

**Between Sentences**

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## **Abstract**

My stories explore different forms, including flash fiction. Some use the fairy tale form to combine fiction and non-fiction in order to reach the essence of the story. In this I am influenced by Kate Bernheimer, who speaks of the “flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic and normalized magic” of traditional fairy tales. A number of stories are set in the places I worked as a newspaper reporter. Here I use my old press reports as starting points for the real or imagined story behind the news – often involving miscommunication, dominance, exploitation, the tension between isolation and belonging, and the nuances of family relationships.



## CONTENTS

The Lesson	7
Displays	9
Rapunzel	11
Movement	17
Petronella	19
Hugo & the Lynx	21
Genesis	25
Ugly Duckling	27
The Log Book	29
What you Learn from your Father	31
Skin	35
Riptide	39
A Garden Full	41
I was Wearing Jeans	43
Stone Cold	47
Carousel	53
Betrayal	57
What Nombuyiselo Said	61
The Good Housekeeping Magazine Quiz	67
Hypocrites	73
Notes in A & S	77
The Game Farm	79
Other Mothers	81
Home Coming	83
Rosalind	85
Swimming with Crocodiles	87
Soft Black Shoes	89
Candlelit	91
Danger Point	93



## The Lesson

Once a British oboe player came to the City of Roses. It wasn't what he expected. There were no wild animals. People either spoke in harsh guttural accents that he found difficult to understand or whispered in a language of complex sound formations and clicks.

He didn't pass a single rose bush on his daily walk from the university to the performing arts complex in town. It took an hour. For most of the way he seemed to be the only pedestrian. Cars with one or two occupants sped past followed by old buses which were filled to capacity.

It was always a relief to arrive at the rehearsal and slip into the chair beside an elderly oboist, between the flutes and clarinets. The conductor would give him a nod to play an A so the other instruments could check their tuning.

The orchestra appreciated his presence. The concert master shuffled the schedule to include a series of oboe concertos. The programme notes flagged his achievements with the Leeds College Orchestra and Gilbert and Sullivan societies. Audiences leaned forward to listen and clapped and cried bravo. He bowed and played, and played and bowed. Grey-haired matrons described his technique as flawless and his musicality as imaginative and touching. Everyone must know you are here, the conductor said.

A newspaper reporter from the English-language newspaper came to see him. She was young and soft. She asked him questions and wrote down everything he said in her notebook. She looked into his eyes.

I don't know much about the oboe, she said. I only played the recorder, badly, tell me more.

He said the oboe was a double-reed wind instrument with a compass of two and a half octaves from B flat below middle C. But when he could see she didn't understand he spoke about double reeds instead. He told her they were attached to the mouthpiece and determined the quality of an oboe's sound. Serious oboists made their own reeds. There were French, English, German and Dutch methods of fashioning the cane. He swore by the American way which he learnt from an Israeli pupil of the French-born American oboist Louis-Marius Speyer, who had died recently aged 90.

The oboe player imported his cane from France. It took him a fortnight to get a new reed working properly. On average – when he circulated three to four double reeds – it would last only four weeks. His French oboe was six years old.

The reporter asked about his family and he said his father had listened to classical music and taken him to concerts. As a boy he sang in the choir and played the guitar, recorder and trumpet. Somewhere in his mid-teens he took up the oboe. He studied law for a short while, but hated it and made music his career.

He was a serious man – tall and thin with glasses, a moustache and curly hair cut short – but he made a joke and she laughed. He looked at her and she smiled. He talked until she stopped asking questions and then she left.

After his rehearsal ended he walked to the newspaper's building in the centre of town. He hesitated outside, polished his spectacles, checked his short-sleeved white shirt was tucked in and then he went up to the reception desk. He gave the reporter's name and she came downstairs.

Is there a problem, she asked. I'm on deadline.

The oboe player cleared his throat. Are you free tonight? I'm playing Handel's oboe sonata. It will give you a marvellous introduction to the instrument. And then I could buy you dinner.

She looked at him blankly.

There is something between us, he said. This morning, when we were speaking, I could feel it.

I was interviewing you, she said.

She went back to her typewriter and finished her report on the retiring postmaster. He was a lovely man. The editor declared it the article of the week and gave her R10.

The paper ran eleven paragraphs on the oboe player the next day. There were very few mistakes.



## Displays

Her trolley keeps clipping the edges of shelves as she turns a corner, slightly dislodging boxes at the bottom of promotional displays. She goes to two shops. The nudging and bashing has nothing to do with the breadth of the aisles or the faulty steering of the trolleys. She wishes a tower of tins would appear, instead of these built-in shelves of metal, these castles of cardboard. She would aim her trolley carefully to hit the most stable and dependable tin of the lot. And as the whole pyramid teetered and collapsed in a clattering mass which drowned out the in-store radio – and all the better if someone was hurt; all the better if it was her own blood – and people came rushing and asked *What happened? Are you all right?* she would answer truthfully *I'm not sure. No.*



## Rapunzel

### I

Not so long ago, after many fertility treatments, a prince was born to the king and queen of a gated estate. The queen had longed for a baby and spent hours gazing at her tiny son. The king had yearned for an heir to his cryogenic storage bank and took his friends marlin fishing for a week to celebrate.

The little boy grew up with everything he needed. He had a puppy to cuddle, a kitten to stroke, horses and motorcycles to ride, a faux castle with real towers and turrets to explore, and every electronic device his heart could desire.

He was called Rapunzel, but everyone called him Rapzie. When he was little his golden curls stood out around his head like a sunflower. As he grew older his hair grew brighter and thicker and straighter and longer and every morning his nanny would weave it into a thick gold rope which hung between his shoulders. When he was eight the plait reached his coccyx, when he was twelve it touched the floor, and when he was sixteen, he could wrap it around his waist ten times.

The king and queen argued about their son's hair. "One day someone is going to grab Rapzie's plait and pull him off his motorbike," the king fussed. But the queen had helmets and leather jackets custom-made to accommodate the royal mane.

The prince was good at everything. He soaked up Maths and Science and knew all about drones and missiles. He rode the wildest stallion and laughed with delight when it tried to buck him off. He won every running race and trounced his peers at target shooting and motocross events.

But Rapzie's favourite part of the day were the two hours he spent with the king's master baker, Yaasiin, and his son, Bashiir, in the kitchen tower. Under Yaasiin's patient tutelage, Rapzie and Bashiir, kneaded sourdough, fashioned intricate pastries studded with chocolate and fruit, and twirled meringues into dragons. The prince would lose track of time until his mother called: "That's long enough Rapzie, it's time for cello practice."

One day the king introduced him to a princess from another gated estate. She had blood red lips, gleaming ebony hair and a father who owned Russian platinum mines. "This is Ludmilla, who will be your bride," the king said. Rapzie ran to his motorbike and sped away for the rest of the day. The king laughed. "Give him a few years and you'll be the one trying to run away," he winked at Ludmilla and her relatives. But the king was angry. The queen consoled him. "You were also shy the first time you met me," she said.

The girls in Rapzie's estate gazed at him through their lashes and wore their tightest jeans and highest heels every day. They hung around motocross finish lines and draped themselves over the horses' paddock, begging for selfies with him. Rapzie waved and smiled at them all.

On his eighteenth birthday, after everyone had drunk too many shooters, the king went up to Rapzie. “You are a man now, son,” he said. “It is time for you to marry Ludmilla before someone else does.” Rapzie went pale and asked to be excused. “He did eat a lot of cake,” the queen murmured.

The prince stayed in his room for three days, eating nothing and drinking only water. On the fourth day the king stormed in like a hurricane. “Please Dad, I don’t want to marry anyone,” Rapzie said. “Lock him in the security tower with no phone or laptop until he signs this marriage contract,” the king boomed. And the queen sobbed as the king’s bodyguards dragged a listless Rapzie up five flights of winding stairs and locked him in a small cold cell.

Rapzie lay on the hard bed with his eyes closed, rising only to return uneaten plates of food. On his third day in the tower he woke at dawn and shuffled to the small window. He leaned out and watched an eagle soaring above the trees and sadly turned his head to look back at the castle, his prison. Just then a flash of light caught his eye. Bashiir was waving frantically from the window of the kitchen tower, turning a spoon to catch the glint of the early morning sun.

Rapzie waved back. Then he ran to the table and scribbled a message on the back of the marriage contract. He swiftly unwound his plait from his waist and tied the contract to the tuft of hair at the end. Leaning out of the window he swirled his plait like a lasso and let it fly in the direction of the kitchen tower. The contract worked loose in the motion, but Bashiir caught the end of Rapzie’s plait and held on, half hanging out of the window, arms stretched.

And this was how the king found them when he crossed the courtyard – on his way to catch an early morning flight – and saw the contract fluttering down. The king went pale as he read his son’s message. “Get those traitors deported,” he bellowed, pointing at the kitchen tower. And six security guards rushed up to collect Bashiir and his father.

The king himself set off to confront Rapunzel. He mounted the stairs two at a time and arrived at the top wheezing and puce with rage. A guard unlocked the door and the king blasted in. But he stopped when he saw the golden rope leading from the door handle to a tight bright coil around the neck of the body on the floor.

## II

Once there was a girl with sad green eyes. She was hairy. She had bushy eyebrows, a dark shadow above her lip, long dark hairs on her arms and legs. The hair on her head was as straight and coarse as a horse's. She plaited it into a long thick rope.

Other girls plucked and waxed and shaved. Not Rapunzel. She saw sad eyes in the mirror. She never saw the spiky tufts sprouting from her moles.

Rapunzel lived with her mother and father and little brother. She lived in a tower. Not all the time, just when her father thundered. He could thunder at any time. They were sitting at the table, eating pasta when he boomed: *Why is there never any meat in this house.*

Her mother's grey hair coiled into a tight bun.

Her brother shrivelled up.

Rapunzel climbed the steps to her tower. It was a steep, twisting climb to the room at the top. The walls were white. The window was tiny. She watched the blue sky. An eagle's wing. Her father pulled her back with one hard yank of her plait. Her eyes splashed.

Rapunzel spoke in ellipses. Her eyes finished her sentences. So when she told a boy: *My father...* the boy kissed her. And when she opened her eyes afterwards and said: *But my father...* the boy passed her a roll-up and she sucked the smoke in.

Her father erupted when he saw Rapunzel's report. The grades. The she-could-do-betters. Rapunzel crept up the steps to her tower. She lay on an iron bed under a white sheet. She watched the clouds puff. A unicorn's horn. She cried when her father seized her plait.

Rapunzel's mother uncoiled her grey bun. She hugged her daughter: *Far away. A school. A safe place. A fortress.*

Rapunzel walked through iron gates and down brick corridors. She stared at the ground. Her hands hid under her jersey, her socks sank down, her plait drooped down her back.

It was a fortress for girls but there were male teachers. There was one teacher. He taught music. He sat beside Rapunzel on the piano stool. He picked up her plait as it brushed the floor. He put the tuft in his mouth.

There were other music students. They called the teacher by his first name. Rapunzel looked at them. She said *Luke ...* The girls understood.

Rapunzel looked for a tower. She saw one in the trees. The guards called her back. They said: *Don't wander off.* They said: *Stay together.* The teacher said: *Time to practice your scales.*

Rapunzel served her time at the fortress. Then she packed a backpack and flew away.

She went to an island surrounded by turquoise sea. The sun streaked honey into her hair; ochred her breasts and belly. A man with one glass eye touched the hairs around her nipples,

the thatch sprouting from her arm pits. He said *Where I come from* – Rapunzel looked at him and said *And ...* And he wrapped her wet plait around both his hands.

There were days of sun. There were nights of heat. Rapunzel longed for a cool quiet tower. She searched. She walked all over the island. The buildings were low. The houses were made of reeds and palms.

She met Adam under a palm tree. He was drinking something cold. He unplaited her thick rope and brushed her hair until she glowed. They flew to a city far away. He fed her Tofu and organic vegetables. Adam knew how things should be done. When they weren't he brushed so hard her scalp bled. Rapunzel hurried up the stairs to her tower. She lay on a narrow bed. She watched the grey sky. Adam banged on the door. Rapunzel said *But...* But Adam was holding the brush.

Rapunzel's mother telephoned. She said: *Your father*. She said: *Gravely ill*. Rapunzel went home. Her brother did not. Her father lay on his bed, his voice weak, his hands dry, his eyes wet. There was another man in the room: her parent's tenant, Martin.

Her father lay in his bedroom when Rapunzel married Martin in the garden. Her mother wore a camellia in her tight white bun. She rushed inside to check on her husband. Rapunzel rose to join her but Martin put his fingers between the criss-crosses of her plait. The criss-crosses studded with frangipani. Martin kept her by his side. Rapunzel lifted her green eyes to his. She said *I ...*

Rapunzel and Martin moved to a little house. They spent their honeymoon planting a garden. Martin picked leaves. He said smell this. Rapunzel inhaled. She learnt the names of wild orchids. They swam naked in a river as black as her pubic hair. Her plait floated behind her. They made love on the river bank. Martin threaded his fingers through her plait.

Rapunzel's stomach grew. Her father died. Her stomach grew again. Her mother died. Rapunzel and Martin moved to the cheapest house they could find. There was no garden. The babies were babies. They cried. They grew. Martin raged. He wielded a wooden spoon. He insisted Rapunzel use it too. Rapunzel said *You're...* Martin stared her down.

Rapunzel could see her tower, but it was so high. It was so far away. There were so many twisting steps. There was another load of washing. There was another dirty nappy. There were two sets of chubby arms asking to be held. There was a husband with an erection. A husband holding a spoon.

Rapunzel trimmed her hair. She got thin. She cut it short. She got thinner. She gave her baby one last feed before they cut off her breast. Before her hair fell out. Before she was as pale and smooth as an egg. She lay on a steel bed under a cotton sheet. She watched the golden sky through the window. The flash of a kingfisher.

### III

This is a story about a school girl and a taxi driver.

The school girl was tall and strong. She twisted her hair into braids. Every fortnight she unplaited her cornrows and washed and conditioned her hair. She sat in front of a square of mirror with a jar of oil and a comb to work on a new style. The cornrows travelled back from her forehead like the rays of the sun. Sometimes they were lightning bolts. Sometimes they cross hatched. She did the front and sides of her head, and her mother completed the back.

The first time the taxi driver saw her she had created a spiral above each temple. He hooted and waved. The next time was during the school holidays. She had weaved extensions into an elaborate top knot like a lacy crown. Every time the taxi driver drove over the mountains to her coastal town he looked for her. The girl lived on a hill above the national road. He drove up and down the rutted streets around the high school until he found her. He hung out his window and called to her.

The school girl ignored him. But you can only ignore a charming man for so long. Her head was singing with his words. The day came when he made her laugh. The day came when she told him her name was Zel, when she showed him where she lived.

Zel's mother and grandmother disapproved of her older suitor. But at least he had a job. He was kind enough to bring food when he visited. He wasn't violent. He didn't drink. He only drove his taxi to their town once a week. They could get on with their lives in-between.

Zel was a bright student. She studied hard. She enjoyed maths and science. She got a good matric. But there was only enough money to educate her brother. There was only enough to educate him if Zel got a job in a restaurant kitchen.

The taxi driver collected Zel from work once a week. She untied her head scarf and shook out her long braids as soon as he drove up hooting. She gathered them into a ponytail or a bun or a French plait. Her colleagues teased her about her taxi driver. They made jokes when she put on weight.

On her days off Zel ran errands for her mother. It wasn't easy to get to the clinic. She might have missed an injection. She might have missed a few periods. When she missed a few more she took a day's leave. She joined the clinic queue.

The nurse admired Zel's braids while she waited for the result of the urine test. She did an internal examination. She thought Zel was about six months pregnant. The nurse needed to do one more test, she needed Zel's permission, she needed Zel to understand what the test was for, what it meant to be positive.

The sun left Zel's heart. She went home and unbraided her hair. She borrowed an electric razor from her neighbour and shaved her head.

People thought Zel didn't want the baby. Don't worry I'll support the child, the taxi driver said, but she wouldn't look at him. Don't worry we will help you, her mother and grandmother said, but Zel turned away.

A crone who lived nearby saw Zel's shorn head. She saw her haunted eyes. The crone was a retired nurse who helped out at the clinic. She took Zel aside. There was a potion, a new potion. Was she willing to try it? She would be the first one in town. The crone took Zel back to the clinic. The nurse mentioned strange words. She rattled off acronyms. She spoke about doses. One now, one when the baby was born, others at intervals afterwards.

Zel stayed away from her friends, she didn't speak to her colleagues, she was sure they were whispering about her.

The crone talked to Zel. She said don't seal yourself off.

Zel's belly was so big it was uncomfortable to lean forward over the basin. She needed her mother to help wash her hair. She leant back and closed her eyes while her mother massaged her scalp. Then she sat down in front of her square of mirror and picked up her comb. She told her mother she wanted to create a simple design of cornrows running from the left side of her head to her right. She told her mother about the positive test. When the last braid had been plaited Zel no longer felt alone.

Zel's baby was small and sickly. Zel loved him. The taxi driver came to visit. The taxi driver had lost weight. He looked at his skinny son. He looked away. He sent money now and then.

Zel took her baby to the clinic. The nurse gave him the potion as directed. He had the test when he was bigger. He got the wrong result.

Zel considered shaving her head again but the clinic doctor said there was new research, there were more potions. There was a potion to give the baby every day. There was hope.

There were mothers who died. There were babies who died. There were others who survived. There were mothers who grew stronger. Mothers like Zel. She got a government job with medical aid. Her grandmother cared for the child while she worked. Her grandmother gave the little boy his potion, twice a day. She never asked what it was for.

Zel took the potion too. She stayed strong and healthy. She wound her long braids around her head like a halo. She tied them into loops on the top of her head. She met a kind man. They had tests, they followed instructions, they had a healthy daughter.

The taxi-driver died. Zel was invited to his funeral. She created a Mohawk of bunches of braids – a mountain range – with cornrows streaming down to her hairline. Zel and her son travelled a long way to a neighbouring country. They were welcomed by the taxi driver's family. They sat beside his coffin. They sat beside his children. They sat beside his wife, beside his other women. The women didn't speak about the driver. They didn't speak about the plague. They whispered about Zel's braids.



## Movement

The sisters turned their faces towards the sun. She shone weakly in the morning, hurrying them through their cereal, cracking eggs, buttering toast. They played under her warmth; dressed and undressed their flat chested dolls in the tiny jerseys she knitted. They played until harmony stretched thin and snapped, and irritation swelled up into screaming-scratching-biting. The sun blazed down on them; threatened to bash their heads together; bashed her own head against the wall. The sisters drooped their petals and let droplets of water splash to the floor. Their leaves wilted. Slowly the scorching heat lost its intensity; the light faded to a mellow gold. Long before the sun had set the sisters were tucked into bed. They soaked up the last rays, listened to stories and songs, begged for one more song and chose the very longest song of all. Then the sun went out. The sisters whispered crossly until one closed her petals. The other stared at the kittens on the darkening curtains; eyeballed the wooden monkeys hanging from the pelmet with arms of wire and coir.

\*

She was a compass. Her head was positive and all negativity leaked away through her feet. (Some spurted from her mouth, especially when their father was around.) When they were young they clung to her force field – her breasts, her arms, her eyes, her voice. They stuck to the compass when she took the rubbish out, made a cup of tea, went to the bathroom. She kept them close, devoured their soft skin, relished their excitement over garden snails and rain puddles, soothed away sibling jealousies.

She couldn't say when she began losing her power. Her force field weakened gradually until suddenly one day her poles were reversed. They veered away from her voice, her eyes, her touch; turned to look out the side windows in silence as she drove them home from school.

\*

At springtide they rolled in by bus and car. A crescendo of exploding laughter, friends, music, action, excitement. They rose and peaked and crashed, again and again. The house was swept along in a barrel of churning washing machines, gnashing blenders, spitting pans; bulging fridges; pulsing speakers. They deposited a scum of jackets, ties, surf boards, guitars, shoes, bags, books, laptops, phones, sunglasses, keys, hats, clothes, bedding, towels, gym bags, bottles, deodorant, hair gel, skin products, sun cream as far as they reached.

They sucked up their detritus and withdrew. The house was quiet, their rooms neat, beds made, desks cleared. Clean towels hung in the shower. The basin was dry. The tooth mug empty. The fridge was full of space and light.



## **Petronella**

Let's just say Petronella didn't look surprised when she heard that Mr Roy had died on the operating table.

Petronella, who was born blue and was always a little slow – special, her father called her – grew up into a languid young woman with heavy hair and thick legs and a lazy grace that trailed behind her as she walked around town delivering letters for a legal firm.

Let's say she had a letter for a company owned by Mr Roy, a loving husband and doting father who liked to stand close to his secretaries and breathe down their necks while they were working; a man who encouraged widows to call him if they were feeling lonely; a man who sold massage chairs on the side and urged women to come to his office for a free introductory session.

Let's say that Mr Roy invited Petronella into his office while he signed her delivery book and that he looked at her kindly over his glasses, like her dad used to do when he was alive; that he asked her where she lived, how she liked her job, what her star sign was and whether she had a boyfriend.

Let's say his questions reminded Petronella of her long conversations with her father, and how she would watch him practice his pharmaceutical presentations, and how afterwards they would look out at the night sky and he would say "Wish upon a star," and then he would say "Be careful what you wish for"; and Petronella realised anew how much she missed talking to her father; and so, when Mr Roy asked her to come back at lunchtime so they could talk some more, she went back, carrying her lunch box with a sandwich and a drinking yoghurt.

Let's say Mr Roy ushered her into his office, locked the door, slipped the key into his pocket, and asked her what she wanted to do; that when she said she wanted to talk he came up to her and tried to kiss her, and when she turned away he said "Oh you don't like kissing on the mouth" and then unbuttoned her shirt, unhooked her bra and put his hands over her breasts; that she was too shocked and frozen to scream, and when he told her to take off her jeans she obeyed; and when he told her to lie down she did, because of the way he said it.

Let's say he took a condom out of his pocket, put it on, raped her and said "Thank you" while wiping himself with a tissue.

Let's say she dressed and left and tried so hard not to cry at the office but that her colleagues eventually took her home and she sat in the bath and scrubbed and scrubbed; that she realised too late she should have gone to the police and a doctor before she washed; that when an attorney from her office came with Petronella to lay a charge of rape, the state prosecutor told them there wasn't enough evidence to go to court (and anyway the prosecutor had the impression that Petronella had played along with Mr Roy).

Let's say Petronella had nightmares every night and slept with a cell phone in her hand and a kitchen knife under her pillow; that she lived in constant fear of seeing Mr Roy again; that

she felt she deserved what had happened; that she wanted to kill herself; that she was very tired all the time; that one day she saw a newspaper photograph of Mr Roy handing over a giant cheque and she took her ballpoint pen in her fist and scribbled across his face until his head was a seething mass of black, and then she stopped, stared into the middle distance, and holding the pen correctly and pressing down firmly, made four precise crosses over his heart, liver, appendix and gall bladder; and when she put down her pen her eyes were clear.

## Hugo & the Lynx

Hugo visited an Oudtshoorn wildlife ranch and spoke to the owner. He wanted a lynx. Not all men would be suited to keeping a lynx, but Hugo was tall with strong shoulders. He had thick eyebrows and size twelve feet.

Hugo had twenty/twenty vision. Once in the Karoo he saw a leopard. We were having sundowners in a Gamkaberg camp when we heard a snort of alarm. Hugo stared at the cliff. Klipspringer, he said. I got up to fetch the binoculars. By the time I returned it was too late. The buck was gone. Hugo said it had moved so fast it seemed to be flying, or falling. The pursuing animal was almost vertical. Baboon, I guessed. But Hugo shook his head. Its tail had been the length of its body: a leopard.

The leopard was Hugo's favourite animal but he knew he couldn't keep one as a pet. That's where the lynx came in. A lynx would be almost as good. A lynx would be a more manageable size, as big as some dogs. A few weeks later the wildlife ranch rang. A caracal cub was available. A few hundred rand for five kilograms of tawny fur with black tufty ears, eyes outlined with kohl and sharp white teeth.

Like the lynx, Hugo was solitary. He was a loner. He spent hours out fishing on the Knysna lagoon by himself. He waited until the grunters were tailing in a shallow spot, then he grabbed his little yellow boat and rowed off. He returned with supper and an empty beer bottle. It was always a bottle, never a can because it's wasn't as easy to piss into a can.

One night he hooked a large stingray. He was drinking a bottle of Calitzdorp Port that time, floating near Land's End, when the ray took his bait. At first he thought he had hooked a kob, but there was a strange splash, an upwelling of water. A few minutes later he realised the boat was being pulled out towards the open sea in slow steady loops. Hugo looked down. He saw the edge of the stingray's wing-flaps outlined in phosphorescence as it swam underneath him. It was as wide as the boat. The ray worked its way free at the Heads. Hugo returned home wide eyed. The next day he used a jigsaw to cut a piece of hardboard into the shape of a stingray. He painted a miniature fisherman in a rowing boat on the edge of its body.

Hugo was an artist. Soon after we got together he made a mobile with tiny tilapia he'd found on the banks of Hartbeespoort Dam. He dried them and sprayed them with silver paint. He didn't ask if I liked the mobile. He arrived at the newspaper and put it up above my desk. The vegetarian sub editor wrinkled her nose. After a few summer thunderstorms the fish swelled. When they started to stink I took the mobile down. I wrapped it in a plastic bag and stowed it in my desk drawer.

Hugo didn't go out fishing the night after the wildlife ranch phoned. We sat on the deck. The moon was bright. The lagoon lapped like bathwater. Hugo was happy. He spoke quietly about how he would take the lynx for walks around Leisure Isle at night when the tide was low. It would follow him everywhere and sleep on the kitchen porch or under the *taaibos* near the rowing boat. It had been born in captivity so was accustomed to humans. He would give it a

bottle and raw meat as it grew older. He made it sound a bit like a dog. But lynx were different, Hugo said. Their droppings were grey and turned white in the sun. They were opportunistic hunters. They ate domestic cats.

I stared at Hugo. We had a cat called Sugar. I got him in Johannesburg. Hugo's cousin phoned me one day and said she had found a stray tabby kitten with a squirrel tail. Sugar hid under my bed for days but grew into the friendliest cat. When I moved to Knysna I brought him with me. He never liked living on Leisure Isle half as much as Yeoville. The lagoon startled him and the coastal sun burnt cancerous growths into his pink nose and white face.

Hugo and Sugar never really hit it off. Hugo liked kissing cats. He said their fur smelt like musk and wild sage. He would get down on all fours and fight with them. He'd let them catch on to his arm and drag them across the floor or shake them playfully until they sank their claws into his flesh. He was always surprised when he saw the blood. His favourite sparring partner was our friend's cat Yagar who scratched his face more than once. Sugar didn't meet these needs. He didn't like rough games, and Hugo said he was too fluffy to kiss.

After Hugo cancelled his order for the caracal cub, he avoided our cat, as if Sugar was somehow to blame for being lynx food. He spent more time alone on the lagoon. He rowed back long after I had fallen asleep.

A few weeks later Hugo arrived home with a furry ball. He pointed out the stripes, spots and russet tint to the backs of the ears typical of the African wild cat. He called him Blaasop, though he looked nothing like a puffer fish to me. As soon as he'd grown a bit Hugo dipped Blaasop's feet into shallow pools at low tide to acclimatise him to salt water. They'd go for walks at night and Blaasop would return with wet legs and burs matted into his coat.

Sugar took to Blaasop from the start, they groomed each other and sat on twin gateposts as regal as any lions. Sugar never joined in when Blaasop wrestled with Hugo. He would wait on the upturned boat when they disappeared on their nightly strolls.

Sugar was sitting on the boat one afternoon when two Jack Russells attacked him. Hugo and Blaasop arrived too late to intervene. Hugo never forgot the look of terror on the cat's face. Blaasop was next. Hugo couldn't speak after he found him under a Milkwood tree, perfectly intact except for a hole bored into his belly. The evidence pointed to a genet.

Hugo vowed no more cats. We moved to the other side of the estuary, further away from the ocean and closer to the river. The vow didn't last. Our next two tabbies, both from Animal Welfare, died in quick succession: Jessie got fat and died on our bed. Crunchie was hit by a car.

I reminded Hugo, no more cats but he went back to Animal Welfare and returned with Doolie, the offspring of a pedigree Siamese mother and a roving tom, a silky silver tabby, a beauty with an ugly voice. As a kitten Doolie leapt out of an upstairs window to chase a bird and landed easily. He stalked a hadeda five times his size. Being neutered only seemed to increase his hunting lust. He ate everything he could find, bells around the neck were no deterrent. Doolie caught grasshoppers, lizards, striped mice, shrews, dormice and rats. He

brought the rats inside. He carried pigeons into the lounge and tormented them until the carpet was strewn with feathers. He killed and ate robins, drongos, doves and sunbirds. Hugo tied a dead sunbird around Doolie's neck to no effect. He prised open the cat's jaws and freed an olive thrush, waxbills, weavers and canaries. When Doolie killed a buff-spotted flufftail Hugo threw the cat into the frog pond. But Doolie had no concept of cause and effect. We bought more bells.

Doolie made us do strange things. Hugo went on an animal communication course. He learnt that you couldn't use words to tell animals what to do. You had to send them images. Everyone had to bring a photograph of a problem pet to the course, look deep into its pixilated eyes and send it pictures. Hugo tried to send Doolie an image of himself in the garden. In the image Hugo was standing very still, his head, shoulders and outstretched arms were covered with sunbirds.

Deep down Hugo believed Doolie was karma. Doolie had been sent to teach him a lesson. To punish Hugo for all the white-eyes, doves and rock pigeons he had shot with pellet guns. All the guinea fowl he had killed with shot guns. Hugo started releasing the fish he caught. He stopped fishing.

Doolie's appetite for killing, however, only increased. He often disappeared for whole nights on hunting expeditions. We had become accustomed to these absences but when he didn't return after two days we became concerned. We looked in cupboards. We made "Have you seen our cat" signs. We walked all the cat paths we knew, crawled under bushes, interrogated our neighbours. Hugo sent Doolie images. We phoned vets and Animal Welfare.

I emailed a cat psychic who asked for a photograph of Doolie and a bank deposit. She told me Doolie was fine. He was having fun with a black cat. He had just caught a mouse and was going to have a nap. He wasn't ready to come home yet. I wrote back and said, tell him we miss him. Tell him I'll open a tin of tuna when he returns.

Next she wrote that Doolie wanted to come home but he was injured. He was staying in a tiny house with people who gave him love. He was sleeping in the arms of a young girl. Hugo was watching the news one night when, behind the man being interviewed, he saw a little girl holding a silver tabby. Hugo said the cat looked right at him.

We kept going over and over our last night with Doolie. Hugo said it was while he was brushing his teeth that he heard a strangled screech. He went out onto the upstairs deck and looked out over the dark garden. But all he could hear were the frogs.

People came to us with their stories and theories. We lived three streets below a tree-covered hill that stretched to the sea and bordered on a nature reserve. Our neighbours listed the cats that had vanished in our suburb that year. There were seven or more, here one day then not. Some blamed owls, others eagles, but Hugo knew who the predator was. Walking in the *fynbos* bordering the plantation he had stopped to pick up a discarded beer bottle. That's when he saw the white segmented droppings matted with grey fur.





## Genesis

On the first day It followed Kholeka to the optometrist. When she was pinned behind a giant bionic moth spotted with dials and rotating lenses – and the specialist was twiddling and clicking to measure her astigmatism – It unleashed a migraine so intense Kholeka bashed her forehead against the phoropter. And while the optometrist fussed with tissues and Dettol, It sliced off a sliver of Kholeka's ear lobe.

On the second day It joined Rebecca as she stared at her computer screen, tapped buttons on her keyboard and kept her hand on the computer mouse so long that her arm went numb and her shoulder throbbed. And while she was searching YouTube for stretches to alleviate her agony It rushed up and gouged away a bit of her sagging right triceps.

On the third day It observed Ishmael delivering his presentation – his hair carefully gelled, shirt crisply ironed, conference-goers laughing at his introductory jokes. Then It clicked Its fingers and blood squirted from Ishmael's nose like two urgent streams of urine. As the auditorium erupted and the front rows emptied, It emerged from the wings and shaved a layer of tissue and stubble from Ishmael's nape.

On the fourth day It hovered as Zoë tossed and turned, panicking that she wouldn't be able to fall asleep before her baby woke for a feed. And if she didn't sleep she wouldn't have the energy to face her kindergarten class. And just as her baby began to mewl and Zoë's sleepless jaws parted in a leonine yawn, It hurriedly removed a juicy plug from inside her cheek.

On the fifth day It watched as Griffin sweated and pedalled his way through his spinning class, music pumping, lycra bottoms bobbing up and down, towels dripping, water bottles emptying. It waited until the instructor gave the order to reduce speed and begin the cool down, then It sent a crippling cramp into Griffin's left calf. While Griffin writhed on the floor, clutching his leg, It extracted a plump mole from his chin, roots and all.

On the sixth day It waited until Muriel was asleep before It unleashed just a few chicken mites to dance on her forehead and make her eyebrows twitch. Then It sent a phalanx of mites down one arm, across her stomach, into her groin, and down her legs. When Muriel leapt out of bed, switched on the lights, tore back the sheets and examined the mattress with a magnifying glass, It slunk in and cut out a quiver of her left thigh sprinkled with mite bites.

On the seventh day It went into an airless room with a desk and two chairs. It sat down at the desk and emptied Its ziplock bag of tissue and blood and moles and muscle and fat and left, locking the door behind It.

On the eighth day It rested.

On the ninth day It unlocked the door and prodded the fermenting soup of rancid bits and pieces with a 4B pencil. It tried to wait, but it couldn't resist lowering Its nose towards the putrid pile, and giving it just the briefest lick. And It found that it was good.



## Ugly Duckling

Isla was ripped out of her mother with a pair of tongs. Her skull was a strange shape. As a little girl she fell quiet and stared into space. “A wind blew through my head,” she said.

Isla looked different to her siblings. She tried to keep up with them but fell and skinned her knees. At school the nuns picked gravel out of her flesh. “Look where you are going,” they said. Isla looked but she couldn’t see the words on the blackboard.

An optometrist put her into a leather chair and switched off the lights. He brought his face close to hers and shone a torch into her pupils. He trapped her behind a metal machine, pushed her chin onto a cold shelf, hooked claws over her ears and clicked different circles of glass in front of her eyes. He made her read nonsensical letters on the wall, showed her circles and red and green rectangles, and asked her the same questions over and over: “Which one is clearer? This one or that one? Number one or number two?”

When Isla walked out wearing her first pair of spectacles the pavement tilted up to hit her. She clutched her mother’s arm. The buildings had hard-edges, the red man on the pedestrian traffic light flashed ominously, the people crossing the road frowned, the mannequins in shop windows had dead eyes.

At home the golden haze in the bathroom mirror had been replaced by a freckled face with fat cheeks and a skew fringe. Disappointment leaked down her cheeks. Her slanted plastic spectacles – blue on top, clear below – had thick glass that bulged out at the sides. They made her eyes look smaller, her teeth more crooked.

“You look ugly,” the schoolgirls said. The girls who said: “Your pigtails are as thin as paintbrushes.” “Your eyes are really small.”

Isla spent afternoons and weekends in her room reading. She studied so hard she won prizes. She studied so hard she needed new glasses: thicker lenses with round navy frames, then still thicker lenses with silver metal frames.

After she left school Isla received the gift of panoramic vision. Two silicon discs floating on films of tears let her see wherever she swivelled her eyes. As long as she returned her contact lenses to their case at night and soaked them in fresh solution, they would transform her every morning. No longer blinkered behind a wall of glass, she felt whole at last.

Isla sailed into the world. She bobbed her hair. She wore black coats and boots with pointy toes. She looked at books in universities covered with ivy. She looked at problems in cities with skyscrapers and tin shacks. She looked nearly as good as her siblings.

A tall man with an expense account bought Isla supper in a restaurant that was once a church. She looked up at the vaulted ceiling. She looked into his hooded eyes. He took her back to his flat. They stood on the balcony. They looked at the stars, at the pinprick planets of twenty/twenty vision. Isla searched for exploding fuzzy dandelions.



## Log Book

She kept a diary. A small wire-bound notebook. A log book really. *Charl looked at me today. Charl didn't look at me today.* Pages of entries.

They caught the same bus to school. To their separate schools.

Every morning – rain, frost or molten sun – the girl and her sister walked along York Road, turned right at Browne, then left at Prettyman, which led into Milner Road and the bus stop on the corner. They bickered all the way. It was worse in the winter when the pavements were white with frost. It was only fun to blow smoke rings for a while. Their knees turned blue between their bobby socks and navy tunics. Her sister called her Freakly. She called her sister a Chorbie Chicken – only once, but her sister never forgot.

At the bus stop the sisters would split up immediately and join their classmates from the Anglican girls' school. Charl went to the brother school across a road so vast it might as well have been at the opposite end of the City of Roses.

On Sundays his family and hers went to the cathedral. She would watch him sitting with his grown up sister and parents, his layered hair a beacon.

At the bus stop he spoke to the older girls, they laughed easily together, kidded each other. The older girls always got on the bus last, then headed straight for the long back seat. Charl got on after them. Polite.

It was an old bus, the kind with a snub nose. When it went fast enough for long enough the whole bus would shake and shimmy, sending ripples through her. She looked around to see if the others were feeling them too. Most were talking, some laughed, a few were silent. It was the kind of bus with a hinged door that folded in half lengthwise. You climbed two metal steps, then the steps turned a corner and you climbed two more up into the body of the bus with its plastic padded seats with metal rims.

It was after Charl had turned the corner and was climbing the top step that he looked straight into her eyes. She felt a charge. All day she floated, the charge blazed, pulsed, flickered. She tried to bring it back. She found an empty notebook. She wrote it down. *Charl looked at me.*

The next day he looked up at her again and looked away quickly. The day after that he kept his gaze on the floor as he walked towards the back of the bus, which was already moving, and he had to grab on to the metal rim of her seat as he passed by, brushing the padded shoulder of her blazer. The following day he forgot and looked into her eyes and she blushed. Variations on a theme. All carefully logged. *Charl didn't look at me today. Charl looked at me today.* He was small and neat and perfect, better looking than any pop star.

He called her Brigitte Bardot. She went red when she heard this. Not because she was beautiful, not with her thick glasses and fat face, but because of the way she flicked her

drooping side-parted hair out of her eyes. She went scarlet when she thought of him laughing about her to the older girls.

She overheard Charl talking about his school dance. He didn't know who to ask. You could always take Brigitte Bardot someone said. But she knew this was just a joke. He took the pretty sister of one of the older girls.

She stopped catching the bus the following year. They drove to school in her mother's new silver sedan with red velour seats. Her sister complained that she never had a chance to sit in front.

## What you Learn from your Father

1. Always tilt the glass before you pour beer, or coke.
2. Throw your head back and laugh as loud as you can.
3. Be the life and soul of the party, keep the drinks flowing, leap forward on both feet when you dance, thump your chest.
4. Don't touch yourself there.
5. The best braai chops are black and crispy.
6. The best dessert is melted ice-cream with bananas, syrup and honey.
7. The best meal in the world is lamb's head – especially the eyes – cooked all day in the kraal fire on your grandparents' first farm.
8. Begin with the outside set of cutlery.
9. When the meat is delicious eat with your hands.
10. Suck the marrow out of bones.
11. Suck your stomach in and insist that you are tall and good looking.
12. Tell your daughters they are gorgeous, and that no one can see their pimples.
13. Tell them they are more gorgeous when they lose weight and wear mascara.
14. Ladies look best with short hair.
15. Ladies should always wear perfume.
16. Medium-sized girls are built for tennis.
17. Never show your disappointment if your children don't inherit your talents.
18. You can play social tennis for the rest of your life.
19. *Quanta La Mera* is a terrific song.
20. So is *Sweet Caroline*.
21. *La Traviata* is a wonderful opera.
22. There are Afrikaners and then there are Anglicised Afrikaners. Your grandparents voted for the United Party and sent us to Catholic schools.
23. That driving inspector who failed you is a Nazi.
24. The Nationalist government is as bad as the Nazis.

25. Communism is worse than apartheid, no matter what you students say, and dagga is dangerous.
26. You can go for a walk with someone and say nothing.
27. You can go for a walk with someone and say just one thing:
28. Just because your younger sister is getting married, don't feel you must.
29. Speak to everyone you meet, everyone is interesting.
30. Everyone loves the smell of a pipe, especially when you're smoking rum and maple tobacco.
31. Slice biltong on the steering wheel with the penknife you use to clean your pipe.
32. Only give up smoking for one year: Begin again after you get so mad you overturn a tea tray on purpose.
33. It is wonderful when a daughter has a career.
34. It is more wonderful when a daughter gives up her career to settle down and raise children.
35. Always pay your taxes.
36. It's okay to have an accountant who moves figures around.
37. Never talk about a business partner who cheated you and died before you could take action.
38. Never talk about how much you miss working after you retire.
39. Never talk about the properties you have to sell when inflation erodes your investments.
40. Always have a nap in your favourite chair after supper, regardless of who is visiting.
41. Wake up just as guests are leaving and say: Hey, where's everyone going?
42. Say: Good night I love you, sleep tight I love you, good night I love you, love you, love you, to your children when they are small.
43. Say it when you kiss your visiting middle-aged daughters good night too.
44. Tap your thumb and middle finger together when you are thinking.
45. Jiggle your leg when you are restless.
46. Rummy is a bloody stupid game.
47. It's never okay to lose, even when your young grandsons are your opponents.
48. Make a clear-eyed decision not to have an operation to mend a heart valve.
49. Only mention as an afterthought that you don't have medical aid anyway.



50. Never tell your children you can't breathe.
51. Say: Let's rest here a while.
52. Say: Look at these flowers, look at these trees.
53. Die quietly in your favourite chair after pulling out a weed.
54. Make your last words: Well, that's done.
55. Leave your children with no unfinished business, except the wish that they'd spoken to you more.



## Skin

I hear about your skeleton while I am making muffins. I switch off the whirring hand-mixer, press the phone to my ear: Your skeleton, found in the Knysna forest.

I think you must be one of the women who vanished in the dense yellowwood forests which hide elephants, which swallowed a crashed helicopter for seven years. Maybe you are Seteline, the missing teenage schoolgirl. Or Rosalind, the UCT drama student who disappeared in 1969. I see my by-line on the newspaper's front page.

I listen some more. You are male. Your skeleton was found in a plantation of evenly spaced pine trees beside the national road.

I put the muffins in the oven. Set the timer. Check whether my son needs help with his homework. Sit down at my desk and make two calls.

The police have opened an inquest docket into your death but suspect no foul play. The plantation manager gives me your name, Gert, your age, thirty. He says his men were cutting saplings when they found you. I email five paragraphs to a Cape Town newspaper. I collect my older son from hockey.

Late at night, I look out at the dark trees in the garden. I can see you. Your flesh consumed by animals and insects, your bones bleached by the elements, scattered by the wind and birds of prey. I can see the porcelain veneer on your teeth, your black leather jacket with all its zips – your identity book in one pocket, a Nokia phone in another, an MP3 player in a third.

Through medical friends I learn more. You had been missing for a year. You were a patient at the Serenity drug rehabilitation clinic outside Sedgefield.

I drive northwest up a long tarred road and along a sandy track. Serenity is a motley collection of buildings on the edge of a plantation. I sit on a brown couch in reception and wait for Gus, your psychologist. I watch six residents on the stoep outside. They seem to be shifting felled pine trees from one pile to another.

I spend two hours on that couch. I listen to Gus, his quiet voice. I change tapes twice. Gus consults a cardboard folder on his lap. Jarryd and Monty join us at the end. Recovering addicts turned team leaders and counsellors, they stand beside the couch, share a few memories. They talk slowly, pausing between sentences.

I drive home with a bursting head, collect my sons from friends, hear them arguing over whose turn it is on the computer. I pour brandy over the Christmas cake, wrap presents. A week later I prepare Christmas dinner for my family and in-laws – seafood curry just to be different.

I walk on the beach alone and think of you. What I know about you. Fragments compressed between a thin cardboard file. Gus says you never told your story. You gave him the bare minimum, the bones:

Junior school: Parents divorce. Attention Deficit Disorder diagnosis. Takes Ritalin. High School: Smokes cannabis daily. Experiments with LSD and mandrax. Arrest for mandrax possession. Two months in jail awaiting trial. Receives a suspended sentence. Two months in a state psychiatric and drug rehabilitation centre. Passes matric. Abandons hotel management studies. Works as a waiter. Drinks heavily. Starts using heroin at twenty-five.

I swim in the sea. I watch my sons surf. After each wave I wait for their heads to re-surface. I think about you. I think about me, my sheltered childhood, my sheltering mothering. Still I know something about isolation. I know something about drinking before I can dance, how weed makes colours glow, how cocaine makes words barrel out of my mouth.

You make me anxious for my sons. Gus speaks about parents who are inconsistent, who over-indulge their children, set no boundaries, shield them from the consequences of their choices. I see myself driving back to the school with the lunch boxes my sons left behind, with the sports gear they forgot to pack, topping up their allowances. I go to gym. I buy food and cook. I make rye sandwiches for lunchboxes. I make chocolate cake for birthdays, I use my mother's recipe.

I want to speak to your wife Jenny Lynne, but she lives in Cape Town. She might still be in prison. Gus says you introduced her to heroin. I pull wet clothes out of the washing machine, hang them on racks in the sun. I know which colours you both wore on your wedding day. I conjure up a hazy image, you all in black, thin body, sharp cheek bones, long dark hair in your eyes; Jenny Lynne in a long red dress. I can't see her face. I imagine a fragile Goth princess.

At Serenity letters home are compulsory. You sent her short faxes. You called her Jinxie, used Afrikaans diminutives: her little arms, her little voice. You said sorry.

I pack the dishwasher, switch it on. I want to speak to Samara, your girlfriend at Serenity, the last person to see you alive. Gus says she died in a Johannesburg rehab.

Samara. Jarryd blames her for your death. He says you messed with the wrong woman at the wrong time. Gus says relationships between rehab residents are discouraged. Being in love gives a false euphoria, stops people from dealing with the issues which led to their addiction.

I open a tin for our tabby. I see you opening tins of tomatoes in the Serenity kitchen, chopping endless carrots. I see you stuck in the mind numbing routine of construction work, carrying planks, hammering nails. The grinding noise of power tools. Your frustration when they won't do what you want. Your surprise when a jig saw slices off the tip of your finger.

I see you as Gus described you at Serenity's compulsory church services: silent, huddled into your black hoodie, just the tips of your fingers sticking out. I imagine the magic Samara brings to your dull repetitive days. Samara, the seasoned heroin junkie, the talented special effects make-up artist, the rehab veteran. I imagine a take no shit beauty. Dazzling defiance. The two of you against the world.

I answer emails for my husband's business. I draw up spread sheets for company expenses.

Our cat walks across the keyboard. I remember Monty said you tamed the wild cats at Serenity. I see you putting out saucers of water and pellets, sitting very still nearby, moving closer to the saucers every day until the cats rub themselves against your knees and elbows, your back, until the black cat lets you stroke her. I see you bringing scraps of meat from the kitchen for the black cat, after she gives birth in your drawer, playing with her kittens as they grow. Your sadness after you deposit them at Animal Welfare.

Our tabby curls up on a pile of invoices. I remember Gus talking about the time he brought you back to Serenity for the second time, after your mother phoned him. He fetched you from an empty house in Cape Town. Empty but filled with cats of every size and colour. I can see you on your hands and knees, moving between them, loving the cats, stroking them, rubbing the tops of their heads. I can hear the rumble of purring, see the twisting supple bodies, raised tails, yellow and green eyes, slivers of pupils.

I drive west to the beach with my husband and sons. The national road crosses the Knysna River and rises steeply, cutting through the Rheenendal plantations. I remember it was somewhere here that you were found. Somewhere here that you and Samara set up camp after you were both discharged from Serenity. After a week of moving from house to house, from friend to friend. After a week of being back on heroin.

I can see a dirt track where Gus might have parked his car before he and Samara walked up the hillside to a level section in the plantation where they collected her clothes and duvet. I can see the signs of habitation he described: Bedding. An apple. A bunch of grapes. A small axe. A pair of your jeans knotted at the legs to serve as a dustbin.

I can see you and Samara making a bed of pine needles, covering it with a blanket, lying under duvets on a warm January night looking at the stars through the branches. Eating fruit, listening to music, making love. I can't imagine the rest. I can't imagine what led to Samara phoning Gus, what led to her saying: Come and fetch me, I can't keep up with this man.

You never asked Gus to fetch you. It was never your idea to go to rehab. It was Jenny Lynne's or it was your mother's. Each time you left Serenity you returned to the place you were happiest.

Gus says it was like you didn't have a skin to protect you. Heroin was your skin.

Serenity felt you needed certain things in place before they would discharge you. You met these requirements. You passed your learner driver's license, got a job as a waiter, made a decision to file for divorce.

You felt you needed certain things to survive in the world outside. You gave your mother a list. That's the only concrete thing I have of you – apart from one grainy photograph – the list of appliances you asked your mother to buy you:

Telefunken portable radio

Cleancut Shaver wet and dry

George Foreman lean mean grilling machine

West Point vacuum cleaner

Russell Hobbes fan

Electrolux iron

And the list of appliances you pawned after your discharge: All of the above, plus one Sony CD Walkman and seventeen CDs.

## Riptide

This is about a man in a doorway. A tall man in army uniform who looked too big, or his uniform looked too small. An army man who took off his beret, and smiled until his eyes crinkled. I smiled back. And we were glad we had finally met because there were only five people in that city who thought like us. One of them was his wife, and I worked with his wife.

This is about desire but it needn't have been if his wife hadn't left town. If she hadn't returned to the coast and moved into a house with my sister. If the army man and I hadn't driven down together to visit them one weekend. If we hadn't loved the same music. If we hadn't had so much to speak about. And it wasn't just about the war. It wasn't just about conscription. It wasn't just about how he felt wearing that uniform.

This is about half glances and drinking looks and undercurrents and cross-currents and a floating feeling when we first arrived at the coast. That night I shared a bed with my sister and we smoked joints. In the morning I passed the bedroom of the army man and his wife. I didn't look through the open door. I only glanced, but it was enough to see them sleeping naked on the sheet.

Believe me I did not pursue this man. Except when we were back in the city he phoned and I answered. He said he was leaving for good and was there somewhere nice to go for a meal. I said the place with glasses like vases. He said would I come there. And it was just us two. We drank. Afterwards we were in my flat and we kissed.

And believe me I said, what about your wife. And he said, she doesn't need to know. Maybe those weren't his exact words but that's what I remember. That's what I understood. He said we have an open relationship. And I smiled because we all believed that open relationships were good. All of us who saw things differently in that alien city, who believed in freedom and equality and mistrusted the bourgeois institution of marriage. People who thought like us only married so their lovers could visit them in detention or give them a foreign passport. And the army man said he had only married so he didn't have to live inside the army camp. And I believed him.

But I didn't pursue him. I didn't arrange to meet him the next day. And I don't remember how we ended up at the same time at a place with a few shops and a restaurant. He said let me buy you lunch. I let him. The restaurant wasn't too big, or too small. The light was dim.

And this is a story about desire and we were both drunk with it.

Later that same day my friends phoned and said come for supper. They said it was to say goodbye to the army man. I went. There were only four of us. After supper the army man and I went outside to our separate cars. We didn't leave. We didn't switch on the engines. He came over to my window and said would you like to go for a walk, even though there was nowhere to walk. It was just a smallholding. But there was a stable. So we walked along dirt tracks that cut through dead grass to the stable. There was a moon but the street lights turned

everything the same flat orange. The stable was rank, the horse long gone. So we kept the door open. There was no manger, there was no laying down. So he knelt. So we stood.

And believe me I didn't phone the army man after he left town. But I might have sent a letter. I might have sent a letter via my sister. Perhaps I told him I was going to a party in another place because he was at this party. He was alone. And we were with people who thought like us – many more than five. They asked about his wife and he smiled and said that she was fine.

And I remember I was wearing a summer dress that was blue and white over the breasts and white and blue below. And I had tied an Indian scarf around my waist. And in the morning I was dressed just the same. We hadn't slept at all. And we did things. Things I had done before and would do again and would enjoy as much, or more. But it was as if I did them with him first.

Believe me when I say I can't remember when I wrote the letter. Whether it was after we drove to my sister or after the stable or after the party. And I wasn't trying to change his life. I wasn't asking to have him all for myself. I was trying to tell him how I felt. How I felt pulled. How I felt tugged. How I felt drawn. Or that is how I remember it.

And it was late one night when his wife called and screamed at me. I was asleep when she phoned. I was at home, in my bed and I held the phone close to my ear as she screamed and said what right did I have. What right did I have to write those things to her husband. And I listened.

Believe me I never contacted him again. I moved on. I met someone else and then someone else and then someone else and then someone I never wanted to say goodbye to.

And it was then that the army man phoned. Of course he was no longer an army man. And he was no longer married. When I didn't return his calls he arrived at my office. He stood in the doorway. A tall man whose thinning hair had grown, whose jeans fitted. And how could I not join him for coffee.

And I could have spoken about the pull, the tugging. I could have spoken about the riptide which sucked us in deep and spat us out. And I still believed the war was evil. I still believed the revolution was good. But I didn't believe in open relationships. And I had met someone I couldn't say goodbye to. So I said nothing. I watched the cups of coffee. The cups on the conveyor belt. Going round and round.



## **A Garden Full**

Hot pink sky when we left the beach. When I was two. Dad had the umbrella. Ma had me. Si had his bucket and truck. That's what Ma says. Dad too when he visits.

We walked up the beach. Up the dune. Up the path. Past the restaurant. Along the road. Lots of people walked too, Ma says. Dogs and people going to the beach. Kids and people coming off the beach. I was too tired to walk, Ma says. Old people with sticks. Running people with dogs. Hello, they said. Hello we said. Tall man says Hello little boy. Say hello Simon, Ma says. Hello says Si.

Along the road. Up our street. Our house. Grass, tree, doors, windows, beds, shower. It's what we needed Ma says. It was a busy year. Time for holiday.

Hot and hungry in the house. Sausage for Si. Milk for me. Dad sweaty. Ma sits against the window, holds me drinking bottle. Si says run outside please-please-please. Okay says Dad but you're showering after me. Okay but just for a little while says Ma.

Si runs through the house out the back door round the house in the front door. Out round through. Out round through. Me drinking. Ma resting. Dad washing. Si out round through. Out round through. Light going. Beetles buzzing. Dad clean. Bottle empty. Ma calling. Dad calling. Ma shouting. Dad running. Me crying.

If only I'd showered later, Dad says.

If only I'd turned and looked out the window, Ma says.

Tall man lifts Si into tree. Si galloping fast horse yee haw, riding big bike vroom vroom, climbing high ladder up up.

Tall man says: Simon you like trees? Come with me I have a garden full.

\*

The body of male child. Height: 1.28m. Estimated Mass: 25kg. A ligature abrasion mark lies in the neck posteriorly. Abrasions in the neck anteriorly... cause of death was: Consistent with strangulation and the consequences thereof.

The body was clothed in: A brown top with the word "Club". A pair of brown shorts.



## **I was Wearing Jeans**

I heard someone on the radio say that that the more you recall a memory, the more you change it. So if you ask me what I was wearing last Christmas Eve I might say jeans and a green shirt. But I might be wrong.

I know I wore jeans the Christmas Eve I was nineteen because I was groped. It's easy to grope a woman in jeans in a crowd. You put your hand deep down her right front pocket. While she tries to pull it out, you put your other hand into her left pocket and remove her cash. It happened to me in Bethlehem. I had joined hundreds of tourists in the square outside the Church of the Nativity. We were watching the Latin mass on a screen. I remember bodies pressing into me from behind and quick hard stick fingers wriggling down, burrowing in. It was over before I had time to scream. I remember feeling winded with surprise. I swung around and confronted a row of young faces all looking up at me blankly.

Four years later I was groped as a crowd pushed its way into a Port Elizabeth reggae concert. I remember the press of bodies as we surged through the door. I was probably wearing jeans because I remember the hand sliding in. It felt the same as the Bethlehem hand, as if the hand was following me. The same hard thin fingers. The same wriggling. I had the same instinct to fight; felt the same confusion afterwards.

I only had a bit of money in my pocket on both occasions. Not a big loss. Not a big violation. And on the El Al flight back to South Africa an old man came up to me. I think he was old but maybe now I wouldn't think he was that old. I was in economy on the aisle with just enough space to place my camel leather bag between my hiking boots. The old man came up to me and said there was a free seat in first class. I have a hazy memory of his face when he said it. He seemed open, matter of fact, passing on information. And I thought, why not. I had heard about the extra space, the better food. I stood up in my jeans and white T-shirt and followed him through the dividing curtain and he showed me a spare seat next to his. I don't remember having a conversation with him, just that first class seemed hushed, my seat felt bigger. Then he slid his hand under my thigh and I went back to economy.

Another incident. Another flight. I was about twenty-six and had just returned to Joburg after visiting my family. I was probably wearing the pixie shoes I liked then – black, pointy lace-ups with bits of red and yellow leather sewn in at the sides. And green jeans and a purple jersey. What can I say, it was the Eighties. Or black jeans and an emerald jersey.

I drove myself home to Yeoville from the airport, parked in the street outside Fortescue Mansions and carried my grey holdall into the unlocked foyer. There was a guy around my age. We were in the foyer together. He was wearing a jersey with a diamond pattern. He was near the lift. I was going to take the lift but then I thought I'd rather take the stairs because I didn't want that awkward being in the lift with one other person thing. I used to take two steps at a time. I was on my way up the steps which were covered with those beige speckled tiles with a few lines cut into them at the edge to provide traction. I was wearing jeans. I was

wearing my pixie shoes with thin soles. I tap-tapped my way up the steps. Then suddenly these fingers burrowed into me from behind. Big fingers pushing the seam of my jeans. Rough. I was half way up the second set of steps. I fell to my knees. A sound came out of my lungs: a breathless primal shriek I had never made before and he ran away. I turned and caught a flash of his grey jersey as he disappeared around the corner.

I thought I saw the same man at a gallery opening a few months later. I was probably wearing my favourite going out clothes then: black and white striped leggings and a long black t-shirt. The man was in a patterned jersey. He caught me staring at him and looked away. He was gazing at another woman. She wore a leather bomber jacket and faded jeans which fell straight from her narrow hips. Her thighs didn't announce themselves like mine did. I told my friend I thought the guy in the grey jersey had groped me. But I couldn't be sure. Lots of people wore those jerseys.

So that was all that happened to me. Nothing to write home about. Nothing to write about. I haven't been in therapy or studied psychology and my idea of history is sifting through boxes of papers at archives, not theorising. But the voice on the radio made sense: the more you remember something, the more you change the memory. So if I tell you I wore a multi-coloured dress on Christmas Eve I can see myself in it.

\*

I can't say what I wore the Christmas Eve I spent in Bloemfontein when I was twenty-three. I remember I wore a hessian jacket and a tie to work once and the deputy editor said: Who is this young man? I still wanted to dress like a student then and on the weekends I wore denim dungarees with a yellow vest.

I invited the deputy editor and his girlfriend for supper when I moved into my first flat on the edge of town. It was a bachelor flat in Fort Drury Mansions, a sprawling complex built in the 1930s with thick walls and arches. My flat was tiny. It was long and thin with a mattress on the floor at one end and a kitchenette under a window at the other. I bought meters of bright cotton – red and purple with striped borders in different colours – and I made a bedspread out of it and taped another length to the wall. I had a rubber plant in a pot and a couple of ornaments and a three-in-one slow-cooker my mother gave me. I made a vegetarian Moroccan dish with zucchini and yoghurt and left it to simmer all day and served it to the deputy editor and his partner. The next day he told me he'd had diarrhoea and blamed my cooking. I laughed and didn't believe him because I was fine.

I only stayed in that flat for a month or two, before I moved to Port Elizabeth. I only met one other Fort Drury resident, an English lecturer. We had some mutual friends and I went around to his flat a few times, probably after I'd been working night duty. His flat was much larger than mine with a separate bedroom and a lounge with couches and a coffee table and shelves overflowing with books. The lecturer was a few years older than me with long dark hair which fell into his eyes. He wore jeans and tweed jackets. He gave me a drink and asked if I wanted to go for a walk and we strode around the empty city centre until midnight. We walked past my office and I took him to see the printing press in action.

The lecturer spoke about his lover who was married with children and wanted to end their affair. He played music I didn't know and we drank wine and smoked grass. The last time I visited him must have been just before I left for Port Elizabeth. I remember sitting on the floor next to his coffee table, books and papers strewn around. He showed me photographs of his lover, large glossy black and white photographs of them together. She had long slim legs, long blond hair cut in that shaggy way that was fashionable then and a face to match.

I remember I was sitting on the carpet at the coffee table and I was feeling a bit drunk and stoned and lumpy compared to his movie star lover. And he was sitting in a chair and he held up a pill and said I got this from someone, I don't know what it does but if you like we can share it. And I said sure or okay or why not or something. And I remember waking up in his lounge the next morning and he wasn't in the room, and walking home and going back to sleep. Sleeping all day.

Then I remembered waking up and noticing that my dungaree strap had come undone and feeling embarrassed about that. The memory came back clearly and I could see myself waking up when it was already morning, and quickly hooking the clasp back over the metal button of my dungarees before I let myself out. And I could feel myself feeling woozy, looking around and not seeing him in the room, looking for the door, which was unlocked, and going out.

And then I had this feeling that I'd been embarrassed. Embarrassed about falling asleep and embarrassed about something else.

The more I thought about it the more I remembered feeling uncomfortable in another way. Walking back home and feeling like something wasn't right. Sitting on the toilet with my dungarees bunched around my knees and feeling sore. Feeling groggy and going to sleep for the whole day and whole night and feeling fine again.

Or am I imagining it?

But I can feel myself waking up, disorientated, dried spit at the side of my mouth, embarrassed that my dungarees had come undone. Embarrassed that I had passed out in his flat. A sore scratchy feeling I wasn't used to as I stumbled the short way home. I can see myself sitting on the toilet. See the dungarees in a heap around my feet. I don't know what shoes I was wearing. Maybe leather sandals.

But I know I was wearing a black dress with a diamond pattern on Christmas Eve; my sister in law sent me a photograph.



## Stone Cold

### I

A churchyard in the middle of town. Two stone churches, a church hall, graves, trees, flowers, paths. A body under a pine tree.

A low stone wall surrounds the churchyard. Two layers of handpicked, hand placed stones. Each stone is different. Some are pointy, others concave, like seats. A man sits on a stone seat: a young man of twenty two with braids. A young woman stands next to him: a girl of eighteen with long light brown hair. They talk. They smoke.

A gibbous moon. A few hours past midnight. A truck driver delivering bread. The driver sees a man sitting on the stone wall under a street light talking to a girl. He sees his braids. He sees the girl's long hair, her jeans and her dark cropped top that shows her stomach. He drives around the block, sees them again. He watches them until the robots turn green.

A fisherman walks up from the lagoon at first light, walks through town, takes a short cut through the churchyard. He sees a body. He sees a pair of jeans, he places them over the body, over its face. I wanted to cover her, he says.

A mother rolls up the cord of her vacuum cleaner. A phone rings. The mother speaks into the receiver. She says: It can't be. I'm meeting her for coffee this morning.

Two night clubs on opposite corners of Main Street: Zanzibar and Stones. The young cross the road between them, looking for the better music, the better crowd.

A Main Street flat next to a church yard: a longhaired girl's flat. A young man with dark eyes: the long haired girl's flatmate. They are hotel interns together – friends, then lovers, then friends. The long haired girl is jealous when he kisses another friend. She forbids him to. The flatmate puts a note on her pillow. It reads: *Fuck off and die.*

A forensic scientist says she has only seen so much blood and flesh beneath a victim's fingernails once before.

A flatmate comes home from Zanzibar with a girl on each arm. He makes coffee. A long haired girl comes home too. She asks for tea. Her flatmate leaves the tea bag in. He takes the coffee and the girls into his room. He shuts the door.

A disc jockey with a roll of fat peeping through his braids. A roll of fat where the back of his skull meets his neck. A disc jockey from Stones. He watches the long-haired girl dance, dances with her, tells her she always skips a beat.

A policeman tells a mother: I can promise you your daughter fought.

A young woman with an elfin face: the mother of the disc jockey's little sons (but not the mother of his little daughter). She sees the long deep scratches down his back. She says: What are these fuck-marks?

A powerfully-built father of four sons, a retired prison chief, with a roll of fat behind his neck. A mother with a closed face, a cancer survivor. They are in the courtroom every day, in the bench behind the dock, wearing white – for innocence – on judgement day.

A mother who will never be happy again, who keeps all her daughter's things, who inhales the scent of her unwashed clothes, wears her jewellery. A silent father who works in a factory fixing machines, who wants to fix someone.

A disc jockey says he and a long haired girl went to a parking area to have sex. He describes the positions, how they stood and sat, how she enjoyed it. He tells the judge about his favourite gig pants, tight-fitting corduroys which display his features nicely. He says all the girls want to sleep with him.

Messages on two cell phones. Short joking messages between a long-haired girl and a friend. Messages sent back and forth. Messages sent at the same time that the disc jockey claims the long-haired girl and he are having sex.

A post mortem report:

*Soil on the face, in the mouth, pharynx and upper trachea.*

*Scattered abrasions of the body.*

*Small tears of the anus.*

*Cause of death: Asphyxia due to aspiration of soil.*

*Mechanism of Death: Asphyxia.*

*Manner of Death: Homicide.*

Too many foot prints in the churchyard. The police don't find the foot prints that matter. Too many cigarette butts around the stone wall and in the church yard. The police don't collect the ones that matter.

Blood and tissue recovered from a long haired girl's fingernails. The long fingernails with tips she painted white. There is a DNA match for the tissue. Semen found in her anus and on her G-string. There is a DNA match for the semen.



A flatmate says goodbye to two girls in the early hours of morning. He sees the teabag floating in the cold tea. He sees the long haired girl's keys on the table. He sends her an SMS saying he's leaving the door unlocked. He goes to sleep.

A man with a gun. A muscled man who likes to tell pretty girls to call him if they are in trouble. He switches off his phone one night. He misses a call from a long haired girl.

A judge says the victim died literally eating soil.

A judge says the accused shows no remorse and at times seems proud of what had happened. He says he should spend the rest of his natural life behind bars.

A model prisoner with a roll of fat behind his neck is studying to be a teacher. He is helping other inmates to complete their schooling. He is hoping to be released early for good behaviour.

A body under a pine tree in a churchyard. A young woman's body dressed in a black long-sleeved jersey cropped above the navel, black G-string underpants, one green patterned sock, bangles and a silver bracelet. She is lying on her back. Her long light-brown hair is fanned out above her on the ground. Her arms are raised. She is scratched and smeared with dirt and blood. She has been dragged from a place where the ground is scuffed. A place closer to a block of flats. Closer to a low stone wall.



## II

“She was afraid of the dark. She always slept with the light on.”

*The eyes are no longer present – lost due to decomposition exposing the bony orbits.*

“He asked for our strongest shooter, Mr Chalky with Vodka and Captain Morgan. They were already drunk but they both had one. She asked me to walk her to her car. I said just wait ten minutes. I was closing up. When I looked up again they’d left.”

*Death occurred about one week prior to examination.*

“She only drank Fanta Grape and Smirnoff Red.”

*Stomach: empty.*

“She lived on meat, fish fingers, potatoes and rice. She couldn’t boil an egg or iron a shirt. Her uncle said I treated her like a princess but it was easier to do everything myself.”

*Gold chain with dolphin pendant, two gold rings.*

“I was ready to leave but she wanted to stay. She said she was enjoying herself. I was jealous. I gave her the keys to my flat. She was staying with me for a week. Her dogs were locked in. I kept phoning her but she never answered. I sent her messages but she never replied.”

*Tattoo of a dolphin on the right lower abdomen.*

“She had very thin feet, size seven. She wore wedge heels and boots with six inch heels.”

*The feet have soil on them but there are no injuries.*

\*

We started kissing in the car. She climbed over to me in the passenger seat, your honour. She tried to undo my corduroy jeans, I helped her because they was tight. They were my favourite trousers, my gig pants. They sat nice and tight. They showed my features nicely.

I began unbuttoning and she began undressing as well, your honour. I pulled my pants down to my knees. I leaned back. She pulled her jeans down to her knees. She began *skommeling* me. She was on top of me. I fingered her. She never told me to stop, your honour.

And I thought hey it’s go, get, get it done. And I don’t know, but she told me at one stage that she didn’t like intercourse because something happened with her former boyfriend. She didn’t want to expand, something which she didn’t like.

She was facing me. I ejaculated away from her. I was afraid it would go on her shirt or something. I can’t say precisely where it landed, but if I think about it now, it must have gone towards the driver’s seat. It could explain why my semen was found on the seat of her black jeans, your honour. I can’t speculate, but it could be the reason.

When I ejaculated I held my penis and she sat back. I don't know how other people experience it but when you are in that moment of orgasm you aren't in control. There was one time I called out someone else's name while I was having one. I mean you can't control yourself. Do you understand, your honour? You are in another world. We call it seventh heaven, something like that.

I am telling the truth here. I swore to tell the truth and I am busy telling the truth. I did not kill her, your honour, it is untrue. I would never set fire to her car.

\*

"The last time she visited she put a photo of herself on the fridge and wrote: I'm not here but I'm watching you guys."

*Cause of death: Feature suggestive of strangulation.*

"She was really warm, really trusting. Even after my son broke up with her she would come and visit me – this tall, skinny, long-legged girl – and sit cross-legged on a chair or desk and just talk. She spoke non-stop. She had something to say about everything."

*Height: 1.7m. Hair: long straight and brown.*

"She had boyfriends for two months, two weeks, two days, two minutes because she wouldn't sleep with them."

*The body is totally undressed except for a bra open in front and a white shirt on the right arm which is mostly burnt.*

## Carousel

It was the men walking towards me. It was my split open bag. It was the way one man held it away from him as if it stank. I was alone at the airport carousel. No more bags coming out of its mouth of plastic sheets. No people leaning over each other to grab their suitcases.

It was a stupid thing to do. To put the books in that flimsy bag. A shopping bag that folded up into a wallet. My mother gave it to me at the last moment. I packed in a rush. I had to have one more swim in the sea. I had to buy all those books. I needed enough for a year. I bought *Time Longer than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle in South Africa* and *The Second Sex* and *The Selected Works of Marx and Engels*. I bought *Freud for Beginners* and *Really Bad News* which both had comics and *The Truth about Afghanistan* with unbroken miniscule text straight from the Soviet Union. I bought too many for hand luggage.

It was how I pictured myself in that inland city, alone at night reading, making notes, pausing to light another cigarette. It was a lie. Smoking made me sick. I spent my evenings drinking with colleagues and friends. My weekends too.

It was my instinct to run. I was frozen. It was my practice to keep quiet if I had nothing to say. If the questions were rhetorical. What are you doing with all these books? I was first born. I was raised to please. I was raised to obey my parents, my teachers. I was raised to see the government as evil.

It was easier to go with the men. I was taken to a small room. I signed a piece of paper with a list of books. I waited while phone calls were made. I was given all my books but one: *Time Longer Than Rope* with Sharpeville on its cover – policemen standing, bodies lying, red sun rising, red banner shouting *BANNED in South Africa*. I had instructions to report to the security police.

It was possible my housemates' phone was bugged. I drove to a tickey box, reversed charges. My mother sounded angry. My liberal mother said: What are you really up to? What are you involved in? Rhetorical questions. My father called a lawyer he knew.

It was unavoidable, the visit to the security police. The lawyer and my editor both said so. I went alone to a vast slab of brick and concrete, iron and steel. Through gates and gates and gates all unlocked and relocked. The colonel was a surprise. He smiled. He had my father's square face, similar glasses. He seemed reasonable. He said my book was banned for distribution, not possession. I had forgotten the distinction. He gave it back. He asked could he phone me from time to time at the newspaper. I shook my head. He said don't answer now. He would call in a few days.

It was easy to say no on the phone. It was easy to say no at my next job when an American voice asked me for background information. I told him everything I knew was in my press reports. I knew about the CIA, how they were in cahoots with the government. I knew about the security police spy in every newsroom. Things were black and white and white was bad.

It was because I was white that the small town hotel gave me a good room. It was because he was not that the advocate was turned away. The hotel owner told me it was because there were no rooms available with private bathrooms. The advocate told me he wouldn't have minded sharing. After my front page story he got an *en suite* room.

It was a series of court cases. They went on for months. There were charges of public violence, assault, intimidation and malicious damage to property. There were convictions for stoning funeral processions and assaulting teachers. The minors got five to seven cuts with a light cane. The adults were sent to prison for two to six years. There were allegations of police beating confessions out of school children. There was a magistrate who said the reasons behind the protests didn't concern the court. What was important was that order was restored in the community.

It was a clear divide. The state structures on one side, the new civic and youth organisations on the other. The children had been boycotting school for a year. They wanted to elect student leaders. They wanted their headmaster reinstated. He was the chairman of the civic organisation. He had been fired after refusing a transfer to another town. The police did their best to stamp out organised resistance. The community did its best to make government employees feel unsafe. Residents wanted local policemen and teachers and state-appointed town councillors to resign and join their cause.

It was as if I was recording history. I was the only reporter in town. I sat through every word of those trials. I filled notebooks. I returned to my room and bashed out stories on my portable typewriter. I called the newsroom from the hotel lobby and dictated my reports. I had supper with the advocate in the dining room. He had four courses. I had two. He ordered whisky, I drank dry white wine. After supper a young teacher arrived and they climbed the stairs to his room.

It was a victory of sorts for the defence. More trialists were acquitted than sent to jail. The state prosecutor didn't look happy. Neither did the two security policemen who sat behind him, who consulted with him frequently. The prosecutor didn't like my reports. The way I recorded every allegation of police brutality. The way I quoted the advocate more than him.

It was the last day of the last trial. My last evening in the hotel. My room was on the ground floor. It had glass doors. The curtains were open. I had typed and dictated my final report. My typewriter was zipped into its case. My cassette tapes were in a shoe box. My notebooks and novels were in a bag – Marge Piercy's *Vida* about sex and political activism and George Orwell's *1984* because that was the year. I was packing my clothes.

It was a young policeman who knocked on my door. He had an accent like my first boyfriend who said fush instead of fish. The policeman invited me to a braai. It was a tradition, he said, at the end of a big trial. Everyone was coming. The defence lawyer too. He had come to give me a lift.

It was the least I could do. I knew I had taken sides. Inside I had cheered every defence victory, grudged the state the convictions they secured. The magistrate was hosting the braai,

the policeman said. He had invited both legal teams. The policeman teased me. He made me laugh. He said it would be rude of me to refuse.

It was because he had an early morning flight that he probably wouldn't make the braai, the advocate said. I met him in the lobby. I hesitated. The policeman ushered me into his car. We drove out of town to a desolate place. There were a few outbuildings, a concrete dam, the braai was in a half drum, the burning meat smelt cooked. The magistrate looked embarrassed and left as soon as I arrived.

It was a choice between brandy or beer or wine, the smiling prosecutor said. I chose wine. A security policeman poured some into a glass. It tasted sour. The prosecutor gave me a plate with a chop and a piece of boerewors. One security policeman put his arm around me. The other took a photograph.





## **Betrayal**

After a long separation, a man and woman meet quite by chance in a city where they once lived. They go for a drink.

The man remembers a letter the woman sent him. A letter he read at the beach. After reading the letter he wrote her name in the sand. Then he crossed it out. Smashed it out. Annihilated it.

He tells her he did this.

The woman feels bad, but not about the letter.

They speak about their first night together. The man remembers a torn condom. The woman a shared bath.

It is a popular pub and the man still has many friends here. A few people come up to their table on the deck to greet him. When he goes inside to get more drinks the men at the bar pull up a stool for him.

The woman watches him talking to his friends at the bar and thinks about the things he gave her: letters, a poem about her milk bottle legs, photographs, an ornament of a little girl doing a headstand. She rarely looks at them but she can't throw them away. He arrived at her house with a dress once. It had diagonal stripes and a belt. She would never have chosen it herself but it fitted perfectly.

Theirs was a war time relationship. The lines were drawn.

On one side the state with spies in every newsroom.

On the other the voteless majority with sympathetic journalists like themselves.

It was a propaganda war. The state was winning at home but losing abroad.

The man and woman worked for different newspapers. He put his heart into his reports. He wrote with passion, with outrage. His stories were slashed by half. She was restrained, she let the facts speak for themselves. She won an award.

Her editor advised her to stick to reporting. He warned her not to mix activism with journalism. He mentioned the liberal editors who had mentored him.

Her lover laughed at her editor's warning. He asked if she was going to put her career above people dying for freedom.

A mutual friend asked her to write a few pages explaining how a newspaper worked. So rural organisations could understand that a reporter didn't write the headline or editorial. She called it "Dealing with the Press". Her lover said it was incomplete. Organisations needed to understand the bias of different newspapers. He added a critique on the different editors. He quoted what her editor had told her about his role models.

Her most memorable newspaper report was about the teargassing of a church service in a small town. The victims told her they had to rush out of the church coughing, eyes streaming. The police said they had no information about this.

She was put on trial for reporting untruths about the police. Her ex-editor was charged too. He had fired her after the security police showed him “Dealing with the Press”. He knew she had written it because of the reference to his mentors.

The woman travelled to the small town with the newspaper’s lawyers. Every witness they found agreed to make an affidavit about the church teargassing and to give evidence in court. Even an activist in detention, his face battered. Even though by then their leaders had been abducted, stabbed to death and burnt.

The police testified that they had been dispersing stone throwing youths. They had fired the teargas into the air, not directly into the crowd. Unfortunately two canisters had landed in the church yard and one near the kitchen door of the manse. Some of the smoke had entered the church. They had apologised to the priest. The magistrate accepted this explanation.

Her former lover returns with their drinks. She says she’s been thinking about her court case. She reminds him that he came to her trial twice.

He was freelancing then, trying to cover too many stories, vulnerable to police harassment, tense about earning money.

She knew “Dealing with the Press” would be used against her. To prove her bias, her alleged desire to help people manipulate the press. So when her former lover arrived during the lunch adjournment she asked him if she could tell the court that he had written the section on the editors.

He begged her not to. He said she was safe now she was working in a bigger city. He was a struggling freelancer, exposed. She gave her word.

Her cross-examination was gruelling. The prosecutor kept asking her about the document. About the section on the editors. He wore her down. She gave her lover’s name.

The magistrate found her guilty of reporting untruths about the police. She and her editor received suspended sentences. The newspaper paid their fines. The magistrate said journalists were supposed to be objective but she had sided with the oppressed. She had considered it her duty to expose police misconduct.

She was sitting on a bench outside when her former lover arrived at the courtroom for the second time. She felt shattered. She told him she was sorry, she hadn’t protected him. He said it was the least of his worries.

Now the woman fills her glass with water and turns to look at him.

She says she still feels bad.

He says he doesn’t remember any of this. He remembers something else.

When he was detained she flew back to the coastal city and dropped off a bag of clothes for him at the prison. She put some of her own clothes in the bag. He laughs. He says you don't know what that did to me.



## **What Nombuyiselo Said**

Ripple dressed quietly in the dark. She left for Cradock at dawn. She drove away from the lagoon, away from the ocean, through forests snarled with vines.

She stopped at Storms River. Checked her phone. Washed her hands in a basin decorated with leaves and flowers. Placed a coin in the saucer for the cleaner. She stared at her image, averted her eyes.

Rip drove east over bridges, under flyovers, past wind turbines. She drove through Port Elizabeth and alongside revetments and dolosse. She stopped again after the Zwartkops River. Bluewater Bay: the coastal scrub where the bodies of Matthew Goniwe and his comrades were found. The off-ramp led to a petrol station. The attendants argued about soccer as they filled her tank, wiped squashed insects off the windscreen. Rip parked, walked through the sliding doors, bought Coke Lite. She checked her phone in the toilet stall.

Colchester. The N10. Paterson. Dense thickets of thorny trees. Sloping Zuurberg Mountains. The red rock face of Olifantskop Pass. The red rock she crashed into. She was young then, playing hard, working harder. A young journalist driving to her first political trial. She must have fallen asleep at the wheel. She remembered the rock face rushing towards her, trying to turn away from it, then waking up upside down, her head resting on the car's padded ceiling, her seatbelt tight, dress bunched up at her waist. Alive. Lucky. Hitching a lift to the court room.

Rip felt her seatbelt cutting into her as she rounded the last corner of Olifantskop Pass, the same red rock where the security forces said they set up a temporary road block. Where a security policeman stepped out into a dark road with a torch to wave down a car with four occupants: Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkonto. Two headmasters, a teacher, a railway worker. Fighting to improve living conditions. Making Cradock ungovernable. Organising boycotts of schools, rents, white-owned shops. Replacing puppet town councils with street committees.

Rip's old dread of the security police resurfaced. Cold waves of fear that drained her of all warmth. The same ice that clenched her gut and chest when her car's tyres were stabbed, or she received anonymous hate mail, or heard the click of her tapped phone. When Ripple's sons asked her about those days her throat closed and she struggled to find a way to begin. What could she tell them? Her experience was nothing compared to the daily harassment, death threats, prosecution, imprisonment, detention without trial the Cradock men endured.

Rip clenched her jaw and drove. She drove away from her nuclear family. She drove towards Matthew Goniwe. She pushed her foot down on the accelerator, chasing a younger version of herself. She had dressed for work then, skirts, black pants. Now she wore magic jeans which promised to flatten her stomach. She passed lucerne fields, aloes, flat-topped Karoo koppies. Old terror resurfaced seizing her neck and shoulders. She ate a handful of almonds, drank Coke, swallowed Panado.

She stared at the lucerne. She tried to picture Matthew Goniwe's face in the torchlight as the men were handcuffed. Rip clasped the steering wheel. She stared ahead of her. She thought about Matthew under interrogation.

Still she drove. In the rear-view mirror the fields gave way to a small town. Cookhouse. Rip kneaded her neck. The first time she drove this way was to interview Nyameka Goniwe. Matthew was in detention. Nyameka was cloaked with exhaustion, her children clung to her. Nyameka spoke with calm, measured urgency: her husband was a man of conviction, a man of peace, a man who gave up boxing for yoga, a man who beat drunk school students who had looted a beer hall.

Of all the places Rip worked as a journalist she had felt most awake in Cradock. Most alive. A witness to an extraordinary political mobilisation of an entire community. Even the toddlers had raised defiant clenched fists. She needed to go back there. She wanted to go back to a time before her horizons shrank to suburbia. She wanted to interview Nyameka Goniwe again, now she was the mayor of a united Cradock. She had sent a letter weeks ago, followed up with emails, left phone messages.

Rip remembered the dip in the road with the blue gums. The N10 climbed, levelled off. Cradock came into view: Lingelihle on the left for black people, rows and rows of identical tiny houses including lots of newer ones, the tips of the concrete pillars of the Cradock Four memorial breaking the skyline. Michausdal on the right for coloured people, slightly bigger houses, some trees. She drove into the town itself: ornate Victorian buildings, a grid of tree-lined streets parallel with the mud coloured Great Fish River, spacious houses still mostly owned by white people.

Rip stopped at a B&B with a rose garden, climbed stiffly out. The housekeeper showed her to her room: a double bed with white linen and beige towels rolled into sausages. She opened the curtains, massaged her neck. Rip checked her phone: no messages, no calls. She dialled the Cradock municipality. The number rang and rang. She checked her emails, still no reply from Nyameka or her office about repeated requests for an interview. She dialled the municipality again: the executive mayor was in a meeting.

Rip walked to a restaurant, ate chicken salad, studied a map of the town. She walked to the freshly painted municipal building with its ostentatious gable and thought about asking to see Nyameka. She went to the Great Fish River Museum instead. She had been there before. She remembered the room filled with cots, life-sized baby dolls with chipped porcelain faces, intricate Christening gowns. There were displays about the British Settlers, Voortrekkers, posters about Nelson Mandela's life.

Rip asked to see The Cradock Four Gallery. A humble shed in the museum's yard. The curator unlocked the door. Large full-body photographs of the men walked towards her from four pillars. The images of Matthew and Fort came from an iconic photograph taken the day they were released from detention. Rip had been standing beside the photographer. Their newspaper had sent the two of them to Cradock to cover the event, but not to interview the men, the "listed" men, whose spoken and written words could not be published.

In the photograph Matthew, Fort and two comrades are walking towards the camera, towards Rip. They are casually dressed, relaxed, smiling, arms hanging down by their sides. Children are watching from either side of the dirt road. Women are walking out of a house with boxes on their heads. Small square houses with wire fences line the street. A sparsely vegetated Karoo koppie forms a gentle background. The picture says: free again. It says: these are the gentle men the government calls terrorists.

That was the narrative her newspaper reports told. Things were clear to her then: the apartheid security forces were bad; the voteless protestors were good. Several cuttings with her by-line were among the newspaper clippings, biographies, time-lines and photographs covering the gallery's three walls.

There was another narrative her reports hadn't told: The men's connections with the then-banned African National Congress. Fort was the grandson of ANC secretary general Canon James Calata. Matthew's brother Jacques was killed while fighting for the ANC's armed wing. At the same time as leading the Cradock Residents Organisation and seeking reinstatement as the local headmaster, Matthew was helping to organise the ANC's underground structures in the Eastern Cape.

Thirty years ago Rip had been careful not to ask too many questions about what people knew, or did, or planned to do. It was a time when just compiling a list of all the missing, poisoned and detained popular leaders was considered defiant.

Ripple drove to the Victoria Hotel for supper. The dining room with its red velvet curtains, fake silver candle sticks and fabric roses was filled with vintage car enthusiasts in town for a rally. Rip felt invisible. Once she would have engaged her affable waiter, asked whether he had known Matthew and Fort. Now she exchanged text messages with her husband and sons. Messages that made her smile. She ate quickly and left.

In the shower, hot water scalding her neck and shoulders. Rip asked herself why Nyameka should remember her out of the dozens of journalists she'd met. It was not as if Rip had kept in touch. Or covered major events. All she had to show for the last decades were a few scrapbooks of small town news. And two golden children. Sons she had always put first, hoping that if they felt loved and heard there would be two less damaged people in the world.

Sitting up in bed under the white duvet, Rip sifted through her Cradock assassinations file. She re-read the post mortems:

Sparrow Mkonto, 33: A bullet in the head. A bullet in the chest. Multiple stab wounds. *Death was due to multiple injuries, the most significant being the gunshot wound to the head and the two stab wounds through the heart.*

Sicelo Mhlauli, 36: A slit throat, *right hand ... cleanly amputated immediately above the right wrist.* Multiple stab wounds in the chest, back and arms. *Death was due to blood loss, predominantly from the severed jugular vein.... The variation in the appearance of the stab wounds suggests that a variety of weapons was used.*

Matthew Goniwe, 37: Multiple stab wounds. *The immediate cause of death was a stab wound which transfixed the right ventricle of the heart, resulting in massive intra-thoracic bleeding.*

Fort Calata: 28: Multiple stab wounds. *The cause of death was stab wounds to the chest involving the right ventricle of the heart and the pulmonary vein; the difference in dimensions of the wounds suggests that several weapons were used to inflict the injuries.*

Collectively the four men were stabbed 63 times. After they were murdered their faces and bodies were doused with petrol and burnt.

Two inquests, a press exposé of a state security instruction that Matthew and Fort be *permanently removed from society*, harrowing evidence before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which refused to grant the killers amnesty – and yet the security force members responsible were never charged.

On YouTube Ripple watched a filmmaker give a reason for the ANC government's unwillingness to act: a tacit agreement between the apartheid government and ANC that "we won't air your dirty laundry if you don't air ours".

On the verge of sleep, fragments of Ripple's Google meanderings returned: Sparrow was a talented soccer player. Fort played in a band. Sicelo worked for an Oudtshoorn community newspaper. Matthew sent poetry and lively letters to an English Professor. The final line of his poem "These Walls" seemed prophetic: *silence seals my soundless box*. Rip imagined the lives these men might have led in a different South Africa.

A face woke Ripple at three in the morning. Matthew's furrowed brow, bespectacled eyes, wide smile.

After breakfast Ripple packed and zigzagged her way through Lingelihle to the rough road with no signpost which led to the Cradock Four monument: four giant rectangular columns of concrete with long concrete shadows. It was only five years old but it felt sad. Neglected. Adjacent buildings designed as a tourist and small business centre remained empty, vandalised, stripped of fittings. A section of the security fence had been pushed over.

Rip drove to the Lingelihle cemetery where she had joined tens of thousands of mourners as four coffins draped in the black, green and gold flags of the banned ANC were lowered into the stony ground. People had travelled from around the country to join the Lingelihle mourners: UDF activists, unionists, young men wearing guerrilla fatigues, others carrying SA Communist Party and Soviet flags, priests, diplomats, students, housewives, local and international media. The police and army had watched from the road and surrounding hills. "It felt like liberation day," Nyameka told a filmmaker. The next day the government declared a state of emergency.

There was no apparent layout for the cemetery, no paths. Most graves were simple heaps of bleached soil, covered with rocks, overgrown with hardy grass or thorny plants. Those with funeral policies had granite slabs and headstones. A number of the granite graves had been



smashed. Rip had read that the Cradock Four burial site had been repaired after suffering a similar fate.

Ripple tried to avoid stepping on graves as she made her way to the largest site. A spiky palisade fence enclosed four adjacent granite slabs and headstones decorated with fluted columns, pediments, Grecian vases. The headstones carried revolutionary words: *Your blood will nourish the tree of the soil that will bear the fruits of freedom*. And below the men's names, and their dates of birth and death, the sentence: *Ever remembered by families*.

Ripple remembered the widows at the funeral with their children: Nyameka Goniwe regal in a headscarf, Nomonde Calata seven months pregnant with Fort's third child, Sindiswa Mkonto as small-boned as a child herself, Nombuyiselo Mhlauli's expression of rage and incomprehension.

Driving away from Cradock, after buying a toy windmill on the side of the road, Ripple was relieved Nyameka had ignored her request to meet. Relieved Nyameka had not had to list all her administration's achievements, and explain all her thwarted plans.

Rip was glad to avoid questions of political disenchantment and theories about who had smashed the graves of the Cradock Four.

She retraced her path, travelling south down the N10 and west along the N2. Going home.

Ripple thought how the Cradock Four had been separated from their wives and young children by their political work: nights and days away at meetings, months and years locked behind bars.

In a way the men's love for their wives had aided their abduction. After their political briefing in Port Elizabeth had ended at nine o'clock, Matthew had insisted on driving home in the dark, saying he spent too much time away from Nyameka. Sicelo, in Cradock on holiday, had come along for the ride at the last moment: to be with his childhood friend Matthew – and hoping to see his wife Nombuyiselo who was working in Port Elizabeth.

None of the widows have remarried.

Nyameka Goniwe told the Truth Commission: "Healing takes a long time."

Sindiswa Mkonto cried every time she was interviewed.

Nomonde Calata told her husband's killer. "Fort was not only my husband to me, he was my brother, my friend. He was everything to me. And you took him away in such a cruel way."

In Nombuyiselo's biography of Sicelo in the Cradock Four gallery, she included just two sentences about their family life: *Three children were born out of the marriage. The last born baby, Bantu, died in the same year as his father, 1985.*

But she told Fort's killer more. Rip watched the news video. Nombuyiselo said:

"I know how it is to lose a loved one: you feel empty, powerless and live with pain all the time."



## The Good Housekeeping Magazine Quiz

1. Your husband's First Big Love is crossing an ocean to come and visit him after thirty years. Would you say:
  - a. I've got so much work to do I can't talk about this now.
  - b. How did you get in touch with her anyway?
  - c. What does she want? To introduce you to your love child?
  - d. She's not staying here.
  - e. All of the above.
  
2. Your husband's FBL has booked a week's accommodation in your town. You will be away at a conference for five of these nights. Would you:
  - a. Say: I've got so much work I can't think about this now.
  - b. Tell your best friend.
  - c. Tell your sister.
  - d. Tell a tableful of mutual friends who all take it in turns to cross-examine your husband with glee.
  - e. All of the above.
  
3. Your husband tells a tableful of friends that he sees FBL's visit as the biggest threat to his marriage in twenty five years. His worst fear is that he will be attracted to her. Would you:
  - a. Say: Well I will be away at a conference that week so it's up to you.
  - b. Say: Just make sure you don't rock our son's emotional stability. Remember he is in matric.
  - c. Take comfort in the horrified looks on your friends' faces as they sing your praises and call the imposter names.
  - d. Turn cold when you see how serious he is when he says this.
  - e. All of the above.
  
4. Your husband has photographs in his studio waiting for FBL's visit. They are pictures she gave him when she was seventeen. She is standing against a wall in baggy pants and a long sleeved white t-shirt. Her hair is down in one and she is holding it up in another. She looks young and sweet and beautiful. Do you feel:
  - a. Threatened
  - b. Threatened.
  - c. Threatened.
  - d. Threatened.
  - e. All of the above.

5. Next to the photographs is a copy of a story he told her every night before they went to sleep. A story about a frog which he illustrated at art school. Do you:
  - a. Think: Well he tried to tell me the same story but I kept pointing out the non sequiturs and asking him questions.
  - b. Think: They spoke different languages so maybe this was their way of communicating.
  - c. Remember a publisher telling him the story did not have a focus.
  - d. Skim through it again and notice how many babies the frogs had.
  - e. All of the above.
6. FBL is arriving in a week. Do you tell yourself:
  - a. I could leave this town and get a full time job. I could have a whole new life on my own.
  - b. I could rent a little house near a surf break. My older son would come and stay with me in his holidays. I could move to a city. My younger son would come and stay with me in his holidays.
  - c. But after a while I would start looking for a man again. Would I find the same connection, the same contentment?
  - d. I'll never have the same shared history with anyone.
  - e. All of the above.
7. It is your silver wedding anniversary two days before FBL arrives. Do you:
  - a. Go out for dinner and speak frankly and at length about your relationship and how threatened you feel about FBL's visit.
  - b. Listen to him say he is as nervous as you are about the impending visit.
  - c. Notice how thin he has become
  - d. Wonder if he's deliberately lost weight to look more youthful.
  - e. All of the above.
8. FBL arrives tomorrow. Do you have:
  - a. Excruciating neck pain.
  - b. No appetite.
  - c. Pain in your right nipple.
  - d. Diarrhoea.
  - e. All of the above.
9. FBL arrives tomorrow. Your husband says he thinks he'll go and have afternoon tea with her at her guest house. Do you:
  - a. Say: For god's sake don't go rushing over there, wait for her to settle in and contact you. But know you are just delaying the inevitable.

- b. Check his phone while he is in the shower and see he never read out the last line of her message: Hopefully see you very soon.
  - c. Not mention that you checked his phone.
  - d. Take anti-inflammatories for your neck.
  - e. All of the above.
  
- 10. It is the night before FBL arrives. Do you initiate sex and go down on him because:
  - a. You want to, and the tension is killing you.
  - b. It might be the last time you want to.
  - c. He won't be able to say he's not getting this at home.
  - d. You might never make love with him again.
  - e. All of the above.
  
- 11. It is the morning after FBL's arrival. Your husband has spent the previous week planting fifty trees in the garden. He has tidied the lounge. He has left to bring FBL to your house for tea. Do you:
  - a. Busy yourself printing out reports for your work trip the next day.
  - b. Go to the loo.
  - c. Take another anti-inflammatory for your neck.
  - d. Wear ordinary clothes and no make-up because really you couldn't be bothered and perhaps this shows that you are not threatened.
  - e. All of the above.
  
- 12. As you are collecting the Sunday paper your husband pulls up at the front door with FBL in the seat beside him. Do you:
  - a. See a heavy middle-aged woman. See your husband look at you with don't-worry-this-is-not-the-girl-I-used-to-know eyes.
  - b. Welcome her, make tea, ask to see pictures of her daughters, show her pictures of your sons.
  - c. Notice her tight clothes, gelled hair, new leather boots. Notice her even-toned skin. Notice the tension around her mouth. Notice how freaked out she becomes by a mosquito bite.
  - d. See her relax and become more animated. Hear her similar views on child rearing to yours. See the way she looks at your husband. See the way he looks at you. See how she is beautiful at certain angles. Feel the tension in your own mouth.
  - e. All of the above – so you excuse yourself to hang up laundry.
  
- 13. You, your husband, your younger son and Orna go to a seaside restaurant for lunch. Do you:
  - a. Insist your husband drives Orna so you can give your son a driving lesson.

- b. Tell your son Orna is a friend of his father's from Israel. Be proud of how charming he is throughout lunch.
  - c. Talk Orna through the menu. Notice how she turns her back on your husband and faces you for most of the meal.
  - d. Notice how difficult she finds it to chew.
  - e. All of the above.
14. Your husband and Orna arrive back home an hour after you. Do you:
- a. Let them talk some more on the stoep while you pack for your trip.
  - b. Tell her it was nice to meet her. Mean it.
  - c. Watch her say thank you for all this – hands raised and open, indicating what?
  - d. Tell her you'll be away for the week and your husband will be very busy looking after your son.
  - e. All of the above.
15. After your husband takes Orna back to her guest house. Do you:
- a. Think about what she's done: Chosen to leave her two daughters, husband, family and friends and come to South Africa to find closure with a boyfriend she knew thirty years ago. Realise she was vague about whether she was still living with her husband.
  - b. Think about what she said: "This is a present I am giving myself for my fiftieth birthday."
  - c. Feel her pain.
  - d. Think about what she said about her siblings. How they are so jealous of her. How they feel she is their parents' favourite. How she was in therapy to deal with their hostility. How she seems to harbour parallel feelings of hurt and injustice against your husband.
  - e. All of the above.
16. Your husband returns home quickly after dropping off Orna. You sit down outside and he tells you:
- a. Orna told him she would have come to visit even if he had tried to dissuade her. She had re-read all his letters and found one where he told her he loved her.
  - b. She wasn't interested in doing much tourist stuff. All she wanted to do was go over the past.
  - c. He is grateful for how warm you were to her. She said she was grateful too.
  - d. He will wait for her to initiate the next contact. He will look after your son while you are away. He will probably meet her for lunch a few times.
  - e. All of the above.

17. It is five nights later and you have just arrived back from your demanding conference. You spoke to your husband by telephone once during the week and he said FBL's visit was going well and she seemed to be happier. Now your husband walks through the door with a pink rose he was given at a relative's funeral. He gives you the rose, you put it in water and ask about his week. His face has a crumpled expression you've never seen before. So you ask him:
- a. If it was a difficult week.
  - b. Whether FBL wanted more from him at every meeting.
  - c. Whether they had a lot of physical contact.
  - d. Whether they had sex.
  - e. All of the above.





## Hypocrites

The smell of cassocks. Not the red cassocks Ashley and the other acolytes wore, the black cassocks of the priests. They smelt like her father's suits. Her father was away for a fortnight at a time and sometimes she would open his cupboard doors and inhale his jackets. They smelt like him: pipe tobacco, Mum for Men, and something else. The cassocks smelt of cigarettes, deodorant and something else.

The smell of incense. Some girls said it made them want to faint, or hurl. Ashley absorbed the cloying sweetness, grew heady, gazed up at the golden light streaming in through the stained glass windows.

*God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.*

The words. The rhythm of them. The silences between the words.

The words she recited with the congregation.

*...in penitence we confess that we have sinned against You, through our own fault, in thought, word and deed, and in what we have left undone.*

The words in the Dean's sonorous voice.

*Almighty God have mercy upon you, pardon your sins and set you free from them...*

The words as she sang them, the slow, hushed hymns when the organ hummed.

*Just as I am, without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me  
And that thou bidd'st me come to thee  
O Lamb of God, I come*

For a few seconds the words and light and incense filled her, stilled her. But then her mind would be off again. She'd be thinking about the chocolate éclairs they would buy on the way home, scanning the pews in the congregation below for boys, gazing at Arthur in the choir stall across from hers.

*Almighty God unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit...*

It was after a confirmation class that the Dean asked Ashley if she wanted to be an acolyte. Up till then no girls had served at the cathedral's altar. It was a commitment: she would have to attend rehearsals, arrive early for services, attend church twice a day at Christmas and Easter.

Ashley took her confirmation classes seriously. She learnt the Creed and contemplated the Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. She knew the Ten Commandments and tried to honour her father and mother and not to covet what others had.

The confirmation service was at night. They had to wear white, like brides. Ashley's mother was making her dress. It had long, slightly puffy sleeves and a flared skirt. The cloth was thick polyester with a ridge.

On confirmation night she looked different. The other girls wore soft dresses and white jerseys against the winter cold. They wore flesh coloured stockings and beige shoes. Ashley's stockings and shoes were white. The others had shiny new silver crosses on short, thin chains. Ashley had inherited her aunt's cross: a chunky, engraved, orange gold with a kink where her aunt had bitten it. Her aunt smoke and drank and swore and never went to church, but her mother said the cross was precious: eighteen carat gold. It had a long gold chain which kept moving off to the side, looping itself over one of Ashley's small breasts.

It was difficult to think about receiving the Holy Spirit when you were wearing the wrong things. It was difficult not to smile about the spitty way the Bishop spoke. The girls sat in the front row right under the pulpit and Lorraine whispered that they should have brought umbrellas. Ashley bit her lips so she didn't shake with laughter.

Ashley expected something transcendent to happen when the Bishop laid his hands on her head, *Confirm O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit*. Or when he made the sign of the cross on her forehead with oil, the secret sign that she had joined the church. Or when she took her first communion: *Take this and eat, this is my body which is given for you... This is my blood which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins...* The wafer dissolved quickly, the wine tasted like her mother's Old Brown Sherry.

*Just as I am, though tossed about  
With many a conflict, many a doubt  
Fightings within, and fears without  
O Lamb of God I come.*

Ashley thought she would be the only female acolyte, but when she arrived for the rehearsal Lorraine was already there. After a few practises, they could control the tapers on the end of long wooden rods and move in unison when lighting the altar candles in the correct order. They learnt how to snuff out the flames without squashing the wicks.

On Sundays the acolytes would line up in their red cassocks and white cottas. The crucifier led the way carrying a brass cross on a long wooden pole, Arthur and Brian followed with their candles, then Lorraine and Ashley with theirs, then the deacons, priests and the Dean. The priests wore long white surplices over their cassocks with stoles and chasubles. The Dean's white cassock, called an alb, was covered with finely embroidered vestments. His Christmas and Easter chasubles were stitched with golden thread.

It was just an ordinary Sunday when the heavy entrance door of the church slammed. Ashley hadn't heard a word of the sermon. Arthur had asked her to go to the funfair with him. She was trying not to smile. She was wondering what to wear. She was thinking about Arthur as she sang:

*Love with every passion blending  
Pleasure that can never cloy*

She was thinking about a beauty tip in *Diana* magazine: for shiny hair use a raw egg instead of conditioner.

Ashley jumped when the church's entrance door slammed shut. There was a brief pause and then the doors of the entrance porch with their diamond shaped panes of glass swung open. A man with messy dark hair and creased clothes stumbled in, holding on to the back pews. He was talking to himself, loudly but incoherently. He sat down in an empty pew.

The Dean announced the next hymn and sang the first lines of *Guide me, O Thou Great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this foreign land* extra loud. The man sat slumped through all three verses. As the organ's warble faded he lifted his head and shouted "Hypocrites".

The word was slurred but clear. It hung in the silence. The man gripped the pew in front of him, pulled himself up and began swaying up the aisle.

"Hypocrites," he spat. "You're hypocrites. You're all bloody hypocrites."

He was speaking to Ashley. He was a prophet, speaking the truth. She was a fraud. She did not deserve to carry a candle. Her face burned.

As the Dean began the consecration *The Lord be with you... Lift up your hearts...* two sidesmen moved swiftly to escort the man down the aisle and out of the church. The man fought them and they had to drag him out, ranting. A third usher closed the door quietly behind them.

Ashley felt guilty about taking communion.

*We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.*

At the end of the service, just before he delivered the peace and announced the final hymn, the Dean congratulated the congregation on ignoring the unfortunate interruption. Then Arthur led the way down the aisle, holding the cross straight and high, Lorraine and Ashley followed behind, blowing out their candles as they passed the wooden entrance doors. The Dean was at the back of the procession as usual. Ashley's mother said he gave his wife an especially loving smile.

A few years later Ashley went to university and took a course in religious studies. By the end of the semester she was an atheist. She bought a musty second hand coat and had it dry cleaned. Back in her residence she ripped off the plastic covering, removed the wire hanger and the smell hit her. A smell she remembered. The smell of suits and cassocks. The smell of something else.



## **Notes in A and S**

### **Addiction**

If that doctor is right about sugar, then she was poisoning her husband for years with chocolate cake and brownies and apple crumble. And perhaps that had enslaved him. Because as soon as he gave up sugar he pulled on his skinny jeans and went forth to propagate elsewhere.

### **Attached**

Her eyes and ears were the strings that controlled her. Without their messages coursing through her neural pathways making her face shine with understanding, blaze with disagreement, she was limp, extinguished. A crumpled marionette.

### **Aubade**

Crossing your legs so your feet are beneath your knees. Placing your hands on the knees. Joining the palms at the base of the sternum. Softly close the top eyelids to meet the bottom eyelids. Descend the eyes towards the centre of the chest, the centre of the heart. Observe the body. As you breathe in a normal inhalation, a normal exhalation, maintain the lift of the spine. Feel the fullness of the chest. Feel the heart expanding as it lifts. Exhale to begin. Inhale. *Om*. Spread and lift the chest. Bow the head to the heart. Release the hands to the legs. Slowly lift the head. Softly open the eyes.

### **Awnings**

They sat on the stoep in the fresh air. He said wouldn't it be nice to sit here in summer? They bought a retractable awning they could roll out when they needed shade. He said wouldn't it be nice to sit here when it rains? A builder nailed perspex roof sheets over a wooden frame. The roof collected dirt and algae but the chairs on the stoep stayed dry. They sat outside on a hot night. She said wouldn't it be nice to feel a breeze?

### **Siren**

He wasn't much to look at. Not tall. Not dark. Not chiselled. He sat at the table. Watched. Ate. Drank. Waited. He opened his mouth, released words. It was not what he said. It was resonance, timbre, molten treacle. It flowed through the women. They shifted, looked down, leaned forward. Humming birds drilled.

## **Spellbound**

They gathered together to listen to a long limbed long faced cowgirl, beautiful and haunted in equal parts. She transferred pain into words. She wove her spell through prepositions. The overlooked words. The in's and on's and over's. She read for an hour. She offered to stop three times. They urged her on.

## **Structure**

They gave him choices. Did he want his nappy changed. Would he like a banana or a pear. Would he like swimming lessons. They visited three pre-schools and he chose the one with the best swing. He wore jeans to school, avoided sport, dropped algebra for maths literacy. He chose to spend his weekends drinking with friends. He chose a best friend who went into an alcohol induced coma.

They gave him an ultimatum. He chose to leave home. He chose a school with blazers and ties and kilts. He chose a hostel where his only quiet time would be when he was asleep. He chose to train so hard that he puked, blacked out, made the team.

## **Symmetry**

Women the same age. Women of a certain age. Mothers of teenagers close in age. One woman a teacher, one a student. One woman a writer, the other a reader of all her books. They meet at the row of basins and mirrors, exchange words of admiration and gratitude, display equal helpings of maternal pride. They excuse themselves, enter stalls a few doors apart, empty their bladders in synchronous urgency.

## The Game Farm

He came back home to build a road for his father. Two tracks of gravel that travelled a circular loop from the farm's entrance gate. It was the first game reserve in the area.

The father's plan was for visitors to stop halfway, walk through a Milkwood thicket, climb a sandy hill to a lookout hut, and enjoy the sea view. There were parking areas overlooking a water hole where people could get out with their flasks of tea and binoculars and observe the zebra, wildebeest and bontebok. They could admire the *fynbos* and identify birds with the help of the list on the brochure.

Most visitors sped around the track in ten minutes. Some wanted their money back.

It was the Cape dune mole rats who liked the road best, especially the grassy *middelmannetjie* between the gravel tracks. Every mole hill in the centre meant a rodent had burrowed under the track to collect a meal. After a few vehicles had travelled over the burrow, the road would sink in just enough to make the drivers of low-slung city cars anxious, and the son and farm workers would have to shovel more gravel into the hollows.

There were natural predators on the farm: puff adders, eagles, caracal. The puff adders took days to digest a thick pelted mole rat with its curved protruding incisors. The rodents were good breeders. The females popped out two or three pups twice a year. They didn't like sharing living quarters: one dune mole rat one burrow.

The farm's most visible endemic mammals were the bushbuck and grysbok. The grysbok was the father's favourite, an African bambi. But caracal kept picking them off. A caracal, with all the mole rats it could eat, kept leaving behind its calling card of grysbok bones and tiny pointed horns.

The son bought dozens of traps and slaughtered three hundred mole rats. But the mole hills kept multiplying, the road kept collapsing. After his father found yet another grysbok carcass, the son baited a walk-in lynx trap. Two days later a snarling caracal hissed at him through the mesh of the cage. A glossy cat in the prime of its life. The most beautiful creature the son had ever seen close up. He photographed it. He put a bullet through its head.





## **Other Mothers**

### **The Mentor's Wife**

His wife was beautiful, but older. She bustled in while they were working to collect a cup or do some filing and checked the electricity. She looked through the window on her way back down the driveway after collecting the post. Nothing. No charge between them: her husband and the young reporter he had rescued. The one who had been fired, who claimed she had been falsely accused of bias. He understood. He had been fired too and falsely accused of incompetence. Two wounded castoffs cut off from the power and glory and madness of their newsrooms, they went freelance.

The mentor's wife was kind to her. She gave her a towel and clean underwear after she worked through the night. The young one had been hired to free the mentor up, to be his eyes and ears. But she didn't see or hear the way he did, so he worked just as hard. He set her up with foreign newspapers but she preferred to write for a struggling local rag. He introduced her to foreign correspondents but she fell for a sport-loving artist.

From the mentor the young one learnt that reporters should always drink or eat what people offer, because that is when they will relax and speak to you. And that a story is like a washing line, only washing goes on to it – nothing extraneous. From his wife she learnt how to cook with wine in a clay oven, how to add mustard to salad dressing, how to sleep all night on a hard floor next to an asthmatic son.

### **The Widow**

She didn't cry at their funeral. Her face shone, her fist cut the air before the coffins draped in flags, men in black berets carrying banners, the defiant multitude. The army and police watched from the perimeter. For one day only.

I met her a year before. She was already in mourning. Her husband in prison, detained indefinitely. She wore a dressing gown. Her daughter leaned against her arm. Her little son snuggled against her breast. She stroked his hair with her fingers, covered his plump forehead with the palm of her hand. Her dressing gown was belted tight.

### **The Stalwart**

The last time I saw her we had tea overlooking her garden. She might have smoked a cigarette. We must have discussed my research, which she had commissioned. I told her I was leaving the city soon; my boyfriend wanted to be a game ranger. Let me give you some advice, she said.

I waited for this large woman with her muscular mind to say the things I was ignoring. What about your career? Are you going to give up your dreams to follow a man? Can we call you if we hear of human rights abuses there? At least keep a journal. But she looked at me and said: Look after your skin. Wear sunscreen every day.

## Home Coming

Griselda made decisions. She made laws. She came home for one night between sessions. She took everyone out for dinner.

Griselda was fair. She listened to the girls' achievements. Smiled understandingly when the boys were too shy to speak. Gazed fondly at each adult. Directed an equal number of questions to Max on her left, Jude on her right, Carlos and Sicelo halfway down the table, the children around them.

And if her knee was touching Jude's under the table, no one could see.

Griselda was happy and proud and hungry. The food was delicious. The youngest boy shouted: I also want to go to school. He burst into tears. Everyone went quiet.

Griselda warned: Be a good boy Pedro. The wails increased. The little feet stamped. The little hands tugged at the cloth around his head. Carlos whispered. Pedro's sobs turned quiet.

Griselda summoned the waiter. The bill was delivered. The plates were removed. The evening was ruined.

Back home Griselda went straight to Jude's room. She unwrapped his headscarf. She lifted his robe. She found him naked. She found him ready.

Griselda was sweaty and sticky. She was ready to sleep. But Griselda was fair. She had a quick shower.

She went to Max. Most women divorced men with useless sperm. Griselda was kind. She let Max move down her body with his tongue.

Carlos's room was empty.

Griselda went to see her girls. She assessed Nwabisa's cello technique, checked Zena's trigonometry, corrected Lindelwa's shoulder stand.

Griselda went to see her boys. She stood outside the door. She could hear Pedro crying. Javier and Raul shouting. The low rumble of Carlos's voice. She turned away.

Sabelo was singing in his shower. Griselda joined him. She praised his voice. She praised his physique. She praised their daughters. They celebrated in the shower, on the couch, on the carpet. Griselda was languid. Griselda was sleepy. But Griselda was fair.

She went to Carlos. He was looking out his window. She removed his robe. She removed her kaftan. She pressed against his back. Carlos moved away. Griselda led him to the bed. She mounted him. She put his hands upon her. She pushed his fingers inside her. She climaxed quickly.

Griselda gazed at Carlos's back. She sighed. She swallowed a yawn. She ran her fingers down his spine. She said: I know it's hard for the boys, but you know what happened when things were different.

## Rosalind

Rosalind finished her joint and looked around. Everyone had paired off. The forest beyond the lawn had blurred into corrugations of green and black, beckoning her like fingers. She lowered herself off the cottage deck and moved through the long grass. Perhaps a walk would make her feel better.

But the stream was the colour of sewage. Forest ferns kept their new fronds tightly coiled as if withholding pleasure. Stepping stones wobbled threateningly underfoot as she leapt across the freezing water.

A footpath sucked her into the forest. Garish mushrooms and fungi burst out of fallen trees like radioactive cancers. A single bird called, sounding panicky. The overlapping canopy blocked out most of the remaining light. Twigs snapped with an ominous crack. Rustling leaves and falling branches startled her. Every step released a stench of loamy decay.

Just as she decided to turn back, the mist fell. If she stretched out her arm she could barely see her hand. She turned back anyway. Or had she turned back already? Was she walking deeper into the forest? Rosalind spun around and stumbled on, panic rising, tears forming. Spider webs broke across her face. Low slung branches and trees with thorny barks bashed and scratched her as she scrambled over a giant lichen-covered trunk that had fallen across the path.

She quickened her pace. The path rose steeply. Maybe there'd be no mist at the top of the hill and she would have a clear view of the cottage and the way back. They must have lit the lamps by now. She broke into a jog, gulping for breath. The mist had soaked up the heat of the day and she ran faster to warm up. Just as she was sure she'd reached the top of the hill the ground fell away and she bounced down the cliff like a boulder, glancing off trees and rocks as she picked up pace.

Rosalind woke up on a bed of forest ferns. Her face felt wet and sticky, she licked her lips and tasted blood. She spoke to her arms and legs but they wouldn't respond.

She gazed up at branches and leaves sprinkled with sparkling stars. She could feel the forest breathing out, releasing an avalanche of oxygen, all for her. She breathed in deeply and out slowly, as all pain and tension seeped from her fingers and toes.

Rosalind raised her head and saw that her hands and feet were covered in lichen. As she watched, long creepers snaked down from the trees and encircled her arms and legs. A handful of leaves silvered by starlight floated down to her stomach. She laid her head back down feeling her long loose hair take root in the compost. She closed her eyes.



## Swimming with Crocodiles

I wear the backless dress I wore to my sister's wedding, a blue cotton dress with a high neck. I wade a long way through shallow tropical water and breaking waves to reach the ship. My child walks next to me, his head is as high as my waist. I wear the backless dress back to front.

Someone has been staying in my cabin, the bed is rumpled. I am looking for a yoga room, we go from place to place searching.

I watch a video of myself in the back to front dress. My nipples are covered with soft black strands of cotton. My son and I are silent, comfortable together. I watch the video calmly.

I notice tufts of long grass rooted in my side. We find the perfect room, it is unfurnished, with a wooden floor and only three walls. We are swimming with crocodiles. I tug at the grassy tufts, they come away easily. The room opens on to a sand dune which slopes down to the sea. The crocodiles come up for breath, they are really just men in crocodile suits.

I find a nylon thread above my hip. Sand lies heaped on the floorboards. The island children come to talk to us. I pull the thread, it comes out and out.

My son finds a treasure on the dune, a drinking glass. I offer the children a banana. I pull and pull the thread, there is no end. I take the glass to wash it but I press too hard, it breaks into three pieces. The children shake their heads, they have all the bananas they can eat.

I use both hands to yank the thread and deliver a trawling net.





## Soft Black Shoes

Once upon a time before cell phones, in the City of Roses, Virginia Gloak lived with her mother and father in a big house at the end of a long driveway lined with trees.

Her friends had all gone to universities far away but Virginia was careful. She stayed home and studied through correspondence.

Every night at 10 o'clock her mother gave her a vial of golden nectar and massaged her plump feet. Virginia would sigh and say: How I would love a pair of cork platforms, or cowboy boots, or slip slops.

Every Saturday Mrs Gloak drove her daughter to town to buy a new pair of shoes. Virginia could choose any style she liked. She had shelves and shelves of shoes. She had boxes and boxes of boots. But she only ever wore flat baby-dolls in soft black fabric. She wore them with short white socks.

Now Virginia was 22. She was getting tired of being careful. She was getting tired of being good. She went to a pub and ordered wine. She accepted a smoke from a man at the bar. She let him make her laugh and wrote her phone number on his box of matches. She drove home in her silver Audi and was late for her golden vial.

I'm not apologising, she told her mother, as Mrs Gloak rubbed antiseptic cream into her toes. I met a dinky man called Timothy.

Virginia liked driving beside Timothy in his rusty Mini and watching the tar through the holes in the chassis. She liked visiting him at The Plot where he rented a falling down house with a couple who rode Harley Davidsons and collected LP's.

Mr Gloak said the plots were a graveyard for dead cars and deadbeats. He said by the age of thirty a man should have more to his name than half a degree and a string of dead end jobs.

Mrs Gloak said: Are you looking after yourself love? Are you being careful?

Virginia said she was tired of eating nutritious meals with her parents three times a day. She was tired of having a mother who gave her a cooler box with golden nectar whenever she left the house.

She liked the breakfast fry ups and fiery curries they ate at The Plot with beer. She lay on the tatty carpet smoking Benson & Hedges Special Mild and making mixed tapes of Rolling Stones love songs. She learnt to play poker and drink whisky.

She liked sitting on the toilet seat while Timothy reclined in the bath with Gitanes and a quart. He looked vulnerable with wet hair. Her stomach hurt when he spoke about a woman he loved who had moved to America.

Virginia was still careful. She always showered alone, she remembered the golden nectar, she remembered the creams, she emerged in a long nightie and clean socks.

Timothy made her happy.

She didn't mind when their love-making ended with him cursing and vowing never to drink again. It was enough for her to wake up to his face. She wasn't scared of him after he smashed a few things, punched his fist through a pane of glass and sat down to write an inventory of what he'd broken. She was scared for him.

Things changed when Timothy lost his job.

Virginia said of course she would drive with him to the coast.

Mr Gloak slammed doors and gave his daughter an open air-ticket home.

Mrs Gloak took Virginia to town to look for shoes for the trip. The shop assistants fluttered around with boxes of takkies and padded clogs. Virginia left wearing moccasins. By the time they were back home she was in tears. Mrs Gloak washed her daughter's throbbing feet and rubbed cream into the fresh sores. Then she quietly unpacked a new pair of baby dolls and wept as she handed her daughter a heavy cooler bag.

I wish I could say Virginia wore silver stilettos to her wedding and she and Timothy lived happily ever after.

But Virginia wasn't careful in the City of the Golden Mile.

She stayed up late drinking and listening to jazz and hearing how Timothy's father had gambled and drunk his money away.

She climbed over a high gate to see the thatched house Timothy grew up in, and hurt her foot when guard dogs chased them out again. She said nothing about her injury and was pleased when her toes went numb and the pain disappeared.

She tried not to bother Timothy's parents who seemed so unhappy in their tiny flat. She ignored her splitting headaches. She ignored her blurred vision. She fell asleep, for the last time, without showering or changing her socks.

## **Candlelit**

after lengthy nocturnal ablutions involving contact lenses and aqueous cream and floss and toothpaste and a final wee the woman switches off the bathroom light and approaches the candlelit bed where she removes her pyjama pants lifts the weight of duvets and blankets and snuggles towards the waiting body not as warm as he was when they first met and he dived into bed every night as if into a swimming pool but still warm and they kiss and he knows just where to touch and pinch and she can smell the Mentadent P on his breath and in two minutes it won't matter but now it does and she thinks of him kissing their cat and burrowing his hands into its fur and she can't stop herself lifting his fingers to her nose and sniffing sniffily and saying are you sure you washed your hands and did you scrub your nails



## **Danger Point**

Once a girl walked along a beach of white sand. She walked at sunset to the furthest rocks. She waited for the lighthouse. It flashed three times. Then paused. Then flashed three times.

She watched until it was nearly dark. If she'd been a ship she would have steered straight for it. Three flashes. Pause. Three flashes.

She tried to walk to the lighthouse once. She crossed two rivers before turning back.

Every time she walked along the beach she looked for him. When the currents were cold she expected him to loom out of the sea mist. She would know him when she saw him. He would be wearing an old jersey. He would be looking for her.

She brought men to the beach. Friends who spent hours fishing from the rocks. A lover who moaned about the wind, the stench of decaying kelp, the haze of sea lice.

One overcast day she drove to the lighthouse. After the second town she turned left and followed a sandy road. It led to an octagonal tower with four narrow windows running up four alternate sides. The tower supported a cage of glass topped with a red hat.

The keeper emerged from the arched front door. He said the lighthouse wasn't open to the public. He told her it was eighteen metres high and built of concrete blocks and mortar. A lens weighing twenty kilograms gave the rotating bulb the power of one million seven hundred thousand candles. The light flashed three times every forty seconds.

The keeper wouldn't let her inside. Security reasons. But he gave her a bulb. A giant clear globe. Its broken fuse vibrated.