancing dust motes. Then there was her mother, Carol, looking at her anxiously, no doubt noting her scuffed shoe as it peeped out beneath the flowing silk of her carefully draped dress. Tracey felt her heart beating under the stiff push-up bra her mother had thought was appropriate to show off her “décolleté”. Tracey’s father stepped back and there was Mathew, so tall, with his military bearing. Tracey shook her head slightly. The pressure in her chest weighed her down. She stretched her lips in a smile. Rigor mortis smile came to mind. Mathew wasn’t noticing, his smile was perfectly in place. The priest stood between them, his cassock a startling white.

Then Tracey was facing Mathew, face to face, her bouquet gone, nothing to hold onto. A drop of sweat made a slow path down her back. Not her front, so much for the décolleté.

“We are gathered here today...”

A picture of Lucy flashed through her mind, grimacing at some dish whose flavour was too strong for her. Crying at some remembered hurt, smiling ... such a smile, more sweetness than a mouth full of honey. The thought of Lucy huddled in the corner made Tracey shudder. She turned to look at Mathew. She remembered his kindness, how he always gave to those street kids. She refused to encourage them, but he insisted.

“Tracey Anne, do you take this man...?”

She gazed at Mathew, turned and saw Lucy leaning slightly out of the very last pew. Then she knew.

“No, no, this is not me. It doesn’t suit me.” There were gasps. Mathew’s eyes widened, his mouth sketched an O. She turned towards her mother, kicked off the opalescent shoes, picked up her skirts and ran down the aisle.

Outside in the fresh air she opened her arms to embrace the sky and screamed as the wind whipped her skirts:

“Yes, yes, I do.”

A Thousand Tears

Kenosi Rakosa

The room was humid. I felt the drip of sweat on my forehead. My covers kept the heat in, but they provided a layer of protection against the world. A part of me felt I deserved to burn in the heat that I was simmering in.

My very own hell was an outside room in my parents' yard. I resented it because it reminded me of how little independence I had accumulated by the age of twenty-six. All my friends had managed to find their own places and, here I was, burning in the heat of a scorching November morning.

My life had not turned out the way I'd envisioned. I was not born to a life of squalor. My father had been a successful businessman. I had been daddy's little girl. He had given me trinkets and bought me anything my heart desired ... until his business failed and my mother became the only breadwinner.

When my sister and I were in our teens, there were days when mealie-meal was the only thing to eat. My sister reminisced about the days when we'd been spoiled. When we'd lived the life of "cheese girls", as the wealthy township girls were called.

But those days were memories and we made soft porridge without milk. We couldn't even afford to buy milk. I had heard about the \$7 poverty line on Oprah Winfrey's show at the time and I realised we could have been living below that line.

My parents never compromised on my education, though. My mother struggled to put me through the best schools. I was moved from a township primary to a Model C in grade 5 and I was grateful for this.

I elected to go to a girls' high school. When I was in Grade 7, I was afraid of boys. I thought if I went to a mixed school, I might fall pregnant and never finish high school. My mother supported my decision. I was giddy and hopeful as I prepared for high school and that hope was justified.

I'd been a solid performer in primary school, but I excelled in high school. I was chosen to serve as a prefect and I became really good at public speaking. I was the chief whip of our debating team. My blazer was covered in scrolls for public speaking, debating and academic achievement.

Prize-giving ceremonies were the best evenings, ever. I was always the last to be called in my grade. The principal would exaggerate my achievements. She would boast in front of the whole school: "I am going to take a sip of water for this. Now for Moipone Pule, who will receive certificates as a top achiever in History, Business Economics, English and Accounting. She will also receive a certificate as the top achiever in her grade. She will get a certificate for participation in public speaking and debating."

The crowd would erupt. I would see my mother in the crowd, crying proudly. I became addicted to achievement. I wanted always to be acknowledged as the best in everything. I wanted the applause and recognition, rather than an internal sense of achievement.

I wanted to become a medical doctor, but I had not studied mathematics or science. Despite passing matric with distinction, I didn't qualify to go to university at all. I was deeply disappointed. My sister suggested that I attend the

technikon and study public relations as she had, so I applied and was accepted.

On the day of my registration, the technikon merged with the University of Johannesburg. The head of department reviewed my marks and arranged for me to study for a degree rather than a diploma. I was on track again.

A township girl from a poor family was going to a university. I couldn't believe my good fortune. Or perhaps I was reaping the rewards of working hard. Or it was God's will. I believed it was a combination of all them.

I became immersed in the culture of the university. I befriended young ladies who had aspirations and dreams I had never known. My world widened. I engaged with people from different walks of life. I was recognised for my position in the top hundred first year achievers.

At the prize-giving, my high school principal sat across from me and we rejoiced in yet another achievement. Her words to me that night stayed with me: "I don't understand why I didn't get along with my mother when I was young. She was always shouting at me. It was only when I was thirty-five and divorced that I understood she was doing it out of love. Always listen to your mother."

In my second year of study, I let loose. I met my first boyfriend at a residence party. I should've known that he was not the person for me, but I was lost in love. He was a party animal and I followed suit. I began to drink, relentlessly. I would drink to forget my struggle.

When classes were complete, I went to his place to eat macaroni or minute noodles in beef curry, rather than the mealie-meal awaiting me at home.

He was a good cook. He was also a great kisser and lover. He was a musician and sang for the university choir. He invited me to one of their concerts and I was captivated.

Their voices were angelic and pure, complemented perfectly by the piano accompaniment, I fell in love with music.

I was becoming a sophisticated, cultured and worldly girl. He was artistic, a creative. He dressed and spoke well. He was everything I had ever wanted. For Valentine's Day, he picked flowers for me. They smelled fresh and alive. He played his guitar and sang to me of love. I loved him, dearly.

He was from a well-off family. He never worried about money. His parents had bought him a car while I travelled twice daily in a squashed taxi. He introduced me to many new experiences. For our anniversary, he took me for a boat ride at Zoo Lake and told me again that he loved me. I went to the Sandton City Mall for the first time with him. He created a vision board with my name on it. He dreamed of being a billionaire. To me, he seemed a visionary, with potential and a love for the finer things. I acclimatised and began to believe that I too could become so refined.

All the while, I still passed with distinctions and attended class. He was not particularly good at school. He hated his courses: Economics and Econometrics. When he had first told me his field of study, I had thought he must be a genius. I had got myself a catch. I dreamed that I would graduate, find employment, get married and have children with him. God was on my side.

The only niggle I had was that he drank more than I desired. That is, until I began to find messages on his phone from other women. One day, I received a message from a girl on my Facebook account:

This is Trisha. I'm dating your boyfriend. I thought I should tell you because he is playing you. I thought you should know so that you can have the autonomy to decide what you want.

Autonomy? She knew a word, I didn't know. She was intelligent too. I went through her pictures on Facebook and

she was beautiful. When we next met, I asked if he had cheated and he confessed that he had. My heart broke for the first time. But I forgave him. I forgave him a hundred times.

All the while, my graduation was looming. I got a call from one of the four big banks and I was accepted into their internship. My mother cried. I had achieved again.

When I began my internship, I discovered that we were mandated to stay in a residence. I finally had my freedom. I would party on Saturdays and be hung-over on Sundays. I attended a work party and drank too much. I kissed a colleague. Two days later, I was intimate with him. I was overwhelmed with guilt. I had cheated on the man I thought I was going to be with for the rest of my life. Yet I resented him for his cheating and the revenge felt justified. The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. I no longer loved him but I chose to stay. I stayed even though I was now paying his rent and paying for our dates. He was still carrying first year subjects, while I was out in the world. He felt emasculated and told me he didn't want to live in my shadow.

Growth is necessary if we are to become better people. It is also painful, since it means we have to let go of people. At work, I met someone older, worldly and well groomed. We talked philosophically about life. I left my first boyfriend, who fell into a deep depression. I resented him too deeply to care about his pain.

My mother mounted my graduation picture on the dining room wall. I was placed in a business area, even though I had a communications background. I was doing well at work and, it seemed, in my personal life.

My new-found love and I shared an appreciation for culinary experiences. When I think of him, it is always with

good red wine. He showered me with jewellery and perfume. He was a Zimbabwean man and, at first, I was reluctant to date a foreigner. But he was handsome and charming, with a six-pack that a music video model would envy.

He like to say: “The simplest things in life are also the most beautiful.” I lay on his chest to feel his heart raging with life. He spoke of his home, which he missed. His father had been an ambassador and he’d attended the best boarding schools, but he told me Robert Mugabe had caused his father to lose his job and ordered his shop burned down.

“There were people inside the shop,” he told me. “I can still smell the people who were burned alive.” I nearly cried. He shrugged and picked me up with his broad hands. I wrapped my legs around his waist and tried to help him forget his pain.

We spent a glorious five months together. He brought colour to my life, and he was kind. I imagined we would grow old together on a porch in his home town of Bulawayo. When December came, he gave me perfume and kissed me goodbye as he headed for Zimbabwe. I couldn’t wait for his return.

He didn’t call for the entire month and the days dragged. He returned in the first week of January and greeted me with a sombre tone. I wondered what was coming.

“I want a housewife,” he said.

I hesitated before replying. I loved him so much, but I didn’t want this. “After what my parents and I have been through, I can’t be a housewife.”

He shook his head and began to pace. He didn’t look at me as he continued. “I can’t have a wife who works. I have a friend whose wife has done a Masters degree and she is a housewife.”

“I can’t do that.” I wished I could make him understand. I wanted him to look at me, to see how important it was to me.

“My brothers all have wives who are housewives. I can’t have a wife who works.”

I stood too and stepped in front of him. I had to make him see. “But baby...”

“The problem,” he snapped, “is that women become doctors and lawyers and think they can also become men.”

From there, it was a short route to talk of breaking up. “I need a housewife. I don’t see why people should date for years only to realise they’re not a good fit.”

I held the tears back. I couldn’t believe I had lost him too. Perhaps being a housewife wouldn’t be so bad...

My friends said I should just let him go. I tried. I resisted calling him, but I couldn’t eat for three months. I managed at work but, at night, I cried alone. A month later I saw on Facebook that he had a girlfriend. I picked up the phone and called him.

“Who is this?” he asked. My heart lurched.

“It’s me,” I croaked. “I saw on Facebook that you have a girlfriend.”

“I never cheated on you,” he said. “But I met her last October when I went to Swaziland. She can’t read or write and she’s willing to be a housewife. I had to admit to myself that I didn’t love you. I just never saw you walking down the aisle.”

Before hanging up, he added: “I don’t understand why God made women like this but you feel more than we do.”

His words rang in my head as I waded through data and created graphs for a big presentation. It came down to that. I chose to work and, while I was busy, I forgot the pain for a while. I worked and drank to forget.

I registered for my Masters Degree in Business Management as I had planned. I was going to improve my business acumen. I needed to be more competitive in the banking environment.

I enjoyed the class debates in Economics, Business and Philosophy. One of our lecturers played Steve Jobs' famous graduation speeches, which I turned to for inspiration and reassurance. Another lecturer introduced us to a South African artist who taught us how to interpret art. I was soaked in culture. I was not only well read, but I had a new-found passion for art. I was becoming a balanced individual, which is what I aimed for. I could speak and write well. I now understood business and numbers and I was cultured in art, music and poetry. I was flying high.

And then suddenly I wasn't.

"So, if you were doing so well, why are you here then?" the patient asked me. I had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

I thought about my answer. "Too much success," I said at last, through a fog of medication. I had not been to work for four months.

The doctors said my episode had been triggered by a trauma at work. I had moved departments six months earlier and a peer had been promoted to the position of senior manager. He didn't even have a Master's Degree. My colleagues gossiped that it was because he was white. They said I had experienced a racist incident. Whatever the reason, he got the position and I didn't. And whether that was the primary cause or not, I was sick and not getting better.

I knew about trauma. I had been hijacked and shot in the leg just after I had bought my first car. This was not trauma. This felt as though I was being eaten from the inside out.

Eventually I was released, after being warned not to drink anymore. And so here I was, having come full circle, Everything had seemed within my reach: independence, success, love and happiness, and now I was back home, dozing in the heat of my parents' back yard, consumed with heart-ache and loss.

My mother said I should continue to fight. And God had placed my heart in a man more deserving. I remembered my principal's words on the night of my graduation so, one day, I rose unsteadily from my bed. I ate the breakfast my mother had prepared for me, I sipped water slowly and popped the pill.

And through the corner of my left eye I caught just a glimmer of sun as it broke through the small window and slanted across the room.

Mortal Sin

Liz Dewing

A congregation of massive granite boulders at the west end of the beach gathered her in on the waves until she lay, battered and panting, on the small patch of white sand below the green slope to the cliff path. Lying on her back, staring up at the clear dome of the sky, Maggie felt disappointment clogging her chest like phlegm. She rolled over, rose on her hands and knees and vomited. Sea water and bile. The bitter taste of failure. Hauling herself upright she made her way unsteadily up to the path and walked along to the east end where she had waded into the waves an hour or so before, her towel and clothes still neatly folded above the high tide mark.

If she hadn't paused to listen to the trees, she would never have noticed the angel. The metallic rustling of the silvery heart-shaped leaves had caught her attention and caused her to stop, mid-step, on the little bridge over the canal that carried the town's storm water to the sea. Tilting her head to one side, she listened more closely. As she stood, still breathing heavily after her ordeal, the late afternoon sunlight sparkled on the shallow stream below, causing flashes of light to catch her eye, and she looked down at the blue-black water. The soggy clump of feathers drifting on the eddies at the water's edge seemed at first to be the remains of an unfortunate bird, caught up in the suburban debris of torn chip packets and plastic bags ...

until it lifted briefly and she saw, quite clearly under the sodden mass, the curve of a pale shoulder.

Oh my god, it's a child, was her first thought, and the one that galvanised her into dashing across the bridge and down the embankment. But on closer inspection, it was obvious the creature was far larger than a child and she paused, suddenly cautious. It was mostly submerged, weighed down by heavy blue cloth which tangled its legs and merged with the dark glitter of the water. The cloth concealed its body so that the white feathers seemed detached, as though they belonged to a much smaller thing. It lay on its right side with the upper wing folded across its head and torso – each of the draggled feathers almost a foot long – and the top of a sleek mat of black hair just visible.

She leaned across cautiously, reaching out a tentative hand to take hold of the wing and expose what lay beneath. The creature lifted its head and looked straight at her with eyes of the most astonishing blue. Perhaps it was exhaustion, or perhaps she was just past caring, but the realisation that she was looking at an angel did not evoke the response she knew it should have. As Maggie stared, tears welled in the cobalt depths of his eyes and slid down his cheeks.

Maggie wasn't sure how she managed to get him home. How she found the strength to raise him, with his sodden garments, from the pull of the water. She draped his arm across her shoulders and staggered back to the gate of her small house, which opened onto the cliff path. All she was aware of was the peculiar tingling along the arm she wrapped around his waist and the sensation of peace that suffused her as they stumbled and tacked along. She didn't question for a moment the wisdom of taking the exotic creature into her home. All she knew was a burning desire to keep him close.

Standing dripping in the kitchen, Maggie fumbled to shut the door with her knee while supporting the stooped figure. She leaned back and gazed again into the pale face, the eyes now meeting her own with a greater degree of lucidity. “Oh God,” she murmured, “What the hell have I done?”

There was no audible reply but his shoulders began to tremble.

He needed to warm up, that much was clear, but ... she hesitated before deciding. “Come.”

Maggie led the angel down the passage to a closed door upon which hung a picture of a small bright sailing boat on a blue sea. She glanced at it before reaching down to turn the key. It stuck on the first attempt until muscle memory kicked in. Maggie pressed her bare toe against the bottom of the door before trying again. This time it turned smoothly in the lock and she opened the door. She paused, taking a deep breath before stepping inside to draw back the curtains. The angel stood in the doorway, watching in silence.

Light streamed through swirling motes of dust as she lifted a teddy bear and pulled back the duvet on a neatly made bed. “Get in.”

Eventually the angel was ensconced in the bed, surrounded by hot water bottles, naked but securely covered by the duvet and an extra blanket she’d extracted from a crisp plastic storage sleeve.

Maggie sat at the foot of the bed contemplating her new house guest and seeing again the evidence of battery revealed as she had peeled off the wet blue gown: a pattern of deep purple and blue-black bruises, edged in places by yellow, which swept across the torso, back and legs. She had touched them aghast, the angel shrinking from her fingers. Her gentle ministrations had exposed other startling idiosyncrasies, but now he (it?) sat upright, propped against

the headboard, wings tightly furled and starkly white against the beige wall and the slightly less dazzling white of the pillows. Looking at the perfect symmetry of his sculpted face and shoulders rising from the duvet, she found herself more fascinated than fearful.

The cascading notes of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony hardly seemed out of place and it was a few seconds before she realised the landline was ringing.

"I'll be back."

Strident music filled the lounge. "Maggie Day."

"Why are you whispering?" It was David.

Maggie paused. "There's an angel. He's in Michael's room."

"Oh Maggie." His voice was thick. "Not again. Are you taking your meds?"

"What do you want, David?"

In the few seconds before he spoke again, Maggie heard David swallow and then clear his throat.

"Um. I need to tell you something. I want you to hear it from me before anyone else. Okay?"

Maggie slid down the wall, sinking to her haunches.

"Maggie?"

"I'm here." Maggie could hear the ticking of the clock on the living room wall. Tick. Tick. Tick. She almost missed David's next words.

"I went out with someone."

"Ah." What else to say?

"Look Maggie, I'm sorry, I really am."

"Actually, I don't know if it's a 'he'."

"What?"

"The angel. It's like Michael's Ken doll."

"What the hell are you on about?" It was a very long time since she'd heard David's angry voice. Ever since it

happened, all she had heard was his therapist voice – calm, measured, rational. Hearing the involuntary rising of his pitch was almost enough to distract her.

“You know ... Nothing down there at all. I wonder if they eat?”

“Maggie. Enough. I can’t do this anymore. You have to get over it. We have to move on.”

Maggie placed the phone gently back on the cradle. After a short silence, Beethoven’s Ninth started up again briefly but died before the fourth ring. She sat on the floor watching the light from the French doors fade from gold to pink to grey, only standing again when a silvery gleam lit the room.

The angel was asleep, curled on its side in the narrow bed. Maybe she had lost her mind after all. But why now? In the beginning it would have been a blessing. Anything to be free of the pain. But now? Its arm lay above the duvet and glowed faintly in the dark room, like the sticker stars on the ceiling would have done had they seen daylight in the past eighteen months.

Lying in the bath, she contemplated the range of bottles lined up on the vanity. A nine-month exercise in patience, one prescription at a time. Innocuous windows between visits ... ailments and injuries attributable to carelessness, accidents, grief ... The average suburban home a minefield of potential disaster. For David’s sake, it needed to be a tragic mistake, like this afternoon’s swim in the spring tide might have been. A terrible error in judgement. That could be lived with.

Hugging pain to her chest while hoarding the tablets was a penance, but one that yielded no grace. Each catastrophe was geared towards ticking another of the fatal combination off the list – opioid, depressant ... the Dormicum from her

doctor, ahead of a long overdue visit to the dentist, was a particular source of satisfaction. "I'm glad to see you're taking an interest again, Maggie." As if. She hoped he wouldn't take it personally. There were enough now to be certain. It was a case of when.

She wondered if, perhaps, with an angel under the roof, the night might pass differently, but in the silent dark hours before dawn she woke again with screaming in her ears; the word "mommy" mangled and maimed as the small body tumbled and turned in the air, as her feet remained welded to the kerb, as the brakes of the lorry protested with shrieking violence.

Opening her eyes in the darkness, she realised she was not alone. The angel knelt at the side of the bed, its head level with her own on the pillow. Already racing from the nightmare, her heart lurched surprisingly in her chest. Why was it, she wondered, that her body still reacted as if the very worst thing had not already happened?

Turning properly onto her side, she stared at the shimmering being beside her. "Why?" she asked. "Why are you here?" There was no answer, but a hand was laid gently on her cheek and sleep returned.

She woke to grey skies and rain, unsure what had pulled her to consciousness until she heard again the fluttering and rustling of large wings, like those of a swan being shaken out and reordered. He was still here then ... not a figment of her imagination.

Standing in the bathroom in the bright electric light, Maggie stared at her reflection in the mirror. Evidence of her foray into the sea was written in blue-black on her own body. She winced as she raised her arms to pull on a clean tee-shirt, and as she bent to lift the clothes abandoned on the floor the night before. Placing a finger on one of the

darkest circles, Maggie pressed until a deep aching pulse radiated from her finger. Still not enough to distract from the other ache which lay remorseless beneath her ribcage, making each breath a betrayal.

The angel sat motionless at the kitchen table, for all the world like a friend waiting for morning coffee. He looked no better than he had the previous day: shadows lay beneath the black-lashed eyes, the slender shoulders hunched forward like those of someone holding something precious.

How did one entertain angels?

Her stomach growled. It was bizarre how the body insisted on presenting its needs with such relentless persistence. Lifting an apple from the fruit bowl on the table she offered it to the angel who shook his head. Whatever his anatomy, it was definitely a *he*, she decided. On autopilot, Maggie opened a cupboard and lifted down a small bowl, placing it on the draining board before taking a knife from a drawer beneath the table. The first green sliver of peel fell into the sink and, in her mind's eye, a memory flickered of Michael in his kiddy chair at the table. He held a neat white moon of peeled apple in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other, a look of consternation on his face as he contemplated which to sample first. The unexpected clarity of the memory made her gasp and hold her breath, and the knife fell into the sink with a clatter.

Fumbling for it with clumsy fingers, she was rewarded by a burning sensation. Looking down, she realised her fingers were clasped tightly around the blade. She watched mesmerized as the soapy water in the sink bloomed pink. The flaring pain in her hand distracted from the pain in her chest and, instinctively, she closed it more tightly. The pool in the bottom of the sink deepened to red. There was a rustle from behind and she turned to face the angel.

He sat at the table as before, but now held his right hand to his chest with his left, a grimace twisting his beautiful features. Maggie frowned for a second or two before a peculiar thought crossed her mind. Dropping the knife again, she reached her hand out palm up, heedless of the blood that spilled across the table. “Show me.”

He shook his head. She repeated the demand, and waited, blood pounding as the angel slowly lowered his hands, right gently cupped in left until they lay as if waiting for communion on the table. Maggie held her breath. There was no blood, but a thin slash ran the width of the palm and extended across the first three fingers of the upper hand, the wound a silver streak, reminiscent of molten metal.

Maggie saw again in her mind’s eye the bruising on the angels’ body, only this time recognising a perfect tracing of her own mottled reflection in the bathroom mirror. No! The angel looked at her with his clear gaze and his shoulders rose and fell in a resigned shrug.

It wasn’t possible. She wrapped a tea towel around her hand and sat down on the other side of the table thinking hard...

In the days after, she had been drugged – long interludes of blessed oblivion. But in between those fogged hours had been fragments of time when the only relief had been through the infliction of a competing pain – something to counter the million *nevers* in the future; all that promise silenced beneath smooth white marble. Only constant vigilance on the part of her mother, the nurses, and David, had held her to the world.

The angel bowed his head.

Then the slow climb back to a so-called normal. “Maggie and Dave”, an introduction that rang one note short of a full chord. The insanity of trying to salvage a marriage forever

blighted. The impossibility of being touched, being held, when her own arms ached with longing. Sleep, elusive at best, and at worst a nightly return to the instant when the small hand slipped from her own and things flew apart.

Maggie shuddered. How many times had she tempted fate or, perhaps, more honestly, invited retribution? Fifty? A hundred...? Caution not so much thrown to the wind as hurled, repeatedly. Every reckless act of the past eighteen months – that one last whisky before driving home, forgetting to switch on the headlights, walking through the wrong end of the park after dark...

Ludo off the leash, arriving home before her and David pacing the drive under the yellow streetlamp. “I can’t watch you kill yourself Maggie ... because that’s what you’re trying to do, isn’t it?” One after the other until the insane venture into the seething waves yesterday afternoon.

She watched the angel’s face quiver and tense as each instance crossed her mind. The rising sun threw a multi-coloured glow over their hands, Maggie’s in the bloodied tea towel, the angel’s still cupped in supplication. Distracted, Maggie glanced across to the window and realised the rainbow was due to a row of coloured bottles that lined the windowsill. Oh my God! The bottles on the vanity.

“You can’t stop me.”

Another resigned shrug.

“No. I *refuse* to be responsible for you.” Maggie stood suddenly, the legs of her chair screeching on the tiles, and stared down at the angel, who tilted his head slightly to one side and smiled – whether at her or the multi-coloured lights dancing across the table, she wasn’t sure.

“Get your own damn breakfast.”

She slammed the door, crossed the garden and slipped through the gate onto the cliff path. Striding so fast her

bruised muscles screamed, she made her way back down to the beach. Standing on the wet sand with the early morning sea breeze lifting her hair, Maggie looked out across the waves. Endless blue streamed away in front of her and overhead. No seam was visible between horizon and ocean.

That was ordinary life, wasn't it? Day after day of routines blending into one another, without taking a moment to think about the wonder of it all. Breakfast, the school run, work, lunch grabbed mindlessly with friends at a coffee bar downstairs from the office, David's usual mid-afternoon call, occasional irritation about having to change a pick-up routine, dashing past the shops on the way home with Michael, his end-of-day grumbling just part of the background noise ... even the best things taken for granted as the blessed monotony of family life swept from hour to hour with the predictability of a heartbeat. Until suddenly it didn't.

How did other people do it? Carry on carrying on with everyone else as if the sky and sea had not torn apart? Every single minute of every single day hurt. It just flat out hurt. It hurt to notice people crossing the street a few blocks away to avoid meeting you. It hurt to pass the cereal aisle and not take Oaties from the shelf. It hurt to open the bathroom cupboard and find the Factor 50, bought for a pale freckled face under ginger hair that harked back two generations. It hurt to find words turning to ash in your mouth as you twist your head to the empty back seat to say, "Look, Mikey, a digger."

It was intolerable, and now there was a freaking angel to contend with. To hell with him. It was going to end today.

The house was quiet, the kitchen empty. The bowl and knife stood in the drying rack alongside the spotless sink. Filling a gym bottle with water and holding it in under her

arm, she walked to the bathroom. Gathering the hem of her T-shirt in her left hand, she swept the bottles into the hollow with her right forearm.

Down the passage to the room with the sailboat picture. She paused in the doorway. The angel sat on the end of the bed.

“Move.” An instruction, not a request. He rose and stood, face half-turned to look up at the sky beyond the window.

Her towel-wrapped hand was making things awkward and the water bottle tipped as she tried to set it down.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Help me.” Again, the small ironic smile. “Oh stop it. You know what I mean.” She patted the bed. “Come.”

Lifting the bottles one at a time in her left hand she held them up to the angel, who used his undamaged left hand to twist the lids. She poured the contents onto the bedspread until a small heap lay between them.

“That should do it.” Maggie wondered if perhaps she’d been overly naïve in trusting Wikipedia research, but the angel looked suitably concerned. A small frown appeared between his eyebrows.

Right. Deep breath. Two or three at a time and it should be manageable. Like Smarties. Not too much water or she’d fill up before getting them all down.

It wouldn’t take long. She wouldn’t rush. More important to make sure than to do it fast. She reached for the water bottle but the bloodied tea towel made it impossible.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” It was stupid, she knew, but she didn’t want to stain Michael’s bed.

The angel got up and walked down the passage. Maggie waited. He came back a few moments later with the small medical kit from the hall cupboard.

“How did you know that was there?” and then, “Oh duh!”

Sitting again, he opened the box and took out a rolled crepe bandage and a sealed dressing. Gently peeling away the towel and opening her hand, he proceeded to clean, dress and bandage the wound. He laid her hand back in her own lap and closed the medical kit with a click.

“Thank you.”

Looking at her neatly wrapped hand, Maggie found her vision blurring. Not today then. The angel stood in front of her. He seemed bigger somehow. Holding her chin in his palm he looked intently into her face. She nodded. Not tomorrow either. Without hesitation he passed his hand over the small multi-coloured pile and it was gone. Maggie gasped, and the gasp turned into a sob, and the sob into a keening.

Reaching out and lifting her to a standing position, the angel held her hands. Then he slowly extended his wings. They swept from behind his back and rose in a smooth arc on either side, the long white feathers separating and quivering until they spanned the full width of the room. Their shirring tremble made her think of peacocks. They blocked the light from the window, sweeping forward and around Maggie and above her head until she and the angel were completely enclosed in a glowing case entirely made of feathers. The white glow of the feathers filled the space as if a stadium light had been switched on. It was breathtaking. His face was radiant and Maggie realised her overriding sensation was awe. So, not mad after all. That was a relief.

The sounds of the house and the world were gone. Maggie breathed deeply, peace settling over her as it had when she first touched him. She closed her eyes.

“Maggie? Mags? Maggie?” Her shoulder was being shaken. Lifting her head from Michael’s pillow, Maggie turned to see David’s anxious face.

“What did you do to your hand? What are you doing in here? Jeez, Maggie, I nearly had a heart attack – the front door is wide open.”

“He’s gone then.”

“Maggie, he’s been gone a long time.” David’s voice was soft. Only someone who had heard him laughing with Michael could know the control that went into keeping it that soft and tight. Maggie was flooded with a sense of compassion. So this was what the angel knew.

“Oh baby, I’m sorry.”

Lying together on the narrow bed, they wept.

Making Her Mark

Margaret Place

It was hot, and the queue was moving so slowly. Sandra wiped her forehead again. She hated it when the sweat ran into her eyes, and it had happened so much this afternoon. She looked again at the overflowing dustbin propped up against the outside wall of the voting station. She was still three metres behind it. The queue wasn't moving at all. The sun was relentless, and she could only move into the shade if she left the queue, and then she would have even more of the flies from the dustbin.

“What’s going on?” She didn’t know if anyone would know, but she asked anyway.

“They have the wrong voter sheets. Someone’s just gone to fetch the right ones.”

She thought of going home to come back later, it was so hot. But she looked behind her, and the queue was now outside the gate and halfway down the block. Her swollen feet had got her this far and she couldn’t give up now. Her bottle of water was half empty, and what remained was lukewarm. She took a careful sip, and wished she’d brought a book to read. Was her vote really that important?

The queue moved one step forward. She was still behind the dustbin, but one metre closer. Something was happening – at last. But it was still hot, and she fanned her hand across her face trying to create a breeze.

She had tied her hair into a knot at the back to keep it off her neck. It wasn’t very secure, and wisps were coming out

and falling round her ears and onto her forehead. She raised her hand to push the damp wisps out of her face, and her elbow knocked into someone standing in her blind spot. It was a young woman, standing next to the queue, and who was totally engrossed in her smartphone.

She was young and beautiful. She hadn't had her hair straightened, but had bleached it so that it covered her perfectly-shaped head like lamb's wool. Her false eyelashes were so skilfully applied that they looked normal, and lay on her cheeks like graceful fans. She'd looked up from the screen when Sandra bumped her, and her eyes were beautiful too – large and brown and sat above model-like cheekbones. Her slim figure was wrapped casually in layers of soft, filmy material and the whole was completed by a pair of pristine white canvas lace-ups with artfully applied sequins. She didn't look as if she felt the heat. Long, slim fingers with perfect glitter nails moved over the keyboard of the matching glitter phone.

Sandra felt her bile rising. This girl was going to jump the queue, she could see it. She glared at the red nails dancing on the keyboard, and stood slightly sideways and put her hand on her hip so that the Beautiful Girl now stood effectively behind her elbow. The Beautiful Girl didn't appear to notice. There were three young men a few people in front of Sandra who were eyeing the Beautiful Girl and commenting. She just *knew* they would let her in. She felt old and angry and very hot, and she kept her feet firmly planted in the queue, her eyes on the young men and her hand on her hip to make sure nobody would try anything.

The queue moved again. Sandra shuffled forward a step or two. She was now in line with the dustbin. A young man with a very deep voice began speaking to the Beautiful Girl from somewhere down the queue behind her. The Beautiful

Girl replied in the same language, and a long-distance conversation took place, during which the phone was not forgotten. Sandra hoped she would move back to the young man and she could then take her hand off her hip, but the Beautiful Girl stayed where she was, still communicating both on her keyboard and to the young man. A slight breeze made the filmy cover of the skirt on the Girl sway elegantly. Sandra couldn't even feel the wind. Her own dress was crumpled and sticky, and she resented the fact that the Girl, who didn't need the breeze, got it.

“Please excuse me. Please excuse me.” A wide pram piled high was being manoeuvred along the broken path by a determined father followed by a tired mother carrying a big bag. As they drew level with Sandra, the queue moved slightly to let them pass. The pram passed between Sandra and the Beautiful Girl, who didn't stop typing for a second while they passed, although she looked at the pram and said, “Hello baby.”

In fact, *two* little faces were visible in the pram, one fast asleep, the other wailing loudly. The prancing electoral official who had tried to clear the way for them, stood to one side while the father manipulated the pram over the broken bits of paving stone and around people who hadn't heard them coming.

“Please... Excuse...me,” said the father as he approached a large woman who hadn't shifted, blocking the way into the voting station. Sandra watched, anticipating a confrontation. An unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. The man with the pram pushed it directly at the woman's large rump. The electoral officer called out something sharply and at last the woman turned, saw the approaching caravanserai, and stepped aside. The

pram, its pusher, and the mother of the babies, passed through. Crisis averted. Sandra took another sip of water.

“Can I borrow the babies when you’re done?” an older man called out, from behind her in the queue, but by then the pram and its attendants had disappeared into the polling station.

The queue drifted back to its original position. The Beautiful Girl was still on her phone and hadn’t moved. Sandra was now slightly in front of the dustbin, and took the risk of taking her hand off her hip, and drinking the rest of her water. She was still hot, and she wiped her face with a shredded tissue. Sweat continued to stream into her eyes. Her neck was hot too, and she searched in vain in her bag for another tissue, or a hankie, or a take-away serviette. Nothing.

Her feet were beginning to get really sore, and she wondered if she shouldn’t loosen the Velcro straps of her sandals. That would mean bending down. She was too hot, and, besides, if she moved, she had no doubt the Beautiful Girl would dart into the queue in front of her. The Beautiful Girl was still busy on her phone, although she raised an eyebrow in Sandra’s direction when Sandra put her hand on her hip again.

Another step forward. She had now indisputably passed the dustbin. Sandra was within spitting distance of the shade cast by the polling station. And then, suddenly, and without warning, The Beautiful Girl made her move. She stepped into the queue ahead of Sandra.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Sandra stepped around the girl and pushed in front of her.

“I was here all the time,” the Beautiful Girl said, smiling modestly, her eyes to the ground.

“Yes, she’s my friend. We came together,” said the woman immediately in front of Sandra.

“You were not in the queue at all. You only arrived half an hour ago.”

“No, I couldn’t get a signal for my phone so I went up to the gate.”

Sandra snorted on the edge of a retort but stopped herself. She didn’t want to make a scene, but she wasn’t going to give the BG any leeway either. She edged closer to the woman ahead of her so the BG couldn’t squeeze in.

The three men up in front, whom Sandra had been watching, were almost at the door. One of them said something to the BG, but she ignored them and took her place beside her friend ahead of Sandra. Oh, no, Sandra was *not* going to allow the girl, beautiful or not, to jump the queue. And so, as the queue shuffled forward she maintained her position just centimetres behind the woman in front of her. The BG was back on her phone. No trouble with the signal this time.

Just then the pram and its attendants emerged from the polling station. The father looked angry, the tired mother looked ready to cry, both babies were howling, and the people in the queue knew better than to stand in their way. Sandra had to nip to one side to avoid being hit by the pram, and in doing so, nearly overbalanced. She felt her foot come down heavily on something both squishy and unyielding.

“Ow ow eish ow ow e-ii-i-i-sh. Ooh ooh ooh!”

What Sandra had stamped on was a pristine white canvas shoe, elaborately decorated with sequins. Looking down, she could see the dusty imprint of her own broad sandal right across the toe. A scattering of sequins lay across the path. It had been beautifully done.

Of course Sandra apologised, but she didn't feel sorry. She hadn't done it deliberately, and the BG had been standing much too close. Her face was screwed up in pain now, and she hopped about, waving her phone in one hand while the other clutched her friend and accomplice's shoulder. Sandra said sorry again, still feeling no regret, and the Beautiful Girl said: "It's okay," and brought her abused foot gently to the ground. She put her weight on it carefully, then gave Sandra a meaningful look, and edged in in front of her.

For some reason, Sandra decided she had made her point, and felt she could let the girl in, without losing face. The girl turned deliberately toward Sandra, and took a selfie of herself and her friend.

"Did you get the sign?" the friend asked. She meant, Sandra assumed, the sign declaring this to be a voting station in Ward 27.

"I think so." The girl looked at Sandra. "Can I please go back to the gate and send this to my family?"

"Sure." What else could she say?

The girl skipped off, barely limping, and her friend smiled at Sandra.

"Ag shame. This is her first vote, and she wants her family to see her. It's so important to them – her granny was banned and her uncle died in jail back in the old days."

The girl rushed back and rejoined the queue just as they got to the door.

Girl in the Shed

Margot Wood

Emma slammed down the phone. Where did these estate agents get her number from? How many times did she have to say she did not want to sell her house.

She glanced out at the building site across the road. Another encroaching commercial development. The house used to be on the edge of the village ... As a child, all she'd seen through these windows had been soft, undulating hills stretching into the distance.

Every time Emma imagined the wrecking balls swinging at the house, she would feel pain, as if the hard metal ball had struck her personally, crushing through skin and bone, tearing away the flesh.

She could not imagine a life without the house. It had always been there, had always been her home. No matter who came and went through its doors, the house had remained.

“Sell the house,” people told her. “It’s old, it’s dilapidated. It’s too big for one person.” What did they know? It was the last constant in her life. People left. Parents, siblings, husband and children. They all left in the end.

She glanced down. The one remaining screw on the window handle dangled precariously. She should really fix it. Someone might get in at night.

She started rummaging through drawers. Where did the screwdrivers go? Geoff had been in charge of the toolkit

but, of course, he'd taken it with him. Along with all his equipment in the garden shed. But perhaps he'd overlooked one.

She picked her way carefully across the back garden. When had it become so heavily overgrown? Her mother had made some attempt at taming it. Only a vestige of her precise flower beds remained. You could no longer even see where Geoff's vegetable patches had been. Every attempt had failed, in the end, either through loss of interest, interrupted schedules or family crisis. It was apt, really. The garden had become a symbol of the chaos in their lives.

The path to the shed was uneven and in some places, completely overgrown. Emma brushed back overhanging branches. She couldn't remember exactly where the door was. Lifting a heavy creeper, she finally found it. Had it always been unlocked? She couldn't remember. The door was slightly ajar and opened easily. She stepped into the half-light filtering through the gaps between wall and roof planks.

The shed was a shambles. It had become the dumping ground for anything no longer in use. Old toasters, piles of newspapers, broken pots, rusty tools.

"It's full of spiders," her mother used to say when they were children. "Maybe snakes. Stay out of there."

She bent to see if there was any sign of a forgotten screwdriver, perhaps on the floor among the rusty nails and bits of scrap metal. A small movement, a sudden intake of breath, and the next moment she was staring into the eyes of a small girl, perhaps four or five years old.

"What on earth? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

For a moment, she was completely paralysed by the sight of the child. Had it been an animal, yes, even a snake, she would have known instinctively what to do. But a child. And

such a small child. Too small to have ventured in here on her own. Emma felt completely bewildered. Should she scold her, comfort her, ignore her? She didn't know. She felt the rising panic in her throat.

The little girl stared back at her defiantly. She tried to soften her tone. "It's all right. What's your name?"

The little girl flattened herself against the back wall of the shed, pursing her lips and dropping her chin. Emma was confused. Where had the child come from – one of the new developments, perhaps?

"Did your mummy leave you here?"

Perhaps people had been squatting in the shed, without her knowing about it. She should really call the police.

"Come, let's go into the house. I'll get you a cooldrink."

The girl backed further away. She looked like a small animal about to scurry into a hole or snap at her hand.

Emma carefully retreated. The key was long gone but the sliding bolt was still functional. She slid it in place, then peered through the dusty window pane to see what the child was doing. She was still crouched against the wall, talking quietly to herself. She had done that as a child. Talked quietly to imaginary friends that no-one but she could see. She had once hidden in the shed like that, too, when her parents had gone away.

She yanked a branch from the path, in her hurry to reach the house, leaving a deep scratch on the palm of her hand. It added to her fury. How could anyone abandon such a small child?

She repeated the question to the police officer and the woman from social services the minute they arrived. How could anyone do that? The question had been spinning through her head while she waited for them, staring at the

shed through the kitchen window. She had felt faint, a wave of sadness tugging at the back of her mind.

When the doorbell finally had rung half an hour later, relief had surged through her. “Oh thank goodness, you’re here, I didn’t know what to do, I...” She caught herself on an intake of breath. She shouldn’t ramble or they’d think her peculiar.

The both looked at her expectantly, the young policeman who still wore the remains of his adolescent acne, and the woman whose sensible heels and the file tucked under an arm spoke of a no-nonsense efficiency.

“I found her there. I went into the shed to look for a screwdriver and she was there. I ... I didn’t know what to do.” She sounded completely incapable, she realised. The woman from social services, whose name she didn’t catch, frowned slightly and shifted the file to the other arm. “Perhaps you’d better see for yourself,” she mumbled.

She was painfully aware of what they must think of her as she shoved at the bushy growth and held back branches to allow them to pass. Probably just another sign of her inability to take charge or organise her life. Emma turned to wait for them. The woman stoically clutched the file to her chest.

“In there, she’s in there.”

“You locked her in?” The young policeman fingered his chin. He sounded surprised.

“I ... yes, I didn’t want her to run off. I thought it would be best. She didn’t want to come inside, I...”

“She’ll be terrified,” the woman said, her voice rising. She used the file to brush Emma aside.

The police officer carefully slid the sliding bolt back and they both stepped into the shed while Emma waited outside, feeling stupid. A moment later, they emerged.

The young policeman cleared his throat. "There`s no-one in there."

"That`s not possible. I locked her in."

"Maybe she slipped out the back or through a window?"

The officer sounded dubious.

"Perhaps she did. Perhaps she ran away." The woman cast a furtive glance in the policeman`s direction. He met her gaze before they both looked away. Neither of them looked at Emma.

"Let us know if you see her again."

Oh God, so now she was the crazy lady, living by herself in the big house.

She lay rigid, picturing the child alone in the shed. She used to lie awake like this when she was a child, waiting for her parents to return.

At first light she got up and fought her way to the shed. The child was back, curled up in the same spot as the day before, asleep on a pile of newspapers. She shouldn`t frighten her. Emma slid to the floor and waited patiently for her to wake. Poor little thing, what was she doing here? When her eyelids finally fluttered open, she eyed Emma, but did not move away.

"Do you understand me?" Perhaps she was a foreigner, lost somewhere along the way, separated from her parents. But the child nodded.

"Where are your parents?"

The child finally spoke. "They`ve gone away. For three months. I have to wait till they come back."

Emma gave a sharp intake of breath. Three months. How could anyone abandon a child for three months?

“How long is a month?”

“Four weeks.”

“And a week?”

Emma fell silent. She had asked that same question once. How did you measure time when you couldn't count, didn't know the days of the week, the months of the year? Time stretched out in a long, drawn-out ache. You only knew you had to wait, wait for the people you longed for to return.

She had almost forgotten that incident. Or how she had spent almost every day huddled in the garden, peering back at the house through the long grass, terrified of the strangers who had invaded their home. She hadn't understood the word “house-sitters” – they'd just been strangers and she'd hated them. She too had ventured into the garden shed, finding it a place of comfort rather than the den of spiders and snakes her mother had described.

The child was staring at her.

“You can't stay here.” She didn't know what to do. Phone the police again? Take the child inside? What if she was accused of kidnapping?

“Do you want to come inside?” Against her better judgement, but what else could she do?

“No, I want to stay here. I don't know the people in the house.”

“I live in the house.” It struck her forcibly that she'd been saying that her whole life. Why had she never moved out, moved on? Everyone else had.

“No, I have to stay right here. They said I must wait.”

Emma felt a wave of sorrow settling on the child and it was as if she, herself, was being swept along with it. They said she must wait. People left, but you just had to wait. They might come back, after all.

Like Geoff. She'd come home one day to find him packing a crate. "I've taken a job in Kenya. I'm starting next week."

No discussion, no warning. What was she to do? The children ... they had to go to school ... she couldn't just leave the house ... But perhaps if she waited long enough he would return.

"You can't wait here all alone."

The child looked at her intently. "It's okay, I have you now."

She leaned against the wall. An old tarpaulin lay crumpled in the corner. She drew it closer and settled down on her side. Within a moment, the child had crept across and, placing her head on Emma's shoulder, curled her little body up against hers.

Emma awoke just as the last light of day was fading from of the shed. She turned. Where the child had been, there was a slight depression in the tarpaulin. Nothing else. She smiled. It was time to move on.

Discovery R

Merle Grace

Everything depended on the queue.

In the beginning I imagined the queue to be like a snake of people with Oom Fritzjan right in front, his frog-like eyes glistening as he held back the rest, eager to be in the lead. I imagined the women's bright teeth glistening in the May sun. I pretended that I could hear the cooing of Janis's baby. I thought that old Missus Malherbe might take tea in a flask and share it with those around her, steam rising from the cups. I thought Mar would come back with packets of Smarties and bags filled with zoo biscuits.

There were queues at school too, but we called them lines. Miss Stacy was in charge. The grade lines were in the shade, right next to the rocket jungle gym. A lady in a blue-grey flowered top stood next to them. She was very pretty and her thin legs were in white jeans. Her shoes had diamonds on them. I wondered if they were real. The heel was so high that she looked tall and wobbly, like a giraffe. We stood in the sun, its rays burning into our skin, but Miss Stacy said we weren't allowed to move, otherwise we wouldn't get goodies. I couldn't spot any goodies from where I stood. The line moved slowly. I decided to brave up and speak to her when it was my turn.

"Jesus bless you, my little one." Her voice was sweet, but it didn't sound as if it were hers. Her nails were long and red, and had the tiniest diamonds I had ever seen stuck to them.

"Is it true then?"

“Is what true, my dear?” A strand of her dark hair fell from its clip as she looked down at me.

“That you’re gonna save us from this?”

She laughed and it sounded more like her real voice. She straightened her back and poured the soup into a white cup. She handed me a slice of bread. It had nothing on it.

“You hungry?”

I didn’t answer, but walked to the school fence where I always sat with Lungi and Anne. The dust gathered and made clouds as the line moved towards the lady with the nails. The soup was mainly water and beans. I was angry, but I didn’t know why. I got up and dropped the paper cup of soup in the bin. I looked at the lady with her diamond nails, but she hadn’t seen me do it. I wished she had.

Last week I threw my birthday calendar in the bin. The calendar that I’d wanted so badly and looked at in the shop window for a long time. Mar got it for me, after a couple of weeks of begging. The calendar landed face first in the potato peels at the bottom of the bin. I used to love the pink flowers that curled around every month. The green leaves had drooped and swayed, as if in a frozen summer wind that broke the heat. But when June stayed June, and then still stayed June, and the food they gave us in the lines became less and less, I knew that June would stand still for ever. Also, I stopped throwing the soup away.

On Mondays Mar got ready to go and stand in the queue. I wondered if they asked her if she was hungry too. I wanted to check, but Mar had thin lips.

This one was called the Solidarity queue. I wasn’t sure what it meant, and Mar didn’t care to explain. She was

prepared for it now. She wore an old hat, the one she got many Christmases ago. She wore long sleeves, but no jersey, 'cause she said it got really hot while they waited. We walked to the school gate. She kissed me and set off for the church hall. I wondered if it was the same lady who handed out goodies there. My stomach turned when I thought of her. As soon as I got home on Mondays, I would go straight to the fridge to see what we'd got. It was almost always the same: half a loaf of brown bread. Onions. Bully Beef, the tin opened and a few scoops already eaten out of it.

Mar said there was more joy in hell than in those queues. On Mondays Mar looked old. Her eyes, which had laughed often, now laughed only when she was ready to cry. Her brows that could curl up as if they could understand jokes, lay flat on her face now.

I missed poker nights with Dave and Mar. I had such great luck and won often. We used to play every Friday night. You don't need money to play poker, and I didn't understand why we couldn't just play. When I asked Dave, he walked out of the house, lit a cigarette and kicked at the garden gnome with his bare foot. I thought the kicking meant that he missed it too.

"I don't know how Agnes and them survive. Look at her. New shoes. I swear those shoes she wore on Monday were brand new." Mar sounded sleepy, but it was only ten to four. I could see the clock tick behind her head. Agnes used to work for us. Her husband Ben had been a miner with Dave, but at Hartebeest.

"More tea?"

Dave nodded. "I think Ben's a zama-zama now."

"What?" Mar got up. Her body was straight. She went to the kitchen to get another tea bag. Dave lit a cigarette, he blew some smoke out as he spoke.

“Ben. He’s an illegal miner. You know ... Just like...” I didn’t know who he was like, but he didn’t stop so that I could ask.

You know. Zama-zama... I’ve heard they’ve made entry holes behind Steyns’, and also behind the old shaft.”

“What?” Mar lifted the lid, and put the teabag in the pot. She gave it a swirl without spilling.

“There’s one at the old Malherbe farm too. Maybe even a couple dozen more.” Dave lit another cigarette. They never used to smoke in front of me, but these days neither of them could get enough. He offered one to Mar. She took it.

“But how do they get the gold out? It’s impossible.”

Dave blew out circles. It was the only part of smoking I liked. “It’s fucking dangerous. But they get some out. Small bits. Black market’s eager to take it.”

“I don’t believe it.” Mar’s voice sounded old again.

I listened, but pretended to colour in a school picture of the Hector Pieterse Museum.

“You should see the set-up.”

Mar spilled some tea as she got up from the couch again. “What? You’ve been?”

“Just to look, I promise. Curious. They wash, clean, melt, set, everything, in those shacks.”

“Promise me, Dave. Promise you would never go near my...”

“Near your ... what?”

“You know ... Him.” Mar’s lips were thin. I didn’t know who it could be, but Dave must’ve known, ’cause he had that teasing smile on his lips. It sounded like it could be the Jesus Miss Stacy talked about at school. They sipped at their tea and I wished they would go on, but they didn’t. Not then, anyway.

My birthday came. My birthday went. Last year I got a Play Station and a make-up kit, and new shoes, all shiny and silver. This year Mar sang to me. She held me. She sobbed into my pj top, which was too small for me now. Yes, that's what I got. Tears, just tears. And a song.

Sometimes there was a different queue that came on Saturdays. Mar said this one was called the Salvation Army queue.

“Government nowhere to be seen.” I didn't understand, but didn't ask either. This one could take the whole day. I would wait on the front lawn, and when Mar appeared from around the corner of Kebble Street, I would scamper down and watch from around the side of the rock garden. I could tell her mood. Head down, bad sign. Left foot kicking out to the side, disaster. When she lit a fag too, I always got up to make a duck for it. As soon as she got closer to the house, she flicked the butt to the side, and then stamped on it as if it were the head of the mining boss. The one that closed the gates with a silver lock. The one that forced Dave to stay at home. That's when I'd creep to the back garden, jump the fence and go to the swings, two streets down.

Sometimes she spotted me. Those were the worst times, because I could smell the dust on her. It smelled of shame. At least in the beginning. Later on I could just smell sadness. The queues fed us, and I knew that she hated it more than I did. The icy sadness Mar carried around couldn't be warmed by the Glen tea or the Frisco or the Cremora they handed out. Sometimes they gave soap and pads, and these made her mad too.

We sat in front of the TV, but none of us really watched. We must have seen the episode of Steve breaking up with

Sally a couple of times now. Her pink lips quivered on the screen.

“You’ve heard about Gert?” Dave lit a cigarette.

Mar pretended not to hear. She stared at the screen, whispering to herself.

“He’s dead, Mar. Shot. He tried to go down the Smith hole, with Xolani and Andre. Andre’s wounded. Got shot in the leg. In hospital. Xoli’s okay.

Mar didn’t speak.

“It’s a war down there. They pretend to be mining pirates, that lot.”

“Why do they do it, Dave?” I felt brave. Usually they talked me down or sent me out when I asked questions.

“They’re fucking desperate, aren’t they?” He said it more to Mar than to me.

“And fucking stupid.”

Mar pointed with her eyes in my direction, but Dave never caught hints like that. Not even when he got kicked or elbowed when we were at the Malherbe house and he said something silly.

The next day Dave went to visit Andre in hospital.

Mar didn’t speak anymore. Not of her own free will, anyway.

Her shoulders drooped in a permanent upside down smile. Then she would go to her room and stay there, the door closed, shutting us out.

“There’s a new shop in town.” Dave looked unsure these days. As if anything he said might push Mar into an even deeper pit.

“And how would....” Mar’s voice was a whisper, a crack

of a whisper like a whip.

“It could help. It buys stuff.”

I looked at Dave, hopeful that this was good news.

“I’ve decided. The lawnmower, the tool set, the....”

This idea didn’t seem to cheer Mar up at all, but the look on her face changed. At first she seemed to get ready to explode, but then she said: “Why don’t you try and sell Frieda and me too?”

“That’s a cruel thing to say, Marguerite, I’m trying to help.”

I didn’t want to butt in, but I needed to. Mar’s name wasn’t Marguerite at all and Dave should know this. But then I decided to keep quiet when I saw her face.

She sat for a long time before she answered. It looked as if she was getting ready for Dave to chop off her left leg.

“I’ll give up the quilt with the yellow ducks ... and...”

“What about you, Free?”

The next day we walked to the shop. I clung to my Playstation like a teddy. Dave pushed the lawnmower and Mar carried two heavy bags, the plastic cutting white into her hands. I took a few pictures of us in my mind, and in these pictures there was an invisible hand. It chopped at our body parts. We walked on our knees. Then we hopped on our hips. Until we only had heads left. These rolled into the street, where a car drove over us, and made us disappear. Leaving the lawnmower on the pavement.

That night Mar had a packet of Dunhill and Dave a packet of Lucky Strikes. I had a white TV bar and our fridge had food in it. Our food. Food we bought. Not food giraffe-women handed out with pity in their eyes.

It didn't last very long. We skipped standing in line for a week. It was a happy week for all of us. But then it was Saturday again and I saw Mar coming down the street, the packets looked light. I watched from behind the rock garden. A lizard almost made me jump, but I stayed down, 'cause Mar had just lit a cigarette. I crept out, and then ran for the back fence. It sagged a bit on the right now. Mar said I was too big for the swings, but I still liked the feeling of them.

I found Lungi and Anne there. When I got closer they hid something under the merry-go-round.

“What's that?”

They looked at me, but said nothing. I dived for it, and they both struggled, trying their best to hide it. I've always been stronger than both of them. As soon as I got it out, I dropped it at their feet, like a dead rat.

“It's from a garbage bin, that.”

“So what, hey? So what?”

“It's dirty, duh!”

“Well, in case you haven't noticed, we're all fucking hungry. You too.”

I got on the merry-go-round and started making it turn. One foot on the red metal, one foot on the dry winter dust.

When I was just over three and Dad left, Mar always told me she added his first initial to Ma. Dave always used to call her Margie, or even Mar, like me. I wondered why he called her Marguerite now. I sometimes called her Margarine, just to tease her. Or Rama to tease her more. She used to love it, giggling and going through the other types of margarine.

The other day I got home from school when she was

speaking on the phone. When I opened the front door, she slammed the phone down and looked guilty.

“Who’s that?”

But she didn’t answer. She switched on the TV and glued her eyes to it.

I walked over to the phone. A post-it was stuck to the table. I struggled to read the name. “Rethabile,” it said. And a number. I slipped it into my pocket.

I wanted to tell Lungi and Anne what I’d found, but I didn’t know where to start. I tried some knock-knock jokes first, but they didn’t think they were funny. I decided to just plunge in. Like in summer at the municipal pool. Straight in the deep end.

“I think I’ve found my dad...”

“Your dad? Isn’t Dave your dad?” Anne took a sucker from her bag. She started sucking it, even though it was filthy. I guessed it was from the garbage bin again. “Where is your real dad then?”

“I don’t know, all right, but I found this.” I showed them the post-it.

“And how d’you even know it’s your dad?”

“Well, I know it starts with R. And who else would my mum phone in the middle of the day?”

We were quiet, just looking at each other. Anne and Lungi had never asked me any of these questions before. It must’ve been the funny name that made them start.

“Those curls or yours ... Where d’you think they’re from, huh?”

My hand moved up to my hair, I pulled a strand, and it jumped back like a spring. I loved doing that, especially

when Miss Stacy lost the plot in class. They looked at me, their eyes teasing.

“Why doesn’t he come and get you, huh?”

“He can’t, okay? He obviously can’t or else he would.” I didn’t tell them I dreamed about that sometimes. A real dad and a place where you didn’t have to sell a PlayStation to buy a tin of meat.

They giggled, but I didn’t think it was that funny.

Anne sniffed and put her foot down to stop the merry-go-round. She jumped off while it was still moving.

I’d thought they’d like to know, too. I’d imagined they’d fight to come find him with me. But they didn’t even care.

“You have a father. How would you know?” I could feel my own tears where I didn’t want them. I got off and ran home. I didn’t want Lungi and Anne to see them. Didn’t want them to know anymore that there might be hope. That I might get out of this. That my dad might be rich. Dave said we would all be skeletons soon. A town of skeletons. That’s what he said.

As I got into bed, the smell of sweat and bad dreams crept into my nostrils. That night I dreamt that my father was dead, and that his dead body floated to me on a sea of garbage. When I woke up, the yellow post-it was crumpled and wet in my hand, but I could still make out the number.

There was one working public phone left in town. The others were ripped out, their green shells dead, as if poisoned. I needed to buy a card. I stole some money from Dave’s bedside table. There were always some coins in there. In Kebble Street, my hand shook as I dialled the number. It rang. I waited. Nobody answered. I went home feeling

heavy, as if my shoes were filled with all the earth that was dug out by the miners of this town.

Mar started with a secret of her own, which I thought might turn into helping me solve my own mystery. She started disappearing on Tuesday nights. Only Tuesday nights. Round midnight. On Wednesday mornings there would be cold pizza, or slap chips. One morning a packet of zoo biscuits. I loved them, but didn't dare touch them. I didn't know why not, but it was one of the hardest things I've done in my life. The funniest thing was that Dave didn't say anything about Mar. After school the next week, I made Lungi come with to the phone and I dialled the number again. He picked up after half a ring.

"What you want?"

I couldn't speak. He snorted into the phone and I knew that he wanted to hang up. Lungi poked me with a finger and mouthed the word hello.

"Hello, hello. It's me." Silence on the other side. "You know ... Frieda."

It was his turn not to say anything. "I don't have it. Tell your ma I have nothing for her."

"What do you mean?"

"Just tell her."

And then he slammed the phone down. I dialled the number again, but he didn't answer. So it must be him. Tell your ma ... Lungi gave a low whistle and I knew she would be on my side now.

I wanted to talk to Mar about it. A few months ago, it would have been easier. Now I didn't know where to start. I knew she was seeing him once a week, and that he gave her

food. To give to me? Was I wrong? So I decided not to speak to her. I would phone him again. And meet him. And see for myself. But I needed Lungi and Anne to help me.

We sat on the rocket jungle gym. We were too big for it, but it was after school, and then the teachers didn't mind. I had phoned again and my real dad had finally agreed to meet me at the half-dug mine, the one we called Dragon's Head. We used to play there often when we were small. It was kif to take a flashlight and make patterns against the dusty walls. We once found a dead meerkat, and I think it must have been the smell that made us not go back. Or maybe we just grew up.

"Are you stupid or something?" Lungi peeled some paint off the steel pipe. She dropped yellow pieces of it in the sand. She didn't speak to me, but to the steel pipe. "This is a horrible plan, Free, and you know it."

"What if he's a criminal or something?" Anne chewed on a piece of paper.

"Hey, my dad's not a criminal..."

"We don't know if he's your dad or not."

"If he wasn't he wouldn't have agreed to see me, would he?"

We sat like that for a long time, before they agreed to go with me on Saturday morning.

Oom Fritzjan gave us a lift. We lied. Said we wanted to play on the rocks out of town. Lungi's eyes were down, too afraid to look at Oom Fritzjan. Maybe she was scared that he would spot the lie. The fear clung to us like lice. It crept into our hairline and walked over our skulls. It itched and laid eggs, producing more fear. But it also held excitement and

maybe an outcome, for me at least.

“You girls okay?” he shouted through the glass screen of the bakkie. His words drifted into the wind, and fell into the sand that made little ripples on the gravel road. All three of us nodded our heads, but held our stomachs, as if we were all meeting our dads for the first time.

“You take care now. And don’t fall into no ditches.”

Dragon’s Head wasn’t at all how I remembered it. There were dirty clothes and socks and jerry cans and a piece of a blanket, torn and muddy. It stank of wee and poo and I couldn’t even make out the Dragon’s Head any more. In the past it was so easy to see the ear, and then the snout, with a little wart to the left.

“He’s not coming.” Lungi didn’t like to wait. He was ten minutes late.

I unpacked an apple I’d stolen from Frankie’s lunch box the day before. We all took bites. Then I saw something coming. I jumped off the rock and pointed. Anne and Lungi came to stand on either side of me.

He walked upright. It felt as if I saw myself walking towards me. He stopped in front of Lungi, but when he looked into her eyes, he obviously realised she wasn’t the one. He looked at Anne and then at me, and it was strange. I didn’t look like him at all. He was dark, very dark. My skin was olive, or that’s what Mar said, and my eyes were brown. Not black-brown. Just brown. And my hair was as curly as if I put it in super-tight curlers every night.

“You’re Frieda?”

I nodded. My voice was gone. He looked at me for a long time until my voice came back. “Are you my dad then?”

He didn't say anything, but started nodding.

"Listen, tell your ma, I don't have any gold. Or *imali*."

"Aren't you seeing her...? Every Wednesday she..."

"Aikona, not that one."

"But I thought..."

"That mampara mother of yours. *Hayibo!* Then she loved me, now..."

"Why haven't you ever come for me?" I didn't really want it to sound like I was accusing him, but it came out that way. There were tears in his eyes now.

"She said it didn't matter. For three years it didn't matter and she wasn't ashamed ... And then ... *Hayibo*."

"What didn't matter?" Lungi poked me in the ribs again, so I asked: "Are you rich?"

He looked at me and smiled. "I'm rich because of you."

"But I'm not ... So ... You're poor?"

"Does this donga look like the Spur to you?"

We all laughed. I held out the apple and he took a bite.

The Dying Woman

Susan Newham-Blake

It started off as a vague sensation as she was drifting off to sleep. She ignored it at first, she'd had odd thoughts before. But the sensation grew stronger, a sense of disconnection, as though her spirit was separating from her body, as if her very essence wished to escape. And then one morning she awoke early stricken by dread. She knew she was not going to be around much longer. She was certain she would be dead within a few months.

She was too young, there was still so much to do. The children were barely in school. She worried about Justin. He never wanted kids in the first place. He'd be furious if she left. What would he do with them? She wondered if he'd simply give them away. Palm them off on her mother who was too old and too grumpy to give them the appropriate level of care. She'd stick them in front of Nickelodeon all day. Send them to school with jam sandwiches on white bread and a packet of Smarties. No, he'd have to step up. They needed him. She was sure he'd figure out how to cope. But still, she felt she'd better check.

She gently nudged his back.

"Justin," she whispered. "Justin, wake up."

He rolled over onto his back and began to snore. She elbowed him sharply in the side. The snoring stopped. He turned to look at her, his eyes battling to focus. He frowned.

“Sorry to wake you,” she said, “But I’ve got really bad news. I’m pretty convinced I’m dying.”

He sat up, the frown deepening, his eyes searching her face.

“What do you mean? Have you been to the doctor?” His voice was thick with sleep.

“No, it’s a premonition. A feeling I’ve been sitting with for some time.”

Justin rolled over, turning his back on her. “Oh, for god’s sake Amy. You are not dying.”

She was annoyed. It was not like she’d ever made such a declaration before. She never even got headaches. It was probably bad timing, but she couldn’t leave it now. Down the passage the children’s toilet flushed. They would be coming through soon, asking for breakfast.

“Justin. Justin.” She nudged him again, but he groaned and pulled the duvet over his head.

The eggs spat in the pan. The microwave beeped, the milk for their coffee was ready. She could hear Timothy’s electric toothbrush whirring from the bathroom.

She handed Justin a cup of coffee. “I need you to promise that, when I die, you’re not to give the children away, under any circumstances.”

He sipped his coffee, the steam momentarily misting up his glasses.

She had another horrifying thought. What if he separated them? Gave the difficult one to Mom and kept sweet, compliant Julie.

“Not even Timothy, Justin, I’m serious. You can’t send Timothy away. He can’t always help that he’s so boisterous.

Please, this is important. They're going to need you. You must stick together after I'm gone. Promise me." He placed a slice of brown toast on his plate and buttered it. She lifted a fried egg carefully onto his toast.

"Who can I give them to?"

"No. No. No. You are not to give them to anyone. You've got to keep them. They're yours! It's going to be bad enough for them growing up without a mother. You have to be there for them."

"So, were you thinking more along the lines of me giving them to your mom or giving them up for adoption?" He paused and then added, "Or just sending them away to boarding school?"

It wasn't funny. It was stupid of her to think he'd believe her. But there were plans to be made. Memory books for the kids to compile. It was distressing.

Justin stopped chewing. He hated it when she cried. "Calm down Amy. You're fine. You've been exhausted with work and the kids. It's just that."

She leant against his shoulder, feeling momentarily comforted. His warm skin, the familiarity of his scent, this was what marriage was about. She would savour these small moments while she still could.

She decided not to mention it to him again. At least not for now. She would go about her life doing what she needed to do, setting things in place, getting her house in order, as they say. She wondered how it would happen, what it would feel like. Would it be a protracted illness spent lying in a darkened room, battling to acknowledge the stream of well-wishers who'd invariably come to say their goodbyes or would she simply drop dead from a massive heart attack in the middle of Pick n' Pay? She imagined the final moments, that split second of recognising that this was it, Game Over.

Would she be terrified, or would she be at peace? Would it feel like slipping into a deep sleep?

That's what she'd told Julie when she had found her sobbing into her pillow after Catnip died. "I don't want to die, mommy. I'm scared," Julie had cried. The thought that death was like falling into a deep peaceful sleep had calmed Julie. She loved her sleep. For months afterwards if she heard of someone dying she'd look wistful.

Amy opened her laptop to finish off the presentation for today's big pitch. It seemed futile now, though, and so she shut it instead. She'd call in sick. They'd have to cope without her. Anyway she'd grown to loathe advertising. She'd never meant to land up in it, she was an artist at heart. She wanted to touch people's lives through beautiful images. Make them think differently. At one point she'd toyed with being a photographer. Instead she'd spent the last seven years helping big corporations sell more stuff. She was not going to spend another minute doing it. She'd take a long walk through The Company Gardens while the kids were at school and fetch them early instead of leaving them in aftercare. She might even take her camera along and see what pictures she could capture. They could go towards the kids' memory book.

The entrance to the Gardens was in a narrow street dotted with cars parked too closely together. Car guards in orange jackets wandered between them. There was nowhere for her to park. She turned up a side road and spotted a loading bay. Ordinarily she would have circled until a legitimate parking became free, perhaps even give the trip a

miss altogether. But today she manoeuvred her car between the yellow lines. What did it matter if she got a ticket now?

She walked down the main path leading through the Gardens, noticing the small purple and blue buds just starting to blossom. Squirrels ran out, hopeful for nuts. She'd stopped buying nuts after Timothy had been rushed to hospital with an allergic reaction. Today she would buy peanuts. She loved them. She and the squirrels would share them. A vendor was selling brown packets of raw peanuts, their brown husks still intact, at the end of the long path. She ordered two packets but before she could pay, a large man came up behind her, talking over her.

"How much?"

"Twenty rand, sir."

"Twenty rand? That's ridiculous. It's a rip-off. I can buy salted roasted nuts from the supermarket for less than that."

Amy rolled her eyes. It seemed there were more and more people like this these days. She started to move aside but stopped. Actually, she was sick of it. Who did he think he was?

"Excuse me," she said. "There is no reason to speak like that. It's his livelihood. If you don't like the price, buy them from somewhere else."

"I'll take the nuts," he said, ignoring her.

"You can't."

"I can and I will. Give me the nuts." He spoke over Amy's head.

"You can't because I've bought all the nuts already." She pulled out five hundred rand from her purse, handed it to the vendor and gathered up the small brown packets.

"You can't do that," the man said.

"I just did."

She found a bench in the rose garden and scattered nuts across the broad path. She smiled as the squirrels scampered towards her, picking up the nuts in their tiny paws. They would finish a nut and then come back for more. Pigeons flew down, pecking the ground. The fresh smell of vegetation filled the air. She removed her cardigan and allowed the sun to warm her skin. An old lady wearing worn clothes and carrying stuffed plastic bags sat down next to her, muttering to herself. The smell of old urine made Amy shift in her seat. She started to stand and then changed her mind. Instead she looked down at the cardigan, the one she'd bought at Woolies last week. She'd liked its neutral tone. Very sensible. She could wear it to work and it went with everything. "Here," she said, handing the cardigan to the woman. The woman held it up in her hands. Amy emptied her purse and handed her the rest of her money. The woman started to cry. "Thank you, thank you," she said and, instead of moving away, Amy stayed and comforted her.

There was a pink ticket on Amy's car window when she got back to her car. She ripped it off, crumpled it up and stuffed it in her handbag. There was still an hour before she had to pick up the kids so she drove to Gardens Centre. There was a shop in there she'd always wanted to visit but never had.

The shop was empty and she glanced behind her. She touched the silky bras and underwear. She'd secretly imagined herself in one of their slips, perhaps even a lace

one. She gasped at the price of a red slip, trimmed with lace, but it felt so soft against her skin.

She arrived early outside the school gates. Julie noticed her first. “Mommy,” she squealed. Timothy always took a little longer than his sister but when he saw her he grinned, a dimple appearing on his left cheek. She hugged each child, kissing their small faces until they both pulled away.

“I thought we could do something fun today. Do you want to go for pizza at Dunes?”

They shrieked.

“Pizza, Dunes, pizza, Dunes,” they chanted and for a second she felt guilty for all the times she had not allowed them a simple slice of pizza.

In the car, she put on their favourite CD and they sang loudly all the way to Hout Bay.

As soon as they were seated, she ordered chocolate milkshakes.

“Why are you being so nice to us, mom?” Timothy asked.

“Because I love you,” she said and looked away before they saw her eyes fill with tears.

She listened to them chatting about their day at school. She asked about their teachers, their friends, their favourite subjects. Long after they’d stopped talking, she sat watching them until Julie said, “Why are you staring at me like that, mom?”

Justin poured a glass of wine and handed it to her.

“Is Margaret coming to watch the kids this weekend?”
For a moment, Amy went blank.

“My work function? Saturday night?” Amy went cold. The last thing she wanted was to spend her time sitting with his colleagues in an overpriced restaurant. Amy hated the way Pieter Swanepoel had the ability to make her feel stupid.

“I’m not going,” she said. “You can go, but I’m not going with you.”

Justin frowned, looking at her. “Why not?”

“I don’t feel like spending my time with your colleagues. I don’t know them and Pieter is a misogynist.”

“Oh, he’s hardly a misogynist.”

“Well, he makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m not spending any more time doing things I don’t want to do. And that goes for your mother too, Justin. It’s time you told her that it’s not helpful to make snide comments about me not spending enough time with the kids. Just because she didn’t have a career...”

“Is this about this morning?”

She stared at him then looked away, taking a sip of her wine. She listened for the kids. They were running the bath water again.

She yelled down the passage. “Don’t use all the hot water.”

“This is ridiculous, Amy. You are not dying. If you’re so convinced, why don’t you go and see a doctor?”

“I am,” Amy shouted. “I’m going tomorrow.”

She had not, in fact, made an appointment yet. There was a part of her that didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t want it to be final. But Justin was right. It was unfair on him. She needed proof. Then they could deal with this together.

It was her favourite time of day. The kids were asleep, the house quiet. Amy climbed out of the bath and put on the red silk slip.

“What’s this?” Justin looked up from the bed.

“Shut up, Justin.”

“Geez, you should be dying more often.”

The waiting room was full: people sniffing from seasonal allergies; coughs that wouldn’t go away. She’d arrived for her appointment on time but would now spend the next obligatory thirty minutes flipping through dated magazines.

She did not have a regular doctor. She never got sick. She usually saw whoever was on duty. Today it was Dr Winterson. She had a moment of panic as she heard her name being called. What if he thought she was a hypochondriac? She’d tell him she was having inexplicable aches and pains that wouldn’t go away. Get him to screen her properly, send her for tests. She sat on the doctor’s table, feeling like a young girl again. He took her blood pressure, listened to her heart beat. He looked in her ears, down her throat. He checked her eyes. He made her lie on the table and pressed against the glands in her neck, under her arms, her groin. He pushed on her stomach, looking for pain, for swelling.

He asked questions, the usual medical routine, and jotted down notes on a piece of paper. When he was finished, he tore the paper off a notepad.

“Right, Amy,” he said. “I’m not sure where these aches and pains are coming from. You appear to be in hundred

percent good health. However, I don't want to miss anything so I'm sending you for a series of blood tests."

She thanked him, feeling momentarily relieved, and then walked down the long passage to the pathology unit.

The house was quiet in the middle of the morning. Amy sat on her living room couch staring into the garden. The recent rain had made the grass bright green. She spotted a dandelion, completely intact, and remembered how much she'd loved them as a child. A tiny sunbird hopped onto the red bottle-brush tree. The tree was so much fuller than she remembered it. Everything was so beautiful. She would fetch the kids mid-morning, claiming an important family function. She would take them to the beach. Why waste time sitting in a classroom? A squawk made her look up. It was Johnny the cockatiel. His cage was a mess. The kids had begged her for a bird, but the novelty had long since worn off. She really should clean his cage, take better care of him. She walked towards the kitchen to fetch fresh newspaper and a wad of paper towel, but she stopped and turned around instead. She slid open the cage door. Johnny hopped forward.

"Here boy." He climbed onto her finger and she rubbed the top of his head. He nibbled her with his beak. She opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

"Off you go boy." She shook her finger, willing him to fly off. He jumped onto the ground instead, squawking.

"Shoo, shoo," she urged. Johnny flapped his wings and hopped onto the grass. She ran at him and he took off, flying over the fence.

She found the box of silkworms in Timothy's bedroom. She hated the things. She hated having them in the house. She'd been patient, waiting for Timothy's obsession to fade, but it had intensified. She took the box outside. She lifted the lid ready to tip them into the garden but the thought of them squirming around the ground disgusted her and she ran back to the kitchen for the Doom. She aimed it at the open box, closed her eyes and sprayed.

Her cellphone rang. It was the doctors' rooms.

"Hello?" Her voice broke as she spoke.

"Mrs Taylor?"

"Yes?"

"Doctor told me to call. The results are in."

Amy sat down on a dining room chair. The cuckoo clock she'd inherited from her father ticked loudly on the wall. She noticed the sunbird was gone.

"All clear, Mrs Taylor. Everything has come back clear. You are in excellent health... Mrs Taylor?"

Amy battled to understand what she was hearing. She thanked the nurse and hung up. How could she have been so wrong? Had she really been under that much stress? She walked into her bedroom and noticed the red slip lying crumpled on the bed. What a fool she'd been. She picked up the slip and threw it in the bin. She needed to get back to work.

At the bedroom door she stopped. She turned and walked back to the dustbin. The red silk lay crumpled in a heap on top of a discarded tissue box. She lifted it out and placed the soft material against her face before folding it and putting it under her pillow.

Death of a Leopard

Susan Hickey

All Jolene heard was a stampede of hooves around the Land Rover, sending up a cloud of dust and causing the vehicle to shake. The impala were clearly panicked but, other than the sound of the hooves, they emitted not a single bleat or cry. She wondered if they were scattering or, if by some instinct, they had followed a leader, seeking out safer ground away from men with guns.

Everybody appeared to be holding their breath in morbid anticipation. The dust settled and, seemingly as one, they rose and cheered at the sight of the dead animal lying still and solitary in the dust of the South African bushveld.

They scrambled like children off the open Land Rover and rushed up to the dead impala – all except Elliot who had yet to react at all. Harold reached the impala first and called out, “A clean shot. Straight through the heart. Well done, Mark.”

“What a marksman,” shouted Colin, apparently hoping someone in the group would notice his clever wordplay.

Maggie tried to make herself heard above the bloodthirsty excitement, interjecting phrases about culling and self sustaining eco-systems. Everyone ignored her. Mark was issuing instructions to the trackers about skinning the animal, distributing the meat and making biltong. His voice grew increasingly authoritative.

It became clear that Elliot had no intention of leaving the vehicle or participating in Mark’s victory. Jolene decided that

she ought to, although she'd left it so late that her reluctance would probably be more evident than she'd've liked. Years ago she'd come to accept that any attempt on her part to camouflage Elliot's disdain was futile. No amount of enthusiasm, sensitivity, social natter or genuine warmth could conceal her husband's refusal to fake enthusiasm for anyone or anything that failed to impress or interest him.

Standing over the impala, Jolene noticed that its eyelashes were long and beautiful and that they cast a shadow over part of its face. She had not expected to see such elegance. Bloated ticks had been gorging on the blood on her neck and Jolene suppressed the impulse to pull them off and crush them underfoot. She felt an ache forming at the back of her throat. Elliot had told her years ago that, unless she could reconcile herself to hunting, it was better for her to stay home. She was not actually reconciled, just reluctant to miss out on Elliot's company.

Arrangements were made via radio contact with the rangers for the collection of the animal and they all clambered back into the Landie. As was often the case, Elliot's silence was the vehicle for his disdain. Mark was buoyed up by the triumph of his kill and almost ready to confront Elliot, who stared ahead as though this spectacle had not taken place. Mark glared in Elliot's direction several times as though daring him to make eye-contact. Eventually he said quite loudly, "So Elliot, why didn't you take a shot? Scared to miss, buddy? Is that why you only hunt alone – so no-one sees if you miss? Isn't an impala good enough for Elliot Lynch? I suppose only a leopard will do."

Elliot didn't turn to make eye contact. "Mark, you shot a breeding-age ewe. That herd was at least two hundred-strong. How do you imagine you could have missed? You might as well have shot Bambi."

Colin looked at the floor but his wife, Helen, glanced at Mark as though pleading with him to allow common sense to reign. Elliot had told her that this hunting trip was probably an attempt to guarantee the merger that Mark and Colin wanted so badly with one of Elliot's companies. Mark hesitated and then continued.

“Elliot, I suppose you think you're wealthy enough to rain on everyone's parade. You must be a real joy to live with.”

Jolene knew that, at the first available opportunity, they would talk about Elliot and mutter about why they “put up with him” and, for that matter, why she continued to put up with him. They knew why they did, though. They would climb over their resentment because it was in their best interest to do so.

Mark was right. Elliot had paid for a leopard and was on this trip to shoot one, alone and without explanation. Just finding a leopard would be a challenge across the thirty-five square kilometres it claimed as territory. Killing it would be even more terrifying. Better than anyone, he knew its speed and strength made it possible for a leopard to kill animals more than five times its weight and size. For him, it was all about an honourable chase. She knew he wouldn't gloat when – not if – he took his shot. He would, as he'd told her often enough, bow his head “in respect for a life well lived”.

Dinner was a raucous affair. Word about Mark's kill had spread. The food was excellent and the wine exquisite, but Jolene felt uncomfortable. Somehow the whole group oozed with the self-satisfaction that comes with affluence and influence. It had an unpleasant aftertaste and Jolene was

relieved when Elliot turned down the invitation to stay on for cigars, whisky and port.

Retiring with Elliot was and always had been the favourite time of her day. He could hardly be described as talkative but his presence was reassuring to her. He seldom permitted the interruptions of business calls but often immersed himself in the study of the balance sheets of companies he was taking aim at. It was his quiet time and Jolene knew that, in part, he credited her with his capacity to concentrate.

Often she would catch him just watching her with such tenderness her heart ached. Elliot came alive in the dark. His ideas and philosophies flowed in the glow of the moonlight, when Jolene held him close.

Tonight it was imperative that she make love to him. Years ago he had forbidden the use of the words “I love you” and refused to explain why. With time she had begun to understand that living with a reserved husband required that she learn “Elliot language”. It was the language of the gods.

Only in silence and, with attention, could she understand what was really meant. It was to be found in the rhythm of their bodies – never urgent, never grasping. “I love you” could be found in the sweat that was all that separated them. Elliot was poetry in motion. His eyes were the measure of his tenderness and in them she heard songs of love.

She could see that Elliot was wearier than he expected to be or would admit to being but she ignored it. Tomorrow at dusk, in the no-man’s land between day and night, she would kill Elliot and so his “I love you” tonight was something she needed to keep forever.

While Elliot slept, Jolene sat on the balcony smoking, watching the stars and reminding herself that she was the wife of The Great Elliot. Because of him she too could be steadfast in her decisions. She was capable of the unthinkable. She was not at the mercy of panic or indecision. She allowed herself one last cigarette and her favourite indulgence – the memory of her most romantic moment.

As a young wife, she had been driven to desperation by Elliot's lack of verbal communication. Attempts to coerce affection or reassurance from him had been met with a weary lack of interest. Eventually, she had resorted to the clichéd "I need space", knowing full well that she had more space than she could actually handle. "Elliot, I want my own room. I hate this bedroom. It's so severe and it reflects you – not me and not us". Elliot had not replied.

The next day, Jolene had arrived home at midday to find his grey Jaguar parked carelessly under the tree and his driver napping in the shade. In the driveway was a lilac mini-van marked *Making Memories*. Inside she heard Elliot being Elliot.

"I trust that the contraption in my driveway is not a reflection of your taste and merely a consequence of your financial predicament. Nevertheless, the wallpaper is to be roses. Only roses - not just any flowers. The colour is called "Pause" and it has just a hint of antique pink and this room is to be filled with orchids of the highest quality. Furthermore, despite the lack of apparent urgency, I expect this bedroom to be changed immediately for which I expect to be charged accordingly."

She had sat on the stairs outside his office and listened to Elliot banish the demons of her insecurity forever. Who would have guessed that Elliot lived in a bedroom with an accent wall of roses? Her lingering misery had never returned. Her trust in Elliot's love for her was her anchor.

The following day was beautiful. Mark had apparently had his fill of killing and Colin was not a hunter. They drove aimlessly and watched the zebra grazing placidly on the dry grass. At some point they came across a lone kudu bull, which stared out into the distance over the African grasslands. He seemed to glow among the grasses that shone in hues of yellow, gold and grey, gurgling with sounds of life.

Smatterings of thorn trees provided a modicum of shade but the day was hot and bright, the sky cloudless and vast the way it only ever was in Africa. Jolene hoped to see elephant but it was not to be. Instead the springbok pranced apparently for no reason other than the joy of movement. No reference was made to the impala and the bumptiousness of the previous night had evaporated. Apparently they had talked themselves into a temporary acceptance of Elliot's attitude.

Right here was the profound truth of life that Elliot had taught her. Nothing was ever as it seemed. This same landscape could be ravaged by drought and become the burial ground of all that depended on it. Giraffe would need to stretch their necks ever higher in search of food until there was none. Hippo would wander hopelessly into the bush, sunburnt and pitiful in search of water that wasn't there. Waterholes would become mud puddles and the antelope grow thinner and thinner. When the rains eventually came the sky would be lit by vicious lightning storms. The animals would wait patiently under the trees or just endure the wrath of the gods. Whichever of them survived would be the strongest and most tenacious – and that was why they endured.

For today, Elliot was still beside her, his handsome face at peace, absorbing the bushveld that he sought out over and over again when he grew weary of power. She smiled wryly to herself. Who would have thought she'd be the Judas of the group? Tonight his shirt would be soaked in his own blood and his unseeing eyes would face a moon that was uncaring. The murderess yearned to stroke his face and look deep into his intelligent eyes but she knew Elliot would never welcome so blatant a show of public affection.

It had been dry and hot for days and the dust rose at every bump, but Jolene knew better than to make this kind of small talk with Elliot now. It had been easy to persuade him to let her come for part of the hunt. Elliot actually saw her as an extension of himself so, having her alongside him was not significantly different from being alone. She understood his defining need for silence and had learnt to be so still that her presence was almost imperceptible.

“You can go on from here alone, Elliot. I’ll wait. I’ll take my own rifle so I’ll be quite safe,” she assured him now.

He stopped the open Land Rover under some thorn trees that provided as much shade as they were likely to find. Elliot had always believed he could will into his life that which he desired and right now he desired a leopard. He looked at her lingeringly. It was Elliot language for “Be safe, see you later. My dearest one.”

He left, alone and on foot. Jolene waited, watching the sun sag behind the mountain. She shoved the rising self-pity back into its place. She knew where he was going. They had seen a leopard there several times before.

“Jolene,” he’d said to her more than once, “at the coal-face your worst enemy is your imagination. Facts – always rely on the facts.”

Carefully she allowed herself to entertain the facts that had threatened to hijack her sanity. She could not tolerate them in full sentences. They appeared to her as a Power Point presentation, in bullet points only.

- Brain cancer
- Inoperable
- Inevitable optic nerve degeneration
- Fine and gross motor co-ordination decay
- Pain, pain, pain
- Palliative care
- Death

Dr Nathan had been unsurprised that Elliot had been unable to attend his follow-up appointment. The painkillers had taken care of his debilitating headaches in the meantime. The most difficult part had been dissuading him from phoning Elliot, but she’d promised that after the hunting trip he would keep his appointment.

She had shaken off Dr Nathan’s pity like a dog after a bath and thrown the prescription for anti-depressants into the bin before she even left the building.

Elliot would not be killed slowly by some sneaking, creeping cluster of rogue cells, too cowardly and disgusting to make their presence known until their victory was guaranteed. She would never allow him to hear himself whimper in the night, desperate for morphine, wasting in a bed that was previously their sanctuary. Elliot would not writhe, nor would he be ashamed by his inability to control his bladder or his bowels. He would not struggle to form the

words he had so little respect for anyway. She would not have him reduced. She would not have him be any less than Elliot.

Dusk came slowly and the sounds of life slowed. No vultures circled to bear witness to her act. Jolene picked up her rifle, loaded the chamber, shot back the bolt and checked her sights.

“Yes, Elliot, I know,” she told the dust, “life demands that we know when to feel and when to do. If we feel too much while we do, we compromise our actions.”

The time had come to hunt a leopard.

“I will remember, Elliot, to bow my head and, if God finds me worthy, I will see you in my dreams.”

Agenda

Thandi de Kock

Here we go again, she thinks to herself. They've performed this dance before. He's been making these moves all night.

Isabel looks over at the man beside her. He's caught up in a story of another high school basketball escapade. She couldn't care less. He looks healthy, his chiselled jaw peppered with a few stray hairs he must believe to be a five o'clock shadow. Isabel can feel herself falling for him with every new glass of wine.

"...so Rob decides to do a backflip off the roof of the cop car, as I'm standing there trying to persuade the guy to let us off easy. Honestly, I've always had to be the one keeping everything together. The mature one. Without me most of those kids would have been arrested ... What about you, mi bella?"

He flashes his Prince Charming grin. His accent is tinged with a hint of Italian flair, which he doesn't hesitate to emphasise. "Who were you back then? Which beautiful version of Isabel do I have the pleasure of meeting tonight?" He grins again, looking up at her through long black eyelashes. He's trying too hard but it doesn't matter.

"I've always been a bit of a party girl, I'm afraid." She winks at him and raises her glass, hiding her lips. "When I was 25, I wouldn't be the one trying to settle everyone down. I would probably have been too busy doing a line of coke off some guy's boner."

Lie. That's a lie. Her heart jumps as she rethinks her last statement. Oh my God, that was too far. What the fuck, Isabel, it hasn't been that long. She feels panic growing and she takes a long sip of wine. She avoids looking at him, terrified of what his expression might show. The wine steadies her heart and she risks a glance at his face. His mouth is open wide in the most authentic smile she's seen all night.

"Well, I don't think we would've had a chance back then." He laughs and picks up his glass. "You and I were very different people. Although with your looks, I probably would have been persuaded otherwise."

He takes a long sip, and she notices how the muscles under his shirt bulge. His long fingers cradle his glass as he looks up at her. "You really are exquisite, Isabella."

He stares at her with a look that she can't really define. He's trying to look sexy. He's trying very hard. He obviously remembers what it's like to be young and irresistible. Now he's trying to be that man again. She can see the lust in his gaze, as his eyes skim her thighs and the curve of her breasts beneath her black silk dress. She can see the desperation in his attempts to impress her. She can hear it in his voice. It's been a long time for him too.

"What exactly do you find so attractive about me? She smiles at him flirtatiously. "Honestly. I mean, to have spent so much time and lavished so much wine..."

She doesn't really care about his response, though. It's just something to say. She doesn't need more than this one night. She's a happy liar. He is desperate and she is ovulating.

Walking accidents and how to avoid them 101

Yvette Wilsenach

She sashayed across the bedroom, stepping delicately over the coiled climbing rope and other paraphernalia. “I still don’t know why you got this. You know I hate heights.”

“And you know I like to be prepared.”

“Mmm,” she said as her still-pert backside disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later the shower hissed into action. Still had a good bod, Alexa. All that time at gym and yoga and God knows what else certainly paid off. Robyn, on the other hand, had the blessed firmness and energy of youth. His pleasant thoughts were interrupted by Alexa’s return. She dressed with a slight frown, which was about all she could manage nowadays.

“Is that a new necklace?”

She looked up at him vaguely as she pulled on her shoes. “Yes.”

“Looks expensive.”

She looked at herself in the mirror, fingering the necklace. “It was rather, but it goes so well with this dress and brings out my eyes, don’t you think? Anyway, not really any of your concern ... is it?”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

She made a little moue with her mouth. “Sorry, darling.”

“Where are you off to again?”

She sighed. “Book club, darling. Same as every month.”

“I thought book club was on a Thursday evening.”

She glanced at him. “And I didn’t think you kept track. It is normally, but because of our walking holiday, I would’ve missed this Thursday and then, next month, Brenda and Phil are on the Italian trip ... otherwise it would be two months ...”

He wasn’t listening. He was bored already. “When did you cut your hair?”

She paused, lipstick poised. “On Saturday. Nice of you to finally notice.”

“You know I always loved your hair long.”

“Sometimes one needs a change, don’t you think?”

“But you didn’t even ask if I approved.”

“Well, it is *my* hair.”

He had wanted to say and you are *my* wife, but he had known that wouldn’t go down well.

“Tea?” She reached for the flask. They had stopped for lunch overlooking a shallow valley. He was glad of the break. He wasn’t quite as fit as he’d thought he was. Time to up the ante at gym.

He watched her pour, but as she was about to add his sugar, he stopped her. “No sugar.”

She looked at him in surprise. “But you always have your little half teaspoon.”

“Well, you know, must watch the old tum a bit.”

“But I like your old tum.”

“Well, I don’t.”

She shrugged, handed him his tea. “It really is peaceful here. This was a good idea of yours. And it’s lovely with just the two of us – like the early years. Who did you say recommended this route again?”

“One of my young engineers – Robyn.”

“Have I ever met him? Was he at the Christmas party?”

He didn’t correct her, just shook his head and gazed out over the mountains.

He picked at his duck à l’orange. Tomorrow was the day.

“What’s wrong, darling?” She took a sip of white wine and another bite of grilled salmon, watching him. “Are you worried about that conference? Are you sure you shouldn’t be there?”

“No, no, I have very capable people in place.” Robyn, he thought. If anyone could strut her stuff and get the buy-ins they so desperately needed, it was Robyn. Bright, intelligent, sassy, she could do it. She had to do it. He would *never* ask Alexa for the money.

As they were hitching on their daypacks the next morning his eye caught a flash of blonde hair disappearing into a shop. Funny how a blonde always caught his eye.

They had been lucky with the weather, clear blue skies, bracing, but not cold. Perfect walking weather, they had told each other. However, after lunch – smoked salmon sandwiches and his black tea – a slight drizzle set in. What one of the boys used to call a mizzle. (“Because it’s miserable and drizzling, see Dad?”) They decided there was nothing for it but to trudge on.

“See?” he said as they stopped and hauled out their protective gear in a copse of trees. “I like to be prepared.”

“So do I, dear.” She seemed to be struggling with her zip.

He looked around for the green cross, trying to seem casual. Robyn had said she would place the mark on a rock near the trees to show which path to take at the fork. Where

was the bloody thing? Ah, he spotted it just as Alexa finished doing up her zip and turned to him.

“Problem with the zip?”

“No. Solved.”

They walked on in silence for ten minutes in worsening weather. “Are you sure we’re on the right path?” she called over her shoulder.

“Perfectly.”

Thank God for this weather. It would provide a good story. She had slipped, he would say. I just couldn’t grab her in time. He paused to catch his breath. He could swear he heard a noise behind him, but when he turned, there was nothing there. Just the rain.

“How much further?” Alexa called. How had she got so far ahead? He stopped and wiped the rain out of his eyes.

She was standing on the rock. The rock Robyn had described to him. It protruded over the cliff they had walked up. She looked magnificent standing there – the dark clouds behind her, her hair tousled by the wind. A bit of a waste, mother of his children and all that.

“Just wait for me there.” He urged himself on, and reached her, panting. “Are you okay out there? What about your fear of heights?” He looked down, feeling dizzy, and shook his head. *He* had never had a problem with heights.

“I think we should go back down,” she said. “This path seems to lead away from where we want to go. I think that’s our path down there. See? We went wrong at that fork by the trees.”

How could she stand there so calmly? Normally she would make sure to have her back against a solid wall.

But never mind that. It was lucky for him. This was his chance – now or never. He walked quickly towards her and then lunged. She side-stepped him neatly, almost elegantly.

The bitch had always been a good dancer. He teetered on the rock's edge, felt the empty space yawn beneath him. He scrabbled frantically with his right hand, felt his nails connect with the cliff face and tear. He didn't have time to feel the pain as he bounced once, cracking his head on a sharp rock, and then landed on his back on a ledge. The air was completely knocked out of him. He couldn't breathe at first and, when he finally did, the pain was excruciating. This could not be happening. He could see Alexa looking down at him. He tried to lift his head, to say something to her.

"Oh, haven't I told you, darling?" she shouted down. "I took up rock climbing to overcome my fear of heights. It's been great fun and you meet such interesting people too."

A blonde head materialised beside her. "He's not dead yet," Robyn said.

"Oh, he will be soon." Alexa threw down the climbing rope and it landed on his belly in a heavy coil. He yelped in pain. "Oops," she giggled. "Guess we'll have to go and get help."

Robyn and Alexa kissed, just before their heads disappeared. He wanted to call to them to wait, to help him, damnit, but the last thing he heard was their laughter in the wind.

How to write a short story

A non-definitive guide

The short story presents challenges, which are the same as for any other form of writing, except for being more extreme. You have to be more precise and more exacting.

You will use fewer words, so each word is more important. You will have fewer characters and it is far easier to pick a story with a limited time-frame: a weekend, a week, an evening. Like a snap-shot.

Where do you begin:

When you tackle your story, you have several choices to make.

- Every story has literary conflict. (This is different from human conflict. It doesn't necessary mean a fight or disagreement, although it can.) In every story, there's an unanswered question, a challenge to be faced. The choices – the way that challenge is met or not met, makes the story.

- Basically, you can see literary conflict as this: your character is up against something. The more we identify with your character, and the harder the thing he's up against (emotional, or physical, affecting the survival of the world, or his own spiritual well-being), the more we will be inclined to read it.

- There are three kinds of literary conflict: Person against person, person against the environment or fate, inner conflict.

- Usually your character will face more than one of these at the same time. The man trying to survive on a raft

will also have to face his own doubts, fears and, perhaps, guilt over the people he has wronged in his life.

Think about your characters

- Have only as many as you really need, even if they exist within a large office or other environment in which we have a shadowy sense of more people beyond our cast of characters.
- Who is your protagonist?
- Do a little work building your protagonist. Work out some background for them. Where do they come from? What has made them who and what they are. The more you can work out quickly, and the more you can get into his or her skin, the better your character will emerge.
- Think about voice and vision. That's what brings a character alive. How do they see the world? Are they naïve or knowing or anywhere in between? What is their voice: sardonic, sincere or sensual? What kind of vocabulary do they use and what is the rhythm of their speech and their thoughts?
- Strong voice and a strong character are essential to creating a strong story.

What is the story?

You've already given this some thought through your thoughts on conflict. Now work it out more exactly.

- The story should feel as though it flows out of the characters, who they are and the choices they make.
- Every story is a journey with a beginning, a middle and an end. Your character sets out on this path because: something has disturbed the balance of their life. They've

been thrown out of their equilibrium. A pebble has been thrown into the pond.

- The body of the story must build our tension.
- Every thing that happens must lead out of the last and into the next. It must take the story onward and upward. It shouldn't be a string of "one damned thing after another".
- The climax is the culmination of your story. It can be something that happens or perhaps, in a coming of age story, it could be something that forces an intense realisation on the character. An epiphany. Either way, it changes everything.
- Sometimes the beginning of the journey is implied. And what happens after the climax (the lesson learnt) does not have to be spelt out. There are short stories which end on the edge of the climax. The man has struggled with a decision, throughout the story. He decides ... and the story leaves us as he's about to ring the doorbell. These are slightly uncomfortable stories, since we have to fill in the end for ourselves.

Point of View:

This is a complex subject, but we'll give you just enough to be getting along with.

- Omniscient (the God's eye view) is very difficult to carry off without sounding clunky. It is much less used than it once was and, if you do use it, you have to give your narrator a strong voice and personality. It works well in satirical works.
- If you want to be experimental you could use 2nd person, "you", but that is very seldom done as well. "You walk into the room..." You could also use an "I" and "you"

as in a narrator addressing or writing a letter to someone else.

- You most common choices are between 1st person, “I” –and you all know how that goes - and 3rd person attached.

- In 3rd person attached, you’re attached to the consciousness of a character, but it’s expressed in the 3rd person. We see the world, and the events of the story, through the prism of that person’s voice and vision. Imagine yourself sitting on that person’s shoulders. You talk of “Linda” or “she”, but you (and we) can hear only Linda’s thoughts and inner life and we see, hear, smell, taste and touch only what she can. Don’t think about this too technically. Think yourself into Linda’s skin and tell the story from her perspective (while using “she”).

Write in scenes:

- Each scene is a story in miniature. Someone faces something, no matter how small. Someone wants something or needs something.

- Write with dialogue and as little explanation as you can.

- Throw us into the scene where things are happening or people are speaking.

- Don’t spend time telling us where they are or why. Allow us to work that out from the details you give us.

General points:

- Don’t explain anything. Don’t tell us who people are, how they’re related and how they got there. We should learn about characters and their world through the things they say and don’t say, the things they do and don’t do, how they react or not.

- Use details well. Every detail is significant so make it count. Details tell us about people and their world. Their gestures, clothing, the things they keep around them, make us work to draw conclusions about them. We like to work.
- The way they see the environment – do they notice the sunshine or the shade – tells us about them.

Where to begin:

- Start late, end early. Do not explain anything.
- Throw your characters into the story where things are happening.
- Don't wind on for ages after the climax has been reached.
- You don't have to start at the beginning of the story, although you can. You can start in the middle or near the end, and then take us back to the beginning.
- Where is the most dramatic place to begin? The beginning is there to draw people into the story. You won't draw people in by making them wade through a lot of explanation or back story first.
- Create questions in your reader's mind – about your characters, the challenge they face or the world they live in. This will pique their curiosity, raise the level of suspense, and cause them to read on.

The middle:

- In the middle, your job is to elaborate and perhaps complicate the story. You want to ratchet up the stakes and, therefore, the suspense.
- The stakes must be important to your character, and therefore to your reader, although not necessarily in any objective sense.

- The stakes may rise as a consequence of your character encountering a series of increasingly challenging tests or trials. In a short story, these are necessarily briefly told.

- The middle ends with your character facing her most difficult challenge... or having given up all hope of achieving her ambition... The bomb might be about to explode in the supermarket, Superman has lost his powers, it's the moment of highest tension and uncertainty.

The end

- The end is the resolution of the story which is not necessarily spelled out in a short story.

- The major threads are tied up – but this again could be suggested, rather than laboriously spelled out.

- The “moral” of the story could be suggested here – or not.

Story Seeds

1. Speak now...

That moment in the wedding ceremony has arrived when the marriage officer says, “If any of you can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now; or else forever hold your peace...” Your character is in the congregation and knows something could well be an obstacle to the marriage – but says nothing. Now, you can go backwards in time to explore what the obstacle is, and how he or she came to discover it... Or, you can follow your character to the reception and explore what happens next. What does your character do with this explosive knowledge (if anything)?

You can write this as... an exploration of character; as a thriller; as a comedy; even as a tragedy...

2. The blue train

Your character, who is married to a spouse who dropped out of the trip at the last moment because of work pressure, but insisted he she (or he) go anyway, has embarked on a long train journey – the Orient Express, say, or the Trans-Canadian Express, or the Blue Train. In the dining car on the first night, over lobster thermidor, they meet someone, either from their past or a complete stranger, and fall into conversation. What they learn throws them and everything they thought they knew about themselves and their relationship into turmoil...

You could set this in any era. It could be written as a relationship drama, a romance, a thriller or indeed a comedy.

3. Bliss

A married couple are going on a much-anticipated holiday – diving, mountain walking, to the Antarctic, on a yacht. We learn that the protagonist has long nurtured the ambition of doing away with his or her unfaithful spouse. He or she feels that this trip offers them the perfect opportunity. What happens? (Look for a twist.)

This could be a suspenseful little tale – or a comedy, or a romance.

4. Walkers

Your character is on a charity walk. He (or she) is nearing the end of his self-imposed challenge. He's got blisters on places he didn't know he had. He's exhausted. He only has a day or two to go... Then he meets a difficulty – that could have to do with the environment, himself, or someone he meets – and this causes him to question many of his assumptions about himself and/or the world. Your story can end happily – or not. It could be a miniature about self. It could be an action thriller.

5. Captive Audience

You're one of three hostages captured by Somali pirates, waiting for your embassies to raise the \$3m dollar ransom your captors have demanded. Something happens between the three of you which gives you the courage you'll need to

endure whatever lies ahead. It could involve one of the Somalis guarding you. This could be a story about human nature. It could be a love story. (It's not a thriller: you all recognize there's no chance of escape.)

6. Shed

A ten-to-fourteen-year-old child discovers that there's a person sheltering in the shed at the bottom of the garden. That person is a badly injured activist of some sort (animal activist, political activist). The child sees in the newspaper that the person in the shed was involved in a nearby incident (a raid on an animal laboratory, an act of violent political protest), in which they were injured. Discovery would lead to their immediate arrest. The child, who is, him- or herself an outsider, doesn't know what to do. He could be tempted to do some act of derring-do to prove him (or her-) self – or his sympathies might be engaged by the fugitive. Or both. The story is essentially about the choice the child has to make: it's a coming of age story.

7. The wild

Two or three children go on an outing into territory they've always been warned to avoid without adults in attendance. They deliberately break this rule as an act of defiance and adventure. This is a wild place: hills and valleys with the possibility of hoboes, snakes, wild-eyed Pentecostal worshippers, badly sealed mine shafts, feral dogs, traps... This, too, is a coming of age story. It could be an adventure, a story about relationships, or a story about your character's experiencing an epiphany not shared by the others.

8. Girls (or boys) just want to have fun

An upbeat story about the difficulties of dating in the modern world. The character must be between 20 and 35. It's about the start of the relationship. It involves new media to a greater or lesser extent. (It could even be written as a series of tweets, for instance.)

9. Fantasy

Your character is on a journey (a quest, in fact, to which you might glancingly refer) when he finds himself, at dusk, on a hilltop, beneath a gibbet from which three bodies in various stages of decomposition are hanging. A crow is busy pecking out the eyes of the most recently hanged miscreant, but is distracted by the arrival of your character – and engages him in conversation. It challenges him with a test: it could be a riddle test, or a test of strength, or bravery, or compassion. Unless he meets the challenge, he can not continue with his quest.

10. The tea-lady's secret

You're a worker in a large office. One day you go to retrieve something from your locker and discover the tea-lady rifling through the pockets of the coats hung in the locker-room. She is elderly. She's a well-loved fixture of your company. What do you do, and what happens next?

All About Writing

All About Writing is a partnership between Richard Beynon and Jo-Anne Richards, who have both made their livings from writing and are passionate about the craft. They have devised a series of creative writing courses and workshops to communicate their passion – and the skills to bring good writing within everyone’s reach.

All About Writing offers a mentoring programme designed to help writers to start and finish a book or a screenplay. In addition they run a writing retreats including an annual retreat in Venice, Italy.

Jo-Anne Richards is an internationally published writer whose novels include *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (recently included in the Picador Africa Classics collection), *Touching the Lighthouse*, *Sad at the Edges*, *My Brother’s Book* and *The Imagined Child*. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of the Witwatersrand.

Richard Beynon is an award-winning film and television scriptwriter with a long and accomplished career in the local industry. He has written for – or headed the writing teams of – many of country’s most popular soaps.

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