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Waking the White Goddess: a novel

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing)

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Introduction

This dissertation presents a novel that charts the progress of Rose, the white protagonist, whose origins are shrouded in mystery. Her mother, who died in her infancy, has left behind no trace of any relative, friend or connection, and no clue as to the identity of her father. Rose's strange origins have rendered her passive and diffident. In addition, her identity has been moulded by her sheltered and privileged lifestyle. Faced with the suffering and poverty that the country's history has bequeathed to present-day South Africa, she experiences guilt but lacks the strength to do anything about it.

The novel opens with Rose, now 30, bereft and alone as her foster mother too has just died. As she begins to tidy the deceased woman's flat in Johannesburg, she finds objects that may provide clues to her parentage, including faded Polaroid photographs that she believes could be of her biological parents. On their reverse side, she reads the word "Oberon", the name of a village in the southern uKhahlamba-Drakensberg. Desperate to uncover her biological roots, Rose travels to this village but her journey becomes more than a search for her origins when she experiences events that lead her to an identity beyond whiteness and help her to find rootedness in African soil.

A reflexive essay follows. The essay is a personal reflection of the writing process, and includes the inspiration and development of the story line, problems encountered around the narrative voice and the contribution of the Masters (MA) programme workshops to the project. It also explores and expounds on the theoretical underpinnings of the novel, such as white identity in post-apartheid South Africa, the use of Western mythologies in an African context, and a discussion of San culture, including concerns around its inclusion in the text. The use of the heavily-loaded signifier, "White Goddess" as in the title, is also touched upon.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

(Name of candidate)

_____ day of _____, 2010.

Dedication

To Andy – for without your story, I could never have told mine

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Waking the White Goddess

Chapter 1

Rose rested her head in Livvie's lap and looked up at the ceiling. Livvie's nostrils got in the way. They were scary –red caves with hairs like weeds growing inside.

"Tell me again about my mummy."

"Your mummy was a beautiful princess." Livvie stroked the velvet skin on the child's cheeks with her fingertips.

"What was her name?"

"Ruby. Like the red jewel that princesses wear in their crowns."

"And why is my name Rose?"

"Because you're as pretty as a Rose."

"And where did Ruby go?"

"She died, my darling. She went away.

"Where? Where did she go?"

"She went to a beautiful place in the sky."

"I want to go there. When can I go?"

"You won't die for a very long time. I'm your Livvie who loves you and who'll look after you forever."

They often spoke about Rose's experience when she was a baby. Rose vehemently swore she remembered, and also how it ended.

"It's impossible," Livvie asserted. "You were a baby. Less than two. Memory only begins at three or four. It's a memory of a memory." But Rose insisted that she awoke to feel a woman scooping her up in her arms and wrapping her in her yellow blanket with the satin edging. Rose told John and Livvie how the woman cradled her and murmured soft words of comfort and that her tears wet Rose's face, and how thirsty Rose felt, parched to the core, and how, when she looked into the woman's eyes, she saw pools that revealed forgotten secrets of her existence and she was suffused with warmth and that she felt whole and comforted.

"Who was the woman?" Rose wanted to know.

"It was me," said John, indignant. "I picked you up and wrapped you in your blanket."

"It was the spirit of your mother," answered Livvie sagely.

When Rose was older, Livvie told her: “Your mother was like a spirit of the air. A free spirit. She had no roots, no origins. She arrived out of thin air and then she left, leaving no trace.”

“Ruby – beautiful red jewel. Huh! Traceless and rootless. She leaves and I’m left with her baggage,” Rose said somewhat bitterly.

“What was she like” she asked, first Livvie and John; then after John left, just Livvie. “How did you meet her? Was she pretty?”

Then Livvie died just as Rose was approaching Ruby’s age when she had died. And that was that. The story lay as hard and as unyielding as a pebble.

So here’s Rose now – nearly thirty years later. The daughter of a spirit of the air. Her hair falls like water; her skin is pale like marble. She stands, hesitating, pointing the key at the front door like a pistol. Doors, hearts, secrets, truths, Rose exhaled then inserted the key. It was the first time she was entering Livvie’s flat since her death.

After the gloom of the corridor, she squinted. Light streamed into the room through the expansive north-facing windows. Time seemed to stop. The weavers’ incessant chattering in the plane tree outside ceased and the buzz of traffic from the M1- it too was silent. The world held its breath as a wave of déjà vu washed over her. She’d experienced this exact moment before. No other human being, no animal, not even a pot plant. Livvie always said that she didn’t want anything that needed feeding and watering. But there were plenty of inanimate objects. What a job. To sort out a life’s left-overs. To make room for her own now that she was moving in.

Livvie. People often asked if it was short for Olivia. “You would think so but my name is actually Livona - from the Roman goddess, Levanna. She lifted new-born babies up from the ground. God knows what my mother was thinking. She died before I got round to asking.” Did Livvie have regrets - not asking? Rose certainly mourned all her unasked questions. Livvie had effectively sacrificed her life to raise a child she had no biological connection to, no legal obligation. Rose didn’t think she would do the same under the same circumstances. Now it was too late. Livvie was gone. And when Livvie was dying and they had both known that time was running out, Rose still couldn’t ask the questions lying there like something undigested in her guts. Oh, how she wanted to – desperately - but when she tried to expel the words, they lodged in her throat like fish bones, or infected tonsils. And her feelings for this woman: she’d so

yearned to tell her how much she'd meant to her, how grateful….but she knew neither of them had the stomach for such outpourings of sorrow and lamentation.

Royal Doulton shepherdess, Jasperware bowl, Moorcroft jug, Swarovski crystal hedgehog. She wandered through the lounge in a drizzle of dust motes, weaving her way through chairs, dressers, display cabinets, tables, picking up and then replacing objects. Things. Memento mori. Rose didn't want them. Livvie had inherited them from her mother who had inherited them from her mother, who had inherited them from her mother. Who would inherit them from her, along with the African objects that had become fashionable in the last twenty years; the wooden carvings and beaded giraffes, the hand-woven runners and throws?

And who would she assign to carry out the chores generated by her death? Who would deal with her death certificate, will, frozen bank accounts, unpaid bills, redundant car? A list of tasks as long as the life that had just been lived. She needed to write them all down.

She went to the escritoire to find paper and pen and found herself face to face with the portrait of the black woman. Or the white woman - she couldn't decide. Livvie called her the Drakensberg Lady.

"Why do you call her that?" Rose demanded when she was little.

"Because she came from the Drakensberg." Livvie explained.

The lady stared past Rose with leonine eyes, her features intense, her skin glowing white. One breast bared, the other covered in a blood-red *kaross* that fell from her shoulder. Her head was adorned with brass rings, her neck and earlobes with cowry shells and her arms with multi-stranded leather thongs. She held a chalice in her outstretched hand as if offering it to a presence that stood beyond the viewer's shoulder. She used to terrify Rose. A wicked queen with magical powers who knew the bad things you'd done. Rose smiled as she remembered skipping past her when she was feeling naughty, or stopping to stare when she was feeling brave and defiant. Then she could study the bare breast. It was very rude.

The muffled tones of her cell phone pierced her reveries. Marion. She resisted answering for a few seconds but the electronic call was too insistent.

"Darling, how are you doing?" Marion's voice oozed dutiful concern.

"Thanks. I'm fine. Really," came her terse reply.

"Where're you?"

"In the flat. Trying to sort out Livvie's stuff. I'm not getting very far."

"Where's Katie? Is she there?" Good question. Where was Katie? She'd cleaned the flat after the funeral and had left the keys with the caretaker, as she said she would, but that was that. Just as well. Rose was feeling too fragile to cope with her. She could just imagine her standing slap-bang in the middle of the carpet, legs astride, arms folded, advising Rose on what to keep and what to discard. Katie had her own very definite opinions and Rose probably would have acquiesced too.

"No…Katie's not here."

"Then, how about a break? Meet me for a quick coffee. It will do you good to get out. Parque in Norwood? I've just finished my Hypermarket shop." Marion's offer was tempting. Rose hesitated, then she succumbed, suddenly relieved at the thought of the caffeine pick-me-up. The list could wait. She locked the door and left the flat, her heels clicking out a snappy duple-time on the black and white tiles of the corridor.

They met at the coffee shop across the road from the park. It was not one of Rose's favourite haunts but she was glad when she saw Marion sitting on the covered veranda. One other table was occupied by a man working on his laptop. He looked up and tried to meet her gaze as she passed his table but she kept her eyes on Marion.

In her cream sweater, Marion resembled a scoop of melting ice cream. She half got up as Rose bent down to kiss her clammy cheek.

"How's the new grandchild?" Rose asked although she knew the answer already.

"A-ah…," she crowed, "…just divine. And not so new anymore. He's starting to crawl. And so clever. I swear I heard him say "mama" the other day although he's much too young to be starting to talk. I can't wait to see him…Where's the waiter? He's just standing there like a zombie. Try and catch his eye."

A waiter sidled up to their table.

"What will you have?" Marion asked.

"Just a coffee," said Rose, looking up at the waiter who waited impassively for their order, pen and scrap of paper poised.

"And a cappuccino for me" said Marion. "But I want extra foam - and weak. Not strong," she reiterated. "Arnold and me are going to the Drakensberg. The Bergsun. Have you ever been? We went a couple of years ago and it was too wonderful." Had she ever had a bad holiday, or a bad experience of any kind? The holidays she took, the movies she watched, the restaurants she patronised – her choices were just impeccable.

There was no one more talented, more accomplished than her children and her grandchildren. They were all so perfect. Even the people she knew – she basked in the sunshine of their lives. Rose supposed it was a good trait – to live life so enthusiastically, so uncritically, to see only the good.

The coffee arrived. Marion fussed with a sachet of powdered sweetener, trying to pour it into a little hole she'd made in the foam.

"That was quick for a change. Mm-m-m. Smells good," Marion remarked.

"Talking of the Drakensberg, I was just looking at the *Drakensberg Lady*," Rose said.

Marion looked puzzled.

Rose stirred her coffee absently. "God, I need this! You know - the painting that hangs in the flat," she pursued.

"A painting? There're so many paintings in Livvie's flat. I'm not so observant when it comes to art."

"So, you wouldn't know why Livvie called it the *Drakensberg Lady*? Did she ever go to the Drakensberg?'

"I don't remember. Why?"

"I don't know. The painting had some sort of magical power over me when I was a child. I believed she was my real mother." She had never told this to Livvie. Why was she suddenly confiding in Marion? "You know, she didn't leave one photo behind. I really only had my imagination to…"

Marion had foam on her upper lip. "I can't imagine what it must be like - not knowing anything about your family. Maybe you need to go to… You know," she said conspiratorially, her cup poised at her mouth, "I've never had a need for therapy, thank God, but everyone's talking about this fabulous hypnotherapist who takes you back to – oh…" She waved her hand about: "…to when you were in the womb!"

Hypnotherapy and that regression stuff! Hocus pocus. Rose gave a silent snort. And don't think I haven't been to therapists. Livvie thought it would be a good idea too. I'm too inhibited. Underneath their impassive exteriors, they sit in judgement of you. You feel like you need to make a good impression and it stops you from being honest. But she said nothing.

Marion sipped thoughtfully: "You know, you've got nothing to lose."

"Except a few hundred rand." And she didn't have the cash to burn.

"Just try him. Um-m…Here. Kevin de Ferraud. Phone him now. I'll send you his business card." She picked up her cell phone that she had placed on the table and held it out at arm's length.

Rose teased: "Gee, I'm impressed. You're so technologically out there!"

Marion busily stabbed the keys with a stubby index finger, pursing her lips. Rose allowed the woman's bossiness to wash over her. She'd known her all her life. Marion was just being her usual self, which she thought was the epitome of wisdom and concern. Others might see her as interfering and insensitive. But maybe it was the push Rose needed because deep down, the idea of hypnotism really intrigued her. She wondered whether she could let go of her reserve and allow herself to "go under". Rose phoned.

Marion prattled on. "Oh – here's a message. From Glynnis. She forgot she had a facial. This afternoon. She's got no babysitter. Why not? Where's the maid?" Marion looked up at Rose. "This new maid of hers! She's forever taking time off. Well, I must leave in twenty minutes or so. How was the coffee? Mine was delicious! Did you make the appointment? "

"Tomorrow at one."

"That was quick. You normally have to wait for ages."

So he was not as popular as Marion thought. His star was already waning with the trendoids.

Rose couldn't face the thought of returning to Livvie's flat so headed for home, a rented cottage situated on a large property in Forest Town. The main house had been built for a Randlord in the early years of the Twentieth Century. There had been many additions and improvements over the years including the cottage, which housed Rose. Now spring and everything bursting, its trellises sprouted baby roses and privet hedges waxed white with tiny blooms. She felt like Sleeping Beauty. She had moved in about eight, nine years ago with her boyfriend at the time, Glen. He was no Prince Charming.

What did she see in him? They had met at varsity; he was sitting a seat away from her in one of those huge lecture halls - a few rows from the front. They weren't those rebellious types who lounged at the back. She had sneezed. It was a big, wet one and she had frantically fumbled for a tissue in her bag, cupping her hand over her nose. A damsel in distress. He'd presented her with a tissue, leaning over the empty seat, looking self-satisfied.

She was to learn that this ready tissue was symbolic, something like the handkerchief in medieval times. He'd never be caught dead without one. He believed his upper respiratory tract was just irresistible to viruses and bacteria. If he had the merest hint of a sniffle, he'd stay in bed and dose himself with every medication under the sun. And his lack of spontaneity. He needed two weeks warning and a consultation with his mother before committing to arrangements. As for shopping with him, watching him hum and haw, reading labels and comparing prices. It was excruciating. The sex, too. It was very tame for a first love affair. There was none of that can't keep your keep hands off each another, no illicit trysts in public spaces. (Did this really happen or had she watched too many romantic movies?) He probably felt guilty about sex before marriage. But to be fair, they were both inexperienced.

She'd thought about marriage but then he wanted to go to London, so they broke up, which triggered a tear or two but afterwards, she realised that it was more from relief than regret. She suspected Livvie felt the same although she never said anything. Rose perhaps needed a more outgoing type of person, an extrovert, a sensualist, someone to counter her own reserve and ascetism.

And here she was, ten years down the line, still in the cottage, almost as inexperienced with men as she was then.

She drove along Second Avenue, under the leafy vault of plane trees, passing large houses that remained invisible behind their high electrified walls. There were few cars on the road and the only pedestrian was a Moslem boy in his white tunic and baggy pants on his way to the madrassa. A mere block away, killer taxis hurtled around Death Bend and the open doorways *muti*-shops along Louis Botha Avenue's were best sidestepped, but here was suburban Johannesburg at its arboreal best.

She loved this time of the year. November. The streets splashed with fallen petals looked like the aftermath of a paintball war – purple, mauve and yellow, jacaranda, Bougainvillea and acacia – before gardeners armed with their big blowers blew them away. Her windows closed, the air conditioner blowing cool, her iPod played through the car speakers:

Sun is in the sky oh why oh why?
Would I wanna be anywhere else

Sun is in the sky oh why oh why?
Would I wanna be anywhere else?

Rose passed a middle-aged black woman limping along the road. She had a blanket wrapped around her middle and was carrying a shabby togbag. Now she materialised in Rose's rear-view mirror. She'd stopped walking and was quietly waving at her vanishing car.

She probably wanted a lift to Killarney Mall. Rose thought about stopping but decided the mall was well within walking distance. But she then felt sorry for her. Her shoes were clearly pinching her toes. So she changed gears and reversed the two hundred meters, her engine whining petulantly, and watched in her rear-view mirror as the woman lolloped towards the car. After a few moments, her face popped up at the passenger window, unexpectedly fraught, rivulets of tears rolling down her cheeks and dripping off her chin.

What now? Rose leant across to open the window. The woman was scrabbling in her togbag, then she thrust a much handled official-looking document through the window.

"Please. My husband. My husband," she gasped. "He left me in Port Elizabeth with no money. I don't know if he's alive or dead."

The music played on:

When you look with your eyes
Everything seems nice
But if you look twice
you can see it's all lies

A young black Adonis stopped on the opposite side of the road and from his black BMW convertible asked Rose if she needed help. She stopped the music. She would have liked to have connected, to have collaborated with this gallant, but she said: "No. No, thanks. It's okay…I think…." Her voice trailed off and the man drove away. As she too would have done at this point, telling herself that this was someone else's problem, but the woman cut such a pathetic figure that she felt bound to hear her out.

"My husband…I've come to find him in Johannesburg. Look at my knee. I've had to walk and walk." She gave a little wail as she lifted the hem of her overall to expose a trickle of blood seeping from her grey and wrinkled skin.

"Now, I came to the police but they say there's nothing they can do here. I must go home," she wailed. "But I've got no money. I sold my jacket. And all I've got is this." She withdrew her green ID book from the bag and opened it to reveal two tattered twenty rand notes. "And I've only got this blanket… I must go home now."

"Where's home?" Rose demanded.

"Er…Oberon… near Pietermaritzburg. And I've got no money." She gave another wail.

"How much do you need?" Rose asked, thinking: Ah ha! So this is what it's about.

"Two hundred and seventy five rand. For the train."

For once, I've actually got enough cash on me, she mused. And if this is true, what a sad story. If it's a scam, well, what a terrible way to earn a living. And her performance is so convincing…

"Get in," Rose said, leaning over to open the door. "I'll give you the money and take you to the station." Sucker! But giving away the money wouldn't kill her and what did she have to do that was so urgent? Her act of kindness would make her feel good about herself.

The women entered clumsily and sat sobbing while Rose drove onto the Houghton on-ramp of the M1. She felt quite torn, not knowing whether to give herself over to the woman and sympathise or whether to remain sceptical and immure herself to this tale of woe.

She stayed in the slow lane, listening to the rise and fall of the sobbing. Finally it subsided and then ceased and a greasy silence filled the car. The woman took a grubby piece of tissue from her bag and began to wipe her face and nose.

Rose imagined what she was thinking: "Why must the *umlungu* take me to the station? Now I'll have to make my own way back to the northern suburbs for my next victim."

"How can you come to Johannesburg to look for your husband. It's such a big place. Where are you going to look?" Her voice was hectoring.

"I came to the woman I know in Alex but she chased me away."

"And what were you doing by the golf course?"

"I was at the Norwood Police Station." Her answers came too off pat. She wouldn't ask her any more questions.

Rose drove onto the Queen Elizabeth Bridge and into Simmons Street, negotiating the taxis idling in the permanent shade cast by the office buildings, multi-storey parking garages and hulking overpasses. She couldn't remember when last she had driven into town. It all looked so dreary and depressing, covered in graffiti and grime. In Bree Street, loiterers and pedestrians spilled off the pavement, competing with cardboard boxes and litter. Women vendors sat expressionless alongside rows of red and orange plastic plates, each displaying a sad little pile of tomatoes or apples.

She turned into Rissik Street and soon entered the station, at which point she fumbled under her seat to retrieve her handbag. "I'm sorry for your troubles." She gave the woman the notes: "I hope you can sort them out."

Woman full of woe. "Thank you. God bless you," she said quietly as she alighted from the car. Rose watched as she walked away. Wrapped in her worn blanket, carrying a shabby tog bag which she said held her only possessions in the world, she vanished into the multitude.

As Rose headed home up the hill towards the concrete monolith that was the Civic Centre, she thought about the accident of birth, the chances of being born at a certain time, in a certain place, to a certain class, to a certain race, but these thoughts offered no consolation for the guilt that assailed her at every busy intersection. Blind beggars and their tin-holding handlers, ragged street children, glue bottles at the ready, toddlers on traffic islands watching as their mothers waved weakly at passing motorists then held out their palms. White guilt, bleeding heart. She never had any change for parking machines – she'd given it all to beggars. She crested the hill. There were low grey clouds gathering in the west. Her gears eased for the downhill run home as the Constitutional Courts came into view.

Tonight she had to decide which of her possessions to relocate to Livvie's flat and which to dispose of. It wouldn't take long. The minute she got home, she'd make a list. Her pieces weren't expensive, the maple only a veneer. Livvie's had lasting value even though some were really not her style. The bed? She'd keep her own. The thought of sleeping in the one Livvie had just died in was just a bit too much. She wondered who moved furniture. It wasn't really a job for big furniture movers. She just needed a

man with a bakkie. And a second-hand furniture dealer. Where did one find these people? She didn't know. She'd never had to arrange anything like this before.

But the minute she crossed the threshold, her intentions dissolved like smoke in the wind and when she entered her bedroom, she flopped onto her bed and fell asleep. Outside, the rain started to fall, a soft feminine rain, freeing a fecund scent that lay trapped within the red clay earth as it soaked into the ground.

Chapter 2

It drizzled throughout the night and the morning arrived sullenly, demanding socks and a jersey that had lain forgotten in drawers and cupboards these past weeks. Armed and organised with black plastic dustbin bags, Rose arrived at Livvie's flat, determined to begin with the worst first – the bedroom.

The light was leaden as it trickled through the windows and she shivered as she entered the room, still redolent with the sweet smell of death. She could see Livvie lying there, waxen, cadaverous, her vitality and humour already consigned to life's outbox.

Rose switched on the light, crossed to the dressing-table and sat down on the stool. Ancient hairbrushes, bristles matted with grey strands, depleted jars of moisturisers, bottles of perfume, smudgy tubes of lipstick, dusty pots of powder were lined up: an arsenal ready to do battle against the ravages of time and disease. Katie must have created this orderly arrangement when she cleaned the flat for the last time.

Rose looked up and saw her face in the mirror, her skin porcelain pale in the harsh electric light. She tied her hair back into a loop with an elastic band and picked up a tube of lipstick. Slowly, she smeared it onto her lips, first on the upper, starting from the middle and progressing outwards and then on the lower, slowly, from right to left. She pressed her lips together. Full lips. Siren. Vamp. More like vampire: the crimson lipstick bled from the corners of her mouth onto her pallid skin.

Her lips felt heavy with their new veneer. She hardly ever wore makeup, preferring a natural look. Her clothes too - linens, or raw silks in stone, wheat and cream. She cultivated an understated look. She wasn't a slave to fashion. Then, neither was Livvie - although this had not always been the case. Rose had seen photos of her where she was exceptionally stylish for the time. Much thinner and sporting a shiny helmet of hair, brown polyester trouser suits and pale lipstick. But this had been more than thirty years ago, before Rose had entered her life, when Livvie had been working for a large accounting firm in the CBD.

So why had Livvie never returned to the corporate world when Rose grew older and more independent? At this stage, Livvie had started her small accountancy practice that she ran from home. Rose knew it satisfied her material needs but wondered whether it had fulfilled her other needs, whatever these had been. And although she had had a large circle of women friends - why had there been no regular men in her life? Of

course, John had been around in the early days: he had lived with them in the house in Sandhurst. But they were just very close friends - they lived in separate wings of the house. How did she fulfil her sexual needs? People could ask the same question about me, she thought dryly.

And what was Livvie's relationship with John? Livvie told her that he'd left for Paris when he found out he had cancer, that he wanted to die there. Why? What was in Paris? He'd studied there. Who was in Paris? With Livvie's death, her questions would remain unanswered forever. Questions and question marks. They lay in her path like rocks. They tripped her up and obstructed her way wherever she went. She thought of Sisyphus forever pushing his boulder up a mountain only to have it roll down again. The human struggle for meaning. How depressing.

Rose couldn't believe the junk that had accumulated over the years: an empty tin of hairspray that rattled angrily when shaken, a few forlorn hair-curlers, paper-clips, buttons, even an old shopping list. So many useless things held onto for what? Holding the bag at the edge of the table, she wiped the surface clean and then upended the drawers into the bag too. Clean sweep. It felt so final.

The built-in cupboards that occupied the length of the room were next on her list. As she opened the double doors, the smell of cinnamon and vanilla washed over her like a wave of longing but sticking her head further in, she could smell a musty odour that seemed to seep out from the row of outfits hanging in their rainbow of colours. The emerald suit Livvie had worn to her sixtieth birthday party - a luncheon for sixty of her best friends in the garden of the country club, men in blue double-breasted blazers exuding whiskey-breathed bonhomie and softly-spoken women wearing floral frocks and touches of lipstick. And the orange number worn to Rose's graduation. Mama Mia! What a hoarder! The blue dress: it dredged up Rose's first and last piano recital when she was a young teen. It had been so mortifying, the focus of all eyes and ears. She'd frozen mid-piece and slunk off the platform, back to her seat where Livvie had eyed her face like thunder and had reached for her tightly-clenched fists.

What was she going to do with it all? She could throw a party for Livvie's friends. There was one to celebrate all of life's passages: kitchen teas, baby showers, christenings, where the guests brought gifts. She could have a passing-on party where the guests got to take gifts home. In memoriam.

She was balancing on the platform in the cupboard, on the shelf that had been built under the dresses to house rows of shoes, gripping the upper shelf tightly with one

hand, and grabbing hat boxes, shoe boxes, Tupperware containers and plastic bags with the other, and throwing them on to the carpet until there was one remaining object right at the back where the daylight never reached. Standing on her toes, she stretched until her shoulder felt quite dislocated from its socket, and finally grabbed it, her fingers splayed to their maximum.

It was a rosewood box that time had patinated to a burnt umber, with mother-of-pearl curlicues in the corners and around the keyhole. It looked antique. Why had Livvie not displayed this amongst her other treasures? It was beautiful.

Rose climbed down and tried to open it but it was locked. Why? She struggled to think where the key might be and remembered there could have been some keys amongst the trash in the drawers. Before she upended them into the black plastic bag. Stupid! She took hold of the bag and shook it like a dog with its quarry. There was a clatter as the junk landed on the carpet and she scratched through. Time was running out. There were several small keys: a flat steel key, a singled-toothed skeleton key, a tiny tubular one. Could this be the one: rusty, with ornate metal fretwork? She looked at her phone. Oh no. Damn. Time to go. Her curiosity would have to keep smouldering for now. Twenty minutes to get to the therapist! She was late. Leaving the debris on the carpet, she threw the keys into her bag, grabbed the box and fled.

The therapist practiced from his home in Kensington, an older suburb to the south-east of Johannesburg. She looked at her watch as she pressed the buzzer marked "Practice" on the intercom, then drove through the automatic gates into a property that swept to the upper reaches of the ridge.

It was still overcast, but it had stopped raining and the air was warming up. The area was lush with delicious monsters, pony tails and tree ferns. They dripped on her arms as she got out the car and scurried along the path, verdigrised with moss and then up an external flight of stairs leading to the practice with a minute to spare.

The reception room was decked in the latest of Johannesburg interior design: glossy Meranti floorboards, Kelim rugs, bulkheads, skylights and low voltage lights. A receptionist with crimson lipstick and a bright expression was manning the desk. "Kevin will be with you now," she said perkily.

Soon, the therapist walked into the reception room wearing a shapeless green cable-stitch sweater and baggy brown corduroy pants. His head was as smooth as a hen's egg but he had an abundance of salt and pepper hair growing on his face.

"Please come in." He gestured into his consulting room.

It was chilly and dim abutting the hill, with three small windows that never let the sunshine in. It was furnished as she imagined a turn-of-the-century bordello. The tables had been covered with embroidered black fringed shawls. Other exotic throws had been artfully arranged on an old couch and a wingback chair. Rose expected to see a tiger rug on the floor but there were only Persians.

The therapist showed her to the wingback chair which was placed alongside a round table. Here, a Tiffany lamp cast a luteous pool of light on the mandatory box of tissues that sat within her reach. "Are you cold?" he asked as she sat down in a pool of light. He held out a furry brown blanket and without waiting for her reply, threw it on her lap. Then he went to sit on the couch opposite her. It was low and his legs splayed out at an awkward angle.

"Tell me about yourself," he said earnestly, his head cocked to one side.

What was she doing here? She never believed in these people. So, suspend your disbelief if you want this thing to work. But she knew there was no magic pill.

"Um…" she began. "My mother has just died and I'm really struggling to deal with it. There were lots of…er…unresolved issues that are making me…dragging me down." Rose shrugged her shoulders, looking down at her shoes. Round-toed pumps. Mother. Foster mother. Whatever. She wasn't going to give him the full Monty. Not today. She just didn't have the energy.

"Uh huh. Uh huh." He nodded, taking down a note or two.

"Do you know anything about therapy?" Her shrug elicited some intense explanation: "The therapy will help you to get to the core issues that are making you suffer, making you feel a great deal of pain. The aim of the therapy is to take away the layers that are obscuring, blocking these issues. You'll get to these issues and when you get there, you'll know. I've had people climbing under my desk because their core issues have been so frightening to them. But you need to confront them if you want to overcome your suffering."

He switched on a CD. The sounds of waterfalls and panpipes filled the room.

"I want you to relax," he said, walking over to where she sat: "So, let's begin."

"Okay. Just close your eyes and let your mind take you where it wants to." His tones were dulcet. He rhythmically tapped the sides of her head with the tips of his fingers. She suppressed the giggle that threatened to rise in her throat.

Tap…tap…tap. But now she found his tapping quite calming. "And relax."

Deeply calming. She could feel her body becoming heavier and heavier. The tapping stopped. She was aware of him sitting once more on his couch.

"I want you to imagine a staircase, a marble staircase, reaching up into a dark but comforting space. There are twenty steps on this staircase.

"Now you begin to climb the staircase and, with each step, you become calmer and calmer.

"One…" he intoned. "You're feeling more and more relaxed.

"Two…your body is becoming heavier and heavier…

"Feel your breathing become deep and regular.

"Breathe out your tension….

"Nineteen…Twenty. Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm in a dark room, somewhere."

"I can see you are very suggestible. It won't be difficult for you to regress at all. Now where are you?"

"I'm still in the dark room." Actually your dark room, she nearly said.

"Okay – I'm going to keep quiet and you're going to just let your mind empty out. After a while, start thinking back to your childhood. Try to imagine going back into the place of memory…talk me through what you are seeing..."

"I feel so relaxed, more relaxed than I've felt since my mother was diagnosed."

"Diagnosed with what?" Kevin asked softly.

"Cancer of the pancreas. It's a terrible one to get. It's always diagnosed too late. You know that once you've got it, you've only got a few months to live. It was terrible. Neither of us dealt with it well." There was a pause. "Listen," Rose interjected, opening her eyes: "I'm not hypnotised. I'm just very relaxed. I'm not going to be able to regress to my primal scream or confront my - what did you call them - core issues."

"Just go with the flow. Talk about whatever comes into your mind."

"Uh…can you turn the music off...please? I can't think with the sound of water running through my brain."

Rose continued once Kevin switched off the music. "She was wonderful. She had such a generous spirit. She gave up a successful career to bring me up. She always told me she was privileged to have carried out such an important task – and she never regretted it. Caring for me." She had stopped talking, the words jamming up under the lump in her throat. She noticed a smudge on her knee and smacked at it but it wouldn't budge.

Kevin interjected: “Don’t suppress your emotions. That’s what’s creating your pain; that’s the reason you’re stuck.”

There was silence in the room then the words tumbled out: “I’m so sorry that I never told her how much she meant… I wish I had. Even when she was dying, I knew that it was now or or never… and still I couldn’t talk...” She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes: “I have so much regret. She was so courageous. She just carried on until she got too weak; until she couldn’t get up from her bed and then she died.” She felt like she was choking. It was a struggle to get the words out.

Tears floated in her eyes. Kevin waited while she blew her nose.“I really miss her. She was my best friend….my only friend.”

He gave her a few moments then remarked. “Okay. Well, I think we’ve made excellent progress.”

“I’m not exactly crawling under your desk.” She was mockingly contrite.

“It was a very good start,” Kevin smiled responsively. “I think that there’s a lot of pain around your mother’s death that you’re not allowing to surface. You’re feeling abandoned.”

Well, that was true. She was feeling abandoned. She had suffered much abandonment in her life. Tears of self pity filled her eyes at this thought.

“I think there are issues in your past that you are not confronting,” Kevin persisted. “You need to deal with these issues but you’re stuck with the very recent pain of your huge loss, your mother’s abandonment of you. You’ve started to confront your feelings around this, which is good. But you still have a lot of work to do to get past this, before you can even begin to think about accessing more fundamental issues.

She nodded in agreement, feeling a bit guilty for holding back but he’d pretty much got it. She was feeling abandoned. She always had. And her fundamental issues, her core issues - they were not going to go away until she knew where she came from.

“Well, we do need to end it there,” he continued. “I anticipate that your therapy will be for the long term. You can book another appointment on your way out.”

So much for hypnosis and letting go. Still - it had only been a month - it was very raw and Kevin said she’d made good progress. But when she had to hand over the four hundred rand, she decided that it was too much of a commitment. Rose told the receptionist that she’d phone to schedule her next appointment after consulting her diary.

She walked down the stairs, slowly, feeling as limp as old lettuce. She couldn't wait to get home to make herself a cup of tea. A young dog waggled up to her, a Labrador cross, all friendly and ebullient. She patted its smooth head. It sniffed around her shoes. She thought how responsive dogs were, so eager to please. She stroked its back. The dog arched in pleasure, twisting its head around to grin at her. "You're funny," she smiled. Dogs must have been sent by the gods to raise people's spirits. She thought she should get one but then she decided she wasn't really a doggy person at heart and didn't want the responsibility.

When she reached her car, the sun was shining; its light reflecting off the raindrops that sat trembling on her bonnet like beads of molten glass.

Chapter 3

In the privet outside Rose's window, a barbet announced his desires to the world, waking Rose with his loud trilling. Slivers of sunlight filtered into the room through the Venetian blinds and onto Rose's pillow. She threw an arm over her eyes to block out the light and drifted between dream and wakefulness.

Her mind wandered to the work that had kept her up till the early hours of the night - an animated sequence showing the process of cell division. She freelanced, writing TV scripts for a production house that produced educational material. Meiosis, mitosis. Her brainwaves oscillating in alpha mode, she invoked odd images of the process,

of chromosomes like dragonflies,
bows of ribbon float on pond take flight,
alight on spindles.
In frames, flicker apart:
chiasmatic separation;
a daughter cell is born:
haploid, hapless.

She laughed in her head, delighted. Remember the words; write them down, she told herself although she knew that in transcription, their magic would be lost. Words were such capricious creatures, elusive as dreams, slippery as memories, their significations as shifting as friendships. They let you down just when you needed them.

Then she drifted back to sleep, dreaming the dream again. The one with Livvie and Ruby and John, where she fought her way through a shady glen into a bright white room. Livvie was in the room. But she was Livvie. John was there. Where was Ruby? She needed to be found; she was in labour and had to get to the hospital. She ran from the white room into a double-volume entrance hall that turned into building site. She watched as she and John ran to the end of a passage, only to find it blocked. They retraced their way to the entrance but then John disappeared. She climbed a staircase and ran about trying to find the exit, but there was no way out. Ruby was in labour and she was trapped in the house.

Abruptly, she was in Livvie's wardrobe, thrashing about as she tried to escape its claustrophobic murkiness. Vanilla and cinnamon. Where was the door? She pushed up against something hard and was flung into the brightness of Livvie's bedroom, onto

the carpet. There was a morass of junk, of boxes and packets, tubes of cosmetics, and unidentifiable keys. She scratched through the pile. There was something she needed but she couldn't remember what it was.

She woke, sweating, her breath uneven, her pulse racing. Dream-disordered, she sat on the edge of her bed as the last dream vestiges ebbed away. What was she so desperate to find? The key. From the box that she had taken from the flat. With her rush to get to therapy, it had slipped her mind.

Struggling to open her eyes, she staggered to the living area where she'd dropped her handbag and shook it, dislodging her purse, lip balm, a pen, memory stick, sunglass case, some loose coins, Livvie's bunch of keys, and, finally, the little keys from the drawer. She switched off the alarm, opened the security gate and, now fully awake, went to her car.

The air was fresh and goose pimples rose on her arms. In her chiffon nighty with its satin bow tied at the back and carrying the box, she was Pandora, the first mortal woman about to release those troubles on an unsuspecting world. She made her way to the bench under the plane tree, treading softly over the wooden railway sleepers, careful to avoid the sharp stones that could pierce her tender soles. Necklace vines hung down from the Cape myrtle and brushed against her, bees buzzed about her head humming paeans to Spring and she could smell the honeysuckle that clung to the trunks of trees with tender green tendrils.

Placing the box on the bench, she knelt among the exposed roots that snaked thick and tumid in the bed and laid the keys in a row: steel key, skeleton key, tubular key, rusty key. Eeny meeny miny mo. The rusty one looked like a good choice. It was almost too easy. The hinged lid opened.

Papers and packets: a Ziploc plastic bag filled with seeds, a catalogue of some sort, an invoice for services rendered, two faded Polaroid pictures and a leather thong. What an anticlimax. What had she been expecting? Rubies and pearls?

The seeds interested her. She poured a sample onto her palm. Some were round, some winged. She studied their wrinkled brown integuments and delicately ribbed wings. She sniffed them. Odourless. She poured them back into the bag.

The plaited leather thong. A holiday souvenir? She turned it over in her hands feeling its weight, the warmth of its leather, noticing how the beads of seed or bone were symmetrically arranged on the plaited strands.

Two Polaroids, a man and a woman, their over-exposed features flat in the bright sunlight. Who were these people? There was a place and a date printed in blue ballpoint on the back. The small square letters read " Oberon, Sept 1977". Oberon! She'd heard this name for the first time just the other day. And here it was again. It was strange how life offered up these coincidences.

She picked up the catalogue and turned it over in her hands. Foiled silver writing on dove grey card: *Catalogue from a London Auction House; fine paintings from the English Classical Academy of the Late Nineteenth Century; Twenty three lots. 15th November, 1972*; *10.00am*. She flipped through the pages, glancing at the small colour reproductions on auction - landscapes, portraits, interiors.

There was a piece of paper. She unfolded an invoice from Morris Hunter Detective Agency, to John Clemens, 30 June 1984. For services rendered. In full and final settlement. Morris Hunter! What a blast from the past. She hadn't heard the name in years. He was the detective they'd hired to try find possible relatives, family, someone who could claim her. Morris Hunter who'd scoured the world to no avail.

Invoice, catalogue, seeds, thong, photos. She lined them up on the bench. A collection of objects kept in a special box, locked away in a cupboard to collect dust? Keepsakes left to disintegrate or to be discovered when the time was right?

Rose sat on the bench and peered closely at the photos, angling them to block out the stippled light. The man was wiry, sporting a droopy moustache, a cowboy hat pushed low on his forehead. He looked into the lens, sheepishly, his shoulders slanting, his hands hanging by his sides. The woman was busty, petite, with long fair hair and a wide smile that time had not tarnished. She'd dropped her chin a little and had turned her shoulders slightly. Sultry. Showing off her best side. When she placed them side by side, she saw that they had posed in the same spot, exchanging the camera, trading places to shoot each other, water reflecting through willow leaves.

She paged through the catalogue again. Slower this time. Pink-cheeked girls, ladies in bustle dresses and picture-hats, at the races, in English country gardens, governesses in parlours, odalisques on couches, landscapes of misty isles and other exotic locales. One lot had been circled in ballpoint pen. It was entitled *The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess, 1883.* Oil on canvas. 2.25m x 1.75m. Artist: Sir Philip Geoffrey. Under instruction of the owners, Mr and Mrs Peter Crystal. There was a woman in a white dress, long hair the colour of honey falling from beneath a sunhat, reclining under a rocky ledge, in three quarter profile, her arm extended towards two

figures - the Bushmen of the title. They were bending over in front of her, their arms stretched out behind them like wings. Who was the White Goddess? What was the significance of the painting?

And the seeds? Why were they hidden in Livvie's wardrobe? What secret was contained within each embryo? Could they hold the cure for humanity's ills? Was this a repository of rare seeds, the last of a species? Hadn't they built a large underground storehouse for this purpose in Iceland? She didn't know Livvie was a custodian of the world's biodiversity. Not bloody likely. Livvie's interest lay with the inanimate.

She turned the photographs over again. Where exactly was Oberon? And the date? What was happening in 1977, in the world, in South Africa? Post Soweto riots. It was a few months before she was born – June 1978. She counted on her fingers. Nine months in fact! Oberon – the place of her conception? Did this all have to do with her parents? Were these clues? How could she make such a leap? Her blood rushed to her head and knocked loudly in her head. Hello. Are you home? She peered at the woman's narrow hips at the edge of the frame. Was this her mother? And the man – her father? She looked closely at his shadowy features: his jaw, the slope of his shoulders, but there was no recognition, no familiar echoes in the etiolated image. The images slid away like a dream.

As a child, a family tree had grown in the fertile soil of her imagination: a father who was noble and brave, a scientist, an explorer, a Daddy Warbucks, a Scarlett Pimpernel, a Che Guevara, a James Bond. Or John. Now, she tried to imagine him as this seventies dude. And her mother, Ruby, the fairytale princess who had died and gone to the beautiful place in the sky. This blonde babe – this was Ruby?

Rose's anger rose like a water serpent, up from her gall bladder, up into her oesophagus. She tasted bitterness in her throat. Why had Livvie not shown her these photos - if they were pictures of her parents? She was furious. Furious! Livid with Livvie! She wanted to scream to undo the tight knots of fury that had gathered in her stomach, cry hot tears of rage. She had always been so desperate to know what Ruby had looked like. And to know her father. If she could have seen these, she would have had a hook to hang her fantasies on.

Why, Livvie? Why did you keep this hidden? Were you trying to shield me from disappointment? Did you know something? Did you know that there were no answers to be found in the box? She should have allowed her to discover this for herself. What was Livvie thinking? Or had she just forgotten its existence?

But it was Ruby she couldn't forgive, Ruby who had died leaving not a connection to family member or friend; so unthinking; so unfettered; so unconscious of a past, a future. It was like she had renounced her humanity. And like an animal, once mating had taken place, there was no further contact with the father. And the natural link between mother and child - even that she'd broken.

She knelt at the bench weeping, her silent tears quickly disappearing into the thirsty horizontal slats of wood and remembered an Enid Blyton story about a naughty pixie. Armed with a sharp pair of scissors, he'd cut people's shadows from their bodies and stole them right away. As a small child, she had wished that the pixie would steal the shadows that darkened her world.

But just then, the sun alighted on some small pale eggs nestling between the plane tree's roots. They were cracked, their insides empty. She lifted the broken shells, as fragile as the finest porcelain, and held them up to the light where they glowed with milky incandescence. A shard as sharp as glass penetrated her index finger and a tiny drop of blood oozed out, crimson against her white skin. Sucking on her finger, tasting the blood's charged particles, she returned the photos, the catalogue, the invoice, the seeds and keys into the box and then, without knowing why and without understanding the reverence with which she did, she lifted the multi-stranded thong and using her body to hold it in position, she tied it onto her wrist.

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It is two months since I bade farewell to Papa and Imogen. As lands draws near, I remember Papa's parting words, which made me laugh: "Goodbye, Goddess". That's what he teasingly calls me on occasion - Goddess. It's a moniker that has persisted ever since my childhood when he taught me to hunt and I imagined myself as the goddess, Diana. "Don't go all native now. Remember you are English," he cautioned.

We docked in the port of Durban at the break of dawn today and not a moment too soon. The tedium of life aboard the ship had become unbearable but I suppose that this is always the case when one's destination beckons so enticingly within range.

Walking down the gangplank, my senses were assailed by the lush verdure of the land, the glittering ocean slapping the sides of the vessel, the shining brown bodies of the stevedores and their many-tongued chatter. Once on terra firma, I was accosted not only by the clammy heat of the tropics but also by Hindoo women vendors in their

bright saris, eager to sell wares that ranged from shiny baubles to fragrant curry powders and odiferous fish. Of course, I was unable to resist the trinkets and purchased a whole bag full of the most inexpensive hair adornments and delightful brooches that are sure to brighten any outfit. Perhaps I shall give some away as gifts as I have such a surfeit.

It was with heavy heart that I bade adieu to the delightful S--- family, who were such pleasant company on the voyage out, especially Mrs S--- whose feminine good sense I will sorely miss, but my spirits were soon uplifted when I spied dear old Uncle Henry awaiting my arrival, whence upon we immediately embarked on the long ride to Oberon.

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Chapter 4

Rose opened her laptop hibernating quietly on the table. On Google, she entered the term: “Faded Polaroids”. A site caught her attention: “DOES ANYONE KNOW IF OLD FADED POLAROIDS CAN BE RESTORED?” The site was some sort of community forum. Picking her way through the insider chitchat, she read:

> have found a couple of pics of my late dad playing in a folk band with some other beardy dudes in the 70’s and they are really faded. Does anyone know if they can be restored?
>
> Photoshop will restore colour - but you’ll need to scan them in and fiddle with them
>
> If you want to restore the original photo you're gonna have trouble though.
>
> …in short, yes if they aren't totally f*cked
>
> Dont do It!
>
> Thanks for info. May have to ask a favour of someone as i don't use photoshop

Me neither, she thought. Who she could ask? Gary, the IT teacher at the school where she used to teach? It was school-time now. She’d phone later. Then, she typed “Oberon” into the search box. Her eye alighted on a site:

> OBERON: A TOURIST’S PARADISE IN THE SOUTHERN DRAKENSBERG.
>
> …Nestling at the foot of the peak known as Dragon’s Tooth, is Oberon, a quaint village famous for its hospitality. Near the Lesotho border, it was established in 1848 by a group of Germans fleeing the turmoil in Europe. Aldous Bergmeier, the leader of the group named it Alberich after the legendary sorcerer in German folklore but as more and more English colonised the area, the name changed to Oberon.

> Bergmeier, who originated from a long line of dairy farmers, recognized that the land around Oberon was ideal for dairy farming. The farm he founded still exists today as Oberon Dairy Farm and Cheese Factory. It is run by Aldous's third great grandson, Roland Bergmeier. Visitors to Oberon are welcome to visit the cheese factory and to sample its world renowned cheeses…

It was strange that she had never visited the Drakensberg. Rose couldn't remember Livvie going either. She remembered Livvie leaving her only once when she was about seven and that was to visit John in Paris shortly before he died. But she and Livvie had been quite the world travellers, going to Europe and America a few times. Mauritius. They'd holidayed once in Kenya. Why not South African tourist spots? Except for Cape Town. Livvie owned a flat in Sea Point.

Even after Rose moved into her own place, she and Livvie spent time together in the flat. The most recent, the summer past, was to be their last holiday together. Livvie had energy but she was starting to look frail and her appetite was waning. They went on slow scenic drives around the peninsula, Rose driving the rented car, and they took leisurely walks on the promenade breathing in the soft coastal air. Often they did nothing. They sat in front of the window in the lounge in a comfortable envelope of silence, their feet up on the sill, watching the sea.

Or they spoke about things that didn't need to be spoken about. Livvie told her she wanted to redecorate the flat. "I've always hated this carpet," she said.

"Uh huh." Rose was watching the old TV set but not really seeing anything.

"And the lounge suite – it's looking really shabby."

"We can go look for a new one, if you like," Rose thought how strange it was to make plans for a future in which she wouldn't participate. It was as if by looking towards the future, she could delay the inevitable. She knew that Livvie's plans would never come to fruition and she knew that Livvie knew it too.

Now, it dawned on her that the flat was hers and that perhaps she could take whatever money there was from the estate to fulfil Livvie's last wishes. But without Livvie it would be no fun. And then she thought that if she was to go anywhere at this point, it would be to the Drakensberg, to Oberon.

This thought brought her back to her research. On her keyboard, she typed in Philip Geoffrey. Wikipedia returned the following:

Philip Geoffrey (1835 – 1905) was an English painter in the style now known as Classical Academicism. The range of his oeuvre included historical paintings, Greek and Biblical mythology, scenes from exotic locales and portraits.
Life: He was born in Bath, United Kingdom. From 1855 – 1858, he attended the Royal Academy Schools. In 1858, he left for Paris where he worked with the Rue de la Roche group of artists. On his return to London, he exhibited at the British Royal Academy and soon after, was elected a member. He was knighted in…

She skipped ahead…

Selected works

Geoffrey's best-known works include:
Pandora releases the Keres (1863)
Prometheus tied to a rock (1879)
Adam rises from the earth (1888)

So, *The White Goddess* wasn't one of his best-known works. She tried searching for the painting on Google, but all that came up was poet and author Robert Graves's *White Goddess*. Her eyes scanned the pages. According to Graves, going as far back as the Old Stone Age, early Europeans practised a religion based on the worship of a matriarchal deity, the White Goddess. But Graves came up with this theory in 1948; years after Philip Geoffrey had painted his painting, so that was that. And now Wiccans and other weirdoes had adopted the White Goddess as their principal deity, their God-equivalent.

Finally, she typed in the words "Morris Hunter" and "Detective Agency", and clicked. The following appeared on her screen:

Your search - "Morris Hunter" "Detective agency" - did not match any documents.

In the Yellow Pages, there were no entries either but there were ten M. Hunters in the Johannesburg directory. She dialled the first one on the list:

"Hello," she enunciated in her best businesslike voice. "Please may I speak to Morris Hunter?"

"Who?"

"Morris" she replied, her voice rising hesitantly on the second syllable.

"I think you've got the wrong number," the voice replied irritably.

"Sorry," she crossed the number off the list.

The next number was engaged. The next was answered by a telephone answering machine and the fourth just rang and rang. The moment was gone; it was too difficult for her to continue. She had chores to do at the mall, there was nothing edible in her fridge and she wanted to clear Livvie's post-box.

She stepped into the shower. Its hot spray beat deliciously on her scalp. Her eyes closed, she had a vision of herself in the Drakensberg standing under a mountain spring in a dell surrounded by weathered rock. She dreamt up black boulders whose every fold was filled with verdant foliage and layers of yellow sandstone where painted antelope stood frozen in the shadow of Dragon's Tooth. She lifted her face to the stream and felt her hair hang heavy as honey down her back. Still wearing the beaded thong, she fingered its wet beads. Their feel brought prickles that ran up and down the backs of her thighs. Off-balance, she opened her eyes to see the glare of the white tiles, and, shivering, stepped out the shower and threw on the clothes she'd been wearing the day before.

Rose headed directly for the post-boxes. Livvie's box yielded the usual accounts, adverts, and charity requests and a collection slip. Crap. A speeding fine.

Since her last visit, a huge Christmas tree had been erected in the middle of the passage and garlands of tinsel looped up the escalators and along the ceilings. Where had the year gone? - everyone always said this when the decorations went up. The year Livvie died. A hard year. As hard as a walnut shell and as bitter as the walnut. She was pleased it was nearly over.

Entering the post office, she joined the long queue shuffling slowly forward, their eyes fixed on the single teller behind the counter. She wondered how he could carry out his job with such unruffled indifference, seemingly oblivious to the glares and mutterings of the impatient customers. She would collapse under the strain.

A woman dressed in an overall walked up to the lottery ticket seller. Rose watched as she put her hand inside her bra and dextrously extracted her money. How

would this woman's life change if she won a few million rand? And her own? Money brought with it its own problems.

Finally, the worker behind the counter took the slip that Rose tendered and handed her the speeding notification. The whole transaction proceeded in complete silence. And there was the photo of her car. There was no denying it.

Her cell rang: "Hello. Is this Ms Clemens?"

The security guard, beady-eyed and wide-girthed, pointed to a sign under the counter that said no cell phones and waved his wrist in the direction of the door. Petty officialdom. I'm going! I'm going!

The voice on the other end continued: "This is Mr Bleazard's secretary, the lawyer dealing with Ms Howse's estate. He needs to make an appointment to see you. How would this Friday be for you, at ten thirty?"

She supposed it was to go through the will. Now on the escalators going up, Rose said it would be fine and made a mental memo of it. She dreaded it. Livvie's voice from the dead. Her finale. Her swan-song. It would make her death so final.

She walked into Exclusive Books, and shuffled around the shelves, stopping at the travel section. There were dozens of titles: Rome, Paris, Madrid, London, New York, Chicago. Nothing on the Drakensberg. Only an *Atlas of National Parks and Reserves in South Africa*. She zigzagged to the South African section and saw a glossy coffee table book: *The Mighty Drakensberg: uKhahlamba: the Barrier of Spears*. Oberon featured as "…a picturesque village, providing the ideal destination for both the intrepid tourist looking for adventure and for those craving the peace and serenity offered aplenty in these magnificent surroundings", and there was a panoramic photo showing the village at the foot of Dragon's Tooth.

Her wrists straining under the weight of the book, she carried it to the adjoining coffee shop. Sitting at a table with a muffin and coffee, she read: "The area provides archaeologists and anthropologists with a rich source of San hunter-gatherer history…It is a veritable treasure trove of San rock paintings." The book contained glossy reproductions of the rock art and fine hand-drawn maps that plotted the many locations of the art. She looked for any mention of a white goddess in contact with the Bushmen.

"Er…excuse me," she heard. She looked up. There was a man standing at her table.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked. "All the tables are full."

She looked around. They were.

"Sure," she said, then continued to leaf through the book.

"A beautiful part of the world," the man said, looking at the book. "I go quite often."

Rose raised her eyes from the book and exclaimed: "Oh! I've never been. Where about do you go?"

"Everywhere. I know the Berg well. I was in the southern region a couple of weeks ago. Hiking. I love it there. It's much less developed than the central or northern Berg."

The Berg. Trendy people called it The Berg - as if it was theirs to abbreviate. She must remember.

"He continued: "I've just done a cycle race in the area. I did it last year as well."

"It must be quite strenuous," she said lightly, noting his lean body and tanned face.

"You're not joking. There's been so much rain this year and there was so much mud, that I had to carry my bike for most of the way! Up hills, down hills, through rivers. But ja."

Rose laughed, touching the beads on the thong. "Do you know Oberon?"

"Ja. In fact, I've often stayed there – at a great B&B. Just out of the village, in fact. It's called the Chameleon, if you're ever in the area. The owners are friends of mine. They bailed out of city life a couple of years back and opened a B&B. It's got this really fantastic garden. It's worth staying there just to see it." His phone rang and he smiled apologetically as he took the call.

"Hello…Anton here. Yep? …I'm not in the office at the moment…He hasn't got back to me yet…I did indicate that if he hadn't signed by…yes, yes…As I understood… "

The exchange manifested no signs of concluding. Rose stood up, signalling a goodbye with a small wave of her hand and an unsure smile on her face. He held up his free hand. She wasn't sure if this meant wait or goodbye so, leaving *The Mighty Drakensberg* on a display stand, she walked out the shop.

Later, she phoned Gary, who said: "Come round now."

He lived in a house in Greenside, in a big untended garden where only bitter aloes and red hot pokers survived. Grassroots poked through the fallow soil where there

should have been lawn. Rose walked up a slastoed path between two gargantuan date palms, removing her sunglasses and dropping them into her bag.

Gary opened the door and greeted Rose: “Howzit. No one snapped you up yet?” He wore a superman T-shirt. The house was gloomy in the late afternoon light.

What are you busy with these days? You always had lots of plans on the boil,” Rose was saying.

“Just the same old shit.” He looked deeply into her eyes: “We miss you, Rose.”

“Come on! It’s been years since I taught.”

“School’s not the same without you.”

They walked past the lounge. From inside, a TV was blaring. “Oh. My parents - I’ll introduce you.” He led the way.

Two old people sat side by side on two large electric recliners, incongruous next to the other furniture in the room, which hadn’t been upgraded since the seventies. They were watching TV, their feet resting on the extended footstools. They looked up as Rose and Gary entered.

“Ma, Dad,” Gary shouted. “This is Rose.”

“Hello.” Rose smiled.

“Rose who?” Gary’s father demanded suspiciously.

“Clemens,” Rose replied.

“Clemens? What sort of name is Clemens?”

“It’s a name, Dad. From England,” Gary cut in irritably.

“England?” he repeated. “Ah.” He nodded his head. “And what does your father do?”

Gary rolled his eyes. “Dad, Rose had come to work.”

“Ah.” His mother nodded her head.

“My parents live in the hope that I’ll bring home a nice Jewish girl,” Gary told Rose, as they left the room.

“So, why don’t you bring home a nice Jewish girl?”

Gary shrugged. “Maybe I’m not looking for one.”

A tabby snaked around their legs and meowed as they picked their way down the passage.

Gary switched on the light and opened the door of the room.

“S’cuse the mess. This was my sister’s room. Made it my study when she got married,” he said, as if this explained the disorder.

"Sorry," he said, removing an empty pizza box from the chair and wiping the seat with his sleeve, "I don't let the maid into this room. She moves all my stuff and then I can't find anything."

The cat had jumped up and sat behind her on the chair she was sitting on, licking its paws.

"Just kick him off," Gary said.

"No, I feel flattered. He likes me. I don't want to hurt his feelings."

There were footsteps shuffling down the passage. Gary's mother stood at the door. "How can you bring a girl to your room? Aren't you ashamed of the state it's in?" She addressed Rose: "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Ma, this is my work. We're working. Rose has come here to work. Not to judge the décor."

"No, thanks, I won't have tea." His mother turned and shuffled back down the passage.

The smell of frying fish wafted into the room.

When Rose showed Gary the photos, he said: "These are totally fucked. Like, who are these hippy dudes?"

"They might be my long lost parents," she replied.

"No way! I'll try my best." He positioned the woman's picture onto the scanner.

The images appeared side by side on his computer screen. After much fiddling with the mouse, he said: "Sorry. This is about the best I can do."

They both looked intently at the screen.

"Your mother's a babe," commented Gary.

"I don't know if she is my mother. She could be."

"You look nothing like her."

"Gee, thanks."

"No, well, you're gorgeous, doll. You must take after your old man. This dude…"

"If that's who it is. Whoever he is."

They looked at the man's image. "What's with the hat pushed down so low? Like he's going incognito," Gary noted.

After some period of silence, he said: "You didn't know your parents? It must be weird, man."

Rose nodded. "Or any family member."

"Jesus! Must have its advantages. I wish I didn't know some of my family."

She continued: "I want to contact anyone who knew my mother… who was around at the time. My adoptive parents hired a detective to... But it was such a long time ago. I wonder if he's around still – the detective, I mean."

"Phew!" Gary exhaled. "It's complicated. So your surname?"

"It's my adoptive father's. It caused major confusion when I was at school. He left to live in Paris when I was young and Livvie brought me up. She was my guardian. Teachers. They called her Mrs Clemens when they met her at Parent's Evenings and things. My friends too. But her surname was Howse."

"Your real mother. What was her name?"

"Ruby Le Grange," she replied.

"Sounds like a porn star from the *platteland*."

"French Huguenot, I imagine. But it might not have been her real name." Rose continued. "I've never seen any identity documents. Maybe, she gave herself the name. Maybe, she wanted to recreate herself, make a new identity for herself. That detective who was hired. He contacted every Le Grange in the country, but no one had ever heard of a Ruby."

For a short while, they sat thoughtfully and then Rose asked: "Where does your surname come from?

"We think that when my great grandfather arrived here from his *shtetl* in Lithuania, the customs official heard Omungri. My great grandfather thought the man was asking him how he was – not what his name was - so he said: Oy, I'm hungry. These must have been the only words of English he learnt on the boat. So that's what the official wrote on his immigration papers.

"You're kidding me, right?" Rose quizzed.

"It's a story. But we're the only family that I know of with the name. He had seven sons. And two daughters. Probably by the time he was my age. They really knew how to be fruitful in those days."

"There wasn't TV."

Gary laughed. "Now, you'll find us everywhere. I've got cousins and a place to stay if I ever find myself in Toronto, San Diego, Sydney, London, wherever. And we haven't changed. I'm fucking starving.

"Smells like it's fish and chips tonight."

"Na-a. I live my own life. Should we go catch a pizza? I'll put this on disk for you," he said. "Here're your originals."

"Thanks. That's great," she said, slipping the disk and photos into her bag. "So, you don't really know what your roots are either?"

"Roots, shmoots. We're the wandering Jews. My roots? They're here. In this country. Where should we eat?"

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Oberon is a quaint and charming little village neatly laid out, with a main street where one will find the general dealer, hotel and magisterial offices, and a residential area with modest cottages of wood and corrugated iron. My uncle's dwelling, as the magistrate's abode, is on a grander scale, built from brick, with a front parlour and sitting room. It even boasts a gentleman's study, where I now sit and write this diary, in the glow of his desk-lamp. Although he remains a bachelor, his home is excellently appointed and sparkles under the constant ministrations of his houseboys. With the hearty meals provided by the housekeeper, albeit too salty and heavy for my palate, his standard of living is most civilised considering the remoteness of his station.

The village nestles in a valley under the foreboding Dragon's Tooth, a magical rock that seems to change colour depending on the position of Phoebus's winged chariot. It is surrounded by delicate green pastures where sleek cows graze under the watchful eye of the farmer, who is mostly of English or German extraction.

High up in the foothills of the Drakensberg, the landscape's beauty is reminiscent of Switzerland's. The air, compared to the coast, sparkles like champagne and the light has a wonderful quality; its sharp, pure colours so different from England's muted tones.

Walking around the village this morning, I was greeted most cordially by the inhabitants. One can immediately discern which villagers are descended from German stock by their cornflower eyes and wheat-coloured hair, tall statures and sturdy frames. The women too. And the clothes they wear!They look at least a decade out-of-date. It wouldn't go amiss to have The Lady's Magazine or La Belle Assemblee sent out here, post-haste. In fact, I would pronounce them so hopelessly outmoded that they caused a giggle or two in me. Men in lederhosen suited only for the Bavarian Alps certainly do

not meet the requisites of sartorial elegance. I felt quite the fashion plate in my charming spotted poplin frock and matching parasol and suspect that many envious female eyes were cast in my direction.

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Chapter 5

She sat at her usual position in front of the computer and looked out of the window. Compared to Livvie's flat, her space was uncluttered: just a thin-stemmed stainless steel lamp on the side table and a large Mexican pewter bowl, a present from Livvie, on the coffee table. And no pictures on the walls - she couldn't bear to make holes in the virgin plaster.

She didn't like to mark her territory and was aware of this characteristic of hers, first noticing it when she taught. Her colleagues took ownership of the spaces they were allocated, leaving much evidence of their presence. Their lockers were crammed with exercise books, notices, folders and files. Hers was empty. Most stuck photographs of significant others on the wall above their workspaces, or pictures of baby animals, or those manipulated images that circulated by email, extreme skiers on implausible peaks, or pugs dressed in tutus. Rose's wall was bare, her workspace impersonal and uncluttered. Others displayed fake cacti in miniature pots or furry bears - gifts from loving learners. Beware those gif-bearing geeks, Gary had told her.

She mulled over his offer from the night before. When they had arrived back at his house after supper, he had nonchalantly asked if she wanted to come in for coffee. What was he thinking? Was it his intention to bed her with his aged parents in the next room? What a thought! Maybe it was only coffee he was offering but it was time he followed in his sister's footsteps and moved out. "Um…Thanks, but I'd better go home," she had answered. "The Friday deadline looms."

Dead line. Why had these these two words been cobbled together to describe the notion of time running out when a dead person, whose time *had* run out, was merely described as late? Dead end, deadlock, dead heat, dead beat.

She needed someone who could positively identify the women in the photo as Ruby. Who could she ask? Who of Livvie's friends would have been around at the time her mother was alive? Livvie's friendship with Marion started when Rose was six – when she and Glynnis had started school and the mums had been in a lift scheme, but that was after Ruby had died. What were the antecedents of Livvie's other friendships? Marion might know. She phoned her: "Isn't there anyone I can contact who was around at the time of…when Ruby was...er…alive?"

There was silence. "I can't think of anyone. I didn't know Livvie then.

"Ja… but there were friends from that time who you would have met."

"Hmm. That's true. I'll phone you if anyone comes to mind," she eventually replied.

They said goodbye.

Johannesburg's birdlife was in full throttle: mouse-birds in the bushes, a piet-my-vrou in the tree, querulous louries, weavers, mynahs, mossies and doves; singing in unresolved cadences. The soft summer breeze rattled the blinds and the sun glared on the book she was working from, the page open to an illustration of the map of the human genome, all twenty-four chromosomes exploded outwards in a wheel. Wheels within wheels. Here were the switches that turned human life on - and off. A few of the more common genetic disorders were marked: colon cancer on chromosome two, Huntington's chorea on four, Alzheimer's on fourteen, breast cancer on seventeen, hypercholesterolaemia on nineteen.

If she had to draw her own map, it would be a blank. She didn't know what her ancestors had been struck down with. There were blood tests for some of these diseases if she was really concerned but what would she say? Please test me for every possible genetic marker that exists. What a neurotic!

Like Charmaine. Her boss. She couldn't bear her. No one could. She was completely neurotic, whirling around like some dervish on high heels, barking out orders. Her tongue was like a panga cutting through the egos in the office. Her energy was something though. She had secured contracts to supply most of the SADC countries. As a contract worker, Rose had the minimum of face-to-face contact with her. Occasionally, she had to go into the plush offices in Milpark for a briefing but mostly, communication consisted of emails. She preferred it that way.

The khaki-clad gardener passed by her window, his footsteps crunching on the gravel drive and she heard the hosepipe splashing on the metal of her car. A dog barked in the distance. Time passed as she unravelled the mysteries of genes and she only realised its passing when she smelt the roasting lamb wafting over from the main house. It must be late afternoon. She wondered if Betty and Harry were around. She needed to give them notice. She got up, pushed her hands down on the desk and stretched her back. The working script was finished. It was now just a matter of emailing.

The property had been built on the slopes of the east-to-west ridge spanning Johannesburg, levelling off at street level. A few blocks north, was the zoo.

Occasionally at night, depending on the direction of the wind, Rose could hear the roar of the big cats lamenting the freedom that they'd lost but that still lurked in their ancestral memory banks.

In the late afternoon light, the expanse of lawn was flawless: a verdant swathe interrupted only by the sparkling pool in which no one ever swam. Normally by this time of the year, the beds were lined with a glorious riot of impatiens but a virus had attacked the plants and she'd heard that Johannesburg's gardeners were struggling to find a suitable replacement.

She walked around the hedge, taking long strides up the hill towards the main house. Against the pale blue sky, the three twirly chimneys rose from the pitched roof like helter-skelters in English coastal towns that summoned up the picture books from her childhood.

Harry and Betty sat on the veranda. Potted hydrangeas in shades of litmus flowered next to stone supporting columns. They watched her progress up the path.

"Hi Rose. Take a seat; how're you doing; what can I offer you to drink?" said Harry genially as she stepped onto the tiles. "Nathan," he shouted. He made a deep impression in the overstuffed cushions of the sofa he was sitting on. His face was florid and his neck hung over his collar. "Aaah," he sighed. "Best time of the day. Best climate in the world."

The gardener stepped on the veranda, releasing clouds of cooked lamb from the open door. The khaki overalls had been exchanged for a short white dust jacket and the floppy hat was gone.

"Hi. Fine. Nothing, thanks. Oh…,"she caught Nathan's interrogative eye. "Water… sparkling?"

"So," said Harry, swirling a tumbler of whisky in his hand. "What can we do for you, young lady?"

"I've inherited my mother's flat in Killarney." Rose replied. "So, um…I've come to give you notice."

"Oh – that's terrible! You've been such a good tenant," cried Betty. Not the brightest bulb in the box, the brightest star in the constellation. Did she realise her faux pas?

"I'll pay next month's rent. That's about six weeks notice. Is that okay?" Rose responded.

"Sure. Sorry again for your loss. Livvie was a lovely lady." Harry said, his expression doleful. There was that connection. That was how she had found the accommodation. Harry and Betty had moved in congruent circles to Livvie although their acquaintance wasn't that old. Otherwise, she might have been tempted to ask whether they had ever met her real mother. Like the lost little bird from the story book who asked of everyone and everything – from ducks and chickens to forklifts: "Are you my mother?"

"Don't you know anyone who would want it? Someone nice and quiet. I don't want a rowdy student," Betty said sharply.

A little boy peeked out from behind the door. Rose smiled; Betty followed her gaze.

"Oh, that's Talita's child. Come here, Pulley," she said gesturing to him with her pale freckled hands.

"What's his name?" Rose was puzzled.

"Pulley" She spelt it out: "P-U-L-E."

"Oh," Rose nodded. "Pule," she repeated, pronouncing it to rhyme sort of with the French "voulez".

The child came over to Betty and hung on the arm of the chair, looking up at her with large liquid eyes. Betty smiled at him, then she looked at Rose and said sotto voce: "I don't like to touch him. He's got Aids."

"Oh my God! That's awful!" she exclaimed. "How old is he?"

"About two," Betty replied.

The conversation ceased as Nathan walked out the doors holding a tray. He gave Rose her water.

"You know," Betty continued, sitting forward conspiratorially. "He got it from Talita. She was so stupid. She was tested when she was pregnant and she got that medication to prevent the baby from getting Aids, but then she went and breastfed."

"Hmm. I suppose if she hadn't, it would have been clear that she was HIV positive. There's such a stigma." Rose took a sip of the water. The bubbles pricked her lip.

Betty continued: "She's supposed to work for me two days a week. She comes in, but after five minutes, she goes back to the room."

"And I pay her for these five minutes," grunted Harry.

There was a short silence and then Betty resumed: “You know, one day, oh – a few months ago - she came into the kitchen and I got the shock of my life. She looked like a walking skeleton. I said to her: “Talita – you look terrible. You must go for an Aids test.” And when she comes home, she says: “No, madam. The test was negative.” So, I believed her.” Betty paused to take a sip of her drink. “Then – you can’t believe what happened. She went mad…crazy. Started washing everything in sight – not in my house, of course. I wouldn’t have minded if my house got cleaned properly for a change…” She gave a mordant little laugh. “But in the servants’ quarters. Walls, floors, cupboards. She went mad with Martha too, attacking her, smacking her, cutting up Pule’s clothes, throwing everything out the window.

“…so we took her to the Gen. Then, Martha tells me she’s being tested for TB. I got hysterical. I wanted to know if Harry and me were at risk. But it was Aids. Can you believe – the disease went to her brain.”

Rose was shaking her head, eyes wide. “Terrible! So, does she have TB?”

“Thank God no, otherwise we all would have had to go for X-rays. And then what!” Betty said. “You know my niece is a doctor - she works at the hospital. She told us the TB test was negative. She looked at the computer records. She phones me and she says: “Talita’s got Aids.” No hello. No how are you. Just Talita’s got Aids. Her CD count is four...”

What about patient confidentiality? Rose wanted to ask but all she said was “Shocking…”

Betty continued unabated: “I got such a shock, I nearly died - even though I already knew deep down what it was. We went to visit her at the Gen. Have you been there lately? It is revolting… filthy… nothing works…the lifts, the escalators. I said to Harry if there’s one thing you need in this place, it’s private healthcare. So now she’s on the treatment. It seemed to help her at the beginning but I don’t think it’s helping anymore. Have you seen her? She looks ghastly.”

Rose shook her head again. What a scourge. It was awful. Horrible.

“She was living with a man but he kicked her out when he found out she had Aids. So now they’re staying here. In Martha’s room. The three of them. I don’t know how they do it. The room’s not big enough to swing a cat.”

“Talita must go back home…to the rural area or wherever. I hate this sickness under my roof,” Harry shuddered.

"Oh no, Harry. I can't tell her to go. I feel too bad - for Martha's sake. She's worked for us for such a long time."

"Then Nathan will bring his family from Zimbabwe and we'll have a whole location in the backyard," Harry retorted.

The child in the meantime had caught Rose's eye directed at him. He came over and held onto the arm of Rose's chair, jumping up and down, laughing breathlessly.

Rose laughed: "Hello Pule." She stretched towards him to pick him up and put him on her lap but he escaped her grasp and bounded just beyond her reach. Then his face took on a serious expression and he looked at her, appearing to weigh her up, challenging, testing her in some way. She felt herself drawn into those dark soulful eyes and beyond but then the spell broke and, with a skip and a hop, he ran onto the grass.

"He's so cute!" Rose watched him as he ran haphazardly around the garden.

"It's a problem," Harry said dryly. The ice cubes clinked as he swirled his tumbler. "They're all cute at this age."

"How's he doing? Is he on treatment?" Rose asked.

"I don't know," Betty said. "You know, he never looked well to me. Very thin. Tiny for his age. And always with a chesty cough. Then, a few weeks ago, my niece came for supper. She took one look at him and said that he better get tested, that the dark marks on his cheeks were a sign. I must say, I don't like this Aids thing in my house. If I had young children, there's no ways I'd allow this."

"Where's the child's father now?" Rose wanted to know.

"God knows." Betty said in an exasperated tone. "He's probably dead by now."

"What can we say - this is Africa." Harry added.

Martha came out to fetch the boy. He yelled as she picked him up from under his arm, swung him round and put him on her back. He quietened and craned around to look at Rose. She smiled and waved.

"Martha, won't you switch off the oven? You can go off then," Betty told her.

"Yes Madam, Good night," she said and disappeared through the door.

In the pale light, Betty's pink cardigan had merged into the green cushions on which she was sitting. The conversation ambled along desultorily. Rose waited for what seemed like an opportune moment, then stood up and said she had to go.

"We're off to our daughter in Toronto in a few days. Nathan can help you with the move."

"That's kind. Thanks," Rose said, stepping off the veranda.

"And don't be a stranger. Okay?" Harry shouted after her.

She sat down at her computer and looked into its dark screen. What was the life expectancy for a child on anti-retrovirals? What would happen to Pule when Talita died? Would he get sent back to the rural area or would Betty and Harry allow Martha to take care of him under their roof? Martha was getting on in years. It wouldn't be easy for her to raise a child while continuing to work. And if he did go home, who was there to look after him and make sure he got his medication? She googled "Life expectancy", "Aids", "Children" but she couldn't find any answers.

It was time to check the script one last time before emailing it to Charmaine. She opened her work file and scrolled down. The cursor hovered above the send button as she steeled herself to send, and once she did, she knew not to look at the script again because there was always some error that caught her eye, a concept she should have elaborated on, an alternative word she should have used and then it was too late.

Rose heard the crunching of gravel outside her window. It was unexpected. Her heart lurched. There was a knock on her door.

"Who's there?" she cried.

"Martha." She stood on her doorstep surrounded by blue and white striped carrier bags.

"Sorry to worry you, Miss Rose. Can you open your gate for me? The driver is coming from home. I give him the food for my children once a month. He always comes to the other gate but he says this side is easier for him."

"Where's home?" Rose asked.

"Ficksberg."

"Ah... where the cherries grow. Who's still living at home?"

"I've got two there still, and my grandchildren from Talita and my other daughter. She's passed away. Last year. I'm trying to get the welfare for her children because they're not yet fourteen but the social worker says she doesn't believe that the father is gone. She's making a lot of problems. She says I must find the father. Can you believe? Where am I going to find the father? I don't even know the father."

It sounded like corruption or maybe she just didn't know how to navigate the red tape. Now that would be an act of charity - to start something to help people negotiate bureaucracy. "Who's looking after them?" Rose wanted to know.

"My husband's mother was looking after them but she's too old now. She's like a baby. She lies in bed all day. She doesn't know anyone anymore. My… my…how would you call her? The sister of my husband is looking after her. But it's heavy for her. The children - they're looking after themselves." She sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

Lost children: lost to society: uneducated, unskilled and unemployable. And lost fathers.

The driveway was illuminated by shafts of light shining through the wooden slats of the gate.

"Here's the man. Thanks Miss Rose. Remember to close your gate."

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The preparations for my trip are almost complete. Uncle Henry has hired two Basotho bearers, telling me that he prefers this tribe to the Zulus, who are treacherous and will murder you in your beds if you don't watch out! I'm also going to be accompanied by his filing clerk and sometime translator, Abel, a most respectful man whom he trusts will keep this headstrong lass out of trouble. I have also met my mount, Betty, a dear little bay of about 14 hands high. She is one of those sure-footed mountain ponies, good tempered and docile, so unlike my Zeus who awaits my return to merry olde England.

I am most grateful to Uncle Henry for the trouble he has taken to ensure my safe passage. He is most disapproving of my peregrinations and warned me of the dangers lurking in the hinterland, painting a bleak picture of a country plagued by marauding bands of cattle raiders and horse thieves. In addition, relations with both the Zulu and the Basotho are fraught. Last year, the British suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of the Zulu and tensions simmer as the colonial government plan reprisal attacks. The Basotho chiefs in the area are rebellious and recently, one withstood an eight month siege until he and his men were killed by British soldiers. There is even a rumour that the king of the Basothos, King Letsie, is planning to take up arms against her Imperial Majesty. But I told Uncle Henry that nothing will scupper my plans. Ever since I saw Mark Hutchinson's reproductions of the Bushmen painting in that most wondrous of publications, The Athenaeum, I have had my heart set on seeing the art for myself, and I go with Papa's full blessing and wholehearted support. So, we are first going to

Patilweng to live amongst the last surviving Bushmen of this area, and then moving on to the Giant's Castle area, the site of the art.

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Chapter 6

The building was covered in reflective glass like a cube of blue sky. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. She pressed the buzzer. The door was opened by a uniformed security guard who checked that her name appeared on his list. He pointed her to the reception area where an expressionless automaton of a receptionist worked her switchboard.

Rose felt like Country Mouse perching on the edge of the sofa. The room was softly lit with red striped wallpaper and prints of English hunting scenes. The only sound that could be heard was the soft hum of the air conditioning. Magazines were splayed like hands of solitaire on the glass topped coffee table. As she reached for one, Luxury Car World, eyes alighted on highly polished shoes. She looked up.

"Hello, Miss Clemens?" He was very nattily dressed in black suit and spotted tie. His right hand was extended. Rose stood up and shook his hand. It was warm and solid. "How do you do. I'm Marshall Bleazard. Please. After you…" Marshall Bleazard. Legal Eagle. Buzzard. Secretary bird.

He led the way. They padded silently along thickly carpeted passages until they came to a doorway, where he indicated Rose should enter. The room was bright, the street visible through the glass skin and although she could see the traffic, she couldn't hear it. It was very neat, dominated by his polished desk and lined with bookshelves of identically bound law tomes. There were no family photographs. She viewed him across the desk, empty except for a chrome seesaw with a ball that rocked from side to side and a manila file. He was in his early forties; well groomed, his expression was professional attentiveness. He had large pores on his nose. They marred his suave looks a little but Rose decided they were probably necessary as drainage channels for his excess of confidence.

"Would you like anything to drink? Tea? Coffee?"

She shook her head. Her mouth was dry. She wondered why she was feeling so nervous, like she was about to be examined.

"Well, let me begin by offering you my condolences. I know that Ms Howes wasn't your real mother but you must have been very close."

"Did you know her?" Rose said eagerly, sitting forward in her seat.

"Unfortunately not. She dealt with my father who's also since passed on."

Rose sat back again. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, well. Let's get down to business." He opened a yellow folder, taking reading glasses out of his jacket pocket and slipping them on his nose. There was a thick white document entitled:

John Clemens Trust

For the benefit and general welfare of my adopted child, Rose Clemens.

"Firstly, your adoptive father made you the beneficiary of a trust consisting of numerous assets and cash. Ms Howes, as his common-law wife…"

"What!" Rose interrupted. "Livvie and John were married?"

"Well…no…but they lived together…shared a house. This gave Ms Howes spousal rights. She had usufruct of the trust's assets, meaning that she could use the assets in any way she chose."

Rose nodded. He continued: "For you, the terms were stricter. The trust paid for your education and granted you basic living expenses, which ceased on your graduation from your tertiary education, or in absence of that, on your twenty second birthday."

"I always thought Livvie was paying for me. Why didn't she tell me?"

"Mr Clemens stipulated that it was to be kept secret from you."

"Why?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Maybe he wanted you to learn the value of money, maybe to protect you from fortune hunters: I don't know." He turned the page over.

"The trust only becomes yours on your thirty-fifth birthday. On this day, you are entitled to receive the assets and the capital and the trust can be wound up, if you so wish. How old are you now? Twenty six, twenty eight?" He flipped a few pages to her details. "Thirty. Only five years to wait."

"Why? Is this unusual?"

"He was being extremely prudent. Maybe he thought that at thirty five, you would have enough maturity and responsibility not to squander the family fortune. And it is quite considerable. There is a nice little property portfolio: apartments in Illovo and Melrose - and others - all looked after by property agents who collect rents, etc.

"There is also a substantial share portfolio. And by the way, the trust continues to grow as we speak because the surplus income from these assets is reinvested into the corpus of the trust. For each million invested, you currently earn about eight thousand a month after tax." He peered intently at Rose who was thinking - each million – how

many are there? Bleazard consulted his papers again. “There is a stock brokerage looking after the share portfolio.”

“God!” was all Rose could say. When she was on a teacher’s salary, she could hardly support herself and had been forced to give private lessons after school. It had been completely tedious. There was a demand for science. She and her students had sat side by side at her dining room table, the students suffering from the various agonies of puberty. Shame. And she from enervating boredom. And all the while, there were these millions sitting in a trust fund for her benefit and welfare.

“That’s the Clemens trust. Now to the Howes’s estate. She was well off in her own right. She made excellent investments from her earnings as an accountant and with the property development business she was involved in. Throughout the years, she reinvested dividends, invested offshore, bought more property. So after the expenses and taxes are paid, this estate is yours to use but again, the will stipulates that you can only get full control of the inheritance at the age of thirty five. In the meantime, she has instructed the executor to negotiate a monthly allowance with you and there is provision for certain large expenses that may crop up – like a car, etcetera, at the discretion of the executor, which is, ahem, me.” He smiled over the top of his reading glasses, then, flipping through more documents, noted: “Oh, there are also the personal and household assets, such as gold coins, jewellery, paintings, collectables, antiques… You must know that both Mr Clemens and Ms Howes were singletons and their estates include their own inheritances.” He looked questioningly at her.

Rose gulped. “I always knew there was no shortage of money. We lived very well but you would never have thought…we never lived extravagant lives. We never discussed money. Now that I think about it, we were a bit squeamish…”

“I’m just waiting for the latest share prices from the broker but I can tell you the rental, the share portfolios, the other assets…it’s sizeable.”

Marshall Bleazard sat back in his chair, pocketed his glasses and interlaced his fingers over his chest, smiling benignly as the bearer of such good tidings.

She opened her palms to the ceiling in a gesture of complete helplessness and shook her head. Marshall raised his eyebrows. What was he thinking? Poor little rich girl: you’re not going to get much sympathy from these quarters.

Rose felt the need to explain: “What I mean to say is that I think it’s completely obscene for one person to have so much. There’s so much poverty in the world. I’ve

really got everything I need. I don't want any…I've never wanted for anything – in the way of – er- material things," she added. She felt her cheeks burning.

The lawyer's face was impassive: "Look, it will take a few months to wind up the estate. Plus, you have the five years to wait out. If you want, you can forgo the allowance – it can just be reinvested. It's being looked after for you. So, in fact, you can ignore it indefinitely; your life doesn't need to change. Take your time to digest it all. Mull over it. If you want to discuss the monthly allowance, give me a call."

A lizard disturbed by Rose's footsteps darted into the pink clover growing in the flower box abutting the building. The midday sun was blinding on the white concrete pavement. Rose scratched in her bag for her sunglasses and cell phone. There was a missed call – Charmaine. She couldn't bear to deal with her now. And why should she? She was a millionaire! No – multimillionaire. A multimillion heiress. She repeated slowly. Mul-ti-mil-lion-aire! The word rolled so easily off her tongue. M-m-m had such zesty flavour; the l-l-l full of allure; and the open ending - 'aire'… so nonchalant, so blasé.

But here she was, still the same person living the same life. She should be out and about enjoying the high life with the rich and famous. Where does one find these people? Did she really want to know?

Her legs were shaky, her mouth dry. Signing the documents, her hands had trembled so much, she hardly recognised her signature. Adrenaline. Fight or flight. Stimulation of the autonomic nervous system. Relaxation of sphincter muscles. Constriction of the capillaries. Rapid pulse. Sweaty palms. She wanted to tell the man she passed on the way to her car: Guess what! I've got megabucks, lucre, lolly, spondalicks, boodle, moolah. I am a m-m-m-i-ll-io-nair-r-re! She wanted to tell. But who? Marion? No. Definitely not. A friend. She didn't have any. Maybe it was time for her to find one.

She found herself driving up William Nichol with its expansive grassy verges and electrified fences. Money, money, money, always sunny. She hated the song. It was so sticky; it played over and over in her head. In a rich man's world. On a whim, she turned left at the top of the hill, and found herself in a stream of cars swimming like salmon towards Hyde Park Shopping Centre.

Once in the parking garage, she followed the now predatory currents, circling slowly around and around, searching for empty bays, sniffing out departing shoppers

and the promise of shining reverse-lights. There were none. She was back at the ramp and circling upwards to the roof. She had never been up here before. It was apparently a well-kept secret because she found a parking space easily. Between a jeep and another 4X4. She squeezed out her car, holding her door, trying hard not touch the Jeep's body.

She hadn't been to Hyde Park in years. She passed shoppers, individuals and small groups, people who sauntered when they walked, who drawled when they spoke and wore clothes with subtly-engraved logos on the pockets, like badges of membership to an exclusive club. She too could belong if all it took was money.

Music tinkled from the PA system. She rounded a corner and was confronted by a doorway leading into a clothes shop. In her life, she had never entered this shop. A girl perched on a stool behind the counter was reading a magazine. "Shout if you need any help," she called out and resumed her reading.

Normally, Rose would have felt intimidated by salesladies in fancy shops but today, the girl just looked…she struggled for the word to describe her… ordinary?

She ran her hands through the clothes on the rails: chiffony fabrics floated through her fingers.

"What a beautiful dress," Rose remarked to the girl.

"Try it on." She hopped off the stool and walked around, taking the dress off the rail and holding it up: "It will look fantastic on you with your fabulous body. It's an Elie Tahari, an American designer," she enthused.

"I hardly ever wear dresses," Rose told her following her through to a mirror-lined room and fitting booths.

"Come out when you're done," ordered the girl, hanging the dress on a hook in a cubicle.

Rose bunched up the dress, her hands trembling slightly from the adrenaline leftovers. She pushed her arms through the armholes and then released it, feeling the chiffon fall over her breasts, her hips, as light as cosmic dust. Midnight blue. It was a change from her usual beiges and creams. She emerged from the cubicle, stepping over the clothes she'd shed.

"Wow!" The sales girl looked impressed.

Rose laughed: "Especially with these." She lifted her foot to display a flat and worn sandal. "It's beautiful but it's really not me. I look like something out of *The Great Gatsby.* Anyway, I don't know how anyone can justify spending twenty

thousand rand on a dress." As Rose said these words, she realised that the amount was only a tiny fraction of her worth.

"You'd be surprised!" the girl remarked.

Rose's cell phone rang. She looked at the screen: Charmaine. Rose answered.

"Listen, the animator will be emailing you early next week to let you know when you can download the ftp file. Give me your feedback by Wednesday," she shouted in her ear.

"So the script was…?" she started saying but Charmaine had already rung off.

Charming Charmaine. She felt relieved that she had been given some breathing space. The saleslady was back on her stool behind the counter when she emerged with the dress hanging like a newly hatched butterfly over her arm. Rose handed it to her. "Maybe if there was a really special occasion ..." She left the sentence unfinished and walked out the shop, empty-handed.

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Abel is a real asset. Being half Bushman and half Basotho, he can speak in both tongues, as well as Zulu and English. He also has a smattering of the language of the Boers, which is a dialect of Dutch. His Western style manners are most delightful and quaint. He told me that his mother was a Bushman born in the village of Patilweng, where we are headed. When she was a young child, she was captured by British soldiers and given to a farmer's wife as a kitchen maid. I was most incensed by what I perceived was this terribly unjust treatment and told my uncle as much but he replied that the Bushmen brought it upon themselves with their incessant cattle raiding and thieving ways. The British mounted huge retaliatory efforts to stop this once and for all, shooting many of the men and capturing the woman and children who were taken to colonial farms as labourers. Uprooted and dispossessed victims of men's cruelty. My heart bleeds for them.

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Chapter 7

She was pulled along the bends of Jan Smuts Avenue by the post-lunch Friday traffic, her mind drawn to her newly discovered riches. She was restrained from buying the dress but when the estate was wound up, she could buy the whole rail…the whole shop if she wanted. She could give into every extravagant whim that took her fancy. She whooped. Aloud. Then sneaked a sideways glance at the driver in the next lane, hoping he hadn't seen her.

A traffic light changed to red. As she braked, a *Homeless Talk* man materialised at her window, waving his latest edition. "Sorry," she mouthed, shrugging her shoulders: "I've got no change." She watched in her rear-view mirror as the vendor disappeared down the row of idling vehicles. She tried to imagine his life. She couldn't: she had no idea how he lived. How long did it take him to earn twenty thousand rand? A lifetime? Never? It wasn't fair. If she had bought something so extravagant, so unnecessary, it would be burning a hole in her boot. Buy now; pay later, with the currency of guilt. Would she feel better if she gave it all to charity? Probably not.

The idea of unlimited funds. She had never been one to covet material things, to pamper herself with regular massages or facials or hairdos, but never to work another day in her life, never to deal with the Charmaines of this world. Ever. It was beyond her grasp. And then? What was she to do with herself? Mooch around malls, trying on expensive lifestyles? And when people got to know that she was quite the heiress, would they all clamour for her friendship?

She could never be the same person she was yesterday. How strange that money could have this power to change a person's identity. She remembered the earlier panic and her hands became clammy on the steering wheel; her pulse raced. Could she share these feelings with anyone? A therapist - Kevin perhaps? No, she would tell no one because who could empathise with her? It was such an enviable position. She could never reveal the source of her anxiety. This surfeit of riches was too embarrassing. She would have to conceal it. A concealment of who she really was. Who was she?

A taxi behind her hooted. The light had turned green. As she geared to go, some wooden bed bases balancing against a shop front caught her attention. A second-hand furniture shop had sprung up amidst Union Billiards, Pool and Pond, Adult World, Central Fresh Produce, San Marco Italian Restaurant and Elite Dry Cleaners. The taxi revved threateningly up her bumper so she turned the corner and pulled into the parking

lot across the street, parking between two blue gums, their trunks thick as colossi. The car guard in a fluorescent orange jerkin hauled himself up from his spot in the shade and ambled over, a sour expression on his face.

"I'll see you soon" she told him, anxiously wondering where she would get the requisite two rand.

There was a spring to Rose's step as she debouched from the shop. Her furniture was sold to the man in the blue dust coat, who said it was all "no problem"; that he'd fetch her stuff "voetstoets, finish and klaar". She'd accept any price he offered. She wasn't ever one to haggle. Especially now, what did she care? He promised that he'd come around on Monday, with his guys and the bakkie. What a win. He'd even move her boxes and swop the beds. By early next week, she would be installed in the flat. How would it feel to be back in the bosom of her childhood home?

Her phone rang.

"Hi, Marion."

"Rose! I've got such news for you!"

And I've got such news for you, she thought.

"I've just been to a book talk with my friend, Lottie. Do you know her? It was fabulous. They had Joan Collins's sister – Jackie. Must be my age but she looks twenty years younger. Well – so would I if I had her money and could afford all that plastic surgery."

Jeez, Marion, get to the point, thought Rose, looking at the seedy characters lounging about, lolling against street poles and slumped on wooden crates. Who were they? Employees? They obstructed her path. The pavement was in bad shape: tiles jutted out at odd angles creating receptacles for the detritus of the pavement loiterers: blackened banana peels, cold drink cans, cigarette butts, plastic bags. She clung to the strap of her handbag, hopped off the kerb and sidled along the verge of the road.

"…So I was sitting next to this woman. You are not going to believe it!" Rose waited. "And who was it? The sister of the architect who worked with Livvie and John. Just when you ask me about people who knew your mother, she pops up. Isn't that amazing? Alice Wright – that was the architect. I met her. Her sister's name is - I forget – something different."

"How did you make the connection?" Rose asked.

"I don't know. I think we were talking about people leaving the country and how sad it is that families are separated, living all over the world. Not me, though. I'm so lucky that I still have all my children here."

Rose had reached her car. The car guard was hovering nearby. As she searched for her keys in her bag, her phone clamped between her ear and shoulder, she felt a coin. What was its denomination? She glanced at it – oh God – one Rand. Better than nothing. She handed it to the guard, avoiding eye contact.

"So, who's living next door to Alice?" Rose got into her car.

"Huh?" Marion responded.

"Where's Alice?" Rose reiterated.

"This you've got to hear! She's arriving later this afternoon. She's been living in Australia for years. For a family wedding. I said, well, she absolutely has to see you. She's only here for about ten days, and they're all going to the game reserve after the wedding, like we did - after Glynnis's wedding. We took all our overseas visitors to Kruger."

Rose sat in her car and looked at the layer of red dust hanging heavy on the western skyline. Finally, here was someone besides Livvie and John who had actually met Ruby, who had interacted with her, who had spoken to her. She had to meet her. Could she dare hope that she'd remember anything? It was such a long time ago. Rose looked at the phone number that Marion had sent her, her thumb positioned over the green dial icon. The number faded into nothingness and then there was only black. When should she phone her? She'd let her settle. Tomorrow. Or after the week-end. Sooner. Sometime. Between moving. She needed cardboard boxes.

She went to Pick 'n Pay and stood at the large swing doors marked "Staff Only". There was a glass-covered panel on the doors but it was so murky that the interior of the storeroom remained obscured. She waited for a member of staff to emerge. Or for someone to enter, but there was no movement. Muzac blared over the speakers. Her worst - Christmas carols. And an announcement for an errant staff member to get back to her till. Finally, a man in blue overalls appeared. She asked if she could have some cardboard boxes. He nodded and brusquely told her to wait.

She paced up and down. There was a fridge dedicated to some imported ice-cream recently arrived on the country's shores. She'd never tasted it. She pushed the heel of her palm into the hollow below her sternum. She was starving. When last had

she eaten? She took a tub of ice-cream out the fridge and opened it. She needed a spoon and went to ask at the tills.

The ice-cream was cloyingly sweet. A brown sludge of toffee ran through it. *Dulce de leche*: the sweet of milk. Mother's milk. Pabulum. She walked back to the doors and the fridge and studied the names of the other flavours. Chocolate chip cookie dough. Vanilla honey bee. She was aware of a presence standing next to her.

"Gary!"

"I thought it was you." He was holding a box of chocolates like it was something hot.

"I'm waiting for some cardboard boxes. I'm moving - to my mother's flat."

"Cool. D'you need some help?"

"I haven't got much. Just my clothes… kitchen stuff… some books." She foresaw an opportunity. Vanilla honey bee. Grab it before it disappeared. She blurted out: "Are you busy tonight? Not to help…Just to…We can…" Her voice trailed off.

"Sorry, doll. I've been invited to my cousins. For Friday night supper. The Jewish thing. You know. But hey! I'll come tomorrow. Give me a call."

Rose nodded, a little crestfallen, and then somewhat ruing her casually-bandied invitation. She really didn't want his help for how, in all practicality, could he be of any? Sorting and packing in the presence of an observer, No thanks. That was way too exposing. She needed to think about what to keep and what to discard. She hated that, having to concentrate on a personal activity while acting the good hostess at the same time. No, she wouldn't phone him. And she'd switch her phone off in case he phoned her. No – that would be rude. She'd phone him but she'd tell him…she didn't know what she'd tell him.

She watched him retreating down the aisle. She should have offered him her ice-cream. Her hunger had waned.

Early the next morning, Rose started packing but her phone presented too great a distraction. She eyed it from time to time. She picked it up, about to press the dial button but then she stopped herself. She was at a loss as to how she would identify herself. Whose daughter should she say she was? Ruby's? John's? Livvie's? Finally, without further deliberation, she hit the button.

"Alice?" Her voice quavered. "It's Rose…um…" She didn't know how to proceed so she ploughed right in: "I'd…um…just like to ask you about Ruby, my

mother…what you remember. Details – you know… I just want to know from someone else's perspective. I also want to show you a photo. I want to know if it's her."

"Rose! Hello. I can't believe it! My sister told me that you'd be calling. I don't know if I'll be helpful. I'll try. I'd love to see you!"

"You must have lots of family commitments. I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

"Let me ask my sister what the plans are. She's my diary. Can you hang on a minute?"

She came back to the phone: "How about this afternoon? Are you busy? Come for tea. From tomorrow, life gets mad."

Alice's sister lived in a house in Orchards, in a leafy cul de sac boomed off and manned by a security guard. Rose pressed the buzzer on the gate. She heard a catch being released and then entered the property. The front door was so solid that her knock sounded like a knock from the grave. She waited. No one came. She pushed tentatively. The door opened and she found herself in an entrance hall with a passage to her right and a lounge to her left. There was no one about. She wasn't expecting a welcoming committee but this was just…rude. Should she call out? She walked through the lounge and out onto the patio feeling awkward, a trespasser.

She had brought the copies of the photos and was in a complete state of agitation. What if it wasn't Ruby in the photo? She would be devastated. This was ridiculous. It was only prolonging her agony.

After a while, she heard footsteps and a tall skinny woman burst out onto the patio. Well, thank goodness! Rose was about to greet her when the woman's face collapsed in an fit of weeping and she covered her face with liver-spotted hands.

Oh God! What was wrong with the woman? Rose stood stiffly, unsure of what she should do or say. Did she need words of comfort? She couldn't think of any.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why I'm feeling so emotional," the woman apologised in a choked up voice. Neither did Rose but she kept silent. She walked up to Rose and embraced her. "And I'm sorry that you had to let yourself in. The maid must have opened the gate. I think they're all napping. This is ridiculous. I can't stop crying. Let's sit down. How are you?" she asked, leading Rose to a couch.

"Fine, thanks," Rose replied, her voice tense and small.

Alice went inside to fetch tissues. Rose sat on a chair that faced onto a emerald square of lawn surrounded by flowering shrubs. Gardenias, fuchsias. Oleanders. Did you know that they're the most poisonous plant in the world? - she asked the brown-grey starlings trilling in the trees.

Alice emerged, dabbing her eyes. "All these years under the bridge. And they've passed so quickly. It makes me sad. It's been such a long time. Thirty years or so. We emigrated a short while after your mother died and then I lost touch with everyone." She sighed: "Ruby and I were pregnant at the same time. I have a son a few weeks older than you. You were such a beautiful baby. Rose. You really were a little rosebud."

Rose smiled.

"You do know that at the time, no one could find anything – there were absolutely no leads."

Rose nodded, taking the photos from her bag. She showed them to Alice who gazed at them with rapt interest. "Where did these come from?" she exclaimed. Then her face softened and she smiled: "Yes. That's Ruby. You can't really see from the photo but she was lovely. Pale skinned. She had a fragilility about her. The type of woman I imagine men would want to protect. Although – she was anything but fragile. She was tough – and competent. Never let the builders or any of the suppliers get the better of her!"

"And the man?"

Alice looked at the photo closely. "The photo's not all that clear…and the hat doesn't help. Alice turned it over. "Oberon, September 1977," she read aloud.

"The month of my conception. I'm wondering if it could be my father. Look. The photos are taken in the same spot. "

"Maybe, but to identify him from this…" Her voiced trailed off, then she continued: "I've been trying to dredge up all that I remember. I don't know if it will be helpful."

"Whatever. Anything."

"I remember the day John hired her. We were on site. It was the first house that he'd bought to renovate. There was knocking and banging and white dust everywhere and I remember thinking that John looked completely overwhelmed. I don't think he'd thought it through. He hadn't realised how much it would all eat into his time. He was a stockbroker. He hadn't hired a building company or anything: he was doing it all himself. I suppose he had clients to deal with. Markets to play. Whatever it is that stock

brokers do. And that was only the beginning. I told him we needed to think about hiring contractors – roofers, plumbers, electricians, kitchen people – you know. And then there would be the hundreds of choices to be made: paint colours, light fittings, carpets, tiles, appliances, door handles, window openers. He needed a project manager, I told him, someone to coordinate the teams, to make sure things ran smoothly, to run around to various suppliers. I couldn't get that involved. I had a practice to run.

"John climbed on top of a little pile of rubble and looked around helplessly. He looked a bit like a teddy bear with blue eyes and curly hair. Do you remember him?"

Rose nodded. Alice continued: "Just then he sneezed. It must have been the dust and the khakibos, but it was funny - we spoke about it afterwards - because when he recovered, when he opened his eyes, there stood Ruby. She was pointing to a rusty Mazda parked on the street. It looked as if it was held together with pieces of string and chewing gum. She said: "I'm really sorry to worry you but my car died". She asked to use the phone – to get hold of her boyfriend - she said.

"We thought we'd wait with her until the boyfriend arrived but then John and I had to go, so we never got to see him. Ever. She used to speak about him, her boyfriend. We assumed he was the father of her child. But no one ever saw him. We used to rag John, accuse him of being the father. He categorically denied it. It feels funny to talk to you like this – of the father. Your father -."

"No, please." Rose enjoined. "Please go on. It's fine. Who's we?"

"Me, the kitchen man, the electrician, other contractors. We were a little team: we worked together for a few years, on quite a few houses. Until Ruby's death. What a tragedy. She was so young. You were so young."

"How did she come to work for John?"

"We chatted while we waited for her boyfriend to arrive. She started asking questions. She was like that – very friendly, outgoing, bubbly. John told her of his project, that he'd bought this house to renovate and resell on spec, and of his plans to buy more if this one succeeded. I think I remember her saying: "The country burns and you fix houses. You have faith!" Something like that. This was the late seventies, remember.

"She told us that she and her boyfriend had recently moved up from Durban and that she needed a job. And John employed her. Just like that. I think he was so desperate. He never asked for references; he never asked about qualifications. He took a chance and it panned out."

"And what were her qualifications? Did you ever found out?"

Alice shook her head. "No. I don't know what she was."

Rose hesitated: "And her accent? How did she speak? Educated?" Was she being disloyal? She'd never wanted to ask Livvie these questions.

Alice shrugged. "She was English speaking."

"A Durban accent?" Rose persisted

"Um," Alice looked vague. "I don't know. Is there a Durban accent?"

Rose shrugged. "Did she ever talk about her family?"

"Her mother had moved to London and her father might have lived here…in Johannesburg…no…I don't remember. It wasn't clear."

"That's as much as I know," Rose commented. "The family must have been so – so dysfunctional. Losing touch like that."

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Rose, in a small voice, asked: "Do I…am I…anything like her?"

Alice looked at Rose and, rather wistfully, remarked: "Sorry, darling. I can't see any resemblance. You remind me more of Livvie. I'm so sorry I never got to see her again…how we lost touch like that." She sighed.

"I'm thinking of going to Oberon. Maybe someone will recognise them... the man…will know who he is."

"Don't get your hopes up, Rose," Alice cautioned.

"And no one ever saw any man in her life?" Rose remained unconvinced.

"You know," Alice began pensively, "although we all worked together for quite a long time, our relationship was professional. We weren't friends off-site. None of us. We couldn't exactly grill her about the man – or men - in her life. John was much closer to her than the rest of us. That's why we used to think he might have been the – your - father. He bought her a bakkie and she even moved into one of the houses he had renovated. But again, although there were workmen in and out while it was being finished off, no one ever saw any evidence of a man living there. No suits in the cupboard, no shaving kit in the bathroom. And, of course, the funeral."

Alice paused to look at Rose, searching for signs of upset, then continued: "There was a memorial service held in a church - somewhere in Parkhurst, Greenside, that side of town. The church was beautiful - huge curved wooden beams supported the ceiling..." Alice indicated their shape with expansive arm movements, "…and beautiful stained glass windows…"

"Who was there?" Rose interposed.

"All of us – all the people on site. Livvie. And John's parents. Did you know them?

Rose replied: "Yes – I did. They died when I was little."

"And that's all. And we all waited in the hope that someone would appear to claim you, but no one did."

When she returned home, she sat down on her couch and kicked off her shoes, enjoying the sting of the sisal rug on her soles. What was she? A candidate for the bastinado, the hair shirt, the cilice: obligated to pay penance for the sins of her fathers. She got up, walked to the fridge and stared into its interior. There was nothing that appealed: she was still full from the cake and tea that Alice's sister had served when she had surfaced from her nap. She eyed the pile of books waiting to be transferred to the cardboard boxes and then the rosewood box sitting like an inscrutable presence on her tabletop.

The catalogue, the invoice, the seeds and the Polaroids. It was Ruby – that was confirmed. And the other revelations: it had been disconcerting to hear of her paternal origins spoken in such remote, impersonal terms, and Alice had given her more insight into John's character than Ruby's. She wished she could have known him better. She liked his spontaneity. It was a trait Livvie had taught her to spurn.

There was as much mystery surrounding John as her biological parentage. He must have been a completely wonderful human being. His sense of responsibility was so super-developed that he felt obliged to adopt her, his employee's child. Imagine. It was inconceivable. Although he had left, and Livvie was left holding the baby. He lost points for that. What did he rush off to Paris like that when she was six or seven? Livvie must have known the answer to this. Why had she never told her? Why had she never asked?

She looked at Ruby's photo. Alice had called it a tragedy. It was - to have died at the age… at her age. Before life had even begun.

What was she going to do now? Was she going to try contact Maurice Hunter? She didn't think so. He had exhausted all his leads. What more could he tell her that she didn't already know – if he was alive, that is. And the painting, the seeds, the thong? She was drifting aimlessly, borne by air currents, a piece of chaff on the winds of fate. She needed to take control. She had to get to Oberon.

She switched on the TV and gazed unseeing at its screen. She wished she could drink. On the few occasions when she had consumed more than a tot or two, she had felt so toxic the next day that she hardly ever touched the stuff.

Earlier, she had switched off her phone. She switched it back on to check if Gary had phoned. There was a missed call and a voicemail message:

Gary's voice said: "Howzit, Rose. What you up to? Phone me when you get this."

When had he called? She looked at the time now. Seven. Should she phone? She couldn't face packing and felt bored with her own company. She hit the dial button.

Rose opened her door. Gary stood on her doorstep; his big frame armed with a box of pizza and a bottle of tequila.

"You sounded tense. I brought along a little something to help you relax."

Rose laughed. "I was thinking earlier that if I drank, I would have had one."

"Never drink alone," Gary admonished, looking around for a surface to deposit his victuals.

"Do you have shot glasses?" he asked.

"No - I don't. I don't drink…hate the stuff. Do you need a plate for your pizza?"

"You're sharing it with me. We'll eat out the box. Come on, girl: tonight you're breaking out."

"I'm not hungry….okay, then…" Rose conceded: "Give me a drop of tequila…I really mean a drop. I can't take it."

"You must be like woman in Chinese proverb: she take liquor - by the ears."

Rose snorted. "Here're wine glasses. I've got salt...no lemons, though."

"We don't need that shit." Gary said, stuffing a segment of pizza into his mouth and pouring the tequila. "Let's go sit on the couch. What's on TV?"

They sat side by side, vaguely watching a programme where participants had to undergo some obstacle course. The smell of pizza and hot cardboard filled the room. Rose picked up her glass and took a delicate sip. She made a face.

"You can't drink it like that." Gary advised. "You need to *sluk* it back. Like this." He downed what was in his glass. "You better eat some pizza – to line your stomach. Here." He picked up a piece and cradled it to her mouth. Rose bit off a piece.

"Now go for it," he told her.

Gary watched as she took a generous swig. The liquid exuded a comforting warmth as it made its way down her gullet, down to her knees. She liked the feeling so quaffed some more. Her arms and legs went weak. She took another big swallow and sunk back into the couch. And another.

Her mind wandered back to the events of the afternoon. She wondered what Alice's son was like, whether there could exist some connection, some bond between them. She wished she had asked Alice about him, about his life, what he did, that sort of thing. She was aware of Gary shifting position and wished he would stop his eating and drinking and make his move. C'mon, Gary, she willed, opening her eyes.

He was meeting her gaze. He lifted her legs and swivelled her round so that she lay back on the couch. She closed her eyes and felt his breath, warm and moist, on her neck, her ear, her mouth. He nuzzled her lips with his and raked his fingers through her hair.

"That's nice," she murmured. His hand moved under her top, to her breast.

"Gary."

"Mmmm?"

She sat up suddenly and said: "I'm feeling very nauseous." Then added: "Give me a moment. It'll pass."

"You need some water." Gary banged around looking for a glass and finally brought her some water. Rose sipped.

"How're you feeling?" he wanted to know, after a few minutes.

"Not great."

"Can I get you something? Do you have something to settle your stomach?"

"No. Wait. Let's watch some TV. I'll be okay in a while." Damn, she thought.

She lay back again, resting her legs on Gary's lap. He had a wiry mop of dark ash hair. She watched his profile polishing off the pizza and his hands fiddling with the remote. She was having difficulty focusing. She closed her eyes and became aware of the drone from the TV. She quickly fell asleep.

Early the next morning, the light just beginning to creep into the world, she awoke in her bed. Her mouth was as parched as the moon, and she had a headache that started in the pit of her brain and radiated out to her eyeballs. She was in panties and T shirt. Gary was gone.

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We left the magistrate's abode under a bright blue sky: I, Abel, the two bearers, and the horses loaded up to the hilt with our provisions. Now familiar with the extreme heat, I had discarded my riding habit in favour of khaki trousers held up by braces, a man's shirt and sturdy velskoene that appear de rigour for male travellers in these parts. If wearing men's clothing is fitting for so many of Shakespeare's heroines, then it's apt for me too. I haven't forsaken feminine dress just yet - my corsets and petticoats are packed, as well as some frothy gowns, which I will don on reaching my destination. To complete the outfit, I threw a large white sunhat over my chignon and my most elegant lady's riding gloves. How my outlandish tout-ensemble would amuse Imogen. For now, I am revelling in the freedom these clothes have to offer.

I have stipulated to Abel that my feminine sex is no reason for special treatment. My horsemanship is as good as any gentleman's, and I am a fine shot with a rifle, all thanks to Papa for choosing me as his honorary son. In this regard, I'm afraid that he was faced with Hobson's choice. Imogen would certainly not have excelled in this role. She is a most delicate creature.

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Chapter 8

It was astounding how much junk she'd collected over the years despite her assiduous tidying and throwing away. It was a depressing activity – this throwing out memories, but she didn't want to start her new life so encumbered by the past. Fresh start, clean flat. She had yet to deal with Livvie's junk and her hangover was slowing her down.

Her iPod played:

She would never say where she came from
Yesterday don't matter if it's gone

…Ruby Tuesday. Ruby Le Grange. That couldn't have been her real name. She modelled herself on a song. A song and a prayer. What was Ruby running from? What chains bound her heart? Or was she just a freedom-loving flower child? A throwback to the sixties. Didn't she know that the call for love, peace and happiness had, by then, faded into the amorphous zeitgeist of the seventies? Durban, the last outpost - of hippiedom. The flower child, who named her lovechild Rose. It could have been worse – she could have been Daffodil or Hyacinth. But perhaps Rose had got her completely wrong. Alice had painted Ruby as competent and grounded. It didn't sound like she was some flighty airhead.

She just can't be chained to a life where nothing's gained
And nothing's lost at such a cost…

…to Rose's identity. And her relationships with others. Her relationship with Livvie, especially, was characterised by Ruby's ghostly presence maintaining the silences between them. This sudden insight saddened Rose. She wished she had thought of this when Livvie was alive. It was time to shake her anger. Time to move on. Who knew what motivated Ruby? Maybe it wasn't for her to judge.

Lose your dreams and you will lose your mind.
Ain't life unkind?

Rose was always so in control, her emotions so suppressed behind an equitable and tranquil façade. And her behaviour too. She needed to take life by the horns. The expression conjured up a matador performing his paso doble with a bull, eyes dull with incomprehension. A life with no future, no past and no consciousness of life's finite path. Rather be the matador than the bull. Ruby was the bull.

Her move was not without a pang. She took one final look around at the empty cottage now so alien and forlorn, and a last glance through the window. Then she went to find Nathan or Martha, Talita and the little Pule, but there was no reply to her knock at their door so she left.

Rose loved Whitestone Court. Someone had told her that it had been built in the 1920s by an Isidore Epstein to house the dynasty he anticipated building, the parking garage of today said to accommodate his horses and carriages. Epstein, entrepreneur extraordinaire and newly arrived from New York, had had the grand idea to build a mini-Manhattan in Killarney, Johannesburg, complete with art deco finishes and a New York lifestyle. Killarney might have provided sophisticated city living then but now, the suburb was doing constant battle against rising crime and grime. The building, however, retained an air of elegance with its wooden framed windows and pilastered balconies.

She found herself in the servants' quarters on the roof looking for Katie. She wanted to ask whether she would like to work part-time for her if she didn't feel ready to retire. Rose emerged from the servants' gloomy stairwell onto the roof. The waterproofing material shimmered like liquid mercury in the sun. She put on her sunglasses and ducked under the communal washing lines, which were never used by the residents below because they imagined their petticoats, foundation garments and bloomers would disappear from here.

Rose used to come up here as a child attracted by this metalayer of life on the roof. In the late afternoons, when the domestics exited from the back doors of the flats and clattered, chattering, in twos and threes, up the staff stairs, the place came to life. In the cell-like rooms, overalls were exchanged for street clothes. Meaty stews, *morogo* and mielie pap bubbled on primus stoves. Dramas played out in these confined quarters, in the summer heat and the winter freeze. But now it was silent and deserted. Which room did Katie occupy?

She had always felt out of place here, an intruder, but now she was scared as well. She walked slowly up and down the deserted maze of rooms, treading gingerly, peering around corners, courting danger. She was crazy to be up here alone. It was so isolated. In an open doorway, an old man sat on a wooden crate, his eyes glazed with cataracts and his face sunken. She recognised him but he not her: he belonged to the army of men clad in khaki shorts and tunics with red trim, referred to by the occupants of the building as the flat boys - although not by Rose. Livvie had always raised her eyes heavenwards when she heard people use the expression. They cleaned the common spaces of the building. She had thought he must be Zulu, his culture recognisable by the rubber sandals he wore and the large round black and white discs in his ear lobes. These had been so stretched that they dangled midway between ear and shoulder, now emptied of their disks. He had always seemed old but now he looked ancient. Nothing for him to do but wait until death took him away.

Glancing beyond him into his room, she saw the bed stretching from wall to wall, its metal frame resting on its customary stack of bricks. So, the *tokoloshe* still roamed these parts. Nothing new, nothing renewed. No change here at all. She asked the man if he knew where Katie was but he shook his head.

She went down to the entrance of the building to ask Aaron, the security guard with his black jacket with its epaulettes and badges. He'd been there for so long he was like a fixture.

"She's gone to a funeral at home. She'll be back. After month-end," he told her. "I'm sorry about the old lady. The building's not the same, you know. The old people are going." He shook his head.

"Times change, hey Aaron. Things don't stay the same forever."

"*Aai*. These new people are not like the old ones." He was such a prophet of doom. "They're no good. And they bring their no-good friends. The other day, I saw some *tsotsis* with screwdrivers outside, trying to take the burglar bars off Mrs Segal's bathroom window. On the first floor! I ran with my stick and shouted at them. So they jumped down and ran away. But maybe they'll be back. You must keep your windows shut."

Rose started to move some boxes from her car towards the lift but Aaron said he'd call the gardener to help. The man sidled into the foyer, self consciously wiping his shoes on the doormat. All the while, Aaron barked instructions at him, which Rose didn't understand as he spoke in Zulu or Sotho or something.

The lift still had its original trellis gate. It closed with a clang. Rose ran upstairs to precede the lift. As she fumbled with the lock at her door, a young woman emerged from the neighbouring flat. She had on tight white jeans, carried a large yellow leather handbag slung over her shoulder and wore the biggest gold hooped earrings Rose had ever seen. Her skin was the colour of black irises.

"Hi," she said brightly. "Are you moving in? Joy to have someone my age as a neighbour! This building's full of old people." Rose tried to gauge her age. She must have been a good ten years younger than her.

Rose felt conscious of her dishevelled state. "Did you know my mother? Livvie? The girl shook her head, looking blank.

Rose explained: "This is her flat. She died about a month ago."

"She died in the flat?" she asked, with wide eyes.

"Ja."

"I wouldn't like to live where someone has just died."

"I'm sure she'd be happy. I grew up here. My name's Rose, by the way."

"Abisola…Abi. Gotta go. Call if you need anything. Maybe we could go for a drink later." Her heels clicked on the black and white tiles as she made her way towards the lift leaving a trail of floral notes in her wake, her hair hanging stiff and shiny down her back.

It was late afternoon. The light in Livvie's large front room was fast fading, blurring the edges of the objects within. Rose flopped onto the floral couch by the window and looked at the rosewood box, which she'd positioned on the coffee table. She had kicked off her sandals and put her feet up on the table; the parts that had been exposed were grey with dust. Abisola wore dainty strappy sandals with big glass beads. And her toenails were painted electric pink. The colour looked amazing next to her black skin. Could they be friends? She wished she had a circle of close women friends, like Livvie. She liked the idea of a circle: a tambour supporting the fabric of friendship as they each added a different coloured thread. They were there for each other to lend a sympathetic ear or to gather in times of celebration or loss.

Could she count Gary as a friend? He had phoned to find out how she was doing the morning after their aborted dalliance.

"How's the *babalas*?" he had asked.

She laughed, embarrassed. Friendship between them was complicated. It was as if she had entered into some sort of contract with him but had broken it and now was obliged to make good. She had wanted him then, when she was feeling low and vulnerable. She didn't know if she wanted him now.

"Come for supper next week – when I've settled…unpacked. You can take your chances with my culinary skills," she had said, lightly.

Shadows conspired in the corners of the room. A breeze sprung up. The plane tree's branches scraped the window pane. Intruder, usurper, they hissed. She thought about Abi's discomfort about living with the dead. Perhaps she would never feel comfortable living with Livvie's presence, always imagining her footsteps, smelling her smell. Yet she didn't want her spirit to wane either. She looked at the *Drakensberg Lady* on the wall, who had all but faded in the gloom of the hour, but she offered no comfort and no truths. She just looked straight past her.

The rosewood box fitted in perfectly with the antique marquetry of the table where it stood but her laptop appeared strange on the polished walnut of the dining-room table, surrounded by the cyclopean-glare of twelve balloon-backed chairs. She needed to check out the animator's work tomorrow. One more episode and then what?

What did the lawyer say about a monthly allowance? She looked at her cell phone for the time. She was going to buy herself a Rolex. No – she wasn't. She didn't like them and she'd never wear one in Johannesburg anyway – too risky. Four forty-five. Still time to phone. She didn't feel like asking about the allowance – it made her appear needy and greedy. In fact, she hated talking about money full stop.

When she finally phoned, the secretary told her that Mr Bleazard was out.

She drifted around the flat, not knowing what to do with herself. She walked into her childhood bedroom. Livvie had kept it as a spare bedroom when she'd moved out. It was just as well. She'd moved back into it in the last few weeks of Livvie's life. It had been refurbished it a little, but the room read as a palimpsest of her childhood. There was the pale patch on the carpet where she had spilt the acetone when she was experimenting with nail polish at age fifteen and the oily marks on the ceiling left by the Prestick where she had stuck posters of epicene boy singers.

Her cell phone rang.

"Hello, it's Marshall Bleazard here, returning your call."

"Um…" she began. "Mr Bleazard…"

"Please, call me Marshall."

"Um…," she began again, now walking back to the lounge. "You mentioned something about a monthly allowance. I'm sorry, I didn't hear…"

"Yes. You need to come up with an amount and sign some documentation. Phone my secretary tomorrow to make an appointment."

"And …er …if I want a new car, how do I do it? I mean, how do I pay...?"

"The car dealer needs to send me the invoice. And… Rose… Can I call you Rose?" And before she murmured her assent: "I'd like to take you out for dinner on Saturday night."

Oh no! What excuse could she make?

"Sure," she heard herself say. Crap. She couldn't believe she'd accepted.

"Eight okay? I'll pick you up. Where are you living?"

She'd phone tomorrow with an excuse to put him off. What could she say? She'd think of something. He was the fortune hunter John was protecting her from. What a cheek. Surely this was unethical?

And no sooner had she disconnected, the landline rang. Marion.

"Hello, Rose, darling! I'm phoning to find out how the move went. I don't know why you didn't get more help. When I moved, I had a whole army of people helping me. Well, I suppose I had collected a lot more than you. I was much more settled. I had a whole family to move. Listen, the girls and me are coming round on Saturday afternoon for tea. We'll bring the snacks. You just supply the tea."

Again, she acquiesced, Oh God! What a Saturday she was in for. She didn't feel like entertaining them – the mother hens clucking and fussing. And she didn't know how she was going to sleep in Livvie's bedroom. When the furniture men had removed Livvie's mattress, her heart had ached so much that she'd had to sit down and now her bed sat in its place, her sheets, pillows and duvet heaped in a pile on the naked mattress. And there were still the debris on the carpet that she'd created on her last visit.

The night passed slowly. For hours, she'd lain awake inhaling Livvie's musky smell. It crept out from the fibres of the carpet, through the cracks between the wardrobe doors. And the noises: the creaking of the plumbing, the clickety-clack of footsteps on the corridors. Unfamiliar voices. Heavy duty trucks rumbled on the highway, declutching around the Killarney bends. She imagined their long haul north laden with containers from China, and their return, filled with livestock or fresh produce from Limpopo or Mpumalanga.

First light brought the choir of hadedas, loud and complaining. She switched on the TV but much later, she was aware of ringing. It was the front-door bell. Stumbling blindly out of bed, throwing on some clothes and stepping into her sandals, Rose looked through the peephole. She must have fallen asleep at some time. It was close to midday.

Abisola.

Rose blinked hard, ran her fingers through her hair and opened the door.

"Hi. I brought you something. A welcome gift," Abisola was holding a cardboard confectionery box sealed with a Pick 'n Pay price sticker. Her eyes were widely spaced. They gave her face an openness. She asked disarmingly: "Did I wake you?"

"No…not at all. Thanks! This is really kind of you," Rose took the box: "Is this something to eat? Come in. I'll make some tea." She led the way to the couch by the window.

"Thanks. Great view. Better than mine."

"What can I get you to drink? I think there's coffee. And tea. Must be some herb tea as well. Sorry…I don't have any milk."

"Whatever…. herb tea. I hope you like Danishes," Abi shouted to Rose in the kitchen.

Rose never ate them. "Love them," she replied enthusiastically, opening the cupboard where the teas were stored. Everything in its place; all familiar. "Ginger and lemon or fruity berry?

"Um… fruity berry. Are all these things your mother's?"

"Yep. Not my taste, most of them." Rose said, arranging the pastries on a plate, and placing tea things on a tin tray featuring a doleful kitten in pastels. She must rmember to donate it to Katie.

"I love them. These little glass animals. They're so cute. Especially the hedgehog." There was a trace of the foreign to her accent.

"Where're you from?" Rose asked as she put the tray on the coffee table.

"Nigeria. My family's still over there. I'm here, studying. I live with my cousin." She lifted her cup, negotiating its ear with her long nails, and took a tiny sip. She declined the pastries on offer, but Rose felt obliged to nibble at the edges of a large custard slice.

Abi told Rose about her parents living in the Niger Delta, her siblings, what she was studying, her complaints about the institution where she was studying, her studying

habits, her dreams and aspirations, what she cooked for supper and how her cousin complained about her cooking. Rose heard that he was strict and wouldn't let her have men come around – like some reactionary father from the fifties. All the while, her French manicure flashed like new moons at midnight, her hands moving as she spoke.

She never asked Rose one question about herself, or her life, and Rose didn't offer any information. She thought that perhaps it was a cultural thing, that maybe Africans considered it rude to ask. Rose wasn't bored by Abi's monologue. She enjoyed listening to people's stories, always in awe of people who could talk about themselves with such a lack of self-consciousness. In any case, her own life was so dull that there was nothing she could have contributed anyway.

"Hey!" Abi said suddenly. "Let's go out for drinks tonight. I'll ask my cousin if he can take us. He won't let me go out with just my girl friends. He says it's not safe - girls on their own."

Rose weighed up the offer. It was too soon. She needed to get to know them better. Maybe it *wasn't* safe for her to go out with them on her own. She hadn't even met the cousin. She should before she agreed to go with them. Maybe they were human traffickers. They'd kidnap her and force her into prostitution, or highjack her kidneys. She was a big girl – she could look after herself. Time to take the bull by the horn – remember? "Okay," she said with a nonchalance she didn't feel.

She worked the scissors under the tape that sealed the boxes, finally locating the box she wanted, and then yanked out the stone linen pants and cream silk shirt, upsetting the layers that she had packed so carefully. Despite her efforts, they were as crumpled as the cow's horn. Which cow?

> The cow with the crumpled horn that was milked by the maiden most forlorn,
> who married the man all tattered and torn...

Where did this come from - so out of the blue?

A chain of events, of cause and effect,

that led to the bed, where Livvie read to her from an illustrated Mother Goose as her lids grew heavy.

The place of her childhood located here, in the flat. The place of her history remembered. It was all so familiar. She knew where everything was, from the tin trays

to the brooms to the ironing board, even though these belonged strictly in Katie's domain.

But it was her ancient past, her unknowable history to which she craved admittance, a past that was so frustratingly inaccessible, so removed from her knowing, that she had as much chance of accessing it as she had of penetrating her unconscious.

By nine o'clock, Rose had lost her desire to go out. This wasn't unusual: she had often felt too lazy, too ensconced at home. "Go," Livvie would command. "You'll enjoy it once you're there."

She heard her neighbours' door slam and the crescendo of their footsteps, and despite herself, a frisson of excitement fluttered in the base of her guts.

"This is my cousin, Obayana," said Abi as she stood outside Rose's door. How would she remember his name? It was a bit like Pollyanna. Maybe she could call him Oba. Oba and Abi.

He loomed large in the passage, wearing loose trousers and matching tunic in a bold black, brown and white print. His teeth flashed in the dull light of the corridor as he smiled broadly, and he took Rose's hand in both of his. A triangle of cocoa-coloured chest peeped out at the top of his tunic. A large gold watch gleamed on his wrist. Abi looked fantastic in a sequinned T shirt and black jeans with bits of bling on the pockets. Rose felt so dowdy next to her she decided she was going on a shopping spree. Tomorrow.

"You'd better watch out for him. He's a real charmer," Abi warned Rose. Everything about her shone: her hair, her lips, her eyelids. "And he's married," she added.

"Ho ho ho," he laughed heartily.

They went to a club in Rosebank called The White Russian, but there were no whites of any nationality within, only black people. On the way, Obayana told Rose sitting next to him in the passenger seat, that he was in the import/export business. She wanted to ask what commodities he traded in but she didn't want to probe too much in case it involved something illicit - ask no questions; hear no lies.

People spilled out onto the pavement from the entrance of the club. They stood around in groups, leaning on the bonnets of luxury convertibles that were parked in the adjacent parking lot. They all looked so cool in their designer clothes. A man slid his wallet out from his back pocket with a shimmy of his shoulders in a move that was pure cool. Rose felt very conscious of her paleness and dull clothes. A woman with the

sleekness of a cat and a feline coldness in her eyes came up to Obayana and embraced him, pushing her breasts up against his chest. He placed a proprietal hand on her buttock.

They jostled their way into the lobby, met by music that throbbed like a heart. Once within the club, they found space on a leather couch near the dance floor. Rose was squashed between Obayana and a man wearing dark glasses and leather pants who nodded to Rose as she sat down. She felt heat radiating in waves through the layers of linen, leather and cotton from their touching thighs. The monotonous thump of House music vibrated through her shoes. Abi perched on the arm of the couch, then disappeared into the smoky haze. Oba looked smoulderingly into Rose's eyes and told her she was beautiful. She wanted to ask him about his wife and children but the music drowned out her voice. He ordered her something to drink. When it arrived, the drink was opaque and moved lazily around the glass as she brought it up to her mouth. She took a small sip. It slithered down her throat, smelling of coffee and paint thinners.

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is a White Russian." Oba grinned, his teeth very white.

"Ah."

There was a DJ on a platform, intermittently lit up by the slits of laser light, like barbs of observation. Lissom bodies moved on the dance floor. It was true - these people really could move.

The man on the couch had melted away, the gap taken up by Abi, who had reappeared with a group of friends in tow, all bright-eyed, swamping the couch with coltish brown limbs, short skirts and enthusiasm. They were curious, wanting to know her, showering her with solicitousness. "How're you doing? D'you need anything? Are you fresh? Are you cool?" Their lips were thick with re-applied lip-gloss, like ripe black plums. They accompanied Rose to the toilet telling her that black men were not to be trusted. They pulled her to the dance floor and cleared a space for themselves in between the moving mass of bodies. They moved unselfconsciously, and she, shadowing their moves, became an indispensable part of their circle, the white outsider.

Obayana drove home very fast. Abi relaxed in the backseat. She had closed her eyes and bobbed to the beat.

Mmmm to the left, to the left

Everything you own in the box to the left

In my closet, that's my stuff
Yes, if I bought it, please don't touch

Rose pushed her foot into the carpet, braking vicariously as the car bounced in the ruts of the road and wondered if Oba's hand on her thigh was just normal African friendliness or if she must read it as incipient foreplay.

Obayana walked her to her door and waited while Rose, with her keys at the ready, unlocked the door.

"Well, thanks," she said brightly, turning around to face him. He put his arms around her waist and breathed into her ear: he wanted Rose, had to have her; taste her honey. She smelled alcohol on his breath. And some sort of cologne, smelling a bit peppery – like nasturtiums. Rose didn't want to offend, didn't want him to think her racist but the man was too different.

"Look, I'm really tired. I hardly slept last night. I've got work to do tomorrow. I need to wake up early. Another night." Her words spilt one into the other.

"Tomorrow night, I'm coming for you. No excuses. I won't take no for an answer." He laughed: "Ho ho ho", and strolled jauntily to his flat.

A sex pest – living next door. What did he think? That for the price of a drink, he had bought himself a night of passion? He couldn't think much of her if he imagined she came this cheap. Could this be an African thing or a cross-over from white behaviour? Tomorrow night, she would make sure she was not at home to receive his promised attentions. She would go out. But there was the night after that. And the next. She couldn't go out every night.

She would go to Oberon. Just like that – she had decided. It was time. She had heard The Berg calling and it would also give her an escape route from her date with Mr Sleazeball Lawyer and teatime with Marian and co. The money thing. It was making her mad. How long would she be staying, she didn't know. Maybe a week. Maybe a month. What was the name of the B&B that the guy in Exclusive Books had mentioned? Something like The Lizard? The Gecko? She thought for a few moments. No - The Chameleon. It was late but she googled it. There was no time to lose – before the momentum of the moment was lost. She'd phone first thing in the morning.

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Abel is a font of homespun knowledge. From time to time, on my prompting, he pointed out species of tree and wild flower, although for much of the time, we rode along in silence. The mountains can only be described as sublime. The scenery is wondrous and the light constantly amazes me. The palette is filled with clear blues and greens, with not a trace of the muddy, the mossy or the grey – so unlike the English landscape. We stopped occasionally so that I could sketch the surroundings but I'm afraid that I was most disappointed with the results for I failed dismally to capture the grandeur and beauty. Although the land is for the most part wild and empty, we are reminded of the presence of men by the horse and cattle tracks that we follow. Today, these led us past the Berlin Evangelical Mission Station and the very remotest of the colonial farms, which is nearly a day's journey from Oberon. Shortly thereafter, we set up camp to bivouac overnight. We have no maps but we are somewhere on the frontier between the Basutoland protectorate and Natal.

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Chapter 9

The proprietors' names were Hank and Brigit Liber. Brigit answered Rose's call. She asked how long Rose would be staying:

"I've no idea. Maybe two weeks …or three," she responded vaguely.

"Most people stay for two or three days. A week is about the maximum. At the moment, I do have the accommodation available but I need to get a better idea. If I get other enquiries – I'd want to let them know. It's getting close to peak season."

"I have some research to do in the area. So, I - I don't know how much time I'll need. Um…maybe I should book for a week to begin with. Then, I could… like… er… play it by ear, once I'm there."

"When do you want the booking from?"

Rose hesitated. It was Tuesday. She needed a few days. "Would Thursday be okay? Um… no no… Er Friday? "

"Yes, yes. Friday would be fine." Brigit's voice was all brisk efficiency. Now her tone changed. "Listen," she said. "If you find its getting too expensive - I hope you don't mind me saying - but most people who stay for extended periods rent something cheaper in the village." How presumptuous! Cheaper accommodation in the village? I should think not. But Rose didn't mind her saying. In her vague dithering way, she obviously sounded like someone who couldn't afford this type of accommodation.

When Rose went to sign the documents for the monthly allowance, Mr Bleazard wasn't in, she was relieved to discover – only his secretary who witnessed her signing some documents and filling in an amount on the dotted line.

The amount had given Rose some anguish. She wanted to request just the minimum but then she decided she was being really stupid. It was time to grow up. What did she care what Bleazard thought of her? She roughly calculated her monthly expenses and added a substantial sum onto the end, for rainy days. If the account grew too large, she could always redeposit the money into – well, wherever it came from.

Rose asked Bleazard's secretary if she could leave a note to cancel the Saturday night date. It would be much easier than doing it by phone.

"Sure, Lovey," she said, bustling away and returning with some thick cream letterheads and an envelope.

Dear Mr Bleazard… sorry to cancel… out of town… Best regards… It was funny to write a letter. It was so formal. But it was better than sending an SMS, which

would have probably read like a cop-out. Rose licked the envelope, the glue's bitter taste at the back of her throat belying the glee she felt at cancelling the arrangement. Why was she being so discreet on his behalf? She had not only enfolded the note into an envelope but had sealed the envelope as well. She should have left it all out in the open for his secretary to read. He should be exposed. But she couldn't do that to poor old Marshall.

And her anticipated confrontation with Oba had also been easy. When the evening following their visit to the *White Russian* came around, Oba just never materialised. And the next neither. She was almost disappointed. She had planned to tell him firmly, through a crack in the door, that she was not interested and that he must go away – or not. Maybe she would have opened the door. Although not her usual habit, she had leapt into a bath in the early evening of both nights, and had thought about the clothes she would wear afterwards. She hadn't seen Abi either. It was exam season for students and she was probably studying.

When she had phoned Marion to cancel the Saturday arrangement, Marion had sounded distracted. Rose thought to ask what the matter was, but she didn't. Now she felt bad, regretting her apparent lack of concern but Marion wasn't someone to admit that there was anything wrong in her life. And Gary had encouraged her, telling her to go for it.

Gary. She sighed. There had been something between them but whatever it was, there would be no realising its potential. It had been just another of those transient connections; flotsam floating down a river, momentarily ensnared by a projecting branch, breaking free then drifting away, pulled along by the currents of life.

On one of the days, she went on a mission to Hyde Park shopping centre and revelled in the attentions of salesladies in the fashionable boutiques. She didn't exactly lose her head but at least if an another opportunity to go out arose, she could dress with some spunk and flair. She felt so bored with the understated elegance she'd always tried to project.

And she took delivery of a top-of-the-range silver Golf Gti, out-the-box. It was fantastic compared to her clapped-out beige Toyota. Entering the on-ramp and pressing down the accelerator, she experienced such a sense of relief; it was like yanking off a too-tight Alice band or some murderous clip-on earrings. Exhilarating! And never having driven this far by herself before, she felt quite the hero – the Thelma or Louise

of Joburg. She needed to find a sexy mechanic to grind down the supports of the roof, to convert her car into an open top. The Brad Pitt of Boksberg Bodies. She could fly in the wake of the wind as she moved away from her past, towards her past; away from her self, towards her self.

The highway skirted the CBD, rounding warehouses, factories and partially cleared mine dumps rising out of the landscape like crumbling sand castles or sarcophagi covered in spiky grey tufts of grass. The figure eights and cloverleaves of the highway led her to the outskirts of Germiston and Alberton where working-class suburbia lay in dreary regularity. Past townships of tin and dust and plantations of electricity pylons, and finally into the flattish countryside awash with dull khakis, russets and fawns in the early morning haze. Clumps of eucalyptus and poplar trees rose as black and as soft as fuzzy felt against the pale sky. On farms, mielie plants grew in regimented rows. A blue-black sakabula bird ascended clumsily from the grass, its long tail pointing to the ground.

Willow trees signified slow-moving streams and *spruits*. One blink and the Wilge, the Kalk, the Hol and the Meul were behind her. She read "Carelessness kills" or "Slow Down Now" from signboards that also announced upcoming towns, villages and hamlets like Frankfort, Cornelia, Tweeling, Reitz and Roadside or named the *koppies* that rose startlingly out of the veld: Tafelkop, Jakkalskop, Leeukop, Verkykerskop.

As the car's odometer clocked up kilometre after kilometre, the landscape appeared devoid of human life. Only the ghosts who had perished over eons of conflict and battle seemed to traverse the thin top soil of this sparsely populated terrain: Boer against British, Boer against Zulu, Zulu against British, Zulu and Basotho. In a country where history had been a disaster, Rose concentrated on looking straight ahead but the past came at her from every angle.

Sleek brown cows grazed in fields and a murder of crows ate a pigeon at the side of the road. The soil was red. Three youths pushed a defunct Citi-golf under a bridge. The outside temperature was thirty degrees. She noticed her fellow road users were mostly male. They drove with one hand on the steering wheel and brown elbows jutting out the window; in T-shirts or shirts with collars and cuffs, in starched cotton, faded serge or khaki. Travelling salesmen and farmers, sometimes ferrying women who sat straight-backed and staring straight ahead. She shared the road with phantoms truck drivers sitting in cabins so high above the road that they were invisible and taxi drivers bearing loads of slumbering passengers. Occasionally, she glanced a female face in

profile, focused and serious at the wheel, an expression she recognised as her own. Eyes met; a connection made.

Thinking how first world, how civilised the state of the road, she moved into the fast lane to overtake a car. She was aware of its occupant looking at her as she did. She returned to the left lane to allow faster cars to pass. The driver now moved into the fast lane, slowed down and leered at her. He mouthed something that she couldn't catch. Then, he cut sharply in front of her and slowed down. God! What was she dealing with here? Mad Max on acid?

When she could, she moved to the fast lane again, and caught the slipstream until she was two or three cars ahead of the driver, then returned, once again to the slow lane. But there he was again, driving neck and neck with her, dicing, smirking, playing his silly games. He had a stupid expression on his eyes. Exasperated, she looked at him: "Oh, fuck off, arsehole", she countered, although her voice sounded small and polite in her ears. She gave him the finger. A shadow darkened the man's swarthy face. He cut sharply in front of her, slamming on his brakes, slowing to a crawl. She braked sharply in response. How to get rid of this moron? She swerved quickly into the fast lane, stepped on the accelerator, and weaved through the traffic, looking in her rear view mirror. Soon, she couldn't see him and there was the sign for the Harrismith rest-stop. Veering off the highway, driving recklessly down the off ramp, then turning into a parking bay, where she sat for a few minutes, breathing heavily, her heart pounding. Jesus! That was really scary. What an idiot. What game was he playing? She felt quite weak. She got out the car and walked shakily towards the restrooms.

There had been some refurbishment. Instead of basins, a slab of black granite lay recumbent like a fallen tombstone. Here, she stood, in front of the mirror and splashed her face, water sliding into the gap between wall and slab like silver foil. In the weird electric lighting, she couldn't recognise this person who looked back at her, in new blue jeans and zooty black T shirt, her face yellow and mauve and a strange tautness around the mouth. She took a plastic tortoiseshell clip from her handbag, wound her hair in a twist and clipped it up off her neck. A large black woman in a pink tracksuit emerged from a toilet cubicle and stood next to her. Their eyes met and they smiled and Rose went to dry her face and hands on the roller towel.

The concrete blazed white hot as she emerged from the restrooms and she tapped her sunglasses off their perch on her head and onto her nose as she scanned the crowd looking for Mad Max. She was scared that she'd encounter him here. The place

was busy. Amongst the masses milling about, she recognised some as her fellow road users but he was nowhere to be seen and, suddenly feeling more ravenous than she could ever remember, she went into the Nandos, bought a hot double chicken burger, chips and a Coke and sat down at an empty bench.

In the hot steamy air, Harrismith's Platberg rose before her, its shimmering presence reassuring her of her progress. On journeys to the coast, it had always been the tradition to stop at Harrismith, the halfway mark, the pit stop named for the governor of the Cape, upheld as a hero in her school history books for his double-quick horse ride from Cape Town to Grahamstown to warn the British garrison of the impending attack from the Xhosas. She remembered coming here at a very early age with John and Livvie, as they journeyed to Umhlunga Rocks for the July holidays. There used to be ostriches grazing in a fenced-off area. She looked around but couldn't see any. What had happened to them?

She felt as if she were sitting in someone else's skin, a less-contained, less constrained individual, with her elbows resting on the table, holding the burger in both hands and taking large bites. Bits of mayonnaise-covered lettuce and peri-peri sauce oozed out the burger and stuck to the corners of her mouth but she carried on biting, not pausing to wipe her mouth until she had completely wolfed it down. The small peri-peri fire that now burned in her mouth was pleasantly tempered by the chips and Coke and soon, these too were finished, and licking her fingers and feeling stuffed, she got back into her car and resumed her journey.

The traffic had thinned; the landscape was greener and more dramatic as the road climbed towards Van Reneen's pass where gulleys grew thick with groves of acacias and spiky aloes dotted the steep slopes. Clouds were banking above the jagged peaks on the distant horizon: the Great Escarpment, the Drakensberg, uKhahlamba, Dragon Mountains, Barrier of Spears.

Down the pass, the road flattened carrying Rose across a valley floor. Dairy farming had stitched together a patchwork of pasture and in the fields, white cows like great bovine ghosts grazed. With Beethoven's Pastoral symphony playing on her i-pod, she passed kraals and scatterings of poor rural dwellings with mud walls and tin roofs held down with rocks. Three birds flew up and down in an invisible funnel. A layer of silver cloud spread across the sky from the south and the temperature cooled. The road curved and she passed through the toll gate, and then there was the sign to the Southern Drakensberg.

She drove further south, through rolling hills, through valleys of soft green and peaks of stiff purple. The further from the highway, the narrower the road became until she was travelling on a forest track through lovely countryside where the trees were tipped with pink. She hummed along to Dvorak's New World Symphony, da- da dum, da- da dum, de de de de dum, enjoying the handling of her car as it hugged the tight mountain passes. The landscape had become a land of breasts, full and draped with soft emerald cloth. Rose smiled. It was impossible to describe the land in anything but the female form. Mother earth - fecund and receptive, ripe and ready for the human male to claim, name and penetrate.

The cloud had thickened and drifted close about the ground. Her headlights were switched on but soon they merely lit the mist. It looked as if an obsessive God, struggling to attain perfection in his creation, had erased the edges of the world to reveal a white canvas. She slowed down. She hadn't seen another car since leaving the highway but she was still nervous of encountering one head-on. She sat up very straight and had switched off her music to focus on her driving. There was not a sound except for the quiet turning of her engine and not another living soul to be seen save for the family of goats that romped daintily atop a small pile of rocks on the roadside and one lone cow tethered near the verge. She felt like she was the sole survivor in a post-apocalyptic landscape.

As she rounded a bend, her car now climbing, she encountered an old and dilapidated truck travelling at funereal pace. How irritating! She was doing so well, now she had to contend with this. She dogged his darkened outline slowly up the hill. The road soon crested the peak and began its descent. Through her windscreen wipers, she saw the truck driver waving his arm, indicating for her to pass. She couldn't see a thing. She had to trust him. She couldn't. She clung to his tail lights, hypnotised by their undulating movement.

Around another bend. Again, he indicated that she could pass. Should she take a chance? Could she trust him? She had no faith. She felt like a Israelite, doubting, yet ready to believe this Moses telling her that the Promised Land lay ahead.

In the valley, the mist lifted temporarily and the road reappeared - a silver snake slithering slowly around the mountain-side. Now! She accelerated, overtaking the truck, throwing off his shackles, flashing her flashers in thanks. He hooted in acknowledgement. Liberation felt good.

She passed a signpost. Oberon 40 km. Aah, she breathed. It was always a relief. No! It was always a huge thrill finally to glimpse the sign to one's destination. She calculated that she had about half an hour to go, then she counted on her fingers: the journey would take more or less seven and a half hours, minus the break in Harrismith. Phew.

Across the bridge over the greasy grey-green water of the Banqaru River and to the main road of Oberon where she was drawn into the Friday afternoon maelstrom. Throngs of people milled about in the fine drizzle, their umbrellas opened like exotic blooms. Taxis stopped without warning in the middle of the road and made U-turns willy-nilly. She passed three blocks of single-storied shops, real-estate offices, a hotel and a petrol station where she turned as instructed by Brigit. Five kilometres later, there was the narrow dirt road that led to the Chameleon.

She descended sharply, crossing a bridge that spanned a fast-flowing stream and climbed again, curving around a mountain. The landscape was still shrouded in mist; only her immediate surroundings were visible and she drove slowly, anxiously looking out for the nameboard. Ah! There it was - at the end of the road - The Chameleon. The gate to the property was closed. She hopped out the car and, in the fine rain, picked her way through rutted mud to lift the catch. And there was the pergola where Brigit said she could park. She got out the car and looked around. She had arrived.

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Today, we arrived at the village of Patilweng, which is to be found along the banks of the Banqaru River within the borders of the Basutoland. This used to be the site of the Bushman's summer camp while the lower lands to the east served as their winter stamping ground. Sadly, they were forced to abandon their nomadic life and settle here, squeezed from all sides by inimical forces, viz., farmers, colonial expansion and native chiefs.

The medicine man was waiting to greet us upon our arrival as Abel had sent word via one of the bearers. A small old man with a yellow cast to his skin, wearing but a loin cloth and beaded bracelets and with legs so thin as to resemble pins, he welcomed us in Pidgin English. When we bestowed parcels of maize, sorghum and tobacco upon him, he gave a wide toothless smile, his face collapsing in a sea of

wrinkles. He appears to be the chief but upon inquiring of Abel whether this is so, he informed me that there is no chief.

There are about 35 villagers, including children. I was told that they are descended from the Bushman although it appears that there has been intermarriage with the Bantu tribes. From my observations, the villagers tending more towards Bushman stock have tawnier skins, flatter faces and smaller builds than those with a greater proportion of Bantu in their blood. These individuals display browner skin, fuller faces, rounder eyes and are of bigger stature. Despite the mixing of the blood and because of the isolation of the village, they apparently still follow many of the old Bushmen customs, speaking a language that is so very strange to my ears that I can barely believe it is used to communicate everyday utterances let alone more abstract ideas and thoughts. It is almost as if they have little percussion instruments attached to the roofs of their mouths. They chatter away in prestissimo tempo, in a range of musical clicks. It sounds most cheerful and makes me want to smile.

The villagers are not unused to visitors but were most surprised to see a white lady. They came out en masse to greet our caravan, the women with their bare breasts, beaded aprons and large necklaces, giggling when I addressed them. There were some with babes tied around their torsos by a skin positioned just so that the babe was able to suckle whenever he desired. Older children romped around and everyone looked very carefree and happy. Of course, they didn't comprehend a word I said but Abel translated and I hope that they heard from my tone that I come in peace and amity.

I knew that there would be a time when I would celebrate my spontaneous purchases on the day of my arrival. After I addressed the villagers, the women gave me gifts of beautifully decorated gourds and bracelets and necklaces crafted from plaited leather and adorned with beads. I, in turn, distributed the hair clips and other sparkly bits and bobs that I had bought from the Hindoo women at the harbour. At first, I thought to give only to the women and girls, but when a little boy stood in front of me with large expectant eyes and an outstretched hand, I gave to him and his little friends as well. When I half- jokingly offered the older boys, they declined with the most disdainful expressions. In any case, there were enough to go around to all those who wanted and everyone was delighted with their newly acquired possession.

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Chapter 10

She'd read on the website that the cottages had been converted from an old stable, which had sounded quaint and romantic but the building was disappointingly nondescript. There was nothing particularly charming or welcoming about the white plastered block and tin roof. She carried her bags onto the veranda and wondered what she should do. Should she phone Brigit and tell her she'd arrived? After traipsing through the wet grass in her sandals, her feet ached from the cold and she shivered under her T-shirt. Should she haul out a jersey and socks from her case? A woman appeared.

"Hello, I'm Brigit." She extended her hand for a very brief handshake. "How was the journey?" She spoke in quiet tones, a plainish woman, a few years older than Rose, large-boned with short mousy hair. She wore a pastel Orlon sweater - something that Livvie might have owned – a shapeless denim mid-length skirt and moccasins.

"Fine. Thanks. Gee! It's really cold." Rose rubbed her bare arms and shivered.

"We needed the rain. It was unbearably hot earlier. Well, here's the key to the cottage. You're in this one." She pointed to one of the two cottages. "We don't have other guests at the moment. Hank and I are right over there." She indicated a house obscured by a thick shrubbery about fifty metres away. "Breakfast is served in the main house from eight to eleven. If you need to get going early, we can pack a picnic basket for you." She gazed out into the darkening mist. "You can wander around the property. It goes right down to the river in that direction, and on that side, nearly to the top of the mountain." She gestured. "There's a fence between us and the neighbours so you don't need to worry about trespassing. Let me know if you need anything – extra blankets, or whatever," She paused: "I won't keep you. Go inside and get warm," she exhorted.

"Just one thing - can I get Internet access?"

"You'll have to come inside the house, into our office. We charge twenty Rand an hour."

"That's fine," Rose agreed although this really wasn't ideal. It felt like she'd get in the way of their work. "And where do you recommend I go for supper? Somewhere casual."

"The pub at the Oberon Hotel is really nice. The food's excellent. Or The Olive Branch. It's also very good." Brigit half smiled: "Well, see you in the morning."

Rose opened the door and dragged her bags into the living space. The room was warm and inviting. On a coffee table was a tray with a small decanter of sherry, a glass, two *lebkuchen* on a little hand-painted plate and a spray of pale blue hydrangea. A pile of magazines like *Country Life*, *GetAway* and *Your Health* lay on an occasional table. There was a fireplace with a log-filled andiron and along one wall, a kitchen space where built-in cupboards, a fridge and sink had been fitted.

She pulled her case down a small passage, passing a dressing table and mirror, to the bedroom where there was a double bed dressed in white percale. In the en suite bathroom, Brigit had supplied thick white waffle-weave towels, Charlotte Rhys soaps and creams as well as scented candles, something Rose never used. She lit the candles and ran a bath and a few minutes later, her arms all goose bumpy, slid into the bath up to her nipples, her bones feeling heavy as she languished. Every now and then, she stretched out her foot and turned on the hot water tap with her big toe.

Later, feeling very grateful to her generous patrons, she sat at the dressing table in the rosy glow of the candlelight and dried her hair with the hairdryer, another thoughtful touch provided by Brigit no doubt, and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Who are you?" she asked, seeing the glint in her grey irises as they captured the candle's flickering light, barely recognising her soft reflection. And she felt such an intense flutter of anticipation that it seemed as if a host of butterflies had taken up residence in her stomach.

It was seven o' clock. She turned on the TV. DSTV disappointingly yielded only the Supersport channels but then she eyed the sherry and feeling sophisticated and independent, she poured some of the golden liquid into a glass, closed her eyes and drank a libation to the God of travellers who had delivered her safely from the Mad Maxes on the road and out of the mist into this haven.

The sherry tasted delicious, even for one as teetotal. She took another careful sip. Before long, the glass was drained and she felt completely relaxed. And fortified. This frightened her because she realised how easy it was to start drinking. Addictive behaviour was definitely an inherited trait. The alcohol made it easier for her to get back into her car and drive the five kilometres along the dirt road to the village in the black of the rural night. The pub sounded like a good idea. There were sure to be locals and old timers there. She had the seeds, copies of the Polaroids and the painting of the White Goddess. She put them in her bag.

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My accommodation, compared to the villagers' is the finest that such temporary living affords, my dear uncle forgetting none of the perquisites demanded by civilised living. My sleeping arrangements and my toilette area are most adequate and although there are no bathing facilities, the sheeting and watering can that Abel has rigged for my shower are a tribute to human ingenuity. I even enjoy warm water.

In contrast, the villagers bathe in the river and live in rude huts constructed from mud, sticks and straw. As the only light that enters is through the narrow entrance, the interiors are drear and dismal, which I'm sure constitutes the most unhealthy of living conditions. They are arranged in a circle with common ground in the middle. This is where they sit as I write. Night has fallen and I can hear them telling tales around the fire, accompanied by laughter and appreciative murmurs.

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The hotel was quaint and shabby. Large leaded windows framed a narrow doorway, which led into a small reception area with an unmanned desk. It had that old hotel smell from years of accumulated rancid fat, stale beer, foetid mattresses and dust balls swept into corners by generations of indifferent maids. Rose walked down a draughty passage that led to the pub on floorboards that creaked uncertainly under her step. She had brought a book to provide her with something to do besides staring at the walls. It was *Night Train to Lisbon*. She had bought it shortly before she'd left, the description and endorsements on the cover enticing her, but she was finding it utterly dreary. It was taking her forever.

Rose cast her eyes around the gloomy room. The bar was a large wooden pen-like affair. It took up most of the room. A bartender cum waitress paced about its confines like a caged panther. There were about ten table and chair sets hewn from railway sleepers – all very rustic - positioned around the bar. Only one of the tables was occupied. A group of English tourists sat quietly munching hearty-looking hamburgers and chips. Surprisingly, there were no other customers. She had expected to see more people on a Friday night.

She sat at a shadowy corner of the bar, choosing a stool with a view of the entrance. She sat straight-backed, not wanting to lean on the bar's sweaty surface. There

were large black and white photographs of fishermen displaying freshly-caught trout and of the hotel and village back in the day. The fast changing images of MTV flashed from a TV suspended from the ceiling. She never watched this channel – she didn't know the hottest hits or who sang them. She read the subtitles: someone called Li'l Wayne was playing.

Rose tried to catch the bartender's eye but she kept disappearing behind two columns and failed to reappear for long stretches at a time. Two middle-aged black men in white button down shirts entered and sat at the bar to her right. A woman joined the English tourists. Then, a group of three men and two women entered the pub amidst much jollity. They all seemed to be wearing khaki clothing, brogue-type shoes and had what looked like DIY haircuts. Rowdy and dowdy. They sat at a table where, if she craned her neck a little, she could catch sight of them.

Some group called The All-American Rejects was on. Strange. All these people seemed to be singing remixes of classic rock. When Britney Spears started singing "Smoke on the water, fire in the ski-iy" in a bass voice, Rose realised that the sound had been switched off and a CD was playing somewhere. The bar-tender took the black men's order. Rose felt a little peeved. She had been there first. Finally, she stood before her with a disagreeable expression. Her whole mien was unhelpful. Rose wanted to ask what her problem was but just asked for a menu instead.

It was nice to see racial mixing. The two black men wouldn't have been allowed in here when her mother was in the area - being impregnated. But even today, the country was still so racially segregated. When she attended cultural things like concerts or theatre, she always noticed how white the audiences were. And if she were to attend black events, like soccer in Soweto or an R&B concert, she would feel like a peanut in a sea of gravy.

A man walked in wearing jeans and a leather jacket. He removed the jacket to reveal a white T-shirt, then sat on the opposite side of the bar. A halo of light cast by a hanging lamp illuminated his number one haircut. Her vision of him was slightly impeded by the column, which was a good thing otherwise he might have been aware of the intensity of her gaze. He had a rangy body, craggy features. He looked like he could have been a hiker or mountaineer.

The bartender took money from the beer drinkers and now appeared to be sorting out the change in her drawer but she finally came over. Miraculous. Rose ordered a Greek salad. "Is it possible to get the dressing on the side?" and then feeling

very daring added: “And can I get a glass of red wine?” The woman nodded amenably and Rose decided that she wasn’t so bad. She was just short of waitressing skills.

The two black men sat looking into their beers. She thought about asking them if they had always lived in the area, if they recognised the subjects in her photos but she knew she wouldn’t. They weren’t even talking to each other, how could she penetrate their personal space? Besides they didn’t look like sophisticated city-slickers. They probably wouldn’t have had a clue what she was talking about.

A waitress emerged from a doorway carrying her glass of wine. Rose took a sip and caught a snatch of the conversation to her right:

“They’re called the dolerite dykes.”

“Sounds like a lesbo group.”

“Ha ha ha.” They all shared the joke.

“Lesbo. I’ve never heard the term.”

“I got it from a *South Park* episode. That’s where I get most of my information from.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“I’ve shown episodes in class. To explain - oh I don’t know…satire, stereotyping, hypocrisy, the concept of monopolies…”

“Haven’t you had complaints from parents? It’s age-restricted - eighteen or something, isn’t it?”

“I’m waiting to get into trouble with the powers that be.”

School teachers. The waitress deposited a woven plastic place-mat in front of her, a knife and fork swaddled in a paper serviette, a side plate and a handmade wire holder containing grubby bottles of condiments and salad dressings.

The man opposite was nursing a glass of wine, sipping slowly with raised pinkie. Rose was amused at this display of gentility in one so macho. He stared intently at the invisible horizon as the bottle cooled in an ice bucket, silver rivulets of condensation running down its sides. She wondered if he was resident in the area. She tried to gauge his age to assess if he would be an eligible candidate for her research. Attractive. He was in his mid to late thirties. Even at the upper end, she calculated, he would have been only seven or eight years old in 1978. Maybe it was worth a shot but he looked so austere she was reluctant to approach him.

Her Greek salad arrived. It was really good, especially the feta. Perhaps it came from Oberon’s cheese factory. The man was now eating a steak. He ate slowly, chewing

deliberately and concentrating on his food. There was a loud guffaw from the school teachers. Rose turned her head, smiling. Their merriment was infectious. A woman in the group caught her smile and returned it like a shuttlecock in a game of badminton.

Later, only she and the teachers remained. Rose waited for a coffee and the bill. She regretted ordering the coffee. It was taking so long and she felt like a spare part sitting all alone at the bar. She opened her book and pretended to read.

"Come join us," There was a voice at Rose's shoulder. It was the smiling woman.

Rose was grateful to be relieved of her isolation, moved by the woman's kindness, but she felt awkward to join such an apparently tightly-knit group. Still, she said: "Well …um …thanks…if you're sure..."

There was a shifting of buttocks and beer mugs to make room. Introductions were made, Rose mentally repeating their names trying to memorise them. Four out of the five were local school teachers; the fifth was an old friend visiting from London for a few weeks. They were thrilled to hear that her background was teaching as well.

"I thought I recognised that mad glint in your eye!" cried Steve who was married to the smiling Megan.

"We're ordering another round of drinks. What will you have?" The man, Ronald, asked. His looks were appealing: green eyes, dark tousled hair, dishevelled clothes. Definitely not a metrosexual man. Rose refused the beer. "I'm waiting for coffee," she told him.

"That's no good. You've got to have alcohol if you're going to cope with us," he joked.

Rose laughed. "I'll cope." But the beer arrived and Rose felt obliged to partake.

"Ooh – I love this song!" Megan announced. They sang along:

one of sixteen vestal virgins
who were leaving for the coast
and although my eyes were open
they might have just as well've been closed

"Da da dum dum, turned a whiter shade of pale" they sang, not sure of the words. Rose couldn't join in even bolstered by the beer (which she was struggling with).

Steve shouted to the bartender, who was toting up her cash register: “Hi – can you turn the music up?” They listened out for the next number:

We don’t need no education
We don’t need no thought control

“I go with that!” cried the stocky Steve who had risen from the table and had started to dance, his chin thrusting forward and his shoulders jerking from side to side. The others followed. Megan had held out her hand for Rose and she took it, allowing herself to become part of the group. The alcohol had blurred the edges of her reserve. Even still, dancing was difficult for her; had always been. It felt so forced as she went along with them, dancing around the tables, holding waists in a Congo line, regrouping, randomly connecting then separating, like molecules in space.

Kind Megan to have drawn her into the group, but Rose preferred to be an observer rather than a participant, choosing to live life from the margins rather than in the centre. She wasn’t used to such concentrated sociability. It wasn’t in her nature. Nature. Nurture. Nonsense. It was her choice. Friendships needed nurturing and effort, energy and obligation if they were to be maintained. It all depended on your priorities. The song changed, the tempo quickened:

Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow,
Don’t stop, it’ll soon be here,
It’ll be better than before,
Yesterday’s gone, yesterday’s gone.

They linked arms and cavorted around the tables. Clockwise, anticlockwise. The bartender sat on her stool, eyeing them with a steely glare. “Last round,” she called. They staggered back to their table, sweating and laughing.

“Thanks. I’ve had the best fun,” Rose panted quietly to Megan sitting next to her, not sure if she didn’t mean it.

“Beers for everyone,” Steve commanded.

When their breathing returning to normal, they exchanged cell phone numbers.

Megan suggested to Max, the UK visitor: “Rose should join us tomorrow.” Then addressing Rose: “ Max and I are going on a tour up the Sani Pass.” Max nodded, endorsing the idea.

Rose held back. She didn’t want to intrude in their plans. “Um…I’ve got some research to do in the village. It’s quite urgent.”

“Then join us tomorrow night for supper,” Megan persisted. “We’ve got a booking at the best restaurant in the area – Leighton Manor. We’ve never been before so it’s a real treat. I’m sure it won’t be a problem to change the booking for one more.”

Rose was pleased about the separate entrance to the cottages when she returned after midnight. She slunk into her bed and fell asleep listening to the low rhythms of frog music.

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I sit here at my small desk in the flickering candlelight, too weary to write, too restless to sleep. The wick burns low and I breathe in this rarefied air, as cool and sweet as the air on Mount Olympus, and listen to the sounds of the night – a nightjar clatters, a baboon barks and a fox bays in so plaintive a cry that it tears my heart asunder.

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Chapter 11

Who switched on the light? Rose thought as she awoke. The light streamed into the room through a skylight in the ceiling. God! What time is it? Who puts a skylight in a bedroom? She turned onto her stomach burrowing her head under the pillow and tried to return to the comfort of dreams. It was useless.

She lay on her back, her eyes closed against the dawn light and thought of the previous night. They were a cheerful bunch. They'd set out to have a good time, and by golly, they made sure they were going to have one. It was better than being miserable and complaining. Had she overstepped any bounds? She had been pulled into the group by the woman's kindness when maybe she should have held back. It was embarrassing to think that the alcohol had made her lose her reserve.

The early morning quiet was rent by mewling. It could have been a cat only it resounded a few octaves higher. It came again, calling her, pleading with her to partake of the delights of the wild so she dressed and opened her door onto the soaring peaks of the Berg. A group of pine trees towered in the cloudless sky, birds alighting on the uppermost branches in slow motion. In the distance, the basalt face of Dragon's Tooth shimmered a pale pink in the dawn light.

From around the corner, a peacock strolled, dragging its tail behind him. He stopped, jerked his head from side to side and then, catching sight of her, turned to face her. They stood very still, eyeing each other: duellists at dawn. Then, with languorous aplomb, he opened his magnificent tail - turquoise jewels suspended in silver casket - she felt like an Indian princess living in a hillside palace. Slowly, the tail dropped and the bird began to preen, his neck misshapen and his beak pulling violently at his plumage with an ugly rasping sound. He gave a high hysterical mewl, looked at her and continued on his way.

She followed the bird through a shrubbery to a courtyard with alternating squares of paving and spiky blue mondo grass to the back door of the house, and then around to the front of the house, where, on a white pebblestone path, she passed through an arcade of honed Cyprus hedges and orange bush topiaries and she stopped in wonder.

The garden spread out before her in strangeness and shadow and dazzling sunlight. High hedges lined pebble paths that opened onto ponds shining black and green with lotus leaves and birdbaths that issued thin streams of water into the air.

Strelitzias huddled like rapacious fledglings, blooms like beaks competing for space amongst golden marigolds and spicy nasturtiums. In dark cool corners, acanthus lilies, lettuces and herbs grew while snails worked their tender leaves into fronds of glossy lace and earthworms carved foul-smelling caverns from decaying humus. Walking down a colonnade of white rosebushes, she almost tripped over a pair of bare feet. The rest of the man was in the hedge. He looked like some sort of wild hog sniffing for roots. A trowel lay next to him.

"Ooops. Sorry," she said.

"Smelling the earth…," He emerged and sat back on his haunches. "Well hello." He looked her up and down admiringly. "Look what the gods have brought us." Then, he wiped his hands on his black boxer shorts, took one of hers in both of his and shook it vigorously. "Hank." He smiled. "Welcome to my garden of earthly delights."

He was big and tall. With shaved head. The sun had turned his shirtless torso orangey-brown. And meaty - like he could run to middle age spread and develop a slackness around the pectorals in a couple of years.

"Hank? Sounds American."

"My name's Heinryk. I got the nickname at school. You know, first team rugby and all. I was Hank the Tank, prop of note."

Hank the Hunk more like. "You?" he was saying.

"Rose. I'm staying in the cottages."

"Rose - by any other name would smell as sweet. Smell this." He took a handful of the dark soil and now standing close to her, held it under her nose. "Fantastic, hey? Can you smell?"

Rose sniffed deeply, aware of the warmth emitted by his hand. "Smell what?"

"Sex. And death. You can smell it in the soil." He crumbled the contents of his palm with the tips of his fingers, letting it drop through his fingers to fall to the ground. She became aware of the rich loamy smell. "My garden –there's this cycle of sex and death taking place here all the time." He snapped a carnidine rose off a thick woody stem. "Check out this flower." He stroked the swollen receptacle at the base of the bloom. "It's pure sex, man. Here's the female sex organ. Here's the male sex organ. Here." He looked intently at her. "This is for you. A rose for Rose."

"Thanks." She took the flower carefully. There were many large thorns. And blushed.

"So Rose," he stood with his hands on his hips, looking at her as if she was a female sex organ: "How did you like to be woken up communing with the gods?"

"Sorry?" She pushed her hair behind her ear and ran her fingers through its length.

"The skylight. I put it in the bedrooms so that there's a window to the gods."

"Er…ja …Great idea!" Sex appeal. This man oozed it from his every pore. "Well. I'm…er…going for a walk," she told him.

"Be sure to pass through the portal. Read the words on the rusted plate that say…" He closed his eyes: "He who enters this portal will partake of the fruits borne of Nature and will be nurtured by the Goddess of Truth."

What did that mean? "Okay," she said brightly.

He nodded, a smile playing around his lips, his hand holding the trowel. She felt his eyes on her until she rounded the hedge where she paused to catch her breath. Through a foliaged archway, she descried the blue-green slopes of the distant slopes. Heartbreak Hank. Their encounter left her feeling quite weak at the knees.

At the edge of the garden, the property sloped steeply down to the river. Rose walked through the portal, a concrete archway with a bell and rusty plate attached to the lintel, and down steps that had been artificially carved out of the mountainside. Bees reeled around the wild mountain flora, drunk on their sweet medicinal scent. Ribbons of water trickled down into secret pools. The grass was alive with cicadas trilling from indiscernible locations. The air was heating up, steam rising from the earth. She felt hot; droplets of sweat mobilising in her armpits, ready to roll down her sides.

When she reached the river, she looked upstream where it curved around the bend of the mountain. The sun's reflections skittered across the water's surface like salmon catching the currents. Rose scooped the water in both hands. She splashed her face then scooped the river directly into her mouth tasting the pure clean essence that arose from its source deep within the mountains. She experienced an urge to lie down on the bank and immerse her whole head in the water, to feel the river's currents tugging at her scalp and fish nibbling on her hair, a river goddess, but the thought of wet hair dripping down her neck as she made her way back to the cottage restrained her.

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While exploring my surrounds today, I descried a vista so picturesque that I ordered one of the bearers to set up my easel and paints. I could see my little pony and the other animals grazing in the pastures surrounding the kraal. To my left and right, were small plots of ripening maize and directly in front of me, I gazed upon a grandiose rock-face rising steeply into the hazy sky for close on 2000ft.

The medicine man could not contain his excitement when he saw me at my toil. He came over, feverishly questioning me about my equipment, touching my brushes and even dipping a finger into my watercolours. Then, he picked up a brush, my best squirrel, brushed it against his cheek and put it in his mouth whereupon he withdrew it and admired its fine point. I felt quite revolted by his uncouth gesture. I would have preferred to donate the brush to him, but I need it – it's my finest! So I merely dipped it into the water and will pretend that I never saw his peculiar gesture.

I told him about the reproductions of the Bushman paintings in The Athenaeum and asked him whether he had travelled to the Giant's Castle area to see the paintings. Through Abel's translation, he informed me that there are as many paintings in the mountains as once the great eland roamed this land and their importance is such that they have the power to give strength to the hunter's arrow, entice the rain bull from the sky, deflect arrows of sickness, appease the spirits-of-the-dead and bind together those who have been dispersed to the four corners of the earth. They hold the potency of the great god and if I touch them, the string connecting the great god to his people will break and the Bushman will be forced to leave his lands, never to return. When I inquired as to where exactly they are to be found, he became furious, narrowing his eyes and hissing that their location is secret and warning me in a terrible voice against trying to find them. I was most nervous of his ill-temper so refrained from questioning him further. Later, I asked Abel what he knew of the paintings but he said that he had no knowledge of them or their power.

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Brigit greeted Rose as she entered the breakfast room. "It's going to be another sweltering day. I hope you were comfortable last night."

"Yes…absolutely. Everything's great. Thanks for the welcoming sherry. You have the most fantastic place. Paradise."

Brigit smiled and directed Rose to a chair. "There's continental breakfast -which you can help yourself to, or Happiness can make you a cooked breakfast."

"I'll just help myself, thanks." She went to the yellowwood dresser where the breakfast had been laid out.

"Bring the madam fresh coffee," Brigit ordered then hastened from the room. Happiness brought the coffee then hovered at Rose's elbow, in her bare feet. There had been two pairs of worn-down pumps placed neatly alongside the mat outside the door. When Rose saw them, she wondered if she was also expected to remove her shoes like she was about to enter a sacred temple.

Rose told Happiness: "You don't need to worry about me. I've got everything I need." Happiness nodded, her demeanour passive, her expression bland. She moved away and stood against the wall, leaning on her hands. Her presence made Rose feel uncomfortable. She would have preferred to be left alone.

A boy of about four ran into the room making a roaring noise, his arms outstretched. He stopped his activity to inspect Rose.

"Hello," she said. "You're a big aeroplane. Where're you off to, Mr Aeroplane?"

"My daddy's a pilot." The boy spread his arms again and wheeled out the back door where the peacock stood looking to enter the house.

A harassed looking domestic worker entered the room bearing a pale-skinned toddler secured on her back with a towel, African-style. The child was pulling away, trying to get a better view of her surroundings.

"*Haai*, Jamie. Don't run away." She saw Rose: "Hello ma'am." She hissed at the bird "Go!" then stepped into one of the pairs of shoes, crossed the courtyard and disappeared from view.

Brigit re-emerged and shouted after the childminder: "Stay in the garden. Don't let Jamie go into the long grass." She addressed Rose: "Snakes."

"Snakes! I took a walk down there this morning. I didn't think about snakes."

"Adults tread quietly and calmly. They mostly keep to the paths where the grass is kept short. Jamie runs and jumps around everywhere, off the paths and into their territory. They're very territorial. They get threatened. We lost a dog recently to snakebite. We were devastated. You need to respect them and tread with care."

Well, that's comforting, thought Rose, although she never considered natural threats as threatening as man-made ones.

The peacock continued to stand stock-still at the back door. "Shame. I feel sorry for your peacock. He must be lonely. He needs a partner," Rose observed.

"I don't want any more," Brigit was replacing the lids of the large cereal jars. "We inherited him from the previous owners. And also a whole flock of guinea fowl. There're only a few of those left. Most have been taken off by birds of prey."

"So, dangers lurk in paradise," Rose quipped and then asked: "Haven't you always lived here?"

"I'm from Durban. Hank was born here, in Oberon, but his family moved to Durban when he started high school. Can I get you more coffee?"

"I'm fine, thanks. When did you come back?"

"A few years ago. When I was pregnant with Jamie. We wanted our children to have this rural childhood but I suppose we'll have to rethink when they get to high school age."

"It looks like an idyllic life for children. Besides for snakes, of course," Rose smiled. "Idyllic for adults too."

"Oh, it's not so easy financially. We all have to do a variety of jobs to survive. Hank hires out his services as a pilot. He has a small plane. He takes tourists for flips in the Berg or sometimes he's hired by farmers looking for stock thieves. And we have an interest in a dairy farm. It's the same for everyone. Friends of ours: the husband fixes tractors during the week and is a mountain guide over weekends and the wife is an illustrator who runs a small nursery breeding irises. I also run an NGO that provides education and ..er… policing for the correct rearing and care of animals - in the black areas. It brings in a little." She paused and then asked: "What do you do, Rose? You said something about research."

"I write educational scripts for TV but my research is…er…personal. I need to…can I start with you?"

"I've got a few minutes before I need to get going," Brigit replied.

"Um…then I'll just ask you…" Rose reached in her handbag for the photos. "I want to try identify these people."

Brigit gave a cursory glance, then turned over what were copies of the photos to read the place and year that Rose had written on the backs. The originals she'd left at home.

"Oberon. September 1977. That's over thirty years ago. How old would these people today?"

" If they were in their, say, twenties, early thirties, then, they'd be in their fifties, sixties today," Rose told her.

Brigit shook her head, and looked doubtful. "I don't know who they are. You can hardly see the man's face –."

Rose nodded glumly. "Who would be the best people to ask? Like locals or old timers who've lived here forever."

"You could start with Roland Bergmeier at Oberon Cheeses, although he's so miserable. You'll find him on the road to Heimat. Or his neighbour, old Thomas Bretton."

"Hold on," Rose scrabbled for her handbag under her chair. "Let me get my notebook. I'll never remember."

Brigit continued: "Thomas Bretton owns the huge cattle farm on the neighbouring property. Oh…there's also Denton Dalbert on Lakeside farm. It's about ten, fifteen kilometres along on the Valley road. They have roots that go back to the original settlers. And ask Hank. His family also goes back to the year dot. He's just gone to the farm. I don't think he'll be long."

"Thanks a lot. And besides the snakes, is it safe here? Can I walk alone?"

"Yes. The locals are very friendly. You can greet them with a s*awubona* and they'll greet you back."

"I saw many…er…locals in the village when I arrived. Where do they all live? Is there a township in the area?"

"No. There's no traditional black township or black location close to any of the historically white villages in the area, but there are lots of black villages and informal settlements scattered around. But it's very rural here. Most of the workers live on the farms. Well." Brigit walked towards the door. "Good luck. Let me know how you go. See you at breakfast tomorrow morning."

Through her windscreen, in the sunlight, it was a bright new world. On her left, the mountain rose in smooth verdant planes and on her right, the terrain fell away to the river through a curtain of pine trees. There were smallholdings dotted with houses and assorted farm buildings. And a Chamco farm school. The big dairy cooperative was obviously sponsoring schools in the area. Big business doing its corporate social

responsibility thing, educating rural kids. She'd love to become involved somehow, to fund a project but what? It required an energy she felt she didn't possess.

The school was silent now on this Saturday morning, and as lifeless as a tomb. A man was walking his Alsatians on the road; their low-slung bodies sashayed obediently on their leashes. He waved at Rose as she passed. In a pasture, a shepherd whistled a mournful refrain and flicked his switch amongst his heaving mass of cattle. Now, nearing the village, she could see the bare rock formation of Dragon's Tooth erupting from the mountain top, like a canine in profile, glistening dirty pink in the sun's early rays.

The mountain overlooked the village, which nestled in the valley and crept a little way up its slopes. It bustled with Saturday morning shoppers but there were also the ever-present loiterers sitting on the edges of the pavement, their feet resting on the national road or standing about aimlessly.

Rose slowed to allow a bakkie pulling out of an entrance to enter the flow of traffic. It had the words 'Oberon Security' written on its body. So, Oberon was not as crime-free as Brigit had made out.

Brigit. She would love to be friends with her. She was down-to-earth and sensible, although a real plain Jane with her clumpy build and pale features. She and Hank made such an incongruous couple. Did she know what a flirt he was? Rose felt a little guilty that she had let him unsettle her mettle.

She now travelled towards Heimat, along an oak-lined avenue that roved through a broad valley theatrically encircled by mountains. She followed Brigit's advice and started with Roland Bergmeier at Oberon Dairy Farm and Cheese Factory. When she arrived, she entered a bright white salesroom lined with refrigerated shelves displaying an array of cheeses, tables stacked with bottles of preserves and packets of biltong and a sign on the wall that read:

"Wine and cheese are like friends, best enjoyed when they are old."

Old wine, old cheese, old friends. Shouldn't it have said "friendship" instead of "friends"? Whatever - Rose had neither. Neither old friends nor old friendships.

"Be with you now," the saleswoman called out, following a customer around the shelves as she made her selection. The customer was saying: "We're at our wits end. It feels we're - like being targeted. Ja, well. What can you do?"

"What do the police say? Are they on top of it?"

"Never. They're absolutely useless. We've reported it but I bet you they don't even come take a statement or…or fingerprints. Been here, done this – you know what I mean. They just never pitch." The woman continued to rattle off her frustrations: "I tell you, I don't think I can take another one of these incidents."

"Shame. It's terrible. Didn't the alarm go off? "

"I'm not sure. But, you know, we'll have to upgrade the system. Listen, I must get going…see what's going on at the shop." They walked to the counter where the saleswoman started tallying up the purchases. The transaction complete, the customer said goodbye and took her leave.

The cheese lady smiled genially at Rose, then her expression changed as she continued: "They have a restaurant in town, and they've just had their umpteenth break-in in the…oh… about eight, ten months since they opened. This time, they broke the glass of the counter and threw the food around. What for is anybody's guess. She came here to replace her stock. Who knows what makes these criminal minds tick."

"That's awful! The place looks so peaceful. It's hard to believe that things like this happen here."

"Especially since they moved down from Joburg to get away from the crime. At least no one's ever been hurt in any of these incidents." And both she and Rose sighed, shaking their heads. "So," she said, adopting a lighter tone. "How can I help you?"

"Um…" Rose floundered. She didn't know how to begin. Her mission suddenly seemed utterly useless; an exercise in futility. What did the past matter when the present carried so much more weight?

The woman smiled: "Would you like to see how our cheeses are made. I can take you through the factory."

"Well, actually, I would but…" Rose pressed on: "…can I just ask you - I'm trying to identify the people in these photos," Rose had taken out the photos and proceeded to show them to the woman. "They were taken in Oberon – in 1977."

The woman took the photos: "1977. No. I didn't live here then. I'm from Maritzberg originally. A lot of us living here moved up from other places."

"Someone suggested I ask Roland Meierberg."

"Bergmeier. He's in the factory. Come. I'll take you to him."

The woman led Rose though a doorway into a maze of huge stainless steel vats. The room that housed them was dark and chilly. Maybe her mother had stood in this very spot. Could the memory of a person linger in the air, in the spaces of the room?

Could she smell her presence if she breathed in deeply enough? The room was odourless.

"Mr Bergmeier," the woman called out. The cheese maker, a man in his sixties, looked up from studying a temperature gauge on one of the vats.

"This lady wants to identify the people in these pictures. She thought you might be able to help."

"Hello, I'm Rose Clemens." Rose was about to extend her hand and explain her mission but he made no eye contact. He stood with a scowl on his face, holding some instrument poised for insertion into a vat so Rose merely held the photo of the man for him to see, trying to read his features for a reaction, hoping that he wouldn't linger over it in self-recognition. She didn't want this surly man to be her father. But he only glanced at it, then grunted with a barely discernable shake of his head.

"Well, thanks anyway," Rose said. The woman, leading Rose back to the salesroom, shrugged her shoulders.

"So much for that," the cheese lady noted. "Maybe you should ask his sons. No. On second thoughts - they're probably too young. I would think you need to ask people around his age."

"Does he have a wife? Maybe I could ask her."

"It's his second wife. She's not from here. His first wife died a couple of years ago," The woman paused, then said: "Can I ask why you're trying to identify these people?" She laughed: "There goes my curiosity getting the better of me. My husband always warns me that curiosity killed the cat."

Rose hesitated for a moment, then decided it might not be a bad idea to divulge her purpose. Why shouldn't people know she was trying to trace her biological parents? It sounded like news spread quickly here. Her quest would precede her arrival and ease her way. She wouldn't have to explain herself each time she interviewed someone.

"No…it's fine," she reassured her, then recounted: "I was…um… adopted. I recently found these photos in my adopted mother's home. They might be my parents." She was aware that she was not telling the strict truth; that the woman had undeniably been identified as her mother but details were irrelevant. "The date – it's the month of my conception. That's what made me make the link. I may be completely wrong but this seems like a good place to start."

"My goodness! Let's think… I don't really know who else there is. Go to Thomas Bretton next door. Um… That's all I can think of. " She was very earnest. "I'm Cathy, by the way. If I think of anyone else, I'll let you know. Where're you staying?"

As Rose drove out, she suspected that most people, like the very helpful Cathy, would be sympathetic to her cause. When people were reunited with long lost relatives, it made for a good news story. Unless they were Roland Bergmeier of course. What was his story? He obviously preferred the company of cheese.

She continued along the road, following the wire fencing she assumed bounded Thomas Bretton's farm. Pine trees grew thick and black within the fencing and screened the property from the passing traffic. Before very long, she came to an open gate that led onto a dirt road. Rose followed the road, which curved and then stopped abruptly at the edge of the clump of trees.

She emerged from her car to gaze upon a large field where dozens of ochre-coloured cattle grazed, their bodies steaming in the midmorning sun. Across the field and in the distance she spied a farmhouse. Apparently, the only way to reach the farmhouse was through the field. There were calves as well as cows, and larger specimens. Adolescents. She knew nothing about these beasts. Were they dangerous? Some had the beginnings of horns. Bulls then amongst this lot but they seemed placid enough.

Rose ploughed into the field of brilliant green. At first she stuck to the path in amongst the tall grass and reeds but quickly the path petered out giving way to muddy marshland. She was forced to veer off the straight line that would have led her directly to the farmhouse as the going grew muddier, zigzagging to avoid black puddles seeping up from an apparently abundant water-table. At every turn, her way was hampered either by the puddles or by the beasts, all twitching tails and shuddering flanks, looking at this interloper from under their bovine lids with surly expressions on their faces. The sun beat down on the top of her head and the humidity assailed her breath. Flies buzzed frantically about her ears fresh from their forays into piles of steaming dung. Wading through the wetland. Fun in the fen. She looked up and saw a man on the other side of the field. He was leaning on a walking stick and waving his hat at her.

"Hi" he shouted. "Come this way." Rose followed his direction to find firmer ground, the marsh giving way to kikuyu grass and then a slastoed path.

"Were you looking for me?"

"Phew," Rose breathed, melodramatically fanning her face with her hands. "Thanks. Are you Mr Bretton?"

"Yep. That's me," he chuckled. His dog, a large Boerbul, sniffed around Rose's muddied feet. Let this dog not sniff my crotch, she thought.

"It's my lucky day when such a pretty young lady comes looking for me!" He started walking, ushering her towards the veranda. He was old but spry and very dapper in his cream-coloured khakis, white shirt and Panama hat. "The gate you took – it should have been closed. My worker in his brilliance left it open for my cattle to wander into the road. You should have taken the second entrance. It would have led you straight here."

They reached the veranda. "Come and have a seat," he gestured, then: "Dora!" he shouted. He threw his hat on an old wicker chair and indicated that Rose take one of the two other shabby wickers that were angled for easy conversation. He sat down, the dog flopping at his feet.

"I'm Rose Clemens." She leaned forward to shake his hand as she sat down.

"What can I offer you to drink, Rose? Something cold? How about some home-made lemon juice?" Dora, the maid, appeared at the door.

Rose was sweating and her face burning from her trudge through the field. She needed to remember also to wear a hat next time she went out in the heat of the day. She'd have to buy one. "Something cold would be excellent."

The farmer asked what he could do for her and Rose showed him the photos and briefly told her story.

"Well, it's neither of my sons, that much I can see even with my bad eyes. But he has the Oberon look."

"What's that?"

"It's the look of the forefathers of this town. I think they were all related somewhere down the line. I suppose you'd call it an Aryan look, although that description has fallen foul of modern-day sensibilities. You know – fair, tall, lean, square jawed. But it could be Scandinavian …Dutch…English, come to think of it. I think I've become too fanciful in my dotage." He wheezed out a chuckle.

How was he being fanciful - that the person in the photo had the Oberon look or that the Oberon look was a construction of his imagination, that its traits were associated with all northern European nations, that it was too ubiquitous to be

associated exclusively with Oberon's first settlers? Bretton's cheese making neighbour certainly didn't conform to these standards whether perceived or real.

"Roland Bergmeier. He's quite stocky and swarthy," she noted.

"His mother was an import. Greek, I think. She was murdered a few years ago. In the retirement village where she was staying. In the Midlands. By young thugs. Bloody animals."

"That's awful! I noticed your security wasn't very tight. Are you not worried about crime?"

"We've formed a community watch to prevent farm attacks. We haven't had any. Yet. But I'm philosophical. Let them come, I say. They can have what they want." He leaned forward, his hands resting on his thighs. "You know I read in the newspaper about farm attacks. It seems like there's a whole organised crime system to force farmers - white farmers - off their land. The foot soldiers do the dirty work – they commit murder and mayhem on the farms for the leaders, the generals. Then these kingpins move in and take over the farms. And the government does nothing. These politicians. It suits them. Less land to redistribute. They think they're gods meting out farms that have been in families for generations. So here we are, the white farmers, between the devil and the deep blue sea."

"Have there been land claims here?"

"Yes – there have been a few successful ones by black farmers. They have no knowledge of commercial farming. They let the land go to rack and ruin, or if they bother to farm it at all they revert to subsistence farming. It's going to ruin the country. We'll go the way of Zimbabwe. But I can't worry. I'll be dead by then. My chest." He patted his chest and coughed a few times as if to confirm this.

They sat in silence for a few moments. This generation was so unable to adjust to this new dispensation. His profound pessimism, too, was typical. Or perhaps his views born of long experience were realistic. Was Rose optimistic about the country's future? She didn't want to think about it.

Bretton asked: "How's the lemon juice?"

"Delicious. Life gives you lemons and you make lemon juice."

He chuckled again. "So back to your business. I don't recognise the woman in the photo at all. My children would be the people to ask but they all live overseas. None of them wanted to farm this land. They left the country years ago. Let me think. Who were their contemporaries?" He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair: "You've

obviously met my neighbour, Roland Bergmeier. I'm sure he wasn't much help," he grunted. "Then, there're the Dalbert twins. Denton's still here but Dariel's gone. Robert Liber…"

"Liber? I'm staying at the Liber's place – Hank and Brigit."

"Oh no, Heinryk…Hank's much younger. He was a real *laat lammetjie*. I think Robert's in Durban." He reeled off a few more names.

Rose thanked the farmer standing up to leave. The dog also stood up.

"I'll drive you to your car. You don't need to go the way you came. It's been a pleasure," he laughed. "You must come visit me again, Rose."

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I awoke this morning to the strains of women's voices chattering outside my tent. Peeping through the opening, I saw three young women sitting on the ground apparently waiting for me to appear. When they espied me, they became bashful, giggling into their arms. I introduced myself, pointing to myself and saying slowly, Ros-a-mund. Then I pointed at each of them in turn, saying: "What – is – your - name?" I had to repeat this exercise a few times in a loud clear voice before they laughed and pointed to themselves, sounding their names. I think I heard the first two as follows: Kantla and Bey. I will call them Katy and Beth. The last name proffered was very long and I only managed to catch the first two or three syllables - Conquo – Conquolo… so I have named her Connie.

I invited them into my tent where they were completely fascinated with all my possessions, from my rosewood teabox to the china cup and saucer, the tea strainer, my writing equipment but especially by my mirror. When they first caught sight of their reflections, there was much consternation – the one I have called Beth even screaming in fright, but after a while, they became a little too self-assured, pushing and shoving each other to try to see their reflections. Most unladylike! I scolded them and ordered them into a queue, allotting each a few moments to gaze upon themselves.

All through the day, the girls and women, (and sometimes the men and boys too) furtively crept inside my tent to look at themselves in my mirror until I commanded that they refrain, although I allow my three young friends to visit me now and again.

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Chapter 12

Driving back to Oberon, Rose thought again about the farmer's reference to the Oberon look. Did it exist? Was it only men who displayed its traits or could she boast of them as well? She wasn't very tall but she was fair…ish, grey eyed, or was she too being fanciful in her desperation to find her roots? Passing a shop-lined square, she saw the Olive Branch, Brigit's other recommendation. It was nearly lunchtime so she pulled into the parking lot.

The restaurant's hand-painted sign dangled from the ceiling of the passage outside the shop. One of the hooks that had suspended it had been yanked out. There was a glazier replacing a panel of glass in the door and the counter had been taped up with brown paper. The owner was the customer in the cheese shop although she didn't seem to recognise Rose. So, it was business as usual despite the break in.

"Where would you like to sit?" the woman asked. Rose looked around. The restaurant was relatively small but extended into another section beyond a glass divider and then into another section beyond yet another glass divider, like a nest of rooms.

It was hot inside. Ceiling fans turned lazily, barely stirring the turgid air. Rose chose to sit near the front door to try catch any breeze that entered. While she waited for service, she looked at the photos on the walls, both large and small, of black and white landscapes for sale as evidenced by the price tags that had been stuck in their corners. Who was the photographer? She liked the work. Maybe she would buy one or two to start replacing some of Livvie's pictures - although not the *Drakensberg Lady*, of course - , and so would begin her real ownership of the flat.

She looked around and was surprised to see the variety of goods on offer on the shelves, which were laden with tins of Spanish olives, Italian tomatoes, German sauerkraut, Dutch wafer biscuits, Italian pasta, Greek olive oils, and Australian liquorice, both red and black. In the further reaches of the restaurant, books replaced the comestibles. Food for the mind. Restaurant, photo gallery, purveyor of fancy foods and bookshop – another example of financial need fostering enterprise. She couldn't wait to inspect the titles but after the toasted cheese. She was famished.

Within arms reach, lay a pile of tabloid-sized newspapers on a low cane table. *The Mountain Mouthpiece*. Rose picked up a copy and paged through. Adverts and religious notices, the opening of the refurbished Spar, a letter bemoaning the rampant

local development, an article on wildlife in the Berg, entertainment for the upcoming Christmas season, photos of the recent mountain running marathon.

She became aware of the only other occupied table. They were young and chattering excitedly to the owner in Afrikaans. Rose was interested to hear what they were saying but their words emerged like salvos of machine-gun fire - their language was too idiomatic for her to follow with ease. One of the group was telling a hiking horror story:

"We started walking round in circles and found ourselves back at the place we'd started from! Ja. It was really scary. We were that lost. And there was lightning."

"Ja nee," said the owner. "You need to be careful of getting lost. And to watch out for lightning. People think that the Highveld is dangerous but more people die in these mountains from lightning than on the Highveld. People should know not to hike when it's lightning. Ja. That's the way it goes." She began another hiking anecdote but it was so long and complicated that Rose lost the plot, and resumed her perusal of the *Mountain Mouthpiece*.

A young waitress deposited a toasted cheese on the table. Then the owner came around and asked Rose how she was doing. In English. She was completely bilingual and was as keen to engage with her as with the hikers, asking Rose if she had done any hiking and where she was staying.

"At the Chameleon," Rose replied.

"Oh – Brigit and Hank Liber."

"Do you know them?"

"Everybody knows everybody here. And their business. Even though we're quite new here. We moved from Joburg about a year ago. We had an HR placements business. Ag, you know what, I said life's too short, so we moved here – to live out our dream in the mountains. We love it, I tell you. My husband does the cooking. He learnt how to cook when he lived in Spain for a few years." So that explained the sobbing flamenco seeping out from the speakers.

"Is he the photographer?" Rose asked.

"Ja – he is." She glowed with pride.

"They're great." Rose gestured in their general direction. "I was in the cheese shop this morning and I couldn't help overhearing your… about the break-in."

"We've been having some trouble lately." Her expression turned downcast but she was more than willing to talk. "You know," she informed her, "since we opened ten

months ago, we've been burgled, broken into at least six times. They've buggered up the counter, damaged the outside signage, broken windows. Some of the furniture destroyed." She sighed.

"That's awful. What do the police say?" Rose asked.

The woman expelled air from her lips, making a pah sound: 'So no. They are complete idiots. They don't know what they're doing. We don't even wait for them to come and take fingerprints anymore. Every time we've done that, we've lost out on so much business. You know, we close the shop and wait and wait but they just don't pitch. But anyway, they're useless. And they're white. You know, they're not some uneducated bunch of black cops."

Rose chewed her toasted cheese and shook her head. She was looking up at the owner, her neck muscles straining to maintain the odd angle but the woman continued unabated: "They say it could be young blacks coming over the border but I can't understand it. They hardly steal anything. The reality is just too much. It's more about damaging things, causing trouble. Ja no. Why do they do it? The police say they can't do anything because they can't track them. It's out of their jurisdiction or some rubbish. But we're not going to be scared off; we're not giving up."

"Shame. I hope you get to the bottom of it," Rose commiserated. She wondered if other businesses were experiencing similar incidents but she wasn't going to ask. This woman needed no encouragement to talk. She asked for the bill.

"Pop in around at lunch-time tomorrow. Ja. There's a crowd that always comes on Sundays. They're great fun."

At about five, she received a call from Megan to say that they had changed their booking to include her and she should meet them at the Oberon hotel in about an hour. No later if they were to catch the sunset. These were spectacular and she should bring a camera if she had one.

Rose arrived with ten minutes to spare but the five were already waiting, Steve, Megan and Max, the English tourist, in the one car, Ronald and Petra in the other. They all greeted her warmly.

"Cool car!" Ronald whistled when she arrived. Steve told her to hop in the back of his - a white something.

"Look how amazing the Tooth looks in this light," Max said. Rose looked out of the window. The peak glowed a pearly grey in the diminishing sunlight. "It's magical how it changes in the light," he continued.

"When you live here, you don't even notice the scenery anymore. You forget just how magical it is. Unless there's a tourist with you and then you start seeing it through their eyes." Steve added.

"Like the mountains – I take them for granted but when I think about them - they're magical, so ancient and so huge you feel like an ant next to them," Megan waxed poetic.

"Are you all from here – born and bred?" Rose asked. They were driving along another tree lined avenue, the sun dropping behind the mountains to their left.

"Not at all." Megan answered. "I've lived here for two years. I moved here when we got married. Steve's been here the longest. Is that right, Steve?" She deferred to her husband.

"I've lived here for about seven years. Ronald and Petra – I don't know about them but they certainly aren't from here."

"Me neither," added Max.

The restaurant was situated about ten kilometres from the village in the opposite direction to Heimat along the Valley Road. It was part of a luxury lodge started by another *arriveste* from Johannesburg, so Rose had read in the *Mountain Echo*. A short brick of a woman dressed all in black - black shirt, black pants - ushered them into the lodge through a luxuriously furnished lounge and onto the patio.

"This is so larney," Ronald noticed.

"Quick, before the sun goes down," Megan said.

"Where's the waiter?" This was Steve.

Max added: "Spectacular view!"

They'd all dressed for the occasion. The khaki had been replaced with chinos and golf shirts in the case of the men and black trousers and silky blouses for the women. The men had plastered down their hair with wet combs and the women had teased theirs up a little. They smiled and waited while a waiter dragged cast-iron chairs about on the patio. Primed of the guests' viewing requirements, he positioned them carefully in a row like they were about to watch a movie. Even now, the air felt very warm as they settled down to soak in the view, making desultory conversation and sipping lazily on long drinks. Then the sun sank slowly behind the slopes and the lake

on their left echoed the colours of the sky and Megan, Max and Ronald whipped out cameras and clicked unrestrainedly. Rose had never been interested in taking photos.

The rooms of the lodge were situated beyond the patio, on the right separated by a grassed area. A young couple emerged from one of the rooms and made their way to the patio. They were holding hands and the woman was pregnant. She was wearing jeans and a tight T-shirt. When did pregnant woman start flaunting their bumps? In their mothers' time, expectant women walked around in tents to hide their pregnancies. She wondered what she would do if she ever found herself in this condition. Did Megan have children? Rose wanted to ask but her diffidence prevented her. She also wanted to ask whether Ronald and Petra were an item.

Clouds changed from grey to mauve and the mountains from mint to deep purple. Another group of guests arrived but they sat at a table placed behind the group, in a narrow section of patio alongside the reception buildings. Who could be so blasé about the view that they spurned front row seats?

The woman in black emerged from the door and hovered about the new arrivals. "Is this a view or what!" Then: "You said no one interesting was joining you, just the boys. But two okes under thirty-five!"

Rose quickly turned her head, curious. The "two okes" were blonde, broad shouldered, sporty-looking. At a glance, it was mother and father and their two sons sitting at the table. She could tell that they were a family by their easy familiarity with one another.

"I wish I may, I wish I might…there's the first star," Megan remarked.

"Venus. It's not a star. It's a planet," Steve corrected her.

"Yes sir," Megan retorted.

The sky's cobalt dome rolled inexorably around towards the horizon. A flock of geese honked forlornly as they flew home to roost. Frogs croaked by the lake and crickets tap-tapped like an orchestra of Jews' harps .

"So I was going out with a girl…," Rose heard one of the sons say.

"…and she turned into Glenn Close and boiled your bunny." The woman in black interrupted. She could only be the owner of the lodge. No employee would dare fraternise so familiarly with guests. And they must be locals and regular patrons - definitely. Silence reigned amongst the front row as they strained to hear the badinage behind their backs but the owner's voice was the only one now audible above the sounds of the night.

"Do you know these people?" Rose quietly asked Megan who shook her head.

"I met my husband on Internet dating," the woman told her audience. "Ag shame. That's sweet of you Jabulani. Jabula. Ja. My staff all have personalities. I wouldn't want *droog* staff walking around. I'd end up murdering them."

Jabulani now walked over to them and asked if he could give them refills. There was some debate: Who's for round two? Should we have now? Should we go in? Who's hungry?

"My astrologer said I needed an outlet for my creative talents so my husband bought me a camera – a Canon SLR…." The owner prattled on.

There was a radiant burst of orange on the horizon then darkness fell and with that came the hungry hordes of mosquitoes. They all slapped madly as the pests burrowed into scalps and down cleavages.

"There're lots of creepies here. I'm being bitten from here to China," the pregnant woman whined. "Let's go inside."

"Maybe we should too," Steve suggested.

"Now, I've taken to wearing these crocodile shoes with little bows…." The owner waddled around the guests distributing cans of Tabbard. Rose recognised her as one of those abrasive bullies she had spent many of her school years trying to avoid. They were always attracted to Rose because they smelt her out as a soft touch.

Guests started drifting towards the dining room. Rose and the teachers were shown to a well- appointed table, all starched white linen, heavy silver and cut crystal. An oil candle in the centre threw pools of light on the men's scrubbed faces and accented the touches of colour on the women's lids and lips.

The family entered the room, the mother elegant, her dark hair coiffured and the father and his two sons, golden-skinned and fair-haired. The Oberon look? The father was spare and spruce, well-preserved. The sons, in their jeans and T shirts, were of heavier builds, broader in the chest. Rose had a great view of their table. One of the sons pulled out the chair for his mother and they all sat with rather straight backs and their elbows off the table.

"Those two are hot!" Petra, who was seated next to Rose, observed. "I'll take the one on the left, you can have the one on the right."

Rose laughed. "So, are you and Ronald not an item?"

"Nah. Just friends. I think he's got his eye on you, Rose."

Rose looked across the table at Ronald who was studying the wine list. He looked nice enough.

"Are we all drinking white? What about this bottle for R60? Here's one – a wooded prize-winning Chardonnay for R240?" Ronald grinned, looking around the table to see their reactions. "Okay – let's settle for this one at R85. Is that okay with everyone?"

Order whatever you want. The most expensive. No problem. I'll pay, she could have said. Would she appear a more attractive proposition if he knew her worth? Teachers' salaries were a joke. It had been such an unmitigated pleasure to spend without mentally tallying up a running balance. But as far as relationships went, her riches were problematic. The inequality of wealth was sure to complicate a relationship. She would never cede control of her finances to a romantic partner but to keep the money a secret? Hmm. Such a lack of trust would imply a very shaky relationship.

"How was the tour today?" Petra asked.

"Great," Max replied. "You should do it, Rose." He continued: "Interesting the lack of trees. I suppose they've all been cut down for fuel…the African mentality - only think about the present and all."

"Not at all. It's the weather. You know - freezing winters, arid summers… high altitude, poor soils... it's been grassland for millennia. Although there is a lack of fuel but that has to do with poverty." Steve told him.

"The poverty is pretty grim there. Those naked kids, crawling around among the goat droppings…and those skinny dogs," Petra shuddered. "It's really survival of the fittest."

"Did you read those population statistics?" Max asked Megan "They hand out a little leaflet on the bus," he explained to the group. "The 20 – 40 age group was very low compared to the others. I suppose it's the effects of Aids." Steve agreed.

"I didn't enjoy the tour so much," Megan said. "I was freezing up there the whole time! And that thing in the hut with the homemade beer. It made me feel uncomfortable sharing with all the other tourists. Drinking out of the same tin mug. And the…the people doing the tour, acting out their lives for us. They looked so sour. Like it wasn't a pleasure."

"Well, it should be. It's the only money they earn," Steve remarked, chewing on a bread stick he'd yanked from the napkin-lined basket.

"It reminds me of when we were in Kenya," Rose began and then she was sorry. When we were in Kenya. It sounded so… crass and brash. She had no choice but to continue: "…there was something similar, like a …er… I'd suppose you'd call it a living museum. It was in some park in Mombasa, and we walked around to- sort of stations, where the different tribesmen and woman actually lived, you know, in their tribal huts, wearing their tribal clothes, doing their tribal thing - and there're about thirty of them – different tribes. There was a young man. Beautiful. He was about the last living member of his tribe, living alone in this weird artificial environment. It was so sad."

Megan lifted the mood: "How was Mombasa? I've heard it's a fantastic holiday destination. I've never travelled anywhere in Africa."

"Oh, I suppose that's because Africa starts on the other side of the Limpopo," her husband noted acerbically. "Anyway, you have. You went to Lesotho today. You even needed a passport."

She giggled, reddening a little. "Oops. You know what I mean."

"Should we order?" Ronald asked.

Rose looked at the family decorously sipping their wine, their backs still ramrod straight.

"You mentioned something about research, Rose. What are you doing?" Petra now asked.

"I'm trying to trace my relatives," she told them.

"Family tree stuff?" Megan asked.

"Not quite. My mother died when I was about eighteen months."

"That's so sad! She must have been young. What did she die of?" Megan clucked sympathetically.

"It must have been from a brain haemorrhage. Something like that, I'm not sure. It was completely sudden and unexpected. She was probably about my age now. No one knew who her family or relations were. And no one knew who my father was. A detective was hired to try find my family - to claim me but he was unsuccessful. Unclaimed baggage. Lucky no one sold me to defray expenses." She laughed wryly but no one joined in. She looked at the expressions on their faces. Shock, horror. Incredulity from Steve.

"God!" Megan exclaimed. "So who brought you up?"

"She was working for someone at the time. A man named John Clemens. He adopted me."

"He and his wife?"

"He wasn't married."

"He was single?" Steve wanted confirmation. Rose nodded.

"Could you do that, as a single man?" Steve asked Max who shook his head vehemently. "Could you?" he asked Ronald who shook his head with even more force.

"He was pretty amazing. He had a really good heart. He was living with a woman - Livvie. They weren't…er….lovers ….or anything. Well, I don't think they were because I lived in the house with them and they lived in separate sections. I do remember this clearly. Anyway, he left for Paris when I was about six or seven and the woman brought me up. She never actually legally adopted me. She died recently. She was like a real mother to me. It's been hard. I miss her." Rose had pushed thoughts of Livvie to the back of her mind in these strange suroundings but now she felt sad.

"What happened to the man - in Paris?" one of the men wanted to know.

"He died about a year after he got there."

"What was his story? What did he die of?"

Rose shrugged. "Cancer, I think."

"Was he from there? Family there?"

"I don't know. We never spoke about him. I think we both held back talking about him – that it would be too upsetting for the other. We had this – this code of silence, it seemed. Funny." Yes – and it was funny how it was sometimes easier talking to complete strangers than to loved ones. Why was she opening up to complete strangers like this?

"Maybe he had a lover there and when he knew he was dying, he wanted to spend what time he had left with her," Steve hypothesized.

"Or him." retorted Max.

"Maybe," Rose agreed. "I've often thought it might have been something like that. Anyway, I found these two photos when I was tidying my foster mother's flat after she died and it's definitely my biological mother. That's been verified by someone who was around at the time." She passed around Ruby's picture.

"She's gorgeous." They all agreed.

"Oberon. September, 1977."

"Yep. I was born nine months later."

"Hmmm. So – that's what brings you here."

"And this might be my father. But his face, his features are impossible to identify." They scrutinized his photo. "Yes. Impossible!" They all agreed.

She told them where her enquiries in Oberon had taken her so far. At some stage, they ordered and later, the food arrived – two seared salmons on a bed of mashed turnips; duck in raspberry jus; ostrich steak with a pepper crust, rare; almond stuffed chicken breast in a citrus reduction. If it was the best cuisine in the Oberon area, they didn't notice.

"Don't you think this looks like Randall?" Megan held the photo towards the candle, trying to catch its light.

"He's the principal of the primary school." Petra explained to Rose.

"Randall with a love child? I think not! The man is gay!"

"The camping gear shop owner? As a hot young stud. I don't think so!"

"He's so henpecked. It would be delicious irony – a little secret he's kept from that overbearing wife of his."

"Except that he's not from here, originally."

The rationalist, Steve, doused their imaginings: "No. I can't believe this story. It's impossible that your mother had no proper ID. It sounds far-fetched to me. Surely this man needed to see her ID when he employed her? And what about her death certificate?" He stabbed a piece of steak and forked it into his mouth.

"Maybe she was employed on a very casual basis. What was she employed as?" asked Max, chewing thoughtfully.

"Maybe she did have ID documents but I've never seen them. Anyway, I'm sure the detective must have exhausted that avenue, to contact Home Affairs for birth certificates and…things." Rose hadn't though of this but it was probably the first thing Hunter did, one hoped, but who knew. She scooped some of the green-tinted mash with her fork: "She was a general run around and dog's body, by the sound of it. But what else there is," she continued, "is this picture." She showed them a copy of the picture. "The name of this painting is "*The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess*. Victorian - by an English artist, Philip Geoffrey. There might be some connection but I can't imagine... And these." She showed them the beaded leather thong on her wrist and a sample of the seeds she kept in a plastic bag in her handbag. "I think there're clues here too. They were all together in a box I found in my foster mother's cupboard. I might be completely off the track."

They pored over the artefacts offering their theories.

"The man was married and had a fling with your mother. Your mother was sentimental and kept the things she found here as mementos."

"That's why he put on the hat. He didn't want anyone to recognise him."

"And when she told him she was pregnant, he denied he had anything to do with it."

"She never told him because she didn't want to ruin his life. She was so self-sacrificing."

"She didn't want a man in her life. She liked her independence. Seventies. She was a feminist. Back then, women needed men like fish needed bicycles."

They laughed. They were so responsive, so engaged with her story.

Ronald stuck his fork in the duck in front of him: "And the painting. Interesting the white woman amidst the Bushmen. Completely intriguing!"

"Bushmen, San. This year the politically correct term is Bushmen. Last year it was San. Next year it will be San again." Steve took a sip of his wine. "White figures do appear in their rock art. They were thought to have been Europeans but other experts have disputed this. You should find out about the White Lady of Brandberg. Have you heard of it? The thong is definitely African. Maybe it's San, but I'm no expert. There's a museum of rock art in the central Berg, part of the Bergsun hotel. I've never been. It's for Japanese, American and German tourists. Sounds completely Disneyesque – they've recreated rock art on artificial rocks. It's a joke. Artificial rocks…ha ha ha…when there're a million tons of natural rocks all around. And they've added water dripping from irrigation pipes to imitate springs and things." He laughed again. "But I wonder if it's not worth visiting while you're in the area."

"What about Wits? When you get home. They must have good research facilities for this kind of thing." Petra suggested.

Rose nodded. She had never had such a captive audience or held court with such clarity and cogency. What had happened to her usual quiet and reserve? She had kept the strange details of her life-story, together with the private, the suppressed, the closely guarded, contained behind the dyke walls, but whether it was the alcohol, the ease of the company or the fact that they were strangers, the dyke had sprung a leak and there was no little Hans Brinker to staunch the flow.

They wanted coffee. Their waiter was standing up against the wall between two life-size carvings of colonial-style black serving men. His arms hung straight down by

his sides and he wore a solemn expression. Hand-picked for his personality after all, he was obviously aware of the response his pose elicited. The group didn't disappoint. They laughed and Megan, Max and Ronald whipped out their cameras, moving backwards to fit the subject matter into their frames until they were almost on top of the family's table.

"Sorry," they apologised. There was some shared laughter and a conversation was struck up. Before long, the father accompanied the three back to their table. People were really friendly in these small places, because they were probably so hungry for new faces and new stories, so bored by the old and tired ones.

The mother smiled vaguely at them from her seat. With the passing of the evening, she had lost her poise and now slouched over a glass of wine, elbows on the table. Her sons continued to sit with backs as straight as ever but they looked pleasant enough as they chatted to each other and their mother.

Introductions were made. No wonder they all knew each other. Sooner or later, one was bound to bump into the whole community from whatever circle one moved.

"Denton Dalbert," he said genially, "I have Lakeside farm a few kilometres down this road. You'll see the sign." His voice resonated with charm and his elite Midlands education. "You must come spend some time there. There's a lake and garden that's open to the public. It's beautiful. Worth a visit."

"Oh, we've been," replied Megan. "We had a picnic there last year. It is a beautiful spot. Maybe we should take Max and Rose." From her vantage point across the table, Rose scrutinised him, gazing intently at the shape of his jaw, the slope of his shoulders. He was the right age; he had the right look. Wasn't he the one with the twin?

Their eyes met – green on grey - and Rose looked away. And suddenly, her mood faded, the bubble burst, and she couldn't believe her naiveté. She tasted metal and a heaviness hit her like someone had thrown a lead apron over her. Exposed. How could she have divulged her story? Word would get around. If he lingered long enough at their table, it was only a matter of time before someone asked him for his help in identifying the photos. And if it was him? He was obviously well off. He would think she wanted a stake in his life. She did! She wanted to claim her share. But only of his heart and his family tree, not of his wealth. What if the man in the photo was a crony of his? The same thing. He would think it was for financial reasons, that she was a little gold digger. They would close ranks. Now what would she do? Drop hints that she was quite the heiress and didn't need anyone's money? She didn't think so.

Denton Dalbert went back to his family. The waiter asked if they could email the photos to him.

They said their goodbyes.

"How long are you here for?" Megan asked Rose.

"I'm not sure. Probably at least another week or so." She felt she'd become subdued. She hoped they wouldn't read it as a cooling off.

"That was a lovely evening. Let's do something next week or maybe even this weekend, then. A hike or something." Petra smiled.

Ronald offered to take her back to the Oberon hotel where her car was parked, the other four left in Steve's car.

Ronald got out his car and walked Rose to her car.

"How about a drink?"

"I'm exhausted. I got up with the birds this morning. Literally! There's a skylight in the ceiling and it lets in the light. It's going to wake me up every morning at dawn."

"There's lots of accommodation in Oberon. You should move. You could move in to my place, in fact. I have a spare room." Yeah right, she thought.

"I'll try one more night. I could always get those eyeshade thingies they give you on planes. Well, thanks." Should she kiss him goodnight? A peck on the cheek? She decided not.

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Let me tell you about the foods the villagers eat: basically anything. These people cannot afford to shun any potential nourishment and utilise anything and everything that grows, crawls, hops or slithers their way. The stomach positively turns at the thought of consuming some of the more unusual items appearing on their menu. In addition to the small antelope that still roam these parts, one thinks here of the tiny duiker or the steenbok, the plat du jour can include porcupine, mongoose, insect, tortoise, snake – both venomous and non-venomous and monkey. The meat is boiled or roasted on a fire. Nothing is wasted and every part of the animal is used, including the marrow, bones, hide and hooves. The game is caught using bow and arrow. Primitive

stone implements are used to carve and shape the bones into spear tips or beads and other adornments.

The men are responsible for hunting and the women for child care, cultivating crops, gathering wood, carrying water and cooking. In addition, the women gather plant material about two to three times a week as well as collect eggs and wild honey. The cultivation of maize has ensured that a source of food is available all year round. The women grind the maize into flour using round pebbles and cook it into a type of porridge, which they eat by scooping it up with their fingers. The maize is also used to brew beer. It is wetted and allowed to sprout and then ground into a course meal, mixed with yeast and water and fermented. Suspect it is not strongly alcoholic as I've never witnessed anyone falling about in a drunken stupor. However, I would not recommend it as it is the most insipid and poor-tasting beverage I have ever swallowed. Then there is also the preparation of tobacco and snuff. Tobacco can be mixed with honey, made into a paste and dried.

All in all, this sounds as if the Bushmen are a very industrious and active people, but in actual fact, they are a gloriously indolent race, spending much of their time sitting around telling stories, the men smoking and the women sitting passively as they listen.

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Chapter 13

Rose lay in bed watching the moonlit clouds scud across the skylight. The night held a magnifying glass to her emotions so that she felt more hopeless, more helpless, more regretful. Her story had monopolised the conversation the entire evening and it made her really uncomfortable. She'd found her voice and the words just tumbled uncontrollably out her mouth. She'd got drunk on the sound of her words. And just what she was doing here? There were no real leads, nothing concrete, no plan. She was just floundering around like a landed trout.

And she had been such an idiot telling her story to that Cathy at the cheese factory and then again tonight. Why was she so sure that the Polaroid man was her father or even that her father came from Oberon? Maybe Ruby was holidaying here, the man in the photo was some arbitrary person, his meeting with Ruby a random encounter between two strangers. If she showed the photo to, say, Denton Dalbert or any other man fitting the bill and he said: "Hey! Yes! That's me! Where did you get this from?" Then what? What if he was her father? Then so what. What if, one day, she did find him, destitute, forgotten in an old age home somewhere? Would she feel responsible for him? Yes – she probably would because that was how Livvie had raised her. She shared fifty percent of his genes but DNA molecules were not the building blocks of father-daughter relationships; they did not code for instant love and affection. The truth was that she might dislike him, scorn what he stood for, eschew his values. When this was the case with natural parents, filial duty and shared history forged bonds of care and commitment in most cases. In her case, there were none. No bonds. Ruby had broken them all.

In the morning, despite her nocturnal qualms, she thought to take a drive out to Lakeview farm. Happiness waited on Rose while she ate breakfast. Neither Brigit nor Hank was around. It was already 10.30. Sunday. Were they the churchgoing sort? Happiness hovered against the wall.

"I've got everything I need." Rose told her. "You don't have to wait here. You can go if you've got things to do."

"Miss Brigit told me to wait," she said. "I'm going home. I've got off."

"I'm nearly finished." Rose gulped down her tea. "Do you live nearby?"

"No, madam. I live far away. In the mountains."

"How long does it take you to get home?"

"Three hours with the taxi. There is a quicker way but then I must cross the river and walk a long way to my home. Sometimes, when the river is very full, the boys stand in the river with the truck tyre and then you must sit in the tyre and they pull you across the river. But it is bad. Everything gets wet. You have to put your handbag and your shoes in the plastic. And you must pay money to the boys. I got the call that my child is sick." Rose regretted engaging with this woman. Now, not only did she feel guilty that Happiness had to wait for her but she felt inexplicably guilty about her sick child as well.

"Who's looking after the child? Did they tell you what's wrong? Is there a doctor you can take the child to?"

"The clinic costs money and I can't afford until the end of the month."

"Let me give you something. How much is it? Is a hundred enough? " Rose whipped a note out her purse.

Happiness nodded. "Yes, madam. Thank you. You help me a lot. I pay you back."

"No, no!" She gestured as if to sweep away the debt. "And please phone me and let me know how the child is. Do you have a phone?" Happiness nodded again. "Here's my number. Put it in your phone. Do a 'Please call me', okay?" Rose told her.

"Yes, madam. Thank you."

Rose drove through the gates of Lakeview farm and parked in a glade of eucalyptus trees next to a sign that read "Visitors Parking". Opening up before her was a vista of lawn pierced by shrubberies. They brimmed with well-tended perennials. Benches had been positioned under the huge pin-oaks and dense chestnut trees, and someone had carefully spaced new hydrangea bushes along the perimeter fence so this time next year would bring a showy display of pink and blue blooms. The owners had true generosity of spirit sharing their wonderful piece of land with the public in this way.

She wished she would see Denton strolling around but there was not a soul to be seen. She was alone, wandering lonely as a cloud under grey skies. It had the feel of the Lake District of England that she had visited as a child. This place would make the perfect setting for one of those English period films and she had a vision of a bride

gliding up the hill, holding the hem of her white gown off the ground, laughing as her satin-clad retinue skipped behind, harassed photographer in pursuit.

She walked down to the edge of the lake and watched ducks drift between trailing willow branches and dragonflies dart above the water's surface. Extending far into the greeny-grey water was a log bird hide. Up the hill, on the other side of the lake, stood a square white-plastered building with a large patio under rustic beams. She supposed the hostess entertained here - the Lady of Lakeview, who looked like she bore the demands of her position heavily on her shoulders. The building was locked, the shutters closed, the kitchen hatches down.

She walked back down to the lake on a wooden path that meandered through towering pines. Where the path met the lake, there was a white metal box on a stand. Rose opened its hinged door. Inside, someone had placed a visitors' book with a pencil attached by a piece of string. She took the book out and flipped through, her eye alighting on the last entry dated a few days earlier. It read:

> I've brought my American children to see where I spent my childhood years. This lovely place brings back many happy memories. It's as well tended and as beautiful as I remember. Thank you.

If the man's children were old enough to appreciate their father's childhood stomping ground, then this park had been created and opened to the public for at least twenty, thirty years. Did this setting provide the backdrop for the Polaroids? She raced to the other side of the lake and up the hill, taking the photos from her handbag and holding them up against the landscape. They could have been taken here - or not. The photos lacked any definite reference points as only willow trees and lake were visible. She now longed to show them to Denton but the road leading up to the private regions of the farm was unwelcoming. Giant oaks loomed inimical on either side. No visitors beyond this point. When had the visitors books started? Would they be available for her scrutiny?

Then do it. Brave the oaks and ask at the farmhouse. But she didn't have the nerve. Her timidity was generating nothing but dead ends and frustration. So then maybe she mustn't actively try to find answers. Just imbibe the atmosphere. Live the life, she told herself. Don't lose hope. There's nothing urgent waiting for you in Johannesburg. Just enjoy the setting and village life.

She returned to her car and drove past Bergmeier Cheeses and the Bretton place, towards the village of Heimat on roads she felt certain had been traversed by Ruby, past trees and hedges that Ruby had also seen. She saw a National Heritage sign to a Lutheran Church. Perhaps her mother had even visited the church and she made a mental note to visit it at a later time.

Maybe in sunshine and with weekday bustle, Heimat exuded charm and quaintness but on this dreary Sunday, it was just miserable and depressing. The village centre consisted of a two-story brick building tenanted mostly by a legal aid office. Everywhere was deserted. Opposite was a derelict cottage that had been converted into a coffee shop or pub. Whimsically named Swallows in the Field, it perched on a rise at the edge of a field, its door shut, its windows barred. There was no sign of any swallows. Rose passed a few ramshackle houses set back from the road then pulled into a filling station. A taxi discharged its passengers in the forecourt.

"*Sanibonani mkulu*," the woman attendant filling Rose's car greeted a grey-haired man who had emerged from the taxi. "*Ninjani*." The greeting of respect. The woman was still mindful of the old ways.

"*Sawubona*," he replied, not slowing his resolute plodding that would carry him to his home far and away. His poverty was palpable. It added to the general dreariness of the place and just intensified Rose's melancholic mood.

A fine rain speckled her windscreen and she decided to return to Oberon. This afternoon would be a good time to start the new episode for Charmaine.

Driving through Oberon she remembered the owner of The Olive Branch telling her about the "fun" crowd that came on a Sunday and the thought of their light banter lifted her spirit. When she arrived, she made straight for the bookshelves in the back section of the restaurant.

It was an oddly eclectic selection. Self help, child care, cookery, star gazing, children's picture books, South Africa in photographs, Buddhism, astrology, Tarot and I Ching. Then, to her excitement, on one of the shelves she found a treasure trove of books on rock art: *Discovering Southern African Rock Art*; *Bushman Art and the Drakensberg*; *Capturing the Spoor*; *Images of Mystery*; *Unconquerable Spirit*. Fab-u-lous! There were at least ten titles that she paged through, selecting which to buy.

There were two men with their backs to Rose nursing beers and lounging in the deep couches that filled the space alongside the shelves. She couldn't help eavesdropping while she browsed.

"It was the pits. For three days – without water," one of the men was saying. "I tried phoning the manager at the municipality but he'd taken his phone off the hook. A Mr Xaba. Completely useless."

"This incompetence! D'you know it was one of the pumps. Peter Hein took it upon himself to find the problem and fix it."

"But they do need to do something about the shortage of water. Every time there's an event in the area, we run out of water. And it can only get worse with all this development."

"Did you go to that meeting about that development on the Heimat road?"

"No. And you?"

"No, but I heard it was an absolute fiasco. The environmental consultants are literally in the pockets of the developers. And as for them. They slip something to the corrupt officials at the DAEA and Bob's your uncle."

The owner entered the space.

"Hey, Elmarie. Heard about the break-in. Terrible." The customer sympathised.

"We're so fed up, me and Corrie."

"How is Corrie?"

"Ja, no – he's fine. He's busy in the kitchen making fabulous paella. I recommend it."

"Let's order a jug of sangria then. How about it?" he suggested to his friend.

Elmarie saw Rose. "Hi! How're you doing? What can I get for you?'

Rose smiled: "I've got everything I need right here!"

The men turned to ogle her for a moment and then continued with their conversation.

"It must be criminals from across the border. They should never have closed the Commando Units."

"The Community Watch has been good. They were there in minutes after the Mollers had their break-in."

My God! Rose thought. If this was Elmarie's idea of a fun crowd, she must be leading an agonizingly dreary life.

She decided that she needed all the books. To hell with extravagance. It was perhaps a way of revealing there was no shortage of funds. She had to make two trips to the counter to carry them all.

The young student was behind the till. Rose asked where the toilet was. The girl gave her a key on a large wooden key ring, which Rose held gingerly with her fingertips while imagining the many unwashed hands that had clutched at it on their way back from the toilet.

She walked along the centre's open corridor, passing an estate agent, hardware store, health shop, pharmacy and a shop dedicated to the sale of fishing tackle. Rose continued to the back of the shops. Right next to the toilets was a corrugated metal door with a sign: Dr S. Mnuse. MBChB (Medunsa). It was rather unexpected to find a doctor's surgery here and with such a mean entrance.

On her way back, she saw the rugged mountaineer she had seen in the pub. He was leaving the pharmacy carrying a large carton. It was amazing how the same faces kept popping up again and again. She wondered what was in the box, what he could need in a pharmacy. He was such an ascetic type with that far-off look in his eyes - like a prophet whose gaze into an apocalyptic future blinded him to the puniness of the present. And healthy. And austere and intimidating. What would you talk about with a man like this? Maybe looks were deceiving and he was really as personable and as approachable as the car salesman where she'd bought her Golf. She didn't think so.

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Beth is particularly vain, visiting frequently to gaze at her reflection. I have become very fond of Connie. She was so taken with my long tresses, forever touching and stroking them, that I decided to allow her to help me with my coiffeur, teaching her how to brush and pin up my hair. I gave her one of my gowns as well because, now that we are in such close proximity, I prefer her to be more modestly attired. I have also taught her how to tie my corsets and make my tea. She is a most willing and quick learner and I can see that she would make a fine servant for a lady.

Beth and Katy were most upset that they had not been given gowns. I remedied the situation by giving them each one. I have enough to last while I'm here and I surmise that by the time I return to London, they will be outmoded.

Sometimes, performing what one thinks is a good deed has unforeseen consequences. Earlier, I was forced to stop writing as there was an altercation taking place outside my tent: women's voices shrill in anger and agitation shattering the

bucolic peace. When I looked outside, I saw Beth and one of the older women scuffling in the dirt in the most indecorous manner. It needed no translation as to what was taking place as it was obvious that the woman was trying to pull the gown off Beth's back.

"Stop!" I bawled, my voice so raucous that they froze, sat up in the dirt and looked at me in surprise. The gown was badly ripped, the one sleeve hanging on a thread.

I cannot give away any more of my gowns. The scenario calls for Solomonic Wisdom. Perhaps the women must rotate the dresses amongst themselves. There would have to be some sort of roster system but as none can write, how would they remember who gets to wear the dresses? Could I perhaps teach them to write?

As I was cogitating on this idea, the medicine man happened to pass. He spoke most sternly to the women and shooed them away. He told me that the women must remove the dresses; they must feel the warmth of the sun on their backs and wear the aprons decorated with the marks of the clan. His heart and lungs are sore because the place does not feel like home since the eland's blood no longer wets the ground and this is why the rain does not fall.

It is all very sad but there's no holding back progress. I say, let these people be better equipped for the modern world and that is why I shall begin writing, reading and English lessons. Is it possible to kill three birds with one stone? How is their language transcribed? Its sounds are so different from those of English or any of the European languages for that matter.

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Rose spent a productive afternoon in the cottage, finishing the draft of the last episode. In the early evening, she thought to check her emails, make some payments and search the Internet for some data she needed. The books she'd bought sat in a pile on the kist at the foot of the bed. Each time she looked at them, she felt excited at the thought of tucking into them but the right moment hadn't presented itself to her yet.

Although the rain had stopped and the mist lifted, clouds still skittered across a nervous sky. She trod lightly in the mint-fresh air through the shrubbery, holding her laptop out like a tray. Brigit and Hank's white Volvo was parked under the canopy but

the bakkie, which she'd seen the previous morning, was missing. She hoped one of them at least was home.

The peacock met her in the courtyard and accompanied her to the backdoor. Brigit answered her knock. She looked harassed - her face was pale and deep lines were etched like parentheses around her mouth. There were excited baby shrieks coming from within but further in the background, the dispirited moans of the older child were audible.

"Oh Brigit, it seems I've caught you at a bad time. I was going to ask if I could use the Internet."

"It's fine. Come in," Brigit answered in even tones. "The office is through the kitchen and then to your left. There's a secured Internet connection. The password's Liber."

The baby was sitting in a high chair banging a spoon on the tray.

"Jamie's running a high temperature. He's very miserable," Brigit told her resuming her feeding of the baby.

"Oh, shame." Rose commiserated. "Is there anything I can do?" She offered although secretly doubted there was anything she could contribute in the way of child-care.

"I'll be with him in a minute. I just need to finish feeding the baby and put her to sleep then I'll see to him . It's fine. You can go through." Brigit looked quite calm. She would be frantic. Imagine being responsible for these two lives. Rose never had so much as a hamster to take care of. Where was Hank to help?

Rose walked out of the breakfast room and through the kitchen, then looked down the darkened passage to where the wailing was growing increasingly louder. She wished she had the temerity to take action, to go to the child and placate him but she intuited that her strange presence might upset him further. Besides her action would completely overstep the guest/proprietor barrier.

"I'm coming, Jamie," yelled Brigit.

Rose sat in the study at the oak desk feeling very much the trespasser, intruding in this very private of spaces. She looked around the neatly organised room with its alphabetically arranged lever-arch files and stationery stored in a desk organiser. Even the pale green deskpad was free from doodles.

Brigit's harried footsteps sounded down the passage. The boy's crying ceased and there was the whooshing of bath water. A little later, Brigit walked into the office.

"Rose, can I ask…er…do you have any plans for tonight?"

She looked up from her computer. "No." She shook her head.

Brigit continued: "I have a big favour to ask. It's such bad timing. Both Happiness and Thuli are off, Hank's chasing stock thieves - he's away for the night - and I have to take Jamie to the doctor. He seems to be struggling to breathe. The doctor said I must bring him in now. Jemma's sleeping. Can I ask you to stay...er… in the house until I get back? I'm so sorry but I'm – I'm quite desperate. I can't leave her…I won't be long. The doctor's just down the road."

"Sure. It's fine. I've got lots of work to do here. I saw the doctor's surgery today - at the shopping centre - Dr Mnuse," Rose remarked.

Brigit looked puzzled. "Who...? Er…no…Dr van der Merwe. He practises in his house about five kilometres down the road. Anyway, please help yourself to…to whatever in the kitchen – if you're hungry or thirsty. You can watch TV in the lounge."

"What must I do if she wakes up?"

"I'm sure she won't. I won't be long," she repeated.

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine," Rose reassured her, flattered that Brigit trusted her enough to leave the child in her care. What if the child did wake up? Then what would she do?

"Here's my cell phone number if you need to get hold of me." Brigit scribbled it onto a piece of paper. Then, carrying a bundled-up Jamie, she was gone.

The Internet connection was mind-numbingly slow. She thought about the two doctors in town. Who would she use if she needed a doctor? English probably wasn't a first language for either Mnuse or van der Merwe – that could be a deciding factor. What was next on the list? Proximity? The attractiveness of the premises? The university where the qualification was obtained? Commonality of race?

Her eye fell on the reservations book sitting squarely next to the phone. Feeling quite the snoop but unable to resist, she opened it and rifled through its pages. The Chameleon was quite a going concern, enjoying high occupancy rates. Many of the visitors came from overseas – the UK, Germany, Canada – even from further afield, like Norway or Brazil. She wondered if that guy she'd met in Exclusive Books was here but she didn't know what his name was. She came to her name neatly pencilled into the Cottage One column until Friday. There followed a hiatus but from mid December, both cottages were mostly reserved. She shut the book and placed it exactly back into its position, then idly waited for the computer's whirrings to cease.

It felt quite surreal, a stranger in a strange place alone with just the hum of the fridge to break the profound silence of the night. Feeling restless, she walked down the passage, and into Jemma's darkened room where she peered into the cot. There was Jemma surrounded by fluffy animals and dolls, in a pink babygrow asleep on her tummy, fists clenched like seashells. The soft and tender smell of baby powder wafted up to her nostrils and Rose wondered about Happiness's child. She hadn't phoned like she'd promised. Was that a good sign or a bad? She reached into the cot and touched the perfect curve of the baby's cheek as cool and as smooth as butter. But the baby breathed raggedly in through her mouth and Rose snatched her hand away, terrified that she'd disturbed her. She had no idea what she'd do with with her if she woke.

She tiptoed out the room and began a tour of the house. To pass the time she told herself. It was organised and uncluttered. Jamie's toys were stored according to type in boxes and jars: the wooden puzzle pieces in their slots; the books ordered by height on the bookshelf. The next room down the passage was the main bedroom and she stole through the door.

If the Corinthian plenitude of the garden was Hank's creation, then the fastidious austerity of the bedroom must have been Brigit's doing. The room was monochromatic, furnished in creams and beiges. It was dominated by the double bed, which looked too smooth and flat to imagine anything ever happening between the sheets. But could one ever? There were no books or magazines on the bedside tables or straggling wires from cell phone chargers. The one feature that she attributed to Hank was the signature skylight in the ceiling. There was a bathroom en suite and dressing room but she decided that to enter would cross a line, so she gave these only a cursory glance and went back to the study.

Some time later, the landline rang. It was Brigit.

"Jamie's having an asthma attack. He has to be admitted to the Kokstad hospital overnight. I can't get hold of Hank - he's out of cell phone range. I'm going to phone a friend to come in. But can I ask…can you…er…wait until she gets there?" Brigit asked.

"Don't worry your friend. I'm fine here. I can sleep on the couch," Rose told her.

"Absolutely not. I don't expect you to do that." Brigit was adamant.

"I really don't mind. It's silly to call your friend. I'm here. I insist."

"I can't ask you to do this. You're a guest."

"It's fine. Really." Then Rose added: "Please. I want to help."

She heard the woman hesitate and she understood. Only in a desperate situation would a mother leave her child with a complete stranger. How could she tell that Rose was not off-balance, a child abuser, a baby snatcher? But who was the friend? Perhaps Brigit's friends, like Rose's, could never be classified as close and that whoever she asked to help would constitute an imposition. Maybe that was what attracted Rose to Brigit: she recognised a lone traveller in time and space.

Brigit conceded. "Thuli will be there at six tomorrow morning so she'll take over then. There's a bed in Jemma's room. You can sleep there. You'll be more comfortable …bottles …teats …formula …nappies ….wipes …dummies …porridge …favourite toy…"

A barrage of instructions. She felt weak from the awful responsibility she had just taken on. How could she just walk onto the stage of this domestic drama that was playing out? She didn't have the script.

"Yes, sure, right," she answered glibly.

She couldn't work anymore and her anxiety made her edgy. She drifted to the kitchen where she opened the humming fridge stacked with Tupperware containers and mysterious packages wrapped in tin foil. Nothing to tempt except for a red apple offered up by the bottom drawer.

Then she looked for a torch to light her way back to the cottage. She needed her toothbrush, the new books, but she couldn't find a torch in the places where she felt strange eyes were permitted to pry. So she stumbled in the dark through the shrubs, very conscious of snakes and other dangers which could waylay her safe passage.

Back in the Liber's house she again stole a glance at the baby who slept so innocently, so unaware of life's pitfalls. Then she slid into the bed with a Bushman book she hoped would lead to some enlightenment, pulling up the duvet, but before the end of the first page, her eyes closed and she was asleep.

Much later, she awoke with a start, befuddled and disorientated. It took her a few minutes to realise where she was and that the fearsome noise shattering the rural night was the sound of the baby crying. She switched on the bedside light to see Jemma, standing up holding the bars of the cot.

She stopped crying and watched with interest as sleep made Rose stagger towards the cot, but when she lifted her out, the child started to scream. She held the little body tight against hers, cupped the back of her head and joggled her.

"Sh-sh-sh. Sh-sh-sh," she comforted but the baby pulled away, her body rigid. Rose bounced her against her chest, pacing around the room, then walking down the passage into the lounge. She turned her around and showed her the pale pastoral landscapes on the walls telling her to look at the horsey and the cow.

"What does the cow say?" Rose asked in a baby voice. "It says moo, moo." For a second, there was silence but then the wailing began once more.

"There now. There now," she told her but the baby was inconsolable. Her cheeks were flushed with rage and upset and her upper lip slimy from mucous. Rose wanted to cry too. The baby would make herself sick. What must she do?

As she held her tight, rocking her and patting her bottom, she became aware of her soggy nether regions and experienced an eye-smarting whiff of ammonia. So she walked back to the baby's room and pinned her down on the compactum as she looked around for nappies. In a flash, Jemma had wriggled out from under Rose's hand and turned over to a crawling position.

"Oh please, Jemma," Rose begged. She picked her up under the arms and plonked her on the floor. Jemma tottered to a box and now sat on her bottom, chewing on a plastic block. Through tear-dark lashes, she watched Rose poke around drawers and containers in search of nappies and wipes. Her crying had stopped.

"Poor baby," Rose sympathised. "Mummy will be back soon. Before you know it. Let's change the yucky nappy." Rose sat cross-legged on the floor, quickly wiped Jemma's nose then tugged at the feet of the babygrow. The child obligingly rolled onto her back and from there it was easy, Jemma gnawing on the block, never taking her eyes off Rose.

Rose scrabbled for the dummy that had rolled under the cot, picked up the baby and sat on the armchair next to the cot. She offered the dummy which the baby stuffed into her mouth and proceeded to suck noisily, her jaw muscles working furiously against Rose's breast. Rose bent her neck towards the baby's crown and breathed in. She breathed in deeply. The smell of baby. With each inhalation she breathed in the smell of baby and the fine wispy hair. It tickled her nostrils. It was irresistible, like a drug, a comforter, something delicious. She couldn't stop. Her eyelids felt heavy.

This age of dependency. Now she had a reference point to imagine and recall. Memories recollected in tranquillity. Rose remembered Livvie telling her the tale of her resurrection. It had been three days since Ruby had last appeared at work. John broke through the door and there was Ruby and there was Rose, alone, all alone, in this age of

dependency. She didn't remember. It was only the memory of a memory recollected and the overflow of imagination. Livvie picked Rose up off the floor after three days. Ruby didn't rise. She remained cold in the bed but Rose rose, lifted off the ground by Livvie. Alone, all alone, all allele, dominant and recessive, receding, mother. And father.

Carrying her close to her chest, Rose lurched to the bed and crawled in, still sniffing at her head. And there they slept until the first light crept through the skylight and the peacock mewled his lonely mewl and the pigeons rose from the top of the pines.

Rose held onto the bars of her cot and surveyed the room in the pale early morning light. Climbing over the bars, first one leg and then the other, she landed on her hands and knees next to her bottle. She picked it up with an insouciant hand and clamped its teat between her teeth.

Now what was this that lay so yellow and soft in her cot? Her blanket - with its delicious satin edging - so satisfying when rubbed against the nose. She tugged at it, through the bars. It resisted until… the blanket was free and she brought it to her nostrils and sniffed in its baked-bread fragrance.

Surprise! The white rabbit appeared. This too she dragged through the bars.

She tottered on bandy legs, swaddled in a towelling pink babygro, clutching her white rabbit under her arm, yellow blanket trailing obediently behind, across the narrow divide that separated her cot from her mother's bed. The bottle sighed gently and bounced on her chest as she walked.

Where was Mama? Here she was. Sometimes, Mama disappeared. Pouf! Out of sight. It was as if her very self had been wrenched in two. Terrifying. But here she was - Mama - somewhere under the huge mound of cream duvet.

The rising sunlight filtered through the pale fabric of the curtains, illuminating her mother's shape lying at the edge of the double bed. Blanket and rabbit forgotten, she laid a dimpled hand on the mound. It did not move.

She pulled herself onto the bed with tight fists, where awaiting her was the mouth that sang the Patter Cake song and the eyes that promised Mama-Rosie together forever. She lifted the duvet and, Peekaboo! Laughed to see her mother's face. The bottle fell out of her mouth with a plop. "Mama," she chuckled delightedly.

Her mother's face remained impassive. No sounds emerged from her mouth, no smile from her eyes.

The baby solemnly studied the still face. She touched the cheek. She grabbed the lips, her little fingers grasping at the pale pink flesh. Busy hands, babbling mouth. Mamamama, dadadada. She probed the unknown cavities of her mother's nostrils, index finger a miniature antenna. Her face was intense with concentration. Mama did not move so she lay down, alongside her and, finding the bottle within her reach, picked it up and once more started sucking on the teat. Pah! All she got was stale rubbery air and spat it out of her mouth in disgust.

She became aware of something nasty that had enveloped her, breathing fire on her bottom and gnawing at her middle. She gave a moan: I'm wet, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty but "mumum mum mama" and then "Waaa-aaaa" were the only sounds that came from her mouth. She flung herself over her mother's body, onto the wide expanse of bed and lay, supine, wailing, her face reddening, legs flailing. Still her mother lay unmoving, unmoved, still as a leaf curled up at the edge of the bed. On and on she screamed. Her cries turned to sobs and then to whimpers and finally she quietened. Her whole body thoroughly spent, she sucked her thumb and dozed off.

The telephone rang, but then it stopped. Cars swished past; pigeons sang a threnody in the pines; somewhere in the neighbourhood, a mielie-seller cried.

Later, when the sun reached its peak and the air hung turbid as glycerine, the child awoke. She lay restfully on her back and watched the play of light and shadow on the ceiling. The telephone rang again. She slid off the bed and clumsily lifted the too-large receiver with both hands and held it to her face. "Hu yo", she said, but the ringing stopped and all she heard was the drone of the engaged signal. Dropping the receiver, she began to push the buttons on the dial, but this activity ceased as she became more and more aware of her aching middle and her throat as dry as sand. She moaned intermittently, walking distractedly around the room. The press-studs on the underside of her babygro had come undone, liberating her nappy, which now hung loosely between her creased thighs, filling the air with its acrid fumes.

She found herself at the door of the cupboard, which had been left slightly ajar. She opened it and saw that she was not alone, for there was another baby. The baby's cheeks were flushed, its hair as wispy as the morning breeze. Eyes wide, she reached out to touch the baby. The baby reached out to touch her, its hands as cold as glass. Bump. Both babies fell backwards.

Rose became aware that the thing she was sitting on was the source of her discomfort. To remove it, she had to undo the tapes but these were obscured by her

belly. She looked down to see what her fingers were doing. Finally, success. She stood up triumphantly, releasing a little stream of brown pebbles onto the carpet, and toddled resolutely over the threshold of the room, her bare bottom as innocent as a new day, down the passage, across new-laid floors to the kitchen, shining with promise in the midday light.

Rose had often explored the exciting things offered up by the cupboards in this space while her mother prepared their meals. The first cupboard housed the sunset-coloured Tupperware bowls stacked so cleverly in a tower. In the next, the pots and pans were stored. Rose had banged these with a spoon, which had made her mother laugh and block her ears. In another; packets, boxes, cartons and tins. She crawled around, scuttling on her bare bottom, opening and closing doors. She found a red plastic lid, which she immediately put into her mouth. Too tasteless. Then she tried biting into a pot. Too hard. She spied a wrapped cylinder and recalled how Mama often pulled, as if by magic, a biscuit from inside the blue packaging and that it was sweet and satisfying. Sitting firmly on her bottom, her brow furrowed, she extracted a biscuit and nibbled on the edge.

Soon, tiring of this, she tottered to the kitchen table, where she scrambled up onto one of the chairs and then onto the table. There was a bowl of shiny apples on the table and Rose reached in and took one, biting into its unyielding redness with her new white incisors. The fruit released a tantalising trickle of sweetness but its skin proved too tough and she lost interest, and she climbed off the table, and back to her discarded biscuit.

Rose pottered around the house, desultorily wandering in and out of unfurnished rooms, and then back to the bedroom she shared with her mother. At times, she moaned and whimpered but her generally passive and quiet nature was brought to bear and so time ticked out its mournful dirge.

The light faded and the air cooled. Objects darkened and tiny goosebumps rippled across Rose's baby skin. Unnamed creatures emerged from tenebrous hiding places, from under the bed and behind the door, and skulked stealthily across the walls and ceilings. Rose climbed onto the bed and crept under the duvet where her mother lay so still but, again, she was met with deathly cold. Rose cried, her sobs renting the air, but finally she quietened and drifted off into a restless sleep.

By the next morning, still her mother did not waken. Rose slid off the bed but her knees buckled and she crumpled in the narrow aisle between cot and bed. She

drifted between periods of restless sleep and fretful wakefulness, listless and parched, sucking her thumb and clutching her yellow blanket next to her nose.

Chapter 14

There was knocking at the back door. Rose, with Jemma on her hip, opened the door for the barefoot Thuli.

"*Haai!*" she exclaimed, her eyes wide "Where's the missus?" The baby stretched out chubby arms and reached towards her. The phone was ringing. Rose, zombie-like with fatigue, handed her the baby and went to pick up the receiver.

"Rose, it's Brigit. How's everything?"

"Fine, fine. Jemma's fine. Thuli's just arrived. How's Jamie?"

"Much better, thanks. We're just waiting for the doctor's to see him, then we'll be on our way. Thuli can take over from you now. And Rose," she added, "thank you so much for everything. Can I have a word with Thuli?"

Thuli secured Jemma on her back with a towel and a giant safety pin and spoke into the phone.

"Yes madam…yes…yes." She nodded her head, then began fetching jars of cereal, yoghurts, juices, muffins, plates and cutlery from the kitchen and arranging them on the dresser in the breakfast room.

The thought of food was nauseating. Rose stroked Jemma's head then dragged her feet back to the cottage. She felt like she was unravelling from tiredness, that she could sleep for a hundred years but when she crawled under the duvet, and closed her burning eyes, she struggled to push the loose ends of herself back inside her body. It was no good fighting the restlessness.

She went outside past Hank's garden, veering off the path that led down to the river and beat her way through bushy undergrowth to a cantilevered wooden platform she had spied on her first visit to the garden. She stretched out on her back crushing pine needles and releasing their aromatic oils. Her bare feet dangled over the edge above the river and the sun shone through the blood of her closed lids. She flung an arm over her face listening to the coloratura trills of birds and crickets, divas of the veld, and she felt the sun's heat intensify as the earth slowly turned on its axis.

How had she survived on her own for three days after her mother had died, when she was about the same age as Jemma? She had survived. So why think about it? But all the same, she thought about it and lay like this for a long while until a shadow passed over her closed lids and she sat up and there stood Hank, bearing a silver tray laden with coffee, orange juice, croissants, a hunk of cheese, nectarines and a parfait

glass filled with layers of yoghurt, fruit and muesli. He knelt on his haunches and deposited the tray beside her.

"Oh! …Thanks! Thanks so much. This is very kind of you." She felt so overwhelmed that tears pricked her eyes. Overtired? Her eyes burnt from lack of sleep.

He put his right hand to his heart: "Nothing next to your kindness, Rose. We owe you big time for last night. Really. Thanks a lot." He looked kind of sheepish. It made her feel tender towards him.

"It was nothing, really."

"Listen. We're having a braai tonight. Just a couple of our mates are coming around. Join us. About six thirty."

How to refuse? "Er…okay. Thanks." This was awkward. She wouldn't know anyone. She could leave early. Make an excuse about the enervating mountain air. "Is Brigit home?" she asked.

"She's on her way," he told her. "Don't worry about the tray. I'll send Thuli to fetch it later." He stood up, caressed her with his smile and was gone.

Cross-legged, she picnicked on the platform. Below her, the river wound its way through the cleft between the two mountain slopes. In the hot stillness, a big pied crow alighted on the branch above her head and cawed loudly. She cut the cheese into smaller chunks and lined them up on the platform.

"Don't listen to that smarmy fox," she warned the bird. Then she picked up the tray and made for the house.

Brigit was drinking coffee at the table in the breakfast room. Hank was pottering around in the kitchen.

"Ah, Rose. You didn't need to," he said entering the breakfast room and relieving her of the tray. "Let me make you coffee." She was interested to see how Brigit and Hank interacted.

"Er… no, thanks. I've just had…" Her voice trailed away.

"Come on. I've just brewed a full pot. Take a seat."

"Oh, okay, then." She sat opposite Brigit. "How's Jamie doing?"

She looked even paler than the night before. Her unbrushed hair created an aura around her head. Rose wondered how she was going to have the energy to entertain.

"He's still got bronchitis but he's breathing fine," Brigit explained: "He needed to be nebulised. I've brought one home with us - a nebuliser."

"You must feel relieved," Rose noted.

Brigit nodded her head over her cup, its steam rising and misting up her glasses.

"Happiness told me her child was sick as well. Have you heard anything?" Rose asked.

"Hmph." Brigit expelled air. "I'm sure she would have let me know if the news was bad. Listen! I can't thank you enough for last night. I feel terrible about …that you had…."

Rose smiled, shaking her head in a dismissive gesture. The sun crept in through a side window and warmed her back.

"How's your research going?" Brigit asked.

"It's not."

Hank entered the room with the coffee.

"Why don't you show Hank your photos? He's from here." Brigit suggested.

Rose bounded to the cottage to fetch her plastic folder. Heartbreak Hank. Heartbeat Hank. He raised her pulse all right. Husband and wife - such an incongruous couple. They walked on parallel paths. No. That wasn't fair. She couldn't say that.

How old was the much older brother who lived in Durban? Could he be a candidate? Imagine! Hank would be her uncle. Gross.

Hank leant over the table, taking the proffered Polaroid copies, then lingered over them.

"He reminds me of someone. There's something familiar…"

But not your brother, please! "Oh come on – who it could be?" Rose pleaded.

He shook his head.

"Well, what about these things? Any ideas?" Rose showed them the thong, the seeds, the picture in the catalogue, explaining how she came to them.

"You could ask the librarian at the Oberon library. She might have something for you," Brigit volunteered.

Rose stirred her coffee absently: "I've heard there's a rock art museum in the Bergsun Hotel. Have you ever been?"

"Nah. You know what it's like when you live in a place. You always think you'll get around to visiting but you never do." Hank gulped down his coffee, then stood up, stretching his back as he did. "Better get going. Enoch's waiting for me on the farm. See you later. D'you need me to fetch anything, Brig?" She shook her head so he strode out, his brown calves bulging over his hiking boots. No goodbye kiss for Brigit

then? Maybe they just weren't into little acts of affection on parting. And if they were both coming and going all day, there'd be no end to them.

Silence enveloped the two women then Rose smiled shyly: "Your Jemma's just the sweetest little thing," she told Brigit. "I have to admit she gave me a bit of a hard time last night but she settled eventually."

"She mostly sleeps through. I'm sorry you had to do this. I'm really grateful…it hasn't been easy - with Hank away so much. I sometimes feel like a single mum."

"Parenting is such a huge responsibility. It must be hard on your own. Did you say Hank was chasing stock thieves?" Rose asked her.

"Yes."

"Did he find them?"

"I don't ask anymore. It's such a losing battle. They leave in the dead of night, going into the most remote areas; they don't know what lies in wait for them. And if they do find the cattle, they have to drive them back across the border – and before long, the cattle are gone again. I don't know what the answer is. Anyway," she shrugged. "It's a job. Hank gets paid for it."

"What happens to the thieves? Are they brought to book?"

"The police are so badly resourced - on both sides of the border. Each village has a local constabulary but the area is so huge, it's impossible to patrol … control. Anyway, all these farmers want is to get their cattle back. For the thieves to get caught and charged – that would be too much to ask."

Rose shook her head in sympathy: "Talking about cattle," she smiled, "I hope Hank told you that I'm invited to your braai?"

Brigit nodded. "Of course. We want you to join us for a meal. It's the least we can do."

"You must be exhausted. Can I help with anything?"

"I'm not cancelling. Everything's bought. Thuli's here to help make a salad or two and Hank does the braaing." She paused: "Listen, if you're not busy tomorrow, let's go to the museum at the Bergsun. I've always wanted to go and it would be nice to…"

"Great! I'd love to." Rose stood up.

"Well, see you later. We can make arrangements then."

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Today, I witnessed a miracle so amazing that it will stay with me till the end of my days. I accompanied the women as they gathered plants in the veldt. I, too, was given a kaross to tie around my shoulders and waist, wherein I was to place leaves, berries and bulbs. I came under the supervision of my three new friends, who took me under their wings, pointing out the nutritious species and shaking their heads most emphatically whenever I was about to gather one of the inedible varieties.

We walked into the mountains, stopping by the shady banks of the river to collect water-roots, then continuing to a glade where the most prevalent plant growing was a type of wild spinach. This was plucked by the handful, but there were also bitter melon and nuts in season and a type of fruit growing upon a tree which caused much excited chatter. After a time, I left them to it and found a rock on which to settle and sketch as the women went about their gathering.

Towards mid-morning, I noticed two of the woman slowly walking away from the group, towards some bushes growing at the edge of the glade. The one whose belly was swollen in pregnancy was being assisted by the other, who was supporting her around her waist. After a time, they emerged, the new mother with a tiny new infant attached to her breast. I have never seen a newborn before and was incredulous at the size of it. He is too adorable, with his miniature hands and feet, tiny fingers and delicate pink nails, everything so perfect and so new. But what an ugly shrunken little face! However, I'm quite sure that he will grow up to be a handsome strapping lad.

The arrival of this new life into the world moved me deeply. I was awed by the wonder and miracle of it, along with the lack of to-do displayed by the mother. What a perfectly amazing thing that, after the birth, the mother simply got back down on her haunches and resumed her gathering. This is in such stark contrast to English women for whom childbirth is such a protracted and painful procedure. I can only think that the reason for this has to do with the differing anatomies of the respective races.

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Rose drove slowly down the main street in search of the library. On the corner, a sign post painted in official green pointed her to a block of shops, but when she walked along the length of pavement, she passed electrical supplies, horse tackle, a Wimpy Bar,

camping gear and an Absa bank but no library. She went into the camping shop where she was met with a stand weighed down with hats - she remembered she'd needed on the other day - and a very young assistant with a self-important expression, who directed her down the side street to the back of the shops where she entered a small neon-lit room.

The librarian behind the desk was in her late fifties, with very short grey hair. She was nattering in animated tones to a woman. Rose waited for their conversation to end, shuffling along the shelves. It was mostly light reading matter - romances, thrillers, crime. There was a shelf dedicated to audio books, also of the same lightweight material. She returned to the desk hoping the librarian would notice her.

The woman was saying: "I bumped her in the street and she asked me when I was getting divorced. Where does she get her information from? She knows I'm getting divorced before I do!"

The librarian shook her head: "That's the problem with living here. Everyone knows everyone else's business."

"But I'm not getting divorced!"

"She's trouble. Don't go near her."

Rose wandered over to a green felt notice board. She read:

Bags!

Keep library items in the plastic bags that are issued. Keep them clean and undamaged. Bring back dirty or damaged items – you WILL pay. If you lose the plastic bag, you WILL replace it.

By order.

That's telling them, she thought. The woman was scary! There was a poster for *The Mountain Minstrels* who were giving a concert on Saturday night, singing their own songs and doing impersonations of Elvis as well as Roy Orbison, Meatloaf, Rod Stewart, Mick Jagger and Julio Iglesias.

She wandered back to the desk and hovered, sure that the librarian was aware of her. Just tell me that you'll be with me in a minute - or ten - and all will be forgiven, she fumed. But this! It was so rude.

She revisited the notice board. The Taylor Ederie School of Ballet was giving their annual concert at the Scout Hall on Wednesday night and the 4X4 Trail Club was

having a Bring and Braai Christmas party at Highvale Farm. Sunday. Only accessible by 4X4s.

What did the woman think? That she had just wandered in off the street and had nothing better to do than hang around, pace up and down and read the notices?

The conversation continued unabated: "I'm sure she's bulimic; she's so skinny. I've heard she always disappears for ages at dinner tables."

"I'm amazed she gets invited anywhere."

"I think she's a drug addict."

"I feel sorry for him - to have a wife like her. It's no wonder his heart nearly conked in."

Rose didn't want to put the woman's back up - she needed her - so she waited patiently. She hoped that when she opened her mouth, she could hide her intense irritation and not speak through clenched teeth. Relax, she told herself. What did she have to do that was so urgent? She went to look at a display on the top of a chest-high bank of shelves. There was a large cardboard sign handwritten in coloured marking pen: "Make your own Christmas gifts", and next to it was a collection of books on cross-stitching, jam-making, herb preserving and baking. She pulled out one of the books and leafed through, looking at illustrations of looms, raw wool and woven cloth. It fascinated her. She'd always been tempted to do crafty things but had lacked the time and the finances. When she returned home, she might do it.

Rose went back to the desk and stood around, her arms folded, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Listen, I better get going. The boss goes mad if I'm late."

Finally. The woman left and the librarian looked at Rose with raised eyebrows.

"Hello," Rose smiled sweetly, the joints of her jaw straining with the effort. "I wonder if you can help me?"

"I close early on a Monday. I also need some time off."

"I just want to ask… I've got these…" She showed her the packet of seeds and the thong. "I know it's a long shot but would you know what they are?"

The woman looked exasperated and shook her head.

Rose persevered: "And these photos. Do you recognise these people?"

"No, listen. I need to go. I don't know what this…this stuff is."

"Okay – this you may – um… I'm doing some research into the San and I was wondering if you have any material."

"I don't get any budget for non-fiction. I'm a small local library, you know. You need to go to the museum at the Bergsun hotel."

"I'm going there tomorrow," Rose told her, "but I thought I'd try you first."

"I do have some books but unless you're a resident of Oberon, you aren't allowed to borrow. I've had too much material disappearing. You can only use them in the library." She came around her desk. Rose followed her billowy floral pants to a bottom shelf in a dark corner. It really was a paltry selection. The collection she'd just bought was more comprehensive.

"Where're you from?" The librarian asked.

"Joburg."

"The Origins Centre at Wits must have a good collection." She was warming up: "Did you see the TV series on San art on SABC1 a few weeks ago? I'd love a copy. Maybe you could make enquiries for me when you get home."

Rose nodded agreeably. "I've also got this. Would you know what it is? It's by an English artist- Philip Geoffrey. I'd love to know what the source….er inspiration of this painting is. Was there someone who could have been thought of as a white goddess in these parts?"

"Hmmm." The librarian peered at it and slowly read out the title: "*The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess.* I've never heard of anything like this. It's fascinating. How long are you here for?"

"Umm…a few more days…"

"Leave me your email address. I'll let you know if I find anything. You know," she now told Rose, "there's a village somewhere whose inhabitants claim to be the last descendents of the Bushmen. I think it's somewhere deep in Lesotho."

"Really? Is it accessible? I'd love to visit."

"It's a real godforsaken place. Certainly not a sought-after destination on the tourist trail but it might be interesting for you.

"Are there rock art sites around here?" Rose asked.

"There're thousands in these mountains but not many people know where they are. The conservationists keep them a secret – you aren't allowed to visit them unless you go with a proper guide of some sort."

"To protect them from vandalism, I suppose."

"And the dust from people's feet sticks to the art and it can never be removed. It causes the art to fade. I did one of these tours – we had to hike seven hours there and seven hours back. I nearly died."

"So was it amazing what you saw?"

"Ja – it was pretty amazing."

"I'm also interested in the inhabitants of Oberon. Do you have any records of the original settlers or even the more recent farmers, any history of the area?"

She started walking back to the desk talking to Rose over her shoulder. "You can see the type of customers I get by the collection. They're not the most intellectual bunch. In fact, they're a bunch of morons. It would be a good project though – to start a historical archive of the area. Certificates, photos, old letters - that sort of thing, but I don't think the farmers would give up their family records too easily. Too many skeletons."

Outside the camping shop, a skinny woman stood smoking a cigarette. She must have been in her mid to late forties, her jet black hair lay lank over her shoulders and she wore skinny jeans and a midriff top. A belly ring was embedded in the slack skin around her navel. She squinted with each deep draw, her heavily mascaraed lashes coming together like inky sea creatures. Her eyes followed Rose as she entered the shop.

Rose headed for the hat-stand. Its offerings were limited to fuddy duddy designs mostly in khaki. The young assistant sidled up to her and asked if she needed help. She shook her head. She was having difficulty choosing. She tried on a floppy denim hat and ducked to look in the small mirror attached to a nearby column but the mirror was too small to give her the full picture.

"That looks good, love." The skinny woman entering the shop sans cigarette, told her.

Rose tried on a khaki cap. "And this?" she asked.

"Also nice. Yes – I think I prefer this one."

"Okay. I'll take it." Rose wasn't going to agonize over a hat.

The woman walked to the till. She had a fantastic figure: taut and toned when covered, but her naked flesh was a dead give away for her age. "Are you here on holiday?"

"Yup." She gave the short answer. It was easier. But then she felt compelled to tell her: "I'm also here to do some research on rock art. I've just been to the library."

"So, you met the witch of Oberon? She's on her own again. Husband number three's just left her and I can't blame him. He was having an affair with the doctor's secretary. But that's over because she's gone back to her husband. Where're you staying?"

"At the Chameleon."

"Oh, the Libers. He's always running to the black areas. I think he must have a black wife and a whole bunch of little black Hanks running around somewhere."

"Really?" Had Brigit heard of this rumour? Had Hank? You really had to watch what you said in front of this woman.

"I don't know how Brigit puts up with him. If he was my husband, I would have told him to jump long ago. My beaut's in hospital. He's just had a by-pass and now he wants to emigrate to England. I told him, if you go, you go by yourself. I'm not going to that shithole where it gets dark at three o'clock in the afternoon. What does he think? That the English are just waiting for him. He'll sit on his fat arse all day and drive me mad. As for this assistant he's hired!" She lowered her voice and jerked her head in the assistant's direction who was standing looking glumly out the front door. "This morning he asked me to make him tea. I said "Listen sonny, if you want tea, you can ask your mother to make it for you." I ask you! Who the hell does he think he is?"

Rose nodded, her eyes wide. These people from small towns just loved opening up to strangers. "Well, thanks. I hope your husband gets well soon." She turned to go.

Through the plate glass frontage, there stood a man looking at the hiking boots on display. Who was it? He was short and stocky with arms like a gorilla's and a scowl on his dark features. He looked familiar.

Er…," she paused. "Who's that looking in at the window?"

The woman peered at the window.

"Ugh. He's one of the Ritters. William, I think."

Rose tried to place him. Where did she know him from? "Are they local?"

"Ja. They're local but you don't want to have too much to do with them. Scumbags. The whole family."

Oh God! Mad Max. William Ritter. She wondered if he remembered her, his mad dicing. Was he about to enter the shop or only window shopping? She moved into the shadows. What would she do if he walked in the shop?

Rose was about to relate her highway experience but decided not to.

The man peered into the shop. Rose felt herself shrinking further into the shadows but then, to her relief, he moved along. The woman came around from behind the counter and gave Rose her hat, then went to stand in the doorway, another cigarette in hand. Rose followed carrying her packet, standing next to the woman for a few seconds and they both watched Mad Max lumbering down the street. She was bound to encounter him again. There was no avoiding people in this little town. What if she did meet him? She consoled herself, telling herself that he probably wouldn't even recognise her. Women, to someone like him, were probably just objects to bully around. He didn't see them as individuals with distinguishable features or identifiable characteristics. Could men like this exist? She couldn't believe they did. He was just a crazy.

Her next stop was the Spar. She wanted to buy wine and chocolates for the Libers, and whatever Mad Max's weird drives, he was not going to stop her.

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Beth, Katy and Connie have disregarded that medicine man's words: they continue to wear their dresses. I mended the tear on Beth's dress and it looks almost as good as new. All in all, the dresses are too big and too long for the women, except for the waists, where the clasps are unable to fasten. Despite this and the lack of bustles and petticoats, they assume a most comely appearance and an air of civilised gentility. The axiom that clothes maketh the man is so very true. There is still the problem of the woman who covets a dress. She continues to cast noxious glances at Beth.

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Chapter 15

Rose stepped on the path to the Libers holding the gift bag with the wine and chocolates. The sun had turned vicious as the day lengthened and although freshly showered, she already felt sticky in her floaty chiffon top and pants. It was nearing the summer solstice. A woman's laugh shattered the sunset calm. She yearned to dig her heels into soft sand but Hank's summons was like a leash around her neck.

He stood on the terrace, a wooden deck abutting the patio, brandishing a two-pronged fork like a worpel blade, snicker snack, and every now and then he poked the braai causing the flames to leap about like dancing demons.

"Too hot," he pronounced.

The men standing around the braai, faces ruddy in the firelight, beers in hand, nodded sagely. The raw meat soaked up marinade in a bowl alongside glass bottles filled with red hot spice.

On the patio, the women sat around the table, dipping their hands into bowls of chips, scooping up gobbets of taramasalata, hummus and guacamole from hand-painted pottery.

"Let me introduce you…"

"What can I get you to drink?"

"Wine's fine."

"Where's Brigit?" she asked.

"Just putting the children to bed."

"We've met. Hi Elmarie. I'm Rose" She gave an awkward little wave.

"And that's my husband, Corrie, at the drinks table." The chef at the Olive Branch – a little man with a handle-bar moustache; a mix between Sancho Panza and Fawlty Towers's Manuel.

"Lola Gerber. My husband's Montrose - over there in the blue shirt."

"They own the Oberon Hotel – and pub."

"I had..er… a fun time there on Friday night. Are you from around here?" Rose wanted to know.

"Montrose's grandfather started the hotel." He had the look. Should she whip out her Polaroids, pass them around and tell her story? She didn't think so. Not tonight.

"Howzit man, Tim. Help yourself to a drink," Hank greeted the neighbour with the Alsatians.

One of the braai maestros slowly poured beer onto the burning wood. It protested loudly, releasing a cloud of white smoke into the air. The skies were darkening, the place was filling up.

Rose sat at the table feeling all at sea, adrift, unmoored as she listened to the sounds of female voices bobbing up and down, their words made incoherent by her disconnectedness. People stood around in groups and pairs and wandered into the garden, pebbles crunching as they tread on paths. Music played.

Where do we go, nobody knows
I've gotta say I'm on my way down
God give me style and give me grace
God put a smile on my face.

Brigit and Thuli appeared carrying platters of pale potatoes, green salad, grated carrot and pineapple, coleslaw and rolls.

Rose asked: "Can I help with anything?"

"Everything's organised, thanks."

A group of men hovered around the braai. They came and went, to refill, to refuel, to fulfil the demands of husbandly attentiveness and flirt with other men's wives.

Hank put a glistening coil of boerewors on the braai. The meat spat and sizzled, its smell hanging over the guests like a tangible thing - a concoction of cloud. Gaseous gastronomy - one could already taste its burnt offerings.

Platters of cooked meat made their way to squatting trivets on the table. Thuli brought out bowls of steaming pap and gravy. Men and women congregated around the table eager for their chance with the serving spoons.

"The meat is too raw," pronounced one of the spinster sisters, Pru or Cissy Frockian. They sat side-by-side sipping diet cokes.

"Put it back on the braai," came the suggestion.

"I like my meat raw," said Hank.

"People eat cooked food. Animals eat raw food. That's what separates us from animals," pronounced an Englishman with a greasy comb-over and goitrous eyes. He wore a blue blazer with brass buttons but conceding to South African informality, left his tie at home.

"I'm an animal" roared Hank, lunging between the two sisters from behind, putting his arms around their shoulders, his face close to theirs, which made them giggle into their hands.

"Are you local or from out of town?" Rose wanted to know.

"We're Oberoners, born and bred."

"Did you ever know a Ruby le Grange?" Rose's question was met with blank stares.

"Go get yourself a piece of steak, Brigit. You look like you could do with a good piece of meat," remarked someone's husband. "You're looking rather pale," he added.

Shame. He's sweet, thought Rose.

"I'm a vegetarian," Brigit told him.

"Are you on holiday here?" Rose asked the Englishman.

"Sort of. An extended holiday. I'm writing a novel."

"Oh." Rose was impressed. "Is it your first?"

"Oh no. I'm published."

"Will we appear in your book?" Sissy or Pru asked archly.

"I do love your accent. Everything you say sounds so important," giggled the other.

"Can you believe some of the accents you hear on radio and TV? They're a joke," someone commented.

"*De –TER- mined* and *cir-CUM-stance*."

"*In-a-VET-able*. Hilarious."

"There's a newsreader who lisps. I mean, this AA and BEE stuff is all very well but this is just ridiculous."

"You better get used to it. It's not going to get any better."

"Give me these Dog Days anytime. I love this time of the year," said the neighbour with the Alsatians.

"Actually there's no such thing as Dog Days in the southern hemisphere." The Englishman pontificated.

"Why not? I thought it meant the longest days of summer."

"Dog days are when you can see Sirius, the Dogstar, rising in the west. In the northern skies, it happens when the sun and the earth are in closest proximity. Here, the

Dogstar can always be seen in the night sky," the Englishman corrected. They walked to the edge of the deck and looked at the sky.

"There's Sirius – next to Orion." He pointed at the sky. "See the three stars of his belt, and his dagger, over there."

The stargazers lifted their eyes to the heavens: "Yes – I see it."

"There's his head. That's Betelgeuse on the left," he told his listeners. "Orion and the moon rise together at this time of the year."

The mountaineer wandered onto the deck: the one she'd seen in the pub at the Oberon hotel. She'd noticed him holding his wine glass with his pinkie raised. And then again at the chemist. So, here he was again. He stood lean and gaunt at the edge of the crowd, a drink in his hand, looking skywards. Was it fanatical zeal that gave his face its haunted look? Rose went to stand next to him.

"Hello. I'm Rose Clemens." The wine had given her courage.

"Wim Metheus," he said with a European accent.

"Where're you from?"

"The Netherlands." Dutch courage then.

"I saw you in the pub on Friday night. I thought you looked like a mountaineer or hiker." He'd had too much midday sun. His skin was burnt and leathery.

"I do hike."

"For a living?"

"No. I run an Aids haven."

"Oh. How long have you been doing it?"

"A couple of years."

"That's very noble. It must be hard - facing death on a daily basis."

"Ja, ja."

"Are you a medical person or more on the management side?"

"A medical doctor."

"I'd like to see what you're doing there. Maybe I could come visit some time?"

"Ja, ja. You're welcome." He glanced sideways at her. She smiled. She'd run out of conversation.

She found herself back at the table where she encountered the neighbour with the Alsatians. He had the right look. He was the right age.

Her glass was brimming with wine - again. Her tongue felt thick: "I saw you walking your dogs the other day. I'm Rose. I'm staying at the cottage."

"He-mm," he mumbled through a full mouth and held up a hand in greeting.

Did you ever know a Ruby le Grange? She couldn't bring herself to ask.

She reached over for a roll and tore off tissue-like pieces which dissolved on her tongue like Eucharist wafer although she'd never tasted one.

Words oozed like tar from the mouths of the men sitting around the table.

"All the developments. That huge trout fishing development on old Tucker's land is really an eyesore. How they got it passed is a mystery."

"It's not such a mystery."

"Everyone wants their share of the Berg. Ever since the white man arrived, it's been a competition."

The first man continued. "It's about exploiting Africa. Always been. That's what colonialism was all about. The West trying to lay their hands on Africa's resources. And now they're trying to impose democracy. Why should democracy be good for Africans? Benevolent dictatorship. That's the answer for Africa."

"There're many dictators in Africa. The problem is finding a benevolent one. And chiefs. Autocratic despots - that's the leadership style they're used to. The chief can do anything because he's accountable to no one. He's the chief."

"Africa has its unique problems. Now the Chinese are trying to get their hands on Africa's riches. Good luck to them, I say. Fuck with Africa and you get fucked."

"The white man's new burden – living with Afropessimism."

" It's corruption that's going to cause this country to go the way of the rest of Africa."

"And crime."

"And incompetence. The place is falling to pieces because all the skilled people have left."

"You mean all the white people have left."

"You South Africans are obsessed with race." The Englishman sniffed. The mood turned as sour as old wine.

"That's rich. You Brits are the biggest racists under the sun."

"Under the sun? There's no sun in England."

Maybe it's true, Rose thought. South Africans probably are obsessed with race but how can we forget the past so soon? Look where we're coming from. You can't just sweep two hundred years under the carpet.

Voices rose, outcompeting the music.

Don't break my heart

My achey-breaky heart.

The conversation mellowed again as dregs were drained and glasses overflowed.

Rose found herself standing next to a small round man with a pink complexion that extended all the way over his shaved head to folds at the back of his neck. He was wearing cream chinos and a tank top. "My laptop was stolen out my car this week. I don't know what universe is trying to tell me. I so need a hug Maureen." Maureen from the camping shop, in a strappy purple dress that displayed her crêpey chest and wrinkled skin around her axilla encircled the little man in her arms.

"Poor baby!" she gushed.

" Ooh, I love you. You're such a *kugel*!" he cried.

"Hello, love" she said when she saw Rose. "How's the hat? Jem! Come meet – er- what's your name?"

"Rose."

"Hello doll." He air-kissed Rose on both cheeks. "You are gorgeous. I just love your outfit. Oh, there's Corrie. Have you tasted her cooking? It's divine. Totally beyondo."

"*Her* cooking?"

"What difference. We're all gods, goddesses, he, she…it's immaterial. Am I too much for you? Just tell me - am I too much for you, darling? This weather is completely O.T.T." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I heard you're looking for your long lost father here." So, the word had spread. And Maureen was the catchment area for gossip. "Do you think anyone will come clean and claim you?"

"I just want to know my roots. I don't need anything from anyone. I've inherited my adoptive parents' estates." Her tongue flapped loosely in her head. She had partaken too liberally of Bacchus's fruits.

Jem closed his eyes and raised his forefinger into the air: "If you want to know your roots, you have to be uprooted. Like a tree. Listen! If you uproot a tree, you kill the tree. You need to listen to Universe. Universe has brought you here for a purpose."

"Oh! Come dance with me." Maureen pulled him onto the deck, closed her eyes and began to roll her hips.

Food and alcohol flowed and the guests mingled, drawn irresistibly to each other, their appetites aroused by the spicy scents of nasturtium and marigold that rose up from the darkened garden and by the meat-permeated smoke that hung over them. They flirted, recycling pick-up lines as if these alone were responsible for global warming. They danced on the deck or wafted down the garden paths and around the pond where the gushing fountain doused the noise of their carousing. They found private places of knowledge and danger.

"Great party, hey? Hank knows how to throw a good one," a man told Rose as she waited for the guest loo. He lent against the wall on one hand, and held a drink in the other.

"Are you from here?" she asked.

"Durban. I've got a holiday home here."

Later, the place emptied out and meat lay forgotten, burnt to a cinder on the braai. White smoke, perfumed with charred bones and red spices, rose up into the ether to the realms of the gods, inviting them to partake of the feast. The moon hovered in the north-west. Brigit had long since gone to bed. Someone had changed the Hits of the Nineties and Latin rhythms slid out the CD player. The man with the holiday home caught hold of Rose, surreptitiously brushing his hand against her breast as he whirled her round the deck.

Ay candela, candela, candela me quemo ae.

Oh fire, fire, fire, I'm burning!

Rose extricated herself and went to sit on a low stonewall; its warmth from the day's heat pleasant through the thin chiffon of her clothing. Her head slowly spinning in time with the spinning galaxies in space, she saw Orion, his belt and his dagger and Betelgeuse and Sirius, the Dogstar, and she thought about the vast distance travelled by the starlight before it entered the eyes, the heart and the imagination of lonely earth-dwellers and it made her sad.

"Rose getting ready to take to the stars." Hank had come up behind her.

"You gave me a fright."

"Apologies. You looked so far away."

"This music makes me yearn for something."

"What are you yearning for, girl?"

"I don't know…love… recognition…to be able to play a musical instrument." She laughed wistfully.

"I know what you're yearning for."

He casually draped an arm over her shoulders and walked with her, past the hot spicy beds and the cold wet ones, along paths where the smell of sex and death rose pungently in the cool night air and the moonlight shone white on the pebbles and burnished the leaves silver, past the gurgling fountain and through the archway with its rusted plate that said "He who enters this portal will partake of the fruits borne of Nature and will be nurtured by the Goddess of Truth".

She stopped in her tracks and asked: "Where's this Goddess of Truth? I want her nurturing."

"Ah. She's here. Somewhere in these mountains. You'll find her when you're ready."

"And the fruits?"

"They grow from the seeds of promise. Like the ones you're wearing here. On your wrist." He brought her thong to his lips and kissed the inside of her wrist, making a spot that burnt white hot. Rose trembled and her knees went weak, and they walked together into the wilderness where the path abruptly ended.

"Brigit told me to watch out for snakes," she told him.

Hank laughed. "Just for me."

They stood on the wooden platform and watched the river run metallic in the moonlight and heard the hoot of an owl and the flurry of its wings as it took off. And all the while, the sounds of the night mingled with the Latin rhythms that trickled down to where they stood. And Hank turned towards Rose and held her ballroom fashion and moved her slowly round and around the small deck. She leant her weight into his body and smelt his male smell and the acrid smell of charred meat and felt his breath warm and moist on her hair. A silent moan escaped from her throat and she felt her blood quicken and its heat rise to her skin and suffuse every pore.

Orgullecida estoy de ser divina I am proud to be divine
Y de tener tan linda perfeccion Proud of such beautiful perfection
Tal vez sera que soy alabastrina Perhaps I'm made of marble
Seran los filtro reinos del amour. And my love is the purest love of all.

The music stopped. She pulled herself away, suddenly sober. “Thanks for the dance.” She mock-curtsied, her light laugh belying the heaviness she felt in her heart. “I suppose I’d better get going. We’re going to the museum tomorrow and it’s an early start.”

Rose lay in bed, wishing, yearning that something more had taken place and her breasts rose and fell as her breathing quickened and she replayed the scene over and over in her mind, each time trying to imagine its conclusion, how it should have ended with Hank kissing her, his hands moving up over her shoulders and down her back, over her top, then under it, over her breasts, her ribcage, past her waist, his hands feeling the contours of her body, one hand roving over her belly, then moving further down to feel the heat between her thighs and the two of them sinking to the pine-covered slats but that’s when her imagination failed her. She couldn’t go on. The music stopped, the dance ended and all that remained was a blanket of darkness under her lids that finally became the blankness of a dreamless sleep.

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Towards mid-afternoon, we returned from our gathering to find a ragtag band of men arrived with ponies and cattle in tow. They are a filthy lot of ruffians and rogues, representing the wide spectrum of race that exists in this country. Boer, Bushman, Bantu, half-castes and Hottentots, their skin tones ranging from yellow to tawny to brown to chocolate - it is difficult to classify them. The leader of the group, the roughest of the lot, is a man who goes by the name of Hannes du Plooy. Of Boer extraction, he is a swarthy and bearded giant of a man, possibly the lowest class of white man I have ever had the misfortune to meet. The men leered at us females most rudely as we passed their encampment which they have set up, I am unhappy to report, in close proximity to mine! This is most distressing. I heard one of them make an unspeakable comment about me as I went by whereupon I picked up the hem of my gown and with the utmost dignity I could muster, I stalked to my tent. The effect was somewhat lost when I had to duck my head upon entering.

Abel informed me that these men are traders who linger here a while, resting their cattle before moving on. And what do they trade? I asked Abel in my ignorance. Cattle and horses, he replied. And what can the villagers possibly have to trade in

return? I pursued. They provide grazing, a place to kraal the stock and to hide out while the heat is on. And what heat is that? I continued. The heat from the Mounted Rifles and the commandos that have been set up to curtail these activities. These men are stock raiders, outlaws, who survive by their wits and cunning. One of the fellows from the village is a member of the gang, his excellent tracking skills and marksmanship with a bow and arrow making him indispensible to the group.

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Chapter 16

"Rose, I'm sorry. I have to cancel our plans for today. I got a call earlier – someone complaining about the bad treatment of a donkey in Mamphis. It's a black village near here." Brigit, dressed in khaki pants and a home-knitted sweater, was hauling plastic containers, wire cages and other assorted boxes out from under a tarpaulin and stacking them alongside the bakkie. A young black man worked alongside her, loading the back of the bakkie. "I might be able to do the museum later in the day but I really can't say how long this will take."

Rose was disappointed. Besides the museum, the trip would have given her a chance to cultivate Brigit's friendship.

"Oh…okay. Well, have a good day." She started walking back to the cottage through the dew-damp foliage, noticing how the leather of her shoes darkened with each step, thinking that, ah well, maybe it was better that she wasn't going because she was experiencing some guilt about her hanky panky fantasy.

"Rose!" Brigit called. "Wait!"

Rose stopped.

"Why don't you come along?"

Rose hesitated for a second. She hadn't done anything wrong. "Um...is that…I won't be in your way, will I?"

"Not at all. Hop in. We'll be leaving in a few minutes. This is Michael, my helper/translator." They did the three-part handshake - shake, clasp, shake, he positioning his left palm under his right elbow.

The air was cool, the sky overcast as they drove out of Oberon on the Heimat road, she in the front with Brigit, Michael in the back of the double cab.

Brigit drove confidently along the country roads: "You were asking where black people live. You'll see now. Many live in the type of village where we're going. It's a pretty basic sort of life."

"And middle-class black people? Where do they live? Do they live in Oberon itself? " They. She squirmed. She and Brigit had excluded Michael completely from their conversation.

"I don't know. But the local school is multi-racial."

"Where do you live, Michael?" Rose turned to look at Michael, hoping her question would soften her faux pas.

"In the back of someone's place in Oberon."

"Well, there you go," said Brigit.

As the bakkie's odometer rolled over, the signs of human activity diminished as fences and cultivated pockets of pine and eucalyptus gave way to increasingly wild and rocky terrain. Gulleys and gorges had been rudely gouged out, and fell dramatically now from the right, now from the left side of the road, and peaks rose so steeply that they were only visible if Rose craned her head, bird-like, and pressed her nose to the window. As before, encapsulated by the mist, she felt as if she had been deposited back in time; the ribbon of road ahead and the electric power lines above were all that linked the travellers to the present.

Rose could see Brigit's profile from the corner of her eyes. She looked serious – her mouth was set in a firm line. Can she sense my feelings around Hank? Rose wondered. She couldn't get him out of her mind. He lingered there, coiled and ready to spring to the forefront of her thoughts whenever there was a gap. Hank. He was one of those men who just loved women, who made women feel beautiful and brilliant, who laughed appreciatively at their every quip, who undressed you with his eyes and stroked your ego. Brigit must know. She had also succumbed to his charms. Surely she must see how he flirts? Maybe she doesn't. Maybe she does. And she knows how I feel and pities me. She's been through it all so many times before. She wouldn't have invited me today if she felt threatened.

"Here we are," Brigit said as they rounded a bend. Two rondavels appeared and Brigit slowed and pulled up over the verge, the bakkie groaning and squeaking as its tyres negotiated the unevenness of its course.

The village lay sprawled before them. Rose was surprised to see its extent. It spread all the way down to the river, up again on the other side, as far as the eye could see: adobe dwellings and other indeterminate structures emerged from vegetation that grew lush in the valley. Here and there, the metal of tin flashed like an SOS. Human life was stirring; women ambled along the paths, some carrying drums on their heads and children on their backs, their clothing bright in the muted misty landscape.

Rose, Brigit and Michael drove along dirt roads carved out of the mountainside, avoiding black water that stagnated in ruts and chickens that hopped and fluttered as they heard the rumble of the bakkie's engine. Brigit drove slowly, giving the pedestrians time to move aside. Through her open window, she greeted them: "*Sawubona*." Some responded amicably but others looked at her with a blank stare.

On the drive over, Brigit had explained to Rose that her NGO focused on education and training but sometimes people called them in when they saw animals being mistreated. This and the training overlapped with the animal protection societies but she and Michael were well-known and trusted by many of the villagers.

"We had to be very careful with our name - we call ourselves Protecting Animals' Wellbeing or PAW- there's some animosity between us and the usual animal protection agencies," Brigit explained. "We rely mostly on the lottery but when we have fundraisers in the surrounding towns, we're competing for the same donors. The funding pot is limited."

"Uh huh." Rose wondered how one went about applying for funding. And did Brigit pay herself a salary? She must. How much did she pay herself? Who assessed how much she was worth? Rose felt quite ignorant of how it all worked. She'd been leading such a sheltered existence. She decided that she'd make a generous donation to Brigit's cause as soon as she accessed her bank account. Anonymous, of course.

"I don't want to diminish what the others do," Brigit continued. "They do a fantastic job but I think there's room for everyone. It's a pity some people feel threatened by us. Ridiculous. We're such a puny operation compared with them. It's a pity how politics always comes into play."

"Even when people are trying to do good."

"Absolutely. And there's never enough that can be done."

Rose looked out the window and read the handwritten sign that hung over the opening of a corrugated iron shack.

Vegetables, hair braiding, cell phone calls – R3

There was a stall next to the shack made from warped planks and crooked poles. Tomatoes, potatoes and cabbages were piled high on the makeshift counter. Goats and chickens picked nearby, scrabbling for scraps and discarded vegetables. A thick black electrical cable looped between counter and the bonnet of an old and battered lime-green Mazda that looked as if it had taken root in the long grass. A woman wearing a bright orange turban stood inside the stall. She spoke animatedly on a cell phone and waved distractedly as they passed.

Brigit slowly followed the curving road. "Okay. We need to find the donkey and his driver. He's the local moving man. You know, if you have furniture or

something heavy to move, you hire him. His poor old animal is apparently a bag of bones, sores all over."

Ugh. Rose didn't feel like being exposed to the suffering of the donkey. Or to suffering of any sort. She could remain in the bakkie looking straight ahead, but avoiding truths because they were too ugly to confront was more than self-indulgent. What would happen if everyone hid behind their soft-heartedness? Like her. She wanted to make a difference but without sullying her sensitive soul. She watched a scrawny grey dog trotting alongside them, his head slung low. He veered into the long grass and disappeared.

There was a woman at the side of road. She was large and solid and squatted alongside a sturdy piece of cardboard that had been raised off the ground by bricks at each corner.

Michael tapped Brigit on the shoulder. "Let's ask this aunty if she's seen him." Brigit stopped and Michael hopped out the bakkie. He was agile and lean, nice looking. He loped towards the woman who was frying clumps of dough that she broke off from a stolid grey mass in a large bowl and dropped into a fryer on a gas-cooker. The pieces of dough bobbed merrily in the bubbling oil releasing oily steam into the air.

Rose watched as the woman and Michael chatted agreeably and Michael returned to the bakkie holding three of what Rose supposed could be called doughnuts, glistening oil-laden spheres coated in crystals of sugar. Michael indicated for Rose to open her window to take his offering. The doughnut was hot in Rose's hand and she closed her eyes, breathed in its fresh doughy fragrance and sank her teeth into the crispy crust. It was delicious.

"She said she hasn't seen him today so maybe we should first pass by his house and ask and then go look in the other direction," Michael pointed in the direction of the river: "It's right down in the valley."

They drove down the mountain towards the river where the mist continued to hover as if concealing a secret.

"I think it's this one." Michael indicated a rondavel. Brigit stopped and the three of them alighted. There were sounds of hysterical barking coming from the back. On a hard-swept yard, a tawny dog tied to a stump in the ground grew exceedingly excited at their approach, slavering at the mouth, pulling at his chain and jumping up and down on his forelegs. He was thin and mangy and his ears were ragged, nibbled by flies. The

place stank with his faeces lying a chain length away, and caused great excitement for a couple of bluebottle flies. Brigit shook her head in disgust.

Michael had walked to the bakkie and now returned carrying an empty plastic container that had once been filled with ice-cream.

"It's probably no use asking inside for water," Brigit told Michael and then explained to Rose: "There's a public tap miles away. Or the river, which is really dirty but it's okay for dogs. These people need to be taught about the humane treatment of animals."

The doorway to the hut was open. It was low and they had to duck to enter. Rose had never been inside a hut like this. Adobe abode. Her eyes had to adjust to its darkness, her olfactory senses to the earthy yeasty smells of wood smoke and fermenting milk. It was very cool, quite chilly. The floors were made of hardened dung. In the middle was a hearth with a pile of white ashes. Around the whole hut, a continuous bench had been fashioned from the clay walls, and on this structure, behind the hearth, Rose saw a woman bundled up in a grey blanket. She lay curled up in a foetal position, and now she twisted her head to look up at them, her eyes big and expressionless in her gaunt face. Rose could barely look at her. The woman looked so pathetic, she could have cried.

"Ask her where the man is."

Michael translated. The woman continued to stare blankly at them.

"Can you see any water here?" They looked around. There was not much to see save for stacked cardboard suitcases along the walls and a few clay vessels on a shelf. Brigit turned to Rose: "There's probably not enough water for this woman's needs let alone the dog's."

The three of them walked out the hut. The mist had melted and the sun shone brightly. Rose shrugged off her cardigan before getting back into the bakkie. Brigit re-ignited the engine and drove slowly down the road. How can you worry about dogs when the people here are so needy? Rose wanted to ask but stopped herself. Her words sounded too critical of someone she desired to befriend.

"The poor woman," she said. "Who was she?"

"Must be the man's relation."

"Shame. She looked in a bad way."

"Aids, no doubt. It's very much part of life here."

"It's so sad that she's lying there all alone. Who's looking after her, do you think?"

"Looks like she's on her own until the man gets home. And then it's hard for him to be the care-giver. It's not considered a man's job. Maybe there's a female relative that comes in to help."

"Don't you ever feel like stepping in to help these poor people?"

"There are people doing things with the community. My thing is to help animals, to prevent animals' suffering.

They came to a clearing in the jumble of dwellings. A queue of women bearing all manner of containers snaked into the road. They stood patiently in the hot sun, many with babies on their backs. Small dusty children wove about the women's legs or occupied themselves with sticks or whatever else the hardscrabble environment offered up. The very little ones were half naked, wearing only faded vests that stretched tightly across their potbellies.

Brigit turned around to Michael. "Won't you fill the five litre drum. We might need more later." To Rose she said: "This area seems to be the last in the country to benefit from the government's social upliftment programmes. No piped water, no electricity, no housing."

"Why's that, do you think?" Rose asked.

Brigit shrugged. "I haven't a clue. Politics? Maybe this area doesn't support the ruling party. I don't know. I'm just guessing."

Michael had hopped out the vehicle holding the drum and went to stand in the midst of the women and children. He greeted them, smiling disarmingly and they made way for him. Soon, he returned.

Brigit turned the bakkie around and started towards the hut. The village had suddenly come alive. Men, old and young, were emerging into the sunlight to gather, loiter and laugh in doorways or sit on tins and smoke. Some wore leather jackets and loafers and spoke on cell phones. School children roamed in packs, their skinny legs poking out of black gymslips or grey shorts. To Rose's surprise, even some of the kids spoke on cell phones. It was amazing how the technology had filtered through to even the most impoverished areas.

As they rounded a bend in the road, they saw the donkeyman's outline appearing over the horizon. He sat high atop his wagon, which was piled high with a huge load of sticks. Firewood from the forest. The man held a stick which rested lazily

on his thighs. Brigit sped up to him as if he might suddenly vanish, braking and stopping, donkey and bakkie nose to nose. "*Sawubona Madala*," she said.

I actually can't bear to witness this, thought Rose. I'm going to stay in the car but she got out anyway and went to stand a little behind Brigit. The sun was now intense and burning her crown. She wished she'd brought her hat.

"*Sawubona* Missus." The man slowly dismounted from the rickety wagon, using the stick to steady himself. He was old and decrepit with a sparse white beard, a shapeless felt hat and wearing what looked like a potato sack with holes cut out for the neck and arms. His legs emerged from the sack skinny and dusty. Sackcloth and ashes. What did he have to repent?

"We got a complaint about you – how you treat this animal." She pointed to the brown shaggy beast which stood patiently, his back curving under too many loads and the weight of age. Michael translated Brigit's words.

"No, Missus, I treat the animal well." The man was tapping the animal on its rump with his stick. The beast's stance never changed.

"He says he treats it well," Michael told Brigit.

Brigit pointed to the sores that suppurated on the beast's bony back. Rose averted her gaze. They made her stomach turn. "No, look here," Brigit's metal spectacle frames glinted in the sun. "These are very bad. They're infected." She turned to Michael: "I think maybe we should ask the vet to take a look."

An old couple came shuffling by. The man wore a baggy blue suit shiny with age and the woman a blue dress with a starched white Peter Pan collar. They looked like they were dressed for church. They stopped to hear what was going on.

Michael had taken cottonwool and was applying disinfectant to the angry wounds. Three schoolgirls walking arm in arm had sauntered up and stood around, leaning on each other and giggling and a middle-age woman, thinking this as good a place to rest as any, had deposited her cabbage-filled bags and watched the proceedings with interest.

"If you don't give him this medicine, he'll die. Do you understand? These sores are very bad." Michael translated. He demonstrated how to apply first the disinfectant and then the ointment, explaining the consequences of neglect in even and gentle tones.

"It's the white man's medicine. Don't trust it. It will kill your donkey." The speaker of these words sported a headband and bracelets of animal skins and a faded

green T shirt with a picture of Bob Marley. “The white witch wants to kill your donkey.”

“These people like to use traditional treatments,” Michael commented to Brigit.

“That’s a lie, old man” cried another. “The white medicine works. I know. I gave my sick goat the white medicine and he lives still.”

Well, we’ve won this one over,” Michael said.

Brigit directed a severe look from behind her glasses at the donkeyman: “This animal needs to rest, to get better.”

The man complainingly retorted: “No Missus. How must I eat if the donkey rests?” He leant on his stick and shook his head.

“He says he can’t eat if his animal rests.”

There were now about ten people witnessing the proceedings.

Brigit turned to Rose: “This animal should be put out to pasture but it’s the man’s livelihood. It’ll work until it drops dead.”

“It says in the Bible that you must look after your animals, that you must give them a rest,” Brigit informed the donkeyman.

This evoked a response from the old man in the shiny blue suit who started to intone in English: “…for six days shalt thou work but on the seventh, thou shalt not do any work, thou, thy son, thy daughter, thy slave, thy maidservant, thy animal…”

“Keep quiet old man,” someone shouted.

“Look. I’m coming back in a week to check if he’s better. If the animal is not better when I come back, I’m going to call the police. They’ll take the animal to the hospital and you’ll have to pay a big fine.”

A woman reiterated: “Ya. You’ll pay the fine.”

‘You can come to me for the loan, old man.” A dapper man in a tan suit offered smoothly, giving the schoolgirls sideways glances.

Brigit glared at the donkeyman. “Why’s he so thin? You don’t feed him enough. You must feed your donkey.”

This proved inspirational to the old man in the blue suit once again: “The produce of the land shall be thous to eat, for thou, for thy slave and for thy maidservant; and for thy labourer and for thy animal and for the beast that is in thy land…” His voice was drowned out by the crowd.

“He must go to jail. He killed his wife because he didn’t want to feed her and now he’s killing his daughter.”

What must he do? He's a poor man. We're all poor men. We can't take away food from the people to give to our animals.

"And your dog. Your dog in your yard. Why doesn't he have water?"

"No, Missus. I give him water."

"It's cruel to keep him tied up in the sun all day with no water to drink. How would you like that? To be tied up in the sun all day with no water to drink?"

"No missus. I'm a man. He's a dog." He cackled, exposing his toothless gums and shook his head again.

"He says his dog is only a dog," Michael translated.

The crowd also laughed. "Tie him up in the yard like a dog. Ya – tie him up."

"But he's a living thing. Like you. He gets thirsty. He needs water to drink. And shade. You can't keep him in the sun like that all day. You're making him suffer. You must build a shelter for him. With poles. I will give you a piece of shade cloth."

"Eish. Now we must build a house for the dog. A dog is a dog. A man is a man."

"We all want the cloth. We all want to build the dog houses," someone jeered.

"They all want shade-cloth now," Michael said.

"Now I'm going to your house and I'm giving your dog water. I'll leave the shade-cloth inside." She turned to the audience: "Isn't it right? If you've got a dog, or any animal, you need to look after it. Animals must always have clean water to drink. And they can't be tied up in the hot sun. It's cruel." Yes. Yes. No. No. Some agreed, others dissented. Their voices rose in dissonance.

She turned to the old man. "When I come back next week, I'm going to check that he's got water all the time and shade."

The three of them got back into the bakkie and the crowd started dispersing. The donkeyman remained standing beside his donkey.

"The onlookers were very interested in the whole drama," Rose remarked.

"That's our modus operandi. It's all very informal. Michael comes in and visits, say, the chicken sellers, or the people who own goats and talks to them, explaining how to look after their livestock, or pointing out any cruel practices."

"Do they listen?"

"It's slow - a battle - but it has its rewards. We see changes in attitudes. And when we see abuse, we threaten with prosecution. You heard. We carry it out too if they continue to treat their animals badly."

"These people's lives are so hard. Maybe their suffering hardens them. They have such problems of their own that they can't worry too much about their animals."

"I don't feel guilty about them being prosecuted because their lives are so bad. It's my job to make sure the animals are well looked after. It's what I do and I'm comfortable with it. I can't let poverty be an excuse for the abuse of animals. Would you let it be an excuse for women or child abuse?"

"That's true. Is it not maybe a cultural thing?"

"Absolutely not. You can't read it as an African thing. Cruelty to animals is a world wide phenomenon. I go into the black areas because that's my job but don't think that cruelty to animals doesn't happen in the white areas. It does. There's no difference. There's as much barbaric treatment of animals by whites as there is by blacks."

Rose nodded her head, appreciating Brigit's argument. It sounded as if she had had to justify her stance many times before. She spoke vehemently, sounding almost on the defensive. For Rose, it was all so new. She'd never thought about any of these issues. Once again, she felt as if she had been leading such a sheltered existence. Maybe shielded was a better word. She had been shielded or had shielded herself from exposure to realities that weren't so pleasant to confront. Time to get real, she told herself. You're living in Africa. No – you're living in the world. Time to take off those rose-coloured spectacles!

Before they left the village, Brigit phoned the vet and spoke to his receptionist. "When's Werner coming in to Mamphis?" There was a pause. "I'd like him to check out a donkey…"

While Brigit was on her cell phone, Rose checked hers. There was an SMS from Ronald:

Hi Rose – Irish pub night in Heimat. Live singer. Come along. Meet at Oberon Hotel @ 6.45. Ron.

Rose thought about it. Yes. She'd accept. His "Come along" gave her the impression that it was casual – not a date or anything. She wondered if Brigit intended taking her to the museum still. She wasn't in the mood. It was nearly noon. They would probably first have to return to Oberon to drop off Michael. She felt completely drained from the morning's events but didn't know how to postpone the event without sounding ungrateful.

Soon, they were on their way back towards Oberon.

Rose stifled a yawn: “You must be really tired from this morning. Maybe we should leave the museum for today.”

“I think it’s too late to go today in any case. We can do it another day. How long do you intend to stay here for?” Brigit asked.

Was she trying to find another day for the museum or was this Brigit’s way of asking how long she intended staying and when she could expect payment? Rose was sure Brigit wasn’t one to avoid direct questions. She wouldn’t be shy to ask. She had a business to run. Rose reassured her: “Let me pay you for next week. That’ll give me two weeks in all. I’m sure it will be enough time.”

“We’ll find a day to go next week then.”

Rose was relieved. She couldn’t wait to flop onto her bed and read.

“How’s the research going?” Brigit asked.

“It’s not. I haven’t made one inch of progress. You know the photos I showed you? I think they could have been taken at Lakeview farm - by the lake.

Brigit raised her eyebrows. “That’s progress.”

“I...I really don’t know. They keep a visitor’s book. I wonder if there’s always been one. A visitor’s book, I mean. Maybe I could see if my mother wrote a message.”

“Why don’t you just phone the Dalberts and ask. I’m sure their number’s in the book.”

“Er… ja. I never thought of that.” They drove along in silence. Then Rose said: “I’m also hoping to find some information at the rock art museum but what it could be, I have no idea.”

When Rose returned, the door to her cottage was open and the worn down pumps were placed neatly side by side next to the mat. The red stoep shone like rubies in the skittering sunlight and when Rose entered the cottage, there was Happiness on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor.

“Hello Happiness. How’s your child?”

“She’s much better.” She was now on her haunches, slowly immersing a cloth into a bucket and wringing it out. Then, she resumed her slow circular scrubbing.

Rose sat on the couch in the living area and flipped through a magazine. How long would the woman take? She was desperate for her to leave. The duvet was soft and yielding and called her name but she didn’t want Happiness to witness her bedding down in broad daylight. It would make her feel guilty. Happiness lingered in the

kitchen, slowly wiping the surfaces of the counter, fridge, microwave, sink area, humming tunelessly as she worked. Oh come on! I haven't touched anything in there. It's all spotless, Rose wanted to say.

"What was wrong with the child?"

"Ah…the healer told me it was her blood. There was something bad in the blood. He gave me something to clean the blood."

God. A healer cleaning the blood. It sounded ominous.

Happiness moved towards Rose and started cleaning around her, neatening the cushions on the couch, straightening the pile of magazines, spraying cleaning fluid here and there, wiping the table, the glass ashtray, the silver tray, the almost empty bottle of sherry. There was something mesmerising about the way she wiped. Round and round – like she was practising some magical ritual. And her continuous humming like an ancient incantation. It really irritated Rose.

Still she lingered. She stood in front of Rose. What now? She wants to clean under my feet. She prepared to lift her feet.

"The healer had a dream about you. About the white woman in the place I'm working."

The magazine Rose was reading dropped on the floor as she sat up. "Really! What does that mean?" She gave a nervous little giggle.

"It means that your ancestors have a message for you. You must come to the healer. She wants to see you."

Charlatan. She dreamt up the ancestor story for the gullible white woman who hands out hundred rand notes.

"Where is she?"

"In my village. You must come with me. I'll take you to her."

Rose's interest was piqued. She wanted to see a sangoma at work. Who knew? Maybe she would have answers for her. She would try keep an open mind.

"When?"

"I'll find out when my next off is. I will tell you, then you'll come." She collected her cleaning equipment and left.

Finally. Rose kicked off her shoes and lay on her bed. It felt chilly so she slipped in under the duvet and, looking up at the blue square of skylight above her head, thought about what information her ancestors had to tell her. Soon, she turned onto her side and fell asleep.

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Mr du Plooy paid a call on me last night, bowing with mock courtesy, and inviting me on a hunt. I think I misjudged his character on first acquaintance. He is most charming- what you would call a rough diamond. So today, I stood on the plain between village and cliff waiting for the group to gather. A man called William Plommer, a Hottentot, gallantly offered to teach me how to shoot with a bow and arrow. I laughed. I – who have been an accomplished archer ever since I was knee-high! I told him that not only could I shoot, but that I would bring down one of the swallows that swooped and dove above our heads. This a most difficult feat as these creatures fly at tremendous speed and also at great height. He shook his head, incredulous, as I posed with the bow and smoothly released the arrow, bringing down a swallow to land neatly at his feet.

The medicine man was standing nearby anxiously looking at the sky, as he so often does, no doubt waiting for the rains. He was furious that I had killed the swallow. In menacing tones, he warned me of the sorcerer who resides within each bird, and who will enter the body of the man who slays it. I do not believe in his mumbo jumbo and if he was trying to frighten me, he failed dismally.

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Chapter 17

Rose arrived punctually at the hotel where Ronald was already waiting. Petra was sitting in the front seat. So, it wasn't a date. She was relieved – it alleviated any expectation of sex. She liked Ronald but she didn't think she wanted to sleep with him. She offered to drive, thinking to ease Ronald's petrol bill, but he laughed: "I don't trust women's driving." She was secretly pleased with his answer because she felt self-conscious with a male in the passenger seat.

It was a mission to scramble into the back of his car, an old two-door coupe and she had to take care to avoid the thick black oil that glistened around the door catch.

In the murky light of dusk, as they drove down the main street, Heimat appeared no more charming or lively than on her previous visit but at the Swallows in the Field coffee-shop and pub, the several cars parked at odd angles on the verge spoke of human activity within. And in contrast to her previous visit, when the field next to the coffee-shop was as inert as Astroturf, it was now all aquiver as thousands of swallows fluttered above the field in a constant draught of restless activity, pouring in and streaming out as if there existed some swallow metropolis from under the eaves.

The place was full and noisy and dimly lit. A singer sat on a barstool in the corner. She wore a granny-print dress and had long wavy hair which brushed against her guitar as she sang haunting folk melodies about long lost loves in a voice as sweet as honey. Was this why it was an Irish evening?

Tables and chairs turned this way and that and couches had been cramped into the small space. They found space on a couch. Ronald groaned as he sank down onto the cushions.

"Long day at the office?" Rose asked.

"This time of the year. It's crazy."

"What will you have?" The waitress, a pixie of a girl with short spiky hair, asked.

"You'll have to have a Guinness," Ronald suggested.

Rose nodded amenably, inspecting the customers. They were mostly around her age - and Petra's and Ronald's - and very ethno-bongo: bearded men in Madiba shirts and sandals, blowzy women in print dresses and African beads.

"Where did all these people pop up from? The village looked so deserted." Rose wanted to know.

"From around, I suppose." Petra replied, scanning the crowd in the darkened room. "Oh, that's fun. We have the Cult of the Goddess here tonight." She looked fresh and crisp in jeans and a white shirt, and she'd tied her brown hair back which accentuated her round face. A nice face: regular features, clear skin and widely-spaced eyes.

"What's that?" Rose was interested, thinking of the White Goddess.

"New Age garbage," Ronald said.

"What are they? Like a coven of witches?"

"I don't think so. It's just what I call this bunch. I've always managed to avoid them." Petra looked dismissive.

"What's been happening? How's the research?" Ronald took a long swig from his glass of Guinness.

"Not much…I went with Brigit Liber to Mamphis village. D'you know that she runs an NGO to do with animal welfare? I think she's doing amazing work but she faces all sorts of obstacles. Like - she always has to justify her position – people ask her why she pays so much attention to animals when the people are so poor and needy.

"I agree. People's needs *are* more important than animals'."

Rose felt irked that Ronald failed to see the value in Brigit's work but she didn't have the words to argue.

"I think it's important that animals are taken care of," Petra responded. "Isn't it the sign of a humane and civilised society?"

"Hitler took great care of his dogs. He had a dog called Blondi that slept in his bed," Ronald rebutted.

"Is this seat taken?" A large woman in a flowing dress and hair like a wheat field bounded up. Rose bounced a little in her seat as the woman sat down heavily next to her.

She smiled at Rose. "Hi. I'm Sue."

"Rose and Petra."

"Hello girlfriend, I just love your cardigan," The woman greeted a skinny woman who walked past. The cardigan was pretty – a hand-knitted creation in soft limes and pinks - very designer. Girlfriend pulled up a chair and sat down. Soon, a circle of women had gathered. Ronald, nonplussed to be the only male, gravitated to the bar.

Rose and Petra eavesdropped as the women nattered about their children's milestones and diets, whether Montessori or homeschooling was the way to go, the advantages of home birthing and where to find a doula.

"What's a doula?" Rose whispered to Petra, who shrugged her shoulders.

"There's a great organic food market in Cottam that sells homemade wooden toys. I don't believe in plastic. It causes cancer," said one.

"Beth refuses to play with wooden toys. She's such a girlie girl, although she loves the horses." She emphasized the word "loves", stretching it out like toffee. This was Girlfriend. She turned to Rose and Petra: "We breed horses. Me and my man." She looked horsey.

"Where're you from?" Rose wanted to know.

"Cape Town. Both of us. I met him at a meeting - we were both into struggle politics in a big way. He walked into the room and I said to him: 'I'm going to marry you.'" She laughed displaying lots of gum. "Well, actually, we're still not married but we live together. With our daughter, Beth. We have such a deep relationship that we don't need a piece of paper to seal our bond. Every night, we sit on the edge of our bed and say what's made us sad, what's made us glad, what's made us bad and what's made us mad that day. It's like this totally safe space where we can talk about our feelings without fear."

"Before my wedding, I'm going to celebrate womanhood. We're all going to the field and we're going to hold hands and say what it means to be a woman," another woman pronounced, her eyes shining.

Girlfriend said: "I'll say: to be a woman is to change the world for the better. We're going to make it like a female space. Long live girl-power!" She raised her fist in the air.

"I'll say to be a woman is to know the power of the goddess," Sue proclaimed in a loud and resonant voice. "What would you say?" she asked Rose.

"God…you've put me in a spot. To be a woman…er…" Rose felt obliged to come up with something. Er…to be a woman is to be a …er…is to nurture life." She felt relieved that she'd come up with this, even if it was so silly. "What would you say?" She turned and asked Petra, who had determinedly been keeping a low profile. Petra smiled with feigned sweetness, keeping her lips tightly shut.

"What is the power of the goddess?" Rose wanted to know.

"We are all goddesses. I am Gaia – Earth Goddess. We worship the great goddesses – like Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter. We believe that each of us has the goddess within. And you Rose. You need to find your inner goddess so that your inner truth can be revealed," Sue proclaimed with solemnity.

Did Hank know these women, Hank with his rusty plaque that cited the Goddess of Truth? Did he also belong to the Cult of the Goddess? She laughed at the thought. If they weren't acquainted, she'd have to introduce them.

Hank. She looked at the door, suddenly wishing he'd would walk through it, that he'd see her and sit next to her, his thigh brushing against hers, and she would feel its heat and, without any words, she would stand up and he would follow her, and they would exit the bar, into the dark of the night and...

"Who would you model yourself on?" Sue was asking Rose.

"Er...Pandora?" she said in a wavering voice.

"Pandora was not a goddess. She was a mortal woman. Who released trouble on the world. You look like you can be Artemis, the virgin goddess, the huntress, but also friend to all small creatures." She turned to the others: "What time are we meeting tomorrow?"

"Didn't we say eight, eight-thirty?" someone replied. "After we finish with the children."

Sue explained to Rose: "We're going to stand in this field outside here to stop the planes from taking off. There's a landing strip just over there." She pointed in the direction of the field. "And there are two thousand swallows that nest over in the field outside and the noise of the planes is stressing them out. We've spoken nicely to the farmer to move his landing strip but he refuses so now is the time for action."

"Won't you disturb them too? Standing all over the field?" Petra asked.

Sue looked at her witheringly and stood up. "Well, must have an early night." And she flounced out the door.

On the way home, Rose and Petra related the conversation to Ronald.

"Ditsy dames," he laughed.

"They take themselves so seriously and they've worked on themselves so much. In fact, they are just so into themselves. Did any of them ask you one question about yourself? With all their new age stuff. They think they're these, like, domestic goddesses, but really, all they are are domestic drudges - like their great grandmothers. What's changed?" Petra was sitting in the back of the car.

Rose felt bad. Had she asked Petra one question about herself? Now she couldn't. It would be too obvious. Next time. Next time she would definitely ask her questions about herself. She'd make a point of inviting her somewhere so that she could ask her questions. But not tonight.

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The hunting expedition was a great success. Dressed in my men's clothing, I was treated accordingly, the men allowing me to get a shot at a mountain reedbok, which I felled. The group's admiration for my adroitness with a rifle was most satisfying, I must confess. The skill of the Bushmen trackers is amazing to behold, their senses seemingly more developed than the other races as they spot the faintest tracks or, by putting an ear to the ground, are able to hear the animals and thus locate them. The hunt produced a half dozen carcasses or so, which they gave to the villagers to prepare for trading with the farmers downstream.

In the night, there was a great meat feast for everyone in the village. After indulging to the point of gluttony, we relaxed around the fire and, sharing pipes of honey flavoured tobacco, the raiders told their stories of great daring and near escapes. It appears as if they are a real thorn in the sides of the native, English and Boer farmers, and pursued by British officialdom all the way from Griqualand in the south to the highlands of Natal in the north. They are rogues but most amusing ones. When it was time to retire, I bade all goodnight, to have Mr du Plooy accompany me to my accommodation as if he were the most refined gentlemen from the best of society. He has an animal magnetism that is positively ensnaring. They are leaving at first light and I will be sorry to see them go.

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She was becoming accustomed to the light flooding the room at dawn and the peacock's mewls piercing her dreams so that by the time she made her way to the main house it was nearly eight. She planned to drive to the museum today. If Brigit was unavailable, she could always go with her again on another day.

"Morning Happiness."

"Do you want eggs?" Happiness, bringing her a pot of coffee, asked.

"Uh…don't worry, thanks. Is Brigit around?"

"No – she went out early with Michael."

Rose helped herself to coffee. "Did you ask her when you can go off?"

"No. She will tell me."

Rose wondered if this was not a little unfair – that Brigit should inform her staff in advance as to when they could go off. But she supposed that there had to be flexibility. It was the nature of the work. If guests arrived at the last minute, the staff would have to be there.

The metallic jangle of the phone interrupted the women's quiet tones.

Happiness answered, then called out: "Mr Hank!"

Rose's stomach gave a little lurch as she heard his footsteps approaching from down the passage.

"Morning. Morning. Morning Rose."

She watched him from behind as he spoke and nodded and shook his head and moved his weight from one foot to the other. It was the first time she had seen him in long pants; his legs rose like pillars from brogues to buttocks, which formed two solid mounds under the khaki. Next time I'm not going to withdraw from his advances. Why had she held back? Was she a slave to some puritanical streak or was she just committed to common decency? In this day and age, was she was just being naïve? That it was fine to sleep around with others people's spouses? The rhythms of human interaction played on around her but she didn't know its form. Still, she longed for a coda to her dance with Hank. She would have to orchestrate a refrain.

He helped himself to coffee and sat down opposite her. "Bang go my plans for today. I had some tourists booked to do a flip of the Berg but they've just cancelled. Someone…the husband…the wife…has gippo-guts."

"That could be a bit awkward in a small plane." She looked down at the pattern of toast crumbs on her plate. She had thought of something but it required courage to voice. Say it. Say it now. Now: "Er…why don't you take me instead? I'd like to see the Berg from the air. You could add your…um… (what was the word?) …er… fee….bill to my account."

"Great idea! Do you have a warm jacket? It's freezing in the cockpit."

They drove on the now familiar Heimat Road. The car smelt of hot leather and damp carpets. She tried focusing on the road ahead but the intimacy created by the confines of the bakkie heightened her self-consciousness. She was aware of his

maleness: his hand smoothly working the gear stick, blonde arm hairs glistening in the sun, his kneecaps pushing against his trousers, pushing against the steering column, a pulse beating in his broad ruddy neck. Now why had she begun to hyperventilate? Her fingers curled and her hands stiffened from the lack of oxygen. She saw black and silver spots dancing in front of her eyes. Where were they coming from? She cupped her hands over her mouth and breathed deeply into them.

"What's wrong, Rosy? Cold hands?"

"I just remembered - I'm scared of small planes."

He took her hand and smiled reassuringly at her: "Your hand is icy! Don't worry. With me at the controls, there's nothing to fear."

Her skin was melting under his touch. She had to breathe. In. Out. In. Out. He let go of her hand to take a bend.

The silence was uncomfortable. She scoured her head for conversation. "I met these women last night who model themselves on Greek goddesses. This goddess thing seems popular in these parts."

"What goddess thing?" He sounded perplexed.

"You know…your Goddess of Truth – the plaque on your archway – the one who will nurture you, the one I'm looking for. And these women I met at the Swallows of the Field - they're...er…do you know them? "

He laughed. "You're the only goddess I know. The plaque came with the house when we bought it."

Truth, lies. Either, or. When you were a child, the truth was all there was but even then, it sometimes took your breath away when you were ordered to tell it. Be true to yourself. Was there only one truth to live by? She wished life were that simple. She asked Hank: "What would you say the truth is – for you?" What a silly question. The last of the bon vivants. The great raconteur. But Hank tried.

"My truth? Hell… er…you've caught me unawares. Maybe eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die or… or… something like as we sow, so shall we reap. No. Here it is: the Goddess of Truth nurtures those who sow the seeds of promise."

Approaching Heimat, they turned off onto a dirt road where they drove for miles and miles around the perimeter of a large green field. Finally, the metallic glint of the steel hangars came into view and Hank explained: "I park my plane on this farm. The farmer has a runway so this is where we take off."

A small plane was parked on the apron. The name Icarus was written in italics on the side.

"My God! Who named this plane? I hope it's not prophetic." Rose laughed nervously.

"Not me. When I bought this plane, this was the name that'd been registered. Well, climb in." He opened the door, pulled down the stairs and guided her up with a firm hand in the small of her back.

The sun shone through the window of the cockpit, making diamonds and rainbows on the flawed glass. As the noise of the engines whirred louder and louder, Rose's excitement mounted; blood pounded in her head and then they were taxiing down the runway, the green field flashing past like your life before an accident.

"What the fu..?"

From the windscreen, they saw women running towards them, their hair streaming and their garments flapping out behind them. They were wielding poles, brooms, garden rakes, pitchforks and other farming implements. Hank slammed on the brakes, the small plane pirouetting in a full circle and coming to rest with its nose once more facing the angry mob.

After a second or two of stunned silence, Rose recovered: "Here're your goddesses, Hank. Coming to nurture you with their truth."

"Their truth but not mine. I wanna get this baby up in the air."

He emerged from the cockpit, followed by Rose. She felt embarrassed for them to see her. She should have remembered their planned sit-in.

"Ladies. Ladies." He smilingly faced the pack. "I need to take off."

"Uh uh. Not gonna happen." Sue, the one who called herself Gaia, stood firmly on the runway, her hands on their hips, her large breasts thrust forward like a diving board. She shook her head.

"Come now, ladies." He was charming and disarming but Gaia was unmoved.

"We've told the farmer that this runway has to stop operating, that the planes are disturbing the swallows."

"Swallows? I don't see any swallows."

"That's because you've scared them off."

Hank looked at Rose, who pretended not to have recognised any of the women: "I could call the cops." The women were now sitting on the runway.

“No. Don’t. They’ll leave soon. They have children to feed.” Rose suddenly felt deflated – all that build-up and now the adrenaline spent – and a little sympathetic to her sisters’ plight. As domestic goddesses, they were bound to their homes and the needs and whims of their husbands and children. It could only ever be a part-time devotion to their causes - between nurturing, nourishing and lifting. But why not avail themselves of the abundance of domestic labour in this country? Brigit was a shining example of a woman who managed it all – family, the Chameleon, PAW - only because she had her two pillars: Thuli and Happiness.

“Let’s go have some coffee. There’s a place at the edge of the field,” Hank suggested.

“I think that’s their headquarters.”

Hank scratched his head.

Rose remembered the Lutheran Church down the road. Again it took courage to suggest it, but she did: “Just for a look-see. But,” she stressed. “You must charge me for your time. Please. Otherwise...” Otherwise what? She couldn’t complete the sentence.

They parked on the church property which was surrounded by hectares of green pasture and walked along the short path that led to the church building. This was small and unimpressive - just a rectangle with a pitched tin roof but, according to the National Heritage information board, it was special and unusual because it was entirely constructed from yellowwood beams. A small brick portico led to the weathered front door on which a bronze plaque read:

Lutheran Chapel of the Holy Spirit.
Building erected in 1874. Church restored in 1990.
Financed by Pine Paper Company Limited.

The door was unlocked so they entered to be met with an eerie light that flooded the chapel. It filtered not only through the leaded windows that lined the room but seemed to seep in through the wooden walls, creating a luteous light that seemingly illuminated your every flaw and failing for God’s harsh scrutiny.

It was cool in the room. And so dreary, it reminded Rose of a schoolroom with its pews arranged in banks of two, also made from yellowwood. There were no soft furnishings, no ornamentation. She walked down the aisle to where the pulpit stood uncovered and unadorned, and picked up the old well-thumbed black Bible. She wasn’t

one who believed that the verse chanced upon by opening a Bible at random held some deep significance but she did so anyway:

To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under the sun...
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted…

The passage was quite beautiful but it didn't exactly beat a path to epiphany so she put the Bible down and continued exploring the room. Along the back wall, was a large wooden chest typical of the ones used for storing treasure or a trousseau. Rose expected it to be locked but when she knelt beside it and tried to lift the lid, it opened. The pastor here must be a very trusting sort or else it contained nothing of value for him, but for Rose, the contents were precious enough. Leather-bound journals. She lifted the uppermost one and leaved through its pages. Columns of names, dates and parentage handwritten neatly in faded blue ink.

"What are you prospecting for?" Hank asked.

She looked at him. "I don't really know. Look – they're records of christenings, marriages, deaths. Maybe I'll find my mother's name. It's a long shot. She was born around 1947. Or my father's. But I don't know what I'm looking for."

He nodded: "I'll leave you to it."

She sat down in one of the pews, the wood unyielding under her buttocks, and scanned the names through the forties, and the decade before that and the one beyond, but there was nothing, no name that sparked a memory or struck a familiar chord, something once remembered but since forgotten. She stood up, closing the book and walked to the window. There was Hank, hazy through the flawed glass. He was bending over, studying something beyond her vision, his shaved pate gleaming in the sunlight. It reminded her of their first meeting with him on his hands and knees sniffing the soil, the gardener who could make her bloom. Or deflower her. He had prepared the soil and was ready to sow his seed. Sex and death. She watched him in this garden of weeds and bones and memories engraved in stone but forever forgotten and she felt an unnamed longing stirring deep in her heart.

Emerging from the chapel, she walked around to the graveyard in the sunlight, zigzagging her way between saplings and clumps of khakibos that had taken root haphazardly amongst the graves. Everywhere, the grass grew pale and lank. Beneath

the oldest graves lay the remains of some German pioneers and British settlers who'd arrived later. The tombstones leaned like old men with lumbago and some were stained with a black liquid that ran down over the inscriptions like inky tears: 'Peace perfect peace'; 'She came from afar and never wanted to leave'; 'He served this community with love and devotion'. A glass jar that had once held the hasty pickings of a visitor lay stained and forgotten on a plinth.

In the newer section, between the likes of Alexander Nicholson, Elizabeth Young and Gerald Wilson, rested the Zulu dead: Sibusiso Guthu, Fikile Mabena and Nomusa Shabangu. So, there was no separation of races in this graveyard even at the height of the apartheid folly. '*Lala ngoxolo'*; '*Tata wethu'*.

Through a brick arch, there was a monument 'in loving and grateful memory of the glorious dead who made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War'. A long list of the fallen young men - sons, brothers and husbands - had been engraved in its stone pedestal. And where were the Oberon inhabitants of German descent? Interred in prisoner-of-war camps a thousand miles away. But the saddest of all was the one gravestone for the three siblings, James who died at two in 1885, John who died at 10 months in 1891 and Mary, who died aged four in 1892. 'Suffer the little children who came unto me'.

"Any luck?" Hank asked her. They had started towards the car.

She shook her head. She was aware of her shoulders drooping under the tragedy of the past and her yearnings of the present.

Hank glanced at her. "Don't lose hope. There would be graveyards like this in every little village in the area: Garten, Cottam, Oberon, Pennock...you could check them all out."

"Oh God," she groaned. "That makes it worse. I don't even know what I'm looking for. I *am* losing hope."

"Hope is what keeps our hearts beating. Don't forget the seeds of hope you wear on your wrist."

"I thought you said they were the seeds of promise… or of truth." She brought her wrist up to where she could see the thong's leather darkening with wear. She wished he would take hold of it and bring it to his lips again. Her shyness and discomfiture had returned and she knew that she couldn't do it – she couldn't betray Brigit for a few moments of gratification and a lifetime of guilt.

"Yeah, well…whatever. Hope, truth, truth, hope – it's all the same." He laughed. "This is all too philosophical for me." They had reached the car. Left standing in the heat of the day, it felt like an oven and she sat gingerly, the heat searing through her light clothes. Hank energetically wound down the window, shifted gears and reversed out the church grounds.

Soon they were on their way back to the airstrip. Rose looked out of her side window at the fields of lucerne flashing by. They were so bright, so bursting with green, they looked plastic. Make hay while the sun shines - for Denton's dairy cows. Why hadn't she called him yet? Maybe she didn't want to confront the truth after all. They weren't seeds of hope and truth that she wore, only seeds of doubt. They were threatening to grow into something quite unwanted. Weeds. Her quest was merely a delaying tactic for the new life that waited for her in Joburg. It felt too much like adulthood- she was on her own with all her money and its responsibilities.

Brushing away a piece of hair that was blowing on her face, Rose looked at Hank's profile. Hank the prop, the tank, the hunk, the gardener, with his green fingers and seedy intentions. She asked him: "If I give you some seeds, will you try grow them for me? I doubt if they're viable – they must be long past their shelf life, but you never know. I'm just so bad when it comes to looking after…" The thought of Hank nurturing her seeds was thrilling. It was a way of growing his acquaintance, of nurturing their association. His phone rang.

"Yep?...Uh huh…" His tone was serious. "How is he?...Have you called an ambulance?....Uh huh…ok…well, just keep him calm until… I'll be there as soon as I can…"

He glanced in her direction, his expression grave: "That was Enoch, my farm manager. There's been an accident…one of the guys landed under the tractor – it toppled."

"That's terrible! Is he…?"

"He's alive. Conscious. But I need to get there as soon as…"

"Just as well we weren't up in the air."

Hank nodded. "We'll do it another time."

Or not, thought Rose. She suddenly felt irritated. There was always this suspension, this deferment, this waiting for the perfect moment that never materialised. Like the museum arrangement. She was going to go tomorrow. With or without Brigit.

She would tell her that time was running out and she'd love her company but if she couldn't join her, she'd understand.

Chapter 18

She found herself standing at the entrance to the Museum of Bushman Culture and Rock Art, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. From what she'd heard, she imagined the building would stand out like a blight on the landscape but it didn't. It had been cleverly enfolded in the thick vegetation that grew at the foot of the mountain that bordered the Bergsun hotel. All that was visible were two discreet ticket boxes – only one was manned today - and a short covered walkway that led to the museum.

She hadn't known what to expect but thought of large dioramas set in walls and glass display cabinets filled with artefacts like the ones she'd seen in New York's Museum of Natural History. She wondered if they still existed, those terrible tableaus where fur-draped mannequins in wild wigs squatted over Perspex fires, or moth-eaten woolly mammoths, frozen in their tracks, stared glassily at air-conditioned wastelands.

The museum was a shadowy and vast cavern that had been cast from a million tons of tinted concrete. There were reproductions of San art on the walls cleverly illuminated by hidden lighting. From out of the darkness, water trickled down over the rocky walls, dripping between crevices and fissures before sliding into black ponds - chlorinated. The razor-sharp smell took her back to Sunday afternoons spent at Livvie's friends' pools.

She stood alone in the silence with only the invisible San for company wondering how the place could ever survive if today's attendance was anything to go by. Were the museum attendants the first casualties of this no-show? So much for the experts on hand to answer all her questions.

The cashier had told her to wait for the film so she stood shored up by the semi-darkness. There was a flicker of lights on the wall in front of her and the crackle of the soundtrack and she walked further into the chamber and sat on a bank of benches, lifting her chin to experience the full effect of the huge screen that curved around the walls.

The title, *The secret of the rocks: the art of the San,* rolled on to the sound of panpipes, marimbas and tom-toms. It was so cheesy but they couldn't very well have used a Bushman number, could they? Had any one ever heard their music? The small group remaining in the Kalahari – did they still play the old music? A sunlit panorama of the Drakensberg lit up the screen and the male narrator began in a voice she'd heard before, a deep voice, roundly-articulated with a barely-there black lilt.

"*The mighty Drakensberg, uKhahlamba, was once home to the San people, the first people to inhabit southern Africa. For ten thousand years, they lived as members of a well-organised and harmonious society. There was no need for chiefs or leaders: all lived peaceably together, hunting game and gathering plants, sharing the land and its wealth, settling where food was plentiful, moving on as it became scarce.*

It all sounded very ideal, this life of the noble savage. Who was the audience? School kids? No wonder the place was so empty. The camera pans to a rocky ledge that falls precipitously away to the shimmering valley floor. Here a Bushman walks, his limbs like water. And under the ledge, another squats, his brow wrinkled by the wisps of smoke newly birthed by his whirling sticks and a woman on her knees pounds a root with a stone. From the unseen speakers, the irregular clicks of a language spoken only by the dead.

"*But this peaceful and ordered way of life was to come to an end. By the end of the eighteenth century, colonial farmers settled into the areas inhabited by the San. They wiped out their game and destroyed their veld foods. Now dispossessed of their lands and denied its resources, the San were forced to raid the farms to survive. The San's existence was increasingly threatened as they were driven out of the area, mercilessly hunted like vermin or enslaved as cheap labour by the farmers.*

"Sadly, today, there are no surviving Drakensberg San. Only their traces remain in their rock paintings. Some have withstood the ravages of time, providing a precious record of their lives, their rituals and their customs.

The camera zooms to the rocks: "*Considering the rough rock surface, the paintings are remarkably fine in their striking detail and delicate colouring. Note the folds of skin, the expression on the faces, the twist of the horns of these elands, all expressed with the most skilful shading and economy of line.*

It was true. She'd never seen the detail before: *"But these paintings give us more than visual beauty; they open up the world of the San for us. This hunter here waits in anticipation of the hunt, his quiver slung over his shoulder; he carries his bow aloft. We clearly see the arrow with its arrowhead that separates from the shaft on impact; the triple-curves of the bow that endow the instrument with greater speed and accuracy.*

"This image depicts a woman with a digging stick, the bulb at its base easing its passage through the soil.

To have this record of their lives, their technology. It was something precious. *"Pictures of women gathering or preparing plants are relatively rare in San art. This is surprising when one considers that more than half the San diet came from women's endeavours. What is also mysterious is that many of the animals depicted in these images were often not part of the diet or even resident in the areas where they lived.*

"Recently, ethnographers and other experts have come to regard San art as something more than a portrayal of their lives. As researchers delve deeper, they have come to view the art as having profound religious significance, connected to the most important religious San ritual: the Great Dance.

Under darkening skies, women sit around a fire, singing and clapping while men shuffle around the edges of the circle: "*It is thought that the Great Dance lies at the heart of San art. During the dance, the shamans of the clan go into a trance-state to enter the spirit world. In this way they can commune with the dead, or ask their gods for rain, heal the sick, bring the antelope herds or chase away evil spirits.*

The dance becomes wilder. Some lie on the ground, their bodies buffed to a sweaty sheen. Others reel and sway, doubled over, their arms stretched out behind their backs like wings. Some of the women also lie recumbent, moaning. The camera cuts to the art again: "*Look at these long lines emerging from the top of the head of this man here, the back of the neck and between shoulder blades - they symbolise the spirit as it leaves the body. He is the shaman of the clan, asking his god for the potency he needs to perform his religious and spiritual duties. See how he staggers, his body bent forward, his arms stretched behind his back, feeling the pain of the potency as it boils in his abdomen.*

Who first came up with this interpretation? Whoever it was must have had really good visual literacy skills - something she admired. Words were her medium.

She realised she was feeling stiff, her neck straining from looking upwards. And she should have brought a cardigan. Hank rose in her mind - like Poseidon, ready to ride the waves of her thoughts. She'd missed some of the soundtrack. She forced her mind back:

"....painting what they saw to harness the supernatural potency that they had accessed during the Great Dance. The shamans, themselves, were then possibly the artists who painted the visions they encountered while in trance.

"The shamans used the power channelled during the dance to try change aspects of their real world. When, for example, Bantu farmers arrived in the area, the

shamans tried to fight off these threatening forces. Spears, shields and cattle appear in the paintings, not as a record of historical events, but as symbols of the intruders' potency, to be rendered harmless by the shamans. And in the same way, when the whites arrived later, men on horseback armed with rifles and wagons emerged in the work. One interesting example of this is the painting that anthropologist Arnold Fitzgibbons discovered in a remote region of the Patilweng region in 2008. It has been superimposed on other earlier paintings, and appears to be of a white woman seen in profile, floating or falling forward, her arms outstretched...

"*In contrast to the older brush-painted art, this has been drawn with a finger. Accordingly, the figure is crude but it is not hard to see that she wears a Victorian bustle dress and a sunhat...*

Now she sat up. A white woman? What was the narrator saying?

"*…A clue to its age is the white pigment. This pigment is less enduring than the colours derived from the earth. It has been surmised that she was painted in the late 19th, early 20th century.*

"Foam and blood stream from her nose, as represented by the thick white and red lines, as if in she is in the throes of death. Two shamanic figures appear alongside her. Their posture is one of deep supplication, their arms outstretched behind them like wings as they wait to fuse with the potency that will be released at the moment of her death.

"Fitzgibbons believes the painting represents a real Victorian woman travelling in the area and encountering the San. He conjectures that she must have embodied some sort of power for the shaman and the painting was his attempt to harness the potency released on her death. Whether her death was real or merely symbolic, no one knows.

"Whatever one conjectures, one thing is certain; if the woman was indeed a subject of Queen Victoria, by this time, she was witness to the very last of the surviving San. Today only a small band of San continues to live in that harshest of terrains two thousand kilometres to the west, in the Kalahari Desert.

"But this is by no means the end of the story. As research into the San continues, our understanding is being transformed. These artworks are treasures to be conserved and safeguarded as part of the precious heritage that the San have contributed as the country's original inhabitants."

The film cut to another panorama of the Drakensberg as the credits rolled, then the scene faded and the lights came back on.

She sat unmoving on the bench. Was this white Victorian woman somehow connected to the White Goddess in Sir Philip Geoffrey's painting? Painted in pigment from bird guano on a rock or in incandescent oils on a canvas, were they one and the same? Who was she and what was her role in Rose's parentage?

And the Bushmen in the painting. Their bent-over stances suggested that they were not paying homage to her at all but trying to harness her power.

What to do with this now? How to make the connection? Where to begin? It was so frustrating. Maddening. She traipsed back to the hotel and sunk into a bucket chair on the veranda. Looking out at the view, the museum was hardly visible. She needed to run this by someone. She needed a friend. Not Brigit. She was too busy with her children, her life. She didn't need more demands placed on her. Rose felt guilty about not inviting her today. She would have but when she went for breakfast, Brigit wasn't around so she just left. She just couldn't wait any longer.

Petra. She'd ask her to join her at the Olive Branch. Would today be good for her? She might have lots of marking - it was close to exam time. Maybe she'd be too tired and wouldn't feel in the mood, or maybe she thought Rose's company was too boring. Or she had arrangements with the others and would feel guilty about not including Rose. Oh! Just SMS. That way you wouldn't pick up any reluctance or embarrassment in the voice, she chided herself.

She sat back nursing an orange juice in both hands, watching it as it rose pastel orange up through the straw. The chair's raffia upholstery irritated her back. After a few minutes, Petra replied:

Would love to. Let's do supper. How's 6.30?

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Connie arrived at the first stirrings of the sun, bearing a gift of eggs produced from a type of quail and some delicious melon, which Abel prepared for my breakfast. Afterwards, I rode out to the cliffs to explore the landscape, meeting a troupe of baboons that caused Betty to rear in fright. I was forced to hang on for dear life, rueing the fact that I was alone. If I had fallen off and injured myself, I would have lain there stranded for the Lord alone knows how many hours, although the rifle provided some

comfort. I'm sure if I fired a shot, its resounding noise would have reached the ears of the villagers in this veriest silent of worlds.

Following the path that wound around the tortuous bends of the escarpment, lo and behold! I came upon rock paintings. It was astounding to see the countless scenes of great complexity appearing at intervals in both directions along the cliff face, until the path petered out and I was forced to turn around. And what made it is even more thrilling was the medicine man's prohibitions. Looking around for fear of encountering him, I dismounted the now calm Betty to take a closer look. The paintings are superb: beautifully rendered in polychromatic shadings, displaying so fine a line, so detailed a representation, such delicate colouring that I am hard pressed to believe that they did not emanate from the finest talent of the Academy. Animals in all poses: sitting and standing, rearing grazing, running and dying.

The human figures are less realistically rendered but display a remarkable vigour as they walk, sit, stand and dance; singly and in groups. And then there are supernatural monsters, half man, half animal that are fascinating to behold, appearing as if they are falling into or emerging from the cracks in the rock face. Driven by instinct, I was compelled to place my hand over a large eland and immediately, I experienced such a profound sense of potency that I could feel it not only envelope me in the present but reach forward in time, towards the stars where future generations will hold it within their grasp.

If I touch the paintings, the string connecting these people to their god will break and the Bushman will be forced to leave his lands forever. Could this be true? While I viewed the art, these words did not enter my thoughts, but now, in contemplation, they have returned. Of course, it is silly superstition but I have kept silent because if word gets out that I have visited the paintings, I fear the medicine man will perform some dreadful mischief upon me.

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When she got back to the Chameleon, the Volvo and the bakkie stood in the carport. Hank and Brigit were home. Would either of them come knocking at her door? She doubted it. Why should they? Was Happiness still due to clean her room? Please not. She dreaded to see the door open to the cottage and the shabby shoes placed neatly alongside the mat but they weren't.

She wanted to check the Internet. Surely in that well-stocked pantry of information there was something about a white Victorian lady encountering the Drakensberg Bushmen but she wasn't going to use the Internet connection in Brigit's office. No. Not Brigit's office. The books then. She made a beeline for them, scattering them on the bed and jumping alongside, rifling through this one and that, haphazardly. The words danced before her eyes, unveiling their secrets – trance, dance, shamans, fish, mermaids, blood, potency, eland, rain cow, dots, spots, flickerings, bees, ladders, but nothing about a Victorian lady who got herself immortalised on the rocks by the Bushmen. A new find – so new that she was presented to the public for the first time at the museum's opening. A debut appearance.

She crisscrossed her arms and pulled her travel-sticky T-shirt over her head, stepping out of the rest of her clothes and into the shower, remembering the earlier vision she had experienced in the shower not so long ago. A hallucination? A self-induced trance? Then there was something impressionable, suggestible about her. That hypnotherapist was right.

Inside the Olive Branch, she paused for a moment, tasting the air before walking outside onto the veranda where a breeze should have been blowing but wasn't. A creeper with dark succulent leaves fell from the eaves and spilled onto the floor. There were wrought-iron tables and chairs with curlicues - heavy enough to thwart burglars from spiriting them away in the dead of night. None were occupied; it was too early for supper and too late for tea.

"Can I get you something to drink?" the young waitress asked, bringing a fragrant flurry of curry with her from the kitchen. She deposited a menu on the table.

"I'm expecting a friend." It was important for the waitress to know that - that she wasn't going to be alone, that she must leave another menu of the table. "Er… oh… okay…I'll have a…" She looked at the drinks on the menu. "Er…a cider…Savannah Light?" She'd try it – she'd never had one before. "Sorry…," she wanted to ask the girl if she could get an Internet connection here but she was gone.

She opened her laptop – she'd rather look busy than anxious while waiting for Petra. Distractedly moving the cursor around, she found herself on Connections and an available network. And it didn't emanate from the restaurant. This wasn't a free wirefire area.

The network was unsecured. All it took was a double click and she was on. This was really bad. Like stealing. She'd only be a minute – just a quick squiz. What was the difference between this and shoplifting? But really, how much bandwidth could she be using? She typed in her search terms. Where did she get this dishonesty from? From her father? Yes – that was it. He was a criminal sitting in jail. That was why Ruby had been so cagey with his identity. That was why no one had ever been able to trace him. A murderer. Ruby had her fling while he was on the run. She thought it was exciting having it on with a criminal.

About ten sites appeared. They all looked like nonsense. So this was why she had always been such a goody two shoes. It was a subliminal response to the idealised image she'd constructed of her father. If she behaved badly, her imagined father would have dissolved – whoosh – in a puff of smoke, leaving behind a degenerate – it was obvious. She looked up at the waitress who had brought her her cider, and shut her computer with a small bang. She hoped her expression didn't reflect the guilt she was feeling.

Kind and generous, well-educated, worldly and knowledgeable, in a respected position, with a sense of humour, clean fingernails and good teeth. And morally above reproach. That was her father. She had inherited his thorough decency. Or not, so it seemed – because she obviously wasn't. Then neither was he. Thoroughly decent. There was something to that expression about apples not falling far from the tree.

The traffic from the main road hissed steadily by. The cider rolled sharp and clean over her tongue. Adult apple juice. She liked its kick. A woman was yelling to her friend across the road. What a pair of lungs. She was disturbing the peace. Rose wished she'd shut up already. Call a policeman. She craned her head to look at the women. She wore a blanket wrapped around her waist. Could it be? The woeful woman she'd driven to the station? She half rose from to seat to get a better look but there was Petra coming through the front door, in a button-down shirt - small pale diagonal diamond pattern - and jeans. She was short, compact and chunky. No-nonsense sandals on her feet and no discipline issues in her classroom, she was sure.

Rose waved to attract her attention. "Hi -" she called. Now hold back on telling her about your discovery. Ask her questions about herself.

They kissed in greeting like old friends.

"This is a real treat. I really needed to get out." She sat across from Rose: "I've just had some great news..."

Elmarie appeared at their table. “Hello, ladies. Nice to see you. What can I get you to drink?”

“Er…I’ll have the same as Rose…I heard about the Ritters.” Petra looked up at Elmarie.

Elmarie hugged the menus to her rather meagre chest: “So no. Can you believe it! Pshew – there must be real bad blood there. The father was as bad in his day. And the grandfather. Ja no, it’s such a relief to know that the break-ins and vandalising have stopped.”

“They were responsible?” Mad Max and his relatives. Rose leant back but sat forward again - the chair was cruel on her spine.

“To try scare us off. The reality’s just too much. One of the brothers’ wives owns the Score Board down the road. They thought we were too much of a threat … too much of a … I don’t know. Well, you know, when we opened, I heard their business did fall off. And not surprising! It’s really grotty. And no wonder the police were so slack.”

“Why were they?” Rose asked.

“Because ... the Ritter whose wife has the Score Board – he’s a policeman. So the police sabotaged the investigation. You know – didn’t send the fingerprint guy, lost files…that sort of thing. But ja, what can you do,” Elmarie replied.

‘That’s frightening! I mean, the whole of the Oberon police force in cahoots to try get you out of business. Because it doesn’t suit one of their guys. I actually can’t believe that.” Petra shook her head.

“Ag, not all of them. Not the whole force. Well, you know, how we found out was that he got someone - his colleague - fired and this guy decided to spill the beans. He came to tell us earlier this week.”

Petra looked dubious: “Still, I suppose it’s better that you can put a face on the criminals… if you know what I mean… rather than faceless young criminals from across the border.”

“Ja.” Elmarie shrugged.

“I had this weird experience with one of the Ritters on the way down. That dark one. He started dicing me…cutting me off…it was really…I was really scared. And then up he pops - in Oberon.” Rose shuddered. “I got such a fright when I saw him here.” She looked at the two women. The experience sounded so puny in the telling.

"He's a psychopath," Petra shook her head. "I hope they all sit in jail for a long time…that more files don't get lost, or…or witnesses don't get threatened, or something."

"Ag, we're not pressing charges. It's not worth it. They won't be worrying us anymore. I don't want to get involved with it all and what not. You know," Elmarie rested her hands on the table, leaning towards them: "I said to Corrie that we would get over this. He was ready to pack up and go back to Joburg. Now he's pleased we stuck it out. But anyway, I can tell you, we went through hell. And it's not finished yet. We're fighting with the insurance company. We didn't even claim for the small losses – we were scared they'd blacklist us. And they still want to raise our premiums to hell. But ja, what can you do. That's the way it goes."

Rose and Petra made sympathetic noises.

Elmarie put the menus on the table: "So, what can I get for you two? We have kingklip on a bed of wasabi mash served with seasonal veggies and a lovely lamb curry. They're not on the menu."

She left them.

Rose shook her head. "Unbelievable – not to press charges. Don't you have to for insurance purposes?"

"Sounds odd. I wouldn't let them get away with it. But maybe the whole police force here is crooked so who would you even report it to? The colleague who was fired – why did he tell them now and not while it was going on? Well, maybe he had a fit of conscience but it sounds more like an act of revenge."

They sat in silence for a few moments, sipping on their ciders. A breeze blew through the veranda, agitating the fine hairs on Rose's arms and she pushed the piece of hair tickling her cheek behind her ear: "What were you telling me? That you had good news."

"I applied for a scholarship and got it." Petra's eyes shone in the veranda's diminishing light.

"Congratulations! What for?"

"To study at the University of London. A Masters in History."

Just as she finds a friend, she becomes history! Ha ha. But Rose was happy for her. And impressed. Petra must be really smart. "That's wonderful! When are you going?"

"The course starts in September – but I'm going to go in January. I'll start reading in the meantime. The resources there …the collections are so fantastic. For my field anyway."

"What's that?"

"I'm looking at white identity in a postcolonial context, the sense of belonging, the idea of rootedness – or of not belonging…"

Rose's expression was bemused: "Come again? It's completely beyond me."

Petra smiled: "It's hard to get a grip on post-grad theses when they're out your field.

"It's brilliant for you."

"It'll be hard to leave my family though. I'll miss them a lot."

"Your parents…?"

"They're in Durban and I've got a sister there as well. She's married with kids. I try to get there at every opportunity – to see my nieces."

"Where will you stay in London?" Now, maybe she was asking too many questions.

"With friends at first but then I'll look for a place of my own."

"It's lucky to have friends in London." Rose said.

"You'll soon have one. You can stay with me if you visit."

Rose was touched. She meant it too, Rose was sure. She was genuine, Petra. Maybe she would go over for a visit. Why not?

A familiar figure walked across the restaurant and onto the veranda. He was lugging a Pick 'n Pay bag in each hand.

"Oh…it's Michael. Hello." They greeted each other, and he made his way to the couch placed along the back wall.

"He works with Brigit at her animal welfare." Rose quietly told Petra. "Do you think I should have invited him to join us?"

"You could have. I wouldn't have minded."

"It's too late now. I feel funny."

"Next time."

"What should we choose?" They studied their menus.

A couple wafted onto the veranda. Tall, thin and grey-haired – they looked alike – from spending too many years together. They sat in silence drinking in the last

vestiges of daylight. Nice to be at that stage, Rose thought. Easy company. No pressure.

"What do you think of the Ritters? Do you think their criminal behaviour is inherited? You know – bad blood," Rose asked.

"They probably grew up in a violent and abusive home. Their father was a thug. His father was a thug. They've inherited thug memes rather than thug genes." Then she said in a small voice: "Sorry. I'm in teacher mode. I can hear myself and it makes me cringe."

"No… it's really interesting. But they've been discovering more and more that behaviour is inherited. Like thrill seeking …or addictive behaviour…or … or serial wife-cheaters. Their sons also tend to be. It gives evolutionary advantage to…– you know- to spread your seed to as many fertile women as possible."

"Maybe some behaviours are inherited. But ethics are learnt. What's unethical for one society might not be considered unethical for another."

"What about incest taboos or murder? All societies think they're wrong."

"The incest taboo thing maybe is inherited." Petra shrugged her shoulders. "We instinctually feel repelled at the thought and for genetically sound reasons. But murder. Well – for modern western people, it's wrong. But what about societies that practiced human sacrifice to appease angry gods? Or suicide – you'd think that every society would have a problem with it... but some suicide seemed to be sanctioned – like Samurai warriors with their hara-kiri."

Rose agreed: "Hmm – loss of face… Although suicide seems to run in some families,"

"That's true – but maybe that's about inheriting chemical imbalances that cause depression."

"This is a really cheerful topic," Rose asserted and they chuckled and then sighed.

"I came across something amazing today." Rose told Petra of her visit to the museum, and the film and the painting of the women who appeared to be wearing Victorian clothing. "What do you think of this Victorian lady being connected to the White Goddess in the painting somehow?"

"Could be," Petra was unsure: 'You'd need more research, something more to go on if you want to join the dots."

Rose felt disappointed. Petra reassured her: “But, well… yes. Yes – she definitely could be. Some research is bound to turn up. Sooner or later.”

Or never. “What I’d really like to do is to visit the rock art sites – especially that one – but I’m sure only the select few can go there.”

“You’d need to find an organised tour; a guide. I don’t know…”

Michael stood up, gathering himself to leave. The veranda wasn’t big. Rose smiled at him as he came her way. Here was her opportunity: “Do you want to join us? We’ve just ordered food. You…you can catch up…order quickly. Do you know Petra?”

Petra and Michael nodded their greetings. “Er…thanks. I’ve got supper waiting at home for me.” He smiled disarmingly.

“Michael – maybe you can help. Do you know any guides who can take me to rock art sites? Maybe a friend?”

“I don’t.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “But I know where a couple of sites are. I can take you to one,” he offered. “Er…maybe…um…,” he struggled. “I need to deliver some stuff to my father tomorrow – his place is near some paintings. I must make another delivery as well. I - I can fetch you. You could come with me. If you don’t mind. My mother – she won’t let us leave too quickly. If you don’t mind. But there’ll be time.”

“That would be lovely. And to meet your parents.”

“I’ll meet you here then. Make it nine. And - bring your passport.” He lifted his hand in leave-taking. “And wear hiking shoes,” he added.

Chapter 19

Rose leant against her car with folded arms and watched the movement of shoppers coming and going about their early morning business. She was wearing a vest and the sun stung the back of her neck and shoulders. Could she, should she apply sunblock cream standing in a car park? She got back into the car and dotted cream on her exposed bits. It was awkward. She didn't want the cream to get into the little holes that perforated the leather of her car seats.

The smell of sunscreen filled the car, evocative. She liked the word evocative. Evocations. Of what? She stretched towards her rear-view mirror and looked into her eyes. Were her secrets and desires still safely tucked away behind their grey irides? And then at her nose, cheeks and chin to ensure that the cream was completely rubbed in.

She got out the car again and narrowed her eyes behind her sunglasses. There was a rumble in the distance growing louder and before long, a quad bike came into view. God - they were such noisy things. The bike turned into the parking lot and drove towards her. Michael.

He grinned: "Hope you don't mind my wheels. It's from the Liber's farm. Brigit lends me one when I need to visit my folks."

Rose looked at the bike and the wide seat she had to straddle.

"Better take a jacket. Can be cool where we're going." He handed her a helmet

"Got one." She patted her backpack.

"Can I help you with the strap?" He fiddled under her chin. "How does that feel?"

Actually, it felt very nice she thought as she mounted the pillion, holding Michael lightly around his waist. A woman in tracksuit and high-heeled sandals walked by, her patent black handbag swinging at her shoulder. She stared open-mouthed.

The bike buzzed through the town like some plugged-in pestilence, attracting hostile looks from the old and the sour or covetous glances from the young and the young at heart. Now on the open road and the throttle opened, she slipped her hands under the hoodie Michael wore and tightened her grasp over his T shirt. Instant intimacy: he felt taut sitting weighted and balanced on the seat.

Soon they were driving along the Valley road, passing Leighton Manor and Lakeview Farm. Was she ever going to phone Denton Dalbert to ask to see the visitors' books? Why the procrastination? Maybe she was just tired of dead ends and

disappointments. As time passed, trails grew colder and leads got fainter. Why should she succeed where Maurice Hunter had failed?

Before long, they turned onto a sand road and started to climb. The bike shuddered over deep furrows where the soil was eroded and over beds of rocky scree. The roadside foliage grew wilder and more rampant, encroaching into the road, hampering their passage. Now and again they had to duck to avoid low hanging branches. Up hill, down dale and through gulley, they bounced around hairpin bends that sloped precipitously away to nothing. Her head, feeling not quite her own under the heavy helmet, bounced around too.

They stopped and alighted. Michael passed her a cold drink from a cubby hole under the seat.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, dismounting to stretch her legs. Her head felt damp under the helmet. She reached for the sunblock in her backpack. The skin on her legs felt tight where they had caught too much sun. She needed to rub more cream on them but it felt too intimate an action to perform under Michael's gaze. She decided to anyway. "Pale skin," she explained.

He nodded. "In about half an hour, we'll be in Lesotho. This is a short cut – through the back door. After that, it's quick. My parents live quite close to the border." He'd taken off his helmet and was throwing back a Coke.

"The passport?"

"Just in case. I can't afford to pay your bail." He laughed.

"Right." She smiled and drank some Coke, imagining it joggling around in her stomach as they wended their juddering way and then poured the rest onto the road. It fizzed on the surface for a few seconds before the pale soil drank it greedily, leaving only a dark patch on the sandy surface.

Michael turned off the rutted path onto a smoother sand road, which now climbed steadily, the vegetation thinning out until they were riding on a pass that offered long vistas of valleys reaching into the distance. They came to a narrow opening between two rocks wide enough for only one car to pass. There was a blackened copper plaque reading "Gabriel's Gate". Spread before them, surrounded by a mauve ring of mountains, was a valley shimmering in the morning heat. God's own land. From their elevated position, the land seemed to undulate like a choppy sea; scatterings of habitation clung tentatively to the peaks and troughs of the valley floor. Michael

switched off the engine. The air felt cooler and fresher than that of Oberon. Rose listened as she put on her jacket. Silence except for the sounds of her inhaling and exhaling amplified by the curve of the helmet.

They got back on the bike and followed the road that descended steeply into the valley. From close-up, the land was eroded and arid, hardly arable, dotted here and there with a balding pine tree or a clump of wattles. Michael turned into a side road. Twenty or so dwellings clustered around the slopes, some of them traditional rondavels, others constructed from concrete blocks complete with corrugated metal roofing and steel window frames. The noise of the bike brought people out from their houses. "*Haai*," they shouted. Michael slowed down to walking pace to greet the people who had come out to welcome him. There was much hand shaking hands and back slapping.

His father's house, a western style bungalow with entrance porch and tiled roof, lay at the edge on the village. Unusually, a shiny wire fence encircled the property, which was much larger than his neighbours', about half an acre of flat pale grass. The same fence continued along an adjacent field where mielies grew green and tall.

Michael parked in the shade of the house. It was a relief to remove the helmet; her head felt strangely light. His parents came out to meet them, his mother, short and matronly, wearing a dress made of brown *shweshwe*, the panels artfully arranged and his father in brown trousers and short sleeved shirt. Michael introduced them only as his parents and Rose wondered how she was going to address them. Mr and Mrs?

Mr, exuding affability and good cheer, ushered them into the lounge. There was wall-to-wall carpeting, brown speckled like eggshells and a brown draylon lounge suite. Rose sat opposite a wooden wall unit with a TV and small ceramic ornaments displayed in its compartments. The room looked like it had been deposited straight from the pages of a Joshua Doore catalogue. Mrs brought out a tray from the kitchen and poured the tea. They spoke English for her benefit but every now and then Sesotho coloured the conversation like a bright thread of cotton weaving through white cloth.

"How do you like Lesotho?" Mr asked Rose.

"It's very beautiful."

"But very poor," sighed Mrs. "There's a lot of suffering."

Mrs passed around a plate of assorted biscuits arranged on a doily. Rose, her cup and saucer balanced precariously on her thighs, took a lemon cream. She remembered how, as a child, she used to prise them carefully apart, scrape off the cream with her bottom teeth and then eat the two halves. She hadn't eaten one for years.

"What do you think of my new fence?" Mr asked his son.

Michael nodded his approval: "Very nice."

"I put it up to keep my cattle safe at night," Mr told Rose. "Otherwise, they stray. They're my wealth. I have twenty head. I'm a rich man." He laughed, throwing his head back and showing his teeth.

She was surprised at the ease with which he spoke of his wealth. In her circles, it was so not done. Maybe he was just teasing. "I earned my money working on the mines on the Witwatersrand," he was saying. "My eldest son is working there now but Michael didn't want to work on the mines. He likes to study."

"I didn't know." Rose turned to Michael: "What're you studying?"

"Community development."

Rose wasn't quite sure what this was. "Where do you do it?"

"They run distance courses at the University of Lesotho." Michael stood up. "We need to go."

"But you've just got here. You must stay for lunch. I have lunch for you," Mrs took the cup and saucer from Rose.

"I'm taking Rose to see the rock paintings."

"But you won't see your brother and sister."

"Not today."

"You must return for lunch. I'm cooking your favourite." Rose wondered what that was.

"Mother, we won't have time. We're coming back to fetch the bike, then we must go straight away to ho Tjhetjha. I have a delivery to make and I don't want to return after dark." He spoke very politely.

"Come then. I have something for you."

He followed his mother into the kitchen and after a few minutes emerged carrying two paper bags. "Snacks." He held them up for Rose to see.

Mr followed them out. Michael fetched a package from the bike's cubby hole and handed it to his father. Deworming medication for the cattle, he told Rose.

They walked along a road that crisscrossed communal grazing lands and the dwellings petered out. Up against a concrete house, geraniums grew as red and unexpected as a fresh wound. A dog chained to its kennel slept in the shade, its ribs like a set of samurai swords under its skin.

"Do people here look after their dogs?" Rose asked.

" Nah…the same…" He shook his head.

"You could start your own animal welfare society."

"My plan is to to organize…maybe try coordinate all the projects in the valley here. Once I'm qualified – I want to do that. There're so many community upliftment projects, Aids projects, voluntary testing, education, women's groups. Lots of children's things – school feeding schemes, early childhood stuff, drama groups, sports clinics, Clowns without Frontiers, Medicine without Borders."

"But no animal welfare."

"There is a horse NGO but no dog welfare. The Basotho are funny. Unless they earn money from their dogs, they're not going to take much care of them. They don't give them meat to eat. They feed them pap."

Not funny, just poor; they don't have meat for themselves, Rose thought, quite surprised at his generalisation. She knew that if she repeated his observations in certain circles she'd be shut down or cause some raised eyebrows at least.

"They just let them breed. They don't care. They need to spay their bitches but there're no vets around here. They all leave and go where the money is." The road curved around a small field of mielies. "And you'll never see a cat," he continued.

"Why's that?" Rose asked.

"Because they've all been made into hats. There's no small game remaining in all of Lesotho. A fur hat is a thing every man wants to own."

As they walked, a young woman, petit and jaunty, joined them. She must have been in her early twenties.

"Hello. Where are you going?"

"To the waterfall and the rock paintings," Michael replied. Rose looked at her, wondering if she was considering joining them for their excursion. She hoped not.

She addressed Rose: "Where are you from?"

"South Africa – Johannesburg."

"Do you have a job for me? I can clean your house."

"Sorry. I don't."

"I want to come to Johannesburg."

"To leave your family and friends; Johannesburg's very different from here." Rose replied, thinking: Egoli – place of gold. Bright lights. Big city. Its very difference is what attracts you.

After a while, to Rose's relief, she left them, veering between houses and then disappearing.

Michael pointed out the crèche and the primary school. As they passed, they could hear the children's voices rising clear and sweet in the quiet air. Some stopped what they were doing to wave. He told her that the schools loved receiving visitors but that she'd be expected to dig into her pockets and give them a donation.

"I don't mind," she said earnestly.

He laughed. "Another time."

Rose asked about education in the country. Michael told her it was good; that the literacy rate was very high – almost a hundred percent.

"All kids must go to primary school - it's compulsory - but not high school. In fact," he said, "girls go further than boys. The boys must herd the cattle so they fall behind and drop out." He pointed to a building in the distance. "There's the high school where my brother and sister go. I also went there."

They had come to the edge of the village. The path fell steeply down a ravine. Michael reached out his hand to steady Rose and she took it, even though she was not unsteady. His hand was dry and warm and she clasped it as she jumped off a rocky ledge onto soft sand that led onto an ancient river bed. They followed its course, walking on a sheet of yielding rock, once molten magma extruded from the core of the earth that had pushed its way up through fissures and faults, filling hollows and other imperfections on its way, flowing around bends and up banks, covering rocks strewn in its path, then cooling and finally hardening to the screed-like layer that shone white and smooth in the late morning sun.

They came across a young herder sitting on a rock, trying to hit an invisible marker with stones. Two large orange dogs slept at his feet; they were well-fed and docile, their coats glossy, while four big cattle browsed in a river bed that ran through a donga. They crossed here and began to climb up a steep and wooded trail, Rose following Michael's lead, using the same hollows in the rock to gain a foothold, pulling herself up by the same branches that he had held. Her legs felt like jelly; her breathing was ragged. Unfit. She needed to start some exercise. What exercise? She hated the gym. How much longer to go? She stopped and looked up. As sky began so the climb would end. What goes up must come down. The return trip will be easier, she consoled herself.

Michael was steadily moving ahead. She liked him. She thought him beautiful with his sensitive face and sculpted body. Would she sleep with him? She'd worry about HIV. Was that being racist? Would she be less worried to sleep with a white man? She wondered if he found her attractive. She couldn't tell; she couldn't read the signs.

Suddenly, they were at the top walking along a level track on a grassy plateau. The view was breathtaking, the basalt crags of the Malutis stretching forever. The Malutis just mean 'the Range' in Sesotho, so she'd read.

On the one side, the plateau dropped vertically, exposing a rockface of bare basalt, its edge notched by a skein of water spilling insistently over eons and eons. It playfully caught the sun, creating a slit of blinding light before plunging down the rockface like a swathe of silver chiffon.

They zigzagged down a path that led to a deeply shaded pool where the waterfall came to rest.

"Drink. This is the sweetest water you'll ever taste," Michael advised and afterwards, they sat side by side on flat pale rocks, Rose leaning back on her hands, listening to the susurration of the waterfall. She lifted her face to the pale sky, closed her eyes and fantasized about Michael kissing her, his mouth tasting fresh and sweet from the sweet water he'd just drunk. She wasn't going to initiate anything. Rejection would be too unbearable.

"Are you okay? Should we carry on?" he asked.

"Yup." She rapidly opened her eyes and jumped up, wiping her hands on her shorts. "Let's carry on."

They followed the river for a while and once again started to climb, hugging the rock face that was no longer basalt but pale shale or sandstone, the terrain thick with shrub. Rounding a bend and tucked in the side of the mountain under a large overhanging rock was the art.

There were many figures, animal and human, large and small. Layer upon layer, human figures superimposed on shadowy animals and vice versa, strange harlequin with collar and tricornered hat, leaping man, legs like threads, arms aloft, emerging from the rock surface but faded and difficult to differentiate where one subject ended and another began. Rose was struck with reverence and awe. There was something in the air, something transcendent and holy.

She stared for a long time then found herself whispering; “This white figure. Figures. What do you think?” They appeared at the edges of the scene: a frontal of a small someone sitting with elbows on knees, large ears or was it an antelope’s head? Beneath, an imposing ochre figure in profile sitting with bent knees, leaning back on one arm, the other arm thick like a rod – elongated - supporting a white figure under the arm. The white figure looked as if it needed support – as if without it, it would collapse, one arm held above the head in surrender, the head lolling, a slackness around the legs, red lines emerging from the legs like blood. Another white figure prone, more white figures, one lying in a puddle of red, a large red shadow – she struggled to make out… For the first time, she would have liked a camera.

“Why I’m particularly interested in these… Have you seen a white figure of a woman in a Victorian style dress?”

Michael shook his head and she left it.

From his backpack, he took the paper bags and handed one to Rose who felt it sacrilegious to eat in front of the paintings. Silly she knew but she walked a little way away and sat on a flat rock with her back to the art and looked down at the gorge that dropped at her feet and the mountains that rose on the other side, listening to the silence.

She was interested to see what Michael’s mother had packed: a peanut butter sandwich on homemade bread, a box of Liquifruit, a small chocolate bar and a small red apple.

“My mother. Look! She’s given us school lunch. This is what I took to high school. Every single day.” He laughed.

“It’s so kind of her to…. I haven’t eaten a peanut butter sandwich since… since I left school. I got more or less the same school lunch. Except for the apple…I never ate them. I’m still not so fond of them. Do you want mine?’ she asked, holding it out on the palm of her hand.

“I’ll swap you something for your apple.”

“What?”

“Er…” he looked around. “This magic pebble. If you rub it between your hands, it will give you great wisdom.”

They swopped the apple for the stone. “I wish,” she said wistfully.

He placed the apple in his backpack: “I’ll keep your apple for later. Maybe there’ll be a hungry child.” Standing up, he asked: “Are you ready to go?”

Lightly touching his forearm, she said: “Thank you. This was fantastic. Really. I don’t have the words.”

She walked back to the rock face and stood close up, looking hard at the details, trying to imprint them on her memory, replaying the touch in her mind - ostensibly just a touch of gratitude; she wanted it to be more than that, knew it was more, wanted him to know it too but felt self-conscious of her familiarity. She threaded her arms through her backpack and they began the long hike back to the village.

Helmets back on and astride the bike once more, Michael told Rose that they were on their way to ho Tjetjha, an Aids hospice, to deliver some drugs.

The hiker? The doctor? They passed through the opening in the rocks, through Gabriel’s Gate, and travelled south into flatter terrain where the air was warmer, slowing through villages where people milled about and gaped as they passed.

Turning off into a narrow track, they started climbing once more, the land becoming less and less inhabited as it grew hillier and hillier and finally, in what seemed the middle of an infinite nothingness, they saw the haven cutting into the side of a slope, a white single-storied building and a couple of outhouses.

They entered the gates. Rose dismounted and removed the helmet.

“What does the name mean?” she asked Michael who was unpacking the cubby hole.

“It means er… refuge … retreat.”

A woman wearing a nurse’s uniform, all shining brass badges and epaulettes, emerged from the main building. She told Rose that she was Maud Khoali, the matron, who’d come out of retirement to run the hospice and that it wasn’t easy living so far away from civilisation.

“Yes – cell phones aren’t working here; there’s no shop nearby; there’s only electricity for a few hours a day - when the generator’s on, and the worst - no water.”

“No water? What do you do?”

“Well, we have a little. We pump it up but there’s not enough for our needs.”

Rose wondered about the location. The place must have been expensive to build – having to haul building materials this distance. And now with supplies. Who’d built it so far off the beaten track? Was it the Dutchman? Was it he who needed a refuge, a retreat from the world of human connection and communication?

They had entered a small reception area with wall-to-wall linoleum, built-in desk and a row of steel-framed chairs. There was a distinctive odour pervading the place, a strong smell of disinfectant but also something sweet and ghastly. The smell of death? It brought back Livvie's closing days with such a vividness that nausea rose in her throat. She wanted to run out the door and gulp down some fresh air. But she didn't. She controlled herself as she always did. Bursting heart, swelling heart. It was Ruby who followed hers. She kept hers firmly where it belonged.

"Would you like to see the clinic?" Maud was saying. "We have about thirty or so at the moment. They're all full-blown cases. Some we give ARVs – if we think they've got a chance. And there've been one or two miracles. Yes. They start the treatment and they get better so we send them home. But for most, it's too late. The drugs are very strong. If you give them to such sick people…" She shook her head. "The body must be strong to cope with these drugs."

Maud escorted her through a labyrinth of small rooms, occupied by three or four people in what looked like the final stages of the disease. Stick thin and hollowed out, some were so close to death she could almost see the Grim Reaper hovering about their beds. She smiled like she was some sort of Florence Nightingale come to bring comfort to the dying. What a fraud. She felt like a voyeur merely satisfying her own morbid curiosity. And all the while that unbearable smell.

"Ah – the patient in this bed." Maud pointed to an empty bed. "She died yesterday. She woke up and said 'Oh, Thursday seems like a good day to die,' and she died."

They had come to a partially closed door.

"Dr Metheus. Do you want to meet Dr Metheus?"

What would she say to him? Hello. You're doing a wonderful job.

Maud knocked on the door and they entered an office lined with metal shelves overflowing with files, papers and medical books and equipment – monitors, a scale - on the floor. The desk too was chaotic, inboxes and outboxes filled to overflowing.

He looked up from his laptop, his blue eyes all the more piercing in his sunburnt face, like he could see into her soul and beyond. He was all hard angles.

"Hello, I – I came with Mi…"

He stood up, coming round to shake her hand which was embarrassingly hot and clammy against his cool dry one.

"Rose Clemens," she told him.

He nodded. “Maud has shown you around?”

“Oh… yes…; this facility is ...”

“Do you want something to drink, my dear?” Maud asked her.

“Um…”

“Yes – bring us some tea, Maud. That would be good,” the doctor ordered.

He escorted her down the passage onto a veranda where patients wrapped in bright blankets sat on a motley collection of chairs taking in the warmth of the sun. Maud brought the tea and Michael joined them and they looked out, past the low stone wall and the aloes that grew in pots, onto a quilt of hills and shadows.

They discussed business for a few minutes: the problem of shortages, the need for another member of staff, a meeting with the community, Michael and Maud deferring to Wim when confirmation was needed.

Rose wondered what drove Wim to this lonely life so far from home. What had he left behind in Europe? She was fascinated by people who could uproot themselves like this and resettle in so alien a culture. Difference always presented itself as a barrier to her. For him, people were just people, whether they were European, African, black, white, rich, poor, educated, uneducated. He related to everyone in much the same way. Or didn’t. She noticed at the party that he didn’t seem to engage much with the other guests. Or maybe they just weren’t his type of people. But he did seem to be too intense, too driven by some sense of responsibility to humans in need. Was this his need?

“Rose is interested in rock art,” Michael was saying. “I took her to the place by the waterfall.”

Wim gestured towards the hills: “There’s that place here, at the bottom.”

“Have you ever seen a white figure, a woman, dressed in…like…Victorian clothing? Rock art? It was on the film they showed at the museum – at the Bergsun.”

“No,” they shook their heads.

“I’ve never been to the museum,” Maud said. “Is it worth going to?”

“It was – er- helpful to me,” she replied. Wim looked intensely at her, waiting for her to expound but she didn’t. She felt too unsure of herself. “The site we saw today – it’s faded hey, Michael? It was quite difficult to make out much,” she offered.

“They mostly all are. The ones you see in books - they’ve all been photographically enhanced,” Wim told her.

They chatted in this vein, and after a time, Michael stood up: "We'd better get going. Don't want to drive back in the dark."

Wim accompanied them to the bike and watched as they prepared to leave, Michael switched on the engine and they were off. As they passed through the gate, Rose turned around. Wim was still standing there. She raised a hand in leave-taking and he slowly echoed her gesture and raised his, and then he disappeared as they took the bend.

They arrived back in Oberon, Michael depositing Rose at her car.

"Michael – I'm going back to Joburg soon. Do you have an email address? Let's keep in touch," although she knew that their correspondence would die. She offered her hand and they did the three part handshake: shake, clasp, shake, and she drove along the darkening roads of Oberon, back to the Chameleon.

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Unable to restrain myself, I rode again to the rocks today. Dismounting Betty, I made my way to the powerful eland. But rounding the corner in the cliff, I came across the medicine man standing at the eland. His arms outstretched, he was in deep prayer, chanting and intoning in his awful voice. I was terrified that he would see me so tiptoed away. Then after rounding the corner, I ran to Betty and quickly galloped away. I could only hope that in his deeply meditative state, he remained unaware of my presence and deaf to Betty's hoof beats.

When I returned to the village, I decided that today was as good a day as any to begin the lessons. Deploying Abel's translating skills, I explained to both the men and the women the benefits of reading and writing, telling them of the worlds that would open up to them and how they would be able to record information for their children and their children's children. The women and girls were interested but none of the men. We went to the story telling place and with a stick, I scratched letters out in the ashes and sand, slowly sounding them out and had them copy my actions and sounds. We had a merry time, laughing and comparing letters but then the children came and jumped around the letters, obliterating them. It was time to stop.

Of course, the medicine man was not happy. He shook his head and said I am causing mischief with the gods. But I told him: Nonsense – his gods truck no power with me and the magic of writing cannot be a threat to his gods.

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Chapter 20

Her key poised above the lock, she heard rustling in the bushes.

"Who's there?" She whirled round.

Happiness emerged out of the darkness. It was the first time Rose had seen her without her overalls. Subservient, subsumed by overalls, she was an ageless faceless presence whose problems Rose didn't want to hear but in the navy skirt and pink sweater, Happiness took on a personality. It was an amazing transformation.

The clothes, despite the suspicion that they were Brigit's castoffs, revealed the woman: her sagging breasts and rolling stomach told of her age and stage of life; the relatively narrow hips conjured up the young girl she had once been. The hair - normally covered with a *doek,* was combed out and clipped in various places. And she'd drawn in eyebrows with a black pencil that Rose supposed were meant to add glamour but they just made her look stern.

"I am going off," she said simply.

"Are you leaving now? Going to your village?" It looked like it. Rose hoped not. She was too exhausted to trek to Happiness's village tonight. The sangoma who had dreamt up her ancestors would just have to wait.

"Tomorrow I'm catching the taxi." Relief. Maybe she had a hot date tonight – all dressed up like this. With whom? Rose was curious.

"Can we go in my car? Will it be easier?"

"Yes. It will be easier. Much quicker."

"What time? Nine, ten?"

"Ten will be good." Happiness nodded and disappeared into the bushes as she came.

Rose, with Happiness in the passenger seat, travelled along the roads that she and Michael had taken the previous day but instead of turning off onto the narrow bike track, they turned off a few miles further north onto a wider sand road and followed the Elands' Way signposts.

"What language do you speak?" Rose wanted to know.

"Sesotho," Happiness told her.

"What's your Sesotho name?"

"Quongquolotsane."

Rose tasted it: “Quong-quo-lot-tsane.” Click click tsk in her mouth. “What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m named for my ancestors. People say it’s very old. From the Bushman language.”

“Are you from the Bushmen?” Rose asked.

“Before our grandparents and parents didn’t want to talk about it but now the white people tell us this.”

“Which white people?’

“From the university. They sometimes come with cameras and exercise books. They ask questions. They say it’s important, that we must know these things.”

“What things?” Rose demanded.

“That we come from the Bushmen, our customs.”

“What customs? Are they different from the other people’s around here?”

“I don’t know.” Happiness shrugged her shoulders.

Rose glanced sideways at Happiness. She was small-boned and her skin did have a yellow cast to it. So were Happiness and her people the last of the San, her village – the one off the beaten track that the librarian had mentioned? The anticipation was almost too much. She was sure that she was finally headed towards her destination. She felt a shiver run up her spine and experienced a flash of infinite knowledge and wisdom, but the feeling dissipated as quickly as it came.

The road wound its way up the mountains and terminated in a parking area surrounded by palisade fencing and a prefab cabin that housed a Parks Board office.

“You can stop here. Your car will be safe,” Happiness told Rose.

Rose had to pay the Parks Board official for the parking. There was an indemnity form to sign which also required details of next-of-kin. Hmmm? Who to put? Rose left it blank. That’s sad, she thought, picking up a map, hand-drawn and not to scale.

The hiking trails were demarcated with dotted lines leading to points of interest: Eyrie Look-out, Devil’s Drop, Sleeping Beauty Cave, Cairns Way. There was a list of what not to do:

DO NOT remove vegetation

DO NOT litter

DO NOT light fires

DO NOT hike alone

DO NOT hike in the mist

DO NOT hike when it is dark

DO NOT hike when it is lightning

DO NOT tease the baboons

The officer told her: “The office closes at five. Then I lock the gates and go home.”

“Oh no. I’ll be out before that,” Rose told him breezily, confident that she’d be finished long before that.

She bought some bottled water for her and Happiness, put the map in her backpack and followed Happiness along a riverine path that thrust its way through growth dense with ferns, grasses and trees whose exposed roots crossed their course like pale serpents. Some of the trees had been identified for the conscientious hiker, green tags tacked on the trunks denoting their Latin names and their common ones, which she liked: Forest Num Num, Bushman’s Grape, Warty Current, Hairy Turkey Berry. Butterflies drifted about them: huge black shadows with iridescent blue stripes, bits of white confetti bobbing gaily in the air, purple and yellow hearts floating.

The water in the river was a slow trickle – it hadn’t rained for a few days. The men who usually sat waiting with their tyres to carry travellers across were nowhere in sight. In any case, Happiness needed no help. She was surprisingly agile as she jumped from rock to rock in her navy skirt and tan court shoes, carrying a large white handbag.

The path veered steeply up and away from the river and Rose found herself walking along a sandy trail that meandered for miles through grassy hills. Although the route was not nearly as taxing as the day before, her legs felt weary and heavy and she and Happiness walked mostly in silence. The sun beat down and cast rays that glittered and sparkled in the lenses of her sunglasses. She felt the skin on her forehead tightening. Crap. A headache on the way. She didn’t think she had Panado either.

“Is there a road in to your village?” she asked.

“It’s only for the special cars and taxis, like the jeep. It goes all the way around the mountains. *Eish*! It takes a long time.”

“What’s the name of your village?”

“Patilweng,” she replied.

And there it was, a few wattle and daub rondavels standing forlornly on a large open plain. The air was icy and Rose shivered. The place looked so deserted. Where was everybody? Rose scanned the area expecting to see the last of the Bushmen, to witness their customs, to find some answers. What was she thinking! She hadn't even formulated the questions.

They wove their way around the huts and the goats and chickens that scratched amongst the patches of spinach and straggly mielies struggling to grow in the poor soil. A few children playing in the dust looked at Rose with wide eyes as she passed. Happiness led her to a hut and ushered her in. The gloom was a relief after the sun's glare but the acrid smell of wood embers made her feel worse. Nausea rose in her throat. She rubbed her temples.

Near the hearth, a girl lay on grass matting. She opened her eyes and scowled at them and rose slowly to her feet.

"My daughter." She must have been about eighteen, nineteen. When Happiness had told Rose that her child was sick, she had been under the impression that she was much younger. A small child, even a baby. Although, she probably had been sick. With depression. Rose smiled at her but the girl didn't respond.

Happiness gave her instructions in Sesotho and she ambled out the hut.

"She must tell the sangoma that you are here. Then you go to the sangoma. I will go with you because I translate."

Rose nodded. She sank onto the floor and sat cross-legged against the wall, her brain knocking relentlessly against her skull. When she was active and walking, her headache seemed to ebb but sitting here doing nothing brought it on with a vengeance.

Happiness poured water from a ewer into two tin mugs and gave one to Rose. She realised she was parched, probably dehydrated. She asked for more.

Happiness busied herself, lighting the fire, boiling water to make pap, soaking a bunch of spinach and other leaves in a bowl of water. Smoke filled the hut, its sharp smell intensifying the pain she felt behind her eyes. By this time, the daughter had shuffled back into the hut. She said something to Happiness, who passed her a wooden spoon so that she could take over stirring the mielie meal which Happiness had been adding little by little to the water.

Rose followed Happiness to the sangoma's hut. She was standing by the opening waiting to guide them inside, a small and wizenened woman wearing black

wellington boots below her dress and layers of beads around her neck that shone so white that they appeared incandescent.

She looked shrewdly at Rose with clear bright eyes and spoke to Happiness. Rose, her head aching dully, felt quite apprehensive. What if the sangoma said something really bad – like a terrible disaster was about to befall her? She decided she would take it all with a pinch of salt.

"Here…she says you must take the chair." Happiness indicated that Rose sit on a white plastic chair placed opposite two green drum-shaped stools. The two older women sat on these and Rose, sitting higher, cast a glance around the hut. The walls and floor were a beautiful rich ochre colour. Matting, the colour of the veld, was arranged to form a low screen that shielded a section of the hut off from her gaze but besides that, it was empty.

The sangoma placed a double-stranded circle of beads on her head –similar to the ones she wore around her neck.

"She's going to pray now," Happiness said.

Closing her eyes, the sangoma began intoning in a low voice. Then, she opened her eyes, slowly removed the beads from her head and placed them on the floor. Next, she opened a bag made from woven grass and removed some objects, holding them between her hands and, intoning some more, threw them on the floor. There was a large cowry shell, a few periwinkles, a pansy shell, a black flintstone and some tiny bones, aged and yellow, whose origins Rose couldn't identify. The sangoma studied the objects, then carefully and with obvious veneration picked them up and handed them to Rose.

"She says you must do the same," Happiness told her.

Rose, holding her breath, threw the objects and they fell with a muted clatter around the circle of beads. The sangoma studied them then began to speak.

"She says the white stranger is welcomed by her ancestors."

Happiness waited: "Your ancestors are here watching over you."

Pause: "Your health is good. Excellent. You will live a long and fruitful life."

That's good. Rose thought. So my death won't be as untimely as my mother's.

The sangoma looked at her and smiled, revealing a missing upper tooth. "You are a very lucky lady. You will have great riches. Your life will be very enriched."

Well, that's true. It already is. Rose smiled.

"You will travel very far – she sees many many journeys - and you will touch many… She says you will touch many children. … You must thank your ancestors for your good luck."

There was a silence. Then Happiness said: "She wants to know if you have any questions."

"I - I'll have children? M - Many?" Rose's voice faltered.

"Yes – you will touch many and they will thank you."

What did that mean? And she did have other questions - like about finding a life-partner, or finding out about her ancestors. Yes, she did have other questions but she didn't have too much faith in the answers. And how did one thank one's ancestors. She had that question too but didn't want to ask. She needed to hold onto the sangoma's auspicious prophecy and if thanking one's ancestors meant practices that completely overstepped the bounds of her non-existent belief systems, the comfort offered by the prophesy would fly away like salt in the wind.

"I've got no questions," she said, standing up. "Thank you, thank you very much." She had brought some notes in her pocket but didn't have a clue how much she should give. Twenty? Fifty? A hundred? She gave the sangoma the hundred and Happiness the seventy and hoped it was enough.

Back in Happiness's hut, Rose went to sit against the wall again, her head bursting with pain. It was especially bad over one eye. And the nausea. A migraine? She pressed the heel of her hand into her eye. She wasn't normally prone to them. But it couldn't be anything ominous – the sangoma told her she would live a long and fruitful life. That was reassuring.

She doubted that Happiness would have an analgesic on hand: "You wouldn't happen to have Panado or something," she asked. "I have a really bad headache." What would she do? Sleep it off? She needed to get back to her car before five. She fretted. Could she follow the path by herself? It was difficult to speak. She heard herself slurring her words.

Happiness unfurled a grass mat on the floor and told Rose to lie down, covering her with a thick Basotho blanket. After a while, she brought Rose some hot liquid in a tin mug. It tasted disgusting but Rose gulped it down.

It was dark in the hut when Rose awoke. She felt fragile, hung over, but the headache was gone. She reached for her backpack to look at her phone. Nearly nine o' clock! She

wasn't going anywhere tonight. Her car should be safe behind the locked gates. And signal? None. Her battery was also running low. She wondered if anyone would worry about her, whether Brigit or Hank were conscious of her absence.

She became aware of the sound of drums steadily beating, on and on. She was alone - Happiness and her daughter were gone. She stood up on shaky legs and walked outside. It was cold and she shivered under her jacket. The huts were outlined with the light of the moon which hung suspended in the starry sky. Could she see Orion from here? She stood still and looked around. There was an orange glow in the distance lighting up the dark night. It came from the direction of the mountain.

She started towards the glow. A silvery path whittled out over the millennia by myriad footsteps led from the village to the mountain over a level tract of ground. As she neared the mountain, she saw, under a ledge like a craggy human brow, people ruddy in the glow of fire, dressed in animal skins, wearing leather amulets decorated with beads and shells, like the one she wore on her wrist, the one she had found in the box.

Women sat around the fire in a large circle, their eyes closed, singing and clapping their hands in time to the drums, their bodies swaying to the beat. Men moved around the circle, jumping and leaping or running about, then suddenly veering off then drifting closer. Some wore bracelets and anklets from dried cocoons, which rattled angrily as they leapt about. Others wore caps with antelope ears sewn in or carried flywhisks and whisked them sharply at the invisible perils that lay strewn in their paths.

The musicians sat to the side of the circle, drummers sweating as they beat the stretched hide with their palms and men who made the saddest sounds, cradling hunting bows against their left shoulders and tapping them with sticks. Their eyes shone as they wrung out music so strange and unearthly, so desolate and heart-rending that it was as if all the lost souls of the Bushmen had gathered here to mourn.

Rose felt herself drawn into the circle. Women shifted up and she sat down in the space that they made. She felt totally at ease, clapping in unison with the women despite the clothes she was wearing - track pants and a jacket made in a factory using the latest nanotechnology. And white, which in the firelight glowed pink but everyone was too immersed in their own heads to notice her pink and white presence.

She scanned the circle for Happiness and the sangoma. She thought she saw Happiness's stern black eyebrows in the flickering firelight but she couldn't be sure. A

nearly-naked man threw a large bunch of grey-green buchu onto the fire which reared up like a mad stallion, releasing clouds of sweet perfume.

With the increased heat billowing from the fire and the aromatic cloud permeating the air, the women's clapping increased in intensity, the tempo quickened. The men's dancing took on a frenzied fervour. They bent from the waists, bodies covered with sweat, their faces contorting as if in pain, clutching at their heads. They cried out; they dropped to the ground, exhausted, trembling violently, lying in a dead faint, blood pouring from their nostrils. Some of the woman too were rocking and moaning, bleeding from their noses and finally collapsing into lifeless heaps.

Rose watched dispassionately, breathing in the scent of the buchu and clapping in time to the drums. She had a feeling that she had been here before and felt at peace with the world. As bodies fell about, she had a clear view of the rockface which now disappeared into a boat-shaped area of dark nothingness with edges that flickered like fish in a fast-flowing stream. Eland and other antelope, their bodies glowing vividly in the moonlight emerged from the darkness, fleet footed and muscles rippling, and ran across the rock face, changing into men as they ran. And there was the woeful woman, her blanket still wrapped around her waist, clapping her hands and swaying but then her body turned into a fish's and she swam away into the night.

Rose recognized that she was at the sacred place of the gods. She rose slowly and waded into a pool. Rain began to fall, dimpling the water. She floated and held up her arm that bore the thong, watching as raindrops deflected off the beads. Now she knew that within each bead was held an ancient promise. She broke the leather thong like an umbilical cord from the past and let it fall, watching as it sunk slowly to the invisible bottom of the pool.

A flash of lightening zigzagged across the sky and the White Goddess appeared before her in a dress of pure white, the skirts full, the neck and sleeves edged with lace and a large white sunhat that partially obscured her face. Her arms were outstretched as if she was about to embrace her.

"I will give you the gift of the universe," she said. "Raise your hands and take the stars as your tools," So Rose flew to the stars following a thread of pure silver that hung from the sky and received them and they became pebbles of light in her hands.

Ruby appeared cut off at the hips wearing a faded T shirt and sunglasses. "When we recognise that we have lost our ancient past, only then can we mourn for it and

move on," she told her and then disappeared, leaving the White Goddess but then she too faded away into the rockface, taking the eland and the antelope with her.

Everyone was quiet around the dying fire. Rose shivered under the bright moon, then dozed off.

She found herself sprawled on the floor of Happiness's hut, lying half-off, half-on the mat with a small pile of smooth white pebbles next to her head. The blanket lay in a heap at her side and her body ached from the cold and the hours she had spent on the hard floor. She rolled over, pulled the blanket over her and snuggled into its considerable folds, lying like that for a few minutes, looking up into the murkiness of the thatched roof.

She felt her wrist. The thong was gone. She lifted the blanket and shook its folds and looked here and there, on the floor as far as the hearth. It was nowhere. The pebbles. She scooped them up and dropped them into a side pocket in her backpack along with the one Michael had given her. Then, she poured herself a mugful of water from the ewer, drinking deeply, pausing to catch her breath, gasping for air and then drinking it down.

She realised that her stomach was aching from emptiness. The pot which Happiness had used to cook the pap was on the hearth. She opened the lid and broke off a piece of the cold pap. It tasted bland and sat heavy in her empty stomach and she struggled to chew but she broke off another piece and another, until, reminded of Goldilocks, she forced herself to stop.

What time was it? She had no idea. She looked at her phone. It was dead. She picked her backpack up by the straps and walked out the door.

As before, the village was deserted, except for the goats and chickens that picked amongst a rubbish heap, and the children. There was a young girl who looked not older than maybe eleven, twelve carrying a baby on her hip. Rose walked up to the pair.

"Hello," she said, tickling the baby under the chin. She wanted to ask where all the adults were but the baby started yelling his head off. The girl and Rose looked into each other's eyes with shared knowledge before Rose said goodbye and walked away.

From the height of the sun, it felt like mid-morning. She looked at the mountain in the near distance and the overhanging ledge and a shadow of the strange night flitted across her mind. She remembered receiving something so valuable, so important that it

would change her life forever, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember what it was. Like a slippery fish, or a dream, it eluded her grasp and each time she tried to recover it, it just got fainter and fainter, swimming further and further into the recesses of her memory.

And her vision of the White Goddess? Was the painting of her to be found right here, on these rocks? Did she see it last night or was the Goddess's appearance just Rose's own desperate need, her mind playing tricks on her?

She walked towards the mountain retracing her footsteps from the night before. Now, in the day, she could see the desolation of the landscape, the empty cold plain where no tree could take root.

She wondered whether the adults of the village would still be at the fire, sleeping off their trance-induced stupors. But no. When she got there, there was no one there; only a pale pile of ashes hinted at the frenzied activities of the night before.

Slowly, she walked towards the rock. The passage of time had been cruel - there were images but they were so pale as to be only vague shadows. She couldn't be certain that there was anything there at all. She walked along the cliff for about half a kilometre and then turned around and walked in the other, hoping to find more paintings that were perhaps hidden behind outcrops or concealed in the facets of the rocks. The running antelopes. The White Goddess. But wherever she looked, they were nowhere to be seen.

The night had left her feeling strange and disconnected. She suddenly felt a desperate need to get back to Oberon and feel its warm ground beneath her feet. There was plenty of time before five to fetch her car, she was sure, and she felt confident that she could find her way back to the parking without Happiness. It wasn't that far and she could even see the path that had brought them to the village, just there, on the other side of the donga. Pushing her cap firmly on her head and her sunglasses up her nose, she began walking towards path that flashed silver through the pale green grass that covered the lonely contours of the earth.

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Writing this diary allows me to unburden myself of a desperate urge to share my experiences with another fellow being. My words are intended for my eyes only, as a

reminder of my travels. However, whereas spoken words blow away on the winds of time, this paper carries enough permanence for these written words to fall into malicious hands and thus I write with circumspection. In these times, an injudicious act, even through no fault of one's own, can bring shame upon one's entire family.

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Chapter 21

She followed the path and from out of the blue or from the jaunty pace she'd set up and the determined swing of her arms, she began to sing. She had never been one to sing or hum aloud before – ever – but she suddenly found her voice and it emerged softly and breathily:

> I love to go a-wandering,
> Along the mountain track,
> And as I go, I love to sing,
> My knapsack on my back.

She didn't know where the song came from. Where had she heard it? She couldn't remember ever hearing it. It was a really stupid song but she couldn't get it out of her head. Val-de-ri, val-de-ra, Val-de-ri, val-de-ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Over and over like a mantra as she walked along the path that cut through the grassy hills. The sun was warm and the grass smelt sweet and fragrant. She stopped to stuff her jacket into her backpack. Val-de-ri, val-de-ra, my knapsack on my back.

The path led to the edge of a plateau, as she remembered, then took her down through tangled and wooded growth to the river. She walked downstream along the shaded bank, scrutinising the pale boulders and flat rocks, the sandbanks where imagined crocodiles sunned themselves and small rocky rapids that fizzed like champagne, trying to recognise the spot where she and Happiness had crossed over.

She walked on, hesitating… it was taking too long… then walked a bit further and found herself on wet marshy ground like thick black soup that smelt putrid and sulphurous. She stopped. Okay. So she'd gone too far. Not a problem. She'd retrace her footsteps and keep an eye out for the path on the other side of the river.

She turned around. She walked. Then hesitated. The topography looked so different from this direction. She walked on. There was a sandbank that stretched three quarters of the way across the water. She thought to cross here but she couldn't remember this feature at all from yesterday's trek. She went further upstream.

It felt like she should return to the path which had first led her down to the river from the village and start again. Or maybe it would just be wiser to return to Patilweng

and wait for Happiness. But hang on. There, a little further on, she recognised the spot where she and Happiness had crossed.

Reassured, she tripped daintily over the stones, not a drop of water splashing on her hiking shoes. It felt easier in this direction or perhaps the river was lower than yesterday. And yesterday, the path had led directly into the water but now, in reverse, there was no path. She had to scramble up the embankment through brambles and bushes but there it was again, the humus-rich tract carved out of the slope.

Relief flooded her veins. It *was* wonderful wandering along the mountain track. The sun glittered cruelly on the water but in the dappled shade on the path, the air was cool and gentle.

The path started climbing. Yesterday, when they descended, she hadn't realised just how steeply the path dropped. She stopped to catch her breath a few times, looking up through the trees to try to monitor her progress, then climbing doggedly on, up and along.

Finally, she emerged from the woodland to a dramatically changed landscape. A grassy knoll rose gently to her right but to her left, the terrain fell precipitously away, forming a deep rift in the earth, which curved and disappeared into the folds of the horizon. In front of her, across a huge swathe of undulating land, far-flung peaks like the walls of a forbidden city rose impenetrable. Where was she? They had not come this way yesterday, that was for sure. There was nothing, not one feature that was familiar to her. Oh God. She couldn't deny it. She was lost.

She pressed her hand over her mouth, panic rising in her throat, her stomach felt like it had imploded and her breathe strangled her. She had no watch. Her phone was dead. She had no idea how long she had been walking for but it seemed to be taking much longer than it should. Calm down! she told herself sharply. She breathed deeply.

She had the map in her backpack. Here was the path and she could she find it on the map. She looked at the map, turned it this way and that. Where was north? She had no clue where she was. Was she even on the map?

The path had to lead somewhere. People used paths. Someone was bound to come this way. The sun was still high in the sky and there were plenty of hours left of the day. Carry on walking, she told herself. Just carry on. There's no stopping now.

Her throat was dry, parched. In the distance, a sinister black spot circled round and around in the otherwise spotless blue sky. Thirsty for blood. She was going to die. She was going to die in these mountains. People die in mountains. Oh God. Thirsty.

There were the two bottles of water that remained unopened in her backpack. She reached for one. It was warm and gave a little sigh as she opened the lid but the water tasted like nectar on her tongue. One step at a time – she told herself. As long as there was a path.

The landscape changed again. Huge boulders hulked on furrowed earth, weathered by eons of wind and water, their shapes weird and wonderful. Giant Mexicans under huge sombreros enjoyed a siesta, oversized balls balanced one atop the other, massive mushrooms sprung from the ground. Still she followed the path, trying to keep calm, talking to herself, reassuring herself, she was going to be fine. She stopped every now and then to sip some water, looking forward towards the peaks, or backwards to gauge her progress, eyes wide with panic. She needed to get to a more protected area, one where there were caverns or overhanging ledges where she could take shelter for the night – like the Bushmen.

The sun had passed its zenith and the shadows began to lengthen. On her left, cumulus clouds were building up like giant cauliflowers but still she walked on, the path taking her to a plain recently ravaged by fire, a wasteland of blackened earth and scorched stalks. She could smell the hot acrid smell and it made her eyes smart. She wiped them with the back of her hand, smudging soot across her face. Her white pants were filthy and flies buzzed around her ears. The first bottle of water finished, she slowly sipped from the second. She must come upon a stream soon. Wasn't the source of the country's water here, in these mountains? She anxiously watched the progress of the clouds. They had become grey and heavy and she could see flashes of lightning. Were they coming this way? Oh no. Please not. Please not. People die in these mountains from lightning.

She now walked on a barren plateau where the fire had been arrested; where the solid rock that had starved the flames had also debarred the eroding forces that formed paths. Across the flat surface, she saw a series of four cairns like dwarf sentinels. She walked up to the first one and circled the pile of rocks looking for a plaque, a sign. There was none. What was its significance? She walked to the next and the next and the last one and again, looked to see if she could see these on the map. But no. They didn't feature. What were they doing here? Their presence seemed to signify that humans had once been here but they had long since left, leaving only these mysterious markers behind.

There was a donga that had to be negotiated. It dipped into the earth, its sides ragged where rivulets of rainwater had carved channels. She looked for a way across. There was one further along and she scrambled down then up the other side where she picked up a path once again. Just follow the path; make your way to the mountains; keep going.

The clouds banking on her left were now black and heavy and flashed sporadically. It was raining somewhere. Were they coming closer? She looked anxiously up at them. What would she do if they came this way? Where could she hide? She sweated from the exertion, her pants too hot, her face and arms sunburnt; she was dizzy with thirst and hunger. More people die in these mountains from lightning than on the Highveld. People should know not to hike when it's lightning. DO NOT hike when it is lightning.

She couldn't lose sight of the mountains; the cliffs of cream sandstone and towering black basalt. Exhausted and filthy, she trudged along. She was going to die. She was going to become prey for eagles, carrion for vultures. She felt her footsteps faltering. She couldn't carry on. She trudged along, hypnotised by the rhythm of her footsteps. She was going to die here. From exposure, from lightning. From thirst and starvation. Who would ever find her here in these mountains that went on forever and ever? Would Brigit and Hank send out the search parties for her? The Parks Board official wouldn't. He thought she was with Happiness. She was so alone in the world that there was no one out there who would alert the authorities, who would miss her, who would mourn her. She felt so bereft, suddenly so fully aware of the pathos of her situation. Stricken, a sob caught in her throat. She couldn't die.

What about the sangoma's prophecy? She wanted to believe it with all her heart, to hang onto it; it was giving her hope. She was going to live a long fruitful life, she was going to take many journeys, she was going to touch many children, she was a lucky lucky lady. People did die in the mountains but she wasn't going to be one of them. She gave another sob. She wasn't going to die. She was not going to die. What happened to the song in her heart? Val-de-ri val-de-ra val-de-ri val-de-ha ha ha ha ha. Val-de -ri, val-de.

The path led her up a grassy slope. Her legs felt leaden and her feet ached but on she trudged. Halfway up the hill, the path forked. There was a large rock that marked the fork. Two arrows had been painted on the rock. And some faded letters below each that she could barely make out. Slowly, the words became clear: Sleeping Beauty Cave;

Eyrie Lookout. Hang on! She had seen this feature on the map. She scrutinised the crumpled piece of paper. There was the fork and the cave and the lookout. She hated caves: their dank rank air, the darkness, the smell of bats, the dripping water, the sandy barren floor where nothing ever grew, they made her claustrophobic. But she could shelter at the entrance and it was quite close to the parking and her car and her safe passage and her comforts. Better than Eyrie Lookout where she definitely didn't want to go. To scale some inaccessible cliff to confront a nesting eagle. No thanks.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, listening to her breath as if each one was her last to treasure and brushed away a tear that had fallen uninvited onto her cheek. The shadows were merging into one big shadow. She had to get to the cave before darkness rolled in. She set out once again, feeling charged with a renewed sense of urgency. The path became rugged, cutting through a thicket of trees where ferns brushed against delicate trunks and poisonous excrescences grew in black hollows and the sounds of water burbled alongside and she tore along, trying to make it before night set in, scraping her hands and grazing her knees under the thin fabric of her pants.

The sky was dark and threatening above the leafy canopy and she heard thunder. The air had turned chilly; the rain was on its way. She dreaded the pitter patter of raindrops, the rocks under her feet turning to glass. Gazing down into the ravine that lay far beneath her, she imagined poisonous roots and grasses and legions of deadly snakes slithering in the rocky crevices so remote from the sun that they remained forever wet and putrid. And falling to her death on the slippery rocks. Again she became tearful as she heard the bark of a baboon, a plaintive roar that echoed, doubled in the expectant air.

And then the rain blew over and there was silence. She walked along the top of the world on a path bounded by flowers, tracts of yellow and white and pink and purple catching the last of the sun's rays. Before her, a river flowed golden and refulgent in the sun's rays as if lit from a heavenly fire. In this magical place, she threw herself to the ground and scooped handfuls of water into her mouth until her thirst was slaked and then she stripped off her clothes and slid into the icy water, slowly submerging herself until her feet came to rest on the pebbly floor and she opened her mouth so that it was filled with water and she threw back her head where the current gently tugged at her hair. After a few minutes, she emerged to dry off in the final heat of the day. Before her was the Sleeping Beauty Cave, her shelter for the night.

A cave but not quite a cave. It was a black envelope of rock where magma had long ago folded in on itself to form an large boulder-strewn cavern, a flattened shelf-like area and a steep slope that dropped down to a gravelly ditch that then somersaulted back up again to form a ceiling as lofty as a cathedral's. More overhanging rock than cave, it was a place where the sun never reached and so gloomy, the air so dry-as-death, that no organic thing could thrive, not even a bat with its membranous wings and squeaks so shrill that no human ear could ever hear but somehow one heard them anyway.

On the shelf, there was a small pile of charred remains from previous campers. She laid her backpack near here and sat on top of it, studying the map before the light faded completely. She was staying here, definitely not venturing to explore the gravelly scree at the bottom of the slope. She had explored enough for one day and was not moving until morning. Too exhausted even to feel hunger, she lay on her back, her head resting on her backpack, her eyes closed. The floor was cold and hard and sharp edges dug into her head.

There it was again. The bark of the baboon. Was she going to be sharing this place with a baboon? Maybe she did need to make her way back to her car. But it was too late. It would be dark soon. It said in black and white on the map – DO NOT hike alone; too late for that. DO NOT hike in the dark. But she would be terrified all night. It would be pitch black; she wouldn't sleep a wink. Baboons or hiking in the dark? Then, she heard the rustling of leaves and snapping of branches. What was there?

In the crepuscular light, a shadow loomed amongst the thick vegetation at the mouth of the cave. She jumped up, grabbing her backpack, wielding it. Her knees trembled and her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

The silhouette had long legs and a spare frame. It paused for a moment as if gathering its wits then entered the space. The doctor, Wim Metheus.

He didn't seem surprised to see her. He nodded a greeting then asked: "Are you camping here for the night?"

Her knees still shaking, her voice tremulous. "Er…yes." She felt so stupid. Did you book this place? Should she offer to leave? She couldn't. She was just too weary and footsore, she couldn't move, couldn't walk another step. And where would she go?

He had taken his backpack off his shoulders and proceeded to unpack his provisions.

She watched as he unrolled a sponge mat, his sleeping bag, a blanket, unpacked his food, busied himself. He scrambled down the gravelly slope and returned with water in a pot. So, there was a river running through at the bottom of the slope.

She lay back on her backpack again and closed her eyes, opening them every now and then to check out what he was doing. Two white stripes down the sides of his track pants signalled his movements, which way he bent, which way he stretched. It was a huge relief that he was here. Rather a human for company than a baboon! He looked so in control. He sat on his haunches, took out a little cooker on three legs and began to boil the water and lit some sticks and firelighters with dexterous movements, his fingers long and tapering. There was a pungent smell and black smoke rose and hovered until it slithered out the mouth of the cave. In the meagre firelight, the angles on his face deepened; he looked like an evil magician.

She was freezing. What was camping etiquette? "Can I share your fire?" she asked, moving towards the heat of the flames.

"Ja. Ja. Where is your food to cook?"

"No… for the warmth. I'm sorry. I've got no… I got lost…I didn't mean to… er… spend the..." She found him intimidating, couldn't string a coherent sentence together. Tongue-tied. She smiled sheepishly, sitting close up to the small fire and tightly hugging her knees to her chest. The flames radiated heat onto her face and shins but she couldn't stop shivering.

Using a sachet of instant coffee, sugar and the water now boiling in the pot, he made her a mug of coffee, then he dropped two mielies into the water.

"Here. And you better eat some of these. Get your sugar levels up."

"Thanks." *Koeksisters*. They dripped with syrup. She must look a fright with her tangled wet hair and filthy pants but she didn't care because it was only her soul that he could see.

"And you better have this." He gave her the folded blanket.

She wrapped it around her shoulders: "Thanks! I'm…er Rose." She thought she'd remind him.

"Yes…I remember. Rose. The flower."

She had been ravenous; her stomach burned from hunger. Now, after a bite of the *koeksister*, she found she couldn't eat anymore.

She licked the tips of her fingers as delicately as possible. "What's the time?" she asked.

He stretched out his arm to expose a big rugged watch: “Six forty.”

Six forty! They were about to spend hours together; they couldn’t spend them in silence. She had to make conversation: “Do you know Patilweng?”

“Yes, I know it. I know these mountains well.”

“Have you heard anything about them – you know - like being the last survivors of the San?”

“I have heard something like that but I don’t think it’s true.”

“Really? Why not?”

“It’s just a silly romantic notion. There is probably San blood in many of the natives of the area, but in terms of cultural practises, I sincerely doubt it.”

“Have you seen a lot of the rock art sites?”

“Ja. I have.”

Rose couldn’t think of anything more to say so they sat in silence, staring at the small fire that he fed every now and then with a packet of sticks that he’d brought along in his backpack.

“You’re not allowed to take firewood from outside? You have to bring your own?” Rose asked.

“Ja. The making of fires is not allowed. You can make a fire here – it’s a camping area – but you’re not allowed in proper caves.”

He has haunted eyes, Rose thought. There’s some sort of fanatical zeal that burns in them. What’s his quest? In earlier times, he would have been a missionary. Had he too lost his way? Maybe he’d found it through his work and hiking in these mountains? Or maybe it was just his foreignness she couldn’t relate to. He was a closed book. They didn’t share the same frames of reference; their histories were too different.

He squatted over the fire, holding a piece of meat clamped between two wire frames. It was very cosy, the two of them. She closely watched as he concentrated on his cooking. The Camel man, self-sufficient, preferring his own company. She wondered about his family, his mother. Did her heart break to see her son’s defences building up on his way to becoming this man’s type of man, or was she the type who could barely wait for her children to leave the nest?

The smell of meat was giving her an appetite.

High cheek bones. Slavic roots? He felt her eyes on him and he looked up. Their eyes met.

“Biltong?” He passed her a paper bag.

Rose laughed. "*Koeksisters* and biltong. You've really taken on South African cuisine. When did you get here?"

Rose couldn't believe it - his face softened in the orange glow; he almost cracked a smile. "Oh …they're good camping foods..." Then he looked thoughtful: "When I got here? To South Africa? About eight years ago. I worked in a rural facility in KZN, running a hospital. I was fired for dispensing ARVs. Yes, yes – maybe they destroy the liver but I was saving lives! Politicians… my hands were tied. So I moved to Lesotho. The government was starting a roll-out programme… building HIV clinics. There was a need for something for the – the ones who leave it too late. I love Lesotho, the country. It's just a small thing I do. Maybe it grows."

He went to fetch a steel plate from his rucksack and a set of cutlery that fitted neatly together, then he cut the steak into pieces and broke the mielies and sat cross-legged at right angles next to her with the plate, their knees and elbows almost touching.

"Here. You eat with the fork."

"No, I can't, really." She should say she's vegetarian.

"Looks like you can do with some food." She capitulated. She let the blanket fall off her shoulders and took the fork. He picked up pieces of steak with his fingers.

Benevolent magician. Maybe he had found fulfilment; he was just very reserved. "Thank you. You're too kind. I'll have to buy you a meal in Oberon - to reciprocate. In the pub, where I saw you first."

"I noticed you too."

"I think it's a great thing that you're doing," she said, spearing a piece of meat. "It's really hard for me to confront all this poverty and suffering. It's really hard. But I don't contribute – or… or do anything."

He nodded. "You feel bad because it disturbs your…your middle-class identity. To be confronted like this; you don't know how to deal with it. It's - how can I say - out your comfort zone."

"It's out my comfort zone, but I live with the discomfort every day. I'm accosted by beggars every day, I see poverty every day. And you?"

"For me, I try do something to make it better but I know deep down, it's really about feeling better about myself. And my guilt. I feel responsible… guilty for colonialism. My ancestors. They really screwed up in Africa." He put a piece of meat in his mouth and chewed slowly, deliberately.

"Tell me about ho Tjetjha. Did you choose to build it so far away from everything?"

"No, no. The building was existing and vacant so we moved in but my dream is to build the haven in the valley. I'm trying to raise funds. There're about eight thousand people living there. It makes more sense. Like this, it's very difficult."

"And Aids orphans? Is there a project there - in the valley - an NGO that takes care of them?"

"No. Not in the valley. They're looked after a little by people in the community. But still, there's a great need." He was looking into the fire.

She'd had enough to eat. Her stomach must have shrunk. "Take the fork. I'm finished. I'll rinse it in the mielie water." Rose got up to rinse the fork, her limbs feeling stiff and sore, and took up her position again, at right angles to him and passed him the fork. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders.

"You know," he continued, "in other… bigger communities, things are even worse. On both sides of the border. There're many many orphans … families headed by children. They're targets for criminals. These – these gangsters steal their welfare grants, the money their dead parents leave behind. They get abused, raped. The older children can't even go to school. They must stay at home to protect their things. And the worst thing – the people in the community know these criminals. They're often related to them! It's very bad." He shook his head.

"Such a problem. There should be some sort of adoption drive - to adopt these children."

"There are so many. Too many."

"Maybe someone needs to start something, like a safe haven where they could be protected and fed and schooled." Her eyelids were feeling very heavy.

"Yes… but to start a project on the South African side…maybe it's better to start a project on this side of the border. There's less bureaucracy. Michael would be a good person to help with this. He would make sure the community supports the project. Ja."

They sat in silence, hypnotised by the glowing embers. Then she spoke: "I'm sorry. I'm falling asleep. I got lost in these mountains today. I walked from Patilweg and got so lost…" she repeated, pulling her backpack towards her, resting her head on it, her head towards him, and curling her body around the fire,. A cold draught blew onto her back and she shivered.

"From Patilweng? That's far. You're very lucky. Lost people walk round and round in circles and sometimes die from exposure. You must sleep in the sleeping bag otherwise you'll be too cold. The fire will go out and…"

"I can't - really I…I've taken enough advantage of you. If I can use the blanket, I'll be…"

"Come – I'll unzip it. We'll both fit. I'll only come in when you are sleeping so you won't even know I'm there. It's going to be very cold tonight. The rain's coming."

Oh my God – sharing a sleeping bag with a stranger. He was right though. She was freezing. How would she sleep? It didn't matter. At least she'd be warm.

Swallowing her reserve, she took off her shoes and socks – they were filthy, covered with burrs and blackjacks - then her jacket and slipped in under the sleeping bag, onto the foam mat, curling up in a foetal position.

"If you need to go in the middle of the night, here's a torch." He threw the blanket over the sleeping bag then placed the torch above her head. That's a comfort, she thought.

The man with the *kaross* draped over his shoulders led the cow he had just captured across the wide open veld. The animal's tail twitched as they walked. There was a Great Dance going on at the cliff - she could see by the glow that lit up the sky and hear by the rhythmic beat of the drums. The man slit the cow's throat with one deft stroke of a sharp stone. The animal sunk onto its knees, gave a great bellow and then died. Rain started to fall, splattering the dry earth. But it was not water that fell but blood and milk, both. They merged on the ground generating puddles of pink liquid.

She woke to the sound of rain – a soft soaking feminine rain. She became aware of the presence behind her and the heat generated by his closeness, the two of them like a double apostrophe in the sleeping bag. Her mind blanked out as she once more fell into the abyss of sleep.

Later, she became aware of Wim's hand slipping under her T-shirt, touching the warm soft skin around her navel, moving to her breast, feeling her hard nipple under his fingers. She desired sex, lusted for it. She moved closer, pressing into him, feeling his body along her whole length and then she rolled onto her back and together, they tore off their pants and she felt his cheek warm against hers and his back taut and his weight heavy on her and a groan escaped from the back of her throat as he thrust into her, and she surrendered so completely to her desire that the rational split from the physical and

she floated above herself and gazed at her body which had become a receptacle of pure pleasure. And there was no shame in their sex, no inhibition, no shared history and no common memories, no thing that complicated their connection. And she felt him burst into her, a million stars filling her every crevice and fold. “More,” she whispered, so he pleasured her until she cried out, shuddering. And again until she was finally satiated.

A full bladder woke her. Early morning light crept into the cave and she heard the dawn chorus of a thousand birds. Taking care not to disturb Wim, she rolled out the sleeping bag and stood up. A trickle of fluid rolled down her leg. In the twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness, she thought she may have imagined it but now she knew it had been true.

The sky was clear and pale and the earth was damp and raindrops quivered on leaves as she made her way to a place near the river. As she squatted, she could smell the familiar smell, post-coitus, the mixing of bodily fluids.

Unprotected sex with a complete stranger. Was she mad? Where had he been – this lonely man living in the heartlands of the plague? Was this a habit for him? Always wear a condom. No glove, no love. A hand-in-glove fit between love and death. Tainted blood and bodily fluids, the fragility of mucous membranes. She was more at risk than he. But still – he was also taking a chance. He knew nothing about her. She must ask him his status. Could she trust him to tell the truth?

She walked back into the cave, towards the sleeping bag, but then her footsteps faltered and she stopped and looked upon his sleeping frame, his bristly head, his dark blonde eyelashes, his sharp cheekbone, and her stomach lurched from the memory of her desire. It awakened a sense of shame in her and she now felt too self-conscious for speech. She knew that she couldn’t ask him, couldn’t discuss what had taken place. And there was the other thing. She couldn’t quite remember where she was in her cycle. She’d have to get to a chemist sooner rather than later.

Quietly, picking up her backpack, she stole out the cave and, with the map in her hand, found the path that would lead her to her car.

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The comings and goings of Patilweng. The villagers live under the protection of a Basotho chief who goes by the name of Steven. He and his people live at the confluence

of the Banqaru and Tsalea rivers, whence a delegation arrived to ask the medicine man to make rain. In return, the medicine man was given two head of cattle to add to his growing herd. According to Abel, all the cattle in the kraal belong to him, and contribute to his high status within the village. Steven is a petty chief who has been associated with a force rebelling against the British, inviting their setting his kraal alight in retaliation. A tremendous conflagration resulted, which continued burning for many day and many nights, eventually blackening the entire valley and destroying both the winter and summer grazing lands. Of course, if the natives rebel, they must suffer the consequences but when I envisage their suffering and their plight, my heart breaks.

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Chapter 22

It was after seven by the time she got back to Oberon. In the main street, taxis disgorged domestic workers, cleaners, shop assistants, waitresses and cooks. It was too early to go to the chemist. After the garage, she turned into the dirt road that took her down to the bridge, then up again on the other side, following the bends past the now familiar houses and farm buildings to the Chameleon. The gate was open and she drove straight in.

The cottage looked unpretentious and simple and welcoming in the rainwashed morning and she couldn't wait to soak in a bath and wash away the grime on her body and the damp that chafed between her legs. She looked for the key, opening her backpack and poking around. She delved deeper, rummaging in the side pockets, feeling amongst the stones. Where had she put it? She looked on the floor of her car and under the seats. To lose the key now! Of all times! She could either knock on Brigit's door straight away or wait until eight to get a key and then she hoped there was a spare. And look at her! She looked like she'd been dragged through a bush backward. It was almost true. What would they think?

Weary to the bone, dragging her feet across the dew-covered grass, she ducked as a black body hurtled down from a lofty branch of the pine tree. Gad! What a fright! Her heart jumped in her chest as if desperate to escape her ribcage. The peacock landed at her feet. She didn't realize they roosted so high.

Flopping into the armchair on the veranda, she watched as the bird strutted about, the beauty of his plumage irresistibly drawing her eye. She'd once read that peahens preferred males with less elaborate tails. The sun made a filigreed network on the thin skin of her eyelids. She fretted. What to do? She'd have to get tested at some stage. It was going to drive her mad. Completely crazy. How long did she have to wait to test? She'd be a complete a basket case waiting for those results. And what about the morning after pill? Did you need a prescription? She'd go to Dr Mnusi next door to the chemist. She had at least a day but she wasn't sure. She dozed.

It must have been close on eight. She brushed and smacked at her pants, ran her fingers through her hair and went round to the Libers. Neither car was there but Thuli had to be inside. She'd surely have a spare key. She stepped on the paving stones that led to the backdoor then stopped on the threshold. The door was open; the breakfast

area in disarray. Chairs had been flung around; drawers were opened. She heard the children crying.

Oh no! Oh God! She ran down the passage, looking into the lounge as she passed. There was an empty space on the unit where the TV normally stood. A bunch of coloured wires poked out from the wall where the set had been wrenched off. Sick to her stomach. Where were they? The children? Brigit?

The doors to children's rooms were locked, the keys missing.

"Jamie, Jemma," she cried. "Are you okay? Where's mummy?" Jamie was furiously jogging the handle of his door. She could hear his cries on the other side: "Mum, Mum! Let me out!", and Jemma's soft moans from behind her locked door.

Rose dashed to the main bedroom, dreading what she'd find, steeling herself, propelling herself through the open doorway.

"Brigit!" She screamed and clapped her hand over her mouth. She felt sick to her stomach. Brigit lay on the carpet, on her side.

She was alive. She swivelled her head to look up at Rose, her eyes weary and owlish without her glasses. Her hands and feet had been bound and she had been tied to the legs of the dressing table. Duct tape had been stuck down over her mouth. Greasy footprints marred the beige carpet and the duvet cover on the double bed had been mussed. Not that! Next to her lay Thuli, moaning. Were they hurt? Get them untied. She ran to the kitchen to find a knife or scissors. When did this happen? Just as well the children weren't able to come out their rooms.

Rose felt like she was in an old movie, time moving in jerky frames. She cut the ties and tape and Brigit got up slowly, rubbing the red welts on her wrists. Thuli sat up looking dazed.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Rose's voice sounded strange, choked up. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her nose was running. Why was she crying? Brigit and Thuli should be the ones crying. She wiped her cheeks and nose with the back of her hand.

Brigit sat on the edge of the bed for a few seconds, then she jumped up and bounded to the children's closed doors: "Children! Are you okay? Don't cry. Everything's fine. Mummy's fine. I'm finding the key now." And she strode down the passage and into the study, Rose following her, her body trembling, her mouth dry. Was she the only one aware of the foetid smell of swamp that followed her? She hoped so.

"Shit. Computer gone. Where're my glasses? And my cell?" Opening drawers roughly and shifting the contents about, Brigit said: "I'm a bit bruised, that's all. Nothing else. They knocked me around a bit. Thuli too." Her face lost its severe expression for a few moments. "Shame. She told them not to hurt me. Ah – here they are." Brigit had found the spare keys and hurried to the children's rooms.

Falling to her knees, she gathered her children to her and comforted them, tightly squeezing her eyelids together and hugging them close, as Jamie cried, and Jemma , not quite understanding the situation, cried in solidarity with her brother. "Come. Come," she soothed. "Everything's okay. We're all fine. Everything's fine. Look! Here, I am."

"Where's Daddy?" Jamie sobbed.

"He'll be here soon. He's fine. Everything's fine. Let's go have breakfast," she said. Where was Hank? Bad time for him to be chasing stock thieves.

"Mummy, Mummy," Jamie had run down the passage, looking into the lounge. "Where's the TV?"

They made their way to the breakfast room. Brigit carrying the tear-stained Jemma, groaned as she cast her eyes into each room: "What else is missing? I'm scared to look. Is my car there?" Rose now wondered whether the cottage had been left intact. She hadn't seen any signs of forced entry as she'd sat on the veranda. What could they have stolen from her? Her computer. It was the only thing of value. She hoped it was still there. Her final submission to Charmaine was almost complete and she had no back-up.

Brigit told Rose: "The children were asleep. I was busy in the study. You know, I heard a noise but didn't think anything. The next thing, these two thugs burst into the room – or three – there might have been another one somewhere - pulling me to the bedroom. I worried about the children. Thuli was in her room; they dragged her here too. Why, I don't know. Thank goodness for Thuli. She was great. But we're fine, aren't we Thuli?"

Thuli nodded. "Oh my God. But it was terrible. I'm still shaking. I thought they would kill us. They had guns. It's terrible what goes on today. Youngsters. They've got no respect. They took my cell phone, my handbag, my papers. I'm going to have troubles now. " Still in her overalls but without her *doek,* her hair was all snarled and knotted above her face, which had taken on a dull cast from the shock.

"I'm making you both tea," Rose stated. "Or maybe I mustn't. I don't know. Maybe we shouldn't disturb anything. Fingerprints. I'll call the police. Where's the number?" She had opening cupboards, not sure what she was looking for. Tremors continued to riffle through her body.

Brigit shook her head. "Just call the Community Watch. The number's next to the phone."

"What happened, Mummy? Where are those men? Were they baddies?" Jamie asked wide eyed. Jemma sat in her high chair, her face tearstained but cheerfully banging a spoon on the tray.

"I'm furious! How dare they!" Brigit expostulated, roughly pouring cereal into bowls, throwing tea bags into mugs. Thuli stood by her side waiting to serve the children. When you worked for Brigit there was no indulging yourself. You just had to shake off whatever and get on with it. They were both so stoical.

"The main thing is that you're all unhurt. Material things are nothing," Rose tried to soothe.

"That's not the main thing! We shouldn't have to be subjected to this. It's not normal. We can't live always looking over our shoulders, always worrying about our safety." Brigit banged the cups down on the table, sloshing the tea over the sides.

"The Community Watch said they'll be here now. The guy told me to call the police as well."

"Waste of time. What're they going to do?"

"When're you expecting Hank?"

"I don't know. Sometime during the morning, I think." Should she offer to try phone him for her? He was probably out of cell phone range anyway. It was too odd – her offering. Like she had some of special connection. Brigit would have to phone him herself - if she wanted.

"Sit Thuli," Brigit enjoined Thuli who'd been leaning against the dresser.

The three women sat at the table, steam rising from the bright mugs.

"Ah – this tastes good. Ow. It's burning my lips. Anyway, thank God you came when you did. Otherwise who knows how long…" Brigit suddenly looked at Rose: "Where were you this weekend, Rose?" She hesitated: "Er…sorry - you don't need to tell me. It really isn't any of my business…but I – I started to get worried. I really... You never know – in this day and ... a woman on her own. I was starting to phone around when …this happened."

She felt the blood rise in her cheeks. Would it have made any difference if she had been around? Could she have sounded the alarm? Maybe she wouldn't have even been aware of the presence of these intruders. Maybe she would have been tied up along with Brigit and Thuli. She shuddered. She wondered how she would have coped with such a violation of her body and its space. Not as well as Brigit – she was a tough cookie. Or good at putting up a front.

"Sorry, Brigit. I - I went with Happiness to her village and didn't realise that…I thought I'd be a few hours but... I'm really sorry. I would have phoned but there was no signal. And then my phone went dead. And look at me!" She laughed hollowly, feeling suddenly nauseous as a wave of guilt washed over her. "I did this gruelling hike and got lost. In the mountains. I'm filthy. I took no change of… I haven't managed to…"

She hadn't given Happiness a thought. Now she felt bad about her too. Had she caused her anxiety as well? Probably not. She probably wouldn't have thought much about her at all. She had enough problems of her own.

"Oh God, Brigit. That reminds me. It seems as if I've…er …lost the key to the cottage." She patted her pants pockets. "Do you have a spare? Sorry. This is all you need now."

Some men from the Community Watch arrived. They screamed up in huge metallic 4X4s, abounding in machismo, preceded by their *boeps* and bristling moustaches, thumping around in their sturdy shoes, poking around, shaking their heads and making sympathetic noises. You had the feeling that they were ready for a showdown, any time, any place. Then they would show them who was boss in this place.

Sometime later, Hank arrived home. He was concerned, attentive, supportive. "We must increase the security here. Upgrade our alarm. Build a wall." Brigit looked stonily at him.

Finally, the police arrived and when they left, Rose left too.

She napped, waking in the late afternoon - too late for the chemist. Time was running out.

She returned missed calls from Petra and they arranged to meet for a drink at the Olive Branch. Ronald would be joining them.

She told them what had happened to Brigit. "She was amazing… really strong. She picked herself up, brushed herself off and just got on with it, comforted the

children, directed Thuli. I felt so hopeless... clueless. I - I didn't know what to say, what to do…"

"It is difficult when you haven't been in a situation yourself," Petra observed.

"Well, thank goodness for that!" Ronald exclaimed.

Petra continued: "And I think she had to be strong for the children…you can't wallow in self-pity… the needs of the children take preference… become more important than your own. Anyway, you'd probably surprise yourself at how well you'd cope."

Rose nodded: "Maybe. But this…this thing with Brigit - I need to get going. I'll think I'll leave tomorrow. Well – it's not only that but… but I just need to get home. There're things waiting for me that I need to tackle and I suddenly feel ready."

"Aw. That's sad. But you must let us know if you find anything… anything about your parents," Petra told her. "Your story's really piqued our interest, you know, Rose. Ronald and I went to the museum today. I tried to get hold of you to ask if you wanted to come, but your phone was off."

"Battery… So? What did you think?"

"Well, Steve was right. It was kind of kitsch but the film was quite well done. I knew nothing about the art; never heard about the Great Dance, in fact," Ronald informed her. "I wouldn't mind participating in one. Sounds like a- er- mind-blowing experience."

"But you have done stuff like this, Ron," Petra lightly reminded him.

"Yeah, well...but I want to do it the Bushman way, without any help from any…er substances."

Rose looked at Ronald with fresh eyes. The revelation made him all the more interesting. He'd seemed so straight down the line. Hmm. You could never tell what lay beneath the skin. She wanted to share her experience with them – to dispel any erroneous opinion they might have of her. Once, a man she'd met had thrown the words upright and uptight in her face. Like a glass of cold water. Look. I'm also open to things like that. I participated, she wanted to say. I flew to the stars and met my ancestral mothers. And it feels like it's changed me in some radical way. But I can't pin it down. Maybe it was the sex. Oh God. And every time I think of that, which is most of the time, my insides somersault like some stupid court jester. She could have told them that but instead she said: "So what did you think of the White Goddess story at the end? D'you think she could be connected to the painting?"

"It's the right historical period, according to the film. Look, I'm going to do some research on the painting when I get to London. I'm sure there'll be other sources of information there. Books, journals."

Much later, they said their goodbyes.

"We're not letting you get away so easily," Ronald promised. "I've got photos to email you. What's your address?" Rose hugged them both tightly, squeezing her eyes together as she did.

The light was still on in the Libers' house when she got back. Opening the door a crack, she peeped in to see Hank sitting alone at the table, busily fixing some piece of tractor. He'd surrounded himself with an array of spanners and screwdrivers.

"I came to see how Brigit's doing," Rose told him.

"Ja – she's strong. She'll be fine."

"And you?"

"Me?" He laughed but it sounded a little hollow to Rose's ears. "I'm always fine."

"Hank – here're the seeds. I'm leaving tomorrow. After breakfast." She passed him the packet.

He held them up to the light. "You never know." He looked at her, a serious expression on his face: "I'll miss you, Goddess. Hey. Come back and stay with us again."

"You never know," she smiled.

While filling her car at Harrismith, she remembered that she still hadn't got the morning-after pill. But it wasn't pregnancy that plagued her, it was that other thing. In the unlikely chance she was was pregnant, she could always get an abortion... termination – it sounded better.

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Writing this in the comfort of my uncle's study, the experiences I underwent in the village of Patilweng seems as if bathed in the light of dreams. Tomorrow, I embark on the SS Dunvegan for the voyage home and I return as someone other than the lady who arrived from England but a few weeks ago.

My last hours spent in the village were strange and imbued with an uncanny quality that remains with me yet. The sun sank and the moon rose and I retired to my quarters but was unable to sleep. The sounds of drumming throbbed ceaselessly under the inky-blue firmament from whence I did not know. I was drawn to investigate and slipping on the khaki pants and velskoene, I entered the night to see the flames of a large fire flickering near the cliffs. Unable to ride, I trod warily across the plain until I reached the site of the fire and was most amazed to see the villagers: the women were sitting around the large fire, clapping and singing, and the men were dancing around the circle, accompanied by the drummers who, as if in a trance, beat their tom toms with the heels of their hands. I did not want them to know of my presence so I skulked towards the cliffs, hiding behind a rocky outcrop to witness the goings-on. Through the billowing smoke, I recognised the medicine man on the edges of the circle, supported by two of the men as he staggered, bent over as if in mortal agony. Then he collapsed out of my line of vision. I watched for another fifteen minutes or so, but then cold and tiredness overtook me and, as the clapping and dancing was continuing unabated, I crept out from behind my hiding place and made my way back to my tent.

In the morning, curiosity overcame me and, encountering no one, I rode out to the cliffs once more, to the place of the night's activities. I came upon the still smouldering ashes and then walked on to the painting of the eland in the rocks. I froze. Shocked and dismayed, I saw that someone had vandalised the beautiful eland, overlaying it with a figure so crudely rendered that it looked as if it had been painted by a child using a finger. But there was another aspect that was even more disturbing and I gasped as I was struck by the recognition. There was my bustle dress and my white sunhat which always sits on my crown in these harsh altitudes. Red and white lines emanate from my nose and my arms are outstretched as if in flight. There are figures of men too, bending over, their arms behind their backs, as if paying homage to the lady. What could it mean?

I slowly lifted my arm to touch the white figure when a hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed my wrist, holding it as if in a vice. I cried out in fright and tried to free myself. "No – you don't!" the medicine man ranted furiously. His fingers, stained with white pigment, dug into my wrist.

"You!" he cried in his broken English. "You witch! You spirit-of-the-dead who shoots arrows where they should not go. You have stolen my power. The rain cannot fall." I managed to free myself from his grasp and run to my horse whereupon I galloped back to the village, my heart bursting out of my ribcage.

As I neared the village, I was relieved to see two British cavalrymen, the red of their uniforms brilliant against the soft greens of the landscape. They had been sent by my uncle to take me back to Oberon. There is news of rebellion and more threats of uprisings and war against the colonial administration and it is advisable for me to return to England.

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Chapter 23

Rose was about to enter the flat, her key poised at the lock when she met Abi.

"Hi Rose, I haven't seen you for ages."

"I was away in the Berg a few weeks ago… just for about ten days or so." The Berg. Now she too could claim ownership and refer to it by its diminutive designation. "But other than that… Where've you been?"

"I went home for the holidays. Just got back. I start college soon."

"Ah ha. So *you've* been away. Where's your uncle?" Rose wanted to know.

"Oh," she tossed her head with its long braids. "He stayed at home - needed to look after his business interests. His managers were robbing him blind."

"Want to come in?"

"Can't now. Later?"

"Sure. I've got something for you." Rose smiled and entered the flat.

The plane tree outside the window looked tired; its leaves wilting and faded. It had been a hot dry January. She wandered through the lounge, revelling in the space, in her health. She'd done it. She'd cleared the flat, made space for her life, rid it of its clutter. The display cabinets were gone as well as some of the fussier items of furniture. She'd given away a lot - the Royal Doulton shepherdess, the Wedgwood Jasperware bowl and the Moorcroft jug, all gone to a charity shop. The Swarovski crystal hedgehog was waiting for Abi. She'd doled out Livvie's clothes and other things to Aaron and the gardener and the old man who lived on the roof and to Katie, who had finally materialized. Rose decided she didn't want to offer Katie the part-time work. She was too connected to the past and Rose wanted to break this tie. She liked to think that Katie was enjoying her retirement at home, being spoilt by her children and grandchildren but she suspected that this wasn't the case.

She looked at the *Drakensberg Lady* hanging above the escritoire. She'd never got around to buying Corrie's photos displayed on the walls of the Olive Branch. There'd be another time. And, feeling all adrift since her work for Charmaine had ended, she sat down at the dining room table, and opened her computer anyway, addicted to its blank screen. The email icon blinked. It was from Petra. She eagerly opened it.

From: Petra Steyn

Sent: Thur 22/01/09 11.04AM
To: Rose Clemens

Your white lady on the rocks - I think I might have identified her. I'm here researching at the British Library, looking through journals, diaries of Victorian women travellers in Africa and have had an amazingly serendipitous find! Came across a diary by a Rosamund Swan (b. 1855) who travelled to Natal in early 1880, and then to the Berg, to the tiny and very remote village of Patilweng. Here, she encountered the last of the surviving Bushmen, living with them for a few weeks, sketching them, studying their cultural practices, their lives, their rock paintings etc. What a woman! She definitely could be the one who appears in the Bergsun film.

From: Rose Clemens
Sent: Thur 22/01/09 11.42 AM
To: Petra Steyn

Patilweng! I was there. This is really fascinating. How do you find this out for certain? And the woman who appears in the Philip Geoffrey painting? Could she be one and the same? I know there is some clue about my parentage in the painting. It's again a question of joining the dots. I can't find much about the artist and nothing about the painting, like who owns it.

She pressed the send button and sat back in the chair, reading and re-reading Petra's words. Rosamund Swan. She imagined her swanning her way around the Drakensberg, seated in a sedan chair borne by little black pygmies in loin cloths. Wrong country. Her phone rang.

"Hello Rose. It's Betty. We're back in town. Harry said I must phone you, see how you're doing. Come for tea on Saturday. I've invited Marion and Glynnis. Do you know she's having trouble with her marriage? But don't say anything," she warned. "Marion told me in confidence."

Poor Marion. How would she deal with a failing marriage when only wonderful things ever happened to her and her family? As for Betty. Now, she was a different

kettle of fish. So what type of fish was she? She googled "fish". Boarfish, medusa fish, megamouth shark, old wife, red snapper, toothcarp? Harry was a grunt. She giggled.

Rose drove along Riviera Road on the Saturday afternoon, crossing Oxford Road into Saxonwold, down the hill past the zoo and into the quiet roads of Forest Town. The sun had settled on the head of the bronze Angel of Peace that sat atop the War Monument and itchy balls from the plane trees formed golden eddies in the gutters as a harsh dry cough of a wind blew in from the west.

"Glynnis, it's been years!" Rose said as they kissed each other. "And your children…" There was a little girl of about three clinging to Glynnis, mumbling into her leg that she wanted to go home and a toddler who had pulled himself up on the flower pot and was palming sand into his mouth.

"Oh look at him," Glynnis laughed, trying to wipe the sand out of his mouth. The baby looked up at her and screamed with delight. "There's such a difference between girls and boys," she said emphatically. "You Rose – no marriage plans?"

"No." Rose sat in a white wicker chair that faced out onto the garden. The giant old oaks threw long shadows into the garden, lush and verdant despite the absence of rain.

"Maybe you're better off. Look how great you look and look at me." Glynnis had put on weight since Rose had last seen her. She looked worn out, heading towards middle-age.

"Well, come sit down." Betty bustled about.

"You've got enough food to feed an army here, Betty," cried Marion.

Martha came onto the veranda carrying a tray laden with cups and saucers, bone china balancing.

"You can put that here." Betty indicated to an empty place on a server between a steaming urn, a large cheesecake, biscuits piled onto a tiered stand and a platter of fruit. "I think I'll put the fruit on the table."

"Hello, Martha," Rose said. "How're the children?"

"You know Talita died?" Betty said.

"Shame. I'm sorry Martha. She suffered..."

"Ya. What can you do," Martha sighed. "Now I've got the problem with Pule." And shaking her head, she went back inside.

"Rose, darling – how've you been?" Marion paused to peer at Rose. "I must say, you're looking particularly well."

Rose lightly touched her cheek: "Am I? I –I've been away. Did me good."

The baby had crawled over to the table and sunk his sandy fingers in a slice of melon. Glynnis whipped him away and he started to yell.

"Darling, give him the melon. Give him to me. Have your tea, then you can take him. Come darling," Marion said to the little girl. "Come with Granny. I want to show you how to make witch's fingers." Marion, the baby on her hip, held the little girl's hand and took her to the wall adjoining the veranda where a bignonia creeper grew, heavy with flower. Putting the baby on the ground where he pulled at the tufts of grass, she picked a red trumpet bloom. "Can you do that?" she asked, putting the bloom on the little girl's forefinger. "I hope you don't mind me picking your flowers, Betty." What a good granny, Rose thought.

"Marion's got a lot of energy. You can't let them out of your sight for a second. This low table… and the pool," Betty observed. "With Pule here, we make sure the gate's closed…Cheesecake Glynnis?"

"I'm not taking my eyes off them," Glynnis responded. "I won't, thanks Betty. I can't shake this weight since the pregnancy." She said to Rose: "Children are exhausting. You have to have help otherwise you can go mad."

"I've got such a problem," Betty informed them. "Martha made me promise not to send the child back to her family at her home when she dies. She said I must bring him up. Me! Bring him up. Rose, cheesecake?" Betty offered.

"Thanks. Looks delicious. Who says she's going to die?" Rose asked thinking that Martha must be really desperate if she thinks Pule would be better off with Betty and Harry.

"Martha's old. She's got all types of problems. High blood pressure, water on the heart. I don't know what all."

"Oh, I will have a piece of cheesecake, thanks. But just a little one," Glynnis told Betty.

"Why can't she send him home? They all do it." Marion retorted from the sidelines.

"She says she can't burden them with him. They're all children themselves. There's no one looking after them. They fend for themselves."

"You can't take this on. Not at your stage of life," Marion declared firmly.

"I can't. Not at any age. He's got Aids, you know," she told them conspiratorially. "Who's going to make sure he gets his medicine? He needs medicine every day. He gets sick often. No - even if he was healthy. I don't know what I'm going to do. I told Harry I want to emigrate. To run away from the problem. He told me I'm mad…but I – I can't help feeling guilty."

Glynnis asked: "Where is he now?"

"Playing golf."

"Huh? No, the child – with Aids."

"Oh," Betty said breezily. "He's around somewhere. In the back. With Martha."

"Well, I don't want him near the children," Glynnis looked around worriedly.

"I feel like letting Martha go but she's the only breadwinner for all those children. Who's going to employ her at her age?" Betty put a large piece of cheesecake into her mouth.

An image of the boy presented itself to Rose. She remembered the knowing challenge in his eyes as he cast his spell on her. "I'll take him. I'll adopt him," she said with a nonchalance that belied the utter astonishment that she was now feeling. Where had the words come from? They seemed to have just popped unbidden into her mouth. She suddenly understood.

"Who?" Glynnis asked, her fork poised with a large mouthful from a second helping of cake.

"Pule. I'll adopt him. And, by the way, he hasn't got Aids. He's HIV positive and well-managed from what I can gather." She was feeling more sure of herself.

The three women stared at her, mouths open, forks frozen in midair.

Then Glynnis laughed. "You are joking, hey? You can't mean that." She'd taken over from Marion and was standing on the grass by the children. They were sitting in a pile of scarlet witch's fingers, shrieking as they threw them up into the air. Rose wondered how happy Nathan would be when he saw this.

"I do mean it," she said, very serious.

Marion, who had popped a strawberry into her mouth, said thickly: "Do you know what you're taking on? Arnold was telling me the other day how much it costs to raise a child? Probably a million in today's money."

"But that's with private schooling. He doesn't need to go to a private school." Betty wasn't going to discourage Rose.

"That's true. But still - she's young. Why must she burden herself with this? And on her own? On top of it all, this Aids, HIV whatever - he's not a well child. And when you meet a man, it might put him off… You're ruining your chances, Rose. Your life! What do you think Livvie would have advised you to do?" Marion looked serious.

Rose laughed dryly. "Livvie? I know what she would have done. Anyway, who's to say Martha will die so soon."

"Well, I think it's good idea," Betty pronounced.

"You're mad," Glynnis asserted.

"I mean it. Absolutely. There's no question. I was thinking of moving out the flat, letting it, going into a house. Maybe in Orchards. Or – or I'll have to see where there're schools. I'll employ Martha. They can come live with me. We'll do it properly. I'll adopt him legally then when Martha does eventually die, he'll just carry on living with me."

"Listen, don't make rash decisions. Talk to someone – your therapist." Marion and her belief in the talking cure. "And I'm always there if you need me. You know I'm always there."

The sky was streaked with orange and faded blue when she got into her car to leave. A hadeda honked despondently overhead. She chuckled. She could just imagine what they were saying about her. They probably thought she was just being contrary, that she wouldn't go through with it. But she was being dead serious. She could give Pule a great life. And Martha would be there to help, although she was old. She'd employ someone else to help with the housework.

She must remember to phone the lawyer on Monday morning first thing to discuss adoption. And how to set up trusts and charities. Marshall Bleazard. She'd use him. He was quite human – he only thought he was God.

When she got home, there was another email.

From: Petra Steyn
Sent: Sat 25/01/09 4.15PM
To: Rose Clemens

The subject of *The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess*, (1883). Yep - she was none other than Rosamund Swan, the woman who lived with the

Bushmen and wrote a diary. (See attachment. Have scanned the most interesting entries.) For a 25 year old, she was amazingly accomplished and self-assured. If I think of myself at this age, I was hopeless - so unsure of myself. The rock art depiction of her seems to be the shaman's (she calls him medicine man) attempt at harnessing her potency.

She didn't die in the Drakensberg but returned to London later in the year- 1880. I looked in Debretts and similar sources for background info. Her family were minor members of society. Her father, Sir Edward Swan, was landed gentry. She was something of a celebrity –feted by the arty set, in particular the artist Sir Philip Geoffrey.

So the big news is that he used her as his model in the painting *The White Goddess,* which also incorporates sketches from her diary. He used them as the source for the background to the painting. She was quite talented – her sketches and watercolours are very delicately rendered. I found a larger, more detailed reproduction of the work in an art book in the library. I've posted a copy to you. It's interesting that Sir Philip called Rosamund the "White Goddess". From his letters and writings, he was completely besotted with her. It seems like they were lovers for a time. He was much older than her and married. Scandalous! And the Bushmen paying homage – the artist's adoration of the subject transferred onto the Bushmen? From the diary, it seemed that she and the medicine man weren't on such good terms.

I can't find out who owns the painting now.

From: Rose Clemens
Sent: Sat 25/01/09 6.30PM
To: Petra Steyn

Completely fascinating. Thanks for all the info. There has to be some connection to my roots. Why else was the painting circled in blue ink? Where do I go from here?

Early the following week, she set up an appointment with Bleazard. Afterwards, as before, a whim drew her to Hyde Park shopping centre. Rounding the stairs onto the first shopping level, amidst the apricot marble and white mouldings, there was a small black man with a dusty complexion manning a Perspex stand. She noticed his bizarre clothes: a faded kilt and ruffled shirt, both of whose worn condition spoke of a costume hire shop. On one leg, he had on a knee-high khaki sock but the other looked like a false leg wrapped in a white bandage. He thrust a pamphlet into her chest and started to speak, mouthing words she couldn't hear. It was lunch time and the place was noisy: abuzz with the clatter of conversation and clang of cutlery as diners filled eateries and coffee shops.

"Thanks," she said, taking the pamphlet and walking away. She glanced at it. It advertised a "Development of Distinction". From the look of the pamphlet distributor, it was distinctively suspect. Freehold and fractional ownership. Fully-stocked trout dams. Flyfishers' Paradise. Own your piece of the Drakensberg.

It made her sad, the Berg being sold off like this. Was this one of those dodgy ones where the developers greased the official's palm and Bob's your uncle? So she too could own a piece, she thought as she ambled along, peering into shop windows filled with luxury goods that only people who felt entitled to own pieces of the Berg would buy.

She passed the shop with the beautiful chiffon dress that had floated over her head like a midnight blue butterfly. On impulse, she stopped, turned on her heels and entered. The saleslady behind the counter was not the young friendly girl from before but an older woman with black runny lines around her eyes. She barely looked up as Rose entered.

"Can I help?" she asked reluctantly.

"Don't worry." Rose sifted through the rail which now had a large sign attached that read Summer Sale – less 50%. There was a small chance that the dress would still be on the rail but there it was. Amazing!

It had to be a good omen. She fingered the chiffon, hearing the voices of women: take it; it was meant to be; it's fate; you won't be sorry; you're going to need this dress someday, and it's even on sale!

She took the dress to the counter. "I'll take it, thanks."

"Don't you want to try it on?" The lady with the racoon eyes eyed her curiously.

"Er… no. Not now. I did a few weeks ago."

The saleslady wrapped it in tissue paper as carefully as if it were human tissue, gently stuck the parcel down with a sticker and placed it in a white carrier bag, which had to be the fanciest Rose had ever toted – the shop's initials had been embossed into the thick cardboard and it had black satin handles. Walking through the centre carrying the bag, she almost felt as if she had joined the ranks of the Hyde Park cognoscenti.

Back at Whitestone Court, she placed the package on the bed and slowly unwrapped it to reveal the membranous dress within the tissue paper, a sheath of midnight blue that caught the air currents as she threaded it through a hanger and hung it on the rail. Then she stood back to admire its addition to her wardrobe, a delicate butterfly coming to rest in a field of wheat.

Another email had arrived from Petra.

From: Petra Steyn
Sent: Tues 27/01/09
To: Rose Clemens

I've been trying to make your family connections so have been doing some genealogical research. Gets more and more interesting…

Rosamund married Cedric Grail soon after she got back from the Berg in 1880. Her first child born in that year was one of many; another was Regina (b. 1890) who married James Room, and begot Rita (b. 1924). It seems that the girls in (your?) family line begin with the letter "R". Rita, with her husband Simon Crystal, embarked on the Gloucester Castle for Durban where they docked in 1946. From there, I lose the trail.

If Rita Crystal was Ruby's mother, Rita would be your granny. But then, how come Ruby's surname was Le Grange? Did Rita get divorced from Simon Crystal to marry a Mr Le Grange? It's up to you to pick up the threads from here. You'd need to apply to Home Affairs for marriage, birth certificates etc. Maybe employ a genealogist. Not sure where you find a reputable one or how expensive it is.

If you make the link, you could probably trace your ancestry back to Boadicea on this side.

Rose rested her chin on her hand and stared at the words on the screen for some time. Then, she typed:

Rosamund Grail (nee Swan) > Regina Room (nee Grail) > Rita Crystal (nee Room) > Ruby Le Grange > Rose Clemens

Her eye was drawn to the rosewood box and she went to extract the catalogue. Flipping to the page with the marked painting, she read for the umpteenth time:

The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess, 1883. Oil on canvas. 2.25m x 1.75m. Artist: Sir Philip Geoffrey. Under instruction of the owners, Mr and Mrs Peter Crystal.

Mr and Mrs Peter Crystal. Rita and Simon Crystal. What was the relationship between the Crystals? Who was Peter Crystal? Was he alive? Should she try to find him?

She closed the catalogue, her eyes passing over the silver words on the cover: Catalogue from a London Auction House…fine paintings…Late Nineteenth Century…15th November, 1972. Who'd marked the entry? Was the catalogue in Ruby's possession or did it fall into Livvie and John's hands later? Either way, there was no clear proof of her connection to the Swan – Grail – Room – Crystal line.

Did other connections exist that they were overlooking? Rose felt too overwrought to think where to look and too impatient to wait for Petra's emails. She wanted instantaneous responses and the exchange of utterances, not pixels flashing on a screen. She picked up the phone and dialled Petra's friend's flat in Kensington.

"What're you doing? Are you busy?"

"Ye-es. I'm busy emailing you!"

Rose laughed. "This feels so scary to me," she told her. "What if I am related…what if I'm not? I don't want to confront the disappointment of… I think maybe…I don't want to make the last link."

"Come on! We've got this far."

"OK – let's say Rosamund Swan… Grail is my - third or whatever – great grandmother. Well, it's fabulous to have such an interesting ancestor. And if she's not related? Somewhere down the line, someone who was really my relative has as fascinating a story to tell. Everyone has stories in their families - some are uncovered;

others stay hidden. And – and, at the end of the day, what difference would it make to my life? Would it change it in any way? I – I don't think so."

"I can understand," Petra agreed. "I was toying with the idea of having my DNA tested - you know – genetic ancestry testing to find out who my ancient mother was or whatever…I've also decided that it's all nonsense. As you say, what difference would it make in my life? It's vanity that makes people want to know this information..." There was a pause on the line. "…in most cases. But in yours, Rose, it's different. You'd have relations – cousins, aunts, uncles…you could connect with them…"

"Blood thicker than water? I don't know. Maybe… Petra – I'm sorry – this has taken up so much of your time… you need to get on with your own…"

"It's actually opened up the most amazing area of research for me. I'm going to use it for my thesis. And Rose – your other news - I'm completely thrilled for you if that's what you want."

Chapter 24

"How old did you say these seeds were?" Hank had phoned her one evening as she lay flopped on the floral couch, watching TV with half an eye.

"Thirty years at least." She sat up, laying her bare feet squarely on the carpet, and staring at the rosewood box on the coffee table.

Well, that's unbelievable – some of them have germinated. Must have been stored in ideal conditions. At first, I couldn't make out what they were – they were so strange - but then I realised they were Eric Vogel's experiments from back in the day," Hank continued. "There used to be a farmer in these parts doing weird experiments with crops – lucerne, maize… He had a lab …a real mad professor."

"Where's he?"

"He's kicked the bucket – years ago. But his widow's alive. Still lives here – in town. She has a small place down the road."

"What type of man was he, this Eric Vogel?" she demanded.

"What d'you mean – what type of man?"

"Was he like … um… kind … reserved…? Hey, listen. I'm coming down. First thing tomorrow morning. Do you have accommodation for me? And Hank – I need to get hold of – er Dr Metheus. I have a … something I want to run by him."

"Try his cell. You gotta be lucky. He's often out of range. The weekends are better. He's often in town then. I'll get you the number."

Hank was waiting on the veranda of the cottage as Rose drove into the Chameleon in the late afternoon. She almost didn't recognise it with the high electrified wall the surrounded it and the electronic gates.

Rose felt suffused with warmth to see Hank.

"Rose!" He pressed her to his chest. Then he held her at out at arms length: "Wow! Look at you! Can it be possible that you're even more beautiful? What's changed?"

"I've put on weight."

"Suits you."

She gestured to the wall: "Feels like home from home…So don't keep me in suspense. What's the story?"

"Come look at your seeds"

They went around to the back of the carport, to a rusty iron frame supporting rough wooden shelves. There were rows of seedlings growing in small plastic pots. Brigit's car was gone.

'Brigit not here? How's she doing?" Rose asked.

"Ja, good. She's doing rounds with Michael today. I sometimes wonder if the two of them don't have some thing going between them." He laughed at Rose's sceptical expression and picked up a pot: "Look at this. Amazing! See these maize leaves. Crinkly. At first I thought something had attacked the seedlings - a virus or something - but then I saw this one – check it out – this colour. Lucerne. Normally bright green." He tapped the side of the pot. "What colour's this? Purple? No… so then I realised."

"So what was this Eric Vogel doing? How was he doing this?"

Hank shrugged. "He told everyone he was taking bits of DNA or whatever from one plant, even bits from goggas and things and sticking it into other plants. In his shed. But that was back then. No one believed him. Now, they're doing that all the time."

"Thirty years ago? Late seventies! He was a pioneer of genetic engineering."

"Ja. I suppose you could put it like that. You know, he committed suicide. No one believed him, in him… his work. He was like this big failure. Everyone here thought he was loony tunes. Where d'you get these seeds, Rose? Remind me."

The Dragon's Tooth loomed gun metal grey in her windscreen as she drove towards the widow's home, a small bungalow on the outskirts of town. It was a Saturday - soon after lunch. She'd phoned and asked if she could interview her, telling her that she was a researcher in the field wanting to know about her late husband's work.

She leant her forehead against the wooden door before ringing the bell for a moment, her mouth bone-dry from nerves. She had told herself that just because Eric Vogel's seeds were in the box along with the other memorabilia, it was like the connection to the White Goddess - it didn't mean that he was her father. The connection was as tenuous, as flimsy as her new dress. She had no hard evidence. She wasn't going to drop any bombshell on the poor widow.

Mrs Vogel opened the door, a shrunken slip of a woman, wearing a faded yellow housecoat and tartan slippers. Her hair was grey and wispy. Like the fur of the dog she carried in her arms.

"I need to pick him up otherwise he piddles on the carpet when there're strangers. He's very nervous, my little Dusty," she told Rose, who tickled the dog on his bony head.

The house was hot and airless and smelt of old age. Rose followed the woman into the lounge off the entrance and sat down on an old faded sofa with crocheted antimacassars on the arms and back. There were dusty paintings on the walls, of the mountains and mountain lakes and moonlights in all seasons, the dark and denatured oils murky and moody. Trying very much to act the professional researcher, she briskly took out her moleskin notebook. The effect was somewhat lost when she couldn't find a pen.

She cleared her throat: "Mrs Vogel, thanks very much for seeing me."

"What did you say you wanted?" She peered myopically at Rose from across the room. The dog panted with rasping breaths at her feet.

Rose felt herself wilting in the room, its air as thick as oil. Her confidence draining, she drew a deep breath. "Er… Mrs Vogel. I'm interested in your husband's work. It… um seems like he was a real pioneer in genetic engineering. Did you know what he was doing?"

"No, my dear. I'm afraid I never understood his work. He never discussed it with me."

She didn't know what questions to ask: "And was he collaborating with other…er… scientists…other people in the field?"

"I don't think so. But he spent years and years on his work." She shook her head. "Such a waste. You know he er… took his own life?"

Rose nodded, surreptitiously slipping the notebook back in her bag. How? Morbid curiosity. How did he take his own life? she wanted to ask. "Yes – I heard. Terrible. When was that?"

"It was in 1982. Aaah," she sighed. "Time flies. It's a lifetime ago. Left us in a terrible way after he died. Me and the children. Never got over seeing him like that." She shook her head and looked down into the faded old carpet with its full-blown roses. Her eyes focused somewhere far beneath its surface.

"How many children did…er do you have?"

"Four. But they're all grown up now. With their own children. None of them live here anymore. It's just me. They were all quite young at the time. It was very hard. I had to sell up the farm. There were terrible debts."

"Now genetic engineering is a multimillion dollar industry"

"He was always talking about making millions with his discoveries, of patents… I don't know. I suppose no one ever respected him; none of us had any faith in what he was doing." She grew silent.

"He was doing really ground-breaking stuff. He must have been a genius. Do you have any photos of him?"

"Yes, I do." She stood up. "Come with me." She'd picked up the dog.

Rose followed her, furtively looking around, down the passage to the small bedroom with faded floral curtains and matching bedcover. On the bedside table was a framed wedding photo of the two of them; the new Mr and Mrs Vogel. Rose's hand trembled as she took the photo from Mrs Vogel's hand.

"When were you married?" She swallowed hard.

Mrs Vogel responded without having to think: "We got married in 1970. My oldest was born in 1972." She pulled a crumpled tissue from her pocket and noisily blew her nose.

The groom was blondish, wavy haired, maybe blue-eyed – or grey. Moustache. He was smiling. Nice straight teeth – at least he complied in one respect with her picture of an ideal father. Both bride and groom were so attractive and bright-eyed in the black and white portrait.

This was how they had started out in a world that held such promise. What happened to the pretty girl with the Stork-margarine skin? This poor old woman didn't have to know about her husband's affair, if it was him. It could have been - the man in the Polaroid, Oberon, September 1977. She wasn't going to ask her to take a look, to ask if this could have been her husband relieving his seven-year itch with her mother, Ruby; having a moment of madness under the sun – or was it in a cave? She couldn't be certain. And she wasn't going to follow up with the children either, all grown-up now with children of their own – at least, not until Mrs Vogel had passed on. And then would she? It would open such a can of worms.

Rose Vogel. It had a certain ring to it but she preferred Clemens. All these potential relatives. She laughed silently. They'd be banging at her door if they knew her worth.

"I've got some photo albums too. Do you want to see them?" Mrs Vogel's spirits appeared to have lifted at this thought.

"I'd love to." She was burning to see if there were photos of a brawny man with a droopy moustache wearing a cowboy hat pushed low on his forehead. She fretted how long it would take to page through the albums. She needed to phone Wim. She could feel her anxiety rising like damp in a wet climate. Rose turned to follow her out the room, but as she turned, she stopped. Next to the door was a painting that was nearly identical to the one hanging above the escritoire at home, in the flat. The *Drakensberg Lady*. It was the same model, the same blood-red *kaross* with the one breast bared, the same leonine eyes and white glowing skin, the same cowry shells on the neck and earlobes, and the multi-stranded thongs on her arms but there was no chalice. Her hands were empty, resting in her lap, like the Mona Lisa's.

"Where's this from?" Rose's voice was almost a whisper.

"What dear? Oh, it was bought years ago."

"Who's the artist?"

"Some local artist. He lived here. I wouldn't know what happened to him. Must be dead by now. He wasn't very well-known. Always struggling to make a living. My husband bought this to help him out. I never liked it very much. A half naked woman. I have it here because… I – I don't like to hang it in the lounge but I just can't bring myself to get rid of it. I'm sure it's not valuable or… anything."

"What was the artist's name? D'you know?"

"Oh dear…" She shook her head. "I don't remember. It's such a long time ago."

Did the painting in her lounge belong to Ruby? Had she bought it when she was in Oberon in 1977? Maybe Eric Vogel had bought it for her. Or had Livvie or John bought the painting when they had come to Oberon to find leads, clues to Rose's parentage? She'd never know. It didn't matter.

She bathed and washed her hair and sat in front of the mirror at the dressing table in the cottage. Her breasts were full and heavy and blue-veined and milky white. She put her hand over her belly and closed her eyes. She loved the thought. No, not just a thought. It's a reality. A state, a condition.

They met at Lakeview; it had been her suggestion. She had got through to his phone after leaving the Vogel home. The encounter with the old lady had left her feeling fragile. The lonely widow, the little old dog, they'd made her sad but then, seeing the painting had given her such a shock that her heart had jumped flabbily around in her

chest and then to try maintain her equilibrium as she pored over pages and pages of family snaps, trying to match the Eric Vogel in the albums to the faded image in the Polaroid. He appeared in only a few of the family photos because that's what happens when you're the official family photographer. And there were none that featured him wearing a cowboy hat.

They'd arranged to meet later, as the sun sank into the peaks and the day lost its burnt brittleness. She stood for a moment, watching as he stood at the water's edge, looking into the lake. He turned around and watched her as she strode down the hill towards him. She was very aware of his eyes on her.

"Do you want to walk?" he asked.

They strolled in silence around the lake, shoulders a breath apart, until they reached the other side. She could barely breathe.

"Come. We sit," he said, directing her to a bench at the water's edge, luxuriant with velvet bulrushes and water irises, petals like yellow crinkle paper.

He looked at her expectantly but she looked at the surface of the shimmering water, with its concave meniscus, a single layer of molecules that could support the weight of water striders as they skated across the surface, a magical membrane that separated the light and the air from the dark and unknowable depths below the surface.

It was a time for words, for truths. She had to speak out. It was now or never:

"Wim, I'm pregnant..."

"I -"

"Please -" she whispered, holding up her hand. She swallowed hard. "I'm not asking for support. I want nothing from you. There's no problem with...er…finances. It was my choice but – but it's your child as well. There's always a…a paternity test, if you want…but it's …

"I wanted to give you the opportunity to know your child, to be the father. It's your right. I'd like the child to know her biological father… for your child to know you. If you want. It's a girl. I'm going to name her Reverie," she added.

Rose couldn't speak. Her eyes had filled with tears and she knew that if one escaped, she would weep and once she started, the lake would overflow with her tears. It was like that in pregnancy. You blamed it on hormones.

And they sat there, side by side, looking out over the water reflecting the darkening sky and she began to compose a letter in her mind:

Dear… er… Marshall, I would like to fund a facility for vulnerable children in the Gabriel's Gate valley, in Lesotho - maybe in John and Livvie's names. No, in the name of Ruby. Maybe the community must name the project. I think I'll come and live around these parts – either in Oberon or in the valley. For a while. While the project's getting off the ground. Or until there are decisions to be made about schools. And – and Pule can meet his siblings, his family, get to know them. We'd be quite close to their place. And Wim can get to know his child. And me. Oh, and by the way, in the really unlikely event of my death, the project will be taken up by him, Dr Wim Metheus, co-executor of the project and biological father of my unborn daughter.

The sun began to sink into the water. She felt as if she'd emerged from the ground, arms raised to greet the world. She was suddenly awed by the wonder and miracle of her existence and the strength borne by her foremothers, each of who had survived to bear the next generation and the next and the next. On and on. She could see the straight line that led from her original mother to herself, from the beginning of time to the present and then further forward on to the next. A heron hovered overhead for a moment, a fish in its bill, then swooped towards the water where it flew, skating along its surface, until it disappeared from view.

Acknowledgements

p. 8 Lyrics from “Ldn” performed by Lily Allen.

p. 25 Can Polaroids be restored? Adapted from a website: htttp:/www.amplifeyeforums.com/index.php?showtopic=20455&h6=faded+polaroids. (Accessed 28/04/2008)

p. 53 Thanks to Robin Fisher of R. Fisher and Associates for information regarding inheritances.

p. 63 Lyrics from “Ruby Tuesday” performed by Rolling Stones

p. 72 Lyrics from “To the left” performed by Beyonce

p. 88 Lyrics from “Whiter Shade of Pale” performed by Procol Harum

p. 89 Lyrics from “Another Brick in the Wall” performed by Pink Floyd

p. 89 Lyrics from “Don’t Stop (Thinking about Tomorrow)” performed by Fleetwood Mac

p.140 Bags! is an abbreviated version of the library notice that appeared in the *Mountain Echo*, Dec 2006, p. 24 in Library Chatter, a column written by Underberg’s librarian, Fay.

p. 147 Lyrics from “God put a smile upon your face” performed by Coldplay

p. 151 Lyrics from “Achy Breaky Heart” performed by Billy Ray Cyrus

p. 152 Lyrics from “Candela” performed by Buena Vista Social Club

p. 153 Lyrics from “Orgullecida” performed by Buena Vista Social Club

p. 178 Verse “To everything there is a season” from Bible: Ecclesiastes 3:1

p. 218 Lyrics from “The Happy Wanderer.” Words and music by Antonio Ridge and Friedrich Moller.

Reflexive Essay

I. Inspiration and development of the story line

My intention was to write about a white woman searching for rootedness and belonging in South Africa post-1994. While I was toying with this idea, I heard a true account of a child whose mother had suddenly and tragically died, leaving no trace of the family she had left behind and no clues as to the identity of the child's father. As in the novel, the mother's employer adopted the child, and his housemate, a woman with whom he shared no romantic ties, gave up her high-powered career to raise the child. I thought this child's story would assimilate well with the heroine I had in mind and so, winding the true story back thirty years or so, I used it to provide the foundation on which to base my fictional story.

In the novel, the orphan's quest to uncover her biological parentage becomes an allegorical search for origins and cultural identity as a white person living in post-apartheid South Africa

II. Genre

In my proposal, I set out to write a work of South African contemporary fiction with a feminist /fantasy/romance slant. My intention was to write a magical realist text but I suspected, even at the proposal stage, that the genre would prove elusive to me.

I drew on Simkins and Mose to describe magical realism as an endeavour to dismantle the paradigms of Western realism. In accordance with the demands of the genre, I intended to bring the lives of the San[1] into propinquity with the 21st century and incorporate elements of San mythology and culture into the narrative. The lives of the San do feature in the novel, as does San art and the spirit world as accessed by the Great Dance.

Shaman dancers were required to enter this world to fight off malevolent spirits, make rain, or visit dead ancestors or relatives in distant places through out-of-body journeys.

[1] I use the terms 'San' and 'Bushman' interchangeably. According to Twidle (2009: 2) both terms are in usage today but neither can be used without reservations as the former was used by the Khoikhoi in a pejorative sense and the latter has colonial connotations. He directs the reader to the website of the South African San Institute (SASI) http://www.sanculture.org.za/body.htm, which states: 'Today San people prefer to be identified as San or by their ethnic community names.'

These tasks called for the supernatural potency that permeated the universe, residing in both animate and inanimate things. The Great Dance was the means by which the shamans accessed this potency and entered the spirit world (Blundell, 2004: 83 -84).

In an assemblage of myth, fantasy and the imaginary, Rose gains access to the spirit world during a Great Dance. During her entranced state, she is confronted with her ancestral mother, a Victorian lady who travelled to the Drakensberg in the 1880s. The lady features in San art, painted in white pigment on the rocks wearing a bustle dress and sunhat, and has blood, represented by white and red lines, pouring from her nose. Shamans stand around her in the postures they adopt during trance. According to San mythology, it was believed that during death, the potency of the dying subject could be harnessed. So while the lady did not die during her stay with the San, their art represented her death as a means to harness her power, which was actually the power of Western technology that she had brought with her to Africa.

The text conforms to another feature of magical realism in that it is open-ended to a degree. The identity of Rose's parents remains forever elusive although there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest who they are. In addition, Western notions of patriarchal power are challenged by the erasure of both Rose's biological and adoptive fathers and by presenting a text where some of the women characters are inscribed as heroines and goddesses. Livvie is the goddess, Livona, who lifts new born babies from the ground and who saves Rose from childhood in an orphanage. Brigit, named inadvertently for an Irish goddess, is a heroine who rears her children almost single-handedly and manages her NGO and B&B and Rose achieves agency, choosing to become the mother archetype, adopting Pule, the HIV positive child, opting to raise her biological child by herself and possibly founding and funding an orphanage in Lesotho (although admittedly all this is only possible with her substantial inheritance). Also, the weaving of the Victorian lady's diary into Rose's narrative conflates the historical past with the present, presenting a challenge to the strict chronological demands of the realist plot.

However, even with the insertion of the diary extracts, the main narrative remains essentially simple and chronological with Rose as its univocal narrator. It is also presented in an uncomplicated and undemanding style. Most importantly, the narrative can hardly be described as anti-hegemonic or politically dissident. For these reasons, I

would be reluctant to classify it as magical but rather as social realist, offering an accurate representation of life in contemporary South Africa.

Ultimately, the novel could be called 'chick lit' as it is about a woman's daily life and her quest for a man, although in Rose's case, the man could imply her father as much as it could signify a lover.

III. Setting of the novel

In a talk I attended at the Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg in August 2007, John Wright, the co-author of *Tracks in a Mountain Range* (2007), presented uKhahlamba-Drakensberg as one of the country's most treasured resources. He described it, in one respect, as a place of sentimental celebration, mountain worship and Berg kitsch. In wry amusement, he cited the museum in a Drakensberg resort that has been built from faux rocks, recreated rock art and water dripping from irrigation pipes while it is surrounded by millions of tons of real rock and natural water features. In contrast to this, he identified the Drakensberg as a site of contestation, dispossession and exploitation. Even today, clashes occur between stock farmers, mixed farmers, timber farmers, hoteliers, estate agents, developers, industrialists seeking out sources of water, farm tenants, labourers, conservationists, provincial administration and government officials, and stock thieves and dagga traders. These opposing facets of the Drakensberg provide a rich setting for the novel but it is the many traces left by the original inhabitants of the country, the San, which provide the main reason for the novel's setting.

Njabulo Ndebele, in the first Steve Biko Memorial lecture, proposes that notions of indigeneity are significant when one is searching for origins and rootedness. He enjoins whites to undergo 'experiential transformation' by absorbing 'new cultural experiences' in their quest for 'rootedness' (Ndebele, 2000: 5). When looking for this transformative experience, one could do no better than to engage with the San, the original inhabitants of the country, and in the Drakensberg, which is an abundant source of their rock art. These traces on the rocks are not only reminders of the San's existence but serve to inform us of their cultural experience. They, thus, provide a conduit through which Rose is allowed access to the cultural identity of the other.

Rose's history as a white person living in South Africa is vastly different from the history experienced by black people, and the magnitude of the Berg echoes the vastness

that separates the histories of the different races residing in the country. The fact that the San are extinct as a people drives home the violence that underpins our colonial history: the last San communities of the mountains disappeared in the late 19th /early 20th century, displaced by both black farming communities and white colonialists migrating into their habitat (Mazel & Wright, 2007: 12). This, and later acts of white upon black violence perpetrated in the name of colonialism and apartheid, is a source of guilt for whites and anger and resentment for blacks. The inaccessibility of the great peaks and deep ravines and caves of the Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg are symbolic of the seemingly impossible task of creating a shared history for South Africans, a revision that is necessary if nation building and national unity projects are to be successful.

A note on the village of Oberon

Although inspired by Underberg, the village of Oberon is a fiction: there is no such village in the southern Drakensberg nestling below a peak called Dragon's Tooth. In this way, I was not obliged to paint an accurate portrait of a town of which I am not particularly au fait. This is in contrast to Johannesburg: having lived here all my life, it is utterly familiar to me.

IV. White Identity

Ndebele describes white identity as inhabiting 'the interface between inherited, problematic privilege…and… blinding sterility' (2000: 2) and calls on whites to find ways to redress their collective guilt through acts of reconciliation. He asserts that 'a shift in white identity' is necessary if whites are to achieve 'a new sense of cultural rootedness' (ibid: 4). Ndebele's idea of 'rootedness' and the search for a sense of belonging is not new to white South Africans. 'Take root or die' was the injunction of an 1820 settler, Henry Hare Dugmore, which Guy Butler turned into his own motto and a play by the same title in 1966. Fugard, in his *A Lesson from Aloes* (1981), also explores this theme.

As evidenced in my proposal, a body of scholarship on 'whiteness' exists within the new power dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa. The country is unstable, unfinished, continually growing, continually renewed. It thus offers a vision of itself as a product of Bakhtin's Carnivalesque, which is a celebration of the organic, of abundance and change as opposed to the 'morose', the 'monological' and the 'ascetic

mindset' of the previous regime (Bakhtin, 1984: 1-10). In the new South Africa, 'whiteness' is offered an opportunity to dismantle old monolithic structures and refashion new notions of itself. For example, the old constructs of whites as bearers of moral values or the white body as signifying civilised enlightenment are challenged and whites are free to discover the play that exists between the racial binarisms constructed by colonial ideology.

In the novel, I offer different whitenesses that present themselves in South Africa today. For many of the inhabitants of Oberon, Rose's landlords in Johannesburg and Livvie's friend, Marion, essentialised ideas about race continue to shape their worldview. Entrenched in this black/white dichotomy, they are guilty of embedded racism and Afropessimism, believing that black people are not competent to run the country and that South Africa is doomed to become another Zimbabwe. They identify with 'First World' rather than African culture and do not venture out of their 'sterile' white enclaves to partake in the banquet of diversity that the country has to offer. Although they dominate in terms of economics, the transfer of political power to the black majority has led to their resentment, anger and fear. Nevertheless, they continue to live off the fat of the land and exploit its resources and cheap domestic labour. In this way, they open themselves to satirical treatment.

In contrast to this notion of whiteness, I try to present a different whiteness in Hank. He is rendered ostensibly in terms of the grotesquely real and the spirit of Carnivalesque as he celebrates the organic in his abundant garden, revelling in the cycles of sex, growth and death that are played out in the soil. His attempts to seduce Rose speak of a Carnivalesque lack of propriety as he subverts societal mores.

Rose, on the other hand, is characterised by her refinement, bearing and manners yet she yearns to transform and find her otherness. As a white trying to 'unwhite' herself, she goes with her black neighbours to a club where there are only black patrons. She perceives difference as conforming to racial stereotypes, commenting on the way 'these people' can dance and wondering whether Oba's attempt to seduce her is a 'black thing.'

Rose's identity shift necessary for her transformation begins with Hank's attempted seduction of her and, in fact, his character is offset against that of hers. Kristeva, in Stallybrass and White, argues that middle class identity formation is constituted when it

discovers its pleasures and desires under the sign of the other (1986: 201) but Hank is not sufficiently other. He remains too stuck in the mould of white machismo, drinking beer around a braai with his mates. However, in encountering this man, the heroine begins a process of identification, moving further towards liberation as she discovers her own pleasures and desires. When he tries to seduce her, she is projected into forbidden territories: the sphere of the material, the earth and the body. Her attraction to Hank causes her some anguish because of her desire to befriend Brigit.

It can be argued that Wim, the arguably cultured man direct from Europe, embodies a counterwhiteness that proves elusive to Hank. As one whose homeland has brought forth the architects, engineers and builders of apartheid, he crosses over to the wilderness, living in an utterly remote part of Lesotho and hiking alone in the mountains for recreation. He conforms to the notion of the mythical wild man living beyond pale of whiteness as described by Leon de Kock (2006). Wim has broken down the civilising/wilderness binary, realigning himself to the dark wilderness as the burden of moral rectitude has become too great. Yet, his compassion and charity reveals him as someone whose life's philosophy is encoded by a civilising morality and he subscribes to the tenets of Western medicine, believing in the efficacy of Anti-retroviral drugs in the fight against HIV/Aids. In this light, he could be viewed as one who has merely heeded the romanticised call of the wild; his identity is that of a civilised whiteness that has always existed but kept innocuous. To counter this and strip away all middle-class whiteness, the sex between him and Rose should have been inscribed as a radically embodied moment of raw desire.

Initially, I wrote the sex scene as a rite of passage for Rose. She experiences sex with Wim as a moment of transcendence. I have her surrender '…so completely to her desire that the rational split from the physical and she floated above herself and gazed at her body which had become a receptacle of pure pleasure.' This enraptured moment allows her to integrate into her world. However, the sex scene disappointed the MA group, who thought that her experience was disembodied rather than out-of-body, and rendered almost as that of a rape victim. They wanted the sex to be animalistic and primal, having already been foreshadowed that way by the bark of a baboon on Rose's entering the cave. On reflection, this works better as it suggests that Rose achieves freedom from the constricted conventions of white gentility and, in the process, connects with the other. This identification with the other has been her perpetual quest, although it would

have been more radical if, in connecting with the other, she crossed the colour bar, which she does not. In addition, there is a challenge in writing this raw desire and primal sex without descending to the depths of pornography.

Rose's great transformation scene begins prior to sex with Wim, when she heeds the call of her ancestors who have spoken through the sangoma from Happiness's village. The words of the sangoma: 'the white stranger is welcomed by her ancestors' speak of the fusion that has occurred between Rose and a deep otherness. This is followed by the primordial scene of transformation in which Rose participates in the Great Dance, where, in an entranced state, she encounters her ancestral mother, the White Goddess, and Ruby, her biological mother. She breaks the leather thong which has she has worn like an umbilical cord and lets it fall, indicating that now that she has broken her ties with the past, she has reconnected to otherness in a bigger way and can move forward as a transformed individual.

Before her transformation, Rose sees her world very much in terms of black and white. At the Libers' party, when an Englishman accuses South Africans of being obsessed with race, she thinks that maybe this is true and asks: 'How can we forget the past so soon? Look where we're coming from. You can't just sweep two hundred years under the carpet.' Wim, on the other hand, sees 'people as people', defining them not by their race but rather by their needs. His philanthropy offers him a way of repenting for the sins of his fathers and their colonising project. Brigit too, is not threatened by differences in race. Although she is high-handed and domineering in her treatment of her domestic workers and the 'donkey-man', she arguably sees no essential difference between the races. She does not apologise for the maltreatment of animals by the black villagers, asserting that both whites and blacks are guilty of cruelty.

The 'donkey-man' scene in the village of Mamphis proved problematic regarding the dialogue between the villagers. Michael translates some of the dialogue but he is much too polite to translate it in its entirety as it diminishes Brigit's efforts. The problem arises whether to provide an English translation or not. Some of the participants on the MA course felt that the dialogue should remain in untranslated isiZulu as a challenge to the English hegemony that exists in this country. Another participant felt strongly that the text should provide a translation. She asked what would be the point of excluding many of the readers. This point of exclusion resonates strongly in a country where

exclusionary policies were the mainstay of the former government. Although there would be some ironic justice in turning the tables on the formerly advantaged, I would think that accessibility should prevail and a translation be provided.

V. The character of Rose and problems of narration

In the proposal for the MA, I presented a profile as would befit the orphan Rose, describing how her ignorance about her origins renders her fragile and fractured and she searches for meaning to assuage her feelings of dislocation and deracination. Introverted and unsure of herself, we never hear of any female friends and if there has been a man or two in her life, she certainly has not given herself over to the relationship, but has always created a strong sense of boundary which she has not allowed people to penetrate.

I wanted to portray her as a picture of classical perfection, a physical self conforming to the Renaissance ideal of the body as finished, perfect, closed off and standing apart from the outside world. Disembodied because of her lack of origins, she is meant to display an exaggerated concern with the abstract rather than with the body and the earth and is thus, alienated from bodily appetites and function, detached even from herself. She is the epitome of manners and morals, bearing, taste and refinement but her inner conflicts lead to poor self-esteem and fear of self-expression.

The process of her identity formation begins when she journeys to the Drakensberg and feels the hungriest she has ever felt in her life. We see her take a double hamburger in both hands and wolf it down as she allows the unbridled appetites of the black body, constructed as uncivilised by colonial discourse, to engulf her similarly constructed restrained and civilised white body. Once in the Berg, she takes some control of her life, actively researching her origins (up to a point). After her great transformation scene, she assumes agency by adopting Pule, keeping her own baby and moving to the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg area where she intends to fund an Aids orphanage in the 'Gabriel's Gate' valley.

Initially, I thought to write the novel from Rose's perspective but then decided on a third person narrator. Normally, this form opens up an element of play between character and narrator. However, I chose to inscribe Rose as the focaliser, thus

essentially the action is processed through her point of view. Like a first person narrator, she is the sole mediator between the fictional world and the reader.

This narratorial form proved problematic in its hybridity. The third person form sets up an expectation in the reader of a distance between narrator and character and of a text that has the potential to offer a polyphony of voices. However with Rose as the focaliser, narratorial distance was lost along with the opportunity for narratorial irony and a multiplicity of voice. The MA group wanted to know where the narrator was. They wanted the distance of a third person narrator. In addition, they felt there was not enough interior monologue as would be expected of a first person narrator set up by Rose as focaliser. They wanted her alienation and isolation more fleshed out and the inscription of some sort of disjuncture between her inner and outer life.

The difference between first and third person narration was highlighted when I wrote the Victorian lady's diary. This was a very late addition to the text, penned only after completion of the workshop component of the MA. Writing Rosamund in the first person affected the creative process itself: it was much easier for me to access Rosamund's interiority compared to Rose's. The third person even distanced me, the writer, from Rose, the character I had created.

Rose also came under fire for her failure to reflect on the people around her. The group maintained that 'one is defined by what one does not like' and there was a need for Rose to define herself 'against the white community and what they represented'. Someone asked the question: 'Who are these people and where do they come from ideologically?' Thus, whereas I assumed that her (what I perceived) satirical representation of these people would provide evidence of her disapproval, there was obviously a need to explicate her judgement of them. To contextualise this criticism, it was offered after the class had been exposed to the rather 'unlikeable' inhabitants of Oberon, and after the Libers' party, where Rose had refused Hank's attentions.

Her lack of reflection and responsiveness led the group to believe that she 'absents herself from reality', that she is 'politically and sexually naïve', 'ignorant of contemporary South Africa in many ways' and 'not fully self-aware'. She is a 'wishy-washy character' and her 'bland desire to do good' renders her as the 'agentless, self-flagellating white English liberal whose identity is formed in terms of culpability and guilt'. She is 'oppressed and suppressed', her 'do-gooder element grates', she 'irritates'

the reader and the question: 'how long can a writer play with the reader's patience?' was asked.

Thus, in my attempt to represent her as detached, disembodied and alienated from the world, I created a character that garnered much criticism. This begs the questions: how credible is she? Does my portrayal of her as closed off and standing apart from the outside world make her too one-dimensional? Is her persona not assertive enough and too hazily sketched to be believable? My concern is whether readers will empathise with her and relate to her despite her lack of self-reflection and her irresolute character. Would they be compelled to find out whether she succeeds in her quest? If I failed in this, then it is a huge failing of the novel.

For me, Rose is an observer who keeps her commentary internal. In this, she is a mirror of white identity. I did not want Rose, through her reflections, to prescribe to the readers how they should respond to the unpleasant characters in the text, but rather allow them to formulate their own responses. To register Rose's disapproval, albeit subtly, I tried to depict the white community satirically: their dialogue is distilled from real conversations on which I have eavesdropped. It is up to the readers to recognise the brand of whiteness I present in the text and to judge it in a harsh, favourable or neutral light. In their response, their own brand of whiteness would reflect back on them. However, judging from the robust criticism, perhaps the satirical intention was obscure and thus unsuccessful.

Despite the class's criticism, I found I could not introduce more self-reflection. It went against the grain. Perhaps this was due to authorial awareness: I knew what was in store for Rose, that she would undergo a grand transformation in subsequent chapters. But even after her transformation, I failed to inscribe her interiority. Again, I did not want to spell out for the reader her thoughts and feelings, but imagined, as before, that they would become clear by her actions. Perhaps this was too much of an assumption on my part.

VI. Myth of origins as a focaliser of identity

The text is very much an ontological search for origins and identity, leading to the formation of Rose as a subject. Rose desires to return to her literal origins but in this,

she is taken on an allegorical search for her mythical African mother. In so doing, she participates in an indigenous myth and thus completes her identification as African.

Stuart Hall, elucidating Foucault's discussion on 'the subject', claims that the production of the self follows a process of self-constitution and self-fashioning. The subject follows a path where from 'docile, desexualised body' he or she assumes 'agency', 'intention' and 'volition' (1996: 13). This trajectory of development takes place within a timeframe, presuming some sort of narrative as the individual moves from the past to the anticipated future. Giddens describes the identification process as one where the individual 'appropriates the past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future' (2000: 252). The appropriation of the past is thus crucial to the process of identification. The past, constructed partly in the imaginary and partly in fantasy, is one that is shared by a group or race (Hall: 1996, 3 - 4). Therefore, unity in the new South African nation would require the rewriting of the past starting with a new common myth of origins. The aim of this would be to connect the diverse races with a lost common culture and foster allegiance in all citizens.

Rose's self-fashioning demands that she return to her beginnings and to her personal myth of origins, where she will confront her three mothers: foster, biological and ancestral, all with gifts to give. Although her biological mother, Ruby, gives her the gift of life, she takes away her identity. Ruby seems to have been all but expunged in the official records and her connection to any member of her family also seems to have been erased. Rose's quest initially starts as a search for her biological maternal (and paternal) origins. Rose's foster mother, Livvie, lifts her from the ground and gives her the gifts of taste and refinement. In addition, she leaves a box for Rose to discover after her death, which contains sacramental offerings that open a stratum of information for Rose, including the thong with the beads of promise. Lastly, Rose's ancestral mother, the White Goddess, bestows on Rose her cultural identity, a gift that allows her to take root in the soil of the South African motherland.

Initially, I had planned to inscribe the *Drakensberg Lady*, the subject of the painting hanging in Livvie's flat, as Rose's ancestral mother. She has an uncanny power over Rose, who, as a child, imagines her as her ancestral mother. With her white skin and black features, she is racially ambiguous, a quality that would have validated Rose's claim of African rootedness. However, this proved elusive in the writing, the

connections too difficult to forge with all the main players from the previous generation departed. At the end, there is an unresolved link to this Lady as a similar portrait appears in what could be her father's bedroom.

For Rose, her moment of identification is authenticated when she participates in the Great Dance, a cultural experience that allows her to reconnect with her ancestral mother, a Victorian woman who travelled to the Drakensberg in the 1880s. Thus, although Rose's ancestral mother originates from England, her connection with her via the Great Dance facilitates her access to the spiritual world of the San and the potency contained within their universe. In this way, she is allowed to identify with indigeneity and find her otherness.

Rose's ancestral mother, as the White Goddess, is aligned to Robert Graves's White Goddess, whom he claimed was worshipped in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe in prehistoric times, but whose lore and worship were driven underground by a patriarchal God in the second millennium BC (Weisinger: 1956, 239). According to Morales, Graves's *White Goddess* reflects a deep-seated phallocentrism; that he shaped her as an inspiration for men, a muse for male poets, but as a source of subjugation for women. Graves excludes women from his, what Morales terms, 'eccentric' hypothesis. She states that he disavows the roles of women by portraying them either as muse or nothing (2007: 105, 112). Graves's representation of women is in antithesis to the portrayal of the White Goddess of the narrative. As a Victorian woman travelling in 'deepest' Africa[2], her exploits are remarkable in an age where women were expected to remain bound to home and hearth.

VII. Western mythologies in an African context

As set out in my proposal, I planned to give cognisance to Western mythologies and mythical archetypes in my narrative. Many literary characters in Western texts, whether by authorial design or not, exhibit traits of some ancient archetype. Scholes and Kellogg (1966: 220) ascribe these reappearances to the power of the mythic narrative to communicate deep-seated human concerns, fears and aspirations. These ancient stories often feature a journey undertaken by an archetypal hero, whose mission it is to fulfil a

[2] Letters, journals and travelogues exist of women who did, in fact, travel independently to South Africa in the nineteenth century. See Michelle Adler: ''Skirting the edges if civilization': Two Victorian women travellers and 'colonial spaces' in South Africa.' In: Darian-Smith, Kate et al (eds.) (1996). *Text, theory, space*. London: Routledge, pp. 83 – 98.

quest (ibid: 228). In my narrative, the heroine embarks on a journey in search of her personal Holy Grail. Her journey assumes a psychological dimension as she finds the path that enables her to find the meaning of her life, her sense of belonging and her authentic identity.

Greek myth has been accused of promoting racism, nationalism and misogyny and for suppressing mythologies from other worlds (Morales, 2007: 116). Related to this, questions have arisen regarding the relevance of overlaying an African reality with classical mythology. This practice has been responsible for some anxiety, as reflected in scholarship relating to this subject. In his essay, 'The Republic and the Arts' (1962), Guy Butler employs the Apollonian-Dionysian model developed by Nietzsche to describe the encounter between European and African identity. Today, his thesis garners much criticism because of its essential representation of the two respective cultures.

According to Gray (quoted by De Kock, 2001: 275), this problematic Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy is again set up by the Adamastor myth, which was used by the 16th century Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoens, and many later writers to represent the rounding of the Cape by Portuguese mariners. In de Camoens's narrative, Table Mountain is recast as a brooding and vengeful Adamastor, who has been turned to stone for lusting after Thetis. He sits at the bottom of Africa daring those outsiders who round the coast to settle on the land. Roy Campbell uses the myth in his poem 'Rounding the Cape' and many other South African writers have followed his example, as evidenced in Malvern van Wyk Smith's anthology *Shades of Adamastor*.

Leon de Kock describes this 'mythical overlay' as 'cumbersome' and marked by 'a crisis of representation', displacing the violence of colonialism and leaving a fairytale in its place. He notes that Adamastor's curse has become an established trope for the ambivalence and division white settlers feel about their adoptive home and the colonial project itself (ibid.). The Adamastor myth speaks of white settlers' deep yearning for belonging, the creation of a myth of origins and a historical identity that justifies their taking root in South African soil. As such, it provides an example of the manner in which myths are deployed to fashion national identity and cultural origins.

It is evident that myths have the capacity to create dialogue with the past and to open up spaces for self-reflection and critique, as witnessed by the African adaptation of the

Adamastor myth and the surrounding scholarship. In their flexibility and malleability, myths can reflect changes in politics and facilitate the rewriting of a new world vision. Thus, an essential component of the appeal and power of myth is that the stories are active agents to be told, retold, revised and recast with a different set of characters (Morales, 2007: 115).

Thus, myths can be moulded as instruments of subversion and forces for change (ibid: 116 – 117). Morales quotes Angela Carter who states: 'I'm interested in myths…just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree,' but then, in rebuttal, Morales offers Audre Lorde who claims that it is possible to rewrite myths by dismantling 'the master's house using the master's tools' (ibid: 95). In Lorde's version of classical myth, sexual politics can be subverted and the female characters reclaimed and recast as heroines with voice and agency.

One such character from classical myth is Pandora, the first mortal female created to punish Prometheus for his theft of fire from the gods. Her curiosity leads her to open a jar (in later millennia, a box) that her husband tells her not to look inside. In opening it, she unleashes evils upon the world. Harrison claims that Pandora was originally created as an all-giving goddess (*pandora* meaning all-giving), but over time, she devolved into an all-gifted but death-bringing mortal woman (1975: 179). Her diminished status probably occurred in the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greek culture, which caused the Pandora myth to change into a misogynistic fable (Graves, 1955: 25). Reeder, a feminist literary critic, comments that Pandora's Box represents the womb. The box's releasing a myriad evil upon the earth suggests phallocentric culture's unease with female sexuality (1995: 195- 99; 277-279).

In the novel, Rose is aligned to Pandora as a mortal woman in possession of a box. In Rose's case, the contents lead her to her origins in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg and to the vulnerable children in the area, and it is in this context that she formulates her plan to uplift their lives. Recast in a positive light, her name assumes its original meaning, that of giver of gifts.

As the first mortal woman, Pandora's story is one of origins. And here, I cross to another mythology that retains currency for many in the modern world: the Bible and its Adam story as a myth of origins. Drawing on Zornberg (2009), who uses a Freudian interpretation of the Adam myth in her chapter entitled: 'Seduced into Eden: the

beginning of desire', I claim the story and feminise it, exchanging Rose for Adam. As an aside, it was always my intention to overlay Rose's story with the Pandora myth but Zornberg's text came to my attention only recently, so the interpretation that follows is the result of a retroactive process.

Like Adam who *rose* from the earth, Rose has also risen from the earth. Unparented like Adam, she lacks the emotional history of family and with no parents, the oedipal narrative is missing in her life narrative. With no father to love and an absent mother, there is no oedipal separation, no conflict, no personal history and no unconscious desire (adapted from Zornberg, 2009: 10). She can only become fully human when she becomes conscious of her own desires.

The essential elements of the Adam story are loneliness as well as repressed desire (ibid: 9). Adam is lonely and desires a mate but it is Eve who succumbs to the blandishments of the serpent and eats the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which, in the Biblical sense, signifies sexual knowledge. Thus, it can be inferred that Eve submits to her desire and seduces Adam. Rose, like Adam, is lonely and desires a life partner. However, unlike the Biblical story where Eve is charged with seducing Adam, the sex between Wim and Rose results by mutual seduction although Wim initiates the act itself. In addition, unlike Eve who brings about the Fall of Mankind (sic), Rose brings about her salvation; her sexual union with Wim being the climax of a series of experiences that allows her to gain self-knowledge and attain subjectivity.

For much of the novel, Rose is on an erotic quest but its enactment is denied until she is ready to overcome the taboo restrictions she has placed on her self. Rose is not particularly self-aware and does not understand her motivations. She yearns for something but holds back her desire. When she finally surrenders and eats from the Tree of Knowledge, the sex is a transcendent moment: it is enraptured, an ecstasy of self that leads to an understanding of the self. There is no connection to the rational or the intellect; it is connected only to the physical, the corporeal.

Does Rose experience a Fall after sex? Although Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, Zornberg asserts that this leads them to a larger, more meaningful life despite the difficulties they now encounter (ibid: 15). As with the first two humans, after eating from the Tree, Rose develops a consciousness and an unconscious, now experiencing conflicting voices of guilt and pleasure (ibid: 17). In becoming a full

subject, she is able to discern self and other, and in this way, separate herself from the ghosts of the past: Ruby, Livvie and her unknown father. Only when these bonds are broken, is she set free.

Morales poses the question: 'To whom does classical myth belong?' (2007: 117). In both the Pandora and the Adam myths, I have taken ownership and subverted the myth to render readings that are more palatable to me, as a woman. However, one can question whether, in the African context, the overlaying of these myths are comfortable or whether their fit is 'cumbersome' and marked by a 'crisis of representation'.

Rose, as Pandora, does not release evils into her world but rather bestows gifts upon its peoples. This conveys my rather anxious and wistful message, that whites do have value to offer and that their presence in this country should not be unwelcome. The Adam story too may reflect my anxiety around belonging and about being cast from the Garden of Eden.

In addition, the Western myths arguably have not elbowed indigenous mythology out the way. Rose's quest for identity is achieved when she follows the call of the sangoma, engages with San mythology and participates in the Great Dance. During the Dance, which is purportedly a central tenet of San existence, she is confronted by the world of African myth as she connects to her ancestors. Later, in her dreams, the rain cow arrives to produce the soft rains needed for growth and renewal, one of the myths that features in San culture.

VIII. Issues around San culture

In the novel, Rose encounters the San art that I was, in fact, fortunate enough to photograph when I visited the remote Malealea valley in western Lesotho in May 2009. In contrast to this, the Victorian figure painted on the rocks, which features in the film screened at the Museum of Bushman Culture and Rock Art at the Bergsun Hotel, is a figment of my imagination.

A connection is made between the image painted on the rocks and the subject of a painting entitled: *The Bushmen pay homage to the White Goddess*. Rose subsequently discovers that the 'White Goddess' of the painting spent time with the Bushmen. The novel's engagement with the San raised two concerns with a member of the MA group:

the first centred on the debate around the appropriation of San culture and the second related to the presentation of accurate historical detail in an essentially social realist text.

South African writers in both English and Afrikaans have had a long tradition of accessing the oral cultures of Southern Africa's authochthonous peoples and incorporating this into their texts. This is especially the case with the San, whose oral culture has been accessible through the Bleek-Lloyd archive, a collection of narratives by /Xam[3] men, transcribed and translated by Wilhelm Bleek, a Geman linguist/philologist, his wife and sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, between 1870 and 1884 (Twidle, 2009: 1-2).

Hedley Twidle submits that the collection has generated a rich, ongoing and diverse corpus within South African literary traditions (ibid: 4,15). In his article: 'The Bushmen's letters: /Xam narratives of the Bleek-Lloyd collection and their afterlives', he cites examples, both old and more recent, of artists who have adapted, recast and woven the /Xam stories into their work. These include, amongst others, Eugene Marais and his *Dwaalstories* (1921); Laurens van der Post's *The heart of the hunter* (1961); Stephen Watson's poetry collection, *Return of the moon* (1991), Antjie Krog's *the stars say 'tsau'* (2004) and Andre Brink's magical realist novel, *The first life of Adamastor* (1993). In addition, the /Xam texts have also found expression through other media, such as the work of curator and graphic artist, Pippa Skotnes, and a collaboration between film maker Craig Foster and photographer Janette Deacon: *My heart stands on the hill* (2005).

Twidle espouses what he terms these 'cultural afterlives', proposing that they have 'extended and celebrated' the Bleek-Lloyd collection. The article concludes with the hope that these texts fulfil the role that master narrator //Kabbo foresaw for his stories. In his testimony, he described them as an embodiment of San culture and a way of creating links between his 'dispossessed' and 'dispersed' people (ibid: 17).

Accordingly, any discussion of the San cannot fail to include the context of colonialism in which the collection was spawned. The /Xam narrators were themselves victim of

[3] The /Xam were descended from a branch of the indigenous inhabitants of Southern Africa, collectively known as the San or Bushmen.

colonial violence: drawn into the frontier disputes, they had been displaced from their homes, convicted and sentenced to hard labour in Cape Town (ibid: 2). A magistrate in Namaqualand, Louis Anthing, in 1863, described the violence perpetrated against the Cape San by the armed commander units as a 'wholesale system of extermination': Bleek recognised that the San were rapidly approaching extinction as a people - and this in adjunct to forced acculturation and language death resulting from colonial settlement (ibid: 2-3). Twidle asks how such a 'distanced and delicate fragment' can be approached. He suggests that there is a need to treat San culture with empathy; that care must be taken to avoid a sentimentalised, idealised and infantilised portrayal, as some authors have tended towards (ibid: 12-13).

Twidle mentions the contestations in recent decades that have taken place around the appropriation of San culture by writers and artists. Leon de Kock, in his article 'A change of tongue: questions of translation' offers a more caustic reading of this what he terms 'compulsive reappropriation and retranslation' of the archive (2009: 8). His words offer a cautionary tale to artists who appropriate San culture. Although their 'memorialising' and 'feting' of the San may be well-intentioned, they do so at their peril as evidenced by the accusations and counter-accusations of plagiarism that have flown between poets Stephen Watson and Antje Krog. The 'culture wars,' have broadened to include Skotnes's *Miscast* exhibition and book on George Stow's ninteenth-century reproductions of San art, *Unconquerable spirit*, playing out in the media and exposing their practices to public scrutiny. The upshot is that artists have been accused of 'cultural vampirism' (ibid: 9). Where de Kock apparently takes exception to the practice is in the conceit of the representation that 'denies the translational nature', where artists assume ownership without acknowledging the origins of the folklore and its stories (ibid: 11).

These cautionary words resonated very deeply for me. Incorporating San rock art into my narrative was carried out with the best of intentions but the path I initially trod might have led to some harsh criticism. For example, naming Rosamund the 'White Goddess' might have been misinterpreted as a deification of white technology and culture. The term 'goddess' assumes a revered figure, placing the San in a subservient position with regard to white technology and implying their desire to adopt European ways. For this reason, I created Rosamund's diary in order to mitigate this reading; that the reader could discover from the diary fragments woven into Rose's narrative that the

deeds Rosamund performs in the San village are, in fact, thoughtless and deleterious to San life, albeit well-intentioned; if she is indeed the embodiment of a goddess, she is a most flawed one.

To this effect, the rock painting does not represent the Bushmen as paying homage to her, but rather the shaman's attempts at halting her imposition of western culture and technology on the clan. Rosamund is unaware of the harm she inflicts so that when she returns to London, she and the artist gaze on her encounter through the lens of colonialism, ascribing the shamans' bent postures as one of reverence towards her.

I may be accused of depicting the San women as vain and frivolous but they are no more so than Rosamund, who is a silly young woman, and a rather arrogant one at that. Although she is sympathetic to the plight of the San – her 'heart bleeds' for the 'uprooted and dispossessed victims of men's cruelty', she remains a product of her times, determining that 'if the natives rebel, they must suffer the consequences'.

A final note on the appropriation of San culture: the metaphoric ideolect of the shaman was 'vampirised' from extracts of the Bleek-Lloyd archive appearing in the Twidle article.

I now move on to the concerns raised by the possible falsification of history in a social realist text. Foremost among these, in light of the fragile and sensitive nature of the San archive, was the appearance of a white Victorian figure in the rock art. I describe Rosamund's discovery of the Victorian figure (as she writes in her diary) as follows:

> Shocked and dismayed, I saw that someone had vandalised the beautiful eland, overlaying it with a figure so crudely rendered that it looked as if it had been painted by a child using a finger. But there was another aspect that was even more disturbing and I gasped as I was struck by the recognition. There was my bustle dress and my white sunhat which always sits on my crown in these harsh altitudes. Red and white lines emanate from my nose and my arms are outstretched as if in flight. There are figures of men too, bending over, their arms behind their backs, as if paying homage to the lady. What could it mean?
>
> I slowly lifted my arm to touch the white figure…

The imagined rock drawing of Rosamund Swan is not that farfetched. In a study on Nomansland, an area rich in rock art lying between the Drakensberg and Eastern Cape, Lara Mallen identifies a type of rock art that differs from that which is normally associated with the San. She calls it Type 3, describing it as finger-painted, and thus less-detailed or cruder than 'traditional' rock art which is finely detailed, brush-painted, and shaded with complex polychromatic variation. Type 3 differs too in terms of its subject matter, featuring horses, wagons, soldiers with guns and people in colonial clothing, (2008: 36, 38, 47, 48). Significantly, figures wearing dresses with bustle pads have been described. Mallen notes that the bustle was worn by South African white women between 1869 – 1900. This data shifts my invented image of Rosamund in her bustle dress to the realms of possibility; additionally the date of the imaginary rock painting, 1880, falls comfortably within this time-frame (ibid: 55, 56).

It is clear that Type 3 art is a more recent development in San art trends. White pigment, most commonly used in Type 3 (although red and pink also appear) is less durable than the earth colours used in fine line paintings. This argument is bolstered by the observation that Type 3 is always superimposed on the fine-line and never the other way around (ibid: 54). Mallen argues that the art suddenly made its appearance, arising from the stress of colonial encroachment suffered by the San. She proposes that the subject matter is emblematic, used to make a statement about the importance of weapons or horses (ibid: 41, 53). She also suggests that people who considered themselves descendents of the San were painting until the early 20th century, although she notes that this cannot be verified (ibid: 28).

Mallen's discussion of the art's context informed my writing of Rosamund's diary to a large extent. In the 19th century, the Nomansland San's contact with frontier farmers, Basotho and Zulu people, European magistrates, traders and missionaries facilitated a process of social and cultural hybridization, with the San participating in trading, raiding, intermarriage, cooperation and conflict with these diverse groups (ibid: 130). These changing social and geographical boundaries led to the disappearance of the hunter-gatherer traditions to be replaced by farming and herding, as well as stock raiding, which became a major econonomic enterprise of the San (ibid: 134).

Post-colonial consensus contends that the San became stock raiders because they had no concept of ownership or were forced into it because of Bantu or colonial settlement of

their lands. Initially, they were an egalitarian society with no concept of ownership; their personal possessions consisted of what they carried in their *kaross*es. However, Mallen suggests that for decades prior to the 19th century, they were already involved in raiding networks; as consummate stock raiders, their skills were recognised as superior. In contrast to the dispossessed and displaced victims of the Cape, these mountain San formed important and powerful groups, playing a major political and economic role in shaping the raiding economy of Nomansland in the 19th century (ibid: 128). The economic activity of stock raiding caused multi-ethnic raiding groups to form, which created composite identities along with new physical traits (ibid: 134).

An analogous group appears in Patilweng. Rosamund describes the arrival of a 'ragtag band of men…with ponies and cattle in tow'. According to her, they represent:

> the wide spectrum of race that exists in this country. Boer, Bushman, Bantu, half-castes and Hottentots, their skin tones ranging from yellow to tawny to brown to chocolate - it is difficult to classify them.

Mallen identifies the leaders of these groups, naming Esau DuPlooy and Smith Pommer amongst others (ibid: 105 - 106). I have drawn on these names; hence the designations of Hannes du Plooy and William Plommer.

A major political figure to emerge out of this new economy was the powerful shaman-leader. In addition to the cattle accrued in exchange for making rain for local chiefs, the shamans controlled the area in political terms, which reflected in the art they were creating. Dowson, quoted by Mallen, argues that the paintings were a means of making certain political statements, for example, in the audacity they displayed by placing their images on top of others, or in the size and number of accroutrements associated with them, compared to the other human figures depicted in the art. The resulting images were powerful and politically resonant in terms of power relations, suggesting their growing level of control (ibid: 120, 121, 124, 125).

In Rosamund's diary, the power of the shaman is clear. He appears to be the chief even if that is not his official title. He is the one who controls the paintings, warning Rosamund against trying to locate them. Lamenting the passing of tradition, he castigates the women for wearing Rosamund's dresses, is unhappy with her efforts to teach writing and is furious when she kills the swallow as it is the San belief that the

soul of the shaman residing within the swallow will the enter the body of one who kills it. He paints her image over the eland in an attempt to defuse her presence, which he perceives as a threat to San life, painting two images of himself to double his potency.

It is evident from the above discussion that Rosamund's diary is based on historical fact. Cited by Mallen and mentioned in the diary is the protection of San people by Basotho chiefs (ibid: 87). King Letsie did take up arms against the Cape government towards the end of 1880 (Wright & Mazel, 2007: 113). Also, Mark Hutchinson did make copies of the San paintings in the Giant's Castle area. These were at the request of Governor-General Sir Henry Bulwer, who, in 1876, inspired by Bleek, Lloyd and Orpen, requested a farmer with artistic ability to copy the art (ibid: 51). Here, I take liberties with the truth: although there was a publication called *The Athenaeum* published at the time in London, I doubt whether it featured reproductions of the art, although articles about the Bushmen did appear.

IX. Portrayal of black characters

As the novel is an interrogation of whiteness, the black characters are rendered in superficial terms, merely playing cameo roles in the narrative. In this way, there is no development of any black character or any account of their actions, motivations or agency.

Rose has barely been exposed to middle class blacks; her contact has mostly been limited to domestic and other menial workers and beggars, even at the present time, when the narrative takes place. The fictional world of Rose reflects something of the reality of South African society, which reveals an apparent lack of transformation with respect to integration in this post-apartheid milieu. Society remains for the most part racially segregated, the differences playing out along cultural, social and economic power lines. It is also clear that this polarised status quo cannot be equalised overnight.

Rose is aware of this aspect of South African life but desires African rootedness and a feeling of belonging. The only way for her to achieve this is to introject blackness into her identity. When the opportunity to befriend her black neighbours arises, she grabs it although she feels uncomfortable with the racial difference and stereotypes Oba as a Nigerian drug lord. Michael is probably her first close encounter with an educated middle-class black man. He generalises about his culture, telling her that the Basotho do

not care about their dogs because they fail to bring in an income and the reason for the dearth of cats and small game in Lesotho is because all Basotho men want fur hats. Rose is aware that his comments are generalisations and makes a mental note not to repeat them to liberal types who would frown upon this stereotypical representation of the Basotho. The fact is that many people, no matter their race or levels of education, make sweeping comments about their own and others' cultural practices. When I was in Lesotho, these exact words were related to me by a young Basotho man such as Michael.

X. Social responsibility of the author

In his influential essay: *Rediscovery of the ordinary: some new writings in South Africa*, Njabulo Ndebele criticises black writers of protest literature during the apartheid era. In their efforts to write socially-responsible texts, they represented only the spectacular abnormality of the times at the expense of the ordinary. Ndebele bemoans the lack of inner dialogue with the self, describing it as 'an emptying out of interiority' in the writing (1991: 38).

In a different context, Rose has been accused of lacking interiority but this omission was not due to any agenda of social responsibility of my part. I did not write the novel to harangue the reader about the social ills that plague our society. There is egregious poverty and a whole array of associated problems: rampant disease, high infant mortality, abused and vulnerable children and HIV/Aids and Aids orphans. Government corruption, poor service delivery and high levels of crime affect both rich and poor. And there are abused animals. As the novel is embedded within a specific context, these issues do emerge. The text, in fact, fails as a vehicle to drive them home as I do not give society's victims a voice; I do not blame; I do not offer solutions. However, by setting down these societal ills, perhaps I will facilitate a raised consciousness on the part of the reader. I am aware that this is an uncommitted stance on my part.

According to Soyinka, the modern African writer requires the prescience of a visionary and should endeavour to project a regenerative vision of society (1976: 63 - 65). The text perhaps engages with the vision of an ideal South Africa in its exploration of a white character's search for identity and for roots beyond whiteness. National identity founded on racial difference as entrenched by apartheid policy

continues to haunt present-day South Africans. In its endeavour to redress the iniquities/inequities of the past, the government strives to transform society by empowering the previously disadvantaged, that is, black members of society. Thus, race continues to be a key determinant of identity in this country. An ideal South Africa would be one where national identity is unified and not based on racial difference. Rose, by striving to connect with racial otherness, moves towards engaging with a hybridised and thus more-encompassing sense of national identity.

XI. The contribution of writing groups to the creative process

The process was greatly assisted by two writing groups – the one to which I currently belong and the other, the Masters programme. My current writers' group meets at a participant's house one Sunday afternoon of each month. The group, which is closed, consists of authors and poets, some of whom are literary academics. At present, three published novels have emerged from the group, a short story has won the prestigious Pringle Award, one has been accepted for publication in a journal, another has been broadcast on BBC as part of the British Council's Radiophonics programme, and a short story collection is in process for publication. Fabulous teas are served and the writer/poet reads his or her work out aloud for the others in the group. There is real benefit to this as it gives the writer the opportunity to hear if the writing jars or the pace drags.

The criticism received from this group is focused more towards detail, for example, where some dialogue feels inconsistent with a certain character. However, an unsatisfactory resolution or poor structure would also be discussed. The criticism is always imparted in a gentle and affirming manner and I leave the group feeling motivated to continue writing.

The contribution of the MA group towards the project has also been a wonderfully positive experience. Firstly, working to formal deadlines has certainly spurred me on and the discipline to produce work timeously has provided a framework in which to work. The formality motivated me to complete the project in well under two years. If I were attending only the informal group where there are no such demands, I might have discarded the project out of characteristic boredom. Another incentive of the workshop was the light of the MA at the end of the tunnel. Even if the work never gets to publication, I feel the qualification would have made it worthwhile.

Writing is a lonely occupation and attending such groups help enormously to relieve problems relating to this. They provide instant readership, interaction and discussion with academics and other writers. Because of the length of time devoted to each participant on the MA programme, the workshop discussion around the narrative was in great depth and thus particularly helpful. The text was minutely dissected on a theoretical, ideological and readerly level. As is apparent in the essay, characters were unpicked, their motivations scrutinised and the more technical issues around narrative, form, voice and structure unpacked.

It was stimulating, lively, always riveting, sometimes confronting and created the impression of the text as proficient and interesting, which was very encouraging, although I suspect that the discussion had more to do with the depth of knowledge and profound insights of the academics and writers sitting around the table than of the text itself. To have readers of this calibre was a real privilege.

Submitting the work to such an august group was extremely intimidating for me especially in light of a deep writerly insecurity. I am not defensive or precious about my writing and am always open to suggestions for change. However, there was one session where my authorial skills came under harsh fire, especially in the rendering of Rose. It was a harrowing experience but in retrospect, I can say something positive about it, that it was better to have the text provoke such robust criticism than no comment at all. By the second last session, the responses I received indicated that the group had engaged with the heart of novel; that Rose could could be regarded as a 'vessel' for whiteness and that her journey was more an allegorical search for her identity rather than about biological origins, a reading that was encouraging to me.

Ultimately, the workshops did not impact on the thrust of the narrative or its style. Even in rewriting and editing the work being fully conscious of the lack of interiority, I was still unable to interpolate any more of Rose's reflections into the narrative, not only because it was difficult to disrupt the flow but also because I am still of the impression that the reader should fill in the gaps for her or himself.

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