

Part A: Thesis

Skipping stones

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

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November 2021

Thesis abstract

My thesis takes the form of a novella exploring suicide and the unanswered questions it leaves. The main protagonist is a young girl who struggles to come to terms with her best friend's suicide. The work is situated in contemporary South Africa, where inequality and depression is rife, especially among young people, and social media too often provides a smokescreen to conceal emotions.

My writing is motivated by my desire to explore the human condition and the world around me, through my own subjective lens of experience. By working between fact and fiction I seek to trouble conventional narratives attached to suicide and highlight the subjectivity of truth.

I am influenced by Lydia Davis's ability to write obliquely about loss, and her light-handed approach to emotionally charged topics; Susan Steinberg's dark motifs, vivid imagery, and her fragmented narrative that captures the characters' responses to trauma and interrogates the notion of truth; Lidia Yuknavitch's cinematic imagery and immediacy of tone and compact storytelling; and Kate Zambreno's poetic prose that lends itself to clear societal commentary.

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Skipping Stones

Prologue

One, two...Pick a few.

Skipping stones. Stepping stones. Gravel. I'm like the waste pickers at the rubbish dump. I collect them all. Scour the edges of dams and rivers, ponds and lakes. Gardens and driveways and broken pavements. Fish them out of potholes. Stones of all different sizes. Shapes. Colours. Some sharp, some blunt. Some heavy. Some light.

Three, four...Collect some more.

Marble. Granite. White pebbles on the garden path that leads to my front door. Materials that make my home. The furnishings of the four walls I live inside. Stones. We sharpen knives on them. We cut ourselves chopping tomatoes and blame the knife.

Five, six...Watch them skip.

Small stones that turn deadly when flung through the air in a catty – that time Alex tried to shoot a bird. *Round and round and round and round and round and round and round. And one little stone went into the sling and the giant came tumbling down.*

Seven, eight...The water breaks.

Rocks. Quarries. Cliffs. Mountains. Volcanoes. Stones that look firm and steady but break apart in your hand. Rocks that look like they can hold you, but start to wobble as you jump on them. Stone, the substance. Stones, the product. A victim of the elements that build it up and break it down.

Stone that stands alone, unaided, like an island. Until the rain bit by bit corrodes it away. Generations of being beaten against, until its form gives way. Broken down until it can't be broken down anymore. Powdered into clay. Eroded into dust. Friction always reduces something to its simplest form.

Trampled upon until it's small enough to pick up. Hold in my hands. Carry in my pocket. Lift and throw. Hear it crash. Follow the echo.

Nine, ten...Start again.

Caress their smooth, never-ending roundness. Hide what lies beneath. Multi-faceted. Push them deeper into your pockets so no one will see. Keep adding more. Until the day you jump, hoping to fly.

But you sink.

The gift

I was still holding onto the gift bag when someone took my coat, led me to the lounge where everyone was seated. The same gift bag I'd been holding in the store, while the sales attendant artfully wrapped the last addition of my purchases, when my phone rang; my fingers slid out of the ribbon handles to answer the call.

Then I was running out of the shopping centre, gift bag hitting against my stomach with each move.

Now I'm sitting on that couch, velvet the colour of rusty orange, still clutching the gift bag at my chest. It crackles every time I shift in my seat. I peer inside at the individually wrapped packages; suddenly I can't remember what's inside.

Someone says something about a bridge and a river and a body. They call the body by the same name as the one engraved on the silver pendant. "Naomi with a 'y' or an 'i'?" the sales lady asked. There are voices and whispers and murmurs and sobs. The sounds wash over me like I'm drowning. Like I'm the body at the bottom of the river.

"Stones," someone whispers. There were stones, they say, in her pockets. We used to skip rocks on the lake that the river runs into. We used to throw sticks over the bridge and make bets on whose would travel faster. *Sticks and stones*...we used to sing that we were invincible.

I want to leave this lounge with these familiar faces telling me strange, horrific tales. Escape the silences between each pounding heartbeat. The clock ticks, no one moves. Mrs Parker's crystal vase catches the sunlight.

Someone asks me if I want tea. I want to go upstairs to Naomi's room and drop off her gift I spent all day shopping for. Her birthday is next week, what's a few days early? She will be back, she's just stepped out for air – this room is so claustrophobic, who would want to stay here anyway? I want to leave, they won't let me. I want to go look for her, but the man in blue tells me they've already found her.

"You've got to understand, darling, I'm so sorry, no one knows what happened," my mother cries into my shoulder.

She wants me to understand that while I was shopping for my best friend's birthday present, she decided to jump off a bridge. But I can't accept that because I've known my best friend for fifteen years.

She would never do that. She's afraid of heights, I say. No one responds because no one knows how to. She would never do this; someone pushed her. But she left a letter and someone saw her jump. If someone saw her, they should've stopped her. Mother says I need to get some rest, she leads me out the room. I clutch the gift bag to my chest.

In my room I close the door and stare into the mirror. There is a point where if you stare at something too intently for too long you stop seeing clearly. Where the present shatters into a million shards of glass and you can no longer see anything.

When we were young and bored and highly competitive, we used to have competitions to see how long we could stare at an object in front of us without blinking. We would sit there, tears streaming, eyes stinging, never relenting.

Now, it's just me and my mirror and nothing to focus on except the gift bag lying side-down on the edge of my bed. I peer inside, empty the contents, smell the perfume. Rip open the black and

white wrapping with a big pink bow I paid R20 extra for. Trace the letters on the silver pendant with my fingers.

N-a-o-m-i

The girl who wears Chanel Number 5, loves anything from Typo, and is always running out of notebooks is not the girl who jumps off a bridge into a river with stones in her pocket to weigh her down.

And all the while I shopped for a gift for the person I thought loved life more than I did.

What to do after the death of your best friend

Try to think back to the moment before you picked up the phone, so you can go back to that moment in your head and not answer it. Stall. The moment. You heard those words. Let them replay. Over and over again in your head. Until it makes you want to scream or throw yourself into a wall. Stare at the wall. Feel as cold and as hard as the stone concrete.

Keep telling yourself it's not so. Leave the room. Leave every room, where people are congregated, crying.

Measure the weight of each gift in your hand. Ask yourself, is this the right gift? Ask yourself, who is the girl I bought this for? Where is the girl I brought this for? Ask yourself why? Then stop asking. Switch off. Your phone. After calling her. Twenty-five times. Internalise the silence from the other end of the line.

Feel sick at the sight of the flowers and the food you have no appetite for. Swallow it down. The feeling that it is so. Let it settle at the pit of your stomach. Feel it rise up and try to suffocate you.

Break things. Like pencils and newspapers. Tear them into tiny pieces with your hands. Watch them fall like snow over your blue duvet. Pick up the picture frame with the photograph of you and her at the beach last December. Smash it against the mirror. Watch the glass scatter like dust on your dressing table.

Think back to the day you brought the gifts. Convince yourself that if you had left home a little earlier; didn't stop for coffee; grabbed a takeaway at Steers instead of a sit-down at Mug 'n Bean – then maybe you'd have left the mall earlier. And if you'd left the mall earlier, you'd have called her earlier. Then maybe you'd have reached her. Tell yourself that if you'd reached her, then maybe she'd have unloaded the stones before they could weigh her down.

Believe the voice in your head that says you were the stones in her pocket. Clench your fists into your pockets. Feel them weigh you down. Become the stone. Cold and hard. Hurl yourself and everything. At everyone.

Smuggle a bottle of whiskey back into your room. Pour it into the tea your mother brings you every morning, every night. Sleep until you forget how to tell the time. Then wake up one morning when the whiskey runs out, and call Alex.

What no one knows

"The funeral is on Wednesday," Alex is saying. We're seated at the bar. The bartender asks him what he's drinking. He won't have anything; I'm onto my second Martini.

"This Wednesday? That's in two days," I say.

"Yes, well it's been almost a week..."

"Has it?"

I don't remember much after leaving Naomi's home. Except running into Alex at the door. He looked detached, untouchable, haunted. Said something about avoiding the bridge. That the search and rescue party were still at the scene with the body. My mother touched his arm and thanked him. I don't even remember if I said anything to him. That was the first time I'd seen him since I returned from Rhodes. Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe I dreamt it. I don't know what's true and what's not.

"Were you at the house that evening?" I ask.

"Yes, I passed you and your mom on your way out, don't you remember?"

"Yeah. So it was you."

"I'd just come from the scene."

"So you were there. When they retrieved her body?"

"Yes. I met Estelle and Matt there. She phoned me on the way there as soon as she found out. I guess, after all I was...you know..."

"Her boyfriend? Yeah, I know, Alex."

He gives me a puzzled look.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to sound...uh, like that."

"Don't mention it. How have you been?" he asks.

"How do you think? I'm sorry, I...honestly, I don't know...you?"

"Pretty much the same," a very faint, tired smile forms at the corners of his mouth, he shrugs.

"Something tells me that's the closest to a smile you've managed in a while."

"And something tells me these tears are the first ones you've allowed yourself to cry," Alex hands me a napkin.

"Caught out." I dab my eyes ceremoniously.

"I can't believe this is the first time I've seen you since I got back."

"Well, second. Although the first was rather brief. And awful. These circumstances aren't much better."

"I know. I'm sorry, I didn't even ask how your exams went?"

"Does it even matter now? Like there's no point even."

"I know. Have you spoken to the rest of the gang lately?"

"Melika sent flowers, but I've barely left my room or looked at my phone..."

"Well, I'm glad you texted me. I was worried about you. Melika figured you just needed some space, you know, to uhm..."

"I hate that phrase...come to terms with what happened? That's what you were going to say right?"

"Yeah, I hate it too."

"Alex?" He looks at me.

“Somebody pushed her. You believe that, right? That the only explanation was that she was pushed, or that she tripped...or fell...or something...right?”

“Charlie, I want to believe that, so badly. But you know that’s not what happened. We’ve just got to accept this. Try to understand it.”

“How do you know?”

“Someone saw her, Charls.”

“Saw her...?”

“Jump, Charlie. She jumped.”

“No. She would never...”

“Yes, but she did,” he sighs.

“But why, what could have possibly made her?”

“That’s what no one knows.”

Forever

I leave the funeral early. No sooner have I entered my front door when I'm overpowered by a green feeling in my stomach, propelling me towards the bathroom. A demon has taken over me. I jerk uncontrollably, cough and spit my insides out onto the wall. Dribbles of butter and coffee coloured slime slide down the wall into the bathtub. Blobs land on the tap handles, the soap dish, shampoo, shaver...my knees hit the floor with a thump and my elbows hook over the bathtub ledge, stabilising me.

I stare at the vomit. Consumed by what I have consumed.

Tiny blobs of green must be the spinach from the quiche. Bits of tomato skin from the sandwich. Floating on top of mucus laden coffee. A clear-cut crime scene, all evidence exposed except the cause. The motive is always unclear.

No one would believe me if I told them I have a chronic fear of throwing up, given the amount of times I actually do. But it's different when I'm sober.

I'm not drunk, am I sick? Was there something wrong with the quiche? Maybe the milk in the coffee was off.

You can't trust funeral food that's been standing out for the duration of the service, diligently waiting to comfort the teary-eyed mourners when they retreat back into the lonesome daylight.

You can't trust funeral goers who send flowers and cards that read shit like, "I'm here for you, no matter what; whatever you need". Who want to hug you and kiss you and cry all over you and tell you how sorry they are for your loss.

You can't even trust the source of your damned loss: She used to say, "I'll always be there for you". Used to sign all her cards and letters "Best Friends Forever".

Now you can't even trust 'Forever' because it's supposed to mean infinity, but when did infinity become past tense?

Maybe it's words like "she was"; "she had"; "will always be remembered" that made my stomach turn so violently.

Maybe it's the mental energy of trying to keep correcting each faux pas in every second speech with "she is" and "she has" and "she will always be" that weakened my gut so I'm not strong enough to swallow this shit back down.

She will always be. I spit into the sordid stinking slime.

Life rafts

Everyone wants me to just accept the most unreasonable, unacceptable fact I've ever been presented with. But I can't believe it, I can't get my head around it. I'm suffocating. Trapped under water. I'm waiting for Naomi to pull me up to the surface again; to tell me it's all a misunderstanding, a cruel prank, someone else; not her.

I was the more suitable candidate anyway. The unstable one. She had her whole life planned out. She had a purpose. I, on the other hand, feel like I'm forever stumbling through the dark. Suppressing, concealing, trying to convince everyone I'm the light and breezy golden girl they love me to be.

I mean, the only reason I decided to go away for varsity was to escape the truth. I'm in love with Alex. There, I said it. All the times I imagined telling her; standing in front of the mirror rehearsing my speech, I knew deep down, I'd take this secret to the grave. I just didn't ever anticipate it being hers. Told myself it'd be easier, for everyone's sake, to be a friend from a distance. So I left.

I remember her interrogating me about defaulting on my plans at the last minute.

"What happened to taking a year off to focus on your music? How many strings did your father have to pull to get you in so last minute? And why so far away? Can't you study here? If this is about wanting the whole 'university experience', I mean, haven't you been doing that already, all throughout high school?"

"I just feel like I need to go away to find myself...I've lived here my whole life. Attended the same schools...same friends...same people..."

"But do I have to lose you, in order for you to find yourself? Please don't go, I need you more than you know."

Those words ring through my head on repeat. Truth is, if I really thought she truly did need me, I'd never have left. But I've always been the one who needs something from everyone. Naomi was my constant, the strong and sturdy pillar I clung to.

To pull me back to the surface when I was drowning underneath the shadows of my own making. She's one of the only people who've ever made me feel like perhaps I'm not a lost cause; that I'm not beyond saving, even if it is over and over and over again.

Perhaps that was part of the problem. Maybe there was only room for one on the lifeboat. Did she fall off trying to make room for me?

What will Charlie do next? – A list made by her friends

How will Charlie most likely respond to the death of her best friend?

- A.) Become an alcoholic (worse than she already is)?
- B.) Go totally off the rails and (hopefully eventually) get to rehab?
- C.) Throw her phone away/Run away/ Shut everyone who cares about her out?
- D.) Go into denial mode (which also entails copious unsafe amounts of alcohol to numb pain which could potentially lead to a life-threatening situation)?
- E.) All (or most) of the above?

Answers (The suspected outcomes):

Rory: A

Melissa: C

Alex: E

The girl outside my window

Alex

When she alighted at my bedroom window in the middle of the night, I was startled to say the least – surprised, in an unsurprising way – but still slightly concerned. We had all been holding our breath, unsure of how Charlie was going to respond to the news.

I didn't expect this though. To be awoken from my sleep to the faint sound of stones lightly tapping my window. That same rhythm triggers childhood memories of neighbourhood kids' secret signals. The "Ta-ta-ta Ta-ta Ta" - scratching sound of stone tapping on glass.

2pm on a December afternoon, the summer of 2010. I'd been lying on my bed listening to The Script's new album, Science and Faith. Headphones on, the world fades into oblivion. The vibration of the glass shattering shook me from my comatose. Through the spider web cracks I could just make out Naomi's shocked face, hands covering her mouth below two bright hazel eyes, urgent with excitement and shame.

"What a stupid thing to do, I didn't think....Of course I'll pay for it, I just hope your parents won't be too mad."

"Don't worry about it, seriously. I'll take care of it." I'd lie and say it was me with my cricket bat, I'd dip into my savings. "What's up?"

"It's Charlie, she made it to the finals of the battle of the bands! We're going for milkshakes to celebrate. You coming?"

Those days Charlie actually sang and played the guitar and busked bashfully at flea markets on weekends. Those days we were fourteen, fearless and full of dreams for our intricately planned out futures. None of those plans involved drinking ourselves into oblivion, dropping out of university, or dying.

"Give me five minutes, I'll be right there."

AALLEEXXX!!!

Faint hisses sounding out my name lure me to the window. As I open it, a flying stone hits the window pane, ricochets back in the same direction.

"Hey! That nearly hit me!" I hear a familiar voice, followed by a rustle in the bush where the stone must have landed.

"Charlie, are you drunk?" In the dim light I can just make out her figure crouched behind a bush. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Alex, I need you to help me get into Naomi's room."

"Naomi's bedroom?" I check my watch. "At 1am? You're drunk, Charlie. The only place I'm taking you is home."

She jumps onto the rock directly below my window and grabs onto my window bars. In the reflection of my bedside lamp I can just make out a blonde ball of knotted waves underneath a grey hoodie. She's wearing black slacks and no make-up. It looks as if she's just jumped out of bed.

"Alex, no. I'm not drunk, I promise." The earnestness with which she speaks blows warm air onto my face. There's no alcohol on her breath.

"Shh! Whisper, will you!" Her arms climb higher up the burglar bars. We're eye level now. Her eyes are ice blue, the colour they always look when she's been crying or sleeping for too long.

"What's going on, Charlotte? Talk to me," I yawn and I glance back at my bed. Half my comforter is lying on the floor. She clings onto the window bars like she's hanging on for dear life. As if there isn't a rock underneath her feet.

"I need to get into Naomi's room with no one else seeing me, or knowing. So I figured, you know, best to go at night...and well, you know the place inside out just as well as I do. I just need a bit of hoisting... through the window....and a look out. You know where all the motion sensor spotlights are and..."

"Are you out of your mind?" My voice burns from the strain of shouting in a whisper. I take a breath and look around, not wanting anyone to wake up. Apart from the one working street light two houses down, and the lamps on my gate post, the rest of the street is black. "Back up a bit, a lot... why the hell do you need to get into her room?"

She sighs. "Estelle invited me to tea today. I almost never went. I really wasn't up to going. But then my mom was all like, you can't avoid them forever and all that. So I went..." Her fingers are peeling pieces of chipped white paint off the burglar bars as she speaks. I am watching the white flecks collect like snow on the inside of my window sill. "And it was kind of nice, except it was so weird. To be sitting in the lounge with her room just a few metres away; I kept thinking, Naomi is just in the other room, you know...listening to music and journaling, or reading. I kept looking towards her room, yearning, longing... just to go in, and say hi..." her voice goes high pitched and shaky.

She pauses to take a breath, then continues. "Like, you know, when we're going somewhere, and you come to fetch her...you wait in the lounge, make small talk with Estelle or John or Matthew, knowing any second she's going to burst through the passage with that bright red leather satchel and quirky leggings or some literary reference on her T-Shirt..."

Her voice quivers. She draws another deep breath. Leans her head into the window. Her hair touches my hand. I put my hand on her arm. Nod. She doesn't see my nod, but I hear a sob escape from her entangled hair. She moves her head as my hand retreats.

"Char, I know how you feel. I feel the same way when I visit the Parkers. I know you think I'm holding up fine and it's so easy for me to just pick up the pieces and carry on. But you don't know that inside it hurts like hell. But the Parkers are basically extended family, and I know Estelle is like a second mother to you. How about you go visit Estelle tomorrow. Ask her if you can sit in Naomi's room. It might be comforting. Maybe Estelle can join you, and you guys can talk about Naomi. Share your memories and such?"

She laughs. "Oh yeah, cause that's what you and Matt and Rory do hey? Sit around all day and talk about feelings. Really? Everyone wants me to open up and talk. Don't you know? If you want me to talk, take me to a bloody bar and get me drunk!"

"When did you get so messed up?"

"Always have been, always will be." She drops one arm from the burglar bar and leans back into the midnight air, swaying, pointing her free finger at me: "And don't you forget the part you played in fuelling the fire!"

She pulls herself back up to the window and then drops the other hand again, buoying herself like a carousel horse at a fun fair. "Before Naomi left you a changed man, you were my ride or die partner in crime." Her face is at the window again. There's a bitterness in her voice as she spits the last sentence out.

"She changed you too, don't deny it."

"Yeah, she dribbled gold everywhere she went and then she left and it all turned to ash." Another flick of paint.

"That's why I need to get into her room."

In the moonlight her eyes glisten like dewdrops on roses after a storm. Her eyelashes are specks of dandelion dust ready to blow away at the slightest flutter. I hesitate a moment and wait for the dust to settle.

"Please, Charlie, not this, not now..." I rake my fingers through my hair, trying to think up a way to stop her.

"I need to get her diaries, Alex!" Her face falls into the diamond shape of the burglar bars. It makes swollen ripples on her forehead and cheeks. "I just know there's something in there." She starts to resemble a mad woman with her wild hair and deformed face dangling from my window.

"Her diaries? Is this what this breaking and entering is about? Diaries? What are you hoping to find?"

"The reason she killed herself, Alex. It's in there. It's somewhere. It has to be. She was a writer. Writers write – they strive to immortalise themselves through their words – They write about their feelings. No, they write to discover their depths – her exact words – while the rest of us just drink to forget we have any."

"Wow. Okay..."

I stare at her, then past her, at the garden, the gate, the lamp post, the street. In the distance, the white noise of trucks break the suburban silence as they struggle up the N3. If you close your eyes and imagine hard enough, the highway traffic sounds like waves crashing onto the shore.

"Why don't you just ask Estelle if you can borrow her diaries?"

"Yeah, that sounds like the practical thing to do," she tilts her face into a frown. "Damn you, Alex, when did you become so practical? We used to do this sort of thing all the time when we were kids."

"We're not kids anymore."

"So what do adults do? Jump into rivers?"

"No, actually kids do that too...I guess they're just too light to sink..." I stare at the moon. There is no longer a man inside.

We used to camp out under the starlit sky, searching for the face of the man who lived inside the moon. We all gave him names and a backstory as to how he got there, trapped inside of all that cheese.

Charlie: Why can't he just eat himself free?

Naomi: Because it's not cheese, Charls. The moon is not made of cheese.

Jordan: Yeah the moon is made up of oxygen, silicon, aluminium, calcium, magnesium, iron, and titanium.

Naomi: And even if Jeremy did manage to escape, gravity would just pull him down. He'd fall and die from lack of oxygen before he even hits the ground. His freedom would kind of be a death sentence.

Alex: Best not to eat the cheese then, Charlie.

"Hey Char, remember the man in the moon?"

"Remember? He's still there isn't he?" the corners of her mouth lift up into a cheeky smile.

"Do you remember we all made up stories about how he got in there?"

"Yes, I do."

"Remind me, what was yours?"

"Help me find her diaries first."

"First tell me, then maybe I'll help you."

She rolls her eyes. "He wished to become all knowing. To see and know everything. So his wish was granted, and he got sucked into the centre of the moon. Now he sees everything and knows everyone's deepest, darkest secrets, but he can do nothing with it. He's sentenced to

knowledge and loneliness...a lifetime of alienation. There.” More flecks of white paint fall. “Now will you help me?”

“Hmm. Quite deep for a seven...or how old were we?”

“Young enough to believe the moon was made of cheese,” she laughs.

“Why don’t you take a page out of your own story – that sometimes it doesn’t benefit us to know everything. You’re so hell bent on finding out the “truth” about Naomi. Digging in diaries – even obtaining them criminally. What’s it going to help? Nothing is going to bring her back, Charlie.”

She lifts her eyebrow at me, sighs. “Maybe I’m a sucker for punishing myself,” she looks at me.

“You mean to tell me you don’t have even the slightest desire to know what’s in those diary entries? Her last written words?”

“I didn’t know she even kept a diary. And I read her last written words, Charlie. In her suicide note, addressed to all of us,” I stare at her.

“Yeah she didn’t even give us each a personal goodbye, I feel cheated,” she smirks and looks away. More paint chips land inside my window. “I’m not concerned with what she wrote for others. When you write to people you tell them what they want to hear. I’m more interested in what she told herself.”

“Isn’t that snooping?”

“If she didn’t want us to go through her stuff, she shouldn’t have given us a reason too. She should never have jumped.”

Have you seen Charlie?

Alex

I never heard back from Charlie. I'd messaged her a few days later. No response. I assumed she'd dropped the idea.

Then her mother phoned me this morning asking if I'd heard from her daughter. I didn't know what to think, or say. The question usually started and ended with Naomi. But since Naomi's death, there's a chord missing, a string has snapped. No reception on the GPS that always used to bring us together.

"She left her phone here, so I have no way of reaching her," there was an urgency in her voice.

"Naomi usually always knew," I swallowed. "And to my knowledge, she hasn't really spoken to Melika or Rory in a while. But I'll check with them in case."

"Will you, please? Estelle said Charlie popped by last Wednesday. She hasn't seen her since."

So she *had* gone to see Estelle. On Wednesday...I did the math: Charlie had come to me last Monday. Today is a week later. Her mother had been out of town, only got back yesterday.

"I was a bit apprehensive to leave Charlie alone, but she was adamant I go; said she needed some time alone, and she did seem to be doing, well uh, better. But when she wasn't home when I got back...and she never came home last night...you know Alex, I won't lie, I'm getting worried."

I took a breath. "There's one other place she might have gone..."

It's an icy July afternoon. I can feel the wind beat against my car. I feel like a sheet of metal being tossed about by the wind. To and fro. I drive the familiar route; over the bridge, turn onto the main street, pass the forest on the left that today looks like eerie shadows against the veil of mist. I clutch the steering wheel tightly around each sharp corner. Until, around the bend, behind the mist, I can just make out colourful flashing lights spelling out T.R.I.B.E.

"Good game yesterday."

"Ja, bru."

The sound of hands smacking, girls giggling. The beer tap gurgles. Glass on wood. "Here you go."

'Beer and Burrito Mondays' is written in colourful chalk on the black wall. Jeremy Loops explodes from the speakers. The multicoloured Mexican skull grins at me from the wall behind the bar. Tribe's all seeing eyes. Watching over the drinks. The gossip. Laughing at drunken revellers. Counting the number of Martinis delivered to the girl at table four...

"She was here Friday," Sifiso says, handing a beer to the guy next to me.

"When on Friday?"

"Afternoon."

"What was her mood? Was she drunk?"

"Don't think so. I didn't serve her. The new girl, Nadia, did. I just saw her sitting outside on the deck with this other guy. Never seen him before. They didn't stay long."

"Another guy? How'd he look?"

"Dark hair, youngish, bout her age."

"Not Rory?"

"Nah, not Rory. Dude had curly hair." He takes another order. Pours another drink. "So she's really missing? Since when?"

“Not sure...two or three days...Friday, I guess. You seem to be the last person to have seen her.”

“She gotta be around somewhere.”

“Yeah. You’ll let me know if she shows up?”

“Course, bro. Give me your digits,” Sifiso hands me a serviette and a pen.

“Thanks, my man.”

“When you find her, you’ll bring her here. Drinks on me, deal?” He winks.

“Shot bru,” I smile. He shoots me a thumbs up and dances away. “Howsit,” he says to the girl seated a few paces from me.

I look out onto the deck where Sifiso said she sat. Smoke encircles loud voices. A hand puts out a cigarette, another picks up a drink. Smoke rises from the ashtray. Charlie doesn’t smoke, does she?

“*You know Charlie...*” I spin my head in the opposite direction. Girls giggle in the corner.

“*Affair...*” The music is overpowering. I stop at a nearby table, pretending to send a text.

“*...her lecturer.*”

“Dude! Watch it!” I almost walk into someone’s Lager.

“Sorry!” I stumble, but the guy and his beer are gone.

“*...Rebecca’s sister is in her English class.*”

I reach the door.

Charlie. Friday. Another guy. English class. Lecturer. Affair.

I can’t shake this terribly deja vu feeling. I’ve driven out of this parking lot, down this winding road plenty times with Charlie: Drunk in the passenger seat, head sticking out the window, threatening to throw up; Hungover on the back seat, vowing she’ll never drink again; Tipsy Charlie arguing over road signs:

“*What’s up with the horse sign?*”

“*To watch out for buck.*”

“*Where?*”

“*The sign, Charlie.*”

“*But where’s the horses?*”

“*It’s a buck, Charlie. Duiker. They cross around here sometimes.*”

But that’s not why it’s deja vu. A month ago I received a similar phone call.

Took six hours to trace her body to the bottom of the river. Three hours to trace her last movements to that bridge. Three hours for the search and rescue divers to retrieve her drowned body. We were three hours too late.

Three hours earlier, a construction worker fixing potholes along the bridge left his jacket against the wall. The team moved away, further along the main road.

At 2.45pm all the potholes are filled. His co-workers are ready to leave. Busane Ndlovu remembers his jacket. Asks the guys to wait. Runs back. The jacket is important. It has his wife’s medicine he collected from the clinic that morning. He prays as he runs. Prays his jacket is still there. The medicine. What will he tell his wife?

He spots the blue bundle. Breathes a sigh. Sets off again. Stops in his tracks. A figure in the distance. Now he’s running, faster, past his jacket, toward the figure. A girl. Standing, looking down at the water below.

Busane told *The Village Talk* he shouted, “Haibo, Ma’am! Don’t jump!”

“*I was running, shouting, ‘Don’t! Please don’t jump! Don’t jump!’ The wind was blowing, I was scared it would blow her over before I got to her.*”

He said she looked back at him, then disappeared over the edge. Went over on cue of his “JUMP”. Said he lies awake at night fearing she never heard “PLEASE DON’T”.

“JUMP” “JUMP” “JUMP”

He fears his attempt at stopping her pushed her over.

“JUMP” “JUMP”

We all think we killed her, even the construction worker who couldn’t stop her.

“JUMP”

Three hours later, I stood with Matthew and his mother at the river bank in silence. Divers’ heads bobbing up at intervals. Cars kept flying over the bridge above us. I still expected her to arrive, walk up to us, hands over my eyes from behind, “whatcha doing here?”

Even when the divers dragged the body out of the water, I did not expect to see her face. Bruised blue, swollen, already stiffening. Her mother screamed. It had to be a mistake. It had to be someone else. Someone who just looked like her, the same height, frame, build, face, hair colour. The same birthmark by her nose and scar on her wrinkled right hand. This was all some huge mistake, I just didn’t know whose.

While we stood at the water’s bank, Charlie stood in a shop queue. While we searched for Naomi, Charlie shopped for her birthday gift. While the shop attendant wrapped Naomi’s birthday gift, the K9 rescue unit dragged Naomi’s body out of the water. I made the call. While Matthew comforted his hysterical mother, I dialled Charlie’s phone, praying she wouldn’t pick up. What was I to tell her?

I remember Charlie’s face later that day when I passed her leaving Naomi’s house with her mom. Similar to the foreign expression that came over her when I told her I’d asked Naomi to be my girlfriend, “and she said yes!” – but magnified. Like the sky when it’s still deciding whether to bring out the sun or expel heavy showers. Weather right before it’s going to snow. Neither warm or cold, you know something is brewing behind all that neutrality. Perhaps shock. Or the physical manifestation of experiencing the full spectrum of emotion possible, simultaneously – the way white is not a colour.

Everything after that is a blur. That day feels hazy, driving through heavy rain that not even your windscreen wipers on full force can clear enough to allow you to see in front of you.

I can’t do this, I can’t look for Charlie without anticipating a dead body around every corner.

Jennifer meets me at the door. Her face drops when she sees I’m alone.

“No luck?”

I shrug, and enter at her cue. I relay the information I received from Tribe. I leave out the gossip about her sleeping with her lecturer.

Jennifer bites her lip. “Friday,” she says softly, circling her lounge. She stops and looks at me, “how long does one wait before we...” she looks away, out of the window.

“Call the police?”

“Report a missing person,” she says under her breath, hands combing her hair.

“I keep...thinking of Naomi..”

“I know,” she whispers. “This is all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m sure she’s absolutely fine. She’ll show up any minute with some explanation, you know Charlie. Car broke down somewhere...or something...” The two lies I had told myself.

“There’s one person I haven’t phoned.”

“Her father?”

She bites her lip and nods slowly.

“Wait, I think I have an idea of where she may be.”

Jennifer’s eyes widen.

“Her father’s beach house in Ballito. She used to go there sometimes to be alone.”

“He lets her use it whenever she wants?”

"I don't know...but she has a key. I stayed there for a week when I dropped out of university – wasn't ready to face my parents. She said they only used the place in December or long weekends. A lot of her stuff was there."

Jennifer looks pensive, like she's trying to process all these pieces of new information. "Do you regret it? Dropping out?"

"Oh that, uhm...not really. I mean, I regret not knowing what I wanted to do with my life...Feels like I've wasted four years figuring things out."

"It's not a waste if you're figuring things out," she shoots a tired smile. "I do think Charlie is wasting her time at university though..."

"Maybe she's also still figuring things out."

"Maybe. I just...sometimes it's like I don't know my daughter at all anymore. You know how to get there? The place in Ballito?"

"Yes."

"I'll just grab my coat."

I think of Charlie flaunting her student life at Rhodes. I think Naomi felt a bit left out, watching from the sidelines. Receiving all her splashy news second hand on Facebook and Instagram.

Jennifer's footsteps grow louder. "I think, let's take a turn at the Police Station on the way..." Her voice is overpowered by an engine up the driveway.

"It's Charlie!" I shout. Jennifer is already behind me at the window.

"Oh thank God," she rushes out the door.

"Mom, you're back early. How was your trip?" Charlie is unloading luggage from the boot of her car.

"Back early? Charlie, I got back yesterday morning and I've been worried sick. We were this close to calling the police."

Charlie notices me in the doorway. "Alex," she nods. "Nice to see you again." Continues unpacking her car.

"Charlotte! That's not the way you greet your friend who spent the whole morning searching for you in every bar around town!"

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, Alex!" She stares at me.

"Were you at your father's beach house?" her mother asks.

Charlie shoots me another dirty look.

"Charlotte, you can't just up and leave for a whole weekend without telling anyone!"

"I wasn't gone for the *whole* weekend," she rolls her eyes, slams the boot. "I seriously thought you were only getting back tomorrow, okay. Sorry!" She looks at me. "Alex, a word?"

I follow her up to her room, she slams the door. Her curtains are closed, the room is dark. She flicks on the light.

"Alex, what the hell. You're telling my mom all my secrets now? What else have you told her? How much I drink? How many guys I've slept with?"

"I'm afraid I don't even know the answer to that last one."

Her ice blue stare cuts through me.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I was just really scared, Charlie. Your mom called saying you were missing. Given the last time I got a phone call like that...do you blame me?"

She looks down at her carpet. "I'm sorry... I didn't realise...I didn't mean...honestly, I thought she was only getting back tomorrow." Her voice goes high pitched. "And I didn't expect you to be here."

"Are you avoiding me?"

"It's not that."

"Where were you?"

She stares at her plushy cream carpet.

“Are you having an affair with your lecturer?”

She looks up. “Bloody small town gossip.” I can feel the force of her spit.

She moves to the window and opens the curtains. White light explodes the room. I blink my eyes to adjust. She turns around, spots her phone on the bed, picks it up, scrolls.

“Fifteen missed calls. And none from you,” she raises one eyebrow, smiles, then throws the phone down again.

Her face looks like it’s being pulled by a million external strings. A puppet controlled by a violent wind.

“You went to see Estelle last week. Did you get Naomi’s diary?”

“No.” Her lower lip falls slightly to the right as she speaks. I know she’s lying.

“Charlie. How did you get it?”

“What does it matter? You wanna go tell on me to Estelle now too?”

“No. But you’ve read it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

“Fine. I just need to know you’re okay. That you’re not going to do anything crazy. Anything you’ll...we’ll regret. Charlie, please promise?”

“Can anyone ever promise that?” She’s sobbing. I stand limp. My hand clutches the handle of her trolley bag.

She exhales. “I’m okay, okay? I was with Jordan this weekend. It was good, you know, to uh, catch up.”

“Jordan, Jordan? Hopelessly in love with you Jordan? The guy whose heart you broke?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s water under the bridge now, Alex. That was high school. He’s back in town and I’m trying to patch things up, okay.”

“Back in town. You’re the reason he left. How are you patching things up? Do you even know how to spot the scars you leave?”

“Look, Alex. I’m trying to work through a lot of shit, okay. I don’t need your judgemental tone right now. I’ll call you when I’m ready to answer all your questions!”

“You know what, Charlie, don’t bother. I care. I don’t know why, or if I even should. It doesn’t seem to help either way. It’s like you died with Naomi. Maybe even before. I don’t know. I just want to be your friend. Call me when or if you need one.”

I leave her room. I don’t look back.

So many silences

We meet at Tribe. I feel my way through the haze. Squeeze between tables, dodge walking drinks. Peer over and in between people looking for a face I hope is still familiar.

There's something comforting about the smell of smoke. Cigarette smoke. Smells like coming home. Tendrilled hands embrace me. I embrace the smell. Warm and stale and chemical. It's strange actually, how I lean towards it. The smell. How it lures me in.

Strange in the sense that I don't smoke. Except the occasional joint at a party. Stranger, because my mom doesn't smoke. Nor my dad. And yet the smell feels like home. Like this bar is home. My tribe.

I spot Sifiso at the counter. He's helping another guy. Tribe's colourful mascot smiles down on me. A friendly fly on the wall. Those lonely eyes and toothy grin that knows all my secrets.

And then the smoke lifts and there he is. Sitting outside. Half his face shaded by the umbrella. Distinct curly brown hair falling in his eyes. Same boyish grin. Jordan. He sees me and waves. I walk towards the deck.

"Missed this place?" I ask, dragging out my chair.

"Didn't really come here often enough to miss it. But I'm sure you do." He smiles.

"Don't have to anymore," I shrug deeper into the chair.

"You're not going back?"

"Back where?"

"To Rhodes. Facebook keeps me in the loop with everyone this side."

"Is that how you found out?"

"No. Actually, Alex messaged me."

"Oh. I didn't know you guys kept in touch."

"We don't, normally."

I nod. We stare at each other. Piecing one another's features together like a puzzle. A puzzle left on the shelf for years.

"So. How have you been? What are you up to these days?" I ask. I glance around, trying to catch a waiter.

"Oh, you know, taken a while to figure things out. Did three years of Classics at UKZN. Majored in Ancient Greek. Even learnt the language. Got my undergrad and wanted to continue all the way to Masters. But then reality sobered me out of my dream state. It's a dead degree. Two lecturers and one's retiring. And they weren't about to hire new blood..."

A waitress approaches our table. Her name badge reads Nadia. She must be new. "I'll have a gin and tonic, please." Jordan orders a Hunter. Nadia slips her notebook back into her apron and leaves.

"I took Classics 101. First year, I think. It was rather fascinating. The history."

"Oh yeah? Why did you stop?"

I shrug. "It just never stuck."

He laughs. "Found anything that has?"

"Not yet. It appears I lack the glue."

We both laugh.

"So what did you do next?" I ask.

Jordan is fiddling with the cork coaster on the table. "I've switched to computer programming. It's the future. The future is tech. Everything is online now. Museums, they're struggling to stay relevant in the digital age. Apps and programs are the knowledge systems of the future."

"Computers? That's an interesting switch."

"Is it? Both disciplines deal in codes. In decoding. Building puzzles. Powerful puzzles. Puzzles civilisations are built upon."

This is the Jordan I remember. The philosopher. The old man professor we all used to roll our eyes at and giggle behind his back. I knew he knew. I just convinced myself he didn't care. Then he left. And I refused to admit that I missed him.

"Well I'm trying to piece together a rather perplexing puzzle of my own right now," I say. Jordan nods. "Naomi."

My turn to nod.

"I was shocked, Charlie. To my core. I'm really so sorry."

"As were we all."

"I can't imagine how you're coping."

"I'm not," I smile and shrug. "Where is the waiter with our drinks?" I turn my head around to gain composure. "I really have missed you, you know," I say.

Because sitting across from him, for a moment I blank back to two primary school children playing chess in the library in the afternoons instead of doing homework. The ease of tension and concentration. The comfort in the silences.

"I've missed you too. From way before I left."

I nod slowly, dreading what's coming next. The drinks arrive just in time. I take a sip. Jordan waits for Nadia to leave before he continues. "You changed when we got to high school, Charlie. Started playing in another league. I couldn't compete. I was just an awkward, geeky third wheel; it was obvious you had outgrown."

That's not true, is what I want to say. But I don't because maybe it is.

"Is that why you left?"

"I got a scholarship."

"Yes. To Michaelhouse."

"Kind of scholarship you don't turn down."

"Yeah. How was boarding school?"

"Different."

"I bet." I sip my drink. "I really am sorry, you know. I was a jerk in high school. Really crumbled under pressure. It's just...all I remember...is that people started calling you my boyfriend and I just wasn't ready for that..."

"So you put up walls."

"I'm ready to take them down now. If it's not too late? I just feel like everything that's defined me up until now is slipping away from me. You and Alex are the only links to the past – the pieces of a puzzle I'm trying so hard to keep together as it unravels."

"Oh yes. I remember now. Alex." He smiles wryly.

"Jordan, there's so much water underneath that bridge."

"Yes. Enough water to drown in."

I stare at him. "I blame myself every day."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. That was terribly insensitive. I really didn't mean it," he says. Then he adds, "It's not your fault. Promise me, you won't, blame yourself?"

But it's not that simple. Because he's right in a way. The puzzle is made up of silences. Silences of so many different shapes and sizes. There's so much I left unsaid. We all left unsaid. Every unspoken word, like a drip of water that drops, PLOP, into the pond. Until it overflows into a dam, and then runs away from itself.

These silences kill. Because silence seems like a whole lot of nothing. But it's not. It's too much of something. Something bigger than us.

The sticky substance that doesn't wash out

Naomi felt faint watching the sheep get sheared. She had to leave the hall. She always felt everything so intensely.

Every year, the Royal Agricultural Society made a show of their prized enterprises. Horses. Sport. Sheep. Wool. Cows. Carcasses.

Seeing the sheep being lifted by its legs, pivoted onto its back, held down by the strong, dark hands; Out comes the blade, dirty cream fluff oozes like sea foam. Naomi couldn't stand it.

Her Dad sprang up after her. "Watch Charlie," he motioned to her brother. I sat next to Matthew, enthralled as the curly cotton wool collected like dirty candy floss in lumps on the floor. The sheep lay silent, malleable in the shearer's hand. Dumb as a mummy until the act was over. The next in line bleated loudly in the background.

Outside, afterwards, I tried to convince Naomi it wasn't scary at all. "The sheep is fine. Doesn't feel a thing. It's harmless. Just makes him lighter, so he's cooler for summer."

"What if they cut him by accident?"

"They're careful. Plus, the sheep doesn't even move!"

"I don't like it. I want to see the rabbits."

The Rabbit Hall stunk like stale fluff. That wet dog smell, mixed with sawdust and bunny poop. It was dark and hot. Rows and rows and rows of cages. Red and blue and green rosettes were displayed on some of the cages. People walked up and down the rows peering through the metal at the giant, twitching rabbits. The rabbits stared straight in front of them, trying to eat their lettuce in peace.

Some had red eyes. That freaked me out. They looked evil. Like electric toys that come alive at midnight. But mostly I felt sorry for them. Involuntary spectacles.

"How big those ears are!"

"What a fluffy tail!"

"That one is as big as a cat."

"This one came first in every category."

"Are you done, Naomi?" Can we go on the rides now?"

I stare at the photograph. It had fallen out of her diary I'd stolen.

Seconds after the camera flashed, we'd jumped on the Ferris Wheel and a gust of wind had blown pink, sticky candy floss into my hair. If the photograph had been taken a few minutes later, my beautiful yellow locks would've come looking like that sheep before it was shorn. The power of a 0.3 second frame.

I stare at two friends. Frozen in an embrace. Candy floss in hands. The total package. Pink t-shirts, plaited hair. #Twinning. "Every blonde needs her brunette". #BestiesForever.

I hate that I'm staring at photographs, holding onto the memory like it's the last thing I've got, because it is the last thing I've got. The girl with the brown plaited pigtails. What happened to her? I want to reach into the photograph. Pull her out. Jump into the picture. Stay there.

I want the candy floss to stay like that. Stiff and separate. Untouched. I want it to stay in my hand. Reverse the wind so that it doesn't fly into my face, tangle my hair. Get it off my hands. So everything I touch isn't soiled with sweet stickiness.

All I have left of her is in my head and on flimsy photo paper that can go up in flames. One, two, three. Grief stops you from counting further than three. Nothing else exists other than the three seconds, minutes, hours your mind is stuck frozen inside of. The past, present, future backed up against a wall.

This candy floss that sticks to everything I touch. I lick it off my fingers. It sticks to my throat. Pour a drink to make it stop. Wash it down with whiskey. Nothing can get rid of the after taste. Grief is the after taste. Spit it out, and stare at it; the image will infiltrate your mind.

I live inside this stone of pain and regret. Small enough to hold inside my closed hand. Big enough to control me.

To reduce me to a girl in a photograph. She used to have a best friend. They used to be inseparable.

The waves

I tell Jordan about the diaries. How I took them from Naomi's room. How I'm trying to piece the pages together. How in the right order they'll form the missing piece. How I'm sure these words hold my answer.

He asks me, what answer am I looking for? Because, he says, whatever I'm looking for is what I'm most likely to find.

I ask him what he means. Then he tells me the story about his mother's horse. Jingles. How when she had finished studying and moved to Durban, her parents got divorced and started drawing a line down the middle of all their shared belongings and family history.

I nod. Because I know about this line. How it works. The scars it leaves.

And this line continued all the way down to their family farm near Kamberg. The holiday home they would pack up, leave the big town buzz and disappear to most weekends. Where his mother and her siblings spent their days riding their horses. You know, a balanced life...

I smile. I look around my father's beach house. The pictures on the wall. The family unit I was robbed of. The woman that replaced my mother. The girl, a few years younger than me, who enjoys the life that should have been mine. Mother. Father. Daughter. The line down the middle that divides. A clean cut. A neat break that heals skew.

And so, Jordan continues, the horses became collateral. They got sold. To the family's doctor who, Jordan's mother was told, had a stud farm in Kloof where her beloved Jingles would live out the rest of his days, doted upon by the doctor's daughter and feasting upon fresh Kikuyu grass. A horse's heaven.

Jordan's mother didn't even get to say goodbye to her horse. She told her father to let her know when the horses were being fetched so she could come and say goodbye. But her father only called her afterwards to tell her the horses were at their new home. Probably to save her the pain; spare her the trouble of tears.

I think back to the day my dad left. A ten-year-old returned from school to only one car in the garage. The defining moment. No more moaning about shoes left in the lounge. Dishes not put in the sink. Messages on cell phones. Just silence and a mother's strong smile. A smile that held the house together. A stoic attempt at dispelling tears. *He said he wouldn't leave without saying goodbye.*

"Your mom must have been upset," I suggest. Jordan shrugs. She was a little upset, but she held onto the promise of her horse, happy as can be living off the kikuyu like a kid in a candy shop.

This was all way before Jordan was born. Jordan grew up on the stories of Jingles and her mother's happy memories of her happy childhood and her happy family, until it all turned sour. Jordan says he knows the stories so well – the stories are so vivid in his mind it's almost as if he had been there himself.

I have a flashback to visiting an animal farm on the Midlands Meander with Jordan, Alex and Naomi. There were Shetland ponies and Jordan kept calling the brown one Jingles even though it wasn't its name. I remember wondering why.

I ask Jordan what happened to Jingles; if his mother ever heard anything more about her horse. That's the crux of the story, Jordan says. I wait impatiently to hear where this story is going and of what significance it could possibly have to Naomi's diaries.

Years later, while in company with friends, everyone started talking about the white lies parents tell about pets dying – 'your dog is living out its days happily in the countryside chasing rabbits' – those kinds of fables. His mother totally flipped. She suddenly recognised the loophole in the narrative, how it always sounded too good to be true – unlimited kikuyu grass. She convinced herself her father had lied to her. That her horse probably ended up in a glue factory. Or horse meat.

The horse meat scandal of 2013 sent the country into a panicked frenzy. I remember it clearly. The concern and distrust of where to buy 'unadulterated' meat. Reports circulating that even Woolworths and Checkers' meat was affected. People rushing home to their freezers second

guessing the labels of their 100% beef mince or sausages. “*SA’s meat fraud and the betrayal of consumer trust*”, one headline read.

Something about the idea of horse meat just doesn’t sit well. Something so pure about a horse; so impure, the thought of eating its meat. I’ll admit, cows are cute. I get sad when I pass them on the highways slammed together at the back of a truck, assuming they’re on the way to the abattoir. And yet, I’ll drive straight to Spur and order myself a steak. Without giving it another thought. What do those vegan bashers call it? Disassociation. Cow is the animal. Beef is the food. Sheep. Mutton. By the time you get to chicken, lamb and fish you’ve already trained your brain to disassociate the image of the animal with the food on your plate. Hypocrites, the vegans call us. You pet the animal’s fur and then eat its flesh. And maybe they’re right because when I think of a horse as meat, I want to be sick. Heart sick. Horses, one could argue, are a multi-million industry; what’s cheap about their meat?

But then horses have four Achilles heels. The slightest snap of the leg and they fall down never to get up again. One bullet through the heart to put them out of misery. And then, where to with their lifeless bodies? What to do with the retired race horse? Useless and unwanted. So their weakness is exploited. And which side of the equation do I fall into? Me, eating at overpriced steak joints, disgusted by the diets of others who perhaps don’t have the luxury of choice. Perhaps hidden underneath all this exploitation is deception. It all boils down to what we’re led to believe. What truths we hold onto. About others. Concerning ourselves.

Jordan says his mother did question her brother, who oversaw the horses’ departure, but he doesn’t remember anything. He can’t recall even being there when the horses were taken away. Which sounds suspicious, Jordan agrees, but he discouraged his distraught and angry mother from thinking along those lines and pursuing that sinister possibility.

Doesn’t she have a right to know the truth? I ask. But Jordan believes, what’s the point?

His point is that for the past twenty years she’s believed a story that brought her peace and put her mind at ease. Entertaining any other thoughts would just be torturous. Going out of the way to prove her truth a lie, would be treacherous. If she did find out her horse went to glue, she’d be miserable for the rest of her life. She’d be stuck in that place, haunted by helplessness and regret over something she had no control or knowledge over. Is that worth it? He asks.

“Sometimes the truth doesn’t save you, Charlie. This is one of those impossible situations where you have to save yourself. From the relentless torture of what could have been, what should have been – As if the truth could ever change anything now?”

So Jordan thinks I should just put the diary down and walk away. Alex thought so too. But are they right? They’re men. Men compartmentalise. My mom says their brains function like a filing system with all these compartments where they dump their deepest feelings and then shut the draw. The filing system idea kind of sounds pretty neat though. And a lot cheaper than alcohol.

We sit on the balcony of my father’s beach house in Ballito. My father, who has no idea where I am. That I’m here, squatting in his picture perfect holiday home. I watch the waves collecting in their circular motions. Turning up more and more sand. Digging up stuff. Like oysters that might contain pearls. Messages in bottles from bygone times – desperate pleas tossed about lonely seas. History. A lone, displaced shoe, a cap, a boogie board. Litter. Occasionally a dead whale. Or a body.

Warning signs

I can't sleep. So I drive. It's either drink or drive. And I'm trying not to drink. I have a desperate urge to speed recklessly. Go fast round sharp corners. Don't stop for speed bumps. Maybe this will shake me up. Make me feel something. Open the window wide. Let the cold air hit my face alive. Turn up the volume until my veins vibrate.

I flinch as the lights of an oncoming car hit my eyes full force. For a minute the whole road lights up into a bright white beam, then it disappears, casting shadows as it fades. The shadows make this lonely road come alive with shapes. Bins and trees look like people, lurking around every corner.

Images fly at me like disco lights as I speed by. Tree. Stop sign. Parked car. Shop window. Street lights. Brick face of a building. A headlight. A packet in the middle of the road. I swerve. Lit up shop signs. All the familiar landmarks broken into fragments. Green SPAR logo. A word, a letter, the number 37, a flash of purple. Half a wall. Wherever the light lands on, wherever the shadows fall. Flashing robots. Brakes screech to a halt.

There's the grand yellow building on the corner of the road just after the robot – the last sharp bend before the bridge. The building that looks like a modern version of the house in *The Sound of Music*. Three storeys, with white around the windows and a stately balcony, where workers probably go take a smoke break. Because this is not a mansion; it's an office block. As if that could make workers feel more at home.

In the dark, you don't see the yellow, just the white trimmings. The leaves and branches, like spidery fingers grabbing at every surface in front of me. They move along with me. I try to get rid of them. These shapes and patterns that take on their own life. Dance in front of me. Two figures crossing the road opposite Tribe. I break before the zebra crossing. Sound bites of conversation, laughter, flutter in and out my ears.

Everything is bigger or smaller or gone altogether. Street lights don't work along this stretch. The yellow glow of Shell garage illuminates the bend like the setting sun. There, and then gone.

I pass the spot Naomi almost rolled her car on New Years Eve, 2018. It's so engraved in my memory it might as well have a tombstone cross like they put on the side of highways to mark the spot that claimed a life. Around 2am. We'd just left Alex's house. On our way back to my place. My head out the passenger window. Let the thick cold air sober me up. We're singing at the top of our lungs. Music blasting from the speakers. Way too loud. I'm high on the feeling of the fresh cold air hitting my face. And the deafening beat. My head bobs through the open window. We fly down the hill. *Yeah Baby!* I cry into the night. Two girls, fast car, smiles and laughter, singing. Carefree. It's a new year. Leave everything else behind us. In the rear view mirror. I blink away the glare from oncoming traffic. A firework frozen in the sky. Immortalized, for one instantaneous moment.

We fly around the corner, screaming HAPPY NEW YEAR to the crowd hanging outside Tribe. Through the air we're as light as speed itself. Speed, propelling us forward toward those bright lights...bigger and brighter and closer with every corner we conquer. I'm hypnotized by the kaleidoscopic circles. Suddenly we were inside the circles. Spinning. Spinning towards and away from everything. Flashing lights and shadows of black and blue and white and red. Heading over the curve, towards white palisade gates. This is it. We're heading straight for everything. Trees, gates, pavements, fences, stop signs. A roller coaster ride off the tracks. Naomi screams. Waiting for the crash. For whatever is going to break our speed. Suddenly, we're jolted forward and then back into our seats by the cutting force of our seatbelts. The car stops before it can roll.

What I remember about that night was thinking the music was dangerously loud; the car dangerously fast; the thought crossed my mind, maybe we should slow down. But I didn't do anything about it. Maybe it was the invincible streak in me that defies reason — never truly believing that anything bad is actually going to happen.

In hindsight, I can't help but think how out of character we both were. Me considering danger, but more so, her ignoring it. I was surprised to see her loosen up; so carefree. In the moment I encouraged it. It scares me, now that it's too late.

It could've all so easily ended that night. For her. For me. For both of us. But it didn't. We came out without a scratch and only one slashed tyre. So I got two more New Years Eves with her.

And then, two years later, about 500 metres away from that exact spot...I guess, the worst accidents aren't always accidents.

As much as we think we know, do we ever really know what we're doing?
I'm approaching the bridge. I should slow down now. I know I should slow down. Before I crash.

The eye of the hurricane

Alex

The way I see it I have three choices.

1.) Abandon it (her) altogether. Let my shadow following me out her room be the last she sees of me.

2.) Sit around waiting for Charlie to call, because she will. Eventually. She always does.

No, she won't beg, or apologise properly for that matter. She'll self-destruct or disappear. And somehow she'll make you feel terrible for treating her so harshly and you'll end up apologising.

3.) Cut the bullshit at the source.

Which would usually be booze, but in this case it's a brown-eyed boy who'll do anything for the blue-eyed girl of his dreams, well, childhood – which is practically the same thing.

What do they say about weak links and strength?

I need to talk to Jordan.

Squash is a game of focus. Of mental concentration. Mind over matter. Restriction and control. Focus on the ball. Where it flies and where you hit it. It's about defence and attack. Timing.

My father taught me how to play. Taught us both. In these same courts we're bouncing around now. I hear his voice echo – in every thump of the ball against the wall; ricocheting back towards the racket – philosophising about strategy and technique. Jordan backs up; his racket tip touches the ball just before it hits the ground.

The secret to squash is to figure out your opponent's strengths and weaknesses. If you know your opponent well, attack his weakness. If you don't know your opponent, play to your strength.

I know Jordan's weaknesses. On and off the court. Today, his main weakness is that he's terribly out of practise. He said so himself when I suggested a game. "Well then, it'll be the perfect time to brush up. Come on, it'll be just like old times."

And it is. Jordan and I. Back in the box. Close my eyes and we're thirteen. My father is in the next court playing against Uncle Jerry. If I just focus on every rhythmic thud of the ball against the wall; every reciprocating hit of the racket, I can keep pretending nothing's changed. That this game is all there is and time is just as it was. Not new or old. Just fixed. On right now. This back and forth. The ball against the wall. Jordan hits it back to me.

"That's 10 for me now," Jordan wheezes excitedly when I miss the ball. He's catching up. Next point decides the win.

I pick up the ball to serve. Jordan catches his breath in the corner of my eye. Play to your strength. What is my strength? That's the thing about strength. You've got to know yours.

Consistency. The ball bounces from wall to racket to wall to racket to wall to...floor. Jordan misses. I win.

"Good game," I say, catching my breath.

"And you've still got," Jordan says, smiling, as he steps out his box. "You still play with your dad regularly?"

"Occasionally. Not as often."

Jordan nods. We walk to the back of the court. Jordan picks up his water bottle. I wipe my face with my towel.

“So, have you seen Charlie lately?” I dive right in.

“Yeah, we’ve been hanging out. She told me you guys are not seeing eye to eye at the moment?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Fighting implies verbal or physical exchange. Charlie and I haven’t spoken in over two weeks. Jordan takes another swig of water from his bottle. I wait for him to finish before I continue.

“You know Charlie, she’s a loose cannonball. Just shoots off without warning. And you spend the rest of your days running after her. Trying to piece together the damage. It’s exhausting.”

“She’s just lost her best friend, Alex.”

I want to say, I’ve just lost my girlfriend. Why don’t I get a free pass? But on me, that just sounds petty.

“Come on Jordan, don’t act so naïve. You know, there’s always a chronic circumstance when it comes to Charlie – Charlie is the chronic circumstance!” I’m bouncing the squash ball around the court as I talk. The rhythm helps release my anger. Anger I didn’t realise I had until I started talking about Charlie.

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?” Jordan calls out to me from the steps.

“I think you’re too forgiving. And your forgiveness borders on weakness.”

“So you’re calling me weak now?”

My back is turned. I’m hitting the ball against the wall. I hear Jordan approaching behind me.

“All I’m saying is how many more times are you going to let Charlie throw you under the bus? Because she will, Jordan. She will...”

Jordan is alongside me at the wall. The ball bounces towards him, he hits it back. To the wall. To me. Both our eyes fixed on the ball.

“You’re back again and already melting like putty in her hand. In her wounded, fragile hand. She’s broken, Jordan. And she’ll break you, all over again – because that’s what broken people do.” Ball bounces. “Don’t fall for her fluttery-eyed apology. See right through it like she sees right through you.”

“Let’s leave high school in high school, okay?” He slams the ball against the wall. It ricochets back to me.

“Funnily enough, that’s exactly what Charlie said. The problem is Charlie is still in high school. She never really left. Never stopped playing with hearts. And you’ve always been the boy chasing the butterfly that will never land in your hand.” I let the ball drop. It bounces three times and then rolls.

Jordan doesn’t pick it up. There’s silence for a moment. Then Jordan shakes his head and looks up at me. “You’ve got it so wrong. All this time, you’ve had it so wrong.”

He shakes his head vehemently, his curls bouncing from side to side, lets out a frustrated laugh. “If Charlie’s still stuck in high school, Alex, have you ever wondered why?” Jordan pauses as if he’s reading my face and giving me a moment to catch up.

“Ever wondered why Charlie left town?”

“Yes. I did wonder about that. We all did.”

Jordan’s face, red and glowing with beads of sweat, is almost as animated in rage as Charlie’s was the last time I saw her.

“Did she, uh, tell you anything?” I ask, hesitantly.

“Dammit Alex. Wake up!” His voice wavers in exasperation as he slices his racket through the air. The ball slams into the wall and back at me. I stare at it as it glides through the air towards my face.

My squash racket flies up and a montage of memories replaces the grid. Snap shots of smiles, laughs, touches, all floating through my head like dust unsettled by sunlight. Suddenly, I read each frame with a new lens. The smiles and laughs ring differently. Facial expressions, tones of voice. Like song lyrics you’ve heard wrong your whole life, until someone points out the lyric you’re singing out loud and everyone laughs.

The ball bounces and bounces and then rolls away from us. Jordan waits a moment for me to process all this then he nods slowly. His face is solemn.

“I’m in love with Charlie and Charlie’s in love with you and you’re in love with Naomi. That’s one fucked up love triangle. Three is starting to feel pretty crowded.”

“What are you saying?” My head feels like the squash ball being bounced from wall to wall.

“I’m saying, I think it’s time we outgrew each other. For all of our sakes.” Jordan drops his racket and walks out the court.

Leaves me standing in the empty court swallowing the echo of metal hitting wood.

Checkmate

Jordan's come to say goodbye. I could see it in his eyes. Definite, with specks of uncertainty. I know those eyes all too well.

"You've been scarce," I say, back turned as I close the door behind him.

"Yeah, sorry I've been busy. Helping my sister move out. Family stuff..."

I nod. "Coffee?"

"Thanks."

I steal a glance at Jordan through the glass door of the cupboard until the kettle mists it up. He's clutching his knuckles like he does whenever he's nervous or uncomfortable. I turn around and smile. Jordan smiles back. We stand in silence listening to the kettle boil. I count three split ends on my hair before Jordan breaks the silence.

"I saw Alex the other day." The kettle clicks and rattles to a halt.

"And how is my least favourite person in the world?" I ask, pouring the coffee.

"Probably happy to know the feeling's mutual."

"Seriously? So he's still angry with me. Milk?"

"Black, one sugar please. He says that..."

"No. I don't want to know. I don't want to talk about him. I really don't care anymore."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"What, it's the truth."

"The truth is whatever you tell yourself it is."

I roll my eyes and hand him his coffee. "It's for the best." I slide open the patio door. The sun is warm today. "Want to sit out?"

Jordan follows me, then stops in the door frame. "Charlie, I need to talk to you."

I've heard those words before. Tried my best to squash them, divert the subject before he could get out his speech about his true feelings. *I'm so sorry Jordan, I'd have loved to go to the dance with you, but I'm already going with Anton.*

I focus on the uncertainty in Jordan's eyes, because that's all I know how to respond to. I can't let him leave. Not again. Not right now. He's all I've got.

"I need to tell you something too, Jordan." I feel Naomi's strong reproach – the glare I've received so many times before – this time Alex joins in. I blink them both away. "These last few weeks have made me realise how much I've missed you. Not just this week I haven't seen you, but all the years we've lost touch. Before I went and messed it all up. I miss that Charlie. The Charlie I used to be, with you. I want her back. I want you back." I reach for his hand. "I need you, here, with me. Please. You're the missing piece to the puzzle. I need you to help me find myself again."

Jordan stares at me for what feels like eternity but is only a few seconds. When he opens his mouth to say something I lean in and kiss him. Lightly, at first. Lingering until he reciprocates. Kiss him until all hesitancy is gone. Harder, until there's no trace of uncertainty on his tongue.

Until his hands are on my body. Stiff and sweaty. Slowly sliding up my shirt. Spider fingers tracing my body. A battle site of history, never conquered. I lead him on, gently. My back. My bra. My breasts. Hot breath on my neck. Like electricity. I'm static at his touch. Run my fingers up his neck, through his hair, till they're knotted in his soft curls. Breathe him in. Stay like that. Kisses hard and fast as our bodies slam together against the sliding door. Like waves against a rock. Compacted. Hold his heartbeat into my chest as if it were my own.

"Please stay," I whisper into his neck.

Third Wheels

Alex

So he stayed. So much for all that ‘we should all outgrow each other’ crap. He went straight back to her. It probably was his plan all along. Easy way to get me out of the picture. Sly! Well at least he’s thinking with his head instead of his heart. Although it’s probably his heart propelling him. Now I’m the bad guy that tried to keep them apart and they’re throwing it in my face. Flooding my Facebook and Instagram feed with pictures of picnics on the beach...all cosied up. You wouldn’t say Charlie just lost her best friend!

I pace around Melika and Rory’s apartment. They live on the third floor offering an expansive view of the city. Through the window, tiny dots of flickering lights pop up like stars marking the pockets of life around the city like a map. It’s the best place to be on New Year’s Eve. They sit in the lounge listening to me.

“But you know that’s what she does,” Melika says. “Pastes over things that are hard to deal with. Finds a distraction to avoid dealing with the truth. It’s not that she doesn’t care. It’s that she doesn’t know how to deal with her feelings.”

So she hurts others instead. And Jordan’s the perfect thing! He fell back into her life like an autumn leaf. Talk about timing. I warned him. But he was too proud to admit it. Now I guess I must just sit back and watch them both self-destruct?

“Or you could just walk away from it all. You’ve got your own heartache to work through,” Rory suggests. Melika looks at him, unsure.

But I can’t. The truth is I do care. We go too far back to just walk away. They’re two of my oldest friends and the most organic links to Naomi. I need them to heal. But they don’t seem to need me. That’s what hurts the most.

I watch Melika and Rory sitting together on the couch. A constant reminder of my throbbing loss. All the double dates we used to go on together. Now I’m the pitiful third wheel. I guess I know how Charlie felt now. The third wheel. I understand it more now. The way I avoid meeting up with Melika and Rory together as much as possible because it’s a haunting reminder of who’s not next to me.

And then Jordan goes and makes up that rubbish about Charlie having feelings for me. What’s up with that?

“I mean, it was kind of obvious,” Melika says.

“It was?”

Melika nods. “But Naomi loved you and Charlie would never come between that. Kind of noble, for her, considering how few boundaries she does have.”

Dammit! I slam my hand onto the table. A stinging pain vibrates through my fingers. Damn you, Jordan!

“Maybe it’s a good thing you know now though,” Melika says. “I mean, maybe now it will help you to better understand where Charlie is coming from. And, if you’re going to be friends going forward, this was something that would have to come to the surface, eventually...”

So Melika thinks I should tell her. Rory just shrugs and agrees. “Text her.”

“No, call her,” says Melika.

I think I’ll just text.

Charlie. Jordan told me you’re in love with me. Is that true? I’m sorry for what I said. Please can we talk? Alex.

Can your baggage carry me?

It could have all turned out so differently. Like a rain drop that ripples. Disrupts the smooth surface. The domino falls. That's what Alex's WhatsApp message was. When everything was balancing so perfectly. Fragile, but stable. The only stability I'd had in my life for longer than I can remember. Two beautiful weeks of reconciling the ebb and flow of a decade. Ocean depths of conversation instead of mindless flirtations. The freedom to speak my mind without fear of being judged or despised. True friendship, like I'd had with Naomi, except with conversation that ended in kisses. Kisses that healed my emptiness. That helped me forget about my dead best friend. Silences that felt like home. Lying beside someone who saw past my flaws. Treated them like the chip crumbs at the bottom of the packet instead of its entire contents. That's how it was with Jordan.

And just as I was, for the first time ever, daring to go deeper than a fling, Alex's WhatsApp message shattered my illusions.

In Jordan's arms it's easy to forget about Alex. I'd almost convinced myself I was cured. That was, after all, my main motivation for throwing myself into Jordan's arms. Whether or not I cared to admit it.

And yet, despite my selfish manoeuvring, I started to believe that this was how it was meant to be. Maybe I needed to go through all this with Alex to find Jordan. Maybe Jordan was supposed to rescue me from Alex all along. Maybe it wasn't a strategy. Maybe it's destiny. Maybe for the first time I was actually building instead of burning bridges.

And then Alex's WhatsApp snapped all the threads I'd sewn in one sentence. It could have turned out so differently. We could have stayed like this. Sitting on the balcony in the morning sunlight. With my guitar under my arm, serenading him with my new musical creations.

Yes, I'm writing music and singing again. The first time in six years I've picked up my guitar and dared to sing a song, let alone put my feelings to music. Jordan has always been invested in my musical dream. He'd patiently wait while I interrupted our chess game to write down a lyric that had just come to mind. He was always sharing alternative bands and new music with me. We bonded over our music and varied tastes. He was always going on about 'serious artists' and what it meant to be a serious artist. To pay attention to craft; the marriage of sound and lyrics, and not sell out to the 'mainstream pop machine'.

"Just promise you won't forget me one day when you're all important and famous."

"Of course not. You'll get a special shout out on all of my albums."

So it's no surprise that after Jordan left, I gradually lost sight of that dream. And it's no surprise that when Jordan returns, he leads me back to the very thing that makes me come alive.

I finish playing the song I've just written.

"Charlie's back." He smiles. "It's just like old times, except more mature lyrics and a stronger, deeper voice."

"Well, I have to give credit to my muse," I tease and lean into him.

"Hmm so I'm your muse now?"

"Always have been, always will." As I lean in to kiss him my cell phone resting on the table next to Jordan lights up with a beep. I'm about to ignore it, when I notice the name of the sender. Then my eye falls on certain words that make me leap from my chair.

Jordan in love with me

I reach over Jordan in a violent sweep that sends the phone sliding off the table.

"Charlie? What's wrong?"

"You told Alex?"

Jordan stares at me for a moment, blinks. He's about to say something then stops.

“Why?”

“We got into an argument...”

“About me?”

“Not everything is always about you.”

“So it was. I can’t believe it. I thought I could trust you!”

“Can I trust you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You say you’re over Alex, but one text from him sends you over the wall.”

I stare at him.

“All I’m saying is, if you’re over Alex then text him back and tell him that.” Jordan pauses, flicking a dead leaf off the table. “Otherwise, what am I even doing here?”

I look at Jordan. And then at the hydrangeas on the table my phone just slid off of creating an earthquake in my head as it fell. My mother’s recently recovered the cushions on the chairs. Blue and white chevron patterned. Half of me feels like I am over Alex, and the other half is too scared to let go. I can’t say that I’m over Alex, but I also can’t truly say that I’m not. I feel like one of those pastel drawings I used to love creating as a child. Where you cover a page in rainbow colours and then cover it in black. Then you take a sharp object and scratch away the black in shapes or words or patterns and the rainbow colours shine through. I’ve been covering everything with black. And when that phone hit the floor it scratched some of the black away. And now Jordan sits staring at me expectantly. For an answer to a question I’m drowning inside of. I’ve dragged him into the exact kaleidoscope I’m trying to carve myself out of.

“Charlie, you know when I arrived at your door that day. I was coming to tell you goodbye.”

I nod on impulse. He looks at me. “I know,” I whisper.

“So you thought of a way to make me stay. Is that it? Was this just another game to you?”

“No Jordan, it wasn’t like that. It isn’t...”

“Then what is it like, Charlie?”

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out my feelings...I’m a bit confused.”

“And I’m just another buffer between you and your feelings. Like Rhodes and your drinking binges. Dammit Charlie. In front of you, I’m a little boy all over again. Every time. And you’re dynamite in my hand. If I don’t let go, I’m going to blow up.”

And so he leaves.

Excerpts from Naomi's diary

2019

September

LinkedIn: "Congratulate Nokuthula Mkhize on starting her new position as Candidate Attorney at Truter and Brown Attorneys.

Mom: "I ran into James' mum yesterday. He's doing so well. Working for an accounting firm in Johannesburg."

Facebook: "Jessica Viljoen got engaged to Jason de Beer."

Just a bunch of washed up kids; we ran wild-eyed and hopeful into the surf, transfixed on the horizon. Now I'm drowning in all this white noise.

*

I used to believe the ocean was harmless.

How could you get lost at sea when the waves kept returning to the shore?

The world's our oyster, they told us.

But the ocean rejected us, like the whale that swallowed Jonah.

Maybe Jonah was too restless in its stomach.

Maybe it was acid reflux.

Or maybe our mission is to stay put.

To return home and watch from our screens, all the pirates conquering empires in far off lands.

*

The world's just not ready for us yet, Charlie says. But she's drunk on delusion and substances stronger than herself.

Maybe I'm not ready for this world.

Bathroom selfies

I'm aware of the girls who stumble in and out of here. They point to the mess at the far end of the bathroom as they enter or exit their stalls. They avoid the wreck hurled over the basin. They whisper words like "trashed"; "wasted".

Someone's going to tell Sifiso. Sifiso will come and drag me out of here. I remember calling an Uber. Now I don't know where my phone is. Left it in the toilet. Or at the bar. It could be in my pocket. My head is spinning. If I move I'll be sick. Again.

So I sit here. Staring into the mirror. Try to convince myself I'm still there.

Excerpts from Naomi's diary

Sometimes I wonder what everyone would do if I died. I think Charlie would kill herself. Sounds awful. But I can't think up an alternative for her.

Wouldn't even know she was doing it – She'd wind up at Tribe one night, order the bar out and call JP. Ask for the strongest shit he had. It's a miracle she hasn't. Done it.

Charlie's life is a cliff edge. The wind keeps her in the air. The same wind carries my heartbeat.

*

Sometimes it's as if I am already dead. And Charlie is already dead. Just a beautiful smile and a vivacious laugh turning heads when she walks into a room. Glowing like the Cheshire cat, with bright red lipstick and blue eyes that stare through everyone. Except me.

I see through her, but not past her. There's a big difference. When you feel like you're dead, it's the world of difference, seeing through and not past.

*

I read a book about a girl who killed herself. She's the protagonist in the book. A ghost. But she's not ghostly, in the generic sense of the word. She's real. Walks around her afterlife trying to connect with all the other spirits. She haunts her past life, dying to be seen by the living. Isn't that what we all want? To be seen.

*

Charlie's the Cheshire cat; I'm the Velveteen Rabbit. I keep waiting. To feel something real. To be felt. Waiting to be picked up and held.

To be seen behind that smoke screen of perfection. All the blue light blinds, so we use glasses to see. All the white noise deafens, so we use earphones to hear.

Just another Saturday night

We're at my house. It's a Saturday night. December holidays. We've just matriculated. Mom is away. Which means party. Which means alcohol. Which means we're pretty drunk. Well, I am. Naomi's only tipsy. Alex is somewhere, out of sight. Probably smoking a joint.

Everyone is dancing in the dim-lit lounge. I'm making my famous Long Island Ice Tea in a corner of the kitchen. Girls crowd around. Watching. Cause I put on a show. Charlie, Naomi says. It's way too much. I laugh. You're spilling, she says. I laugh harder. It's not really Long Island Ice Tea I'm making. We're buying alcohol with our allowances. Stealing from our parents' cabinets. I work with what I'm given. It's more like half vodka, half coke and a dash of gin. We're low on ice. But I've got syrup. And lemons. I grab a knife. My fingers shake. Charlie, you're going to cut yourself, Naomi says. She takes the knife and cuts the lemon. She squeezes the juice.

Pass the glass around. Everyone has a turn. Some spit. Some go "Aaah". Did you stir this, Naomi asks. The glass comes full circle. Back in my hands. I take swig. Another. Suddenly I'm sliding. Off the counter. Falling. Alex is there before I hit the ground. That's all I remember before I blackout. That's all I ever remember before I black out.

When I come round, I'm lying on my bed. Naomi is in the doorway. Alex says, come and dance. "Someone has to take care of Charlie," I hear her say.

The next morning, Naomi is still there. Holding my hair back while I hurl into the toilet. Because I can't hold myself up. Because that's what BFFs do. Because someone has to take care of Charlie.

Something stronger than me

“Charlie, you’ve got to stop coming here every night. It’s not healthy,” Sifiso tells me when I try to order another drink.

“For you or for me? Since when is it a good idea to turn business away?”

“Charlie, seriously, I’m worried about you. Where are your friends?” Sifiso asks. His mouth, which usually curls up into a permanent grin, lies closed, dead straight.

“My friends, my friends...” I sigh and wave my empty glass around. “I don’t have any.” It’s quiet here tonight. Maybe because it’s earlier than usual. I’m earlier.

Sifiso raises his eyebrow. If it was busier, by now Sifiso would be already helping another customer, but tonight he has time for me.

“The one died and the others turned their backs on me. Sifiso, you’re the only friend I’ve got. Tribe is my home. Don’t toss me to the curb!”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Don’t be dramatic,” he says. “But you’re wrong about your friends. Just lift your head up from your glass long enough, and you’ll see. You’re wrong. About a lot of things.” His head bops in rhythm with the music.

“And you’re right, because?”

“Cause I’ve known you since you were sixteen. And you share a great deal too much when you’re drunk.” He winks. “Come on, Charlie,” he hands me a glass of water. “It’s time to sober up. And I don’t just mean tonight.”

I stare at him.

“Hey, my shift ends in five. Let me stick you to a burger. What you say?”

“That’s sweet, Sifiso, but you really don’t have to. I’m sure you have better things to do in your time off.”

“Come now, it’ll be fun. Plus, aren’t I your only friend or something?” He grins.

I laugh and slide down my stool. “Okay, then.”

Losing all of my closest friends in the space of three months has made me realise that perhaps I take friendship for granted. And if that is so, then Sifiso falls into that category too. I’ve been going to Tribe since before I was legal and Sifiso’s trusting eyes have received me every time. And yet, I’ve always regarded him as part of the furniture that forms my second home. I never imagined him stepping out from behind that counter and buying me supper. A drink would have done fine, and he knew it which is probably why he didn’t offer. *It’s time to sober up. And I don’t just mean tonight.*

And yet sitting there across from him talking about everyday stuff, family, hobbies — single mother, two sisters. He works at a bar to put his sister through school and dreams of becoming a rapper. He’s got some killer beats. We used to jam together — I realised I know more about him than I’m aware of, and well, he knows pretty much my whole life history.

Sifiso is the extension of Tribe’s all seeing eyes. Perhaps Sifiso is Tribe’s eyes. The spirit that walks on the ground. So when he said I’m wrong about a lot of things, I was reminded that he knows a lot of things. *You’re wrong. About a lot of things.*

Every time I replay his words I think of Naomi. I can’t help it. Maybe it’s because I desperately want to be wrong about Naomi. What if I am wrong? What if there’s a different story? The truth. Maybe the truth isn’t what I’ve been led to believe. *You’re wrong. About a lot of things.*

Jordan tried to sway me to believe the truth was harmful. I should drop it like a hot potato and move on. But how do I move on? What do I move on from?

What if the truth really will set me free? Jordan also said the truth is whatever I choose to believe. So maybe it's time to free myself. *You're wrong. About a lot of things.*

I'm tired of stumbling around in the dark. I don't care if it kills me; I want to find out the truth. The truth about what killed her. Who killed her. What pushed her over. How she ended up at the bottom of that river.

The Questions:

- 1.) How was Naomi at work?
- 2.) What stories was she covering just before her death?
- 3.) Who was she close with at work? (Did she have another 'best friend' at work she confided in)
- 4.) What was she supposed to be doing the day she died?
- 5.) Had her mood or attitude changed over the last few weeks of her life?
- 6.) What was the last book she read?
- 7.) Who was the last known person to see her? (According to the newspaper, that was Busane Ndlovu – find him.)
- 8.) Was she drinking or taking drugs?
- 9.) Who was her last phone call to?
- 10.) Did anyone have bad blood with her?

Tinder IRL

Brad is a businessman. Well, he helps run his family's laundromat. Has hope and vision to take it over one day. Revolutionise it.

Brad buys me a drink. He doesn't ask, "Can I buy you a drink?" No, that would make him a gentleman. And then he wouldn't be buying me a drink. So he says, "another one for her" and puts the money on the counter. Like this is a poker game and he's bet's on me.

This is like Tinder but in real life. It's better than Tinder cause it cuts out all the bullshit. You can suss out intentions a lot faster. Almost instantaneously instead of wading through threads of small talk. So we cut the chase and swipe right at the bar. It always starts with a drink. We both know where it's going to end.

"What about you?" Brad asks me.

My move is to play mysterious. I can be anything I like. Anyone Brad wants. I play to the power of the drink in my hand. "I sing."

"What do you sing, Charlie?"

"Everything. Anything."

"Sing something for me."

"What do you want me to sing?" I bob my head slowly in time with the music.

"How about this song?" Dua Lipa is blasting from the stereo.

I smile. Nod. Down my drink. Wait for the sound to bolt from my chest. */If you don't wanna see me dancing with somebody / If you wanna believe that anything could stop me/*

Brad is clearly impressed. His grin and sure nodding spurs me on. Sway my arms wide, shoulders move along the wave of my voice. */Don't show up, don't come out / Don't start caring about me now / Walk away, you know how / Don't start caring about me now/*

A guy at another table is clapping. I laugh and exaggeratedly blow a kiss. Bow. Almost fall off my chair. Brad levels me.

Behind the bar, Sifiso smiles. But it's a sad smile. Nostalgic. Maybe cause he just heard me sing. Does he miss it? Like I do. It feels good. To open my mouth and thrust out a sound bigger than myself. It always feels good to feel bigger than myself. Is my voice back or is it my drink?

Maybe it's just Brad.

Excerpts from Naomi's diary

2019

October

Never thought of myself as a lighthouse – That's what I've become. A fixed mark. Waving hello and goodbye. A spotlight for others.

Today I interviewed Tebogo on publishing her debut poetry collection, at 23. She was a year below me in high school. Guess she caught up, overtook me.

*

Age is just a number when you leave school. An irrelevant number. Unless it's mentioned in relation to your accomplishments – then it's very significant. Suddenly, your name is reduced to a number of letters. Numbers start defining you everywhere you look. Number of stamps in your passport. Digits on your bank balance. Memories on Facebook. Likes on Instagram. Career moves on LinkedIn.

At just 23, Tebogo has already...

*

Why does it feel like I'm trudging forward with my hands tied behind my back? Like there's some self-sabotaging seed planted in my pancreas chewing at my ambition.

Therapy

What you thinking, he asks, lying next to me.

I'm not thinking. That's why I call him up. To not think. He knows that. So why does he push.

Nothing, I say.

You have a blank look. Like you're not really here, he says.

It's cause I'm not. I never am. My head and body have a disconnect. I'm watching from outside myself.

I feel nothing, I tell him. And it scares me sometimes.

What scares you? I feel his body start to tense beside me.

That I feel nothing.

Silence. Silence like he's trying to think of something to say. Like, what can you say? It's impossible to say anything. We've known each other since high school. But not like this.

It should have been me.

Don't say that, he says. His eyes are big and worried. Like he wants to run away.

Too late, I think.

He rolls away from me and grabs his shirt. I think you need help, Charlie, he says. I think maybe you need to see someone.

Switching seats

I'm a bit out of my depth meeting Mfundo in a tucked away coffee shop in the back nook of an overly cluttered décor and gift shop in town. I would have suggested Tribe, but it suddenly felt too exposed for the kind of investigation I'm embarking on. For one, Sifiso might get suspicious and catch on to what I'm doing and, while I'm not sure of his response, I've received enough negative criticism to take the risk.

Finishing Touches is one of those businesses in the centre of Pietermaritzburg that's converted an old Victorian home into a shop. The relics of another area. The buildings colonialism went to die in, resurrected. Perhaps not resurrected, but kept stirring the coal, keeping it from becoming ash. There is still the elect (read elite) few that cash into the economy called the past. Nostalgia has become an art form. People dress their houses with it. It's not all bad. Some of it is strikingly beautiful. Like holding history in your hands. Useless or timeless, that's what you have to sift through.

Not all of it is old though, some items are brand new, but every room of the house is filled to the brim with eclectic bric-a-brac. Lamp shades and soft furnishings, china and crystal, Italian Venetian mirrors and artwork and ceramics. Trinkets and ornaments to display on side tables, and mantle pieces in the sun-filled room with the boxed windows that overlook the road.

The perfect place to shop for a kitchen tea, or a birthday gift, or just to browse around when you have time to kill in the city. Like a museum to look and not touch, unless your wallet is heavy or your card is loaded.

I feel as uncomfortable in this shop now, as I did as a child when my mother spent what felt like hours wandering about the rooms, with me lagging behind her with my hands behind my back – following strict orders not to touch anything. I was too scared to even move, fearing I'd knock into something.

Mfundo finally walks through the door and calms my claustrophobia induced by all this clutter. We proceed through the shop, one room to another until, finally, around the corner the shop turns into a tiny 'garden café' with floral murals on the wall and a real water fountain trying to make you think you've stumbled into a secret garden. Ingrained in my memory is the mural of a ginger cat sitting in a window staring at you as you eat your food. I look for it now and am encouraged to find the cat still at its perch.

There are only four tables – that's how small it is. And every patron who claims a seat likes to think this little spot is their secret. Only to have the illusion shattered when another unsuspecting patron steps through the door. We smile at one such surprised lady as we enter. I'm relieved to notice her teapot is empty and pray she isn't going to order a refill.

It was Mfundo's idea to meet here. Which shows, as a journalist with a keen interest in business and politics, he also has a soft side. Or maybe, he too, felt a need to hide. To disappear from public scrutiny and for one sweet moment, not be seen. Maybe he just didn't want to be seen with me.

Mfundo is a colleague of Naomi's. Was. I don't know how to structure or rearrange the sentence to make it read correctly in this present context. In fact, my brain is constantly tired from trying to rearrange my language to be grammatically correct in this new, awful present tense.

Naomi used to work with Mfundo. When she was alive.

I've never been a fan of the present tense. It's easier to slip into the past or stay delusional about the future. The present is always messy and the hardest tense to write. That's what Naomi

said, at least. And I can believe it because it's even harder to live through. At times. In times. Like this.

"So, how are you doing, Charlie?" Mfundo asks as the waiter walks away with our coffee orders.

I shake and nod and shrug at the same time. "Fine."

Mfundo smiles and nods slowly. "It was such a shock, hey. We're all still grappling to come to terms with it." He stutters slightly as he talks, and pauses. "I'm uh, I'm sorry I didn't get to talk to you much at the funeral."

"No need to apologise. I barely remember that funeral. I spent half of it avoiding people actually; chances are, I was probably dodging you."

We both let out a nervous, but relieved laugh.

Mfundo shakes his head. "There's been such a grey cloud over the whole office...we're so heartbroken. I can't imagine what you're going through."

"Yeah it only ever rains hey."

I start picking off the petals from the flowers in the vase on our table. It's an absent-minded habit I have. To pick at anything that's in front of me. Tear paper and wrappers into tiny pieces. Leaves of plants. I do it without thinking, usually when I'm thinking too hard. Like now. How to broach the real subject for summoning Mfundo here.

I can see he's playing polite. Saying things he thinks he's supposed to say. Things he thinks I want to hear. These days, it's like I'm a character in a pantomime and every time I enter the room there's a chorus on the side of the stage prompting the audience to pity me. *She just lost her best friend: "Aaah"*, the audience echoes. At least they're not booing me, but sometimes, I'd rather be booed. I'd do anything to rather be booed.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you to meet me."

"I'm guessing it has something to do with closure?"

"If by closure you mean the truth, then yes."

"In this situation both seem to be very elusive..."

"I prefer the term evasive," I spit out, a bit too defensively.

Mfundo sits up and stares at me. "If you're wanting to know if she was acting weirdly at work, I'll tell you the same thing I told her mother. We didn't see anything like that coming at all. There were no signs. Well, we didn't pick up on any signs...that's what we're all battling with now. I'm sure you are too." He pauses, "Did you, uh, pick up on anything?"

"I wasn't really around a lot...but that's my own issues I need to work through, and partly why I'm here. I have a few other questions for you, if you don't mind?" I promptly take out my notebook and my pen.

Mfundo watches me with an amused expression. "Sure thing, ask away," he shifts slightly in his seat and folds his hands.

I unfold my list of questions and smooth it out on the table. "Thank you. How was Naomi at work?"

"Exactly as described in the obituary we ran. She was happy. Always positive. A ray of sunshine – I know how cliché that sounds, but that's the phrase that comes to mind. She had a can-do attitude. She never said no and nothing was ever too much for her. She was enthusiastic and always willing to help."

"Was she overworked?"

"No, I wouldn't say so. I mean, we're a pretty small newsroom, you may go as far to say short staffed, but that's just the nature of community newspapers. We make do and get the job done with a lot of team spirit. We're a close knit team."

“What stories was she covering just before her death?”

“Uhm...community stories mostly. Human interest stuff. She liked the fluff pieces. Shanta liked hard news – the murders and breaking news, the action. And political reporting is more my neck of the woods.”

Shanta Naidoo. Her byline popped up a lot, sometimes alongside Naomi’s on some features. I’d heard a lot about her, but never met her.

“And Naomi and Shanta? Were they like...close? Besties?”

“We were all super close at work. She always talked about you, her best friend.”

“Really? She talked about me. What did she say?”

“I mean... a lot...”

“Good stuff?”

“Only good stuff,” he winks.

“Don’t lie.”

“I promise. She’d talk about the things you guys did. Memories. You sing right?”

“Kind of. Used to.”

“She said you had an amazing voice. And that you’re beautiful. Her beautiful best friend, she called you. She used to talk about how you were very social and made friends easily. People were drawn to you. You were....what’s the word she used?...uhm...”

He scratches his head. “Charismatic! Yes...that you’d just walk up to people and talk to them. She used to joke that you’d have made a better journalist because you had the people skills. That you got people to open up to you, but that you never opened up to anyone else.”

“But she could write. She used to say, ‘I’m a writer, not a journalist.’”

“Yes. We all thought she was just being self-deprecating. But she was more concerned with telling stories than she was with investigating and uncovering the truth.”

I smile at the irony. That here I am, trying to uncover hers.

“Did she really say all that about me? Or are you just sugar coating? Because I can handle the truth, I promise. It’s actually what I’m here for.”

“I promise, no lies. That’s what she said.”

So that’s what Naomi thought about me. Is that truly what she thought of me? I can’t help feeling like I don’t deserve her praise.

“Come on, she must have had something bad to say about me. Moan, complain, bitch about. Tell me. I’ll believe it. I probably deserve it.”

“Well, she said you drank a lot, which was a concern for her. And that you could be a bit selfish sometimes.” He scrunches up his face. “But I mean, who isn’t?”

“She wasn’t.”

“Some say suicide is a selfish act...”

“Some do say that, yes...”

“Do you believe that?”

“I’m not sure what I believe.”

The truth is, I never used to think much about suicide except that it was sad. I used to feel remorse for the person who gave it all up. Life. I used to blink it away that they obviously weren’t thinking straight. Not in their right mind. Excusing it as that made it easy to blink it away and say, how tragic. And then Naomi jumps off a bridge and I can’t seem to find any reason to excuse it. But I still can’t bear to call her selfish. Somehow it makes me feel selfish. Like the fact that I feel lost without her is somehow my problem and not hers.

Do I feel rejected by her? Yes. I feel betrayed and abandoned and stabbed in the back, heart and side at the same time. I can’t fathom it. That she would do that. To me. To all of us. But when I

say that, I feel selfish. Because, it's still all about me; how I feel, how I'm hurt. And I have this recurring nightmare of her looking back at me just before she jumps. She shouts, "this one's for you, Charlie" and then she's gone. So maybe I am selfish and maybe it is my fault. I keep coming back to me. Did I push her over the edge?

I realise I'm tearing up the flowers again. Mfundo is watching me. "Any more questions?" he asks.

I look down at my list. I haven't covered half of the important ones yet. How could I have gotten so off track?

"Yes, just a few more. Sorry...Uhm...Had her mood changed in any way over the last few weeks leading up to her death?"

"Like I said before, we didn't notice anything different about her."

"In hindsight, looking back, do you recall any signs you may have missed?"

"I mean, now I want to go back and ask her how she was. Like, not just in passing, but be like, 'Naomi, how are you, really?' and just check in more. And be there more, you know? It gets busy. It's in and out. Chasing stories, then writing on deadline. Sometimes you just forget to look up and say hey, how's life? You know?"

I nod. I'd check in more too. If I could rewind, I'd call her every day. And respond to her emails, pronto. Not wait weeks, and start each message with, "So sorry this is late". If I could, I wouldn't wait till she's dead to find the words I should have said.

"Did she ever cover a suicide?"

"Yes. Last year. There was one at Howick Falls. We only cover suicides in public places. Shanta and her went. They had to walk down to the bottom of the falls and spent the day watching the divers search for the body. It took almost a week to retrieve the body."

"I remember that. And what was her take on it afterwards?"

"We all agreed it was a horrible thing to put your family through. Such a public end. To make your family search for you. The guy was a doctor with stage four cancer. He could have overdosed with morphine in his chair."

I pick up the vase and the limp posy and slam it down on the table. "Explain to me then, how she could go and do the exact same thing!"

Mfundo sits up startled and looks around the empty room. Even the waitress has absconded the scene. I feel water dripping off the table onto my leg. "I'm so sorry. I...I didn't mean...I don't know why I did that."

"It's okay," he says, but his eyes don't look it. They're big and more white than pupil. I try to compose myself and wipe up the water with a serviette, but I'm shaking.

"So, uhm, Naomi....uh...her last day. What was she supposed to do that day?"

"You mean at work?"

"Yes."

"I honestly don't know."

I stare at my list of questions. Trying to pick out any I've missed. I realise I haven't gone in order and this has got me off topic. I feel an increasing sense of urgency to ask the last few questions. Like Mfundo is getting over this, tired of me and my pedantic questioning. Like he's going to get up and leave any minute. Mfundo shifts in his seat.

"Did she have any enemies?" I half shout the question out and feel spit flying off my lips.

Mfundo looks startled and then laughs. "How am I supposed to know?"

"So you uh, you don't know anyone who might have had bad blood with her?"

"I can't think of anyone," he pauses, "but Charlie, can I ask you one question though?"

I nod slowly.

“Charlie, what do you actually hope to achieve with these questions?”

“I want answers.”

“What answers are you looking for?”

“The truth. The real truth.”

Mfundo shakes his head. “What if the truth is buried at the bottom of that river?”

“Then I’ll go diving.” He laughs.

“I’m serious. You think I’m crazy.”

“No, I don’t think you’re crazy. You’re as sane as anyone can be without closure. But you’ve just got to accept that suicide doesn’t offer closure. You’ve just got to learn how to get by without it.”

Impossible pillow talk

I lie there. In this guy's bed. Staring at the painting. He kisses my neck. I should not be thinking of her as his hands slide over me. But it's the painting. On the wall above me. Bold shapes and colours. Like Matisse. Her favourite artist. He stops. What's wrong? I shake my head. Nothing. That painting, I point. Oh, that. He laughs, my ex...I should take it down. What's her name? What, why? No, never mind, just reminded me of someone I used to know. Who? A friend. Where's your friend now? Dead. I'm sorry, what happened? I think I killed her.

Excerpts from Naomi's diary

At least I'm not the only one.

It's a sick kind of comfort, the false sense of security.

At least I have a stable job.

Look at Melika trying to make a name for herself in a highly competitive industry.

At least I have a degree.

Alex dropped out.

At least, I'm not starting all over again at 24.

Maybe I should be.

I shake my head at Charlie – aimlessly dancing along the waves, swept off in a current of her own choosing. No care about where it's taking her.

Am I the opposite equivalent to Charlie? She's made a home for herself out of the white washed walls of academia, not coming out any more the wiser or better informed. Others leave for seven years and return with a PhD. Charlie brings home drunken tales, a new guy, failed subjects, and flaky intentions of changing her degree next semester. *You know what, I'm thinking of switching to...Classics.*

I come home with news of the same-old-same-old. Different day, same job, more of the same kind of different news. But same house (still living at home), same town, same friends, same people.

People who believe in me and my pocketfuls of potential. But maybe my hands are stuck so deep inside my pockets I'm weighing down the wings that are supposed to make me fly.

Flying High

Hanging with the high-flyers means tearing apart philosophies on the balconies of holiday homes in Kenton. Drinking and smoking the weekend away.

I'm part of the private school crowd, now at university. But I'm not a high-flyer. I just float. Above and below every expectation. In and out of every crowd. Of every conversation.

I'm floating now. Somewhere, far out. Somewhere unknown. Above the waves. Gliding along this high quality shit, waiting for the moment I crash.

Focus on the waves. They come and go. Closer and closer like they're coming at me. I'm drowning above the foam. Then they retreat. I reach out to touch them but I can't. Something on the edge of the horizon. I want to catch it. I want to fly there and grab it in my claws.

It's Easter weekend. In the middle of term. We come here because we can't go home. Bring our readings in the pretence of finishing the essay due Wednesday. Over achievers. Not me. I don't set standards I know I won't meet. It's about self-discovery and knowing your limits. Isn't that what recreational drugs are all about?

We blow out big words that sound pretty. Petty. Clever. Pretentious. Twist our tongues around theories bigger than ourselves. Man's search for meaning.

Freedom. Lies beyond the waves. I close my eyes and pass the joint along. This circle we live inside. The cycle. One hand to another. Hand to mouth. That's how life is on the shore. High and dry.

Watching the waves. Freedom bounces above them. That elusive thing. Does it even exist? Maybe it's a whole lot of fluff. The white of clouds.

I close my eyes and I'm spinning. Voices around me fade into a distant blur muffled underneath my pounding heart. Hands touch me, *Charlie!*? I'm underwater. I can't breathe.

"I'm dying," I shout. "Can anybody hear me? Help!" I'm sweating and shaking uncontrollably.

She's greening out, someone says.

She drank too much before.

Shouldn't have had that last joint.

I feel the green inside my stomach rising. Get it out, get it out, get this feeling outside of me. I topple over and pour my insides out in the middle of the circle.

The sea goes quiet as I shake in the corner with a blanket wrapped around me. I clutch the corner like I'm holding onto life. Too shook to be embarrassed.

When I wake up the sun is red on my face through the window. It's quiet inside. My head aches. I feel light as air and empty inside. Hungry.

Outside, the sound of waves is overpowered by children's laughter. Echoes of high pitched squeals. I watch kids flying kites on the beach.

Dominoes

We fall like dominoes. Crash into each other. Bounce back like waves. Remote controlled by the DJ. Hypnotised by the flashing lights.

Dominoes need something to fall onto. So keep your body close to mine. Let the drink in my hand be the wind. Let it blow me. Towards you.

Ring-a-ring-a-rosie

We all fall down

This is where I go to forget. So all I will remember in the morning is the neon green flashes throbbing in my head. The body lying next to me.

I don't even remember your name.

Have I gone mad?

It took me a while to track down Busane. I didn't know how he looked or which construction company he worked for. All I had to go on was a name. In hindsight, I could've kicked myself for not asking Mfundo if he knew, but at the time I wasn't thinking of Busane at all. And now, after how things ended with Mfundo (he probably thinks I'm insane) I'm too embarrassed to go back and ask him. He doesn't understand. No one understands. I dare not even breathe my thoughts for fear of being institutionalised. I don't think I'm crazy. But I'm scared others might. It just takes one person to give you a label, and you're stuck with it for life. I would know. And once you've got a label, it's hard not to live up to it.

I once watched a movie about a genius mathematician that lost his mind and his daughter was worried she was starting to follow in her father's footsteps. She asks the question, "Am I going mad?" and her father says no, because when you're crazy, you don't think to ask the question. So I keep reminding myself to ask the question and that reassures me to some degree.

But it's imperative I keep my mission to myself. Although I almost slipped with Sifiso. But then he led me back to Busane, so I guess it's just as well. I'd just come from Quincy's enquiring if Naomi had gone there on the day she died. This was an important part of my investigation, tracing Naomi's foot trail from that day. She left home in the morning, usual time, but never pitched for work. Because the journalists' itineraries are always in flux and not many people were in the newsroom that morning, it took a few hours to realise she was actually MIA.

According to the coroner's report, she had died just after 2pm, a few hours before they found her body. Which means her whereabouts the whole morning are unaccounted for. I need to find out where she went before the bridge because maybe that will lead me to the truth.

The main road is long and windy with businesses, shops and offices, a school, a church, and a few houses and blocks of flats scattered in between. Old Main Pub marks the one end and Tribe marks the other. I watch cars break for speed humps, swerve for potholes. Taxis hoot, trying their luck at every passing pedestrian. Cars hoot. I'm unnerved. Every time the sound pierces me. Fear the hoots are directed at me. I'm always self conscious on the street. It feels like I'm on show. Like I'm a target. Hold my bag close to my body. Try not to make eye contact with oncoming traffic. Keep my head down. Nod small acknowledges and murmur greetings as my path crosses with other pedestrians. Stay alert. Watch the pavement – watch for uneven surfaces and broken paving. Watch for robots that aren't synchronised to accommodate pedestrians. I count my steps. Count the number of chip packets, coke cans or broken bottles that crunch under my feet. Walk around the black rubbish bags ripped open by beggars, or dogs, or monkeys. I'm not used to being a pedestrian, but today for my specific purposes, it's easier to use my feet rather than to stop and start and search for parking every twenty metres. Headphones in my ears create a barrier from the sea of flashing metal, squealing brakes, car fumes and the ghost-like breeze from every speeding car.

"Did this girl come here on Wednesday, June 6?" I walk from shop to shop, showing a picture of her to people who didn't know her too well.

It's impossible to cover every single place. So I try to think of places Naomi might have visited. The Veterinary Clinic? The One Stop Party Shop? I pass the bus stop where hawkers try to sell me sweets, chips and fruit. At the robot, Thabo holds his sign asking for work, food, or to collect the rubbish from your car for a donation. He catches my eye, I shrug apologetically. I don't have cash on me. A psychologist? Maybe. But it's not like I can just go in and ask for a squiz at the patient list.

I pass Pam Golding Properties with the pretty white gate. I wonder what the real estate market is like around here. Every now and then there's a newspaper article raising concern that the ongoing failing service delivery and ageing infrastructure is chasing investors away. Already,

having a generator is almost a prerequisite to running a business in the city, with the frequent electricity outages. And yet, it appears, every piece of open land continues to get snatched up for new developments. Office parks, shopping centres, residential estates. Where are all the people and businesses who occupy these places coming from? What do they see in this place? This city that is falling apart. The City Hall that has copper stolen from its roof. Are they trying to hold on to the last dregs of opportunity? Build up a modern empire next door to the squalor.

So many old houses bordering suburbs have been converted into businesses. So the suburbs become integrated into the town. So people who originally thought they were out of the city, are selling up and moving further out into the Midlands. Until all that green grass is gone, and then people will go further and further out, until small towns turn into big towns and there's more city than country left. It's called the Urban Sprawl. We studied it in high school geography, but I didn't take it seriously, until suddenly, I returned home and noticed my small town becoming more and more unrecognisable. The only Dischem in the city used to be a half an hour drive to the mall, now there's one ten minutes away from my house.

Solé salon? Did she kill time getting her hair done, or her nails? Hard to imagine but not impossible.

"Did you see this girl on Wednesday, June 6?"

The road winds. Cars whiz by. I spot a brown dog running on the other side of the road. He looks agitated at the traffic. I hold my breath as he crosses the road. I'm trying to decide if he looks lost, or if he's just a regular stray. He's a little on the thin side. I never know what to do. Should I call the SPCA? But he'll be gone by the time they get here. Rabies is always a risk at the front of my mind when I have an urge to help stray animals. Naomi never cared about that. She was one of those people who'd just open the car door, put the dog in the back seat and take it to the SPCA. The Vet I've just passed takes in lost dogs. Maybe there's a kind soul like Naomi who will stop and take it there.

I keep on the far left of the neatly trimmed foot path adorned with orange Aloe Vera flowers. This is the nice section of the street, where some of the businesses have taken the initiative to neaten up and beautify their corners. To attract business. To deter crime. The Hospice charity shop. Probably where all her clothes will eventually go. Did she need a lawyer? Again, it's not like I can walk in and ask. There's confidentiality clauses and all that. Then there's the shopping centre with SPAR, Woolworths, CNA? Naomi was always popping into CNA. To buy pens or notebooks or browse through magazines. What about that little boutique that sells clothes imported from China?

"Did this girl come through your store on Wednesday, June 6?"

Most places say so many people pass through on a daily basis they would not be able to trace that face back to a specific day.

I try to imagine how I would spend the last morning of my life. Maybe I'd fill my car with petrol and drive until it runs out? Drive far away, to a place no one would ever think to search for me. The smell of petrol thick in the air hits my nose as I approach the BP garage. I love the claustrophobic black scent. The way it fills my nostrils and slides down the back of my mouth as I breathe it in. Dirty, grimy and chemical, and yet, its fragrance has a freshness that jolts my senses. I wonder how much you would have to inhale before it harms your lungs. And what effect it has on the petrol attendants who work with these fumes everyday. Some people use exhaust fumes to end their life.

People hurry in and out of the express shop. The comforting whiff of a warm pie trails after a woman hurrying back to her car. I step over a puddle of black liquid. Water or oil. Oil spills have left metallic rainbow spirals on the coarse black tar. I've always been obsessed with the colours. The richest hues of emerald, purple, turquoise, aquamarine and gold. To think even this thick grime can turn into art in the right light. Takes me back to hanging around the mechanic's workshop as a child, following the rainbows while my mother waited for her car to be ready.

Some of the attendants wave to me. They know me. Some of them have been there long enough to watch me grow up. From passenger to driver's seat. They know Naomi too. They smile and nod and shake their heads at her picture. But none of them can remember the last time they saw her. Besides, she hadn't taken her car that morning. Maybe she stopped for coffee.

At Quincy's I wait almost half an hour to speak to every waitress and the manager. They know Naomi and I well. We were regular patrons. Quincy's was our spot. We even spent afternoons studying for our matric exams there. But no one at Quincy's can recall seeing her that day. "We would definitely remember seeing her on hearing the news. The last time I remember seeing her was with you, a few days before." That was when I returned from Rhodes. I dropped my bags at home and went straight to meet her there after work.

I start to feel stupid; worse than that, I start to feel like people think I'm crazy so I call off my quest at Tribe.

"Hey Sifiso," his back is turned as I flop onto a stool at the empty bar.

"Char – don't even think about me serving you alcohol this early." He looks at the clock. "It's barely 12!"

"And yet, you're serving that guy beer?"

"You're special," he winks. His dredz are wild as his head bobs in rhythm with the stereo. I raise my eyes and stare at him.

"Someone's got to take care of you. And I, being your only friend and all..." We both laugh.

"Fine, in that case, one virgin Bloody Mary, thank you."

He laughs. "What are you doing here so early? We've barely been open an hour."

"I've walked my feet flat and ended up here."

"You always end up here."

"Sometimes I start off here."

"Fair enough. So what have you been up to with all this walking?"

"You really don't want to know."

"Now I really do." He does his cool bottle spin while he pours a cocktail.

I glance around. "Who're you trying to impress?"

"No one. Just doing my thing." He gives a cheeky smile. "Now tell me, what are you up to?"

"Trying to find out where Naomi went. On that day."

Sifiso stops pouring and stares at me. For a minute I think he's going to drop the bottle in his hand.

"Did she come here, Sifiso? At all that day? Before that day? Have you seen her a lot recently...before, I mean?"

Sifiso's eyes soften. He looks down for a moment. "Charlie, she didn't come here. I've only ever seen her here with you...or when she was looking for you. She never came here that day."

I nod. "I thought not. I just want to know...where...who...who was the last person to speak to her?...that kind of thing, you know?"

Sifiso looks at me and nods slowly. He hands a girl her drink. "You know who the last person who saw her was. You know who you have to speak to, Charlie."

Sifiso pulls a newspaper out from below the counter. I stare at the cover. The same picture they used for the funeral.

"You kept the paper?" I ask, surprised.

Sifiso shrugs. He points to a block quote in the story. "Here's your guy."

A construction worker says he struggles to sleep at night after watching a young girl jump to her death off Groenekloof bridge.

Despite multiple attempts to stop the girl, who has been identified as local journalist Naomi Parker, Busane Ndlovu, who had been filling potholes on the bridge, said Parker looked back at him while he shouted for her to stop, and then jumped off the bridge into the water.

Parker's lifeless body was recovered three hours later on Wednesday after a search and rescue team was dispatched to search for her.

I finally track down Busane. Get hold of the construction company he worked for. The woman on the other end eventually divulges that the team will be filling potholes along Old Main Road this afternoon.

Old Main Road is about 5km of winding, twisting motion-sickness-wrenching bends that leads into Pietermaritzburg CBD. All downhill or uphill depending on which direction you're travelling in. The road cuts through a steep hill. To your right and above, there's a steep cliff face interspersed with rock formations and bushy vegetation. And the higher you climb, you'll eventually reach a blue gum forest plantation. On the left side of the road are residential properties, which have the view of another blue gum forest below, bordering the N3 highway which runs parallel to Old Main Road.

I park my car near the top of the road on the least inconspicuous corner, where the road plateaus a bit before the last final snaking climb. I walk down the road towards where I have just driven past a group of workers. They're wearing orange reflective gear and chattering in isiZulu as they work. Stationed a bit above them is a lady with a flag and a Stop/Go sign board orchestrating the traffic flow so the workers can work without hassle. Right now a steady stream of backlogged traffic is making its way up the hill. In the next five minutes, a steady stream of backlogged traffic will be coming down the hill, in the exact same lane. That's how it works. I'm glad I'm not in the queue. I reach the first group of guys with spades and shovels smoothing over liquid tar. There's four of them filling two large potholes.

I stare at the dark circle, a perfect patchwork. I wonder how long it will last before the patch wears away. Everyone says that due to decades of lack of maintenance, the roads need to be replaced altogether; that filling the potholes is always just a temporary fix. I watch the workers hard at work. Occasionally mumbling something to each other in the language I don't understand. At least, this way, I think, creates employment. Another major issue in this country. And in my life.

Charlie, when are you going to start thinking about your future? When are you going to graduate and get a real job? You can't stay at home forever. Look at your friends, they're all focusing on their futures. What's your plan? You can't stay at university forever either. You need to do something with your life.

"Hello," I walk up to the group of workers. They're so busy with their mechanical movements and chatter they don't seem to notice me.

"Hi, I'm looking for Busane. Busane Ndlovu? Is he here?"

The guys stare at me and then talk amongst themselves in isiZulu, I just catch the name Busa. One of the guys points further down the road.

"He's further along?"

They nod.

I keep close to the far left side of the road, trying to stay out of their way and avoid the oncoming traffic, which is now going down the hill. Around the corner I spot two workers. They've just finished covering a pothole and appear to be packing up.

"Busane?" I call, almost tripping over a stone.

One of the guys turns around. He's wearing a blue jacket. I quicken my pace, trying to watch where I step on the uneven ground while keeping my eyes fixed on the man in blue. The other guy turns to look at me, and then turns to his friend and says something to him. They both walk towards me.

"Hi, uh, is one of you, uh, Bu-sane?" I stutter as I get close to them.

The other guy looks at me hesitantly with a straight face and impatient eyes. I try to catch my breath as I reach them. The man in blue takes a step forward, his friend stays put and looks at him, unsure.

“Yes ma’am, I’m Busane,” he responds with a question mark in his voice. Busane turns to his friend and says something to him in isiZulu, pointing down the road with his hand. His friend says something back, nods and walks away, in the direction Busane just pointed.

I watch him leave, suddenly not sure what to say. How to explain to this man why I’m here. Why I’ve spent a week phoning every road construction company in town trying to locate him. How I scoured newspaper articles online and finally found a story naming the company the municipality contracted to (finally) fix the city’s potholes. Now why did I do that? Go to all this trouble? What do I expect this man to tell me?

“Hi Busane. How are you?”

“Okay...and you?” he asks, slowly and unsure. He has pronounced wrinkles around his mouth and forehead when he talks. He looks around late 30s, early 40s maybe.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“You are looking for me?” he asks. I can hear the confusion in his voice.

“Yes, I um, I’m here about the newspaper article...”

Busane frowns at me as if he’s racking his brain to figure out what I’m talking about. Behind us, a truck struggles up the hill, leaving a long line of cars on its tail.

“The newspaper about the girl...who jumped off the bridge.” I take out the newspaper article and show it to him. I point to the picture of Naomi.

A distressed expression comes across his face. He stares at the paper and then looks at me like I’ve brought up an unpleasant memory, which I have.

“I’m the girl, Naomi’s, I’m her best friend. I’m Charlie, hi.”

Busane looks relieved and disturbed at the same time. He looks at me and nods, then shakes his head slowly.

“Haibo ma’am,” he moves his arms as if he wants to hug me, but resists the urge. “I’m so sorry.”

“You said you saw her? On the bridge?”

Busane nods. “I tried to call her,” he uses his hands to show his desperation, “I shouted...” his hands come up to his jaw and stay there shaking. “Ey ma’am, I can’t sleep at night now.”

“Yes. You said that, for the newspaper. Busane, do you mind if I ask you a few more questions? Seeing, you were uh, the last person to see her?”

Busane nods slowly and turns his head as if he’s checking if anyone else is around. “I’m so sorry for your friend, ma’am. So terrible.”

“Thank you.” I take my notebook out of my bag. “Uhm, was there anyone else on the bridge?”

“No ma’am, just me.”

“Just you.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“So you were the only person to see what happened?”

“I think so ma’am. I tried to call. I was running. I shouted ‘Stop!’ But she didn’t...she didn’t...”

“Yes you said,” I say.

Busane carries on as if he didn’t hear me. He motions with his hands again. “She just...” Busane’s voice shakes. He breathes a deep, distressed sigh and shakes his head low. “So terrible...I’m...”

“And why should I believe you?” I didn’t plan to say this. My mouth just spat it out before I could swallow it back.

Busane lifts his head and stares at me with big eyes. “What you said?”

I'm still trying to figure out what I actually said. Why I actually said it. That's if I did say the words my head heard my mouth spit out. Maybe I didn't say it. But then I look at Busane's shocked, speechless, scared expression and I know that I did.

I did what? I say and laugh and scrunch my face into my pillow when people tell me the drunken shit I did or said. This is classic drunk Charlie, but on a darker level; but I'm not drunk. I mean sure, I've thought about it. Countless times. Did I come here to investigate if my theory could have been true? Yes. But did I come here to accuse him face to face? Was that ever the plan? I don't think so. It's different in your head. Even when you're accusing someone in your head, it's easy and comfortable to believe they're guilty. But the minute you say it out loud suddenly the air you breathe lacks evidence.

"Haibo, but ma'am, you can't say that." His voice is a whisper, pleading, exasperated. I feel terrible and guilty, and deep down I know this is wrong of me on so many levels but I continue anyway.

"Why not? Why can't I say that? How do I know you're telling the truth? No one knows if you're telling the truth. No one was there to corroborate your story! You could have pushed her over and made this pitiful story up! Who knows? Why should we believe you? Give me one good reason!" I'm shouting, I realise. Why do I keep slipping off script.

Busane looks around, panicked, takes a step back. "This is not fair! Why would I push her? I never saw her before. I'm no murderer, I'm no thief..." he points to the newspaper I'm clutching, "Look here, these people, they ask me questions. I tell them truth. They don't tell me I'm lying. They write down what I say and put it in the paper. If they believe me, why don't you?"

"Because I'm here to find out the truth, not sell papers!"

"Hawu ma'am, please. I have no reason to push her. I didn't! She jumped. She jumped! I'm telling you truth, ma'am, she jumped! Please, how can you say this about me? I promise you... I saw her... You got to believe me, ma'am, I go to sleep at night and I see her face! I hug my daughter now, all the time! I'm scared for her now!"

And then I break down. My tears blur his face of all features so all I see are too kind eyes. Desperate, hurt eyes. Eyes of a father who hugs his daughter every night to try and keep her there. In his embrace. The eyes of a man who watched a girl jump off a bridge and is no longer in control.

"I'm so sorry, Busane. I believe you. It's all my fault. I came looking for the truth and I found it. I killed my best friend and I'm trying to blame you!"

Busane touches my arm. He's about to say ma'am, but I stop him.

"It's Charlie," I whisper.

"Charlie," he says, "If you believe me that I was there. If you believe my story, that what I say is true. Then you believe me, Charlie. You did not kill your friend. Cause I only saw one girl there. And she had brown hair, not like you."

I let out a half-laugh half-sob.

Busane continues, "When I saw her early that morning..."

"Wait," I interrupt him and rub my eyes. "You saw her before?"

"Yes, when we worked on the bridge. She walked past on the other side. She waved to us as she passed. She had a book in her hand. Later, we moved on. I passed her at the end of the bridge, she was by the wall writing in the book. She remind me of my daughter. My daughter always writing too."

"She was writing? How long?"

"Couple of hours, ungasi," he lifts his hands. "I only saw her when we leaving the bridge."

"What happened to the book?"

"When I came back later again...cause I left my jacket..."

I nod. I remember the story in the paper. The medicine for his wife. What medicine? Is she sick? Suddenly I want to know all about Busane. His family. His daughter, who writes. His daughter he hugs every night. His daughter who Naomi reminds him of.

Busane continues, "I saw her there. Standing up," he motions the height with hands, "she had the notebook in her hand..."

"She had the notebook in her hand?" I almost shout.

Busane nods. "I started calling..."

I can see he is starting to get emotional rehashing the events yet again. For the newspapers, how many times? In his dreams, every night. And now for me. For my selfish pursuit of a truth that has never been in my reach.

"And then she jumped." I cut him short.

"Yes."

"With the notebook in her hand?"

"Yes."

"Why did the newspapers not say anything?"

"I don't remember if I told them. But I told her mother."

"You met Estelle?"

"I met her, yes. I stayed on the bridge and watched while the swimmers...they uh..."

"You saw them bring her up?"

Busane nods. "I wanted her to be alive."

"How many stones, Busane? Did you see any stones? Did they say anything about the stones?"

I'm crying again. Busane shakes his head. There's tears in his eyes too.

"Busane? What time do you finish here? Can I buy you a drink?" I look at my watch. "A late lunch? An early supper?"

It's 4pm when we arrive at Tribe. I lead Busane through the bar to a table outside. People throw glances as we walk. A guy sitting at the bar stares. He must think it's an odd sight. Busane is still in his work overalls. He walks slowly, disorientated, like he's scared he'll bump into something.

Outside, Busane waits for me to sit before cautiously lowering into his chair. He looks around and flips the menu nervously.

"It's gotten cold all of a sudden," I say, responding to an icy breeze.

"Ey, it has."

"What would you like to eat?" I ask.

"Whatever you have," he shrugs and smiles shyly.

"Please, order whatever you like," I tell him. A few minutes pass in silence as we pretend to read the menu.

"I'm really sorry for what I said earlier, for accusing you. It was not right of me. There's no excuse for it. I've just been in a really bad and confusing space. But you tried to save her and I acted so horrible towards you, and that is inexcusable," I break the silence with my apology. I don't want things to be awkward. I want him to want to be here with me. To want to talk to me. To see me. And not the monster I behaved like.

"All is forgiven, Charlie. We won't speak of it again," he smiles.

"Thank you. We will speak of other things. Like your daughter and your wife?"

"And your friend," he says gently.

"Yes," I smile and swallow back a tear. "I think I'm going to have a cheese burger. And you?"

"The same."

"And to drink?"

"Coke."

Sifiso must have seen us come through because he arrives to take our order.

"Sifiso, this is Busane Ndlovu. Busane, this is my friend, Sifiso."

“Ngiyajabula ukwazi, baba,” Sifiso shakes Busane’s hand. We place our orders.

“Two cheese burgers and chips and two cokes coming up,” Sifiso throws his thumb up and gives me a big, approving grin and wink as he leaves.

Busane tells me about his family. About his wife who takes medicine for her heart. That he leaves an hour earlier for work once a month to wait in the queue at the clinic to fetch her meds because she can’t walk too far because of her heart and he’s scared to let her go alone.

About his sixteen-year-old daughter, Londeka – he shows me her school photo he keeps inside his wallet. Londeka loves to write and is always reading him poetry he does not understand, but he loves to hear it because of the way her eyes light up and her mouth curls as she reads to him.

I don’t know why Busane had to be the one to watch Naomi wave goodbye to the world. It doesn’t seem fair. It was awfully cruel; and I can’t help but hate Naomi for it as I look at Busane’s eyes – soft and gentle as a calm ocean, but bearing the scar of a ripple. A ripple formed from a sight that cannot be unseen.

Why was he chosen to bear the burden of a sight that I could have rather been punished with? Perhaps the reason was that I don’t have anyone to hold onto afterwards. Busane has Londeka. Maybe God takes that into account, when His finger, like a brush stroke, holds every person, every strand of hair and every breath of wind in His perfect timing.

I don’t know. I don’t have any answers, and it takes a huge weight off my shoulders to resign myself to this truth. But maybe there’s a chance Busane and I can help each other.

He is haunted by the image of a girl he doesn’t know; never laid eyes on before, but now can’t get out of his mind. And me, well I’m haunted by the past leading up to the event that lacks context. Together, we have the knowledge to answer each other’s questions.

Maybe Mfundo was right; maybe there is no accessible answer; no available truth. No puzzle piece to miraculously complete the picture. Maybe we all just hold fragments in our hands and what we do with those fragments, how we interpret them and respond to them, becomes our truth.

I think back to what Mfundo said about closure and my lack of it being my problem and I realise this is probably the closest to closure I’ll ever get. Instead of the last image I have of Naomi being her standing on the ledge of that bridge, unstoppable, now I imagine her sitting against the wall and writing. Writing away furiously, unstoppable.

If I imagine hard enough, maybe I can leave her there. Leave her sitting against that wall with her notebook. Erase the memory of her flying over the edge; replace it with the notebook. It’s a fair substitute. Transfer the weight of her onto her words. Let the words be so heavy that they sink.

I’ll even settle for not knowing what those words were. What was written on that paper. That settled at the bottom of the riverbed, disintegrating into nothing. I’ll give it up. The words. It’s a fair compromise. I’ll put my pen down and close my eyes and focus on the transfer. The exorcism. Of body to paper and paper to body. Just leave her on the bridge. Without her words.

Bird's eye view

"How big were the stones in her pocket, Alex?"

We're sitting in the long grass of the wildland in the middle of a neighbouring neighbourhood. It's long been our hang out spot. Two soccer fields of long brown grass with an overgrown footpath cutting through it. Five minute walk from Naomi's home. Where the residential road ends, a dust road simmers into a foot path connecting the two neighbourhoods. Just off the main road, opposite The Coffee House. In the distance behind us, between the trees, you can catch glimpses of the white and black Tudor walls of the hotel. We park our cars, grab take away coffees and walk to the end of the residential road until it simmers into dust. We wave at runners, red faced and struggling up the hill we're walking down. They huff and nod, ever so slightly, as if any further movement will slow them down; stop them from reaching the top. We ignore the dogs barking at us from behind their gates. After the last house, the tar turns into dust. We take the detour into the bush, a footpath of flattened grass, so slight it could have been paved by an animal. Just wide enough to fit one foot in front of the other. We camp out here, in the middle of the wildland. Alex and me. Hidden behind the long brown blades. Watching the sun cast a fiery filter on the tall dry grass. Close your eyes and forget where you are. Imagine. You could be anywhere.

I called him here for a truce. To apologise. So much has passed since the last time I saw him. Leaving my room. I'd acted cruelly indifferent. His last words have been eating at me ever since. *It's like you died with Naomi. Maybe even before.*

The river runs. In the distance, you can hear the faint trickling. Wherever you are in this city, it seems this river is always nearby. Lurking in the corner of every frame your eye captures. In earshot of every sound wave. The constant movement of water. Running its course. Collecting rocks and stones, rubbish and debris as it speeds along, dragging its baggage downstream. How deep is it? A little stream connecting towns to cities; lakes and dams to the ocean's mouth. The way the city was built. Built around the river. The river was always here first.

Maybe I am. Dead. Inside. Naomi said so, in her diary. Said I was a walking skull. A smiling Cheshire. I'm so lost. I don't know how I got here.

*"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" said Alice.
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat.*

"What?" Alex looks up.

We've both been sitting here in silence, until I broke it. Asking about stones. He's twisting strands of grass. I'm digging my fingernails into the sand.

"The stones, Alex. In her pocket? You saw her..."

Just 500 metres away. On the other side of the wildland is the bridge. The bridge that connects the suburbs to the city. The bridge we drive over almost everyday. If you peer over the bridge, you will see the water the river runs into. Follow the direction of the water. Moving around anything in its path. If you're in its way, it'll take you with it.

I peel the 'hot' sticker off the lid of my takeaway coffee cup. It says it's biodegradable. I imagine the soil eating away at the paper fibres until it disintegrates into nothing. Like a body, both soil and water corrode.

They cremated Naomi's body. I didn't get to see it. The last memory I have of her is two days before. Lying on my bed talking about boys. And girls who were interested in those boys. One of them was Savannah. "She was so flirting with Alex!" I told Naomi she had nothing to worry about. "Alex only has eyes for you."

Birds circle above us. I watch their wings flapping, creating their own wind. Wind that keeps them in the air. I get dizzy watching them. Do they ever get tired? Do they ever want to stop flying? Do they ever fear they won't make it to the next tree? Do they ever start to feel like their wind is too strong?

"I never saw the stones," Alex says. He looks away.

I can tell he'd prefer not to talk about it. About Naomi. About that day. About what happened just 500 metres away. Maybe a few weeks earlier, when I was too self-absorbed and preoccupied with denial to be there for him. To be the rock he needed to fall onto.

But now, he's trying desperately to look forward. To the future. Wherever that may be. However hopeless it feels. And I'm going backwards. Emerging from my cracked shell. Only now realising how deep the cracks run.

After a while sitting here, you stop hearing the water. It's still running, still making the same rustling sound, but you stop being conscious of it. Heart, head, muscles bends toward it, falling in sync with its rhythm.

Two black birds dive bomb us. The water gushes again. We start arguing over what bird it is. I say Starlings. Starlings always dive bomb. To protect their young. No, Drongos, Alex says. It had a forked tail. But I was sure I saw orange on its wings? Alex says the fast movement caused a blur – the orange was from the sunset. I know better than to argue with Alex. He's probably right.

The birds are flying home, I think. They respond to the colours of the sky. Wake up and sleep on and sing on cue.

I ask him, "If we were birds, what birds would we be?"

"You're a swallow. Naomi's a robin, even though she can't sing."

We both laugh at the memory of Naomi on karaoke night. He'd be an eagle, he says.

I think of an eagle. Fiercely majestic. It's long, wide wings. Stretched out. Cunning eye. Devil over every detail.

I think of the robin Naomi used to feed. It would come to her kitchen window, dance around asking for cheese.

"Of course you'd choose your favourite bird. But why a swallow?"

He points to a pair circling in the distance. "Look at them, gliding in circles. Swooping down. Shooting up. They're acrobats in the air. They only know how to fly."

Is that how Alex sees me? I'm not sure what it means, though it sounds awfully poetic. Like something Naomi would say. Is that how I see myself? Who's to say whose version of me is more accurate. We all look at the same picture and remember it differently. But how do I see myself?

I think of the African cuckoo. The nature program on DSTV: The African cuckoo lays its eggs in the robin's nest. Throws the robin's eggs out. The robin sits on her nest, day in, day out. When the eggs hatch, there aren't baby robins. Just one big, fat, demanding cuckoo. The mother robin now has to feed this foreign infant. Twice the size of her. She did not ask for the cuckoo. Now she's stuck with it.

I tell this to Alex. I tell him I'm the cuckoo. Selfish. Always putting my eggs in everybody else's nests. He listens quietly. This is the first time I'm admitting this, realising this. Since Naomi's death, I've blamed everyone else. Made my anger everybody else's problem. I don't mention this though.

Alex says nothing. He carries on breaking blades of grass.

When I finish he says, "Cuckoos are extremely elusive birds. You hear them. But very seldom do you actually see them. It's first prize to see a cuckoo."

Excerpts from Naomi's diary

2020

*"it was a terrible thing, it was a terrible thing
to see
her dying,
inside" - The Cranberries*

February

12/02/2020

Two years today since Tibby died. Still remember her at four weeks. Standing on the ledge in her cage at the SPCA. Screeching at me. This grey ball of fluff, desperate sad blue eyes. Tiny mews knocking at my heart.

I stopped at Quincy's on the way home after work. Took an outside table and ordered filter coffee. Felt impressed to write a letter to Tibby. Asked the waiter for a serviette, unfolded it into a large square. Tried to control my pen as it pierced the sheer paper. The guy at the other table watched me amusingly. He held up a sheet of paper from his notepad. I just shook my head and smiled.

I needed my words to be lost in the moment. To be as temporary as a passing thought. I was writing to a memory, to something that no longer exists. Something stuck in the middle of the veil between reality and memory. Something in my head. There is no point for these words to be remembered; for them to live a minute longer than the time it takes to pour them onto tissue. Let them dissolve into the fabric. Become the tear. The breaking point.

I'm trying to do that more often. Write in the moment for the moment. And leave it there. Let my letters fall away slowly with each consistent tick of the third hand.

Ephemeral art. Like those spray painted letters that named "Buttercup Bridge" on Groenekloof street. Everyone remembers "Chin Up Buttercup" long after that well-meaning citizen turned my smile upside down with each fresh coat of white paint...

I had intended to scrunch the serviette into a ball and throw it into the wind. But the wind was never right. Either too insipid or too strong. So I stuffed the serviette into my pocket instead. Maybe I'm not ready to part with my words yet after all.

[Barely legible. Handwritten on two faded, torn serviettes]

Dea ibby,
the day we brought you home.
peed on pants in parking
Spar. warm wetness seep through
. Your warmth
left me
lonesome car ride
three years later.

Your life short
barely survived
everything happened to you.
abandoned
plastic packet
bin in town
permanent limp.

You a sickly, scrawny cat
 I watched helplessly
 Tiger took advantage
 your weakness. You could never outrun
 the cat next door.
 got you on your bottom
 you got an abscess.
 overnight at the vet.
 drain out all the pus.
 You kept trying to attack the pipe out of your leg.

 helpless. Tibby, I couldn't protect you
 this time your leg
 watched you stumble
 puppet with one string

 all those days I came home
 you huddled underneath that chair.
 you never left the house.
 watched the window the world went by.
 eyes sullen, blink at me,
 the movement tired you.
 Tiger never missed a beat minute we turned back .
 I'd plead Tib ,
 stand up for yourself.
 fight . Claim territory.
 You just look at me.

 final trip to vet,
 Matthew turned his head around
 watched my brush strokes try
 colour back your corpse.
 he asked "Why choose
 the weakest kitten absolute runt
 A stronger, healthier kitten, he
 wouldn't caused
 heartache.

 but we don't get to choose our heartbreaks.

Tibby, when I close I still feel
 eyes squeeze shut as the needle pierces skin.
 Feel muscles relax.
 bury my head into you.
 last time felt your warmth.
 floating.
 white cloud.

vet told you died infectious poison
 Tiger's scratch;
 saliva seeped your skin,
 breeding ground
 Parasites
 fed on your flesh
 Until just a shell scrawny self
 I carried
 Until death
 became
 prick of a needle out of misery.

 weakness
 killed you.
 long before

 Tibby, we know.
 there's no room for weak in world.

Like clockwork

"Charlie, you're better than that," Naomi told me when I tried to flirt with a guy to make another guy jealous.

"You're worth more," she'd say about guys who only want one thing and I'd give it to them.

"Look at Alex and me. That's a healthy relationship built on mutual love and trust."

I gulp down my Martini.

"All I'm saying is, you deserve better."

But do I? I think of Jordan. I think of the newspaper Sifiso keeps behind the bar. That vivacious smile, those big brown eyes. Now immortalised on cheap, dirty grey newsprint.

Her words ring through my head. Louder than the music. Drown them out. Take another sip and another and another.

There's a guy at the other end of the bar. He's looking at me. Lower drink. Lift head. Smile. Do the thing with your eyes. Pursed lips. Maintain eye contact. One. Two. Three. And he's here.

"Looks like you need a refill?"

You deserve better

"I probably don't. But who's counting."

"Another one for her."

Haven't you had enough? Sifiso's eyes ask as he pours me another drink.

You deserve better

Not tonight.

Consumed by what I have consumed

Places I seek out my reflection:

The mirror. My wine glass. The water's edge.

Smash the mirror into a million tiny silver shreds. Drink till I'm transparent. Jump into the river. There's no escaping it.

What lies behind?

Behind the image that light can't penetrate. Light that bounces back and reveals me to myself. The silver screen I can't break through; no one can see past.

What lies beneath?

At the bottom of my wine glass. That I sip and gulp and spit out again. Convulsed and revulsed. Simultaneously. By the taste of it and the sight of me.

What lies above?

Above the water. The girl peering down, below. A face refracted like a jigsaw puzzle.

Who is she?

A wild card. A timid mouse. A caged bird.

What does she hope to find?

A way in. A way out. The truth.

And who is the girl staring back at her?

The girl through the looking glass. Tumbling down the treacherous path called time. In search of something to save her from her sanity.

To: charlieangel@gmail.com

From: naomip103@gmail.com

Subject: I miss you

Hey C,

I read a story from the *Sunday Times* the other day. It reminded me of you and your love for murder mysteries. The title caught my eye: “Lone survivor holds down village of one”.

“Lekkersing, Northern Cape – Ten years ago, the village of Lekkersing had just over 300 residents. At the start of this year, it had six. Then five were murdered. And now there is just one: Greta Arendse....”

Doesn't it just send shivers down your spine? I didn't get to finish the article (you know that marketing strategy they use...lure you in then make you pay to read the rest :/) but it was dated July 2019, so it's quite recent. My first response was, this would make a brilliant crime fiction plot. I suddenly wished I could meet you at Quincy's or Tribe to bounce ideas off of you. You always have such a brilliant imagination and knack for crime fiction plots. (It's actually creepy!) So here I am, sharing it with you. Of course, it would be easier if you weren't so far away. Then maybe we could chat about this in person, over coffee at Quincy's.

But how are you? I miss you. Tell me about your classes? And what's the latest with that guy? Kyle, was it? We need to Skype soon. I'm sorry our schedules have been clashing so lately. How's that one-donkey town treating you? I saw you got to PE last weekend. Beach looked stunning! And so did you, as always!

It's much the same here. Work is hectic. Did you read about that horrible freak motor accident on the N3 last week? I had to write the story. Truck crashed into a broken down car. The girl died instantly. She was just two years older than us. A St John's Old Girl. A close friend of Melika's sister. I'm sure you saw her IG post? You know how I hate writing obituaries. Always makes me cry.

Alex has been going through a lot since he came home. He's pretty conflicted. Doubts whether he made the right decision. I won't lie, it's been great to have him home again though. Felt like such an island with both you and him away these past few years. He's coaching the school hockey team now while he figures out his next step. He's considering architecture...I guess life took unexpected turns for all of us. We had it all figured out in high school: You, a famous singer; me, a best-selling author; Alex, a lawyer. Now it sounds so cliché. At least you got out of here. Even if it was to some random middle-of-no-where town with no cinema or proper drinking water! I'm stuck bumping into our old teachers and classmates in Spar. They ask about you. If we still keep in touch.

I just can't stop thinking about this Greta character. The last surviving resident of a defunct village. Why did she stay? Did she like the peace and quiet – absolutely no one to bother her? Or was she too scared to leave? Holding on or hiding from her past?

What if she was the murderer? Just think about it...the last two residents were murdered. She survives. What if she killed them? Survival of the fittest, fighting for territory like cats. You know the stories that come out of these out-of-sight-out-of-mind little towns....

How's this for a story plot: The journalist goes to interview the last surviving resident. Fuelled by curiosity and the thrill of breaking the story, he makes the trip to find out how she lives, all alone in that ghost town. Does it cross his mind that maybe she's the ghost? Is he so enthralled in the novelty of this situation – already envisioning the front-page story with his by-line, so busy crafting the wording to his captivating intro, that he falls into her spell. Forgets to search for skeletons.

Maybe Lekkersing is one of those “whoever goes in, never comes out” kind of places; maybe Greta holds the key. Maybe she lost the key. Maybe she's trapped. Perhaps the journalist asks too many questions....What does he unearth?

Greta left town just before the two murders. When she returned, everything she knew was gone. An evasive alibi. Does the journalist accept it? Or does he start to dig deeper? Does he ask her why she stayed? Does he start to become too fascinated with this person who chooses to live like a lone wolf?

Is Greta the survivor or the killer?

Is it possible she could have been both? I mean, isn't that kind of like what staying is? Staying relevant. Staying alive. Doing whatever it takes to pay the bills. One foot. in front. of. the. Other. Sometimes surviving feels like I'm slowly dying.

Maybe Greta did leave. Finally found the courage to forge her own path. But when she returned, everything and everyone was gone. Crippled by remorse, she clings to the last remaining pieces of stolen memories. Secures her anchor in that soil, where she lives still, all alone. With her cat. And a few chickens, and a cow – meat and milk. Living off the land, finding refuge under misery's shade.

How's that for a story? Maybe I'm just going crazy without you. Or maybe it's the start of the novel I've been putting off writing. Maybe Greta is my ticket out of here.

What do you think, Char?

I miss you so much. Please email/ call / Skype/ WhatsApp/ text me soon?

All my love,

N

Murky Waters

There are ghost towns in the ocean.

This is a lyric. A displaced lyric ringing through my head all day. I probably heard it at the bar. Probably danced to the song half drunk. Maybe it was the last thing I heard. Before I hit the floor. Woke up in my bed with a headache. How did I get here? Home. This place I can never again leave.

Charlie is home. That's what everybody says behind my back. They roll their eyes expectantly and shake their heads. They laugh and joke and shrug. At me. The thought of me. I can never leave this place. This house. This bar. This bridge.

I stand on the bridge. Lean against the ledge, peer over. Look down into the deep dark nothing. The wind blows and my reflection fractures.

My reflection. A pin drop. A white fleck on the water. Bobbing. The only thing that doesn't move is the diary I'm clutching.

Alex was right. It doesn't help. Reading her words. I feel like the man in the moon. Trapped between the letters. Can't stop her. Can't warn myself about what comes next.

The more I read Naomi's email the more I become her. Greta. She wrote me onto the page. I cannot escape. I'm stuck inside this half-told story. I remember receiving her email. September last year. Read it twice, smiled and never replied. I never replied.

Never replied.

I look down at the water. Never replied. It ripples. I never replied. I want to jump. My hands reach out towards the dot. To pull me back, to pull me in.

My best friend. And I never replied.

She felt like she was Greta. That's what she was trying to tell me. She felt stuck in a dead end. She was talking about Alex and staying and being alone. Talking like it was a good thing that I had left.

How could I tell her? I was Greta. Greta with a machine gun. Putting distance to everything I feared I would destroy by staying. Too close. Too comfortable.

I wanted to reply. Wanted to say, no Naomi, I'm the dead end. Lost inside my own dead end. I'm the stuck one. Stuck inside this tiny triangle.

Come home then, she'd say.

Greta came back home. To nothing. To ash.

Now I live inside this rubble.

This rubble that ripples. Rises and falls in waves. Draws you in, spits you out. This substance that I need. This substance that is me. All 70% of it. The death trap my body is made of.

I stare at the dot. The dot that marks my spot above. Hanging over the ledge of the bridge. In the face of a huge body of water, I'm reduced to a dot. If the wind blows hard enough, can it blow the dot away from me?

How far is the furthest distance my reflection can exist away from my body before it too disappears? What if the current pulls it away. A ripple swallows it like a bubble... Pop.

Will I disappear with it? Am I tied to my reflection with an invisible string?

Reflections are always warped. Shadows always taller, skinnier. Over the water, I'm wider, stumpier. Weight always in flux. Who's to say the shadow is inaccurate? We always say the shadow is wrong. But that's to say the sun's vision of us is warped.

Who is the girl in the water? Who is the girl staring back at her?

Maybe my shadow has escaped me. Run away and taken on a life of its own. Finally freed from this death trap I walk around in. Maybe I am my shadow. Floating above the water. No body to weight it down. As long as that figure stays on the bridge watching me. Keeping me here. Stay there, blocking away the light. Move when I move. Mirroring my movements like a goalie in a soccer match.

A mouth moving. Hands flailing. Who is the woman peering back at me? Naomi? Is she going to jump? Maybe I can catch her.

“Charlie! Stop!”

Alex. I turn. Toward the direction he’s running. Suddenly I realise. It’s me. On the bridge. Bent over, the ledge. Kneeling. Paper in my hand. Torn. Bits of paper. Falling. Floating. Torn bits sinking. Paper wrinkling. Disintegrating.

“It’s not...I’m not...I was...just...” I hold up the paper scrunched in my hand. “Her diaries...” I spit out helplessly.

“Charlie, what were you thinking?” His face is ash. “Charlie, the wind!” His voice is barely a whisper.

“Alex, you were right. It’s hopeless. All so utterly hopeless!”

“Charlie, you can’t...do this...you can’t...you can’t be here...Have you been drinking again?” his voice shakes. He gives me an unsteady hand. Stone grazes my back as I slide. Onto my feet.

“Naomi was the glue,” I say.

Alex holds my arms to steady me.

“I’m the paper that stuck to it. Now I’m drifting, Alex. Aimless. And one day...One day, I’m going to blow away.”

We stare at the water. At tiny flecks of white. Alex holds me while I crumble into his arms. He inhales the sob that escapes my chest. Then he slowly leads me away from the wall. The ground is hard underneath my feet. I keep expecting it to fall away, but it doesn’t. There are no cars on the bridge so we don’t worry about walking inside the lines.

The sun is setting. Birds flying home swerve around the scarecrow figure in the middle of the road. The silhouette of two figures. Embracing.

We walk home.

Loneliness kills

A story by Naomi Parker

Corpus Delicti

Greta has a way about her that makes you forget all the questions you have come to ask. Greta speaks and you slide deeper into your chair, throw your head back and let her words wash over you. Her words like the velvet of the couch she sits on; soft and rich and smooth. She spreads them into an intricate tapestry. You lose yourself in her labyrinth.

I've been here for two days with my well-crafted list of questions still sitting folded in my pocket, untouched. I keep telling myself I'm waiting for the right moment. Any good journalist will tell you it's good to build relationships first. Build their trust before you break it with your expose. Though, I keep having to stop myself – I'm quite presumptuous in terms of what I'm expecting to find.

I guess all seasoned journalists have that same sixth sense. When you look at all the facts presented and can't ignore the itch eating at your stomach. Something doesn't add up. That's how award-winning investigative journalists are made. Intuition. Follow your gut. I've worked with some of the best. I've learnt from some of the best and now I'm following my gut.

But I'm also well aware of the flip side that sometimes follows on from following your gut. That gut-sinking feeling of disappointment when your intuitive gut leads you to a dead end. That's the risk we all fall prey to when we start writing our leading sentences – or crafting catchy headlines before we're back at our computers spitting out the hard cold facts.

Right now, I keep reminding myself not to get too carried away. To stop imagining my by-line underneath the striking headline I'm already beginning to conjure up. After all, I haven't even gotten down to digging up the dirt I'm so confident I'm going to find. *Slow down, slow down. Don't get ahead of yourself...*

What can I say? It's the thrill of the chase. My job is to just go out there and gather the facts from every side. That's the hard part. Getting the facts from every side. I'm listening to Greta talk about her life in this one-man town. Quite literally, a one woman town. She's the only resident, living among the dusty relics of a former life.

A remembrance. A tribute to that which used to be. A tribute she actively keeps going, she says. Although, apart from manning her farm and looking after the abandoned animals her farm is made up of, the town is more like a graveyard – even the shop windows now read the equivalent to tombstone inscriptions. Like tombstones, the signage is not immune to the natural elements. Letters fall away and shop window displays are hard to see through all the spider cracks and dusty cobwebs. A real ghost town. Greta's is the only breath that stirs the deathly surrounds.

I ask Greta how it became deserted. She said it was gradual – very gradual, over a period of twenty years. People just packed up and left, slowly at first. Children would grow up and instead of investing their time and skills into the town, they'd broaden their horizons in search of more glittery prospects. The youth that left had a pied piper effect. More and more followed. Into more built up areas. Their parents aged. Became grandparents. Too frail to manage their farms and land. Soon, they retired to sitting on their stoep. Watching the sun rise and set. Talking about the good old days.

Suddenly only a handful of residents remained. 200, then 150, then 100, then 50. Last year there were five. Then people started dying, mysteriously at first, according to reports. Followed by two murders. The last to die was the last remaining police officer at the defunct police station. Apparently a suicide.

Now there's just Greta. She sits, her body leaning into her corner of the coach relying on the arm to keep her body up. She sips her homemade *iqhilika* – a fermented honey beverage originating from the Khoisan. She makes the brew using the honey from her own bees. Well, the bees she 'inherited' from one of the recent killings. She took over her dead neighbours' apiary – the same way she's taken over the neighbouring farmer's goats, chickens, sheep.

She's got quite a nice sized little plot of land she's turned into a well-functioning, self-sustaining farm. A real 'live off the land' concept in the sense that she never leaves her home.

"What need do I have to leave? There's nothing but spiders and rats and ghosts in town. Everything I need is right here," she smiles. Her smile, however, is somewhat disconcerting.

She calls it an 'inheritance'. The price, or punishment, or reward for sticking it out. The natural progression of things. "Iemand moet dit doen. Look after the animals. The lot has fallen on me," she tells me with a shrug.

I mean to ask her what she meant by ghosts. I try to get more information out of her about these deaths. The mysterious ones. She shrugs it off. She says the newspapers blew it all out of proportion. That they were natural deaths.

"So? They never woke in the morning. Hulle was oud. Old people die. Niks vreemd nie."

She's got a harshness around the lips. The kind of rough lines that are born from a tough life. From one too many pursed-lip 'it is what it is' utterances. The kind of lines formed from a life of hard work and no play. Doing what has to be done.

Soon, the hype died down and the neighbouring villages got on with their lives and left her alone. The same way no one wants to buy a house haunted by death, people avoided the graveyard village. Out of sight, out of mind.

I want to ask her now, why she stayed. It seems a fitting follow on question, but the moment doesn't seem right. My intuition says no, not now. And I listen because well, this whole trip, this whole story is resting on my intuitive sixth sense. I'm in too deep to stop now.

My watch is ticking past ten. I swallow back a yawn and politely excuse myself to bed. She nods, and makes a weak apology for tiring me with her boring stories. I shake my head, remind her that her stories are the reason I came here.

The truth is actually my main pursuit. I'm still confident I'll plough it up with enough diligent digging. All stories are just dressed up truths. Everyone has an agenda. No agenda can ever be pure.

There's something unnerving about the way the floor creaks with every step I take as I climb the stairs to my loft room Greta has kindly offered to put me up in on no notice. I feel Greta watching my turned back, as I climb the stairs carefully. It's not just her eyes I feel on me every waking moment in that room and in her house. There's a presence. Something that makes me lock the door and check it three times before I finally fall asleep, with the key inside my pocket.

Notes.

Day 1: Arrival and meeting Greta

Walking through the town is what I imagine it must be like walking through a war-torn village. No sign of life. Shop doors closed and dusted over; windows cracked – some looking as if they'd been left like that for years. It's something likened to Pompeii, but without the stone. This town is built on sand. Enough to make anything crumble.

It has all the makings of a little rural village. A long dust road snaking down from a mountain with small painted brick buildings, mostly in white and beige, a stone's throw away from each other. There's a white church with a steeple — resembling the same postcard image of any iconic small town in the Cape and Karoo. It stands deserted and paint-chipped. On the other end of the one street town sits the municipal offices. Well balanced governance. On the other side of the street, down a small road, there's what looks like a school building, all locked up and window panes missing from the windows. I can't make out what the other shops/buildings are supposed to be. Except for a sign that reads 'Winkel'. And a stately two storey building I assume was once a hotel.

When I reach the end of the red, dusty gravel-stoned road through the town it all just falls away into an overgrown, brown-green nothingness. I can see plots of land and houses that look decayed, derelict, half-demolished by the natural elements. Gates wide open. Fences broken and trampled on the ground.

In the far distance, peering out of the thick overgrown bush, I just make out a glimpse of yellow light of a paraffin lamp. This is where Greta, her cat, Mielie, and a hoard of displaced farm animals are the sole proprietors. There's a long strip of overgrown bush you have to traipse through before you reach her house. The only house with any sign of life.

The moon was beginning to rise when I arrived. As I approached the house, a shadow flickered across the paraffin light. The sound of a door unlatching in response to my footsteps.

Greta gives me the look over. From my soiled shoes to the duffel bag hanging over my shoulder. She stares at the beige bag as if she can calculate from the size and shape of it how many days I intend to stay. She's not as I imagined. She's slightly younger. I envisioned an older woman with pronounced wrinkles and greying hair.

She has frizzy black hair that ends at her jawline. She is wearing a muslin dress. Yellow and dirty and noticeably repaired quite a few times. I say I'm a journalist. That I'm interested in her story. How she lives alone. How she's stuck it out, made a life for herself out of the loneliness. How courageous she is to stay put while others fled or fell like flies at her feet.

She smiles and shakes her head, "Die eensaamheid can jou doodmaak." (*The loneliness can kill you*. Profound quote...perhaps this is my angle for the story). Then she takes my duffel bag and leads me inside.

Her house is made of part cement, tin and wood. It looks like a clumsy large shack with a tin roof, slanted so rainwater runs off of it into what looks like a water catchment contraption. This area doesn't get a lot of rain, she tells me. So she has to save water every and any way she can. It's a very makeshift farm house. Inside, it's cosy in a very chaotic, cluttered, unstable way. The mismatched furniture gives me the impression she's furnished her house with second-hand bric-a-brac. Like you're living in an antique shop's dusty store room. Shabby chic.

A day in the life of an exile

Greta wakes up early. Five am every morning. She leaves a tin cup of freshly squeezed orange juice on the kitchen counter for me that I find when I surface at around seven am. Oranges she grows from a small potted tree she tends to with care. I'm a very light sleeper in this house. I hear her wake up, get dressed and leave the house. I watch her from my loft window, doing her farmyard rounds. She's always humming a tune. There's a lot of animals to feed. I hear her at the chicken coop first. Then she moves on to the sheep, then the goats, then the cows. The horses and donkeys are stabled the furthest away so I only hear the faintest neighing indicating her arrival.

I take my time getting dressed. Make some extra notes in my notepad and take full advantage of the empty house for my research.

I'm tempted to go into her room and look around. See what I can find, though, I'm not quite sure what it is I'm looking for. Weapons? A gun? A bloodied knife? It's all too obvious. Perhaps documents. Letters. A diary. Photographs. It's usually the least suspecting thing. But something stops me. The feeling that there's eyes on me, all the time. Perhaps it's just Mielie. From the half-closed door, I spot her on Greta's bed. The cat glares at me forebodingly. With her own black patched eye like a pirate. Mielie takes the proud stance of the butler around here. Waiting at doors, and always checking up on you. Taking care to ensure every item is exactly where it should be. The first to notice if anything appears out of place – like my presence, which has put her pink nose more out of joint than Greta's.

Aptly named, with her light ginger coat and green eyes Mielie is terribly bonded to Greta. I'm pretty sure Mielie knows everything that goes on around here better than her mistress. They say cats can sense things and hear things long before they happen. So Mielie is the secret keeper of every living creature on this establishment. Mielie is the one I should be talking to. But Mielie's a tight lipped cat. Even if she could talk, I believe she'd be skinned alive before she let out a sound. She only talks to Greta and Greta talks back to her, as if, on some level, they actually understand each other.

I give Mielie an appeasing nod and make my way downstairs where I drink the orange juice that's become a ritualised token of Greta's hospitality – which is essentially doing what the Romans do when in Rome. If I am to encroach on her living area, I will live exactly like her. That's the unspoken arrangement I've arrived at based on subtle hints. Eat what she eats or don't eat at all. Keep up with her schedule or get left behind. Like I am right now, wandering outside in search of her.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining about her hospitality at all. I'm grateful for the simplest effort she goes to. Breaking her mundane routine to place two plates and cutlery sets on the table; cooking double the amount of vegetables and chicken each evening; squeezing an extra orange from her already limited harvest each morning.

Though, I'll admit, I am dying for a cup of coffee. The closest to the real thing I can find around here is four tins of Ricoffy in her grocery cupboard – one is open but hardly used. But Greta maintains strict rationing of such luxuries, which, believe it or not, Ricoffy in this instance, makes the cut. When the tins run out, that's it, she says. No more. All her perishables, such as tinned food, coffee, packets of salt and sugar and rice, she places in her pantry in the order of their expiry dates. Her cupboard reminds me of those bargain buyers and coupon collectors who end up on reality TV shows showcasing their storehouses full of hoarded products.

But, in Greta's case, her pantry is funded by looting. Stealing from her dead neighbours, who had all stolen from their dead neighbours until Greta won the monopoly when she landed on Free Parking. In this sense, free parking means hers is the donkey cart parked next to the paid parking metre, but no one's left to collect her money. Besides, when you're the only one living in a village, there is no longer an economy. No more money to keep the train of capitalism smoking. No one to barter with either.

So she rations out her luxuries. Coffee only on Sunday mornings – this also helps her keep track of the days of the week. Gives her something to look forward to; break the mundanity. She'll eat out of a tin, roughly once a month – usually around full moon. She uses the moon as a marker for a lot of things. Her way of keeping sane. Grounded. The easiest way to maintain a sense of order, otherwise the barren endless circular motions would drive her insane.

So, every day from five am to five pm she tends to her farm. To keep things going. Her cattle and her chickens are her livelihood. Her food and her clothing. Without which she would die. Of hunger, of cold. Her vegetable garden is self-sufficient too. Food waste goes straight to compost, as well as all the cow and chicken manure, which she diligently collects. Nothing is wasted.

If I wasn't here on another mission altogether, her farm would make an excellent article on how to successfully go off the grid and live 'waste-free'. These small Karoo towns have gained appeal as retirement destinations in recent years for this reason among some city slaves who, after sacrificing the better half of their life to their jobs, find the stark contrast of being out in the sticks with no neighbours or phone network nearby, a peaceful end to their restless lives. But I'm not here for that, I have to remind myself. I admit, I've become quite taken with Greta's lifestyle. Her resilience.

And yet, underpinning this resilience lies the thumping question, *why?*

I find her at her sunflower patch. This is what she does 'for me', she says. Her sunflowers are one of her only passion projects. That and her two horses which she uses for out road trails.

"Sometimes I'll take them through the town. The sound of their hooves on the dusty gravel, for one moment, brings some life into this dead place," she tells me.

I watch her cutting the sunflowers. She places the cut stems in a posy and hands me the bunch. She smiles and the harsh frown lines that usually pull her tanned face taught disappear for a moment and then form again in a concave, pulling her smile upwards like puppet strings.

The backdrop of the sunflowers makes a perfect picture and I'm tempted to whip out my camera and take a snap. But then I remember the questions in my pocket and tighten my resolve not to get carried away. This is not the right light after all.

"So, how did you end up learning all of this?" I point to the vast expansion of the multi-purposed farm.

Greta shrugs.

"My Pa en my man."

This is the first time she's mentioned a husband. Come to think of it, it's the first time I've asked her about her history dating back more than ten years, except for her telling me she grew up here. But by here, I still haven't established if she meant *here*.

"Oh so you're married? Were married?"

"Ja, a whole three times," she laughs and tosses a bunch of what I assume to be weeds she's just pulled up.

"Three time wife. Three time divorcee? Widower?..."

"Widower," she says, looking up at me.

"All three times?"

"Kobus was my first. Died in a mining accident." She points her finger towards the east. "The old quartzite mine. It's closed now." She continues weeding around her sunflowers. "Then there was Samuel. He got sick."

"I'm sorry. What sickness?"

"Not too sure. Some kind or other. Medical treatment isn't too advanced here. We're at a loss for anything herbs and natural remedies can't fix."

I nod. Greta's been pointing out plants with healing properties to me on our daily rounds.

"Then there was Andries."

"And what became of him?"

“Good old, old age,” she laughs and throws out more weeds. “He was quite a bit older than me. These natural elements warring against the walls of our worlds.”

It’s almost unnatural how natural everything around here is, I think.

“I guess it’s been a constant fight against loneliness out here then,” I offer.

Greta shakes her head. “I’ve come to find loneliness quite becoming.”

Notes.

Day 2. The farm.

Greta's farm is almost as chaotic and haphazard as her house and yet she manages to live off of it all. From the bees to the goats she milks. She even sheers her own sheep and spins it into wool for jerseys. She gave me a jersey. I assume it was one of her late husbands' as it's clearly made for a man, and clearly made by hand – as evident by the clumsy stitching.

So Greta does everything herself, by hand. Some things, however, she just doesn't do well. Like cooking food with flavour. For all her freshly grown herbs, she seems to lack the touch. It's all mechanical. Food is the fuel her farm runs on. Stripping anything down to a necessity is a sure way to squash the joy out of it.

But, she can start a fire by rubbing two stones – something not even seven years of scouts equipped me to master. And she cleans her clothes by smashing the dirt out of them against a rock by the river.

In the age of Google and robotic technology that does everything, let alone think for you, it's kind of refreshing, even attractive, to find someone who's built a life upon doing everything from scratch. And makes it look so easy.

The questions

Questions for Greta:

- 1.) How old are you?
- 2.) Were you born here? On this farm?
- 3.) Have you ever left this town?
- 4.) Why did you stay?
- 5.) When did you decide to stay instead of leave like everyone else?
- 6.) Was it always your intention to stick it out?
- 7.) Is there anything you're afraid of?
- 8.) Who are these ghosts?
- 9.) Why have you exiled yourself?
- 10.) What are you running away from?
- 11.) If you could go back in time, to before everything went wrong, would you do anything differently?
- Would you leave before you would be forced to stay?
- 12.) When did you find out about the murders?
- 13.) What was your reaction?
- 14.) If you were the last one left, you would have found the policeman's body?
- 15.) What did you do with the body?
- 16.) Who killed the policeman?
- 17.) Who killed your neighbours?
- 18.) You have to admit, in a court of law – if there were people left to investigate these murders – you would look guilty. What's your alibi?
- 19.) How does it make you feel knowing you're surrounded by death?
- 20.) Aren't you scared that you're next?

Questions for me to answer regarding Greta:

- 1.) Does she have a motive?
- 2.) Does she seem capable of murder?
- 3.) Do her answers add up? Are there any loopholes?
- 4.) Have you paid careful enough attention?
- 5.) Do you think she could be lying?
- 6.) What if she's really telling the truth?
- 7.) What if she's innocent?
- 8.) Is she the victim or the killer?
- 9.) Where does she go straight after you've asked her these questions?
- 10.) Where does she look when you ask her about the murders?
- 11.) Does she stumble or stutter or get defensive when answering?
- 12.) Does she evade answering anything fully or truthfully?
- 13.) Is there any physical evidence to support her claims?
- 14.) Could she be a psychopath?

Nobody, no crime

We're sitting at the kitchen table. The sun slipped away without me noticing and now, as I look up, the moon shines in its place. Greta is stirring the pot of chicken soup while I ask her about her childhood. She grew up on this farm. Though, it was a lot smaller back then. Just a dozen chickens, goats and sheep. That's how she learnt to shear, she tells me.

Earlier this afternoon, I watched her kill the chicken that's now boiling in the pot. Watched her walk to the coop, grab the chicken by the neck, then carry the writhing, cackling bird by the feet. On the other side of the porch, she just hacked off the head in one swift movement, unflinching. I stood limp. Still processing what had just happened. Then she picked the limp, headless bird up, swaying it in her hand, turned to me and asked, nonchalantly, if I wanted to defeather it. I told her I don't know how. City slicker I am. If she saw my traumatised expression of the sudden act of violence, she didn't acknowledge it at all. When in Rome, do what the Romans do. So I let her teach me how to defeather my dinner. Although, watching the pink flesh turn whiter beneath the bubbling caldron, I suddenly am not sure if I'm going to be able to eat it.

"Did you have any close friends in the town?" I ask.

"We were a close knit community. We all looked out for each other."

"Was it like that right to the end?" I ask her while she stares into the pot.

She hesitates a moment before answering. "More or less," she says into the pot.

I watch her stirring, while she remains unstirred. Unstirred by the questions, unapologetic about her vagueness. I don't know how to respond to 'more or less'. I'm hesitant to ask her to elaborate and she doesn't seem to feel any need or desire to. She stops stirring to lift the spoon to her lips.

"Hmm. Almost ready!" She smiles at me. "Jy moet honger wees. I really made you work for your meal today," she laughs.

I was tired more than hungry. I've been trying to immerse myself into Greta's life in an attempt to better understand her. Her likes and dislikes. What makes her happy, sad, angry.

But Greta doesn't deal in emotions. Only hard work and sweat, no tears. Some of the physical labour had me close to tears, but I dare not say this.

Greta leaves the pot and walks toward the cupboard, stretching on her tiptoes to reach the bowls on the top shelf. Before I can offer a hand, she's back down with the bowls placed on the counter.

"Kom ons eet," she announces with an eager smile, motioning me towards the pot.

I stare at the dishwater-coloured grub with bits of white floating around near the surface like dense clouds. Pieces of orange carrot, stubby circles of celery and green parsley leaves that wrap around anything they're stirred against. I hold the spoon half-heartedly.

While we eat, I try to ask her more questions. If I keep her talking she won't necessarily notice I'm not finishing my food.

"So any friends that left that you still keep in contact with?"

"I tried to stay in contact. It got harder to do that the smaller and smaller the population got. Now, with no functioning post office, I'm really cut off from all of them. I think the postman bypasses this route altogether now."

"Did you ever consider leaving?"

"Yes, but I left it too late."

"What do you mean you left it too late?"

"I simply have nowhere to go now."

"No family living anywhere else around the country?"

"None who knows or cares to know I exist."

I'm starting to feel a deep sorrow for Greta's plight. A victim of loneliness. Circumstantial isolation. But it still doesn't add up. Surely if she wanted to leave she'd have found a way, like everyone else did.

"And your friends that left for other cities? Do they not have space for one more?"

"I went to visit a friend in Springbok a few weeks before the policeman died. With that exact intention. To see if I could make a new life," she pauses for a mouthful of soup.

This is interesting. The first time she's ever admitted to actually leaving this town. I almost can't believe her. I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't seem committed to the rest of her story.

"And? Could you?"

"Ag nee. You know, it's all so claustrophobic. Yes, the loneliness here is a curse. But sometimes it's also a blessing. And besides, when I got back the policeman was dead. That was final. I could never leave. The minute someone leaves this town, someone else dies."

It all sounded a bit superstitious to me. "Do you really believe that?"

"Well that's how it's worked out up until now. If I can find a way to break the curse...then maybe..."

"What curse?" My spoon slips out of my hand and into the soup with a splatter.

She jumps in her chair, shaking her head violently. As if she's realised what she's just said.

"Oh no, no, not a real curse," She laughs, then sighs. "Jy wil nie verstaan nie."

Her eyes drop to my bowl and then lift back to me. "You barely touched your kos. Better eat up."

I politely take a spoon to my mouth and smile as I swallow. And another. Swallow. Another. *Focus on the mechanics. Open mouth, close mouth, swallow. Think of nothing else. Not of the taste. Not of the silence. Not the curse. What curse? No curse. Swallow.*

When we're done, she takes away the bowls in one swift motion. Her back is turned to me as she stands at the sink with a rag in one hand and a bowl in the other. I can see her face through the reflection of the window. I need her to finish this segment of the story. I need to tie the loose ends together.

"So when you returned..." I raise my voice competing against the sound of the water gushing out of the tap. "When did you find out about the policeman?"

She switches the tap off and turns her upper torso around towards me. She tells me it was on her return that she found out. She passed through the neighbouring village and that's when she heard snippets of the story. Newspaper articles.

"Everyone had a different idea of what happened. His body had been found lying on the bank of the river bordering the two towns. Some said suicide, others ruled it a murder." Her back is turned towards the sink again.

I focus on her face in the window's reflection. "And what do you think?"

Greta looks up at me through the glass. "He was murdered."

Our eyes lock for a moment in the glass reflection and I'm lost in the definiteness of her gaze, of her answer. When she looks down again only then do I gain composure and my thoughts return to me.

"Who murdered him?"

"I don't know. Maybe the same person who murdered the other woman."

"Could the murderer still be lurking around here?"

"It's possible." she turns away to place the clean pot on the dish rack.

"Then aren't you afraid you could be next?"

Greta turns to face me. "What makes you think you're not?"

I go cold while my brain tries to process what this means. What she's just said. On the one hand, it's a perfectly obvious question. There's no reason it has to be sinister at all. If she's at risk, then I, by association, have willingly allowed myself to become collateral. But it's the way she said it. The sly, wry, defensive smile.

"What do you mean?" I finally let out, slowly.

"You came here. Asking questions, searching for answers. Answers to what? What answers did you want? You don't know that the answers you're looking for are greater than the questions you're prepared to ask. What you don't know is, the minute you set foot here, you become part of the curse."

She's animated in a rage. Like a cat hissing in defence of its territory. Perfectly composed, perfectly still. Just this voice, crystal clear, that projects through me and lands like ice on my back.

"What curse?"

She suddenly relaxes her controlled composure and yawns. "It's getting late. Too late to talk about this. Lekker slaap."

She leaves me there, leaning against the back of the chair. I watch her leave. Walk slowly up each stair, the wood creaking underneath each foot, catching every step. When I hear her door click shut my heart makes up for every missed beat. Each pounding thump vibrating from my chest rings the chorus: youneedtoleave.youneedtoleave; YOU NEED TO LEAVE.NOW. GET OUT OF HERE; NOW!

I take a deep breath, try to calm my panicked mind down enough to concentrate on climbing the stairs as silently as possible. Practise for my final descent. There's only one thing I need from upstairs. If I had my notebook with me, I'd already be out that door. Forget clothes, soap and toothpaste. I just need that notebook. Otherwise this trip is a waste. This trip will be a waste if I don't survive to tell the story.

Upstairs, I lock the door behind me and make a dash for my notebook. Holding it to my heart, I turn around back towards the door. What is my plan beyond the front door? I don't know. Guess I'll trust my intuition that led me here.

Right now, it says get out. So I make my way to the door, as quietly and slowly as possible so the wood doesn't creak. I reach the door. Hold my breath. Turn the key. But the key doesn't budge. The knob doesn't turn. I forget about being quiet and yank the doorknob violently. Nothing happens. The door refuses to give way. As if it's been glued shut. Locked from the outside perhaps? But how? It's not that kind of door. Not that kind of lock. I peer through the keyhole into nothing. Nothing but black. I can't figure out if the black is the absence of light or if there's something blocking out the light.

I've never felt so alone. So frightened. So stuck. So helpless. I move the desk against the door as my last resort of protection from what lies on the other side. I don't know what or who to be afraid of. It suits me to blame Greta. The person I've set out to cast the blame on all along. The desk makes a grating sound as scrapes against the floor. The windows rattle and I suddenly don't trust them either. I trust no opening that can let the outside world in. Even though these openings are my only way out.

I open the cupboards, then close them. Can't decide which makes me feel safer. Open or closed. Same with the curtains. I don't trust anything; even my bed feels too exposed in the centre of the room. So I crouch in the darkest corner of the room, too scared to make a sound, but even more afraid of keeping silent.

Maybe Greta isn't the villain. Maybe she'll save me if she knows I'm trapped. Maybe this is just some horrible prank. Maybe it's the ghost Greta mentioned briefly. A passing comment. Now I regret not pressing her for more.

Maybe Greta was right. Maybe all of this is way out of my depth. Maybe I'm not prepared to hear the answers. Maybe Greta is the ghost. Maybe it's all in my mind. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I'll wake up in my bed with the light streaming through the window and the sound of Greta tending to her animals outside.

Or maybe I'll never wake up. Maybe I'll die in this room and no one will ever know.

No body lives here anymore.

I must have eventually passed out from exhaustion. The mental exhaustion of paranoia. The physical exertion of trembling and clenching hands and teeth. My head feels heavy. My teeth ache. My muscles are stiff. I awake to find myself huddled in the corner. Light seeps in through the curtains, making me blink aggressively. I slowly look around, getting my bearings as the events of the night slowly filter back into place like the dust particles stirred by the sunlight, falling softly onto the desk.

The desk is still slammed against the door. Everything is silent. I'm at a loss for what time it could be and I try to estimate the hour of the day from the sun's sharp glare.

I look out the window. My eyes adjust to the scene before me. Animals running amok. Chickens out of their coops, mingling with the goats. Small black dots zigzagging in the air. Bees. I rush to the door, push the desk away just enough to unblock the door. I turn the key. It miraculously opens with ease the first time. I stand in the open door frame and freeze. What happened last night? What is happening right now? Where is Greta?

Her door is wide open. The bed is made, pristinely. Looks unslept in. The room looks un-lived in. Nothing is out of place. I venture through the door and stand in the doorway. The furthest I've ever allowed myself to come. There's no sign of Mielie either, which suddenly perturbs me. Where are the mistresses of this house?

The house is deadly quiet. No sign of life except my weight on the wooden planks as I make my way downstairs. There's no orange juice left for me on the counter as before. No sign of any oranges ever being peeled. No tin mug in the sink, or the dish draining rack. The only remnants that confirm my sanity are the two bowls, pot and utensils from the night before balancing against each other on the drying rack. The sink is empty. As if the last time the kitchen was touched was when she laid the dish cloth down and excused herself to bed last night. After implying I'm next.

Outside I'm met with havoc. Making my description of her chaotic house seem like child's play. I make my way through the crazed animals, running around aimlessly, frenzied. Blaring and clucking and buzzing. I dodge the bees swarming above my head as I run, to every corner of the farmyard.

Every station is turned upside down. The apiary is wrecked. The doors to animal pens are wide open; hay bales knocked over; water spilled. The horses neigh hysterically in the far corner. Their stables looked smashed in. Pieces of wood flung everywhere. The donkey cart is in splinters. Saddles strewn across the lawn. Dogs howl and run in circles chasing their tails.

The whole farm is traumatised. Slipped off its axis. Skew. And I stand in the centre of the chaos. The eye of a hurricane watching the destruction.

GREETTTTAAAAA? GREETTTTAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!

But Greta is gone.

I spend the day searching for her. For Greta, for Mielie. For their bodies. But the duo are gone. Without a trace. No footprints. No signs of departure. No footprints, except mine. I walk through the town. Not even a flicker of dust on the red, dusty path. Nothing out of place. It looks even deadlier than before. Like the last slither of breath has gone out of it and the shade is the sun turning its back on it. There's not even the faintest breeze circling through this town. Not even the hot, suffocating wind I've come to hate. I can't even hear the echo of my own footsteps.

I turn around to head back. Back to the dreaded farm, because what else can I do? Where else can I go? I can't bring myself to cross the threshold and continue to the other village. Perhaps I should look for her there. But what do I say when I arrive there? I have no alibi. I have no reason to

substantiate my arrival. My presence will only unearth more questions. Questions I'm not equipped to answer. I forget why I even came here now.

As I walk back, I notice my own dusty footprints pointing in the opposite direction. I turn around and regard the marks of my own trail. A horse shoe shape, walking in circles. I remember what Greta said, about walking through town with her horses. How the echo brought some life to the dead walls. I realise I'm afraid of that. I'm scared of any sounds, even my own. I'm scared of even my own footprints that demarcate my path.

It's ironic because I came to frame Greta as a murderer. Now my murderer is missing and my fingerprints are all over this house, this town. I want to make them disappear. Any trace of me ever being here. Wipe my footprints off this dusty sand. Set fire to the whole farm. Burn down all the evidence. I know longer care about it. I don't want to solve the mystery. I just want to erase my implication in it.

But even if I burn everything down. It lives on in my mind. I can't escape this place.

I'm still clutching my notebook inside my jacket. I'm too afraid to put it down. It's the only thing I've got to prove my sanity, and even then I fear I didn't record enough in there. Right now, it's all hearsay. Who will believe me? I can't even believe myself. The door. Who locked it? Who opened it?

Do you believe in ghosts?

I'm still not convinced Greta's innocent. I just don't know what she's guilty of. Of leaving. Or leaving me here. Perhaps she's not really gone. I keep looking for her everywhere. Everything around here reminds me of her. What would Greta do now? Where could she be? Will she return? These questions haunt me.

I turn at the slightest noise, anticipating to see her face. But it's only a dog or a chicken, a fly or the wind. I even long for Mielie's unnerving presence.

From where I stand, there's only three options left for me:

1. Stay here, out of sight, out of mind, and escape having to answer to anyone.
2. Return home with all the questions I have no answers for.
3. Kill myself.

Whatever I choose, Greta is controlling my narrative. I'm trapped in the centre of her labyrinth. With this buzzing sound closing in on me. All I can do is pray I wake up. Somewhere else. Rid of it all. Or for someone to come and rescue me. To take my place.

The curse. I think I'm slowly starting to understand. She bequeathed it onto me.

Ask yourself these two questions:

Who are you?

I'm Charlie. Charlotte....Charlotte – I'm still deciding what my last name will be. My mother's or my father's. I'm closer to my mother, but my father's sounds better. Holds more weight. What's in a name? But my whole identity.

What do you love?

I love sitting in a sun-filled window. Listening to music. Singing. Although, I don't sing anymore. I love...a good party...friends...but I don't think I have any party left in me. Do I even have friends? I love laughing. I can't remember the last time I laughed.

And what do you hate?

Hiccups. Sneezing. Getting sick. Feeling fat. People who steal parking spots. Heavy emotions. Myself, most of the time.

I hate that I don't do most of the things I love any more.

I hate that Naomi killed herself. I hate Naomi for killing herself. I hate myself for hating her. I hate myself because it's got to be my fault.

Where did you come from?

I honestly don't know. I just arrived here? My mother gave birth to me 24 years ago.

My parents moved to KwaZulu-Natal from Johannesburg when I was two.

The first memory I have is in Durban. Swinging from a tree. So I guess I came from Durban.

Then we moved to Pietermaritzburg and my parents got divorced when I was seven.

Dad moved back to Durban. I only see him when I need something from him. Or he needs something from me.

Usually a united family front. His new family and the bothersome remnant of his old life.

That's where I come from. That's where I fit in. The grander scheme of things. It's all appearance.

The smiles we hide behind.

How did you arrive?

In this room or to this place in my life?

Both.

I think the answer's pretty much the same for both.

This room is synonymous with the place I'm at in my life. I'm unravelling. I'm told people come here to learn how to stitch themselves back together.

It'd be easier if someone else could do all the stitching back for me. But there's no quick fixes, they tell me.

Alcohol is my quick fix. What? Don't look at me like that. Spoons full of sugar come in many different forms. We're all entitled to our vices.

Naomi was my stitching. She weaved my frayed pieces together. Built a nest for a bad egg. Then they found her at the bottom of the lake.

Now I'm a classic Humpty Dumpty with no one to put me back together again.

What is the shape of your grief?

My grief is circular. As small as a white round pebble. I hold it in my hand. It encompasses everything. But when I want to throw it. Away from me. It turns into an egg. Rotten. Exploding all over me. It stinks of self-loathing and pity. This nemesis that controls me. I hold it in my hand to contain it.

Who was responsible for the suffering of your best friend?

That's what I'm trying to figure out.

How are you trying to figure this out?

Oh you know, conventional methods.

Stealing her diaries. Re-reading old message conversations, emails. Looking for clues.

Replaying every memory I have in slow-mo. Searching for something irregular. A missing puzzle piece.

Interrogating people.

Starting murder investigations.

Trying to get people to confess she didn't kill herself.

It would be so much easier if I could find someone else to pin her death on. Someone that's not me.

And how is that going for you?

Every road is a cul de sac. I'm the dog chasing its own tail. I'm starting to fear I was drunk for all those truth bombs. If she ever dropped any.

Naomi lived on a cul de sac didn't she?

Yes she did.

What do you remember about the street where she lived?

We used to ride our bicycles up and down the road. We used to pretend the dead-end was the edge of the earth. We used to see how close to the edge we could get. Sometimes we fell off. Then we'd lie about how we got hurt because we were clever enough to know it was a stupid game.

*

There are three houses around the cul-de-sac. Naomi lives in the middle. Her neighbour has a German Shepherd that barks at us. We ride in circles just to make him run up and down the fence.

We drive him into a frenzy until the old man complains that we're causing a raucous.

We drive in circles until we are dizzy. Alex and Jordan join with their skateboards or rollerblades.

They come straight towards us until we think they're going to hit us. We scream and they swerve.

They laugh at us. We hate them for it.

*

I spent most of my life driving up and down that street. You could go as far as to say I lived on that street. When we got older Naomi and I would walk around the block and come and sit on the pavement next to her driveway. Out of earshot of everyone. We'd talk. Mostly about boys. That's where she told me she liked Alex. More than just friends. That's the last distinct memory I have of that cul-de-sac.

A new group of neighbourhood kids dominate the streets now. They remind me of us. How I wish we'd all stayed.

If you could go back to that day and tell her something, what would you tell her?

Don't do it. I'd take her place. I'd push her onto the ground and throw myself over.

Why are you so desperate to keep her alive?

Of course I'd want to keep her alive. She's my best friend. I'm lost without her.

Of course I want her alive. But I want her to want to be alive.

I want her to reassure me that she didn't abandon me.

I want to know she'd miss me, and her mother, her family, and Alex. You don't miss people when you're dead.

I want to believe that if I was the one who found her on that bridge, she'd let me talk her down from that ledge. She'd take my hand and I'd lead her back home. To her family and friends who love her. Back to the life I know she loved. At some point. At some point she wanted to be alive.

Together we'd retrace her steps until we found it again. That secret ingredient. The nutrient of life.

Maybe my motives for keeping her alive are more selfish. Everything about her death has shone a spotlight on my shortcomings. I want the chance to be a better friend.

Like where's the rematch button? I want to replay. I'd act differently.

I know now to pay more attention.

You'd even take her place to keep her on this planet. The planet she seemed desperate to escape from?

I just don't think she was thinking clearly...

Because if she was thinking clearly she wouldn't have done it? Is that what you're saying?

Somehow, yes. That's what I'm saying. I'm still formulating my argument...

So what is it about life then, that's worth holding onto? That you believe one would have to be out of their mind to give up.

I mean, I wouldn't phrase it so dramatically...but yes. There's got to be something to hold on to.

And what happens when that elusive thing – you can't even give a proper name to – slips out of your hand? Let me remind you a few weeks ago, you were on that bridge...peering over, rather transfixed.

I wasn't going to jump. It's all a misunderstanding. I was only trying to get rid of her diaries.

Ok, that sounds a bit psycho, maybe I need to explain.

Alex and Jordan were right, her diaries just made things worse.

They took me to this really dark place. They meant everything and nothing and somehow all pointed fingers at me. They'd play through my mind on repeat.

Until they felt like my words. I didn't want them to be my words. I hated that they were hers.

I just needed them gone.

Are you sure you weren't going to jump? Cause it sure looked like that from where Alex was standing.

Alex saw wrong. He must have panicked.

Maybe from where he was standing it looked like that.

All I know is I was crying when he reached me. He shouted my name. That startled me. The fright was enough to push me over.

I'm not sure what happened. In the moment everything was just this great big blur.

The line between life and death?

In that moment there wasn't a distinct line. There was just...water...ripples...wind...paper, falling.

But, remember, you were holding the paper. Let me put it this way: Life is just one long moment. A cow frozen in headlights.

No, Life is a stutter. One. Long. Stutter. The stutter ends with the cow in your headlights. When we finally get our words out, they kill us. That's how I felt after reading her diary.

Ever listened to someone with a stutter trying to speak?

Matthew, Naomi's brother. He used to have a stutter. Had to go for speech therapy when he was young.

Did his stutter stop him from speaking?

No. Even though he had to try harder to finish his sentence. Sometimes it was painful to listen to him struggling to form a syllable or vowel. You wanted to just finish the sentence for him. Naomi and I used to giggle and mock him behind his back. We were just kids. We didn't understand.

But it was important for him to finish his sentence himself.

Yes. There's courage in that. Tenacity. Basic human impulse, I guess.

Ever thought that maybe some of us die trying to finish our sentences.

Have you ever imagined your death? Imagined officiating it?

Sure. When I'm standing on top of a high place looking down, I think, "what would happen if I just jumped off...right now?" Leave these people that love me standing here, and just disappear over the ledge. Or when I'm about to cross the road, and a truck or car is speeding by, I think, "what if I just jumped in front of it?"

But you don't. What stops you?

I suddenly cringe at the thought and it passes. I mean it's exhilarating for a second,...but then it shakes me back to life. I think, "what's your problem? that's so messed up."

I guess, maybe I do that to make me feel alive. Convince myself I don't really want to die.

Why not? What is it that is keeping you alive?

I don't know. I still have something to say, I guess...maybe I'm just stuck in a stutter. Floating, drifting, aimless. Wasting time.

Sometimes it feels like I'm a waste of space. And yet I hold onto that space. And yet I keep wasting it. I'm too scared to give it up. It's all I've got, it's who I am.

Then I suddenly realise, I don't own this space. I'm a product of time.

That's why it's so hard for me to understand. Why she could kill herself. And yet I, of all people, am stuck here, still desperately grasping at the wind. It's just unfair.

Different winds, darling.

Why does a 30-year-old father die of cancer and another lives to see the birth of his great-grandchildren?

Why does one girl make it out of a deadly car crash, and the other girl doesn't?

Why did a boy who fell out of a 5m tree snap his neck and die, but another guy falls from a three story building and survives?

Is it a case of only the good die young? These are questions I can't answer.

I'm going to ask you one more time. Who was responsible for the death of your best friend?

I don't know. No one. Everyone. Me. The entire world. Her. Social media. No one. Me?

It was an accident.

An accident. Is that your final answer?

Yes. One of those accidents that's a long time in coming. Except, the problem with accidents is that no one sees it coming...A cancer undiagnosed.

You're speeding along the highway. Pushing 130. While talking on your phone. You know better. To speed or text. Know you shouldn't be doing it. But it's an important call, they all are. And you're running late, you always are. Besides, you can multitask...But once you start it's hard to stop. And nothing happens. So you continue. And each sharp corner you survive. So you get complacent. Until...

The cow in the headlights.

Yes. Suddenly, there's a cow. In your headlights. The cow replaces the headlights. Don't see it until it's meshed into your windscreen. Blood and guts and glass and cow hide. An unenviable, regrettable mess. And yet somehow, you survive and she doesn't. But you shouldn't have survived because you'd been driving in a drunken comatose for most of the ride. She was awake. She was alert, for you. She was the one who had kept trying to pull you out of it. Pull you back. But she dies and you live. You killed a cow, and your car's wrecked.

How do you make sense of it? How do you move past it? What do you do with the cow?

Were you the reason she died? Was she the reason you lived?

How do you forgive yourself?

Does surviving make you look at your life differently? Reassess where you're headed in relation to where you want to go?

Yes it does. It kind of wakes me up. I see everything clearly now. It's too gory to ignore.

So maybe, you could see it as Naomi giving you a second chance?

But how do I begin again?

How do I live now?

Return

Return implies walking the same road, from a different direction. Return implies going backwards, after you've gone forwards. You return to begin. You don't return to the end. You reach the end, turn around and begin again.

U-turn implies a sharp and drastic change of direction. U-turn implies full body jerking. U-turn means checking behind and in front and both sides before jack-knifing into oncoming traffic. U-turn implies you're headed in the wrong direction. U-turn means you're doing something about it.

My U-turn is more of a figure of eight than a horse shoe. I keep going in circles. Trying to figure out where the end begins and the beginning ends.

Check list:

1. Return the gifts
2. Return to the river
3. Return Naomi's diaries
4. Return the stones
5. Return home

1. Return the gifts

I argue with the shop assistant because I don't have the slip. Must have misplaced it. Somewhere. It fell when I ran. Dropped with the phone that slid out my hand. I can't tell this to the shop assistant. She'd think I'm pulling a 'poor me'. I'm done with that. I just want to move on now. First stop is returning the gifts. I no longer need them. She didn't want them.

"It was a gift," that's why the prices are ripped off, I try to explain.

She raises an eyebrow. This is not the sweet friendly lady that helped me three months ago. A lot can change in three months. I wonder if the other lady still works here. I should have gotten her name. Then I could have asked for her. She'd have remembered me. Or would she? How much have I changed in three months?

My appearance, sure. A little thinner, scruffier. Limp hair, no make-up and tracksuit pants I'd never normally wear out. To the mall.

My mental state. My mindset.

"The only thing we can do is give you a gift voucher," the shop assistant is saying. But I don't want a gift voucher. I don't want anything from this shop. I'm done with gifts, buying gifts. Now I wake up in the middle of the night from this recurring dream. I'm walking to a birthday party with a gigantic bright pink gift bag. I get to the door, ring the doorbell, when the door opens, suddenly it's a funeral. Everyone in black, and I'm standing there in my pink party dress and my big present ballooning from my side.

"That won't suit me," I say. "Just take the gifts, okay. Keep them. You can have them. I don't even want the money back. Just take them off my hands," I plead.

I'm tired of standing at this till. With the same music and colours and personalised pens with the most common names from A-Z. N for Naomi? There isn't one.

"I can't do that, Ma'am," the shop assistant says, "it would be against policy." Policy.

"Perhaps you would consider donating them to a Hospice shop?"

I nod and smile and leave the shop. For the last time, I mumble.

I dump the packet in the bin as I exit the mall. It crashes into the hot, claustrophobic stench. Of coke cans and soggy till slips. Sticky melted ice cream, or was that milkshake? A half-eaten burger. A fly emerges, disturbed by my intrusion on its feasting. It tries to follow me as I leave. I swat it away.

So wasteful, Naomi's voice pokes at my shoulder. *You're one to talk*, I put her back in her place. My hand that's just been freed from the burdensome parcel shoots to my neck, tugging at the chain unconsciously. I let my finger trace the letter N. The only gift I couldn't return.

Now I carry her around my neck.

2. Return to the river

Alex finally told me about that day by the water's edge watching the divers retrieve her body. Still, his detailed version reads more like snippets of a developing scene.

I later learnt that retrieving drowned bodies can take up to a week, depending on the water's force and current. It takes up to four days for even a weighted body to float to the surface. But bodies can get trapped underneath rocks and then it takes longer for water movement to dislodge the body. After seven days of searching, if divers have not found the body, they usually call off the search. Guess we got lucky with Naomi.

The water rushes by. Splashing as it collides into rocks, over, around, underneath, in between.

There's a retired couple in California who spend their days volunteering on search and rescue missions and have developed an "uncanny ability" to find dead, drowned bodies. Most of their year is spent on the road or on the water, travelling to different sites, searching for dead bodies. I read an article about them online. They use a "specialised sonar system" to scour the waters for drown and suicide victims. Like the psychics people visit or animal whisperers people call on when their beloved goes missing without a trace.

The clouds are fractured in water's ripples. Above me, they're moving, so slowly you don't notice at first. But once you see the movement, ever so gradual, it's enough to make you dizzy.

What would make someone passionate about searching for wrinkled, rubbery, bloated blue bodies when it's not their actual day job? A hobby formed from some morbid fascination of sorts? Perhaps a personal tragedy of their own?

Imagine being on the periphery of a not so fortunate, clear cut search operation. Imagine being the family sitting at the phone, wondering where. A dead body is one thing. A displaced body is another. Imagine sleepless nights thinking up possible places. Ghosts lurking everywhere.

If Naomi hadn't been found, she too, could still be anywhere. It'd give us something to hold on to. However false, hope is hope. Like the coffee we drink in the morning to kick us out of bed. To force us to contribute to society. The wine I drink at night to ease my mind. To make it shut down.

The wind changes direction, bringing along an icy chill. Trees shake. Leaves fall. Some fall into the water.

Naomi was not a crime fiction writer, but she used to entertain me. Think up thriller plots that read like book blurbs. Enunciate the ellipses for dramatic effect. It was all for my enjoyment; she had no care to write the endings.

I think about Greta. The only a murder plot she cared to finish. It just didn't end the way I expected – anticipated. That's the problem with fiction. Or is it the joy of fiction? That we like to think we have some control, some idea, some say in how the story should end. We can relish in the thrill of being surprised. Turn the page and remind ourselves it's just a story when it turns nightmare-ish. Take comfort in its predictability. Look forward to a resolution at the end. And if, come the last page, the ending is dissatisfactory, you can write a scathing review and put the book to bed forever.

The sun is setting. The sky has changed from blue to pastel pink, peach and lilac. The next time I look up it will be fuchsia pink and purple and orange. Then it will flicker like a flame into ash.

Naomi's job as a reporter gave her ample crime plots to tell, real ones. But it's different when you're reading a story that actually happened. I remember opening up the newspaper the day after her death. Newspapers only report on suicides that occur in public places. She knew this. She reported on these. Then she chose a public death for herself. She did this to us. I'll never know why.

Perhaps she was considerate enough to care that her mother didn't find her...hanging from a chair... gassed in her car....slashed wrists in the bath...OD'd in bed. Perhaps she didn't anticipate her mother and her brother and her boyfriend getting to the scene in time to see her wrinkled, bloated blue body being dragged from the water.

Perhaps it seemed like the most foolproof way to go. Least chance of failing. I mean, even Busane couldn't stop her. Timed it perfectly. Chances of a pothole fixer being a pro diver were slim. So she had a three minute advantage. That's long enough to lose consciousness. Water's filling her lungs, rapidly, while the ambulance is bleeping its way to the riverbank. Stones in her pocket push her deeper and deeper beneath the surface. The divers squeeze into their gear. Too late to change her mind. Did she panic? Did she regret it when she started gasping for air? Did she start praying for a hand to lift her up but instead got a hypnotic display of water bubbles? What was the last image that flashed through her mind? Before her body let go of everything. Everything except her stones.

I hope it was me. That sounds selfish. I hope it was all of us. I hope she saw a Christmas card-style portrait of all of us. Estelle, John, Matthew, Alex, me, Rory, Melika. And we're all smiling. Holding each other. Laughing. Maybe we're younger. Children. Maybe Jordan is in the picture too. I hope she clung to the picture for as long as breath lingered in her lungs.

I stare at the water's edge. Small ripples remote controlled by wind. The Umgeni River starts in the Midlands, outside Howick. It runs through all small towns until it reaches the ocean; connects Pietermaritzburg and Durban through the Duzi River.

This river runs through the trajectory of my small life. From my earliest memories buying sheets of stickers at the flea market along the Blue Lagoon, to peering over the ledge at the cascading waterfall of Howick Falls. Skipping stones at Midmar Dam. Watching the start of the Duzi marathon with my father when I was five. All the watering holes this river supplies. I've followed this river and it followed me.

Up until now, its purpose in my life has been purely recreational; geographical. A line on a map this side of home. But now I stand at this specific bend in the river bank and I look death in the face.

This river is no longer just a sporting event, a tourist attraction, a water source, a livelihood. This river has become part of my life. Like the veins my blood runs through. Connecting me to every corner of my existence. Pinning me down and flattening me out like a map. Where can I go to escape it?

I place the photograph on the surface of the water. The photograph of me and Naomi on the Ferris Wheel. The moon is slowly rising. I can see its white reflection in the water. I can see my reflection too. It hovers over the picture like a superimposed print. A photoshopped image. I stare at my reflection, moving and changing in front of my eyes. The wind holds the paint brush. Like a crystal ball, perhaps this is where you come to truly see yourself as you are. Constantly in flux.

I shouldn't be here this late. It's getting dark and it's not safe. These are the kind of places you don't go alone at night. For fear of being mugged, or raped. I'm not really afraid of anything anymore. My biggest fear has already been realised, six months ago today, and I didn't know I was afraid of it until it happened. And left me here. Staring at the water that swallowed her up. Welcomed her away from this world. From us. From me.

I've been here for over an hour. No one knows I'm here. Which is probably looking for trouble, if trouble does arise. I start to think of the uncanny irony. If something did happen to me here. If my body was found here tomorrow morning. Dead. On the six-month anniversary of Naomi's death, in the exact same spot.

It's full moon tonight. A bright white circle refracted on the water.

My muscles tense at the slightest movement. Of wind? Water? The headlights from cars above cast eerie shadows. I'm trying to determine what it is that my body responds to. Is it the threat of trauma or bodily pain that could be lurking in the bushes? The unnerving idea that I'm playing with my life. Could I value my life enough to want to be cautious? Enough to not stand on bridges and think *what if*. Enough not to dip my toes into murky waters without contemplating the consequences.

It's different being here at night. In the absence of light, there is just a surplus of sounds to dissect. Stripped of context, the sound of trucks speeding along the N3 could easily pass an ocean rumbling; the rustling water, crashing waves.

The sound of something crunching behind me. Footsteps. Feet crushing leaves. Maybe just an animal. But what kind of animal? A duiker? A hare? A mouse? A caracal? Once, long ago, there was a report of a leopard in this area. The forest behind the highway. Someone driving home from a party at 3am said they saw it crossing the intersection.

Maybe it's just a frog. Sometimes the smallest things make the most noise. The crunches grow louder, bigger, closer. Splintering flashes of light hit the water like a jerky disco light, and I'm in the centre. Collateral. I freeze. The sound is too big to be an animal. Lights too close to be headlights from the freeway. Instead of passing, they bounce closer. To me. Past me. Onto the water. This is the moment I'm supposed to fear. The moment I'm supposed to avoid. A shadow looms, larger, footsteps, faster, I turn, slowly.

"Charlie, is that you?" It's Alex. Breathe. Try to get a breath in between each pulsing heartbeat.

"Charlie?" The more breaths I can get in, the quicker my heart beat will slow. I try to imagine how that tug of war would be when drowning.

"Gosh, you gave me a fright!" My hand is at my heart.

"So did you. Lurking in the shadows there, I didn't see you at all until my torch caught your hair."

"Think I was a ghost?"

"I was kind of expecting to find you here..."

"You were."

"Well I tried your phone several times and didn't get you. Popped by your house and you weren't home. I figured you may come here today."

"Glad you checked here first before the police this time," I hope it's not too soon to joke about it.

"Well, it was my last stop en route there," he laughs.

"Thanks for stopping by. And for not being a murderer."

"Don't thank me. We both know who brought us here. But you shouldn't be here so late."

"You know I never do what I should."

Charlie's life is a cliff edge. The wind keeps her in the air.

"So you have anything you want to say to her?" I ask him.

"Like right now?"

"Yeah. Throw your words into the water."

"What?" He looks at me like I'm crazy.

I take the torch and hover it over the water until I find the small square of white. You can just make out our faces, two girlish smiles following the current further away from where Alex and I are standing.

"Oh I see. What did you write on it?"

I shake my head.

"You're just going to leave it? To pollute the water?"

“It’ll travel downstream. Disintegrate slowly and dissolve into nothing.”

“Like we all eventually do.”

“Where do you think it’ll end up?”

“There’s never a way of knowing.”

“Maybe someone washing clothes downstream will find it before it’s too far gone.”

“The picture would be ruined.”

“Maybe it’d become a blank canvas again. To start over or scrunch in a ball and throw away.”

“It all depends on who finds it.”

The hands that deal the cards we’re dealt. The currents that carry our memories. The radio waves that recite our words back to us. I watch the reflection of the moon on the water in the silence that ensues.

“I have something to say to her,” Alex suddenly says.

“Then say it.” He hesitates. “Just let it out.”

He takes a step forward towards the water. Looks back at me unsteadily, turns back to face the water. “You shouldn’t have jumped!” He shouts, voice shaking. “Naomi, we all cared about you, but you jumped. Why did you jump, Naomi? Now we can’t care anymore.”

Alex is crying. I don’t know what to do. I walk towards him. Put my arms around him. He crumbles. Sobs reverberate through him like electric shocks.

“She should never have jumped,” he mumbles between sobs.

“I know, Alex.”

“Why did she jump?”

“I don’t know...”

“She should never have...”

“I know, I know. I know.”

3. Return Naomi's diary

Estelle looks surprised to see me on the other side of the door. I hadn't called beforehand. Just showed up here. With her dead daughter's diary tucked underneath my arm. I keep waiting for her to lower her eyes and spot the book, but she doesn't. She's focused on my face, looking into my eyes and smiling as I mumble some stupid excuse about being in the neighbourhood. It'd be easier if she'd just look down, and then frown, confused by the familiar brown leather holding torn and tattered pages of words that no longer hold any weight. I'm carrying around a skeleton. I'm desperate to put it down.

Estelle invites me inside, rattling off a list of drinks...coffee, tea, lemonade, water... "What can I offer you?" I spot the wine rack through the kitchen doorway. Wouldn't mind a glass of red right now. "Coffee would be lovely, thanks." I follow her into the kitchen. I bring out the diary and place it on the kitchen counter just as Estelle turns around with two coffee mugs in hand. She stares at it for a minute, reacquainting her eyes with the memory of Naomi hunched over, scribbling eloquently away at the dining room table, her desk in her room, swinging from the hammock outside.

She looks up at me. "Where did you find it?" The thought briefly flashes across my mind that I could lie. Spin some elaborate tale. Naomi left it at my house, the last time I saw her. It must have fallen under my bed and I came across it while cleaning. But I came here to tell the truth.

"I stole it. I took it from her room. On one of my visits. I'm so sorry, Estelle. I shouldn't have done it. Behind your back like that..." Estelle smiles and shakes her head. "It's okay, it's okay." She puts the mugs down, hugs me.

"Did you read it?"

I nod.

"Did it help?"

"No."

She nods. "Come, sit outside with me." She leads me to her floral haven she's always tended to with love and care for as long as I remember. Her house no longer looks and smells like a florist. Time. Heals. All. Wounds.

"I'm thinking of making a garden of remembrance for Naomi over there," she points to the circular garden bed by the bird bath. "What do you think?"

"I think incorporating the bird bath would be fitting. She loved feeding the birds."

"She did, didn't she? She had an affinity to nature," Estelle smiles, focused toward the spot in the garden with the bird bath. As if, in the memory she's conjuring, Naomi is standing right there.

"And yet her death seems more unnatural than if she'd been shot or died in a car accident. Or illness."

"You know, Charlie," she takes a breath and looks directly at me as she continues, "the months before her death, I was a bit worried about her. She'd become quieter, more withdrawn. It crossed my mind that she could be depressed. I kept meaning to talk to her about it. Broach the subject. Kept trying to check in, ask if everything was okay. I always figured she'd tell me if they weren't. It wasn't easy, because the signs were all so subtle. Sometimes I thought maybe I was overreacting. Imagining things," she fidgets with her hands. "Maybe she was just growing up, becoming more subdued. Work was stressful, but she loved it. Didn't she? It kept her busy. Always on call. The news never sleeps," her hands land reluctantly in her lap.

A silence passes between us as I try to digest what Estelle's just told me. Depression is a word that's used so lightly it almost holds no weight. Which is ironic, because it's supposed to be an inescapably dark, heavy black cloud.

"I wasn't around most of the time to pick up on any signs. She hid behind her screen. Hid behind her words. Maybe if I'd been here...been there for her...If I had known that she needed me to be there for her..."

"I also blame myself, Charlie. Every day," she pauses and looks away. "Bogged down with guilt. Crippled with the inability to turn back time," she takes a deep breath and looks up at me.

"If we could go back, turn back the clock, do you think we'd be able to change anything?" I almost regret spitting this question out. Outside my head it sounds too stoic.

"That's an awful thought that also runs through my head sometimes. I don't know what to do with it. But I can't seem to get rid of it."

"What if going back in time would just be buying time?"

"I guess we just have to hold tightly to the little bit we have. Even if what we have is only memories now," Estelle wipes her eyes. We both stare right in front of us while we talk.

Time. We build our lives on it; barter with it like a currency. And it always runs out. I fantasize over time machines that have the same effect as Tipp-Ex. But like an open wound or picking at a scab, if you keep rewriting over the same white patch, you end up with a bigger scar. There's no point in pretending to understand. Because we can't.

I realise I'm still clutching the diary. That somehow I must have picked it up again and carried it outside when we left the kitchen. These words I can't part with, though I so badly want to.

"There's such a fragile line. The line between what we know and what we don't know. What we think we know. What we wish we knew. It's such a mash up. Naomi didn't know. She felt. And she acted on her feelings," I say. I hand the diary to Estelle. "These are just words on a page for us to read now. But she lived inside them."

Estelle strokes the leather cover as if to iron out any creases.

"I'm sorry there are some pages missing," I add, not wanting to explain any further.

Estelle smiles and squeezes my hand. "Do you think she's free now?" she asks, flicking through the diary.

4.) Return the stones

Rolling stones don't gather much moss. So I put them down. Drop them one by one. Let them fall for the last time.

Let there be no more skipping. No more betting and competing for the farthest post. No more flags to mark the winners. Now gravestones mark the ones we left behind. Who lost the race, but not by choice. Did we even choose to compete? We just started and the current took us away.

What was the furthest distance my stone ever skipped?
None of that matters anymore. Child's play. We closed the chapter. So many closed chapters. How many more chapters must we close before we lose ourselves altogether? How many chapters must open before we find ourselves again?

Return the stones to their rightful place. Let them drop to their death. One by one. Stones don't die. They knock against each other. Sharpen, chip, and break apart, smooth away rugged edges.

Let them lie at the base of river beds. Dams. Pathways. Let them exist outside of me. Let me never pick them up again. To carry in my hand. To hurt or harm. To put in my pockets. To throw. To skip and count the furthest distance.

How many stones have I gathered these past nine months? Collected from all the different places I find myself. Which hasn't been very many. Her garden. Mine. The bridge and the river. The church's gravel parking lot. The pebbles from the orchid somebody gave me. To say sorry. A stone for a stone. As if wrongs can be righted.

I've got about fifty here now. All different sizes. Collecting dust on my windowsill like souvenirs from past travels. An archaeologist trying to make sense of my surroundings. Where I come from. How I got here. Where I'm headed. It can all be traced back to these stones.

What is the most amount of stones you can fit in your pockets? That is the question I struggled to answer. No one can help me either. Too many variables.

What is the size of the stones?

Are they all the same size? Or different sizes? If they're different sizes they can fit together like a jigsaw. This complicates the equation.

How many pockets?

This depends on the clothing. How many items of clothing have pockets? How many pockets does an average garment have? A starting point would be, what was she wearing? Everyone uses vague terms "Jeans and a jacket". It was all so blurry they say, it's almost cruel of me to push for specifics.

Jeans have a standard four pockets. Two front, two back. That's easy. A jacket usually has two side pockets. For hands. But it can also have one or two breast pockets.

Men's jackets usually have top pockets, though. She could have borrowed her father's. Some jackets have hidden pockets inside the lining. This is where things get tricky. It's hard to identify the stones we cannot see. The stones we're not able to account for.

How many got lost along the way?

No one is able to dive the depths in search of some nameless, faceless elusive thing. No one knows what they're looking for.

And what of stone hard will?

How does one measure the weight of stubbornness or short-sightedness? The stone at the pit of our stomachs that propels us toward something, good or bad, the stone we cannot name but what keeps

us going towards a destination, unstoppable. The bigger question is, what can kill that stone?

Science always deals with variables. That's why it's so hard to get a concrete answer. Only a million different possible theories, each planting their own unique questions. Always the same destination, but so many different roads to get there it's easy to get lost.

So I return to the start. The start is also the end. These parallel roads that lead to the same place from different directions.

I carry these stones, my souvenirs of pain, in a rucksack on my back. They hit against my bones with every step. I think of it as a form of training. The military. Or a pilgrim on a journey to enlightenment. A lesson in endurance for the road that lies ahead.

Always a sucker for punishing myself. Purging my way through purgatory. I leave my car at the end of the road and perform my pilgrimage. To this bridge.

This bridge has birthed me. The new me. I stand above and look down. Now I have to forge my own path without a compass. Every compass I've tried in the past has been rigged.

Naomi always followed her heart. I just followed.

I open the bag and pour the stones out. One by one. Watch them fall. Follow each other down. Different weights, different sizes and shapes and colours. Return to the source. Watch the water break to welcome them. Ripple as it swallows them up.

Like the swine of Gadarene. Let the stones be my scapegoat.

I am not thinking of her right now. I catch myself in time. It's a slippery slope the way thoughts provoke one another. How memories slide into one, never ending montage.

This moment is not about her. It's about me. This bridge. It's about me choosing a side. A direction.

Let me always choose to stay on this side of the bridge.

Let me resist the currents' tug of war.

Let me stop running away and towards every little thing.

Let me search for a centre.

Let me stay still for a moment.

Long enough to appreciate life's gravity. To ponder its push and pull.

And what of the small stone at the pit of my stomach keeping my feet on the ground?

Let me hold on to that stone only. Let me search for a name for it. A purpose for it. Let me fight for a space for it. Let me never stop fighting.

5.) Return home

I think of all the times I've turned my back on these two parallel pillars of stone. Looking back in my rearview mirror. The last glimpse of home. Feel the rope connecting me to those I love – those on the other side of the bridge – pull and stretch. Longer and frailer as the numbers on my odometer increase, slowly, consistently. A piece of prestik getting thinner and thinner until it snaps in two.

Leaving is always a liminal space. A Venn diagram where your heart is always in the middle, overlapping. Torn. The tear creates a third circle. A void. A void you live inside. I've gotten so good at leaving and returning I may as well be the wind circling. A tornado destroying everything in my path until I self-destruct.

Underneath this bridge I am standing on, this bridge she jumped over, this bridge I'm about to leave, are scribbled the words, in ten-year-old graffiti, *Alex and Charlie 4eva*. Maybe they're not there anymore. We outgrew the words so I've never had the need to check.

A time before Naomi entered the picture that changed the narrative. A time when it was just Alex and Charlie. Two parallel lines, until a third line suddenly formed a triangle. Maybe the natural elements, like a prophecy, slowly degraded each painted particle. Years of moisture like tears hitting at the same spot until the letters started to fall away one by one. Until I felt it best I left the triangle for the sake of the two lines.

Until some angst-filled teenager came around and sprayed FUCK U over our narrated fantasy. As angry teenagers do. Angry because dreams turned out to be just dust. Elusive as the clouds in the sky when you grow up and learn they're just vapour. Angry because our bridges failed to serve their purpose of being a life raft.

It's easy to stand here on this bridge and look over at the water beneath and imagine a different outcome. Rewrite the story differently. There can be many different variables, but one common denominator.

If I write Alex out of the story it's just Naomi and I. No third complication. No reason for me to leave. *The two friends lived happily ever after*.

But I don't want to write Alex out of the story. I'm too invested in Alex. He, like Naomi, is too much a part of me to give up.

If Alex stays, the only other option is to write myself out of the story. Scratch my name out and replace it with Naomi. *Alex and Naomi 4eva*. Maybe the paintwork would stick.

So I left. Then Naomi jumped. And those words suddenly, like a prophecy, came true.

Now I'm back on this bridge with water gushing below me and truck engines droning beyond me. Thinking about beginnings and endings and the writing on the wall she jumped over, wondering if she ever read it. Those words that suddenly hold no weight or future in my heart.

A discarded Simba chips packet flaying in the wind, falls into the water; is swept away by the current that never changes direction. Only goes forward. With everything and everyone in its path. This current that doesn't discriminate against waste. No separate lanes for plastic, paper or glass. It just gathers and gathers all the misfits and collects them in a sloshy slump in the ocean's surf. Displaced, but never destroyed. Pollution in its purest form.

It's just Alex and me now. The circle is closing in on us. And what do we do with it? Do we escape the circle? Do we turn on each other? Or do we turn to each other? Cling to each other as a sense of comfort? Or run away from the constant reminder of it all? Like I've been running all my life.

Or do we walk around the periphery, slowly, carefully, reacquainting ourselves with the walls of our new home.

It's time to leave this bridge one more time. And not just because the sky is spinning the muted shades of pink, purple and blue into a sheet of fire turning everything to silhouette. It's not just the birds' soft singing; it's the memories – some good, some bad, some confusing, some unbearable – that are ushering me out. Away from the site I keep returning to relive them.

It's time to accept the bridge for what it is. A failed life line. And stop rearranging my memories into a net in the hopes that it would catch her. It's time to accept the irony. Learn to smile at it, even when it pangs at my heart.

It's time to leave, but this time, in the other direction. Turn right, and not left. Go back. Home. To pick up the fragments of memories. Use them to forge a new path, forward.

This time, I'm going to stay. To make up for all the time I've lost, running. Running away from the truth. From all of our truths.