

Crumpled Hearts

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Abstract

A middle-aged woman, living in Johannesburg, has an experience which catapults her into changing her life. In the process of confronting her alcoholism, she realizes how patterns of addiction extend to other areas of her life and tries to make sense of the tragic events that have occurred. Her world becomes a different place as she questions everything that she has been taught about relationships, religion, race and her place in society. In the search for answers she uncovers stories about the lives of her parents, grandparents, relatives, friends and acquaintances. Embarking on a journey of discovery and rediscovery through her experiences and those of others, she explores the ways in which the things that she thought she knew defined her behaviour and expression of herself.

1

Kris knew that she was awake because she could feel her body.

She lay still, mind blank, hoping that the throbbing pain would subside. It did not, and she couldn't locate its source, it seemed to be coming from all over her. She opened her eyes, slowly, as usual. She was at home, in her own bed. *Good*. She winced when she moved her left hand. It hurt more than anything else. She winced again as the first memory of the night before dropped into her befuddled brain.

Fumbling her way through the lace curtain across the bedroom doorway, she stopped at the chaos in the lounge. Broken glass, coloured with lines of gold and blue and red, the broken glass of her favourite wine glasses. All four of them lay shattered on the floor, her special present to herself the last Christmas that she had spent alone.

Shit! There was someone on the sleeper couch under a thin blanket. *Who?* Remembering then, it's ok, at least he had not made it all the way to her bed. This time. *Shit!* She retreated, as quickly as she could, back into the bedroom, but he had not seen her, naked and shaking in the unforgiving light of morning. Drawing the gown over her body was awkward with only the right hand. Peering at her left hand she saw that it was turning blue-black. Moving sent blades of pain up her arm and it could bear no weight.

More memories of yesterday began to drop down into her awakening consciousness. The magic, the pub and dinner and dancing and wine, lots and lots of wine... Fancy meeting you here, Marius, you haven't changed. Nor have you, Kris, except you're not a little girl any more. Well I was all grown up the last time I saw you. Yeah you were at that. Swallowing the pain of the past along with another big glass of red wine, warm and roundly soothing. There was a gap. A dark patch, like the Bermuda triangle, where memory is sucked into the void. It was summer, the scent of flowers and trees rising in the morning sun, but she stood shivering on the black slate of the bathroom, sore and scared. She looked into the mirror, there was a faint blue mark between her eyebrows. Her fear grew as she stared at the puffy face staring back at her with frightened dark eyes.

You want to change, you have to change.

She stumbled backwards into the middle of the small room.

We cannot protect you like this, anymore.

There was a small hiss as she held her breath. She looked slowly up at the ceiling, peered sideways. But there was nothing, she heard nothing else.

She turned to the mirror, stared at herself again. She knew then that she was all out of chances. Next time she might break her nose, slice her hands on broken glass, smash her face on a piece of furniture, wreck the car, hurt someone else, get raped. My God! She had not seen the man in years! What did she really know about him? Her instincts had been wrong before.

I have to change. I have to stop drinking.

“Oh God Daddy Granny someone Mommy help me someone...”

The sound she made was low, a keening and it woke the man on the couch.

“You look like hell! What are you doing on the floor? Wait, let me help you – o sorrie, your hand?”

“You don’t look much better than me,” she sniffed, looking up him with his hair on end, dark rings under red eyes.

His hands shook as he felt the pockets of the rumpled shirt, feeling for his cigarettes.

“I have to stop drinking,” Kris whispered.

“Ja, my skat. And I must stop smoking as well,” he said, heading for the door.

Kris lived in a small cottage on what had been a farm on the northern outskirts of Johannesburg. With the city spreading outwards the plot was to be developed as a townhouse complex for the aged. Looking for over fifties, the advertisement read, invest in your future now. I worry about you, her mother said, you are financially insecure, have no pension or savings. Yes, she was broke.

So was Marius, this man in whose presence she felt unaccountably comfortable and safe. She made coffee, strong and black and they sat underneath the tree that the loeries liked to perch in. Marius smoked his last cigarette and she began the process of getting sober, finding herself in a strange alliance with this man that she had first met when she was a child.

2

Marius took her car and brought back fresh ingredients for dinner, plus a large duffel bag of clothes, a box of books, laptop and a juicer. It was easy, then, to make space for his things in the cupboard, easy to accommodate him in the small cottage and, it seemed, in her life.

Kris was to hear that most people remember their first AA meeting clearly. Marius accompanied her to her first one, because you need the support, he said. Their new friends at AA, or their old friends at the bars, or family or psychologists – why even strangers who watch Oprah or Jerry Springer would have given the same advice – all might have told them that moving in together was not a good idea. Get a plant, and if it's still alive in a year, get a pet, and if that is still doing well after a year, consider a relationship. But they didn't ask anyone, barely discussed it with each other.

There was a meeting at a church nearby, in a rectangular room around the side of a large, rambling collection of buildings. They found it by following the signs, "AA" with an arrow, and nervously tagged along behind a group of people making their way in. The charcoal plastic chairs were arranged in a semi-circle in front of a table covered in a blue cloth. Kris could feel the shaking in her body, wondered nervously if it was too late to leave. She looked up at Marius as they hesitated in the doorway. Perhaps this was a mistake, she need not be here at all. Before she could take Marius by the arm and leave, an older woman with impossibly black hair and bright red lipstick approached with her hand outstretched. "Welcome," she said, "Take a seat, first time? How long since your last drink? A week, oh, well done! If you have a problem with drink you're in the right place." Kris huddled into the seat beside the anonymous woman, convinced that people were staring at her.

As newcomers they were asked their names.

"Marius."

"Kris... I'm an alcoholic." The admission came out unexpectedly, but it sounded a strange release. She listened to people speaking about things that were familiar, things that she had done. Could it be that after years of struggling to be a part of something, to belong to a group, or to someone, she might find membership through addiction?

“It’s chip night. For the newcomers, this is where we acknowledge milestones in sobriety. Anyone sober for twenty-four hours? How about one week?” Red Lips poked Kris in the ribs with her elbow, began waving her hand in the air, pointing at the couple. “One month ... oh, we have a taker for one week, two takers, both of our newcomers. Well done, come up, come up, here we go.”

Back home Marius opened his starter pack. “Keep coming back. Stick with the winners.”

“What?”

“That’s what they said. I think we may be onto something here, skattie.”

Marius kept going to the meetings, it turned out that he also had a problem with alcohol, and Kris kept going too. Getting sober was to be the easy part of her new life, for that is what it was to become, for her. A new life.

Kris remembered another time that her life had changed. That day she came home from school to find the kitchen door closed. She had hesitated, for how long she did not know, time frozen into the red and yellow and green of the stained glass panel in the top half of the door. The door that was usually open.

Kris and her family lived in that house before her father died. A Jewish man owned it, her mother said. She could not remember experiencing shock at the news of her father’s death. How could she? She had no knowledge of death, the years that followed teaching her that dying meant a person left and never came back; it meant exposure and vulnerability; it meant change and discomfort; it meant loss of affection and abuse disguised as love. It meant her mother cried when she put her makeup on in the morning and at other times when she thought she was alone.

Susan lived out back, with Stephen who was tall, very black, stately. He reminded Kris of her father. “I thought Stephen escaped through the garage,” Kris had said to her mother, “through a secret panel in the side of the wall.”

“No! Your father constructed a false panel of corrugated iron, with a space behind it for Stephen to hide in. It was just big enough for him to sit in there and wait until the police had left.”

They left the house, Kris and her mother, to stay with Gran and Grandad Kurt before the funeral. Years later her mother said, “I had no idea that we would be leaving for good. I only went back to pack.”

The events that followed were jumbled in the mind of the young Kris. She remembered a trip to the Old House, Grandad Kurt snorting when he climbed into the pink Jaguar, “My god, the woman was possessed when she chose this car.” Kris sat in the back staring at the trees as they glided past. When they arrived, Dorcas helped get their luggage out of the boot.

Her mother quickly mounted the stairs, “Mom, what’s the matter? Are you ill?”

Gran pale, tired, “I’ll be all right, Grace dear, a bit of stomach flu, that’s all.”

There were conversations that were suspended mid-air when Kris approached, the older women with their heads together, whispering and her mother crying, “...drove right into a tree. No, no other cars involved. Yes, he had been at the Club... drunk... Dorcas! Take Kris, give her some tea or something!”

Kris wore a new dress, black with white polka dots, and shoes that pinched to the church. She remembered little of the funeral, wedged between her mother and grandmother. Kris whiled away the time by watching the way the sun shone through the glass angels and saints, tracing splashes of colour on the back of the head of the man in front of her, down onto the arms of her grandmother. The funeral party went back to the Old House where there was nothing to play with, so she spent the morning kicking the gravel in the driveway, tracing circles and patterns, scuffing the black patent leather of her shoes. She was told to get fresh air, that it was good for her. Everyone seemed strange and separate, and that night was filled with shadowy dreams.

Memory provides imperfect images of the past. That which we are certain of may never have been, and there is that which was that we do not recall. So it is that our stories are as much about what is left out, the spaces, than about the shapes which we are able to create with what we imagine we know.

Kris wrote for a living but she also wrote in an often vain attempt to make sense of her life. Sometimes, when the sun shone sideways or the call of a bird fell softly on her shoulders, words filled up her head, spilling over into her body like ants, compelling her to let them out onto paper through her pencil. The night of her first AA meeting she drew heart shapes in black marker, one on top of the other, doodling absently as thoughts chased across her mind. Crushing the paper into a ball, she threw it towards the bin but missed, picked it up and opened it out. Slowly smoothing out the creased paper, she had a vague sensation of crossing a threshold into unknown territory. The crumpled hearts encapsulated a universe of paradox, of wanting to be loved but fearing it, being capable but wanting to be looked after, a reminder of a resilience that makes mindless acquiescence impossible to bear.

A loud crashing startled Kris from a restless sleep. "Vok! Blerrie ding!"

"Leave it, Marius, come."

It must have been the third time that the couch had fallen over because he forgot to put the extra legs out. His body felt warm and comfortable against hers, "Ag skattie, don't know why we just didn't do this from the beginning, sorrie to wake you."

"It's okay, I was battling to sleep."

"Me too, let me hold you a little."

"Yes, it's okay, hold me."

"Don't worry, I won't molest you."

"That's also okay, not sure I can do sober sex."

“Ja nee, skattie, and lately I haven’t been too good at it myself.”

3

For a while, with a strong coffee in front of her, French toast on its way, her thoughts turned from death, dying, the dead ones and the lost ones in her past. Kris liked going to Bojangles early enough for breakfast, found comfort in the morning chatter and clink of cutlery and cups. It was a good place to write.

She could look out into the little square and watch people come and go from the bookshop, the food store, and down the passage to the clothing and gift stores. Skylights filtered the sun which fell gently onto the twisted stems of the large ficus plants that formed a boundary between the restaurant seating and the walkway. The air was rich with the smell of freshly baked breads and croissants, mounds of moist muffins bursting with chocolate and poppy seed, and her favourite, the French toast, thick slices of golden farm-style bread with purple berries, creamy mascarpone and maple syrup.

A couple sitting at the next table were having an argument. "I don't feel connected to you," the man said. Kris was surprised when he verbalised that: he was a large, overweight man in a sleeveless lime green t-shirt and baggy grey shorts, looked like a body builder gone to seed. His sense of style and colour co-ordination was demonstrated in the bright lime streaks on his training shoes, unless they were the only pair in his size in stock when he bought them. He was bald, or shaven, in his late fifties, his partner plump, dark and desperately made up. He spoke again, leaning earnestly towards her. "You tell me you can't be touched, that your nerves are frazzled, and it happens a lot lately."

She frowned, played with her food. "Don't get angry, you get angry so quickly!"

"Better watch those hips, skattie," said Marius, placing a large plate with its decadent offerings in front of Kris. "Taste. I'm trying something new for the specials this month." He looked across at the couple as he sat down.

"They're having an argument about their sex life," Kris said, "I wonder why they're doing it here and not at home?"

“It’s safer, in public, they feel safer. I see people doing it all the time. Maybe they think they’ll avoid a big scene. Taste, taste!”

The new recipe was delicious with almonds and honey, “Sure to be a great success,” she mumbled between mouthfuls. Sober, Marius was eminently employable, and he had found a job at their favourite haunt as its manager and chef. She never did find out what the proper title of his job was, or even if there was a proper title.

He watched her polish off the plate of French toast and she wondered what he thought of her. They spoke of the programme, of their sobriety, of their new friends, of work, even of the past, but seldom spoke about the nature of their relationship. They never spoke of how they felt about each other and years of silence locked her throat. There were times when she wanted to reach out and touch his craggy face, run her fingers down that bony, bent nose. But there were also times when she feared the tenderness that rose in her belly when he hugged her, suppressed the little wild thing that she felt leaping into her eyes when she saw him across a room. Even if she could find a way through the tangle of attraction and resistance, she did not have the vocabulary, then, to articulate what she was experiencing. So she said nothing.

Instead, she spoke about her last visit to Sannette, the psychologist. “There are things that I don’t remember, Marius, big gaps! It’s scary. When she asked me about things, when they happened, what happened, I couldn’t tell her.”

“Maybe you should try writing about it.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Maybe you should, then. You write a lot, you write other people’s stories, hell, you could turn them into movies.”

“Oh, I’m not sure... Journalism, writing for magazines, it’s different. Anyway, what you’re suggesting is more of a memoir.”

“The bits you don’t remember, ask your family, ask people who know what happened.”

So simple, a suggestion that begins a journey within a journey, reclamation within discovery, the searching through the bones of the past.

Sometimes it is the seemingly small, the insignificant, which has the biggest impact on our lives. There are no such things as coincidences, she had heard, but she wondered at the synchronicity of her chance meeting with Marius. She tried counting back the years to Charlie's twenty-first birthday, fourteen years ago? No, fifteen?

"My Dad kicked me out," Marius said, staring at his folded hands.

"What?"

"That's why I came to Joeys." It was as if he could read her mind, wondering what brought him to Johannesburg. "I was drinking too much, I fucked up at the Lodge. I was supposed to be running it, the place in Limpopo."

She allowed herself no response to the unexpected revelation, placing it on display in her mind. How did his father look? Authoritarian, no doubt, old-school Afrikaner, a deacon in the church? What sort of Lodge, fancy, a game lodge, a rustic or a boutique lodge? It could be rustic and boutique, it could be shabby-chic... He was speaking again, looking straight at her.

"And I'm getting divorced."

"You're married?"

"It was never much of a marriage."

* * *

He takes out a joint and hands her the opaque plastic shopping bag. They are nice big ones, he says, fat. He glances at her, unfolding his lanky body from the divan and stepping out onto the balcony.

It is, indeed a large, fat joint, as thick as her ring finger, but it lights easily and she takes a deep draw. She is surprised at the way the smoke enters her lungs and she does not cough.

She is not a smoker. Shamans do this, or some such people – smoke in a sacred way – cleanse and bless this space in the name of spirits of air, spirits of fire, spirits of water, spirits of earth... She scans the room, barely big enough to take the folded-out divan, covered in a faded orange cloth. Leaning back against the mismatched cushions piled up against the wall, she pulls the woollen rug over her legs.

He comes back inside, joins her on the divan. Dreamily she watches him reach out for her. His hands touch her, exactly as she had imagined they would, strong, hard. He presses his thin body against her, his skin dark against hers, his voice deep and rough through the smoke. For a moment she lies still, wanting to have sex with him, craving intimacy. At any cost? No. Not this time. She pushes him away, sits up, taps his chest. Can you make love to me? Can you do that? Open your heart and touch me with love?

* * *

Kris woke suddenly, it was all gone, the room, the divan, the man.

The first time that she dreamt about him she wanted to call and tell him that they almost had sex, but that she would rather make love to him. She wanted to speak to him of truth and how they both pursued this, relentlessly, in different ways. She wanted to tell him that She knew him, recognised him when they met as if they had known each other before. That she loved the way the words rushed from his mouth in an apparently meaningless stream, flowing through valleys of ideas before dropping, crystallizing, into prisms of shattered illusions. To ask him what he meant when they had agreed to meet for coffee, and he wondered where this would all lead, and she had flippantly replied, “All roads lead to Mandalay...”

They had never met for coffee, after all. And she did not call him after her dream, never spoke of what she held deep in her mind. She was still doing this, years and years later, unable to express her deepest longings and desires.

He was not the first person that she had secretly desired. The years rolled back to the first time that she fell in love. It was a party, her brother Charlie’s birthday. The sherry was sweet and rich in her mouth, warm in her belly, giving her the courage to flirt with Marius,

Charlie's friend. The music was loud, she loved to dance, "Come dance with me!" His arms were strong and firm, his eyes smiled at her and she knew that he liked her, too. They danced out of the lounge and onto the patio, down the stairs and under the spread of the old oak tree. Lying on the lawn, moon full and yellow, she felt his tongue on her lips, his palms warm against hers. Suddenly he pulled back, "You're too young, you're Charlie's sister, bliksem, you're only sixteen – are you even sixteen?"

She watched him go, staggering a little, and she was certain that he loved her, too. But was that true? If this love was one-sided then it was an obsession – her obsession – and in the absence of speaking of it she had created her own fictional love story.

In that strange world between dreaming and not waking, she turned to Marius, slipped her arms around him, kissed his neck. He rolled onto his back, she kissed his chest, stomach, "Skattie...". She felt his hands, strong and hard, moving down her belly.

"Yes..."

"Ja skat." But he could not enter her and the coldness closed her mind as her body shut down. "Jammer skattie."

"I'm sorry too, it's also me."

He held her while she cried for both of them.

Kris thought that the qualities of the feral lurk in women. She had noticed how some women could return to their wildish nature, find refuge there. When they come back from their secret places to this sometimes unbearable existence, they have the ability to recreate themselves and their lives in surprising ways. Without this ability, neither she, nor her mother, nor her grandmother, would have survived their experiences. They were a family of women who did better than survive, they sought something more. They wished to live, however that looked, and on the surface, that looked very different for each of them.

Kris regularly visited her grandmother, Helen, not as often as she should, or so her mother told her. As she parked her car in the carport, covered with purple wisteria at that time of year, she thought that her mother was right, that she really should make an effort especially with Gran being ill.

She loved the majesty of the Old House, with its staircases and pressed ceilings, wooden floors and window frames; the way extra corridors led to unexpected rooms and alcoves; the courtyard enclosed by renovated outbuildings; the round herb and vegetable garden in the centre of it that Helen tended through the hands of Whisper, son of Dorcas.

"I wish you would come to stay, Kris, there is more than enough room," Gran said, dwarfed by the large-winged armchair with its overblown floral print.

"I keep telling her it's the practical thing to do, Mom," said Kris' mother, entering the room bearing a plate of scones. "You look tired. Are you sure you should be up? We could have tea in your room."

"I wanted to sit in the Conservatory. I feel strong enough, today."

Time had stood still in the airy room. It had been part of the porch which ran, deep and cool, around the entire house. A twisted ficus shimmered in the light of the sun, filtered through the lace blind, which was pulled down over the top half of the wood-framed window. Henry (the Eighth), the African Grey, cocked his head and glared belligerently at Kris and Grace. "Go away," he squawked when Dorcas brought the tray with tea, jam and cream. It could

have been ten years earlier, Kris thought, except that they were all older, Dorcas was a lot rounder, and the oak tree had spread wider and taller over the porch.

“Grace, has anyone heard from Justin?”

“No. He has not returned my calls.” Grace tightened her lips, clattered a teacup onto a saucer.

“It was the boarding school. He blamed me when his father sent him there when he was only six years old. I thought that he was far too young, but it was the English way. When he came home for his first holiday he was different and distant from me.”

They had heard this story before. Before the morning was done and Helen became too tired to talk, she tell them about the Debutante’s Ball, the one where she was sixteen and beautiful and met the handsome man that she was to marry. It was a fairy tale story and she told it that way, casting herself as the princess. The happy ending was not for ever after, though.

“You wouldn’t know Grace, because your brother seemed to be getting along much better by the time you came along.”

“What happened when he was a child hardly excuses his behaviour now. You do realise that?”

“Yes, dear. Not too much sugar, in my tea, only one spoon.” Kris smiled at her grandmother.

“It’s been six months, now, since I last had a drink, Gran,” Kris said, to change the subject.

“Well done, dear. I am very proud of you. I know how difficult it can be to overcome addiction.”

Kris wondered how she could possibly know, but let it go.

“Are you and Marius still together?”

“Well, Gran, we’re not a real couple... I mean, it’s complicated.”

“I am not sure that I understand, dear, you are living together? You really need to make up your mind about what you want before it’s too late. I would hate you to make the same mistake that I did.”

“Which mistake would that be, exactly?” Grace gazed expressionlessly at a point somewhere beyond her daughter’s shoulder.

Kris turned to see what she was looking at, saw only Henry, who bobbed his head up and down a few times and squawked, “Go away!”

“I know that I have made several, Grace, where you, Charlie and Kris are concerned,” said Helen, ignoring the grumpy bird. “And heaven knows I am dreadfully sorry. But one of the biggest mistakes that I made was that I left it too late to apologise to your father.”

That took Grace by surprise. “Father? What did you need to apologise to him for? He’s the one who had the affair with your best friend.”

“Voetsek!” grumbled Henry.

“Indeed, he did. But I was also in the wrong and it was very difficult for me to admit that. It was years before I allowed myself to communicate with your father. I asked to see him, I had something important to say. I wrote him a letter which I was going to give him. I was not certain that I would be able to speak of the things that I was thinking of.”

“You saw Father before he died? You never told me that.”

“He died of a heart attack the day before we were to meet. I never saw him, I never told him, I never gave him the letter and he never heard my apology.”

“That sounds very sad, Gran,” interjected Kris.

“Yes, dear, yes indeed. It was very, very sad. Then I met Kurt. And we all know how badly that turned out.”

Except Kris did not really know, because when she was young she could not understand what was happening around her, and when she grew older no-one would speak about it.

“Hamba Wena!” said Henry.

“How old is Henry Ate now?” Kris asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, well over twenty-five, dear, I never knew what age he was when I first got him.”

Pausing, Helen reached out a thin hand and ruffled the feathers on the back of his neck (the only person allowed to do that). “He still has a voracious appetite, Kris. I guess that is where you and Charlie got that nickname from. What do you say Henry?”

“I am not sure what good it will do to go over the past,” said Grace, looking askance at her mother, “the old stories have been told and heard. We all have our secrets and will probably keep them to the grave.” She smiled faintly, apparently absorbed in spreading jam and cream onto her scone. “Dorcas always did make the best scones!” She took an enormous bite, licking the cream from her top lip.

“Vokkof!”

“Heaven knows where he got that one from!” Helen exclaimed, as she always did, tilting her head to one side.

This was something that Kris did know, remembered Charlie’s stooped form over a much younger, but no less irascible, Henry. They learn by repetition, he had told her, smiling wickedly.

Kris was uneasy as she drove away from the Old House, but could not detect the source. Perhaps it was too much sugar and caffeine, or something else. She was worried about her grandmother, it was difficult to tell how ill she was, and mother had asked her to come live at the Old House. Would it be a retreat, to live with her mother and grandmother, to go back home? Would that be such a bad thing, after all?

She had timed her departure poorly, driving across town as hundreds of others began their journey home after a day at the office. Well, not all of them from the office. A black, smart-looking car pulled out suddenly in front of her as a gate slid closed behind it. Li'lee Lodge – upmarket room rentals by the hour – seemed busy at that time of day. Behind her an impatient driver in a large white SUV swerved into the right-hand lane, hooting as black smart car pulled in front of him and braked. She edged her way behind the white SUV, keeping a safe distance, watching the car speed up and brake, both cars then changing lanes again at the same time. The sun was still hot and bright, forcing her to sit up a little straighter and adjust the visor. At the traffic light, a red-faced, large man leaned out of the SUV, waved his fist, shouted insults. A black man, equally large, stuck his head out of the black car, in time to hear, “You cunt!”

Startled, Kris hesitated enough for SUV to pull in front of her and he sped off. So did black car, the chase fairly short as the next traffic light caught them all. “Hey wena! Umhlungu!” The driver of the black car partly opened his door, half-stepped out of his car, menacing, voice deep and strong. “I’m not a cunt! I’m a human being!” As Kris passed him the umhlungu was open-mouthed, wide-eyed, like her. And then she laughed out loud, but her heart was pounding and she felt the perspiration trickle into the small of her back.

By the time she reached home she was on edge. She hated the feeling that rose in her, the jangled nerves and restlessness that foreshadowed trouble. Something was going wrong in the background of her life and she was powerless to change it. She tried to dismiss this thought, telling herself that it was the traffic, the noise, the close shave with the large truck that almost crashed into the back of her, swerving to the left at the last moment.

There was a white envelope wedged under the door. She felt the panic rising again. Over-reacting, she knew, but how to stop it? She placed it, unopened, on the counter, as if that would make the contents less real, but couldn't leave it there, picked it up again after staring at it for a while, before tearing it open. Yes, one month notice. Calculating – that would mean finding a deposit finding a place filling out forms packing boxes finding boxes credit rating bad, where to go how to move hire a trailer with what money would Marius go with her – shit, she didn't even know what the story was with him and her.

For the first time in months she wished that she could have a drink. Hell, no, she wished she could have a whole lot of drink, and some drugs, anything, anything to make her feel better. She forced herself into a fragrant hot bath, a song about not being able to sleep blaring through the cottage. It would be hours before Marius finished off at the restaurant. She told herself it would be ok, but didn't believe it.

She is small, a little girl. She can reach into the darkness, it has depth and heat, a breath warm and heavy in her ear. It's a dream, you're sleeping, keep your eyes closed, it's a dream. The voice rasps and she squeezes her mind behind her eyes and tries to close her legs but feels them forced apart again. Sleep, stay sleeping, it's so hard to stay asleep. It's a dream, it's our secret, our dream, that feels good, feel that. Feels like you want to pee, but you won't, aahh, yes, hold here. Don't want to stay sleeping, not in this dream. Squeeze eyes shut, don't peek he'll know you looked at him. Yes, he says, big breath ha-ha-haa! Stay still, keep sleeping, it's a dream, you're dreaming.

"Skattie, you ok? It's me, it's only me! Shh, sshh, don't cry, *ag skattie.*"

Kris lay shivering, cheeks cold and wet, Marius sat on the edge of the bed, still dressed.

"You've been dreaming, sorrie to wake you"

"No, that's ok, I was dreaming, yes. It was a dream, but I remember something, it was also real, then, when I was little. Stay, don't go."

“I’m only taking my jacket off.”

“It was him, he came to my room at night, he... and there was a big scene, Mom was shouting and he, Grandad Kurt, he said she was mad! She was, she was, but it’s my fault then because I didn’t speak up! I never said what he did!”

“Skattie, ag skattie.” He stared into space, eyes narrowing, “That bastard, no wonder Charlie ...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She pulled back. His face was carefully impassive.

“What do you know?”

“Agh...” Silence. Finally, “I was there when Charlie went to the Old House.”

“What are you talking about, Marius?”

“You weren’t there, nor was your mother. Charlie came back for a few days, sorted things out. It started at the Old House, with a fight with Kurt.”

“I don’t understand. The night Kurt was injured?”

“But I only know some of it, only saw some of it.”

“You were there, you know something, and you never told me.”

The wheels of the old Escort crunched over the gravel drive as Marius stopped the car in front of the wide steps leading to the front door. It was dark, the moon full and low on the horizon. The lights on the front porch profiled Charlie’s straight nose, full mouth, strong chin, leaving out the detail of his clenched jaw and grim expression. He opened the car door, straightened his long body, clutched his beret in his left hand, right moving over his head as if to smooth out hair that had been longer, once, but now stuck up in a short crew cut.

Marius watched him take the steps two at a time, the door opening before he got there. An elegantly dressed woman with shoulder-length hair greeted him with a hug, ushered him inside. Sighing, Marius lit a cigarette, pushed his seat back and looked at the moon in the rear view mirror. This could take a while. Man, he was bushed! Straight from the air base in Pretoria, all the way out here in the rattly old Escort, Charlie becoming more tense the closer they got. What a bad break! Finding out that his old man was dead four weeks ago. You get five days, sort out what you need to, then report back to Waterkloof. Meyer goes with you. It's the best I can do. It said something for Charlie that the General had taken a personal interest in him.

So here they were, Marius Meyer and Charles Durant, back in good old Johannesburg, but not back really because they were still on duty and in uniform and even if they weren't he doubted if Charlie would be in a mood to party. Marius automatically scanned his surroundings.

The car was parked parallel to the house, the driveway widening at the top, plenty of room to turn and exit quickly without reversing. The lawn was clear for several metres before the garden beds began, curving and waving, paths leading through shrubs and trees. He wished he could have a drink, dreamed of a beer, long and wet and cold, and a lekker stuk boerewors. It was a warm summer's night, and he thought there was the smell of meat being braaied in the air. He amused himself for a while by guessing what traffic travelled on the busy road nearby, a small car, maybe a Renault ring-ting-ting, a truck broom-broom, that's a bike, a Harley, vraaam-vraaaaam definitely. He was on his fourth cigarette when the front door opened suddenly and the elegant woman flew down the steps towards him.

"Come quickly," she had said, "you need to stop him, if you can." Her voice was low, but there was an urgency that he could not miss. Without waiting for a response, she moved quickly back into the house and he followed her through the entrance hall (a door each side, both closed) towards the lounge (passage, three metres, door at end to kitchen, two doors to right closed, two doors on left, closest one open, noise of fight coming from there). The woman stopped beside the open door, her face pale, grey eyes wide. "Stop Charlie before he kills his father."

He hesitated briefly, she meant his grandfather, step-grandfather? Marius stepped into the room, quickly moving to the side of the door. There were only the two men inside, Charlie moving in on the older, bigger man who was trying to get up from his knees.

“Halt! Durant! Stand down!”

Charlie had his knee in the small of Kurt’s back, his arm around his neck, choking. The command reached through to him and he let go, suddenly, the bloodied face hitting the carpet with a thump.

“Vok, man, wat gaan aan hier? Charlie, this is Home, man, this is not the war!” Feeling a pulse, then, at least Kurt was alive. The room was a mess, glass from a broken lamp and vase knocked over, red roses crushed into blood on the cream carpet. “Charlie, look at me, look at me!” Charlie’s eyes were empty, the eyes of a soldier returning from battle. They never filled up again, completely.

“I’m Helen,” the woman had said, “Charlie’s grandmother.” She had not been in the room when the men spoke, but had heard them shouting, then the sounds of a fight.

“Do you have brandewyn?” Marius asked.

Helen opened the liquor cabinet, helped the now shaking Charlie to a glass of neat brandy, watched as he drank it, wincing as the strong liquid burnt into his cut lip, before pouring one for herself and Marius.

“Please,” she had said, as she handed the glass to Marius, “we need to think this through. I don’t want Charlie to get into any more trouble than necessary.”

Yes, they agreed, Kurt needed medical attention, Helen would call the police – no, Marius would call the Military Police – it was an army matter, they were on active service. Call the ambulance now, it would take a while for the MPs to get there.

Charlie spoke, his voice harsh. “You have to get Mom out of there, and little Kris too, from that other place, you have to get them back home!”

“Yes, Charlie, I can do that, I have been a foolish woman, but I will fix things.”

Marius told Kris that Charlie had not wanted to go back to the border, he had wanted to stay and help his grandmother, but he had no choice. It was jail, or back into operational territory, for both of them. He left out her grandmother's slip of the tongue, its echo running through his head, "Stop Charlie before he kills his father."

"I have never seen a woman look so determined," Marius told Kris. "She showed no emotion for her husband. There he was, bleeding and unconscious on the floor. She behaved like a soldier, focussed on the job at hand." He shook his head at the memory. "A beautiful woman, but as cold as a statue. Charlie never told me what happened. But I'm sure that what you told me, what did you say, 'The dream that wasn't a dream'? I'm sure that had something to do with it. Ja. A thing like that could make a mother turn to stone."

Kris felt that she had uncovered a few more bones, but didn't know which skeleton they fitted into.

The slick luxuriousness could not disguise the smell of wounding, of dying. Skylights threw a checked pattern of light and shade on the shiny linoleum floor, sunlight somehow pale and forlorn, filtered through layers of domed plastic. The entrance area was empty and slickly cheerful with bright red sofas and fashion magazines on the lacquered black table – not lacquered – squared off, but some kind of plastic. Bad feng shui, all this plastic, Kris remembered reading that somewhere, but perhaps the effects of badly placed objects and undesirable materials were inconsequential to the patients of this busy hospital. Besides, no-one actually slept in the lounge, at least not the patients themselves. They, like her grandmother, were in rooms with little plastic, certainly no racks of books shooting out sharp poisonous energy straight at them, nor mirrors to reflect the negative emissions of sleep. Would the rules of feng shui count here, or would there be special rules for the arrangement of furniture for the terminally ill? Metal beds and pans and yes, metres of plastic tubing from needles taped to fragile hands and arms and round suckers on chests and coloured wires and black screens with jumping lines in green and red, graphs and beep-beep and sucking noises, wooshh-wooshh oxygen masks and those eyes that are open seemed to be pleading, make it stop, make it stop...

Kris spent hours at her grandmother's bedside, the expensive clinic able to do little more than keep her comfortable, they said. Helen talked when she felt strong enough, telling some stories that Kris knew, others that were disjointed and unfamiliar, sometimes dozing off mid-sentence.

"There is a book in the desk, little draw... key, red ribbon..." The voice was soft, faint, the frail old woman's eyes still closed. "You see, I can't sleep. I need sleeping tablets..." Her grandmother was rambling and Kris was not sure if she was speaking to her at all.

Kris must have dozed off in the armchair, woke with the startling image of a good-looking red-haired doctor dressed as the Mad Hatter, offering her a tray of Welkanol tablets, singing that he couldn't sleep in a deep, resonant, voice.

"Kris?" This voice was real, it was deep, and it came from a mouth close to her ear.

“Charlie!”

“Don’t cry, you idiot! There now, did I frighten you?”

“Oh no, Charlie, it’s so good to see you, so glad that you made it, wasn’t sure you’d get here in time...”

Charlie, grey hair shaved short, pale blue eyes twinkling at her, straight nose and full-lipped mouth in a smile, square chin. Charlie with wide shoulders, strong arms and big hands, his muscled body barely softened with age. Her handsome, capable big brother.

It would be alright, because Charlie would take care of everything. He would take care of Kris and their mother, and he would know what to do about Uncle Justin.

“I think you should move in to the Old House now, Kris. You really should have done it before she ...”

“Died. Yes, Mom, I know. You don’t have to rub it in. Anyway, I have to find somewhere by the end of the month.” Kris was out of options. “I don’t have money for a deposit. Doubt I’ll pass muster with a credit rating.”

“It looks like we’ll all be staying here. I’m going to base myself back home for a while.”

“That’s great, Charlie!” Grace smiled at her son.

“What about Marius?” Charlie asked, looking at Kris.

“What about him?”

“Isn’t he staying with you?”

“Yes, he is. But I don’t know... It’s complicated, Charlie. I don’t even know if he wants to stay with me or if it’s just because he needs a place...”

“Well, there’s plenty of room. I’ll take one flat, Marius can take the other. I’ll speak to him about the rent. And you take the top floor.”

So that was that. Sorted. Charlie took it for granted that Marius would not be sharing his sister's bed, and she was surprised at how relieved she was that the decision had been made for her.

"Justin absolutely refused to take my calls," said Helen. "Elizabeth, Great Aunt Elizabeth, spoke to him herself, so he knew that his mother was dying. Do you remember Aunt Elizabeth?" This last was addressed to no-one in particular, or perhaps to both Charlie and Kris, and Henry Ate, the grumpy bird.

"Aunty! Aunty! Go Away!"

Oh yes, Kris remembered Great Aunt Elizabeth, and her plummy speech, well rounded and carefully enunciated English, her hooked nose long and thin, the little pinched mouth beneath it creating a disapproving exclamation mark on the centre of her face. Spare the rod and spoil the child, she would say, except she didn't use a rod, she used her hands, sharp and stinging to slap and smack. She also believed in rationing food, Kris remembered bitterly, locking children (or at least Kris) in the outside room, the benefit of cold baths and kneeling for hours at prayers.

"How silly of me. Of course you remember Aunt Elizabeth because you stayed with her while I was... you know, when I was in That Place..."

"Shoo! Shoo!"

"For goodness sake, Henry, do shut up!"

"Shut up! Shut up!" The bird was on a roll.

"Justin had better not come to the funeral," muttered Charlie.

"Vokkoff!"

"Exactly! You tell him, Henry, if he does show up," smiled Charlie.

"You really shouldn't have taught the bird language like that, Charlie."

"I thought you'd taught him, Mom," said Charlie, winking at Kris.

Kris felt sorry for her mother, that she had a brother like Uncle Justin. And desperately sad for her grandmother, that she had not reconciled with her son before she died.

We get better at funerals the more we go to.

Kris looked over at the group of dark-suited, grey-haired men in a huddle under the trees, wondering if they were talking about Old So-and-So who went last year after sudden – well perhaps, expected, given the amount he ate and drank – liver failure; and Old Whatsit who developed that lump on his neck and bang – just like that – died of cancer within three months of diagnosis; and what about that Young Thingummibob – yes, young, only fifty-two he was – fit as a fiddle, dropped over stone dead in the middle of that Comrades run, yes, the last one, don't you remember his funeral, lovely widow, lovely. We're still standing – they stop short of patting each other on the back – the sweet compensation of being alive to pay last respects to the recently departed.

Young people, those in their self-conscious teens or studied twenties, hover hesitantly, unsure about the correct attitude to adopt, does one smile, or not, is there such a thing as conversation at a funeral? Well, of course there is, except that most of it has to do with dead people, or at least the one that has most recently died. Only the older hands have mastered the art of this particular kind of talk. Then there is the catching-up talk, haven't seen you in ages, we really must get together, how are the children, soft voices, almost whispering as if it may be impolite to speak of the business of life in the presence of death.

The Dearly Departed look down at gatherings of family and friends, many decorously dressed in black, only a little colour amongst the rest. Dress them in brighter clothes, not white – it would be very bad manners– play Here Comes the Bride, and it would be a wedding, instead of a funeral, with the same people in cheerier faces and, of course, a bride and groom. People, some people, cry at weddings and funerals alike, touched by the inevitability of sorrow, guessed Kris. She sighed, bringing herself back to the present, the funeral of her grandmother. The church was impartial, with its beautiful vaulted roof, and stained glass windows, sunlight throwing patches of colour over the shoulders of those on the pews on the left.

It was in this same church over thirty years ago, at the funeral that Kris barely remembered, that Helen Jean Masterson, Kris' grandmother, experienced a sudden illumination or awakening.

"I looked at the hair on the back of his hands," she had told Kris, "and I knew, I simply knew, that I could not trust this man and that I needed to find a way to separate from him." There was no reason for this that she could detect, no rationale, simply something about the sight of his hands gripping the back of the pew in front of him, bristling with hair in the sunlight.

Helen had said nothing of this to Kurt, the man she let the world think was her husband. She said nothing of the disquieting thoughts that spiralled down through the shafts of light, dust dancing through the colours thrown by the saints and angels, green and blue and red and gold, setting her mind and her heart racing. She had said nothing, either, of the night before when she had retched up the evening dose of sleeping tablets and whisky; or of how she had barely slept; or that she had risen with jangled nerves and a fear in her belly. As the day passed she grew increasingly anxious, nauseous, unable to eat, and shaky. She went to bed early, Kurt bringing her the usual whisky and tablets.

"Take them my dear, you will feel better in the morning," he had said, sitting on the edge of the bed. She asked him to send Dorcas up with ginger tea to settle her stomach, and when he left the room she hid the tablets in her bedside drawer.

"I'll finish the whisky after the tea," she had promised, but she poured it into the teacup. "I won't tell him, I'll look after you, Helen," Dorcas said as she took the cup away.

"Shoo, Miss Kris! What happened after your father was late, it was terrible! Yes, I remember, your grandmother was very sick. I was new to that job, but I could see that Kurt was not a good man. With the ladies! Shoo shoo shoo! Always touching, pretending like nothing happening. Hauw! I was scared of him, but I needed the job, so I said nothing that his hands go all over when he thought there was no-one else in the room but I moved, fast-fast, away from where he was.

“That one night he come down to the kitchen. ‘Dorcas,’ he say, ‘get your beautiful arse upstairs with ginger tea for the Madam and make sure she drinks her medicine.’ He did not try to put his hands on me that night, because there were other people in the house. You, Kris, and your mother. He thought that I did not see him put something in the water in the glass that he took with him. I wondered if he had a headache.

“Your grandmother was crying when I went upstairs, and she said that she did not want to take the tablets. She hid them, she said I must help her, I must take the whisky in the teacup and throw it down the drain. Of course I helped her!

“The next morning I was in the kitchen early to make coffee and breakfast and I heard Miss Grace screaming upstairs. When I got up there she was crying and Master Kurt was giving her some water from a glass. He was holding her very tight, he said because otherwise she would hurt herself. When Miss Grace tried to speak to me he chased me out of the room. Haauw! Something was wrong, but I did not know what thing. I saw you, Kris, standing in the passage, you looked like you seen a tokolosh! Do you remember? Then you ran, ran to your gogo, right into her room.

“There she was lying in bed, she looked very sick. I bring more ginger tea, sweet, and took you to the kitchen for breakfast that you liked. Nice eggie bread with butter and syrup, you remember that? Your favourite. Then Master Kurt came in, shouted at me, ‘Get a bag ready for Miss Grace,’ he was taking her to a hospital. He half carried her, your mother, she looked like she was drugged and she was moaning and crying. Please, she said, but please what, I could not hear. Eish! I could do nothing!

“I went back to your grandmother, she was vomiting and shaking. She sent me to fetch the telephone book, showed me a number. Call Miss Elizabeth, call my sister-in-law, she told me. I did what she said, I asked your auntie to come right away and take you, I packed your bag too. Shoo, shoo, that auntie of yours, Elizabeth, came in like it was her house. She did not stay long with your grandmother. When she came out she just said, ‘You better get a doctor for your Madam’. Just like that. And she took you away.

“I thought maybe your grandmother must have more tea, so I make some, but I found her on the carpet, but she was not late – no, she was not dead – she was not opening her eyes.

“I had to call a doctor but what one? I looked in Helen’s phone book but I did not know which was the right doctor’s number. So I called Dr Frank Malone, because I have a little piece of paper with his name and number on it from Elsie next door when Johannes put the garden fork in his foot, and he came to the house. Eish, that morning was too much happening!”

The lined notepaper on which the first four entries were scrawled in pencil had been placed between the end papers of the soft, brown notebook. The notes in the book itself were written in a flowing copperplate with a fountain pen. Kris’s grandmother started writing her notes on the Thursday following Jack’s funeral, the number of each entry indicating not the date but the amount of days that Helen had not taken the sleeping tablets.

Kris had read a little of the notebook, sitting in the flowered wingback chair as the sun dipped orange towards the horizon, slowly releasing its soft touch on the wall of her grandmother’s room.

Thursday

5

He may be trying to kill me. I am afraid to drink anything that he brings. I am weak.

Saturday

6

I am beginning to regain my strength. When Dorcas brings my food I know that it is safe. Kurt has been considerate, but I am no longer fooled. He knows nothing of what I am thinking. I am not sleeping well. I fear that I may be going mad. I am writing things down now so that I don’t forget them. When I asked what he does

when he walks around the house at night he said that I must be dreaming. I must be careful. He must not know that I am not asleep. Last Tuesday I heard noises but was too afraid to go and see what they were. I am still afraid, but am not sure what of.

Sunday

7

Kurt tells me that he had to take Grace to hospital for her own good. He said that it was a mistake for me to ask Elizabeth to take Kris. He wants us to fetch her when I am able to get up. He wanted me to take a sleeping tablet tonight now that I have recovered from that gastric upset. The very fact that I crave them the way that I do is an indication that I absolutely should not take them! He was insistent, so when he brought me two tablets I pretended to take them. Writing these things down helps to steady my nerves.

Monday

8

I am much stronger, but have not let Kurt know that I can get up. I was excited to get a phone call from Charlie. He was in Pretoria and is getting a lift to visit tomorrow night. Rather, because it is 03:20, tonight. Tuesday. He says that he only has a few days. I do not understand this army business, nor why he could not come home for his father's funeral. I told him where his mother is and that I had not been able to see her yet. Kurt is behaving strangely. He is spending long hours out of the house and is speaking again about going to Germany. That means he will want me to sell more shares. I am afraid of how he will react if I refuse. Dr Frank was outraged that I did not know what the tablets were that Kurt gave me. It was my own fault because I liked what they did. I had no idea how addictive they are. Kurt must know all about them. He trained as a pharmacist, after all. At least that is what he told me. I question everything now.

Now her grandmother was back at the church for a funeral, this time her own. The photograph on the funeral notice was a favourite of hers, one of several taken at a special trip to a studio for a family portrait. In this monochrome shot she looks unsmilingly up at the camera, her hair swept back into an elegant French knot, smoky eyes, straight nose, wide mouth with dark, full lips, a beautiful woman with the enigmatic face of a film star.

Marius nudged Kris from her reverie as the priest opened the service. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here to Celebrate the Life of Helen Jean Masterson..."

"Oh God! I was hoping he wouldn't say that!"

"Don't be so grumpy. People like that stuff. Beats the hell out of my church's fire and brimstone sermons."

"Well, I don't like it. And I am grumpy."

"It's better than being told that the dead person is lucky because they've stopped sinning. You, on the other hand, are doomed!"

"Shush!" But she smiled.

“Well, look who crawled out of the woodwork! Uncle Justin himself, or should I say herself?” Charlie made his way through the gathered well-wishers to the front door.

Nattily dressed in a broad-collared black suit, crisp white shirt and a black cravat, Uncle Justin had swanned up the aisle as the service commenced, taking up a seat in the front pew. Charlie jabbed Kris in the ribs, their mother turned in time to receive a condescending nod from her brother. When he disappeared after the service Kris was certain that he would not have the gall to pitch up at the Old House. She was wrong.

“You’re not welcome, Uncle Justin. You should have come when you were asked to.” Charlie stood square in the doorway.

“If it’s not the little bastard himself, acting the Lord of the Manor!” Uncle Justin waved a hand and wrinkled his nose, as if there was a bad smell in the air, “Oh, and here comes my dear sister.” His voice sounded rough, as if he had a chest infection.

“You are not welcome in this house, Justin. When Mother was ill we heard absolutely nothing from you.” My mother’s voice was cold.

“Very good, Grace, I see you have taken over as the Lady. We know that every sin can be forgiven if only you put a genteel package on it. Let me admire your dress.” He paused, taking a few deep breaths, “It’s appropriate, black and demure, but drapes beautifully, hinting at the curves so many have delighted in over the years, a few touches of lace to lure the eye from the imperfections that age brings. Are you not going to return the compliment?”

“Please leave. I have no desire to see you again.”

“But you will see me again, my dear, I am sure,” spat Justin, backing away hastily as Charlie stepped towards him. Putting a little distance between himself and Charlie, breathing heavily, he continued, “Don’t think I’ll be cheated! I am the eldest, and the son.”

“Physically, perhaps, I guess it takes balls to come here after all this time,” retorted Charlie, closing the gap.

Justin stepped backwards, “I suppose you would like to hit me, that’s your style, isn’t it? If you could beat up your own father...” His voice trailed off as he stumbled on the stairs.

“Shut up!”

“Some would call my dear sister a slut, but I daresay she was simply keeping it in the family, as it were. Oh come on, everybody, don’t look so shocked. Surely you all know who fathered our handsome Aryan Charlie? I’m going, don’t touch me! Back off!”

I watched Uncle Justin mince off, smoothing his jacket, tossing his head, his voice carrying up to the house, “I can scarcely believe I come out of that family! Give me a camera and Jerry Springer and we have our own white trash reality show!”

“Of course everyone knows who Charlie’s father was,” Kris thought. “he is my brother, that meant we had the same father?”

“It’s ok, Marius,” said Charlie, “I’m not going to waste energy on that old moffie!”

Marius took his hand off Charlie’s arm and turning, saw Kris watching them, “Vok!”

“Don’t tell me you knew about this too, Marius?” Getting no answer, Kris turned to her mother, “Mom? Charlie? Will someone tell me what the story is?”

Kris had known that Charlie was home because his bicycle was propped up against the stoep wall. But he was not in his room. “Charlie, Charlie?” She found him in Mom and Dad’s room, cross-legged on the woven straw mat. Charlie was the most handsome brother in the whole world, tall and strong, blonde hair almost white from the sun, blue eyes that smiled into the heart of you. “What are you doing, Charlie, Mom says we’re not allowed to play with her things. She’ll be cross.”

He was looking through papers in the large tin box on his lap. “No, she won’t, because she won’t know, will she? Not unless you tell her, you little monkey.”

“Maybe I will tell her. Charlie? I said maybe I will tell her.” Charlie stared at a paper in his hands. “What’s that? What does it say? Tell me Charlie, why are you looking like that?” Slowly Charlie folded the paper, carefully replacing it, and the other documents, in the tin. “Charlie? Are you cross with me Charlie? I won’t tell, promise, I won’t tell!” Frightened by his silence, the clench of his jaw, by the sudden flatness in his eyes. Frightened by the sudden coldness of him, the feeling that her warm Charlie had gone somewhere inside of him where she could not reach. Kris watched him reach up to put the tin on top of the wardrobe. She followed him down the passage to the front door, “I won’t say anything, Charlie.”

“Oh, stop bleating like a little sheep!” He left, pedalling his bicycle like the tokoloshe himself was after him. She knew all about the tokoloshe from Susan. He was a funny creature that played tricks on people and he was the reason that Susan put her bed on bricks so that he could not climb onto her clean bed with his dirty feet. She would not let Kris touch her white bedspread with the embroidered flowers, not even when she licked all the peanut butter off her fingers.

The red stoep floor was warm under her bare feet, the afternoon sun slanting over the waist-high white wall. Waist-high for grownups, that is, shoulder-high for her. She walked disconsolately up the concrete pathway to the open gate. She stared down the tree-lined street, willing Charlie to appear, cycling back towards the house with a grin. “Hello Kris!” He would shout out to her, “What have you been up to today? Monkey tricks, I bet.” Then he would hold the bicycle steady while she climbed onto the pedals, or pick her up and swing her around and around, or carry her on his shoulders or tickle her until she cried. That day Charlie did not come back until Mom rang the bell for supper and it seemed that only she could tell that there was something wrong with him.

“Go wash your hands, Kris.” She wondered how her mother knew that they were dirty, splashing her hands under the tap and giving them a quick rub before returning to the dining room.

“... that the neckline must be higher, and the skirt longer. I wanted to ask them what next, would I have to kneel like the girls at the school so that they could measure the distance of the hem from the floor? That’s better Kris.” Her mother dished up the cottage pie, “My favourite, Mom! Do I have to have...” A spoonful of steamed vegetables. “Eat it all up and you can have pudding.”

Kris pushed the vegetables to the side of the plate, looking at her father, but his attention was on his food and the large glass of red wine in his hand. “Eat the vegetables first, Kris,” was Charlie’s advice, “leave the stuff you like till last.” She felt his sadness, so she put a forkful of broccoli into her mouth. It worked, Charlie smiled a little. So she ate some more.

“You could wear a nun’s habit and make it look sexy. I can’t see anything wrong with that black dress, shows off your delicious figure. Why I could eat...”

“Jack! The children.” Grace laughed and blushed.

“... my dinner and spend an hour simply looking at you. Speaking of which, how about we let the kids go over to the Old House so you and I get a bit of adult time?”

“You know how I feel about that, Jack. I won’t have them staying there.”

“Sure it will be fine, there are the servants, and your mother to watch over them.”

“My mother is in such a daze she barely knows what time of day it is, let alone what goes on in her own house! I won’t have it, not as long as that man – “ She stopped mid-sentence, flashed a glance at Charlie, then Kris. Her voice dropped and she said quietly, “I don’t know that it would be fine.”

“Why is that Mom? What man? Do you mean Kurt?” Charlie’s face was expressionless, his tone flat, but Kris stopped chewing. The clatter as Mom put down her knife and fork broke the brittle silence.

“I just don’t want you to stay there, Kris is too little,” she said, “and I don’t want to discuss it.” She glared at Charlie, then at Dad.

“I’m not so hungry,” said Charlie, “think I’ll go to my room.” At the door, he turned, looked straight at his mother and said, “I may only be seventeen, but I’m old enough to know about my father. Are you ready to tell me?”

Kris looked up at her mother’s eyes, big and round, her mouth opened into a little circle, moving like the fish in the tank at the pet shop.

“No? Well, when you’re ready, then. Good night.”

Their father sighed, drank deeply from his glass of red wine. “Maybe you should let Kris have a little pudding, Grace,” he said. “I’ll talk to Charlie.”

“No! Absolutely not!”

Kris did not understand what had happened, but a stiffness grew between their mother and Charlie from that day.

Of course it was not appropriate to talk about Uncle Justin’s outburst, not at the funeral gathering, later perhaps. Polite conversation resumed, Grace with the guests, Helen’s friends and allies, Marius and Charlie head to head glancing occasionally in the direction of Kris. She felt on the outside of secrets, yet on the verge of knowing things that she did not, after all, wish to know. She went outside, picking up a bottle on her way.

It was Irish whisky, the first mouthful oily and strong, exploding into her stomach. She fought to keep it down, chasing it with another gulp from the bottle. The oak tree had her back, she leaned against it and let her head drift up into its branches. If she shook the family tree, the shaking leaves would whisper unspeakable things, the dead ones rattling down like dry bones into a pile at her feet. The sun shone orange beneath a thick black cloud that spoke of thunder, the greens of the garden luminous, colours saturated. The elements know nothing of death, of funerals, of things that cannot be said. Spinning, the world keeps going round, air and fire and earth. Water, too. Lightning, you should not swim in a thunder storm, but it was not raining yet. Floating, round and round the sky black above and the sideways sun and blue, blue beneath her.

No Kris dear, not now.

Too late, Gran, I'm drowning...

Black, water heavy on her chest, roaring in her ears. Kris! What has she done? Thump, thump, it hurts, cold in her heart. Marius has her, she must have jumped! Now why would she do that, stomach cramps, pain and her grandmother scarcely cold Oh my God! She's alright, vomiting means she's okay?

"Ag, skattie, I just had the suit cleaned."

Kris saw them all, for a moment, a circle of faces above her. "I didn't jump."

"No, you fell in. Because you drank this." Marius held up the bottle. It was almost empty.

Her dead grandmother visited her often, Kris could feel her looking over her shoulder when she read Helen's diary. They shared secrets that they would never have spoken of had she been alive. Helen spoke through her writing, Kris spoke out loud, talking to Henry Ate. The bird seemed to know when her grandmother was in the room, would perk up and start bobbing his head, asking to be touched, letting Kris scratch his head.

The bird had begun to accept Kris' company, perhaps even enjoy it, she thought. He listened intently, head cocked to one side, when she told him and her grandmother that Marius seemed quite happy on his own in the flat out back.

"I like staying upstairs, Gran, and I'm sorry that I didn't move in when you wanted me to. I messed it up, Gran, with Marius and with the booze. Puking all over him was inelegant, for sure, but he seemed more upset that I drank again. Hell, I'm upset about that. And I'm really sorry that I did it at your funeral, Gran. That was in poor taste. I went back to the rooms – to AA – it was really embarrassing, you know? At least the first meeting was hard to go to. Then I felt better when I heard other people talking about how they had slipped. Yes, that's what they call it. A slip. Like on a banana peel. Ha! And I slipped all the way into the pool so people thought I had tried to kill myself. Perhaps that was really the problem, with Marius, I mean. His brother shot himself, you know, and he's edgy around situations that remind him of that. He said that drinking was a really long and messy way of committing suicide and he didn't think he could stand by and watch me do it. What do you think of that, Gran? What do I do with that?"

Kris could feel the plait bouncing on the small of her back as she ran down the field with the hockey stick, striking the imaginary ball into the net. Goal! She twirled in the sun, had to hold the heavy stick with both hands, felt the sand crunching underneath her shoes. She sat, then, took her shoes off so that she could feel the earth with her toes. The terrace of the clubhouse was deserted, the players behind the closed door of the bar. No women allowed. No children allowed, that meant she had to wait outside. She danced down the empty field

towards the shade, humming a tune that drifted through her head and into her voice. The trees there were tall, with rough bark that peeled off in strips. She rubbed the smoothness of the light trunk, listened to the whispering of the dark leaves, wondered if the white butterflies were fairies in disguise.

The sun began to turn orange, the shadows grew colder. The little girl retrieved her shoes, her jersey. It was a cardigan, a girl's jersey, pale blue. She really wanted a thick shirt, a boy's one, like the one Charlie wore when he went to the Army, the colour of rudeness. "Kak-ee!" she had laughed at him. "No, khaki, that's what this greeny-brown colour is called, Monkey," and Charlie hugged her so that she could feel the coarseness of the fabric on her cheek. His uniform still had the creases of newness, she had helped their mother to sew in the labels with his name on it. "I'm good at that, sewing that is. I can make neat stitches, but I am still a little slow, so I only did a shirt and his cap."

"I'll think of you every time I wear the hat, Monkey. And the shirt. That will be a lot, because I wear them most of the time!" She could hear Charlie's voice in her head, deep and round like a drum, with smoke in it, especially when he sings. It reminded her of Mom's favourite jazz singer, that King someone. He sang with Ella Fitzgerald? She could not remember. The sun dipped down behind the trees, and the shadows caught up with the terrace where she waited on the stairs.

"Where's my girl?" The wooden door banged open and she forgot that she was tired and bored and hungry. There was much slapping on shoulders and backs, stamping feet and loud laughter as the men gathered their kit from the porch. One of her father's friends leaned down to hug her, smelling strongly of smoke and beer. She carried the hockey stick to the Baby Ford, put it in the back with her father's bag and goalie pads. Before they reached their driveway her father had finished the beer that he carried out of the pub, put the empty under the seat with a wink. Glass clinked as it bumped against other empty bottles rolling around on the floor.

The sharp, staccato sound of Mom's heels sounded on the wooden floorboards as her father opened the door. "For goodness' sake, Jack! Kris must be starving." Yes, she was, but she would never say so for fear that she would not be allowed to accompany her father the next

time. But her mother did not ask her. Kris did not get a chance to say anything at all.

“Hands,” said her mother, and Kris went to the bathroom. She could hear her parents from there, through the open door. “I swear you spend longer drinking than playing hockey!”

“Oh, don’t start Grace. I was feeling good when I came back.”

“Of course you were, tanked up again. It’s not safe to drive like that, and you know it. Especially when you have the kids in the car.” Her mother was on edge, she could hear it in the sharpness in her voice, and she spoke faster.

“Kid. One kid,” said her father.

She’s highly-strung, her Gran said, and Kris wondered if that was something like Charlie’s guitar when the strings were wound up too tightly and where Mom’s strings were and who winds them up anyway. Maybe it’s Dad that does it, makes them too tight, because it’s him that she gets angry with. Her mother dished up roast chicken and crispy potatoes, lots of gravy, only a small helping of peas for Kris, one spoon of cauliflower with cheese sauce. Kris smiled at her mother, thinking that she could manage that. “Look Charlie, I’m going to eat the vegetables first,” she said to herself and the empty chair where Charlie normally sat. There was far too much food for the three of them to eat, another sure sign that her mother was anxious.

“You really don’t need to drink more,” said Grace, pouring red wine into glasses, “I’m worried, I feel as though something bad is going to happen. Is happening, right now! I wish I knew where Charlie was. I haven’t had a letter from him in months.”

“He’ll be fine. Nothing bad is going to happen. Relax, will you?”

“It’s alright for you, you don’t have to worry because he’s not really yours!”

Kris stopped chewing, looked at her mother’s strained face. Her eyes were red and puffy, her lips pinched together but trembling. The colour drained from her father’s face as he glanced at his daughter, clenching his jaw.

“I didn’t mean that, Jack. I’m afraid and I don’t know why.” It came out as a whisper. She reached out to touch him on his arm, but he pulled back, drained the glass of wine.

Kris felt her throat close up with questions unspoken and chewed chicken, a thudding in her ears as her father rose slowly, deliberately. This felt like a fight, like something that had happened before, and she was on the outside of it, looking in.

“Please, Jack, have your dinner. Let me pour you some wine.”

“I have been his father since I met you, Grace. I am the one he calls Dad.”

“Don’t go Dad, read me a story.” Kris found her voice too late, or perhaps she spoke too softly, because he walked down the passage as if he had not heard her. His shoulders were hunched over, he stooped a little, walked like an old man. The front door closed behind him, and she was stuck between his going and her mother’s sobbing.

Where would a man go on a Sunday night? Bottle stores, petrol stations, grocery stores and bars were closed. In the suburbs the restaurants shut after lunchtime. Closer to town, in Hillbrow, he may have found a restaurant that sold exotic shvarma and falafel, grilled steak over charcoal, late into the night, even on a Sunday. From outside it looked small, the take-away counter and till lit brightly, a few white plastic tables and chairs facing it. Walk through, and the restaurant opened to left and right, warm alcoves with red benches, upside-down bowls of light slung low over the tables with crisp white linen, pillars black and red.

Rolling the cold glass of whisky and ice over his aching forehead, Jack wished the pounding in his head and heart would cease. There was something wrong with him, he did not know what, and the world was full of chaos and conflict. Leaving for the night and the bar and the booze was not the answer, but he did not know how to stay and what to do if he did. When did ‘I love you’ become not enough? The truth... the truth? The truth was that he felt it too, the worry that wormed through his wife’s mind and kept her pacing the passage at night. He

felt it in his gut when he woke during the early hours of morning, in the band that pressed around his head, squeezing his troubled thoughts into a space too small to contain them.

Jack left the restaurant when he ran out of money, but no amount of alcohol had the power to ease his pain. Staggering a little, he might have had the vague notion that he should not drive, that night. But it was a Sunday, the streets were quiet, he would take the back roads, and somewhere in the dark and the confusion in his head he took a wrong turn, then another.

Kris climbs the apricot tree alone, she feels nimble and strong. She reaches the corrugated roof, rattles over it under the night sky. There is a full moon, big and yellow, speaking of magic. Perhaps the fairies will join her here under this starlit sky? She looks for them, turning around and around. A cold wind springs up and it begins to blow, harder and harder, until all of the leaves of the tree spin off and fly away. Now the night takes on an eerie feel, becoming chilly, everything looks black and white, drained of colour. She wants to leave the roof, but suddenly it is high, much higher than the tree, too far away for her to get down. She is afraid, can hear a wailing, it sounds like the cats at first, but it is a baby, lying naked and cold and hungry on the brick wall, far below. She tries to block out the desperate cries by covering her ears. Strange black shapes, bats perhaps, are flying through the air, getting closer and closer. She needs to get off the roof, but there is no way down. There are footsteps, something comes, she is too afraid to turn and see what it is, clack clack clack, she jumps, Aaaahhhh!

Her voice caught in her throat and the strained sound woke her. She sat up, heart pounding, breathing fast. She could still hear footsteps. It was her mother, pacing up and down the passage. She had not heard her daughter. When Kris reached her side, her mother was talking to herself, crying. Kris held her hand and they sank to the floor. "We have to stay here, they're coming to get us," her mother said, "Close the doors, lock the doors." Kris locked the bedroom door from the outside and they spent the rest of the night in the passage.

Her mother was right to be afraid, Kris would see years later, but she was wrong about what to be frightened of.

“Hamba Wena!”

“Damn bird. Are you coming with me to a meeting? Leave in fifteen.” Marius was courteous, but cool, distant.

“Hey, sorry, lost in thought here. Yes, I’ll join you.”

He looked as if he wanted to leave the room, so Kris started talking. “I’ve a paying job, did I tell you? Writing about Tantra. Do you want to come to the introduction with me? It’s free?”

“That’s about sex?”

“Yes and no. From what I’ve read, sex is only a part of what Tantra is about. That’s the whole point of doing the article, series of articles, to explore that.”

“Sure. I’ll come.” She wanted him to touch her, call her Skattie, feel his hands on her skin.

“Oh, and you’re still coming to that drumming circle on Friday? Remember?”

“Ja. With you and Charlie.” Marius turned again, heading for the door.

“I don’t understand, Marius,” she blurted it out without thinking. “You seem distant. It’s as if you’ve taken yourself away from me!”

“What don’t you understand?”

“Why? Is it because I drank at the funeral? I found out that my brother is my half-brother! I found out that my mother’s stepfather is my brother’s biological father! Shit, Marius, I didn’t know what to do with that. I still don’t know.” He looked at her then, shook his head a little, and made for the door.

“So you leave? Is that your answer? You leave and you don’t tell me why? I made a mistake, that’s all.”

“It’s not always about you, Skattie,” he said. He looked at her again, with tenderness perhaps, but he left anyway.

“Hamba!” Kris watched Henry Ate preen himself, preparing to settle down for the night.

It was never about her, she thought, even when it should have been. Marius had it all wrong. But she saw how it looked, in that moment, that she was drawing attention to myself. Poor me, pour me another one. Sympathy is in the dictionary between shit and syphilis. Someone said that, in the rooms. This paradox was that she was unable to live in the centre of her own life, continually spun to the periphery by the force of the drama of those around her, her strangled voice unheard.

Over a hundred drums sounded into the night, a golden moon rose slowly, bold and full in the Southern sky. A woman danced in front of the fire, the fire in the centre of circles of drummers, the drummers in circles rising in tiers to catch the starlight. A woman danced, her body undulating, rippling like flame, like a figurine filled with air waving in the heat of the beat and the fire. Kris beat her drum wildly, watching the dancer's body ripple through her pelvis and stomach. The vibration reached her heart, she thought, and the woman stretched her arms and fingers, then dipped them down to the earth to gather the air at her feet.

Another dancer sat low in her hips, rooted to the earth, hands and body close to the ground, swaying to the deep beat that she heard with her pulsing heels. A hundred drums, a hundred drummers, a hundred calls threaded their way through each other, a shifting fabric of sound like light, a blanket of sound that ignited like fire, but ran over heads and shoulders like liquid. Kris had never drummed before but felt as though she always had. *My drum speaks, I am the breath of the drum.* Her fingers and palms found the rhythm of the other drums, sound rising hot and strong in the night. *I am the beat.* She felt as though she were surfing the waves of the crashing sound before sliding into a space of calm. The drums slowed, gently falling to a satisfied rest, chins dipped to chests, eyes closed. Kris felt the breath of the crowd, the exhale. In the momentary silence she could hear the crackle of the fire and the call of an owl. Then it began again with the tapping of a single drum, others joining in and Kris could feel the skin vibrating beneath her open palm. Eventually it seemed that the beat fell into a timeless space, leaving only the gentle murmur of people talking to each other, packing up to leave.

The moon, replete, sank slowly in the Western sky. Marius drove because Kris felt high on vibration and the night, Charlie from smoking weed. Lying on the back seat, she watched the night flow past the window. Charlie's voice was deep, hypnotic, washing over her. He rambled on about the healing properties of dagga, how it would change the planet if soldiers were given regular rations of it, maybe teach the cooks to make special cookies for

the non-smokers. She listened more closely when his voice changed, dropping even lower, charged with an emotional intensity rare to Charlie.

“For a long time it bugged me. Of course it did. I wondered how it happened, but I couldn’t ask her. It’s not the kind of thing you talk to your mother about. You don’t talk to her about sex and things like that. You don’t ask her how come she had a baby from that man, how she came to have you, how it happened... I mean, really now, could I ask her? No. And at first, when I first found out, it wasn’t that Kurt was my biological father, that wasn’t the thing. It was how? How did it happen?”

“I wanted Jack to be my father. He was Dad, still is, in my mind. It was all fucked up. I was fucked up before I got up to the Border. I was good at fighting. A real dinkum animal with a gun in my hands. You know, some of the manne, some of the guys, enjoyed it, it made me feel sick when I saw that. Me? I just went into automatic pilot. You do what you have to do. A killing machine. We were all killing machines – like in that book, the one about Cuba – we were pit bulls, or alsations. You know, fighting dogs. And they taught us to kill. And then they pulled out our teeth and told us we’re lap dogs.”

Encapsulated in the car, removed from the world of past and future, the sound of the tyres on the surface of the road was the only reminder of their contact with the earth. Kris felt the rough fabric of the car seat under her cheek, the air in the car warm and safe.

“They told me Dad was dead when I came back from the mission. You know the story, Marius. I came back here, too late for the funeral. There was something fishy about Dad’s death, but there wasn’t time to find out what it was from those shifty bastard cops. Gran was sick. I found out Mom was in a nut-house. And you, Kris, were palmed off onto that mean old auntie. And I blamed him. Kurt. It had to all be his fault.

“When I saw him, that night, he had that stupid smile on his face. I knew that smile, I saw it in the mirror sometimes. It meant fuck you, you arsehole and then he said that thing about women, ‘All women are whores,’ and I hit him. I hit him because he said what I’d been thinking and sometimes I wanted to hit her. I hit him again and I knew his face because it was mine and I was just like him.”

Kris heard his voice running like dark chocolate, raw and deep, opening the night.

“I only saw in black and white. That’s funny, really, because that’s what we were doing up in the bush – everything about black and white – and I made lots of mistakes. And I blamed him, I blamed him every time I fucked someone and felt nothing. Every time I killed someone and felt nothing. I blamed him because I felt nothing.”

Kris could hear the phantom drums following them, soft and gentle, floating along behind the car. She saw them rising and falling, flying, in the movie that played out on the inside of her eyes. She was sure that she could hear the beat of Charlie’s heart when he said, “I love you guys. Marius, my buddy. Kris, my little sister. I haven’t been able to say that for a long time. Not to anyone. I love you.”

I love you too, Charlie, I love you both.

You can see music if you know how to look for it.

Kris listened to the sound of *Für Elise* as it wove its way through the house and into the Conservatory, delicate silver threads and blue mist, top notes with sparkles of gold and the bass sinking gently into grey. Dorcas set out the coffee pot, cups, sugar, a plate of pastries. “Hauw, Grace, she makes nice music,” she smiled broadly, “and Marius brings nice food from the restaurant. We are lucky, in this house. How your grandmother would like this, her family staying together!”

Do you like it, Gran? Kris believed her grandmother did, indeed, approve of them all staying together. Charlie and herself and Mom, one happy family. Her grandmother had probably not considered that Marius would be there, but then neither had she. In the order of things he was Charlie’s friend again, not her boyfriend. She wondered what her grandmother would have thought about Justin showing up at her funeral. How would she have dealt with his visits? Her diary said nothing about him. Nothing at all.

“Hamba Wena!”

“Hauw, that bird she is so funny! Good morning, Charlie. Marius brought nice cake, and the coffee is strong, the way you like it.”

“Lekker. And good morning to you!” Charlie had dark circles under his eyes, which was not surprising since they had little sleep. “Hey, Kris, you look like I feel! Let me pour you a stiff one.” As he busied himself with the coffee pot and cups, he glanced over his shoulder, suddenly awkward. “About last night, I think I shot my mouth off a little...”

“It’s ok, Charlie.”

“Ok, then.” He had poured the coffee into her favourite mug, with the print of the bright dancing woman on it. The rawness that she had heard in his voice the night before was still there, a vulnerability in his eyes that she had not seen in years.

“Good morning, Charlie, Kris.” Dressed in white, Mom brought a large plate of scones, freshly-baked, and placed them besides the pastries. She tinkled when she moved. Charlie raised an eyebrow and winked at Kris over the edge of his coffee mug, the one with the stick figure children and the print of the cockroach in the bottom of it.

“Are you nervous, Mom? We have far too much food. And what’s that noise?”

“Do you think so, Kris? I mean, do you think there is too much food? I woke up early, so decided to bake, and I saw that Dorcas did not bring them out, so I brought them myself. Nervous? Well, I don’t have to be. I’m wearing these silver bells, you see,” lifting the legs of her cotton pants, “it’s an Irish thing. Or a Celtic thing. Maybe they’re the same thing. I’m not sure. It’s supposed to bring luck and chase away bad spirits. They have to be tied onto black ribbon. For good measure I have one on my wrist as well.” She smiled, waved an arm, turning her attention to the mugs. “What colour, what colour, oh, I’ll take blue, for calm. No, maybe yellow, for energy and attraction. Oh, dear, let me take the one with the coloured spots.”

“That should cover all the bases,” Charlie laughed, “Maybe, just maybe, the silver bells will frighten Justin away again. I don’t know why you agreed to see him. Especially after the way he treated you at the funeral.”

“I don’t know either, Charlie dear. It was something in his voice, as if he was desperate.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he is. Desperate for money. Well, he didn’t get anywhere with contesting the will.”

“Bugger off!” squawked Henry Ate as the doorbell rang. They sat in silence, waiting for Dorcas to usher their guest in.

Kris thought that there was something different about her Uncle Justin. He looked smaller, as if he was taking up less space. The only feminine touch to his attire lay in its stylish attention to detail, dark jeans, white cotton shirt, a soft wool jersey hanging from his shoulders. His face was pale, drawn, dark circles under his large eyes. He greeted them courteously, cautiously even, accepted a mug from his sister. There was a little awkward small talk about the weather and the traffic while Justin sat down.

“Helen, let me not beat about the bush. This is very difficult for me.” Justin pursed his lips, took a deep breath, “you probably think I’m here about the money.” He sat on the edge of the armchair, knees pressed together, cup held in front of his chest, reminiscent of the Queen. His hand trembled slightly as he took a sip of coffee, “Maybe I am, in a way. I don’t know where to begin.” His voice rasped, he raised his chin as he sucked the air in through his mouth.

“At the beginning?” Charlie’s voice was cold. “Spit it out, Justin.”

“You have every reason to be angry with me, Charlie. I was unforgiveably rude to all of you, especially to my sister. There are things that I have done that I cannot take back. There are things that I have not done that I wish I had. Oh, God, this is hard for me...” Placing the cup on the table beside him with a shaking hand, he pushed back the lock of hair that had fallen across his eyes. If it was an act, Kris thought, it was a good one.

“Look... the thing is... I have Aids. There, it’s out.” To fill the silence, he hurried on. “Actually, it’s not full-blown Aids. I’m HIV-positive. But I don’t think that’s going to be my biggest challenge.” He paused, breathing deeply. “Apparently I only have something like forty-five percent use of my lungs. That’s what years of smoking will do for you.”

So that was it, he carried the fear of dying with him. The coffee pot hissed steam, even Henry Ate was quiet. It was Charlie who broke the silence, "What do you want?"

"Family. You're all I have."

"You've got a nerve! All that time when your mother was ill, not a word, not a call, not a visit, nothing!" Grace began pacing the room.

"I know, I know, I know!" Justin stood suddenly, clasping and unclasping his hands, one passing over the other, around and around as if he was trying to wash them clean. Out damned spot. She wrung her hands in despair! "Please, Grace – Charlie? Kris, all of you, please, I'm asking you to think about it. Talk about it. Don't say no, now. I'm asking for a chance to get to know you. For you to get to know me." He looked close to tears and his chest heaved as he struggled to breath. He sat down again, sucked in great noisy gulps of air. "Look, Grace, we're a fucked-up family! Some of the things I said... Well, I could have worded it differently but none of us are conventional when it comes to our sexuality!"

"You know nothing about Charlie and Kris," Grace said, stamping her foot. "And you're the only homosexual!"

"That's true, but I'm not the only whore!" They glared at each other, then Justin shook his head, "Dammit! I can't help it. The words just pop out before I can stop them. I'm a real bitch sometimes." He sat down again, arms straight, hands on his knees, staring at the ground, his adams apple bobbing up and down and his chest heaving. Charlie stared at him, Kris looked at Charlie, their mother paced. "What's that noise?" Justin cocked his head, "Is it you, Grace?"

She stopped pacing, raised a leg to show the silver bells strung to her ankle on a black ribbon. "Oh my God! Silver bells to chase the naughty elves away. I taught you that, Grace, do you remember?"

"Maybe. Well..." She frowned at her brother, "Perhaps I do." He met her gaze, his white face shiny with sweat, eyes red, knees pressed together. She looked at him, then away, eyes absent, unreadable. "Yes, I remember." The bird scratched his way along his perch, bobbing

his head. Kris only realised that she was holding her breath when her mother turned back to Justin and asked, "Scone?"

Monday evenings had belonged to Arthur Goldman, the attorney. Kris remembered him as a part of the Old House and spoke of him as Uncle Arthur. Helen had written of both Doctor Frank and Arthur in her diary. It was Doctor Frank that had helped her overcome addiction, but it was of Arthur that she wrote, "I do believe he saved my life". He did this by saving The Trust from Kurt's mismanagement. What a word to use, mismanagement. It was embezzlement, theft, Kurt capitalising on Helen's distaste for legal and financial matters, and her inherited belief that such things were best left to men. He siphoned off as much as he could, curbed only by the terms of The Trust itself.

So it was that on Monday evenings, once a month, Arthur continued to join the family for dinner, ostensibly to discuss the Trust.

"Only on its surface is a will about the distribution of goods or money. It is validation. Cutting someone out of your will is to deny them, it is the ultimate withdrawal of love." Arthur smiled, "You may think that an odd notion for an attorney, but it explains many a strange will and the acrimony they induce.

"The terms of The Trust are specific. Money will be made available for the household expenses, the servant's salaries, medical expenses and the like. Each of you – Grace, Charlie, Kris – gets an allowance. For the first year, the capital may not be touched, and no drawings may be made other than what has been stipulated." Arthur looked at them over the top of his glasses, "Money cannot be made available to help Justin with his medical expenses. Not from the Trust."

It was late afternoon, the sun still high, air hot and dusty as Kris climbed out of the car. It was cooler on the porch, a welcome breeze on her flushed cheeks as she trudged through the kitchen, dropping hockey stick, duffel bag, blazer. "Hey Gran, Uncle Arthur!" Kris paused

at the strangeness, Gran at the top of the stairs in her summer housecoat with her Monday guest. It was hockey day, Tuesday. She wondered if grandmothers always kissed their gentlemen friends, because that's what she thought she saw.

"Kris! Come back and pick up your things, Dorcas is not going to do it for you!" Her mother stopped short, then saw what Kris was looking at. "Goodness me! Mother, do you think this is appropriate?" Without waiting for a reply, she continued, "It's bad enough you carrying on with these liaisons, but at least you could keep it upstairs and not in front of Kris. Have you no shame! What about their families, for God's sake, and what about their wives? Have you thought about what you are doing to them?"

Uncle Arthur fidgeted, glancing at Helen, "Well, I'll be going then." He pecked her on the cheek, whispered something that made her smile. "Goodbye Grace. Bye Krissie," he winked at her over her mother's shoulder.

"You have adopted a very narrow outlook, Grace. Is it that new church that you are going to?"

"Mother! Two different men! Is that really necessary?"

"Not necessary, no. But very liberating. You should try it, Grace dear. You should try one, at least."

The exchange had left the teenage Kris with much to mull over.

The oak tree was losing its leaves, allowing the shifting sun to reach further into the Conservatory. It was neither the oldest oak, nor the biggest, in the urban forest, Kris discovered while researching a story about Johannesburg. That honour was officially afforded to the Johannesburg Oak in Northcliff which was protected by law. This meant that it could not be mutilated, like the Sophiatown Oak, which had died as a result, its site remaining historically significant because it had been a landmark for the meeting of those involved in the struggle against apartheid. The oak tree at the Old House had been planted by the original owner, its age not known. In later years, when a high wall surrounded the property, it was large and grand, standing tall and wide on the slope before the house, clearly visible from the road.

It was this tree that Dr Frank Malone had used to identify the house when he made his first call there, and it was in its shade that he and Helen sometimes sat on Friday afternoons. Kris held her grandmother's diary in her lap, watched the leaves of the tree flutter in the wind, thinking about the closeness that had grown between doctor and patient all those years ago. He seldom missed his Friday visit, arriving in time for lunch and leaving around six ...*so as to miss the traffic* (Helen wrote in her diary). The second Wednesday of every month her grandmother accompanied the good doctor out to dinner. Their favourite restaurant was five minutes drive from home, run by an Italian couple in a rambling house with wooden floors and an enormous fireplace. Kris and her mother accompanied them, now and then, on Helen's birthday or during school holidays. His regular presence was met by Kris with the unquestioning acceptance of youth. She liked Doctor Frank, made a game of getting him to break that long, stormy face open into smiles by hanging upside down from the oak tree, or reading him something that she had written.

The Friday following her grandmother's funeral, Doctor Frank's old Jeep pulled into the driveway at noon. He had called first, "I have nothing else to do on a Friday. Would you mind terribly, Grace?"

“We don’t mind at all,” she replied. Friday lunch was reserved for Doctor Frank, as Kris remembered it had been since she and her mother had moved into the Old House with her grandmother.

She ruffled through the transcripts of interviews for the article that she was writing on tantra, thought that she should have begun researching earlier. Perhaps she would find something there that could help her with her own sexuality, help Marius, help them both. She chided herself, for of course it was too late for that. She and Marius were no longer a couple, barely had been at all.

Martin

I carried her with me for days, weeks even, tangible on my skin, in my belly, the shiver up my spine. Fading, she became the scent of coconut oil, the breeze on my cheek, an elusive whisper that slipped through my body. I can’t tell you how she looked, because she changed, shape-shifted. I have no words for the experience. It felt like a dream but I have never been more aware of my body. It changed my self-image and it changed the way I do things. I would say that I stepped into a new awareness. After that session with the dakini, I became more open. I think that I am ready to learn more about tantra and myself.

Lucy LunaWolf

I lived with a Tantric Sex Master so I know all about tantric sex and not being able to come for hours. I need to find out more from these tantric practitioners about me working as a Dakini. But as a High Priestess there is no way that I will be sucking some man’s cock so that he can go home happy to his wife. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a prude. I’ve done sex magic, *a la* Crowley, the full ritual, and sky clad circles. Advanced practices. Mystery school stuff.

Maxine

The sex is very important in relationships, I think it is good for a woman to know how to please a man. This is what I come to learn in tantra, about having better sex. That’s what tantra is all about, really.

Mark

I agree with Maxine, that sex is important, but I think that there is more to it than that. I want to find out what the other things are. The techniques of good sex can be learnt in many places, on the internet, books, videos. I have had a few sessions with a dakini of this school and I know that I am only beginning to learn about energy and my own body. The practitioner workshop is about technique, of course, but I believe that there are things that you can only learn from a teacher who is present. This introductory talk is a good idea, because it gives me a chance to make sure that I am happy with the teachers before I spend my money and my time.

On her way downstairs Kris wondered if she had made a mistake inviting Marius to join her on the introductory workshop on Tantra. What hope was there that the rift between them would be healed?

Over cold lunch in the Conservatory, with her mother and Uncle Frank and the grumpy bird, there were many questions that she wanted to ask: Were you and Gran in love, Doctor Frank? What about your family? How do you feel about Uncle Arthur, what do you know about Gran's relationship with him? What am I to you? What would you call your relationship with Gran? She said nothing, though, not only because she could not ask out loud, but because she knew some of the answers. Helen's diaries and the scattered reminiscences of a dying woman were helping Kris form a clearer picture of the past.

"So Justin can live for years with Aids?" Grace asked.

"Absolutely. If he has been diagnosed as HIV-positive, he may exhibit little or no adverse symptoms at all. If he does, indeed, have full-blown Aids, with careful management and the treatments that are available, he can live a comfortable life. The emphysema could be a more serious, and debilitating, threat. A lung infection could be fatal."

Kris listened to her mother and Doctor Frank, letting their conversation float behind her thoughts. Perhaps Justin believed in his illness, the spectre of a rapid death spreading its dark wings over him, shadowing his days. Was this how karma worked? Her mother believed it did, that somehow her brother was getting his just deserts for his neglect, no, for

his cruelty towards their mother. He had forfeited the right to the love and support of his family. How far would we go to prove that we were not like him, were not heartless in the face of his distress? It would be much easier to find that he had exaggerated his plight, and that our sympathy and support were not needed, after all. Thinking of him made Kris feel uncomfortable and prickly.

“Doctor Frank, what do you think of AA?”

“Kris, are you asking me as a man of science or for my personal opinion?” His head inclined, so that his eyes twinkled at her from under his bushy eyebrows. “Both,” she smiled, “and a third one, what you can tell me from your experience with alcoholics. You must have had many of them as patients.”

“Ah, the Journalists asks!” He laughed, “Indeed, I have treated alcoholics and addicts. I am not able to give you a medical explanation for the phenomenon, but alcoholics seem to fare better as members of AA and patients who follow a twelve-step programme have a better chance of long-term recovery than ones who do not.”

“I’m starting to see that there’s a lot more to it than simply stopping drinking.”

Her mother smiled at her across the table, “I’m so proud of you, darling. I had no idea, when I was younger, about alcoholism. I thought your father drank too much and I couldn’t understand why he simply could not stop.”

“Do you think Dad was an alcoholic?”

“Yes, dear, I’m sure of it. Looking back, there were the signs. There was a man that spoke at that AA meeting you took me to, do you remember, the tall older man with glasses? He said that alcoholics have an allergy which means that if they take one drink, their body craves another. Your father was like that, once he started he couldn’t stop. If I had ten rand for every time your father promised that he would only have two beers, I’d have a fortune saved up.”

The sins of the fathers, and the mothers. Kris wondered how much of her father she had in her, how much of her mother, and her grandmother. If you keep doing the same thing, you'll get the same result. She was thinking in AA-clichés.

"Perhaps the two of you would care to join me for dinner on Wednesday?"

"I would love to," Grace smiled at Kris over her teacup, "and I am sure that Kris would as well." Kris nodded assent, relishing a silence that was as expansive as a warm embrace.

Doctor Frank stared at the plate on his lap, pushing the remains of apple tart around with his spoon. His jaw moved a little as if he wanted to speak, and when he looked up he looked worn and tired. There were tears in his eyes.

"Go away!" squawked Henry Ate.

"Time to go, yes." Doctor Frank unfolded himself from the armchair, suddenly awkward with the plate and spoon in his hands.

"Let me take that," said Grace, "next Wednesday it is, then. Six o'clock?"

His smile opened up the severity of his face and Kris savoured the sweetness. In a wordless exchange they hugged their goodbyes and Grace walked him to his car.

As her days of being sober turned into months, Kris felt the weight of her secrets growing in her belly. For a little while at a time she could keep them subdued, but they would soon burst out into her body again. They were alive, they festered, they bubbled under and they sent vapours that spun her mind into chaos.

Did you get it right, Gran? Did you figure out where the line is between love taken and love given? Is there a line? When does the lover become the abuser, or the victim the one who wields power? Did you see that addiction runs deeper than substance abuse or alcoholism?

Kris told herself, as she had told her grandmother and mother, that compassion drove her to support Myra, her ex-lover's mother. But this was not true. It was a combination of fear and greed, of addiction to pain, of inability to let go. The fear was of being caught out, of

doing something wrong and being punished for it. The greed was in the idea that if she did good deeds she would be rewarded, that god-points would be translated somehow into material abundance.

“You owe her nothing,” her mother had said, “You should be here, visiting your grandmother, rather than wasting time on that awful woman.”

There was something else that kept Kris visiting Myra every Wednesday morning. There was the notion that if she expressed compassion for the mother of the man who had abused her, then she too would receive that someday, somehow. That her kindness would make her deserving. She tossed these ideas around in her head, trying to find a tidy explanation for a behaviour that she really could not understand in herself.

The world had become a smaller place for Myra, contracting to the walls of her room, the corridor to the bathroom, mealtimes in the dining-room and the small television on the little dresser at the side of her bed. She was thin and bent, her deep auburn hair forming a large and carefully curled frame around her wrinkled face. Placing a cigarette in the black holder (with a filter so that she did not inhale the harmful chemicals) Myra complained about the other women in the old age home.

“It’s a waiting room for the mortuary, that’s all it is.” She crossed her legs, rested an elbow on her knee and lifted the cigarette holder to her mouth in a practised movement. She tilted her chin upwards, her head slightly to one side, and lit the cigarette. Out of habit she flicked Kris a coy glance, stopped when she made eye contact, inhaled deeply. “I told that nurse, this is not what I’m used to. Old Irma in number three snores all night but she has the nerve to complain when I watch my programmes on the television.”

The white plastic chair was placed in the sun against the wall of the laundry. Another pose, cigarette poised in the air, crossed leg twitching a little, in what the old woman may have imagined made her look like Greta Garbo. How many women, like Myra, had practiced the pose in front of the mirror? It would account for the sideways tilt of the head, so that she could see herself in the mirror. Black and white stills of beautiful women peeping down their

noses through thick lashes, or with cheeky sideways glances, or looking seductively up at the camera. Women sighing over dreams lost, love broken. We'll always have Paris...

"And because they like me so much they moved me into my own room, for now." Kris followed her down the corridor, floor covered in linoleum, cream and green squares shiny in the sun. They moved you because you drove the other old ladies nuts, Kris thought, and the nurses got tired of your whining and constant demands for attention. What was she doing there, why was she supporting this horrible woman?

"I miss my old cottage dreadfully, it was so much better than this place."

"You hated it there. You told me it was the worst place that you ever lived in."

"This is the worst place. Oh yes, you don't know what it's like to live in a place like this. If Tony was alive he would make sure that I was in a better place than this." She looked at Kris accusingly, as if it was she and not Tony who had stolen her small savings, sold her meagre store of jewellery and the car, and then got himself killed. Tony, her son and the apple of her eye, the psychotic bastard that Kris had the misfortune to imagine herself in love with.

Thoughts of Tony crowded in on Kris, bringing with it the metallic taste of fear, the gut-wrenching jumble of love turned to desperation and clenching. Love with concrete feet... Through the pounding and the smoke in her head, she allowed the idea, the unspeakable notion, that she had a choice, that she could walk away from this. If love were an iron ball... Tony was dead, she had no need to fear him any longer, had no obligations to his mother.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

Kris slowly rose from her chair, looking at the crabby, pathetic, old woman as if she were seeing her for the first time. She stepped slowly backwards, then turned.

"Remember my appointment with the hairdresser on Thursday!" Myra shouted after her.

Kris ran, afraid that if she stayed any longer Tony would reach out through his mother and pin her down, shatter the brittle clarity of her resolve. She left the heaviness that bound her

to him at her feet. She heeded the advice given to Lot's wife, and never looked back, not even to check that the shadow remained behind.

Amber

My job, as a dakini, is to bring him to his awareness. The male, that is. Tantra is about truth however that looks for you. Tantra is about consciousness. Tantra is about presence, being present. It's not about sex, actually. Swami, my teacher, wants me to do the practitioner course. He hopes, I hope, that I will feel confident enough to start doing session work. Swami says I could be doing it already, but I haven't felt it... I have been out of my flow, you know?

Justin

I am in a relationship with a dakini, which can be really intense. I think that I want to be a daka so I need to do the practitioner training. I am interested in getting another perspective and insight from a different school. This teacher, Leo, has practiced in the States, Australia and the UK. I'm pretty sure that he studied at the Osho school as well. Anyway, he has loads of experience and training in tantra, so I reckon the course will be powerful.

Immersing herself in a hot bath, fragrant with rose and lavender, Kris watched her breath. Breath out, let go of that which no longer serves you. Breath in, invite in that which you need. But what did she need? She had been reading about unconditional love because she thought that was what she wanted. Be careful what you wish for, the old witches say, because you may get it. She wanted to be loved, but not with the dispassionate compassion that Osho spoke of, the love of angels and ascended masters. She wanted to be loved in a deep and dirty and messy human kind of way, she wanted love that was intensely personal, she wanted to laugh and hug and have wild sex. She wanted to be touched, to feel his hands in the small of her back, to drift into his smiling eyes. The steam from the bath rose against the candles, a shadow on the wall taking the shape of a dragon with an open mouth. The dragon breathed out, then it sucked her in as she became steam and she felt herself slipping away, waking suddenly with the tepid water splashing around her.

It stood in the doorway, an animé. It took a step – a tiny step – into the kitchen, before Kris realised that she was real. Her silver hair, high and full on top, was skilfully tapered into wisps over her cheeks and shoulders, makeup edgy with dark eyes and an overdone mouth, thick matt foundation and blusher applied to accentuate her cheekbones. Underneath all of that Kris thought there could be a passably pretty face. The pale blue fabric moulded to her body, a shiny futuristic dress, albeit a very short one, her shoulders covered in a fluffy, dark blue shrug that showed off her rounded bust. She took another few tiny steps and Kris marvelled that she could walk at all in the silver-blue platform shoes, so high that she was perched on her toes. Could a body like that be natural?

Grace had looked from Kris to Marius to the doll with wide eyes. Kris shrugged, signalling to her mother that she did not know anything either.

“Ummm, this is Candice. Candy.”

Of course it was, but what was she doing there, and what was she doing with Marius? Candy did a little bob when Marius spoke her name, bending her knees slightly, her hands clasped in front of her, elbows straight.

“Ummm. Candy (little bob) is my... I mean, I met Candy (bob) at the Salon.”

“Thai massage, Marius?”

Candy turned slightly from the waist, twisting from side to side, hands still clasped in front of her.

“No! Uh, no. Wax.”

Marius had not shaved, bristles dark on his craggy face. Kris caught her mother’s raised eyebrows and sudden smile, Marius ignored it. “She said she was interested in Tantra, so I thought she could go with us tomorrow night. Well, I hope it’s ok.” The bob was combined with the twist, accompanied by a carefully regulated smile to reveal perfect white teeth.

“You want her to go with us to the Tantric Introduction?”

“Ja.”

Bob and twist, twirl a strand hair in her neck, a fabricated woman, no doubt with a hairless body like a Manx cat.

“It’s an introduction, that’s all.”

“Ja. She wants to come. You did say it was free. Something about that article you’re writing?”

Bob, twist, bob, twirl hair and smile.

“What on earth were you doing at a waxing salon?”

Candy Manx Pussy met Kris’s gaze, blue eyes wide and steady, but Marius answered her, “Not really your business, skattie, but I’ll show you if you like ...”

“Oh God no! Can she speak?” Something flickered through Candy’s eyes, but her expression remained impassive. “Anyway, the introductory talk is free. So that means it will be you and Candy, me and Mom. How absolutely fucking delightful!”

“Do join us for tea in the Conservatory,” said Grace, lifting the tray which she had been carefully rearranging, “I can make a pot of coffee, if you like.”

“Thanks, Tannie Grace, but we’re going for a ride on the bike.”

“I think we can drop the Tannie, don’t you, Marius? Especially since we will be exploring Tantra together.”

“Sure, Grace.” said Marius, bending over to kiss her on the cheek, “I think the talk will be great! Yes,” looking at Kris over her mother’s shoulder, “absolutely fucking delightful!”

Candy bobbed, smiled, twirled all the way round to follow him out of the room. Out of sight, her voice carried into the kitchen, “Marius, I thought there wasn’t going to be any sex?”

Grace almost dropped the tray. “I have to see this,” she said, walking quickly towards the Conservatory. Kris beat her to the window to watch the helmeted Candy attempt to mount

the bike behind Marius. “I wonder what fabric that dress is made of,” mused Grace, “it’s very elastic.”

Candy, perched precariously on the passenger footrest, holding onto Marius’ shoulders, made several attempts to straddle the bike by aiming a knee at the seat. Marius held the bike still, with difficulty it seemed, eventually turning to speak to her. Finally, balancing on one footrest and abandoning small movements, she sent a leg swinging wild and wide, high over the seat, platform shoe slipping as her body connected with the seat behind Marius. “Maybe the tights and skirt are attached to each other?”

“Voetsek!” squawked Henry Ate.

“No, really, otherwise the skirt would have ridden up, surely? I am sorry, dear, but you must see the funny side!”

“It’s bizarre, Mom. My life is a movie, produced by Salvador Dali. And scripted by Stephen King. Directed by Tarantino. Heaven knows who did the casting! It’s full of caricatures!”

“Imagine how glum it would be if it were the collaboration of Dostoevsky, Hugo and Tolstoy. I, for one, can’t wait to see what she wears tomorrow night. Do you think we’ll do any practicals?”

“Oh, Mom.”

“Maybe you should also call me Grace.” She smiled sweetly, “When we attend the talk, I mean. There’s no need for people to know that I’m your mother.”

Kris realised that some might find the idea of attending a tantric workshop with their mother bizarre, unnatural even, but she had been dragged along – willingly, in most instances – to a variety of activities over her childhood and teenage years. There was transcendental meditation until it got too intense; yoga until they both got bored with white and agreed with Helen that the turbans were unflattering; there was a brief foray into shamanism until it was suggested that they spend a couple of nights up a mountain without

toilets. Grace threw herself into these explorations with an intensity that could be considered obsessive. For her research Kris thought there might be something tantric about her mother's total immersion into the experiences.

Stephen

Like shamanism and magic, tantra is a form of mystery school teaching. With Kabbalah there are structures and rules. These are not there to hide the teachings, but to protect the student. You have to be a certain age, you have to have studied certain texts, you have to have a certain amount of experience and then – only then – can you begin to enter the realm of the mystery teachings. Too many so-called teachers, whether they call themselves shamans or high priestesses or swamis, don't have the grounding in a solid tradition. How do you tell the sham from the shaman? There are many fakes out there. There are those who have some ability, but they are irresponsible when they practise ancient mystery school arts indiscriminately.

Stara

There can be dangers that people don't recognise when they work with the energies of tantra, or any working that is designed to take you into another dimension. You can call it an altered state of consciousness. The problem is that people practise out of context of a discipline. A few things can happen. At best, the practice won't work for the person. They will get no result. Or a person will experience some success, or some result, but because there is no context the result may not be favourable – it could be detrimental to the person – or they can misuse the energy to cause harm to another, or let a destructive energy work through them. There is also the possibility that a person can experience the energy or go to a dimension for which they are totally unprepared. This can split their mind. They can lose it. Go nuts. Be unable to function on this earth plane.

Grace had been afraid that Kurt would contrive to send her away again if he knew she were pregnant. The first time was a blur of hospital and pain after she had made the mistake of telling him. But perhaps he was right, she had imagined it all, made it all up in her head. She could not think of it, did not want to think of it, what if it happened again? What if her mind split and she became lost in that dark world where monsters came in the night? I don't know what's happening, Mommy! I'm so sorry, I'm bad, I'm bad I know it's not the dreaming please help me! Her mother, Helen, weak and sad, disoriented, supported by Him, by Kurt, I'll take care of it, Helen, I'll handle the hospital. It's for her own good, you know. She's rambling, hysterical. Come now, Grace. She had tried to scream but Kurt stifled her breath by holding her tight and forced the pill in her mouth.

The hospital a blur, memories of a procedure. A whirlpool of doctors and counsellors and patients and a clinic. Group sessions and talking, talking, talking. Medication, lots of medication. When they said she was well enough to go home again there was nothing that she was sure of.

How could Grace explain what happened next? Memory is imperfect and complicit, and she could not prevent her body betraying her, her mind playing tricks and whispering that the pleasures were somehow innocent. He played her, brought the pills that sent her to another place. When she woke what she remembered felt like a dream. Except for the last time. She lay there, waiting to vapourise and float through the air, all sensation delicious and detached, marvelling at surreal delight. But the drugs failed her, and he did not care. What difference does it make, you know what you're doing, whether you're high or not you still want me to fuck you. Still he played her, expertly opening her legs, arousing her. Look at me, you slut, look at me, tell me you want it! Her body said yes, her mind said not like this, and her soul cried.

It would not happen again.

Grace tried burying the memory of her own disgusting behaviour deep in the dirt where nightmares squirmed, covering it with music and poetry. The growing being in her body was her connection to the earth, all of her energies turning towards the baby's survival, because her own life depended on it. Where to go, what to do? To Dmitri, who whispered sweetly in

her ear, his beard brushing her neck. He took her out to the country for picnics at the waterfall, accompanied her piano with his flute, caressing her skin with music and his eyes. Eyes that smouldered through thick black eyelashes when he spoke of the future and his family in Cyprus. She would tell him that she was pregnant and he would help her because he said he loved her.

“It’s not mine.” He said it, flatly, and he left the room. Jack, his flatmate, found her there, weeping helplessly.

“To Edward,” is written on the front of the cream envelope, its edges dark with age. It is not sealed. Inside is a photograph and a letter.

My dearest Edward,

If you read this, it is either because my courage has failed me, or we did not meet, and I have been unable to express myself in person.

This is simply a heartfelt apology for my selfishness and foolishness. I was cruel when you appealed to me, in the name of the love that you claimed you bore, not to end our marriage. Too late I have come to believe that you meant what you said, far too late I have realised that what I feel for you is more than affection. I regret the wasted years more than I can express. You are my one true love, Edward.

There, it is out. When you agreed to meet with me, in spite of my refusal to speak with you over these last few years, I allowed myself to hope that all is not lost. My dearest wish is that we can rebuild, at the very least, a friendship.

Love,

Helen

In the old monochrome photograph, a smiling bride and groom pose on the steps of a church. Her dress has a simple, figure-hugging bodice, the skirt falling full to the ground. She looks straight at the camera, her blonde curls pinned up on her head with flowers, some

cascading over her shoulder. He is a head taller than she is, broad shouldered, dark and handsome. He looks down at her, his right hand covering hers in the crook of his arm.

The Pied Piper was richly dressed, reminiscent of the tarot Fool, but not as slender. He bounced and twirled his way across the stage, playing a beautiful tune on his flute, and the children danced behind him. The theatre was warm with laughter and music, and as the show drew to a close the teenage Kris savoured each dramatic moment of fantasy, clapped until her hands hurt. They slowly made their way to the foyer, up the steps, the real world waiting for them beyond the doors of the grand old theatre. There, with the white marble floors and ornate ballustrades, suspended between fact and fiction, Kris looked at the programme while she waited. Her mother was talking to the young lady at the programme stand, stooping to write something, then making her way back through the chattering people. "Oh, look dear, the Pied Piper is Dmitri Stavros, your old friend," Helen had said.

"Jack's friend, mother," Grace had replied a little curtly.

Helen did not let up, "Why, dear, I distinctly remember you going out with him on a picnic, at least once."

"I'm surprised you remember anything at all, mother, you were pretty out of it in those days." Kris looked up at her mother, then, startled by the edge in her voice. Helen blinked hard and stared back at the programme. Grace sighed, "I'm sorry, I would rather not talk about that time of our lives."

Even though Helen nodded, smiled, Kris could feel the tightness between her grandmother and mother. Then the music swelled up and she lost herself in the joy and pageantry of the pantomime.

For days after that Kris heard her mother playing tunes on the piano that reminded her of the show. She had discovered Tolkien, spent most of that December holiday reading and swimming. Her friends were away with their families, at the South Coast, or down in the Cape, which seemed impossibly far to her. Her grandmother hated travelling at Christmas

and Easter, "Like lemmings, they are, off to the sea," she would say, "Let's go to the Kruger Park in July. Punda Maria opens in winter."

The house seemed emptier and it was quieter, with Dorcas and the gardener on leave. Kris missed Dorcas chattering, sometimes singing in a rich, round voice. She loved pop music, always got the words wrong. Her mother's voice broke through her wandering thoughts. "Hello? Yes, hello. To whom am I speaking? Mrs...? Mrs Stavros. Mrs Stavros, no thank you, I have the wrong number." The telephone rattled in its cradle as it was hastily put down. Kris stepped through the archway in time to see her mother hurry down the passage towards her bedroom, one hand to her face. Puzzled, she picked up the programme beside the telephone. Puss in Boots and the Pied Piper – A Christmas Pantomime. In the margin her mother's neat script: The Downtown Theatre Company 432 2611 D home 6463022.

"I never told him."

"What?" Kris had been staring at the reddening clouds, the oak leaves shaking gently in the cool evening breeze. The photograph and the letter that she had found in her grandmother's diary lay on the coffee table between them. The reading of the diary had become a key that unlocked their voices, not all at once, but gradually, so that they were able to speak of some of the things that had been kept secret.

"Dmitri, the musician. I never told him that I loved him."

"Did you love Dad?" Kris watched her mother carefully.

"Yes. I loved him very much, but in a completely different way. You know how that feels, don't you dear?"

What did Kris know about the different shades and textures of love? She was discovering that certainty had as much solidity as the clouds that puffed along the horizon, and also that what appeared ephemeral could condense and plop down into waking reality, liquid and sweet on the tongue.

He stood at the far end of the room, turned as they entered and walked towards them.

“Jeezuz,” whispered Candy. His wavy hair flowed over his shoulders, moustache and beard framing a full, wide mouth. The peacock-print sarong wrapped around his lower body emphasised his tanned muscular physique, and Kris wondered if the prophet (any prophet) had radiated the sexuality of this large man who moved gracefully towards us. “Welcome,” he said, holding both of her hands, his gaze intimate, a sky-blue caress, “Leo. You must be...?”

“Kris.” Her voice was soft, almost a whisper.

“The journalist, of course. So glad you could come.” He moved away, slowly releasing his hold, reluctantly Kris thought, but then she saw that he greeted everyone, men and women, in the same way. Large cushions had been placed in a circle on the rugs covering the centre of the room, a medley of exotic reds and oriental print. The lighting was soft, candles glowed in coloured glass containers and a light breeze blew the smoke of incense through the air. Soft gauze curtains, patterned with a rich filigree of indigo and gold, framed the wooden doors which were folded open to the garden. The murmur of voices floated in with the scent of jasmine, mingling with the gentle music playing in the background. Om Shanti Shanti Sha-aaa-nnnn-tiiiiii. In spite of herself, Kris began to relax, feeling a release of tension, perhaps even a little excitement and interest emerging. Good setting – good stage management. Kris walked outside to follow-up the written interviews with as many of the participants as she could before the show (as she had come to think of it) started.

Earlier Kris had been uncomfortable, unable to detect the source of her growing unease, which had spiked into irritability when Marius brought Candy to the car. Was there a real person inside that carefully created exterior? Would she feel better if Candy were ugly, or old, had crooked teeth or less expertly applied her makeup? Candy picked her way across the brick paving in flat silver sandals, her simple halter dress plunged low and gathered under her perfectly round breasts. In the fading light, orange of the sun dipping low, Kris thought that she caught a speculative look from Candy, but dismissed this curtly. That would denote thought processes. If she had two more brain cells she’d have to be watered daily.

Before Marius or Candy could greet her properly, Kris was behind the wheel of the car, starting it up. She ignored her mother's amused glance, managed an impolite grunt in acknowledgement when they climbed into the back seat, was grateful for the silence on the short drive to the venue.

Shaking off the drive, Kris had headed across the slate patio towards a group of people in time to hear, "... water with strawberry and mint, and here we have chai, which I'm told has been on the go all day." The melodic voice belonged to a woman who moved like a dancer, fluid and graceful, her hair long and straight into the small of her back. "Greetings!" Stepping towards Kris, she smiled and held out her hands, "I am Kamala". With only their hands touching, Kris felt embraced by the warmth of the woman, mesmerised by her eyes which reached deep into hers. Kamala turned away at the insistence of a voluptuous, dark-haired girl who tugged on her arm and spoke with a French accent. Released from the unsettling intensity of the woman's gaze, Kris poured herself a cup of chai, rich with spices, sipped the intoxicating brew while she looked around. Kamala made her way across the patio, touching arms, hugging, smiling at each person she encountered. She was older than Kris had first thought her, perhaps in her late forties, and when she passed under the light there were streaks of grey in her black hair.

Whether it was the chai, or the heady encounter with Kamala, or because she had not eaten properly, Kris began to feel light-headed. Greetings, for those familiar with the world of tantra, were accompanied by lingering embraces, hands moving gently down the length of her arm, stroking away the anxiousness of the day and the drive. A thin woman with the skin of an alabaster jar introduced herself as Lucy LunaWolf (with a capital 'W'). Her eyes darted around in a face framed by wild, wavy red hair. Dressed in black, an enormous sparkling pentacle hanging around her neck, she was eager to tell Kris about her experiences as a high priestess with what she called sex magic.

The woman with the French accent prowled back outside, "It is Maxine," she said, "from the Mauritius, you know it?" Yes, Kris knew of it, but had not been there. Maxine moved like a cat, radiated a primal sexuality and at close range was closer to forty than the early thirty-

something that Kris had taken her for. She had fine black hair on her cheeks and she twined herself around her companion, Mark, dark and delicious.

The interview was interrupted by a stroke on her arm, a breathy voice, "You must come, you'll never guess who is here!"

"Mom – Grace – what's with the voice?"

"Oh, it's how they talk. And the touchy thing. Had you not noticed?" Voices low, bedroom voices, full of sighs. Her mother was a chameleon, caught on fast. Grace glided across the wooden floor, presenting Kris to a large man with an olive complexion and a mop of black hair streaked with grey. "This is Dmitri," she flashed a knowing look at Kris, "you know, the friend that I was speaking of?"

"The musician. I remember." Dmitri hugged Kris in greeting, eyes smiling through thick lashes, his full mouth spreading wide under his large nose. "It is a long time since your mother and I saw each other," he said, "I am so surprised to find her here, at a talk on Tantra."

A little bell rang and a young woman began ushering people into the room. Leo arranged himself on a cushion, sitting cross legged, with Kamala beside him. Leo spoke of sacred sex, the ancient practice of healing, of connecting with spirit through sexuality, of temple arts. Dakinis were female teachers of the tantric path, women in touch with their own sexuality whose task it was to bring the male to his awareness. The talk was being recorded, so Kris did not have to take notes.

Kris looked across the circle at Kamala, sitting cross-legged beside Leo, and as their eyes met she had the sensation of being stroked, of being drawn out, as if they were embracing in the space between them. It was Kamala that led the group through breath work to awaken their energy centres, demonstrated eye gazing and taught conscious touch. Her voice was deep, hypnotic, as they moved around the room under her direction.

The evening was drawing to a close and Kris had barely noticed time passing. I love myself, I love you... a poem to the beloved blended with music wove its way through their moving

bodies as they touched each other, gazing deeply into the eyes of each person encountered. “Bring your heart into your fingertips,” Kamala said, “bring your heart into your eyes, be present to the Other, be present in your body. Be mindful. Be aware. See the divine in the Other.” I love myself... It felt like a dance, this giving of loving touch, allowing herself to be touched in return, allowing herself to be seen. Kris felt larger than her body, expanding, part of an unseen but tangible energetic web. I love myself, I love you, I love myself... Rising with the heat from their bodies and their breath Kris flowed through the room with the drums, the voices and the melody. When she encountered Marius she wanted to cry with the intensity of the love in his eyes. She wanted to cry because she had longed to see that look and now that she did, she felt that it was not only for her. She wanted to cry at the perfection of that, the paradox that Marius could show the love he was capable of in the safety of a room full of strangers and not when they were alone. I love myself, I love you, I love myself...

At the end of the evening Kris sat quietly on her cushion, pretending to gather her things but trying to gather herself. Something was rising in her that she had been trying desperately to suppress, her throat felt thick in keeping it down. Grace flitted about making arrangements for the trip home. Marius wanted to use the car, would bring it back later. Dmitri was joining them for coffee and a chat, how nice, he would drive us to the Old House.

“Kamala, Leo, please come over for coffee and a light bite. If you have time, of course. There is so much I want to talk about.” Then turning to Kris, Grace asked, “Kris, dear, this will be helpful for the article you’re writing, won’t it?”

Kris agreed absently, disconsolately watching Marius leave with Candy.

What a strange and suddenly scattered ending to the day, she thought, wondering how she would translate her experience into writing, sensing the years of suppressed emotion and memory that were getting ready to blow.

The gun was cold and heavy in her lap, the night pressed down on her shoulders, her vision blurred by a drunken darkness. Kris could smell the chlorine in the pool, hear the soft beat of the Kreepy Krawly round and round it goes quieter than her heart which pounded in her head where was he why wouldn't he answer her call, "Tony! Tony! Is that you! I can't do this anymore I can't do it I can't do it!" She lurched out of the chair and stumbled across the bricked pathway, her shadow swivelling black and grotesque behind her as she stepped towards the light above the kitchen door.

The gun fell from her limp hand onto the kitchen counter. She tried again to load it, but her hands were clumsy and her brain spun round in confusion. She called again, stabbing at the cell phone, "Tony please come back I can't do it anymore I know that you're sorry I'll do anything Tony..".

Did he hear her? Did he answer his cell? For a moment the spinning in her head stopped and there was stillness. What had she become? The question dropped silently through her body. "God help me!"

She had her back to him when he walked in. His voice was cold, it meant he was going to hit her. "You fucking bitch, Kris, why did you phone John?"

"I didn't... I called you, I only called you," she whispered, frightened, turning around. He saw the gun in her limp hand, the bullets on the counter top, the magazine. For a moment she thought that the man she fell in love with looked out at her from his eyes, "Jeezuz, Baby!"

"Think about a love affair, one which has ended," Kamala had said, "A love affair that you may not have been able to let go of. You will know this by strong feelings around this relationship. Now I want you to think about the ways that sex was used for power in that relationship. This could have been by you, or your partner. Did you ever use sex as a reward? Was it a punishment? Was it a duty, an obligation?"

It had taken less than a year for Kris to become the object of Tony's abuse, his bitch, a defeated woman. What was she when she met him? She was passionate about her writing career, excited with her abilities and creativity. She loved singing and dancing, played the guitar and painted in oils. She hatched vague but noble dreams to teach crafts using recycled tin cans and plastic bottles, sketching light fittings created from chicken wire, pieces of metal and sand-blasted glass. Yes, she was bright and clever but also brittle, fragile and naive in ways that she only began to fathom months into her sobriety.

Kris met Tony at a party, the darkness and danger around him an irresistible lure. It was a warm summer evening and the hostess had decked her garden with fairy lights. Cushions and blankets were scattered across the lawn, candles sparkled through punched tin cans hanging in the trees. Kris wandered through the house with a glass of wine in her hand, standing for a moment to watch the lone DJ with blonde dreadlocks. He played trance music to a still empty room, coloured strobes dancing across the walls and across the shiny tiled floor. A middle-aged woman shimmied across the space, testing the beat with her arms and legs.

"You'd have to be stoned not to be bored to death with this music!"

The dreadlocked young man looked at her blankly, then pointed to the enclave to his right. "Knock yourself out, Auntie," he said. The woman stared at the luminous green branches with semi-dried serrated leaves that were strung up against the bright red wall. Kris laughed as the bemused expression on her face changed to incredulity when a couple carefully picked a few leaves, expertly crushed them in the palm of their hands and sat down on the fat purple bean bags to roll their smokes.

The party was picking up tempo, a bong or two making its appearance, more people selecting leaves from the arrangement on the alcove wall. Drugs come in many forms and Kris was sure that most of them were present that night, along with alcohol.

Feeling at ease, the red wine working its magic in her body, her attention was drawn to a fey girl with long blonde hair. "Oh, come on, Mark, John would never hurt me!" The response was deep, guttural and the young man had his back to her. Kris moved closer, pretending to

admire the candles floating on the surface of the pool. "You're jealous, and anyway what do you care? It was you that left me, remember?" The girl drew a hand across her forehead, scooping hair back over the top of her head. It slid down over her ears, silky strands that looked as though they had caught the moonlight. Her companion reached across and held her arms above the elbows.

"Yes, I left you. Yes, I am jealous. But I am worried. He and his mates are bad news, that Tony fellow, all of them, into drugs and who knows what. There was that thing with the girl..."

"John told me about that. It was an accident, it had nothing to do with him or Tony. They don't know where the girl got the bad E from."

The response was low, intense, "Don't be an idiot, Fern! Wake up! Those guys are bad news!"

"Hey, babe! This guy bothering you?" A wiry man, perhaps in his thirties, said loudly to the girl, Fern, who could not be older than eighteen. "Shove off shit-face! She's my girl now."

"Fuck off, you prick!" But the young man released her. He stood for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and walked off without another word.

There was something feral in the lazy movements of the man who claimed Fern as his property. Kris had a sense of a wild tension that rippled around him, temporarily contained, that was shared by the man standing slightly behind him, who had watched the exchange with a slight smile. This energy was exciting, dangerous, simultaneously repelled and attracted Kris. He was handsome, dark and tall, broad-shouldered, confident. She watched him speaking first to a girl on his left, hand touching her upper arm, then the one on the right, leaning towards her and laughing at what she had said. Kris walked away when he glanced up, not sure if he had noticed her staring. She had only gone a few steps when she felt his presence behind her. "What do we have here? A beautiful woman, unattended?" His voice was deep and strong, a little smoky. Kris turned and was captured by the intensity of his dark eyes, "The name is Tony."

Kris must have been mistaken about what she saw then, because his face was twisted, eyes black and hard. "You stupid bitch! I told you not to touch my things!" The blow knocked her sideways and she fell awkwardly against the cupboard. She tried to get up, but he kicked her in the side. "Stay down," he ordered, "on your knees like the bitch you are." There was a new tone to his voice. *Oh God Oh God*. "No talking, dogs don't talk, do they? Make a doggie noise for me, bitch – fuck goddam phone!" He left her trembling on hands and knees, "I want to find you exactly here, exactly like this, when I come back. I'll know if you moved." The door slammed and she heard his car accelerate out of the driveway. She stumbled to the bathroom, retching violently into the toilet bowl.

There was a banging on the door and she spun into panic. The banging was accompanied by voices. It sounded like her mother, "Kris! Krissie! Angel, open up, quickly!"

"My God what's happening here?" Her grandmother looked around the kitchen, "We're getting you out, it's a Removal."

"You mean Extraction," her mother interjected, "And you've been watching too much television. Where's your handbag, Kris? Grab a few things, here into this case. No arguing."

Kris stumbled into the night, bundled into the pink Jaguar by her grandmother and mother, both talking constantly. "After that message you left on my phone..." her grandmother said.

"What message?"

"Heavens, you probably didn't even know who you were phoning. Look at you. Right, Grace, drive!"

"I can't just leave..." Kris mumbled.

"Why not? If you stay he will kill you, or you'll end up wishing he would." Her grandmother sat in the back holding her hand, "We'll get you fixed up at home. We'll help you sort this out."

Kris had heard about Fern's death by chance, bumping into a mutual acquaintance at Bojangles. There is a tautness, the quality of strings overwound, at the funeral of young people. There is also an element of suspense, as if family and friends are waiting to hear that it is a monumental joke, albeit in bad taste, and the girl or boy will burst laughing out of the coffin at any moment. We would berate them, perhaps threaten them, but we would embrace them and forgive them all in a flash. But the funeral was no joke and a young woman was tragically, inexplicably dead. Suicide, Ja right. Kris caught the whispers of the people that had known Fern. What did she know of ropes or knots or how to go about hanging herself? For that was how she was found, hanging by a rope in John's house. He's into drugs, you know. The cops are in his pocket. She had been badly beaten before she died and Kris thought of the other girl, the one that she had heard of at the party when she first met Tony and his friends. John had got off scot free with that one. Swept under the carpet. Whispers, secrets and warnings that Kris had ignored, like Fern. She felt guilty, because she had been rescued. She felt relieved, but she doubted herself. Surely Tony was not dangerous, at least not to her, and if she went back he would prove to her how sorry he was and never beat her again? He was not like his friend, was he? Her mother and grandmother kept a tight watch on her, as if they knew that her hold on freedom from Tony was tenuous. Tony was killed before Kris could convince herself that it was safe to go back to him. Drive-by shooting. He messed with the wrong girl. She was connected, you know. Her brother was also into drugs or something. A hit. Kris had not mastered the art of mourning, but she did know how to escape into wine and tequila.

The morning was grey, the sky heavy with rain. Kris sat up, disorientated by the dreams of Tony and abuse and murder. There, she had named it, called it what it was. The air was colder than it had been for days and she pulled on a tracksuit before heading downstairs for coffee. Her mother was up, playing a melody that moved like water over pebbles in a mountain stream. Kris pottered about the kitchen, chasing the elusive notion that something had changed. Like Alice, who had stepped through the looking glass into a shop where things disappeared as soon as she tried to look directly at them, thoughts fluttered through her mind, will-o-the-wisps that vanished when she tried to pin them down. It was giving her a headache. Perhaps it was the musty smell of rain on dry stones and earth, the promise of new buds and sprouting that was causing her restlessness. Her body felt tender, her muscles a little sore. She wondered if the cramps would go away if she ate something. The notes of the piano swelled up, bursting over each other like butterflies and birds.

“Good morning, Henry,” Kris said to the bird as she passed through the Conservatory and opened the stained glass doors.

“Hamba wena,” he replied.

The rain had passed and the sky was clearing, the sun shining through the cottage window panes onto the polished wooden floor. Kris stepped into the room as the last notes rose into the air. “Oh, Leo...”

Surprised, she almost dropped her cup when he stepped out from behind the piano, stark naked, heading straight for her, eyes locked on hers, greeting her with a drawn out, “Beeluvverd! I hope you’re feeling muuuch better!” She tried to keep her eyes off his lingam – a nicer word than penis – but could not help noticing its majestic proportionality with the rest of his large body.

“Oh God, Mom-, uhh- Grace! Aren’t you cold? Why are you naked?”

“Why not, dear? I thought I would give it a try. It’s enormously liberating.” Where had she heard that before? The image of her grandmother on the staircase flashed through her

mind. But she had been clothed, that time. Her mother's voice was still tantrically breathy. Feeling more like Alice than ever, with a hundred-and-one unanswerable questions, or rather questions with answers that she would rather not hear, Kris settled for, "What about Dmitri?"

"What about him, Kris? If he wants to call me, he knows where I am, now. You really should let Leo give you a session. It's... it's very relaxing." She smiled radiantly, looking up at Leo who stood at her side. "It's good for creativity, too. That was my own composition that I was playing."

"It was great. I hope you remember it," Kris said weakly. "I'm going to sit and have my coffee. Please put some clothes on if you come through." She turned, feeling as though she was the oldest person in the room and walked straight into Marius. "Damn, I spilt my coffee!"

He reached out to steady her, hands firm on her shoulders as he looked over them, "Morning, Grace. Leo."

"Beloved! How are you?" Kamala came in behind Marius, greeting Kris with a long stare into her eyes and an embrace, before crossing the room. "Grace, Beloved! Leo!" Kris was finding the staring and hugging irritating.

"What happened last night after I went to bed? Did you guys have a big love-up or what? You might call it tantra but what if it's just a big fuck? I hope Randy Candy enjoyed the show!" Kris spat it out, irrationally angry.

Marius looked surprised which did nothing to improve her sudden irritability.

Kamala turned, wide-eyed, "Oh, did I miss something? Perhaps I should have stayed, last night."

"Kris, dear, are feeling alright? You don't seem yourself, at all," her mother said.

"I'm taking my coffee upstairs," Kris replied, feeling a little foolish, the cramps in her stomach increasing.

“Don’t forget that Justin is stopping by later,” she heard her mother call.

“Voetsek,” squawked Henry Ate as she passed him.

It was backwards, Kris, thought, she was the one who was supposed to be experiencing free love or tantric whatever. Instead she was behaving like a cross between a spoilt teenager and a judgemental old prude.

Down the rabbit hole! But she’s climbing up the stairs... Open your heart, she says, like this – spreading her arms outwards – and she feels the warmth beating out in waves, embracing her, covering her with kisses. Open your heart, he says, the blade sharp on her tongue and the blood wells in her mouth warm and salty and spills onto her breasts. Open your heart, says Alice, handing her a box decorated with mosaic and inside it is a red heart that flashes when she ties it around her neck.

Kris walked into the Conservatory. Their tantric guests had departed and Uncle Justin was telling a story. "So there we were, sitting in that awful grey waiting room, you know there must be a special place in decor hell for the people who decorated that place, we're sitting there, half of us at death's door, when this woman's cellphone rings. She puts it on speaker and holds the thing up in the air near her face as if she's a bit deaf. 'Birdy gone,' a voice says, 'I open da window and birdy flew away!' It's a man and he sounds really distressed. The woman had an absolutely beautiful sarong in peacock blues – how long do you think it takes to unwrap those things and then wrap them back up, I was glad she was in the queue after me – then she shouts into the phone, 'You must be very upset!'" Uncle Justin laughs, breathes deeply, "Hello Kris, I hope you don't mind me rattling on."

"No, go ahead." Grace smiled at Kris, turned her attention back to Justin. Charlie slouched in his chair, arms folded, expressionless, but he winked at her.

"As if we couldn't hear everything, the woman repeats the conversation, but she speaks at the top of her voice, 'Poor man, his birdie flew away, he must be very upset.' The guy positively wails, 'Oh I don't know what to do! Birdy gone. Lass time I open de door and he flew away but he flew back but now birdy gone gone.' She shouts again that she is sorry for his loss and then shouts to us that this is her local Community Helpline and she hoped we all didn't mind her taking the call. Funny how something like that has a way of putting things back in perspective. Anyway, she yells goodbye to him but so help me if he doesn't call back ten minutes later. 'Hello lady, lady? Birdy back! I open da window and birdy flew back in!'

'You must be very relieved. His birdie is back, he must be very relieved,' she shouted at us." Justin's chest heaved as he breathed. There were spots of colour on his cheeks and Kris detected a little mascara, a subtle smudge of eye shadow. He looked even thinner than the last time she seen him, but that was only weeks before. Or was it longer?

"How are you doing, Justin?"

"Oh, quite good, Grace, thank you for asking. I have an oxygen machine now and that helps a lot. As it turns out the HIV-thing is the lesser of my problems. Bit of a bugger doing the

hospital thing, but I'm coping." He smiled wanly and Kris wondered again how much of it was an act, then chided herself for being uncharitable. His pallor and struggling for breath was real enough. She half-listened to the conversation, wondering why she was still feeling so irritable.

"Go away," Henry squawked. If the grumpy bird flew away she would probably be quite upset, even if not as distraught as the man whose bird had flown out the window.

"You're nice people, Grace, you and Kris. Charlie even," Uncle Justin was saying, "Much nicer than me. I would never have let myself be here, I would have held onto my grudges." He looked like he wanted to cry and Kris felt her irritability flare up.

"You did hold onto them." Her voice was harsh, "Gran said that you blamed her for something that happened to you when you were young. In the boarding school. Was that why you couldn't visit her when she was ill?"

"Kris, what's got into you today?" Her mother looked at her crossly, "We've had this conversation before."

"Not exactly, Mom. Uncle Justin said he's sorry, but that's not making amends, is it? I'm not sure I can buy this whole reformed thing that we're all a family again and we'll be happy ever after! It's going to take more than a couple of visits and some funny stories."

Justin seemed to gulp for air, his mouth opening and closing several times, the rasping of his breath audible. "Look what you've done, Kris! Justin, do you have your oxygen with you?" Grace fussed around him but he waved her away.

"I'll alright," he said as he looked up at Kris. "Kris-," deep breath, "Kris, I understand perfectly. If I were you I would not have accepted my apology, not at all. Something did happen to me and I was too young to know how to deal with it. I never spoke of it. It's too late to make fix things with my mother and I wouldn't know how anyway. So all that's left, all I can do now, is apologise for behaving badly."

"Oh, God, Uncle Justin! Look, it's not really my business anyway."

“It not being my business never kept me from rattling the skeletons in other people’s cupboards.” He smiled ruefully, “I would like to tell you my story, one day before I die, it might be the saving of me.”

“Tula Wena!”

“Yes, the bird is right. It’s time that I shut up and went home,” Justin said.

Kris fussed with the teacups and plates, stacking them onto the tray, trying to explain to Charlie – and herself – what had happened. “It’s these secrets that everyone seems to know more about than me. Okay, this one is Uncle Justin’s secret, but it affected me.”

Charlie looked at her, quizzically, “It affected Gran and Justin a lot more.”

“It’s not about me...” She thought of Marius. “Charlie, what do you know about Marius and his marriage?”

“I know quite a bit, because I was there. Is that what’s bugging you, this thing with you and Marius?” Was that the source of her bad temper, her restlessness? “Look, Kris, I know you’ve had a crush on Marius since you were a little girl, but you’re a woman now. Have your feelings grown up with you?”

They had drifted in from up North, Charlie said, buying and selling gold and diamonds, flashing money and their white teeth, loud and arrogant. The Zulu was short and muscular, with a long scar down his left cheek and hands that hid their strength in softness. His partner was tall and blonde with the thick neck and shoulders of a rugby player, a voice that carried across the reception hall and a broad smile that did not touch his pale blue eyes. “Three nights for three, one self-catering bungalow, breakfast included, no discount for cash,” Marius said. Rat Eyes smiled, but his lips compressed imperceptibly as he counted out the cash and handed it over. “Dinner is available at the restaurant if you book and pay by lunchtime,” Marius added, “Solo will show you to your bungalow.”

When they walked outside, Charlie had got up from the chair in the corner. "Better make sure these two settle their tabs before they leave the bar each night," he said, "looks like our friend Cherise is back in town."

"Ag, she's a lost cause, that one," said Marius. "Here's the keys to the cottage. Stay as long as you like."

"Ten days or so. I want to get across to Kruger while I'm around."

Charlie caught glimpses of the girl, who had paced outside, smoking, while the young men checked in. She was short, a little over five foot tall, with straight blonde hair that fell to her waist. Her white cotton shirt and frayed denim shorts left much of her curvaceous body on display, legs shapely and skin a light honey tan. Walking back to the Jeep Cherokee with her companions, it looked like she was about to throw her cigarette butt onto the ground but was stopped by Solo, bowing the top half of his body politely as he spoke. She shrugged and walked the few metres to the bin that he had pointed out.

Charlie found Cherise talking animatedly to Marius behind the bar, that night, her two friends ensconced at the bar counter. Zulu drank Johnny Walker Black, Rat Eyes chose Windhoek draft interspersed with shots of Tequila, a drink that they provided in copious amounts for the girl. She had a pretty face that reminded him of the pictures of fairies and elves in his childhood story books. Beneath the jaded exterior that she presented to the world he thought he detected something wounded, broken even, and perhaps it was that air of vulnerability that had first drawn him and Marius to her.

"Charlie," she exclaimed when she saw him, "I was saying to Marius what fun we had that summer, picnics in the forest and swimming in the river." It had been fun, the young men vying for her attention and all of them only beginning to explore their sexuality. Now she flirted with both of them. But even when she laughed her eyes were empty. Charlie couldn't be sure if they had been like that when he saw her last, the summer ending with the tragic death of her mother who, they said, was probably drunk when she fell over onto the railway line.

The next day Charlie watched Zulu and Rat Eyes stroll into the dining room moments before breakfast was due to close, taking their time with the buffet while the staff waited to clean up. “Hey, Chief,” he heard Rat Eyes calling loudly, “How much for dinner? Okay, Chief, here’s the bucks for three for tonight. Make it extra good, now!” They left noisily, banging the chairs and talking loudly, revving the motor of the jeep and spinning the wheels on the sand road. Cherise stayed behind. She came to the office around midday, looking for Marius. “They left me with no money,” she said, “but I need to eat.”

“No problem,” he said, “I’ll add lunch to their bar tab tonight.” That night Cherise sat at the bar counter, demurely sipping a glass of wine. The evening was quiet, the bar emptied early and she told him that she was afraid that she had been deserted. Two days later they had not returned and Cherise had run out of meals and a place to stay.

“So we took her in to the cottage, with us,” Charlie concluded. “I was back in Pakistan with the UN when Marius sent me a message to say that she was pregnant and of course I thought it was his. If he’d asked me, I would have told him not to marry her, but he didn’t. It was a sham from the start. She disappeared again as soon as the kid was born, leaving him with the baby.”

“So that’s the whole story, Charlie? I get the feeling there must be something more.” Kris had cramps in her stomach and she didn’t think it was because of what Charlie had told her.

“Don’t we always keep something back? We can’t just spit it all out in one go, especially when we’ve kept it to ourselves for a long time. Us guys, some of us find it hard to speak at all. We’ve been conditioned to suck it up and keep quiet.” Charlie smiled at her, “I’ve told you what I know. Or most of it. You’ll have to ask Marius the rest. It’s his story.”

The green edges of the cream enamel basin are chipped and a little water spills over onto the stone floor as she sets it down. She stirs it to dissolve the handful of salt, throws in a few dried rose petals and a drop of basil oil. Kneeling, she carefully washes his feet in the scented water, drying them on a large white towel. She leads him to the low bed in the middle of the hut, unwraps his sarong and helps him lie down on the red blanket with its edge of marching elephants, giraffes and rhinos in black, red and white. She removes her robe, a white fabric that reflects the candlelight in the rainbow hues of mother-of-pearl. Working upwards from his feet, she massages him with scented oil, honouring his earthly body. Turn over, Beloved. The heat is white, it ripples through her body, their eyes meet and she rises to make love to him.

Kris woke suddenly, shivering with cold, her body aching as she dragged herself to the bathroom. She tried to hold onto the sweetness of her dream, but it faded. Think of times when sex was a duty... he grabbed her hair, forcing her head down, "Baby, you give the best blow job I swear!" Her bowels violently emptied and she grabbed the plastic bin beside the toilet ... when sex was a performance... "Yes, it was good for me." Cramps gripped her stomach, it felt like fear, bile rising up the back of her throat ... when you were not present in your feeling body... She remembers a man walking towards her, naked, and as they were about to have sex she felt ice cold, all desire leaving her as she moved her body mechanically. Weakly she held her hair back from her face while she vomited into the bin on her lap ... let go of these things, let them leave your body. She became weaker each trip she made to the bathroom, alternatively sitting on or kneeling beside the toilet. Was this a purging and if it was what was she making space for?

"Oh, Kris darling!" Her mother's voice reached into the whirlpool of her mind. Faintly she heard her calling out, the sound of a door, voices coming closer and then felt herself being lifted. "I need to shower," she whispered.

"Ja, skattie, I'll clean you up."

Kris wanted to tell Marius that she was sorry about being mean, that she was sorry she got drunk at the funeral, that she loved him with a woman's love and that it didn't matter what his past held. But she was too weak to speak that much and gratefully sat on the floor of the shower with the warm water pouring over her back while he washed her like a little child.

Time slipped by while she slept feverishly, waking intermittently to sip ginger tea and water, Marius slipping tissue salts under her tongue. She was not sure if she spoke out loud or if the conversation simply drifted through her mind before she finally fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I feel you love me, why do you push me away? Skattie, it would not be fair. I don't understand, what is not fair? There are things you don't know, Skattie. Get better, sleep now. I love you, Marius. Ag, Skattie...

Getting better was like finding herself floating on a quiet pool after tumbling down a waterfall and she could not be sure if she was looking at reality or its reflection in the water. Either way, it felt remote, as if she was a witness and not a participant. Kris observed how Marius kept a careful distance, noticed how he avoided meeting her eyes, felt the angles of his awkwardness when he thought they may be alone. She also saw her own confusion, felt the contraction in her belly when it looked like he wanted to open up but did not. She saw how she held back, as well, not knowing how to speak to him across the strange divide between them, but would make sure that she was down in the kitchen when she knew that he would come in before he set off for work. She told herself that she needed to let go of the idea of Marius as her lover, that being friends was good enough. For days they danced the pretence of casual encounters, for she had the feeling that his timing was as studied as her own.

"Morning, Marius."

"Morning." He had his back to her, putting his coffee mug in the sink. Kris wanted to make small talk but could think of nothing to say. Morning, Marius, I think you might be the love of my life but I don't know how to tell you. Morning, Marius, I think I've loved you from the first time I met you. Morning Marius, Charlie was right, I've had a crush on you forever but

now it's changed, I'm all grown up. Morning Marius, why would you choose someone like Candy instead of me? Morning, Marius, why don't you tell me about your wife and the child?

He turned and for a moment she imagined that he had heard her thoughts, but he avoided her eyes, mumbling something about getting to work as he headed for the door. Struggling to maintain her detachment, she watched him walk across the round, grey stones through the lavender and the rosemary.

Kris absently poured herself a cup of strong, black coffee, breathing deeply. Let go of expectation around love. "Skattie..." She almost spilt the coffee, left the cup on the counter and turned. He put his hands on her shoulders and she caught her breath at the look in his eyes. "Skattie, it's killing me. There is something I want to show you. It's a whole big thing that I haven't spoken to you about."

"I have a past as well, Marius, that you don't know about."

"I may know a little more than you think. I've heard you share at meetings and your brother is in security, remember?"

"Do you want to tell me about the Lodge in Limpopo, your parent's place, where you worked before you came back here last year? Yes, I know about that. My brother is your friend, after all." It was surprisingly easy to say, once she had started.

"I don't just want to tell you. I want to take you there. We leave in the morning, at five. Wear jeans and your walking boots, I have a jacket for you and a helmet. Ok?" He still had his hands on her shoulders, his eyes pleading.

"Okay."

"Dankie, Skattie." His hug was strong and warm and it seemed that to Kris that there was a lighter rhythm to his walk as he strode along the path through the herb garden.

"He is a good man. And a good-looking one," she heard her mother behind her. They watched Marius open the peeling green wooden door to the garage. Kris visualised it

stripped down, layers of old paint in the deep cracks, the rich warmth of the natural wood glowing and smooth to the touch. Marius had said that he would do that work, she would perhaps stencil something in white on the corners.

“How are you feeling, this morning?”

“Oh, much better, Mom. I need to finish that piece on tantra quickly. Marius is taking me to Limpopo tomorrow.”

“Is he, now? Well, finally. Now perhaps you two will be able to sort something out.”

“What does that mean? What happened to Candy? I forgot to ask him.”

“You know that there was nothing in that. If there were, you wouldn’t be going to Limpopo.”

That night Kris went early to bed, warning herself not to hold expectations of the trip with Marius. You have no idea what it is about, she told herself. Surely he wouldn’t take all this trouble only to dump her, once and for all? He’s married... but he is getting divorced. What about the child?

Standing in front of the mirror she looked at her naked body, wondering what others saw: white skin, medium height, oval face framed with curly auburn hair. She couldn’t see the colour of her eyes in the soft light, but they were green and large, eyelashes thick and long. Her hair hung down over her shoulders, breasts firm, belly slightly rounded. She ran her hands over her full hips, child-bearing hips, her Gran called them. She thought that she may be attractive, pretty even, would have liked to hear someone – Marius – tell her that she was beautiful. Turning, she could see the line of her back and wondered if she would dare have a photograph of herself like this, something tasteful but daring. Calendar Girls. To her left and behind her the naked figure of her mother and behind that her grandmother. What a picture that would have been.

The ride to Louis Trichardt had taken four hours, Marius courteous and caring, careful to stop every hour so that Kris could stretch her legs, offering her a drink, food. She felt the city drop from her and watched the changing landscape as they rode towards the Waterberg across the Tropic of Capricorn, the deep green of the mountains speaking of sacred forests and secret places. They were riding to the place of the forbidden Lake Fundudzi, sacred to the Venda, where generations ago maidens had been sacrificed to the Crocodile God. Those that were allowed to visit the lake have to approach it backwards, the brochure had said, and first gaze upon it by bending over and peering between their legs. In this way one would avoid giving offence and, perhaps, diminish the awful power of the terrible water and its resident deity.

A smiling guard with crooked teeth stamped his feet in a little dance as he opened the gate to the Lodge, waving and shouting in welcome. Riding past the reception, Marius stopped at a rondavel removed from the main buildings and secluded with trees, shrubs and reed partitions. Giving Kris time only to freshen up, he met her outside with a quad bike and they were off again. Forty minutes later found them in the forest, driving along roads that most cars would be unable to negotiate. They crossed a stream and Kris exclaimed at the dozens of butterflies flying over the sparkling water. Marius stopped the quad bike on the low concrete wash so that she could get off. She played for a while on the rocks, with the beautiful creatures dancing around her with their brilliant black wings, marked with an iridescent purple. "Its special, Marius, there is something very special about this."

"Ja, Skattie."

The forest was man-made, the trees planted so that they could be cut down when they reached maturity, commodities with a pre-determined lifespan measured in yield. Still, it held her, drew her in as she crunched over dried pine leaves.

Kris wondered what kind of man could stand before a tree older than his great-grandfather and be deaf to its voice? What was absent from the heart of such a man that he could hack into the heart of the old tree, proudly standing before its fallen body and have his photograph taken, evidence that he was a killer of trees?

Kris walked a little deeper into the forest while Marius set out a blanket and food that he had packed into the box on the quad bike. The trees opened up onto another clearing, this one littered with cardboard cups, cartons that had contained take-away food and beer bottles. It looked like some people had come into the forest for a party. Scattered in the centre of the clearing were several torn condom packets. Standing there, looking at the debris, she felt a chill slip down her spine. Something unpleasant had happened here. The trees rustled their leaves above her head, as if telling tales, but she shook off the sensation and turned back.

The picnic blanket was ruby red in the dappled sunlight and Marius had unpacked their lunch from the box on the back of the quad bike. The hearty wholewheat sandwiches were filled with creamy cheese, ripe red tomatoes, peppery rocket and avocado. There were ripe yellow bananas, pale gold macadamia nuts and naartjies the colour of the setting sun. A silver flask was filled with coffee, rich and earthy, another with fresh borehole water.

“Anything will grow here,” Marius told her, “this coffee is from a farm a few kilometres to the east. The factory that processes the nuts, the macadamia nuts, is on the road to the Kruger Park. On the other side of the forest there is a farm that grows tea and you saw a few fruit plantations on the way here.” They feasted on the simple meal. Then Marius spoke more in one go than she had ever heard before.

“I thought the baby was Charlie’s, at first. I couldn’t kick Cherise out, I believed her when she said she had nowhere to go. I was with her when she gave birth and that’s what did it for me. I held that baby girl in my arms and looked into her face... she had black eyes that looked like they knew everything. I don’t know why I married Cherise. Maybe I married her to make sure that I could look after that little baby girl, but that was stupid, too. I was mad in the head. Or drunk. Or both.

“Ag, Skattie, I’m messed up, you know? Getting sober, that whole thing... I’m not relationship material, I don’t know how to do them. I want to come back here, help with the Lodge again, be a real father to Olivia – that’s what we called her – don’t know what I can ask of you, don’t even know if my father is ready to have me back...”

He took a picture out of his wallet. The little girl had skin the colour of chocolate and a mass of hair around her smiling face. "She's cute, but she's-she's..."

"Not mine or Charlie's."

Lying on her back on the bright blanket, Kris watched the clouds building up in the deep blue sky and wondered what little Olivia would grow up thinking about the family that brought her up. Would it change anything when Olivia was old enough to know that Marius was not her biological father? Did she already realise that?

Kris closed her eyes, felt the fullness of the past rising up through the ground, the future still in the air with the whispering of trees. She had the notion that she would not be able to bring the entirety of herself into the present moment until she stopped dragging around the bags of stories that she had collected over the years. A song ran through her head, the singer's voice deep but crunchy like honeycomb ... we contemplate how time annihilates all remaining truths and all our alibis... She had loved that musician once, the one that came into her dreams, but no longer felt the need to hold onto him. Perhaps she could try that with Marius, simply offer love without expectation. After all, he had brought her there, to share the forest and his past.

"What are you smiling at?"

"I'm happy, Marius. Not scared, not worried. I am sure that it is working out exactly as it's supposed to." She might be delusional but there was no way out except through. "I love you. You know that."

He bent over her, touched her cheek. She wondered if he'd been as afraid as she'd been, all along.

"I'm not going to worry about how the story goes," she thought, "I think I'm going to make it up as I go."