

AHMED MH PATEL

STUDENT NUMBER: 0305000M

SCHOOL OF LITERATURE, LANGUAGE AND MEDIA

MASTER OF ARTS BY RESEARCH (CREATIVE WRITING)

SUPERVISOR: PROF. BRONWYN LAW-VILJOEN

CREATIVE PROJECT: NOVEL

TITLE: THE STATE

FINAL SUBMISSION DATE: 13 JUNE 2022

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
School of Literature, Language and Media

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Student

I, Ahmed MH Patel (Student number: 0305000M), am a student registered for an MA Creative Writing degree in the years 2020/21. I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.
- I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.
- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.
- I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature:



Date: 13 June 2022

The State
(Novel)

&

Pop, Paranoia and a Pornographic Nexus: Reflecting on a Not-Nailed
Production
(Reflective Essay)

Ahmed MH Patel

Contents

The State	5
Pop, paranoia and a pornographic nexus: Reflecting on a not-nailed production.....	192

The State

What she found most difficult about the fasting month was waking up before sunrise to eat. The smell of toast in the passage and the sight of her mother sitting stoically at the eating table – that permanent black headscarf, that resigned expression – made her uneasy.

She scanned the table. Soft butter, grated cheddar, chunky cottage cheese, raspberry jam, slices of toast upright in their rack, a large pot of tea, a white sugar bowl, last night's quiche.

She poured tea and buttered a slice of toast.

"You can't go the whole day on that, Azra," said her mother.

Every morning the same inquisition. She bit off a corner of the toast. It was hard to chew and harder to swallow. She took an exploratory sip of tea. It had cooled down enough to take two large sips and be done with.

"I'm going to my room." She swallowed the last bit of tea. The toast, with its bite-sized piece missing, stared up at her.

According to her Ramadan calendar, she still had to wait a while for the exact time of first light. Then only could she pray, have a short nap and start getting ready for work. She lay on her bed in the darkness. The birds had already begun to chirp. What if they, like her, mostly rejected eating the worms they caught?

She was neither disillusioned by the fast nor conflicted about its purpose. Usually, it was a good opportunity to strengthen her resolve and sharpen her focus. But this year things felt different. It seemed the very resolve she had acquired over the period so far had led her to notice odd feelings slithering within. Perhaps they had been there all along, but she had only just begun to feel their sharp, hollow pangs with increasing regularity.

Maybe these feelings were symptomatic of an understanding that she was alone and was going to be for a long time, if not for the rest of her life. Alone with nowhere to go but to work and back home, to her mother. Alone with no one else to speak to but her mother. A lifetime of painfully insubstantial exchanges.

Why her firm insisted on closing for the festive season was beyond her. Now, with Eid set to coincide with Christmas for the first time in her life, she had run out of workdays to train her focus. She'd have to spend the final third of the fast in dead time.

What she did like about mid to late December, though, was how the city's inhabitants left in droves. Beach, bush, Bolivia. Anywhere but Joburg. She hardly left her apartment. Her trips were brief, and mainly involved moving from her bed to the bathroom and back, and to the lounge when it was time to break her fast.

The bed was her horizontal home office, except instead of doing work on her laptop, she watched TV shows and googled things as they came to mind. She had also been reading. Luckily, during the Christmas rush prior to the city's great emptying, she had managed to order and have delivered the full set of the *Seven Sisters* novels. Just a couple of days into dead time and she was already on *The Shadow Sister*, the third in the series.

"Azra. Iftar time." Her mother's knock at the door came precisely 30 minutes before sunset. Breakfast in a truer sense, perhaps. She crept out of bed and headed to the lounge. There, she was pacified by the wingback in the corner. It was as if it knew which parts of her body to pad and prop. She curled deeper into it and stared through the large glass door, past the balcony, to a pink horizon dotted with treetops bobbing in the warm summer air.

Her mother brought over a tray of dates when the signal came to break their fast. Some of them were rolled in toasted coconut flakes, some were stuffed with almonds and others were plain. She took an almond-stuffed one. "God! I fasted for You. I believe in You and put my trust in You. I break my fast with Your sustenance."

She bit on the date and watched the pink light fade.

The first workday of the new year had finally arrived, but her excitement was short-lived. Her access to the bottle of Voss in the fridge door had been obstructed by a jam jar her mother had crammed in front of it. When she yanked at the lid of the Voss, the jar became unstable.

She watched the jam jar crash to the floor in slow motion. Her plan to leave home in one fluid movement was thwarted. "I told you not to leave this stuff in the fridge door!" She hoped that her mother, who was sitting and reading at the table, would hear the full fury in her voice.

There were clumps of raspberry jam and shards of glass on the floor, and red specks on her shoes and pants. She made a fist and brought it down, hard, on to the kitchen counter. It was sore but worth it.

She barged her way back to her bedroom and changed quickly into outfit B, which she'd luckily managed to arrange in her head before nodding off after breaking her fast. Thank God she didn't wear the leather sandals she had initially planned for outfit A. Literal toe jam, imagine.

When she left, she slammed the door as hard as she could and stomped across the linoleum passageway leading to the stairwell.

She was calmer by the time she got down to the parking garage. She started the engine and selected R. The view screen displayed her rear view. All clear.

Because she hadn't driven in a while, her phone didn't immediately sync with CarPlay, so the entertainment system defaulted to some talk-radio station. The voice of an assured-sounding man blared on the radio. '... the market took a dip towards the end of the day's trading on the back of slow demand and weakening investor confidence ...'

Huh?

Her Mercedes crawled through the parking garage until she came to a large rectangle of sunlight streaming in from the spaces between the garage gate and its frame. She moved the car towards the rectangle and pressed the button on the gate remote. The motor rumbled and the gate rolled open, gathering speed like an underground train. Sunlight flared into the dull garage. She pulled her sunglasses over her face and inched the car out. Traffic streamed steadily past. She nudged the car closer to the street until she spotted a gap.

The route to work was so familiar she had become attuned to its many nuances – evasive manoeuvres around potholes, bumps and other obstacles; which beggars to give money to; which beggars to ignore; which robots to race to make the green light.

Another news bulletin was about to start as she approached her office building. Lulled by the inanity of talk radio, she'd completely forgotten to connect her phone. She harpooned a finger at the on/off button on the centre console. She couldn't bear the thought of having to hear that news presenter's stupid voice again.

David, whom she supposed considered himself a catch, tended to wear the same button-down shirts as seen on faceless Thomas Pink mannequins. The curve of his paunch where his shirt tucked into his slim-fit suit pants betrayed any claim he might have had to youth. A dad bod. His hair was dirty blond and fell to ear length when not slicked back. He wore a fine platinum wedding band and sometimes mentioned his "boys". She pictured David's wife as tall, blonde, thin and tan – pretty even.

They were about to start a big audit. It was just as well, and a welcome coincidence, that it was so soon after the fast and holidays ended. She felt fortunate to have that kind of continuity. No time to sit around and wallow in whatever grey feelings she might have developed over a month of fasting and relative solitude.

She moved her eyes slowly from David's crotch up to the projector screen. He'd pulled up a rudimentary pre-plan. Did he get one of his prepubescent offspring to do it as a holiday assignment? Her gaze drifted back to his crotch.

"... there's quite a large pool of clerks to draw from. I'll draw up a roster of duties and senior staff present here can delegate where they deem fit." A roster. There was some hope after all.

David brought down his laptop screen and the meeting ended. She gathered up her printouts into a plastic folder and shot another glance at David, standing authoritatively at the front of the room. Most women probably found him attractive, but she was still to be convinced after many hours spent, cumulatively, staring at his crotch in boardrooms.

"Hey, Azra."

Trapped.

"David. Hi."

“How are you doing? Did you enjoy the break?” She smiled, nodded and avoided eye contact.

He was hardly interested a response, let alone in pressing her for one. All he wanted was for her to stay where she was while he leaned against the doorframe and got his scrolling fix. He reeked of Coach Blue and something fruity, no, caramelly. Was vaping his new thing or had she just not noticed before? Men like David, tall and slightly bulky, conventionally handsome, had a particular stance. He looked up from his phone.

“It was OK, relaxing.”

“Oh yeah? How did you relax?”

Some valuable scrolling seconds bought.

“I usually stay at home over the Christmas holidays.” How much longer would he need?

“That sounds relaxing, I guess.”

“How about you?” She gulped.

“Oh, we took the boys to visit my brother in Paris. First time in years it snowed there over Christmas. It was great...”

Was he playing it down to seem cool? To her? Finally, some hope punctured the sad reality of their exchange. Genevieve – all smiles, red lipstick and pumps. Being on the same level as David, they had to strike something up. It would be impolite not to. Then she could simply leave. Like an animal on the hunt, he picked up Genevieve’s scent.

“Oh hey, Gen...” He said before his eyes left the screen.

She shared a brief yet honest and knowing glance with Genevieve, whom she respected for her machine-like consistency at work.

She made a mental note to straighten the drawing, a self-portrait of the artist, hanging above her overflow desk. Once again, it made its presence known, staring back at her from The Vortex that was its mouth. She hated it as one would an unwanted pet or child, or parent. She fell into the high-backed chair and swivelled in semicircles. The tips of her toes touched and left the ground in short bounces along the arcs of each swing. She pictured her feet as puppets, dancing for a silent, unimpressed audience.

She reeled herself back to her desk. The chair's wheels rolled hesitantly along the dark, rigid carpet tiles. What if she were to have an office romance? What if it were to involve the petite, dark-haired articles clerk who joined the firm late last year? But how would she manage an office romance with her intense workload? Surely it would take great tenacity, especially if a scandal were to break out? The words "orchestrate" and "scandal" floated inside her head in crude neon, like an old PC screensaver. They melded into a yellow beam then materialised into a warm, tingling sensation that crept southwards.

The screech of the fluorescent light above injected gravity back into her body. It entered through her ears, grey and heavy, and rolled through her veins. She looked ahead, through the glass door, and saw a few articles clerks huddled around a monitor, laughing at a meme. The hot clerk wasn't part of the boy huddle.

There were a few dozen tabs going in her Chrome. She Ctrl-w'd with purpose, lingering only on pages that might have been worth bookmarking. Through all the crap, she was pleased to add only one more grave to the boundless cemetery that was her "To read" folder. The thought of one day having to sort through and organise that folder was deflating. Bookmarking made her feel like a comfort-seeking procrastinator.

She Alt-tabbed back to Excel. The spreadsheet containing David's workplan for the coming audit stared back at her. It still needed input from several colleagues. She wondered when they'd be back from leave and whether their absence would hold her up.

Steeling herself, she placed a fingertip on the trackpad and opened Outlook. In no time, the programme spread itself across her screen. Although she wasn't expecting anything important, she didn't want to submit to email. A bold 34 in brackets next to "Inbox". Not too bad, considering. She clicked the oldest unread message, dated December 23, with the subject "NOTIFICATION – BUILDING MAINTENANCE". A four-hour power outage in the area on Christmas Eve.

She hit the up-arrow key and the bold unread became the plain read. She stopped at a "season's greeting" from a small firm she took point on auditing back in Q2. Happy customer or auto send? It didn't matter, her email address was on their spam list forever.

She was sucked out of Outlook by a small, hunched silhouette stalking the doorway. The figure's tentative movements suggested it was contemplating whether to knock on the glass door and, if so, how hard. She peered over the screen, taking care not to telegraph that she'd noticed the figure.

She looked up fully from her screen. At last, as if having granted permission, a soft knock on the door, then another. Mei stooped and retracted her hand carefully from the door. She gestured for Mei to enter. Mei pressed down the door handle, in slow motion, as if sneaking into the room, and nudged open the door.

"Hi. I saw you come in earlier."

"Yes, I went straight to a meeting. Just got back and had a look at my email."

Mei giggled into the palm of her hand and adjusted her thick-rimmed glasses, smudging the bridge closer to the point between her eyebrows.

She scanned Mei. Always the oversized knits in varying weights, sleeves pulled up to the elbows. Today it was a powder-blue cardigan that looked like cashmere. The hip-side pockets would've been cute if Mei hadn't stuffed them with stationery.

By default, Mei's gaze was fixed firmly to the floor. She swayed for a moment, looked up and adjusted her grip on the stack of plastic folders she cradled in one arm. "So... I suppose you're on the team for the new audit?"

"Yes, but most of the team's not back yet." Sometimes she felt bad for being terse with Mei. But it seemed that even the softest, most gentle treatment would be too harsh, or sudden, for her.

Mei stared hard at her brown Birkenstock Mary Janes. She seemed perplexed, like she too couldn't understand how and why people could still be on leave. "We're wrapping up KBT. It's been straightforward," she muttered.

A few seconds passed in silence. She bit her lip and Mei looked down and dug the toe of a Mary Jane into the floor.

"Hey, let's have lunch together." She tried sounding enthusiastic.

"Yeah, later." Mei nodded.

"It didn't really matter, Mark wanted a beach holiday so we went to the beach. I didn't want to tell him for the millionth time that I don't like the beach." Mei investigated her palms.

Azra picked at a slice of avo peeking out from a thicket of various leaves. There was no work to rush back to. Besides, The Vortex had been staring her down all morning. She indulged her colleague. As expected, Mei's complaints centred on her boyfriend, Mark. Mei and Mark. Mei-Mark-Mei-Mark-Mei-Mark.

Her knowledge of Mark was limited to the few times she socialised with Mei outside of work. The first time they met, at a restaurant in Illovo, Mark was horrified when he discovered that she ordered water and would not have any of the wine he ordered for the table.

"You can't be serious ... water on a Friday night!" He had said. She especially despised people who drank but felt so ashamed of it they alienated those who didn't. As if the only means they had to legitimise their addiction, and in the process feel like it wasn't such a big deal, was to surround themselves with other addicts. From then on, Mark became an object of her disdain. She relished Mei's seemingly endless complaints about him (his flippancy, his narcissism, his disregard for her thoughts and opinions, his friends, his family). There was nothing better than a character so loathsome as Mark being betrayed by his own girlfriend. The one person he, Mark, the arsehole, believed was his loyal and obedient pet for whom he took the liberty to order wine.

"...the place we stayed in was nice enough, a house on a secluded little beach on the North Coast. Very rocky, though. But then, like two days after we got there, his parents arrived with the news that they bought the house in November. That's why Mark insisted we go to the beach, to check out his family's new holiday house. Mark knew all along. Apparently, he did the transfer." Mei remained impassive throughout her explanation of this ordeal.

She feigned concern and looked ahead – a plate of salad and a bottle of Evian waited expectantly. She unravelled cutlery from the napkin tucked under the plate. She moved the point of the knife towards one of the three pieces of halloumi resting on a bed of tangled wild rocket. Dark-brown sear marks ran diagonally across the pieces of cheese. She targeted the middle piece, using its topmost diagonal sear line as a guide for her incision. She severed the tip and speared it with her fork, its tines easing into the rubbery flesh. That she was

salivating was repulsive, but she was already too far into the action to abort it. She opened her maw and fed the cheese into it. She chewed a few times and swallowed.

Mei had hardly touched her salad either. She had been staring at something directly ahead of her for some time. When she finally snapped out of it, she grabbed her takeaway coffee and took a sip. "I wonder if Mark ever sees how ridiculous his family is."

She chortled and patted her lips with the napkin. Mei's complaints confirmed her suspicions about relationships with men. Beyond that, though, Mei's whining bought her precious time. She smoothed out the serviette on the table and sat back into the uncomfortable cafeteria chair.

"And if that wasn't enough, on Christmas Eve, his friend Alistair arrived with his annoying new girlfriend, Claire..."

Mei's voice became softer and softer until it diminished to a distant muffle. She watched the movement of Mei's lips going out of sync with the muffle. A fuzziness entered her brain, like she'd inhaled smoke laced with white noise. Gradually, in the tiniest of increments, she dissolved into the static.

"...shit, look at the time, I actually do have something to do before I leave. Azra...?"

"Oh. Yeah. OK."

The cafeteria was busier than when they had arrived. It seemed that everyone who was at work that day was in it. The tinselled Christmas decorations, green, red and yellow, were still draped across the walls and over the large square hanging lights at the salad bar. A banner that read "Merry Christmas" followed by a trail of reindeer and a sledge hung on the wall above the cashier's desk. The atmosphere was cheerful. Most of the people there were, like her, taking an extended lunch. But unlike her, they seemed eager for the year ahead and were probably sharing their New Year's resolutions. She had none.

They had seated themselves at a small square metal table on the edge of the large, brightly lit indoor section. On hot days like this, the dining area, which was on the top floor of the building, opened on to a lawn terrace overlooking the bottom three levels. It was a pleasant enough view. Outside on the terrace, people sat at the concrete sets in groups of four or five. Blue and white umbrellas bearing the firm's logo ballooned out of the tables on thin poles. The grass emitted a bold odour, something like a petrichor, as if it too were eager for the new year.

“Last night I read an article about a family that finished the last can of beans their grandfather stockpiled before the 1994 elections.” She looked up. Mei had already left. The stack of folded glass doors about a metre away made her think of animal carcasses hanging on meat hooks.

She pushed the button and the down arrow lit up. The black display strip showed “G” in the same green. A few seconds passed. How much longer? Then, footsteps. “Great.” She scoffed. Even though it was clear that the down button had already been pressed, a slender finger poked through from behind her to press it again. She cocked her head to register who this insistent person was. It was the hot clerk.

She wore a pair of heeled leather sandals, loose-fitting ankle-length slacks and a lace swing top, all black. Her toenails, painted black, revealed themselves neatly at the tops of her sandals. Her hair, fine and deeply black, was cropped just below her ears in a bob. All the black was offset by her pale complexion, but not in a way that seemed cold, rigid or jarring. Her clothing, especially the slacks, with their large pockets and flared legs, traced a playful, girlish silhouette.

She and the clerk exchanged nervous smiles.

“Floor 2, going down,” said the lift.

She stepped into it and the clerk followed. She pressed “G”. The wait was longer than the ride, but it was worth it. She gestured for the clerk to get out before her. The short heels of the clerk’s sandals hit the marble of the building’s vast entrance hall in echoing clip-clops. She slowed down to a creep behind the clerk, pretending to be busy on her phone. She was mesmerized by the clerk’s swaying hips.

When she reached the security guard at the main turnstile, the clerk smiled and tapped her access card. An effortless exit. She caught the smile side-on from a distance. It injected in her a substance that slowed down time. She wondered if the clerk noticed her stalking, and if she did, whether it gave her a thrill.

Her dose of slow motion wore off when she reached the security guard and a solid beam of sunlight, reflecting at sharp angles from the glass of the main entranceway to her far right, caught her square in the eyes. Things sped up and the light became unbearable. She laid her satchel and handbag on the guard’s small desk and rooted around the front compartment for her access card and sunglasses. No effortless exit for her.

“How’re you, ma’am?” the guard asked.

“Hi. Good. Busy.”

“Ja. Busy, busy.”

She tapped her card, the turnstile's short metallic arm lifted and she descended the stairs to the parking. She heard the last few clip-clops of the clerk's heels, then silence, then the dull report of car doors unlocking. She traced the sound and caught a flash of amber reflected on the concrete floor about 50m away. The clerk got into her small white student car.

"Hullo, darling." He bugged his eyes and peekabooed from below her window.

She drew it down a crack. "Bonga! You're sweating."

He laughed and said something in Afrikaans. She reached for her purse, fished out a 50 and fed it through the gap. He snatched the note as soon as it became available.

"Dankie, my eerbarige dame," he said with a deliberate English accent, curtsying. He crumpled the note and stuffed it in his pants.

She enjoyed his performances because they were funny and brief. He moved on to his next drive-through audience and she looked ahead. The robots at this intersection took notoriously long to change. Some work people even started an email petition to get the firm to contact the relevant authority to have them adjust it. "We don't want to be hijacked while waiting at this dangerous intersection," was how it went. Did their concern have anything to do with Bonga?

Even if she took it slow along the M9 and on Oxford, she'd still be home before 4pm. How drawn out these summer holiday-work transition days could be. This kind of heat turned boredom into even more of an effort.

The public park across the road from her building was packed. Some people sat on benches and others languished on the grassy slope just off the pathway running through the centre. A group of children played on the roundabout, three of them sitting on it and two running beside it, spinning it vigorously. A couple, teenagers, occupied the swings, smoking and talking animatedly.

She turned into the driveway and pressed the button on her garage remote. In her rear-view, she saw a young man on a bench at the edge of the park. Was he looking directly at her? Maybe.

"How refreshing to see such a beautiful young woman on such a beautiful day," a man with thinning grey hair called out from one of the deckchairs. He turned around and looked towards her with a furrowed brow. He wore nothing but a faded Union Jack Speedo. The sun pounded his flesh.

She looked up from her phone, adjusted her sunglasses and half-smiled, not expecting the old man to pursue anything further.

"I hardly see you around the building. Do you live here?"

"Damn it!" she said to herself, regretting not having taken her earphones downstairs.

The man looked at her expectantly.

She cleared her throat and projected. "Yeah, I live here."

"Oh, which floor?"

"Fourth." She lied.

"Ah, right. We're on ground floor. I'm Neville. Neville Sonley."

"Azra."

"Lovely to meet you, Azra. Did I say it right?"

She looked past Neville at the pool. A filter in one of the corners sucked in water greedily with a slurping sound. It turned her on.

"Do you ever swim?"

"Not really."

"You know, my husband sits on that bench most mornings with his coffee and newspaper."

She shrugged. Her gaze lingered on his crotch. The tip of his penis was at the exact point where the saints' crosses intersect. "England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales. Inside, outside, inside, on." The skipping game she and Nadia played as little girls was still so fresh in her memory. Why didn't the Welsh dragon feature on the Union Jack? Had Neville ever referred to his penis as "The Dragon"?

When she got back up, her mother was still sitting at the table reading her thin prayer book.

“Hey.”

“Azra. How was the pool?”

“I’m going to pray and hang out in my room until supper.”

Her mother nodded and continued reading.

On summer afternoons, she had to open her windows and balcony door for the room to be bearable. She removed her shoes and gathered them in line with the horizontal edge of a parquet tile at a right angle below the base of the bed. She put her feet down on the cool floor.

In the bathroom, water hurried down the drain while she looked at herself in the mirror. Lifting her eyebrows and popping her eyes out like Bonga did earlier, she examined the depth of the lines that appeared on her forehead. She frowned to inspect the lines that formed between her eyebrows. She scrunched her eyes. Crow’s feet? Can’t be. Imitating Bonga’s crazy smile, she checked the laugh lines. She snarled and folds formed around her nostrils.

She rinsed her hands and dabbed them on and around her head. Three times face-splash. Pat down forearms, right then left. Rinse hands again, bend over and pat tops of feet, right then left. Rinse hands. “I bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped but God alone, who has no partner.”

Pinching it at the corners, she flared out her scarf and gave it a shake. She draped the black silk over her head and bunched the loose ends against the soft of her throat. With her free hand, she reached for the rolled-up prayer mat and hiked it under her arm. At the dresser she plucked out a broach from the hamsa-shaped tray and placed the pin between her teeth.

Standing on the mat looking ahead out the window, she saw the tops of mighty oaks hanging motionless in the thick summer air. She looked to the mat and raised her hands to either side of her face. Behind her, everything.

Vilakazi drops me off by the Riviera robots. His car is smoking a lot and he says he must take it to a mechanic in Yeoville. I tell him to ditch it and get a new car because the Metro will soon stop him in that fucken thing. He says it has sentimental value because the first time he fucked Gugu it was in that backseat. I ask him what's sentimental and if it meant that Gugu is special and he says yes. I laugh. He gets upset and lifts one side of his top lip and flashes me his stupid gold tooth.

He says the car will be fixed before the weekend, then we can go out to party. "Get your head out the ghetto, boy," he tells me in an American accent as I step out. I hear his busted exhaust all the way down Riviera. Poes.

The lines of cat I shot with him earlier are wearing off and my head is pounding. I cross the street and walk past the white flats on the corner. I head up to the park I found last week after I helped Nyoni fetch some goods from his girlfriend. Not sure what their plan was, but it seemed stupid. At least I got 200 just for taking the madam's jewellery from her and giving it to Nyoni.

I can feel the sweat between my toes. I get to the park and sit on a bench in the corner under a tree. There's an old hobo sitting not too far away drinking a beer wrapped in a black plastic. I tell him to give me some and he tells me to fuck off. I laugh loudly and he mumbles something.

I don't feel like sitting but it's too hot to walk. I see this pretty bitch pulling up to the block of flats across the road in a silver Mercedes. She scopes me in her rear view and drives quickly into the garage. Maybe two minutes later, I see the skinny bitch walking across on the third floor. She opens the fourth door and goes into the flat.

KB's uncle told us he and his boys used to work in this area in the 90s, before the buildings were so secure. "That's how I got this tavern," he told us proudly. I didn't care much for the uncle. He was bragging, making up a lot of it, making it look like he was more important than he was back then. But what else can you do with the past if you can't lie about what happened?

I walk to a tree and unzip. An old bitch driving past hoots and shakes her fist at me. Would she let me use the bathroom in her flat? Back at the bench, the hobo is still mumbling. "Hey, who are you talking to, you old fool?" I say. He waves like there's a fly buzzing around his head and taps the top of the brown bottle against his forehead.

Maybe later, on my way home, I'll stop at the shebeen for a beer. Vilakazi finally gave me some of the money he owes me. This afternoon in the car he played some rapper called Curren\$y. It sounded shit. I'm restless and thirsty. I get up and walk back the way I came to the park. I'm going to have to take a taxi up Oxford and get off in Sandton.

I dial Squash's number from memory but that stupid bitch tells me I have no airtime. When I get to Sandton, I'll walk to the BP where Squash works. Maybe he's about to knock off. But lately he doesn't want to drink. The last time I went to his house I asked his wife where he was and she said Rashid was not there. I asked her who the fuck is Rashid and she looked at me funny and told me to call Squash to find out. That stuck-up bitch, always judging.

I catch a taxi on Oxford. There's a young bitch next to me chewing gum so fucken loudly I want to bash her head against the window.

Vilakazi picks me up on the main road near Sindi's place. She wanted to come with but I said no she must fucken stay in Alex. When I get in the car, Vilakazi passes me a zol that's already lit and I can smell it's not just dagga in the zol. I take a puff and the thick smoke burns my throat and warms me up. He makes a U-turn and drives back up the road. Everything is moving slow.

The BM is working fine now but I don't know for sure. I can't read the orange letters on the radio display. Even though the bass is deep I can only hear like it's coming from far away. From the side, Vilakazi looks like a demon from hell.

The Gautrain station was just veld when I was a boy. The porn pictures I found there, torn out of a magazine, was the first time I saw naked white bitches. Looking at the pictures later that night, I skommelled for the first time and came into a stream of shit water running down the street.

Vilakazi makes a wide right on Marlboro and glides on to highway. He passes the zol back. I sink into the seat and feel the BM's engine in my bones, like I'm part of its chassis. Streetlights and billboards catch my eyes so I let them close. We're still on the highway when I open them again, but I can't make out anything. The music is loud and all the windows are open, so there's poes wind rushing into the car. I look over the dash. The car is eating the white lines on the road.

"Welcome back," Vilakazi shouts, steering with one hand and holding down his spotty with the other.

"Where are we going?"

He doesn't hear. It's dark and I can't make out the street but I'm thinking maybe we're heading on that long road through the east that eventually meets Louis Botha. After a while, the wind becomes less powerful and every now and then Vilakazi slows down, and sometimes stops. I can at least read the orange letters on the display now: "Untitled". We pull up to a building called Morris Heights. "Ja, we're outside," Vilakazi says into his phone. He drives through the garage and parks next to an old Toyota on bricks. There's no light in the garage except a flickering fluorescent.

"The lift isn't working, we must take the stairs." He tells me.

On the top floor, we stop at the second door down the passage. A tall guy opens, Vilakazi shakes his hand and they shoulder-bump. He introduces the tall guy as Lucky.

“Jerry M.” I say.

Lucky looks at me then at Vilakazi. “What does M stand for?” He asks.

“I don’t think he even knows.”

They laugh.

There’s two guys sitting on a couch in the lounge. Next to them, there’s a small table with a heap of white powder. On the shelf above the fucked fireplace, there’s a bottle of Bell’s.

“Take a seat.” Lucky points to a plastic chair in the passage.

I bring the chair closer to the couch and eye the small table. One of the guys looks at me and nods. The cat goes straight to my head. I pick up a glass on the floor and take a sip – Bell’s.

Vilakazi’s looking at CDs in a big cabinet close to the balcony door. Lucky joins him and they talk softly. I sit back in the plastic chair but stand up again quickly because there’s a leaking toilet down the passage. The drip echoes down and bounces around my head. I need a cigarette.

I see Vilakazi across the way, reaching into his back pocket. He pulls out a pack of Stuyvies. Lucky is tall and dark. Vilakazi nods and bumps to the music as he takes instructions from that Congo fuck. Finally, he lights his cigarette. The lighter’s spark cracks against the darkness of the night over the balcony. Vilakazi takes a puff. Now he starts talking. He is short and very thin. He uses the cigarette to point, like it’s part of his hand.

We pull up by the McDonald's in Braamfontein. When I get out of the car, I almost knock into some bitch walking down the pavement.

"Watch it!" she says.

"Voetsek!"

"Learn some manners," she clicks her tongue.

"Voetsek!"

One of her friends tells me to fuck off.

We walk on for a while then take a right towards Smit. There's a queue outside one of the doors but we go straight to the front. The bouncer lets me and Vilakazi in.

"Hey, we're waiting in line..." some bitch behind us complains.

Inside, there are many more like Vilakazi. Some of them wear big stupid glasses.

The music playing isn't bad – House. I go over to the bar and must wait behind a row of people before I can get to the front. On the wall behind the bar counter, there's a big old painting of a man with a big moustache. Maybe he used to own this place. Maybe, like KB's uncle, he was also a skebenga.

There's a tall guy with big hair standing next to me. He looks high and stupid, staring ahead at nothing. I see the outline of his phone in his jeans pocket. The top of the phone is sticking out. I take half a step closer to him and wait. A few seconds later, a drunk bitch stumbles into the gap and brushes up against me. I bump into him and pinch the phone out of his jeans. That tall poes doesn't notice a thing.

"You caught on quick." Vilakazi laughs and sips his beer.

"Don't worry, I'm watching out for you." He disappears into the crowd with some dreadlocked bitch.

I push through and find a small space where I can at least light a fucken cigarette. Two guys next to me are kissing and I want to throw up. I knock one of the moffies' shoulder hard on my way to the dancefloor.

The bodies move to the music in the dark. I remember the first time I went to church with my mother and her mother. I suppose the old bitch was trying to get my mother straight or something. I light another cigarette.

It wasn't much of a church, just a garage of one of the bigger houses in the area. It was packed, like this place, and the people also moved to the music. But the music here is better. I hated the church and never went back.

Vilakazi has connections to sell the goods fast. What was he discussing with Lucky earlier? I move along to a small courtyard close to the bathrooms. There's a group of drunk bitches standing against a wall, smoking and talking shit. I catch eyes with one of them and walk over. She looks at me and smiles. I look up and blow the smoke into the dark. When I look back, she's talking with her friends again and I see the handles of her handbag looped around her forearm. The zip is wide open and in the handbag I see a wallet and a phone. I move in a bit closer but she doesn't notice and carries on talking with her friends. I snatch the phone from her handbag.

Vilakazi can't do this kind of shit himself, he's too pussy. All he wants is to party and have a good time with these Wits bitches. I walk through the courtyard into another bar area and lean against a wall. Look at them, talking and laughing, sipping their drinks.

"It's a good night, huh?"

Vilakazi hands me a beer. I raise my bottle

"How much do you come here?"

No answer. He's smiling stupidly and waving to a group of people who've just come in. "Hey that's..." he says, but I stop listening.

Now I'm staring out of a window, looking past the pavement, the cars on the street and the buildings. I see the darkness; I hear it, too.

"Come here!" The cruel master calls.

"Jerry..." Vilakazi nudges me with his bony elbow. "... let's bounce, man."

I push myself up from against the wall and follow him towards the entrance. He nods to the bouncer. The bouncer looks at me and I nod. There's a drunk bitch falling over on the pavement. The friend who is trying to hold her up is struggling to keep her footing. Eventually they fall on top of each other and roll into the gutter. Their other friend points and laughs.

“Did you get my email?”

David leaned against her doorframe and scrolled. It was if he’d been there all along.

“Not yet, I just sat down.” She pointed to a clear-glass mug from which steam rose. A slice of lemon bobbed around inside.

“Their ARC sent some preliminary assessments. Maybe it’ll keep you busy until the rest of the team gets back.”

“How many juniors are we getting?”

David looked at her for the first time. “It depends, we haven’t yet grasped the full scope of the audit. I’m sure it will become clearer in the next week.”

“OK, then. I’ll have a look at the prelim.”

“I’ll get in touch with their previous independents. It’s going to be rough one.” He tapped his phone on her door and walked off.

Was he reminding her to prepare herself? Surely, he knew her better than that? She gripped the mug and brought it to her lips. It was still too hot to drink so she inhaled some steam.

She imagined receiving stacks of files and boxes, filled with reams of paper following no order, chronological or otherwise. Reams and reams, kept together in lever arch files, for the sake of it, with the lazy abandon that someone, somewhere, would one day make sense of it all. Then she imagined the client’s messy server, littered with zip files. Each zip file containing folders upon folders. Subfolders within those folders. Sorting through them would only be the beginning. What kind of shit would she have to deal with afterwards? She’d have to do a deep dive.

“Deep dive,” she said. How and when exactly did the term slip into her head and stick enough to be used without irony? Did she pick it up from one of those know-it-all periodicals, or had it just become part of the office in-speak? All those tiresome meetings, hotbeds of cheap jargon.

When did deep diving begin happening on shore? “Deep dive.” Was there more to it? There had to be for it to be done in an office building in Johannesburg, way above sea level. She indulged the prospect of doing a deep dive between the hot clerk’s thighs. She looked up the clerk in Outlook. Helena Loukakis. Cell number included. Amazing how the firm made them so available.

"I'll have to check."

Her brother had a knack for calling at the wrong time.

"I'm pretty sure mum took them with her when she moved in with you."

"Why don't you call and ask her yourself?"

"I haven't yet got a SIM, so I'm only on Wi-Fi. Can her phone even get WhatsApp?"

"I don't think so. I mean, no, it can't. Wait, Aki, where..."

"Look, Az, I can't talk for too long, I've a train to catch soon. I'll send you a postcard, OK?"

"OK. Bye."

Akeel's so-called postcards usually came as iMessages that contained snapshots of landmarks in whatever city he found himself. She liked these postcards for their lack of attention to detail – a carefreeness she envied in him – and their literal conformity to the postcard medium. "Wish you were here!" read every caption, no context given. The last recognisable postcard had him standing close to the Brandenburg Gate making a peace sign. Her little brother, playing reporter-reporter. Where would his next postcard come from? Minsk? She'd never been there and wouldn't recognise its landmarks. Why did he need to know about those old photos?

It was almost 7pm. The prelim shouldn't have taken her that long to look through, but there was no urgency. The Vortex caught her eye just before she shut the door.

The fluorescent lighting in the stairwell was anaemic and unpleasant. She could only look down. Was the hot clerk around this evening? Doubtful.

"Good evening, ma'am."

It wasn't Clement, the usual night guard. Puzzled, she searched the new guard's face. He was brimming for some reason. "BRIGHT" was engraved on his shiny new nametag.

"Hi," she said.

The light reflected sharply off his shaved head. Was that how he got his name?

The Mercedes handled the M9 satisfactorily. She hit the accelerator and took the bend merging on to Oxford Road at about 110. Waterslide-like exhilaration. Warmbaths with family, Akeel too small to go on the big slide with her and Nadia.

Red meant stop. A high perimeter wall stood her left. “Guess who don give a shit bout your afro” was spray-painted at the bottom corner of the wall. An image of a bust (Kafka?) was stencilled above the words. Was this a statement?

More than a year had passed since she had seen Akeel. They had met in Istanbul, she was on holiday and he was writing on northern Cyprus. He had already made friends – two slender men with scraggly beards and a brash woman with delicate features. They wore only black; they were serious. They had invited her to dinner at a terrace restaurant in Galata one night. The woman, who smoked and whose English was good, told her that the restaurant belonged to relatives of hers and that it was the only “authentic” place left in the area. “Not commercial chic shit.”

Images from the night began to stream back as she lay roasting on her bed – the woman’s cherry lips around her cigarette; countless rooftops, minarets and spires; Bosphorus Bay. Her brother’s words later that night in a steep and quiet walkway: “I feel like there’s a lot to say but no one is saying anything.” A trolley car rumbled by when they’d reached the bottom. The chintzy hotel lobby. The glint in Burak the concierge’s eye every time she walked across it to get to the lift.

“On your next inhale, raise your right leg and point your toes up to the ceiling.”

Transitions from downward-facing dog to lunges had become routine for Haroun. But the thing that supposedly brought him back to the studio most days was to see beyond the routine. He inhaled, closed his eyes and pictured his leg lifting, slowly at first but picking up speed in increments until it was raised at what he imagined to be an acute angle from the ground. His thigh and calf muscles were fully stretched, and the tops of his feet curved outwards and faced the floor.

To his left was another regular, a toned strawberry blonde with an angular face. Carla was her name, he gathered.

“Nice, Carla ...” the evening’s instructor, Meg, said as Carla nailed yet another transition from lizard to side plank to a one-legged low plank, then flowing seamlessly through upward facing and back to down dog.

“Fluid movements. Breathe.” Meg patrolled the studio on soft feet, adjusting people as she went along. She stopped by him during triangle and put one hand on his hip and nudged his shoulder to correct a hunch with the other. Meg breathed softly, but not without intent, into the back of his neck.

By the time Meg brought the class to final seated position, he was soaked in sweat. Hot Flow in summer, what did he expect? She invited them to place their hands either palms down on their knees, “for grounding”, or palms facing up, “to receive from the universe”.

“May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May all beings rejoice in the wellbeing of others. May all beings live in peace, free from greed and hatred.” She had previously told him this was an articulation of the Four Immeasurables.

He was still catching his breath while gathering his things on the bench outside the studio. She was at the reception area, still barefoot, saying well done and goodbye to students as they left. Her striped tights accentuated her long, slender legs. Her cropped tank-top revealed her toned abs, and even from distance he spotted the small, bright blue Cookie Monster tattoo just above her hipbone.

“Great class today, thanks Meg.”

“Haroun! Thanks, it’s good to see you again. How were the holidays?”

He wiped some more sweat off his forehead. "Good. I went to Nature's Valley."

"Wow! Nature's Valley is amazing!" Meg nodded slowly, scanning him with keen interest.

"Thanks for your New Year's message," he shuffled and fidgeted. "What did you get up to?"

"Just chilled with a few friends." She waved and smiled at someone on their way out, then looked around to see if there were any others left. All clear. "You know, I've been thinking a lot about you since the last time we hung out." She bit her bottom lip.

He picked at the strap of his black duffel. His gaze moved from her eyes to her lips and down her slender, milky neck to the tops of her breasts.

"Are you busy this evening?" He looked back up.

"Not really, just planning on making dinner. Maybe I'll read."

"I must eat too," he cleared his throat "and I don't feel like doing it by myself. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"OK!" She replied instantly. "But I need to go home first. Where shall we meet?"

He gave the adrenaline a few seconds to settle. "Oh, I know! There's a new dim sum place a block away from me. Apparently it's good. How do you feel about dim sum?"

"I feel very open to dim sum."

She leaned slightly forward on the ball of one bare foot, twirling a finger around a lock of hair running down the side of her face.

"Great stuff!" He was in Grade 7 again, in the square, asking Cara Wilkinson to be his girlfriend. The thrill never died down, even in early middle age.

"I can't remember the name of the restaurant." He scratched his head. "I'll have to check and text it to you. Are you going to drive?"

"I think I'll order a ride. Text me the address soon, OK?"

He took a left on to Oxford and headed towards Bompas. All the windows were fully open. Beyond the fumes and dust, he picked up an essential odour, Joburg's summer scent, as it were, of thunderstorms long passed and of those fast approaching. With their spring show now over, the jacarandas had settled in for a season of lush languor.

He thought about the Four Immeasurables. Although he could relate to them only very vaguely, like Meg, they could be fun to fool around with – as a thought experiment. It was difficult to choose which of them resonated the most. Could “the universe” be reduced to just four statements? Given the fortunate turn of events with Meg, it had to be the one about wellbeing. “May all beings rejoice inside the wellbeing of others,” he said out loud.

“I don't want to be a full-time yoga teacher forever, I'm only 23. Besides, like, forever, what does that even mean?” Meg wielded a chopstick in one hand as she spoke.

“That's a great age to be, I think.” A bit of Stella spilled from the bottle as he landed it on to the table. She had locks of thick hair tucked behind her elf-like ears, which in the warm lighting of the restaurant accentuated her cheekbones. Her blue eyes seemed bigger and brighter this evening.

“What do you mean, ‘you think’?”

“I'm turning 40 soon.”

“You're old.” She giggled deliberately and took a sip of wine, a blush the restaurant sold by the glass.

He was already nearing the end of his second beer. Getting the waiter's attention had now become urgent.

“Do you ever do private classes?” he asked, peering over her shoulder to make eye contact with the waiter serving the table next door.

“Now and then. They're mainly rich women who can't bear the thought of sharing space. They also have no idea who Adriene is.” She LOLed.

He had no idea who Adriene was.

“What's the weirdest private class you've had to do?”

“Let's see...” she ran a fingertip along the rim of her glass.

“You must promise not to tell a soul, OK?”

“I promise.” He raised his beer.

“OK, so, this lady who’s a regular at one of the studios I teach booked me for a private class. I didn’t think much of it because, I supposed, maybe she was a bit tired of the studio and needed something different, or maybe she wanted to work on a particular part of her practice. You get students like that. Diligent, you know.”

He nodded and leaned in closer.

“So I arrive at her house, which is just down the road from here, quite plush. It reminded me a bit of Cameron Diaz’s house in *The Holiday*. Have you seen that movie?”

The point at which alcohol began taking effect on people was always one to cherish, he thought to himself. Things became warmer, fuzzier, infinitely easier to deal with.

“I have not seen that particular Cameron Diaz film.”

She continued nonetheless, “So she sets the whole thing up on email, which I thought was strange to begin with, but I just went with it.”

His thoughts lingered on Cameron Diaz as Meg spoke. That opening scene of *A Life Less Ordinary*. Cameron emerges from a swimming pool in a striking black one-piece. Her cropped honey-blond hair is slicked back. She flings an apple to the butler and removes an immaculate Colt Python from its case. She loads a single silver bullet into the cylinder.

“Haroun, hey,” she snapped her fingers.

“Yes, sorry, please go on.”

“Anyway, so she lets me in wearing nothing but a linen robe. And I think, OK, she’ll get changed while I wait. But then, as I enter the house, I meet her husband, who’s also wearing just a linen robe. They had matching robes, can you imagine?” She took a sip of wine. “So, suddenly the lady becomes super flirty and the husband tells me to come in. The house is all glass and screed and open plan and, you know, like, floaty.”

“Floaty?”

“You know, a floating staircase leading to a mezzanine that looks like it’s floating. A large island between the kitchen and the rest of the living space, with the lights not really hanging from the exposed beams but floating around. I don’t know, floaty.”

He pictured a house designed by StudioMAS. “So, what happened in this floaty house after they invited you in?”

“Here’s the weird part. They seat me on this long sofa and sit next to me on either side. The woman shimmies a bit and lets the robe fall off her shoulders. While she does this, the husband has a grin on his face. Although his hands were folded in his lap, I could sense

he wanted to move them on to my thighs. But, you know, they're a 'sophisticated' couple, they waited for me to take the hint." She rolled her eyes.

"Not very subtle. So, what did you do?" He leaned in even closer, almost knocking over his beer.

"To be honest, there was a moment I thought to just go with it. They were an attractive couple; it could have been fun. But that part of my brain, the part I guess where professional Meg lives, said no. It just wouldn't have been right."

"Why?"

"Because it would be awkward if I saw the woman again in class. She's a client and I'm a professional, at least that's what I told myself."

"Yet, here we are," he laughed for the first time. She seemed either unperturbed or unaware, but he didn't really care. "What did you do once you said no?"

"I stood up and said I was there to teach a yoga class. They understood, of course. The woman very coolly, as if nothing had happened, got up, adjusted her robe and walked over to the kitchen to get her purse. She even counted out the cash and handed it to me!" She smacked the table.

"They'd clearly done this kind of thing before." He fell back into his chair and signalled with a drunken exaggeration that his mind had just been blown. Cradling his beer, he rubbed his thumb on the rim of the bottle's mouth. He felt the excitement of a boy getting his first bike.

Sunlight striped the side of her face and ran down her bare back. He wondered what she had planned for the day, if she had any classes. She wasn't scheduled to take the class he'd booked for later that evening. He left her to sleep. The coffee grinder would jolt her out of his bed soon enough.

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier?"

She emerged from the bedroom wearing what she'd worn to dinner, trying to conceal an immense yawn. He half expected her in the shirt he'd worn to dinner. He was glad she didn't take that liberty.

"I haven't been up for that long." He waved her over to the kitchen island. "Coffee?"

He stopped scrolling on his iPad and looked up. She was cute in the morning. Her eyes, usually wide like metallic blue flying saucers, drooped at the corners.

"You have a nice flat. You know, good energy." She continued her scan. "A guitar!" She pointed to the Fender in its stand beside a sturdy bucket chair. It was still plugged in, the thick black cable running to a cream amp, which stood a few feet from the chair.

He looked up from the iPad again. "Yeah, an old habit that hasn't yet died out. These days I've got to keep the volume low." He mouthed "low" in an exaggerated whisper. He felt like a cool dad, reading the *Business Day* of all things. It was an odd but no less pleasant feeling.

"What are your plans for the day, Meg Ryan?" He was unsure she'd know the actress, let alone her stellar romcom work in the 90s.

"Well..."

His mind drifted further into the possibility of fatherhood, something that had been occupying his thoughts with increasing regularity. How would this morning be different with a young child to see to? Surely, he wouldn't be sitting in the kitchen so calmly, making references to irrelevant actors. He'd be in the throes of getting the child (a boy?) ready for school. He'd be reaching for his cup of coffee standing at the counter's edge, sipping hastily at any fraction of a free moment. He'd be looking for his car keys, then his flat keys, then the kid's little school bag. Just when they'd be finally ready to leave, the kid would stop in the entranceway and begin to cry. His favourite toy was missing; it wasn't in his backpack.

"... and then, I'm not sure, I might have dinner with my friend Carol."

The name Carol caught his ear. At least Meg wasn't named Carol. "That sounds like quite a day. I hope you manage to get the most out of it."

"You didn't hear a word I just said!" she teased.

"Of course I heard. You said you were having dinner with your friend Carol."

"And the middle part? I saw you staring blankly. What were you thinking about?"

"Not much."

"[...]"

"If you don't mind waiting for me to get ready, I can lift you before I head to the train station."

"Thanks, but I'll just order a ride."

She shook her phone a few times with an expression that said "technology, duh".

Now more than ever, the prospect of untethering himself from the tedium of adulthood *sans* children excited him.

The Gautrain was a calm commuter line, even during peak hours. Nonetheless, his eye for vacant seats on trains was still New York sharp. He found one starboard and pounced on it. His headphones were already playing by the time the train left Rosebank.

“You need a good pair of NC headphones in this city. All this fuckin’ noise, huh?” He recalled the Hassidic salesman at B&H in Midtown saying to him when he got the pair of Bose. He had been in New York for just a few months and the city’s charm had worn off via, among many other sound-related things: the intrusive echoes of buskers’ instruments in the subway, the constant jabber of passers-by into their phones on sidewalks, the drone of cars and buses, automated voice prompts. “Stand clear of the closing doors, please.” The NC worked well to block out the flat Joburg-accented voice prompts on the Gautrain, too. Was there any union or guild that brought voice actors together, he wondered. Their recorded presence, however annoying, was crucial in the urban voice automation supply chain: lift companies, grocery stores, public transport authorities. “Next customer, please. Teller 5.”

But no matter how good the NC, sound was always there. Complete silence, he had come to understand, simply did not exist for the living. Beyond any deafening device, or deafness itself, sound was a feeling. All other senses were immersed in it, but not the other way around.

The train was already leaving Centurion, that little part of the world with a distinct khaki tinge. Blink once and you miss it; blink twice and you forget the place even exists. He checked the time on his phone. The title song off a four-track EP by Wildfire rang expansively through the headphones. The synthesised vocals, drums, clicks and reverbs bounced crisply around his head and created an uplifting soundscape. He wondered if the Canadian bedroom DJ/producer, no older than Meg, would release anything more substantial than this EP, so casually titled *Daydream*. Blink once and you miss an entire microgenre of Balearic beat; blink twice and you’re 40.

He stared out the window again, trying to decide whether he’d get off at Pretoria or Hatfield. The latter seemed the better option, if only to ogle the university girls getting off and on there.

He was lucky to be based at 40 Church, the better of the two Treasury buildings. From his desk on the third floor, he had a partial view of the square and the Paul Kruger statue. More of a monument, really, with a proud Kruger on the plinth and his unnamed boer soldiers crouched at the corners, way beneath him.

“I saw your little friend this morning ...” a text appeared on his lock screen.

He was surprised that Percy was awake at 10, let alone at 7, to have spotted Meg leaving. He pictured his neighbour now, sitting in the lounge, curtains still drawn, smoking and texting a million people at once in the raggedy brown bathrobe that he seemed to be living in the past few weeks.

“Did you say hi?”

“I did. We chatted ...”

“Never one to resist a chat.”

“Want to get a beer later ...”

“Absolutely! Where?”

“Do you think yours will still be smelling like sex later ...”

“I left the bedroom window open this morning.”

“Let me know when you’re back home and ready for some company ...”

Always the nosy ellipses. At least they weren’t emoji. Small blessings.

His thoughts went back to fatherhood and parenting. He'd seen it being done – by his sister and her husband, and a few friends, but he couldn't imagine what it must feel like. Was it as “infinitely rewarding” as they said? The only way for him to find out would be by getting a child of his own. But it wasn't that simple. In his way stood many unforgiving and complicated social obstacles, the first and main one being finding someone to have a child with.

His sister often told him to “settle down”, for his own sake. But who would he do this with? How would he find that one person? It wasn't impossible, his own parents had settled down together and seemed happy while doing so for as long as he could remember. His sister, too. For him, though, it seemed too far out of reach. Besides, his parents, his sister, somewhere along the line they must have surrendered something of themselves. Like, their essential selves. Economically, that would count as a steady decline in the personal growth sector.

Plus, there's an implication that marriage isn't the only thing happening in the settling down framework. Divorce had to be factored in, given the relatively high rate among married couples in his demographic. Marriage, a settlement of odds; divorce, a settlement of regret. A grave toll on personal growth either way. If the framework was the scaffolding on which to build a new life, it was also a sinkhole in which to destroy one. It was, as far as he could tell, an arbitrary framework and not entirely necessary for parenting.

Besides that, surely he had missed the settling down window. Most married people his age, having adopted the framework, were already either heading for divorce or remarrying.

He continued scrolling down his inbox, an endless stream of emails that bore no relevance to his wants and that he would never get around to reading.

He and Percy sat on the balcony of his apartment, overlooking the building's English garden as the sun set. Soon their view would be completely swallowed by the night.

"Do you know who Adriene is?" He asked.

"I think I might know one. But she just goes by Adi. I doubt you'd know her."

"No, I mean Adriene, like on the internet."

"Fuck, Harry, there must be a zillion Adrienes on, like, *the internet*."

He stared ahead, hoping to return to their previous silence. He was impressed by his recollection of such detail in his conversation with Meg at dinner. Since when did Percy start calling him Harry? Only old friends called him that.

Smoke emerged from Percy's cigarette. "What's so interesting in that far-off horizon?" he asked.

"Not much. Just winding down. What's going on in your world, Mr Moloto?"

"Ah, man! I'm excited for my new project. Do you want to hear about it?"

Percy had arrived high; he was always high. "If something has you this excited, then yes, please, tell me." He prepared himself.

"I've started sketching out a translation machine. This machine, once designed, or at least once I somehow figure out how to articulate its design, will be a custom-made translator of the paintings I include in my next show."

"I don't understand." He wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

"So, painting on the one side." Percy held out an imaginary tennis ball. "And translation of painting next to it."

He stared at Percy's invisible balls. He couldn't immediately respond.

His neighbour continued: "You know how, like, through the 'ages', abstract-expressionist painting has been this thing where meaning is deferred to the viewer? Not because artists themselves don't see or find meaning in their creations, but more like it's easier to put that on the viewer (or consumer, or whatever you want to call them) than have to sit and explain it."

He nodded but felt completely caught off guard by Percy's stoner theory. "I suppose so, but I don't know much about abstract-expressionist painting, or any kind of painting for that matter, so I'm not sure how it's been regarded through the ages. The most I've seen in

real life are some Pollocks and Rothkos, whatever they have at the big New York museums. And yours, of course.”

Percy waved away his plea of ignorance.

“It doesn’t matter, that’s a minor point. Think about it in musical terms. Have you ever wished you could ask your favourite musician what a particular song meant? I mean, like, *really* meant?”

“There are tons of songs I’d like to know the ‘true’ meanings of.”

“This machine will produce literal written translations of my paintings. Viewers will get the exact meaning instead of having to guess; or, even worse, make up their own.”

“OK, but –”

Percy stuck out a palm in front of his face.

“Obviously I’m not going to build a damn machine and put the paintings through it, like, physically. Basically, I’m going to sketch out this machine and explain what it does. So there’s going to be some background info, and it will state that I built this machine and here are the machine’s specifications and this is what it does, and that I ran my paintings through the machine, and what you see alongside each painting is the direct translation of that painting.” Percy gave him time to process the concept.

The idea seemed familiar to him, but he couldn’t immediately pin down where he’d come across it. Was it in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which he watched religiously as a teenager? Maybe he’d read it in a Vonnegut novel, read religiously as a teenager? He was almost certain that Percy’s idea had been conceived and done in some creative form, if not TV or books, then in art, photography or whatever. But that didn’t point to a lack of originality. Borrowed ideas were at the core of cultural production, weren’t they?

“So does this mean you’re going to be writing now as well?”

“I’ve already started!”

“Interesting. If you care to share before your show.” Was this the beginning of Percy’s hyphenated life, he wondered. The painter-writer.

“I’ll mail them to you in due course.”

“Would you need feedback?”

“Not really. What, are you all of a sudden a fucking English professor?”

Percy laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. He laughed, too, more relieved than in appreciation of the joke. Although he had a strong sense that whatever Percy wrote would be deliberately obscure nonsense, with a three-beer buzz on, he found himself genuinely intrigued.

“Speaking of email, I need some advice.”

“I’m a repository of good advice, you know that.”

He cracked the cap of his fourth. He should’ve been thinking of it as his last of the evening. “I’ve been thinking about an old ex. My relationship with her was by far the best I’ve ever had. That’s not counting, of course, the on and off –”

“Wait, the on-and-off thing you had with the fine young woman who went on to become the director of the you-know-what just a few blocks away? Talk about a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, continue.”

“Yes, but I don’t count that. I mean, we were so young. She was more of a groupie.”

“That ‘groupie’ was in love with you. Everyone saw it.”

“I wish I knew you back then, when you were, as you claim, just one of the faces in the crowd who came to watch us play.”

“Trust me, I came to most of your gigs. I was smitten by your singer. What was his name?”

“Dane.”

“Dane! He was perfect. The hair, those bedroom eyes. And the show he put on! Those hips!”

Percy’s face bore a wide-eyed grin that was at once innocent and lascivious.

“We would have been great together, Dane and I.”

“Dane is now an engineer with a wife and, last I checked, three young children. They live in a gated estate somewhere beyond the boundary of what you and I consider Joburg.”

“I could have converted him, we could have had a great life together. Can you imagine? Surely with that stage presence, that charisma, he could have found another band once you and the rest of those knob-twiddling geeks finished your commerce degrees or whatever.”

“Somehow I *can* imagine it. I’m sorry things didn’t turn out the way you wanted with Dane. Hey, also, I’ll have you know that our drummer, Marcel, studied drama, not commerce.”

"The Stargasms. Who came up with that name?" asked Percy.

He observed his neighbour's nostalgia with a scepticism that rested on the borderline between indulgence and outright annoyance. "Drew," he replied.

"Drew, the bassist! He was the only one of you I kind of got to know. By that I mean we partied together maybe twice. Then there was you and the other guitarist – tall and skinny, hunched over, insecure, boring."

He got up and exited the balcony midway through whatever the hell Percy was saying. A song by Destroyer rattled through the floor-standing Celestions in the lounge. He recognised the song immediately, "The State". He'd listened to *Trouble in Dreams* countless times. Each listen confirmed his dislike for the song. It stuck out like a sore thumb on an otherwise solid record. He stood at the exact centre point between the speakers and bathed in the sonic substance they produced.

The third verse started: "Loose lips sink the lives of disgusting women/So The State rolled me up into a ball," he couldn't take any more of the song so he went back to Percy. He had become the tennis ball.

"Anyway, back to the point." He noticed a heap of cigarette butts in the ashtray on the floor beside Percy's chair. How disgusting.

"Yes, yes, your ex," Percy said, exaggerating a yawn.

"Justine. We were together for about two years when I lived in New York."

"You've told me about her. I can picture her. Was she a goddess?"

"I'm thinking of emailing her, you know, just to find out how she is. What do you think?"

"You are aware that exes see random emails or texts as desperate reach-outs?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean, Harry, is that she's going to think you're sad and lonely."

"I don't care if she thinks that. Besides, wouldn't thinking that be kind of immature?"

"Trust me, the first thing she's going to think when she sees your email will be, 'What does this loser want?'"

"I do want something, I guess. I want to know things, like how she is and what she's been up to. Has she settled down?"

"And what makes you think you deserve to know all these things? From what I gather, you just dropped her in the middle of something good. I'm not judging you for that,

it's what you wanted at the time, but I think you hurt her. I know I'd be hurt if someone I loved and lived with just upped and left for no good reason."

"It was a long time ago. She must be over it by now." He fidgeted with a bottle cap he'd picked up off the floor.

"OK, I tell you what, send her your email. Ask her things about herself that you want to know. Let's see if she replies. I'd be surprised if she does. But hey, I love being wrong." He stubbed out his cigarette. "Also, if you were on social media, you'd know these things without having to ask. Who emails socially, anyway?"

He appreciated Percy's frankness. He also found it funny how, in that moment, Percy seemed like a character on a *Real Housewives*-type reality show. All the sass; all the ready answers. "Thanks. I'll let you know if she replies. Either way, it's not a big deal."

"Whatever you do, just don't start the email with 'Dear Justine', OK?"

Their laughter echoed in the English garden below.

“Dear Justine.” Fuck, he couldn’t think of another way to start the email. Percy had primed him. It was just after one, that would be, what, 7pm in New York? Maybe not the best time, but not the worst time either.

“I hope you are doing well and that this message finds you healthy and happy.” He thought for a second how he himself would receive an email that began this way but he pushed on regardless. “I know it’s been a while and I’ve been really bad at keeping in touch. For that I must apologise, but I hope you understand. I’ve been thinking about you and thought I’d send this just to find out how you’re doing(?)”

Enough to warrant a reply, right? Maybe not. The draft stared back at him from Gmail. How much more compelling should it be? He tossed the iPad on to the coffee table; it almost slid off the other end. He laughed an empty laugh. It was late and he knew better than to send emails on a waning beer buzz. He’d get back to it on the train to work. He got up to go to bed.

It hadn’t yet locked; its glow was irresistible. He grabbed the iPad from the edge of the table and tapped send on the draft. The option to unsend remained for a few seconds then disappeared. He tossed the iPad again, this time on to the sofa.

I sit on the bench and watch for that pretty bitch to leave her flat. A while later, I see her drive out. She looks out the windscreen like a scared little bird, moving her head left and right, left and right, with those goggles on her face.

My watch says 07:06 when I open my *Daily Sun*. I take the same one with me every day. The main story is about some bitch who's complaining that in her dreams she's being raped by 2Pac and some other men. She believes that one of her husband's other bitches put a spell on her. She complains about waking up feeling sore by her poes. "How can I be raped in my dreams?" she says. The date on the newspaper is 22 December.

I need something; it's not cigarettes or beer. I feel like even though I've been coming early to the park every day to watch this bitch, it's like everything is cloudy. I need power. I need to see straight. Last week I smoked something with KB that made things right. I asked him what it was but he just laughed at me. My vision and thoughts became clear. It was like magic. I need more cash.

My watch says 06:59. I set it exact using airtime to call the number where that bitch tells you the time in English and Afrikaans.

At 07:00, the skinny bitch opens the door. She doesn't have a gate like the other flats in the building. She doesn't lock when she closes the door. She just walks quickly down the passage and takes the stairs down.

At 07:03, I see the Merc pointing out of the garage. Less than a minute after, she's driving down the street towards the mall. There's probably a sensor because the gate closes fast after she pulls out. I roll up my *Daily Sun*. I must find another way into the building.

The building's main entrance is lit up and there's a security guard sitting behind a desk inside. There's a metal gate then a glass door, both strong. Next to the outside gate, there's a long keypad that's in a burglar-proof casing. After the guard's desk, there's a passage that leads to the lift and a staircase next to it. All I need is to get through the gate and glass door, and past that guard.

There must be maids going in and out during the day to do their madams' shopping. I can check how the guard deals with deliveries. I have time. I'll stay in the park for longer every day. I know that if there's a way to get in, I'll get in. Soon I'll have my magic and things will be clear again.

Even the digits at the corner of her screen looked tired. It was late enough to go home and avoid her mother, and any fuss that might be made over food. She had sufficiently killed off whatever appetite she might have had with strong coffee in the late afternoon. She thought about texting Mei but hesitated when she pictured her colleague in Mark's arms, dozing off in front of the TV watching *Mexico Life*, or whatever. Did they ever just chat, she wondered, or was the TV central to their cohabitation?

Mei might have complained about Mark, but at the end of the day, she went back to him. Why? He had something that Mei couldn't give herself. What? Comfort? Maybe. Strange how people clung to essential comforts in the face of other discomforts that could be conveniently de-rationalised as minor annoyances. Such was the hypocrisy of human needs.

She had two constants in life: her mother and work. She found a degree of comfort only in the latter. That she thought of her mother as a burden made her feel guilty and angry. The source of her guilt was obvious – an ingrained belief that one's ultimate service in life was to God and their parents. The source of her anger, though, was less clear. Was she angry at being driven to guilt by the position she'd been put in against her will? Maybe it was caused by something deeper that she couldn't quite grasp. Not yet, at least.

Although her job was an anchor of sorts, it was hardly fulfilling. It failed to alleviate the tensions gnawing inside her. And it seemed she was equipped to understand those tensions only as being inherently spiritual, brought on by the immense gravity of belief, which attracted and regulated every form of pleasure and pain, joy and disease.

What did it create, this gravitational force? Balance? More like chaos.

Maybe the source of her anger was her faith, which she had inherited rather than discovered. No room for open exploration there. She had been unable to fully accept this imposed limitation for most of her life, but she went with it anyway. Why?

She stepped into the frigid basement, whose overhead vents exposed it to the elements outside. She'd felt the chill, subtle as it was, creeping into the night air for the few days that had passed since the beginning of March. That creep would develop over the coming weeks into a gradual, less subtle winter stalk. By mid-April, autumn would be all but confirmed.

On St Andrews, she wondered about Bonga and where he might have been taking refuge for the night. Would he, like Mei, be in the arms of another? She imagined his bony arms wrapped around her own body. Would she find comfort in his embrace? Probably not. He wouldn't either, not in the arms of a woman.

A woman – was that all she was, stripped of affection, without an available warm body to affirm her mammalian desire? “A woman, alone!” her father had sneered before she went to New York. A woman alone: the most detestable thing he could have imagined. At the time, she felt liberated by the idea, but it was only because the rope he had placed around her neck was slack. It had since tightened. Now she was a woman completely alone.

As a rule, she didn't turn on any lights when nights limped on like this. It was a way of accepting the darkness and living with it; a way of learning to feel around and attune her eyes to make sense of the sleepless space she was forced to occupy. Also, it was a statement to the cruel, sleepless night, reminding it that it, too, would eventually be forced by the dawn into nonexistence.

The darkness obscured her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She looked spectral, but she could make out the jagged edges of her ruffled fringe against the pallor of her brow. The image gave her a sudden jolt as if she herself had become the kind of demonic tormentor she imagined would feature in a horror movie about some dead little girl with "unfinished business". What would hers be?

Maybe she'd be the unloved, untouched maid, returning from the dead to scare the shit out of the great-grandchildren of those who had been cruel to her. Or maybe she'd be the murdered spouse, avenging her death at the hands of her abusive husband and his new lover. How they had enjoyed stabbing her, simultaneously sensual and deeply calculated, as an act of their new-found love.

But her ghost had absorbed their fleeting, lustful pleasure and transformed it into a source of hateful power. She'd stare into their petrified eyes, poised to exact torturous revenge. The implement they had used to fatally violate her would be obsolete. They'd have no protection. She'd claw into those petrified eyes and pick them out, then dig into the eye sockets, feeling gratified as the warm fluid from their punctured eyeballs oozed over her fingers.

She'd reach further, fingering the raw flesh and sinew. She'd pick out bits of tissue. She'd scratch deeper until she hit bone. She'd scrape the bone and delight in her victims' screeches. She'd push further still, wanting to pierce through spongy grey matter, taking care to maximise her pleasure through their pain.

Would she simply disappear when her business was finished? If so, then didn't the ultimate revenge always belong to nature, the keeper of nonexistence?

She rubbed her eyes and sighed as she walked out of the bathroom. There was no use in trying to find fantastical versions of herself when she knew the truth, cold and hard as it was.

Instead of getting back into bed, she paced briskly beside it. She grabbed her phone off the bedside table and stared into the screen. No new messages. No new posts on any feed. Nothing.

She texted Nadia, who seemed always to be working nights. "Hi, can you chat?"

“Hey! I can chat. Surprisingly slow night.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Did you try take something?”

“That stuff you gave me made me feel like crap the next morning.”

Nadia planted a thinking face emoji.

“How’s it going with you?” she pushed on.

“I’m seeing someone. An orthopaedic surgeon.”

“A bone doctor?”

“A boner doctor, more like it. Hey, my parents were asking about you last weekend.

Why didn’t you come for lunch?”

“Big audit.”

“Let’s meet up soon, babe. I *need* to see you.”

It was uncommon for people to go out of their way to italicise words in texts. The gesture comforted her.

“I’m not sure when I’ll be able to, Nads, you know I hate going out on weekends.”

“I know, my angel, but just try. Hey, here’s a funny one ... one night some idiot came in with his index finger superglued to his eyeball.”

“Idiot. Did he survive?”

“Of course, with very little damage to the eye.”

“That’s a shame.”

“It’s my job to keep people alive!”

Now she planted an emoji – a shrug.

“Guess what? I’m not on the roster this weekend, so...”

“I’ll think about it. Will you bring your boyfriend?”

“Yaseen? Hardly my boyfriend. It’ll just be us.”

“Thanks for the chat.” An appropriate emoji seemed just out of reach.

“Take care. See you this weekend. GN.” Fingers crossed.

What drove her friend to care about others so much that she laboured away in the trauma unit of a public facility? She could’ve been in private practice earning, like, stacks more. What she admired about Nadia was that her care seemed somehow unsentimental and tactfully detached.

She felt calmer after the chat. As she slid under the covers, her satin night shorts rode up and gathered between her legs. She liked the sensation of the fabric rubbing up against her as she squirmed. It had been a long time since she touched herself, let alone since she'd been touched. Was still even able to get wet? Porn never did it. She consumed it merely "to see", like Erika in the book *The Piano Teacher* – her involvement only as a distant, dispassionate observer.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine something that might turn her on. An image of Helena flashed by. If there was anything to be glad about, it was Helena's assignment to her team. Working in close proximity had given her time to memorise the clerk's features.

An image of Helena began to appear, vague at first, but gradually becoming clearer against a black backdrop. She reached a hand out to Helena. The clerk moved in closer and guided the hand towards her buttocks. But when She gripped tighter, Helena pulled back. The distance between them began to increase, as if they were on trains going in opposite directions, slowly at first, then rapidly until Helena was completely out of sight and everything around her went back to black.

She opened her eyes and the darkness was still there, in every corner and between every object in her room. She sat up again and looked over to her phone, contemplating whether to pick it up. Frustrated, she ripped off the covers and stomped over to the bathroom, adjusting the satin shorts as she made her way.

"Is there a reason I received four invites to the same meeting you scheduled for tomorrow?"

David was annoyed, she could tell. The demands of the quarter had begun to take its toll on him too. He was still conventionally cute.

"There's no reason. You should have received only one invite."

"So which do I accept?"

"The most recent one, I guess."

"Has this been happening with the client?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Should I get hold of IT to investigate?"

"No. It'll take them forever to figure it out. Just make sure you hit send just once, OK?"

"OK."

It was possible that she had amended the agenda after the meeting request had been sent, but it seemed petty for David to confront her in the staff kitchen. It made her anxious. She stared at the stainless-steel urn and made out her contorted reflection on the curve beside the black plastic spigot. Her forehead was oblong and protruded as if her temples were being squeezed. Her nose appeared as a growth on one of her cheeks. Was that how David saw her, was she a walking grotesquery for him to regard with such disdain?

She placed her mug under the spigot and moved a hand closer to it.

"What's this all about?"

Had Mei been standing in the doorway the entire time? She had a way of creeping around unnoticed.

She stood at attention. "Oh, he's clearly letting the job get to him."

"Who? No, I mean, why were you hunched over the urn like that?"

"It's been a long day."

"You look super tired."

Mei flipped a pencil between the fingers of one hand and carried a ridiculously oversized mug by its handle in the other.

"Do I? I don't feel tired."

"What time have you been leaving here?"

“I’m not sure.” she shrugged. She couldn’t help but look down at Mei’s hand. She wanted to ask her to stop flipping the pencil, but she also wanted to watch the pencil as it went round and around and between Mei’s delicate yet poorly manicured fingers.

“Let’s do lunch one of these days, huh? It feels like we haven’t spoken in ages. Let’s catch up.”

Mei sounded more confident than usual. A good fuck was all people needed sometimes. Go Mei!

“Yeah, just message me.” She forced a playful smile and turned to face the urn again. She saw a reflection of herself in it, but this time her face was stretched along the broader contour of the stainless steel. What if she was now stuck inside the urn, desperately trying to get someone’s attention to get her out while the water burned through her flesh? She could feel her skin blistering. The fluorescent tubes overhead weren’t helpful. Their sick, pinkish light aided the urn in its mission to provide a broiled version her. Was this the hell that one had to endure for updating a meeting request? Why did everyone have to be notified about slight changes to the agenda? She should have followed protocol by drafting and editing it offline before sending. Her blood boiled and rose to her head. A needless error.

The vibe in her office had suddenly become cold and uninviting. The Vortex swirled and pulled her in. The only way to make amends was to continue hammering away. There was no shortage of work to get through. She’d work despite the so-called law of diminishing returns.

Eventually, without ceremony, the anxiety would dissipate and she’d be left with a sense of bewilderment and mild anguish – she was simply not good enough. She knew that all of this was part of a larger pattern, but she didn’t know how to change it. It probably had something to do with her anger, source not yet entirely known, and her insomnia.

All these interrelated things, she thought as she tapped her fingertips on her desk, looking down towards her phone, all tangled in a web of shit. Was there any way of unravelling it? She looked at her phone more intently, waiting for it to vibrate and the screen to light up. Eventually, she grabbed the phone off the desk and unlocked it. She opened her contacts and quickly scrolled to Helena’s number. As protocol would have it, all numbers of audit team members must be saved. Helena’s was one she didn’t hesitate to save.

“Hi. Azra here.” She typed quickly and hit send. Her heart pounded in her chest and she couldn’t focus on anything but the message screen. In less than a minute, she saw that Helena had read the message, was online and typing a response.

“Hi Azra. How are you doing? What have I done wrong?”

Helena followed her message with a nervous grin emoji. She was amused.

“I’m well, thanks. You haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just checking in to see how you are. We hardly get to speak.”

She scrolled through the seemingly endless pages of yellow-faced emoji but could not find an appropriate one. If she were to be entirely true to what she felt at the time, she figured the peach would probably be the most expressive. It took a while for the clerk to respond. She figured she must have been trying to word the message as carefully as she could, having to message her direct superior.

“Thanks for asking! This is my first audit, so I think I mentally prepared myself to expect the worst. Based on that, I think that I’m doing OK, surprisingly. But what really matters is what you think. Am I doing OK?”

“You’re doing more than OK. You’re an asset to the team.” She settled for a broad smiley emoji. Suddenly, she was giddy. Before Helena could reply, she sent another message. “Lunch tomorrow?”

“That’ll be great!”

She was encouraged by Helena’s immediate response. The clerk must have been young to be using exclamation marks so frequently.

An otherwise dreary week had suddenly come to life. She had never pursued someone before and had always wondered what was meant by the term “the thrill of the chase”. But now she began to feel it and she liked the feeling; it wasn’t at all as complicated as she had thought. She had become the central character in a nature documentary, a big cat hunting prey.

Were those other little clerk wimps, Helena’s peers, also fancying their chances? She had no reason to doubt that they were. She scoffed at the thought. Helena was hers.

I step to the security guard at the main entrance while he's taking a delivery. Before I can say anything, he makes with his hand like I must move along, like I'm a piece of shit. When I get back to the bench, I can see that he's following me with his eyes, like he knows I'm up to something.

I need to find another way to get into the building. I pick up my *Daily Sun* and walk around the park. It's not 09:00 yet but I'm already itching. I need to hit that shit again.

Last night, me and Plaz crossed Marlboro into Kelvin and went looking for houses to knock. After walking around for some time, we found one without electric fencing. We scaled the wall so easy, we laughed when we got into the garden. We walked up the driveway to the house and found a room on the side that only had a glass sliding door. It was unlocked. We went into the room quietly but no one was inside. It was just a TV room with a snooker table.

I passed the TV over the wall and Plaz carried it by himself to the corner and cracked the screen just there under the streetlight. He told me to take out the cracked pieces from the plastic frame and stamp on them until they became power, then to take the powder with my fingers and put it into the small plastic bags he gave me earlier.

He told me that that's how he got his name, Plazma, because he showed all those fucks on the Far East Bank how to crush the LCD screen into your smoke and the kind of high it gave.

I'm not so sure I believe Plaz because he mostly talks shit, but he wasn't wrong about the high. He crushed some dagga and mixed in a bit of white powder from a small bag he took out of his pocket. Before he licked the Rizla to close the zol, he sprinkled some of the LCD that I crushed on top. He said it was the LCD powder that gave it that extra kick.

We left Kelvin feeling good. I had like 15 small bags of crush in my pocket. Walking as if nothing could touch us, we crossed back over Marlboro. I bought loose cigarettes off some stupid petrol attendant at the Sasol and Plaz said he knew a yard we could find quarts at and chill.

I left the yard only this morning. Plaz was hanging over my shoulder. I had to lift his head and straighten it against the wall. I saw some white snot running down his nose and from the sides of his mouth. I wanted to slap him awake but stopped myself because then he'd want to hang around with me the whole day.

I round the corner and look across the park. I don't think the guard is still following me with his eyes or even thinking about me.

There's a maid walking out of another building. I say hello as she passes me on the pavement. Without even looking at me, she clicks her tongue and walks past. I turn and watch her big arse bouncing as she moves along.

I haven't had a fuck since the last time I saw Sindi, which was when I last saw Vilakazi. That poes still hasn't paid what he owes me. I reach for my phone and dial his number but the bitch on the other end tells me I have no airtime.

Person/spirit in the bush who sees Jerry M through a drug portal – I

I hear a baboon barking from across the valley. Ahead of me, there are thick vines and thornbushes, but it's pitch dark and I can see fuck all, so I can't be sure. I feel around for my headlamp – forehead, neck, pockets – but there's nothing, I must have dropped it somewhere. I see nagapie eyes glowing orange in the distance, blinking on and off, on and off, some higher than others. Always in pairs, big and round.

They're scary when you need to take a shit at night. Not because nagapies themselves are scary, but because it's fucked up, thinking that so many eyes are on you, so interested, while you're squatting there, vulnerable like, with your pants around your ankles, a lighter in one hand and bog roll in the other.

I look for a flat surface between what I imagine are thickets about 100m from the campsite, feeling around for thorns. I might as well be blind. I can't trust my eyes in any case, I've just come off a second changa hit and the ketamine floating around my system has clung to some residual DMT from the changa, suspending me in a drowsy trip.

Some neon geometric shapes linger in my peripheral vision, but straight ahead there's nothing, just darkness. Finally, I find what seems like a good place, relatively flat and seemingly unobscured. I pull my shorts down, feeling confident.

I'm wide-eyed. All I see are the lingering neon shapes every now and then, and those nagapie eyes. I squat down low and push. The vein on the side of my head starts throbbing. I haven't shat in a while so I have great expectations for this one.

I bear down and push harder. Still nothing.

Maybe some finesse is what's needed; maybe I need to coax rather than force. I relax my body. The throbbing on the side of my head settles. I ease my frown and my vision merges with the darkness. There's nothing to do but surrender to the darkness, I tell myself.

After some time, I see the outline of a man in the distance, tall and dark, very thin. He's walking slowly towards me. He doesn't seem threatening so I remain still and watch as he approaches, only half aware that I'm still sitting bare arsed in the middle of this fucking bush. So it's him, this tall and dark man, very thin, and I; and, of course, the nagapies, whose flying saucer eyes still make for a menacing backdrop.

I feel so relaxed now, squatting here, it would be a pain to do anything else. Besides, if I move, I could frighten the man and who knows what he might do. He approaches at a

steady pace, neither too eagerly nor languidly, ghostlike. If it wasn't for the ketamine, I would've been scared shitless.

I am shitless, come to think of it. At least I'm not scared. At least. I wait, pants still around ankles and sphincter wholly exposed to the terrain and whatever might be growing or crawling on it or burrowing inside it. (Imagine some creature nibbling on your nought, literally.) That might be a more excruciating prospect than the supposed wrath of the man approaching.

I notice some details as he draws nearer. I see a floppy hat and white shoes. He doesn't at all seem like he belongs in the bush or lives anywhere near it. I blink a few times to make sure, but there he is, in jeans and a T-shirt, All Stars and that floppy hat.

Could this be? I very much doubt it. But could it be?

"There are just two of us in the group who went to the same varsity."

Helena was eager to talk, and she was more than willing to let her.

"And I don't really even know her; I just recognise her from classes."

"What do you think of Joburg?"

"It's a lot different than what I'd imagined. Before my internship, I'd been here once before as a child."

"What did you come here for?"

"We visited my gran before she died."

"So how is it different? Better than you expected or worse?"

"Better."

"Why?"

"Somehow, in spite of what you hear, people are actually friendlier here."

She scanned the clerk: fine, jet-black hair; oval eyes set deeply in magnificent cheekbones; a button nose that held it all together.

"But because of our work schedule, it's been pretty difficult taking them up on anything.

"You know, since our work hours are more or less the same, we can hang out."

"I might take you up on that."

Was that a flirty glint in the clerk's eye?

She tapped her fingertips on her desk and looked towards her phone. How the comforts of her repetitive existence had somehow become trivial in light of this new, refreshing pursuit.

“Hey! How are you?”

She’d almost forgotten her desperate chat with Nadia a few nights ago.

“Hi. All good, thanks.”

“So, this weekend? (Don’t flake, it’s my only off weekend for a while!)”

“Still on. What do you have in mind?”

“Dinner Saturday night?”

“OK. You pick the place.”

‘Yay! OK, I’ll think about it and text you.’

Suddenly, she felt like she was at the centre of someplace, if not the entire world. She had plans and, more than that, a promising prospect. Should she disclose her intentions with Helena to Nadia? After all, it’s what girlfriends did on “girls’ nights out”, except she wouldn’t be drinking, as girls supposedly do – excessively – on their nights out.

Was not drinking yet another choice that was made on her behalf? Apart from her secondment in New York all those years back – something she had to defy her father to do – how much of her life was lived by her own choices? What made her start to wonder about these things? Until now, she had been firm in her faith and the stability it offered.

She didn't care much for trying new places, she thought, as she looked at herself pouting in the mirror. Discovering new restaurants wasn't about reading new listings or good reviews. It was about word of mouth and seeing and being seen. She smacked on her lipstick.

How did Nadia find the time to for socialising and chatter while working in an emergency room? She wasn't sure what crowd Nadia was part of. If she and Nadia had met now, they would not be friends. But people found ways to socialise despite their work schedules – "time-efficient socialising". She recalled the blurb of the article in *Cosmo*, or whatever, offering "tips for working around your busy work schedule". The article itself made socialising out to be more of a basic need – a feed – than anything else.

A car guard in a raggedy neon reflector vest made some odd hand gestures she didn't understand. Better to stick to the rear park assist and follow the lines on screen. She was lucky to have found a spot on Corlett so close to the restaurant. She'd been there before, probably with Nadia (who else?). It was tacky in a way that only Greek restaurants could get away with: drawn-on archways, murals of village scenes covering sandblasted walls, all bright blue and white with grey squiggles for seagulls.

Nadia was already there and waiting. She waved her over.

"Wow, I've been transported back to Kythira," she said as she sat down.

"That holiday was the best, right? Greek boys, yum."

"How long ago was that?"

"It seems like yesterday." Nadia signalled for the waiter, stretching her neck to make eye contact with the dark, lanky man who looked like he could have been from East Africa.

"Hi there! Hey!" she called out. He glided over.

"Sparkling water and lemon slices, please." she swivelled back. "How've you been, my darling Azra? You look more beautiful every time I see you!"

"Thanks."

"That's an interesting looking man, huh?"

"I suppose." She wanted to be chattier but she was nervous. She picked up a menu and flicked through it nonchalantly, avoiding eye contact with Nadia.

"Hey, look here, let me see you properly."

Was this Nadia's bedside manner, she wondered. If so, it seemed convincing enough, if only in the moment.

"Sorry, yeah." She looked into Nadia's eyes for the first time in ages. They were kind and caring and gentle. "It's good to see you, Nads. I think of you often and I sometimes worry."

"About what?"

"You in that crazy hospital, tending to gunshot and stab wounds. Dealing with criminals."

"Oh, come on, Az. We have a system; it's not just all chaos."

"I've been there with you, it was insane."

"I'd probably also think your work is insane, you know."

The waiter rematerialised with their water as their laughter subsided. He had a smooth demeanour. "My name is Nixon and I'll be your waiter for the evening," he said calmly.

She left it to Nadia to do all the interacting. She was enjoying it in any case.

"It's great to meet you, Nixon. I'm Nadia and this is –"

She shot Nadia a hesitant look, which, her friend was luckily able to read in time.

"This is my lovely friend."

"Pleasure to meet you, ladies. Now can I interest you in some of our delicious meze?"

Nadia was spellbound by Nixon, checking him out as if he were a famous actor or model. She pointed to a few things on the menu, Nixon nodded the kind of nod one does when memorising something, then slinked off again.

"It's always you and waiters. What's that about?" she was starting to feel more relaxed than when she'd arrived.

"I just appreciate a good-looking man. So, tell me, would you mind if I ordered some wine?"

"If that will make spending time with me more bearable."

"You crack me up! I thought it polite to ask first."

"That's nice of you, but your body, your choice."

"Thanks babe. Now let's see."

Nadia picked up the wine list.

"Whites, whites, there we go."

"I suppose everyone needs something to destress."

"Exactly! That's why I worry about you. How do you destress?"

"I haven't changed much since high school: pyjamas, ordering in, crappy romance novels."

"And your mum, what does she say about all of this?"

Nadia giggled like she did when they were girls.

"Same as always. That I must eat."

"Your mum is a one hell of a feeder, babe. It must take some real discipline for you to stay so skinny."

"You understand my plight." She appreciated the irony.

"But she's so sweet. So devoted." She wasn't like all the other mums, mine included, so driven by their so-called professions.

"I wish she had been, maybe she wouldn't have got fucked over so badly by a stupid man."

"I guess. But look at my parents, they're nearing retirement and have no clue how to live with each other. What will they do when they stop working and have to actually be together? What will I do? God, I really need to get out of their house before they retire!"

"All you need is to find the right man to marry." She was unashamed in her mockery.

"But it's just so easy staying there. I literally worry about nothing. Most of my colleagues have to juggle work, kids, housekeeping and all that shit."

Nixon arrived with a small bowl of hummus, sliced pita, dolmades and Kalamata olives.

"Nixon, tell me, do you sell this one by the glass?"

Rather point than pronounce a fancy sounding wine, she figured.

"By the glass?"

He'd probably sensed that Nadia had been checking him out. He now seemed cocky with his newly acquired leverage. "It would be more fun if you just ordered the bottle."

"Ah, you see," Nadia pointed casually at her, "for health reasons, my lovely friend over here doesn't drink."

The waiter turned slowly to her, delaying a break in eye contact with Nadia. "But I heard that wine is proven to have health benefits."

“I’m good with water, thanks.” She snorted at his attempt to be charming.

He pouted and turned back to Nadia. “I’ll bring your glass of wine right away, ma’am.”

“Don’t you love a man who calls you ma’am?”

“Actually, I don’t. I need to ask you something.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“I’m interested in pursuing something with a work colleague.”

Nixon returned to the table with Nadia’s wine. Typical of a man, interrupting at the most crucial moment. Nadia was no longer interested in Nixon. She grabbed the wine and waved him away.

“Wow, that’s amazing! What’s he like?” she plopped a few ice cubes ice into the sav blanc.

“It’s she, and she’s an intern.”

She’d never seen Nadia’s eyes so wide before. “Shit, Nads, it looks like your eyes are about to pop out of their sockets. Should I rush *you* to the emergency room?”

“I never knew you were —”

“What? Interested in seeing people?”

“No, sorry, that’s not what I meant.” She reached for Azra’s hand across the table. “I think it’s great.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I want to see you happy. It’s all I really care about.”

“OK.” Suddenly, she felt pathetic.

“I think if you have the right intentions, it’s definitely worth pursuing. But just careful, you know, ethically.”

“That’s what I need your opinion on.”

“Thanks for reaching out. I know it must be difficult. I know how much your faith means to you and I can’t imagine what must be going on inside here.” She tapped Azra’s temple lightly.

“To be honest, I’ve been questioning my faith a lot lately. Is it really mine, Nads?”

“I had a similar internal debate during med school, you know, when I really got to see how nature takes its course. Maybe that’s not such a good way of putting it.”

“I think I know what you mean. But it’s not so much about God as it is about all the things that are required to be done around Him, in His name. Are they necessary?”

“I’m not sure, it’s a tough question, but one that must be asked if you’re to grow.”

"It just seems late to be learning something so fundamental. You know how much I dislike the initial stages of learning."

"I know, but it'll be worth it. You'll see. So, tell me, what's this intern like?"

Nixon returned to probe whether they'd made any more food choices. She wished he'd go away and not come back. Nadia blurted out some things as if she knew the menu by heart. The waiter nodded, eventually – finally – leaving the table with a bow. She admired how her friend could simply flip the hot/cold switch with people.

"I see things have become more professional between you and the waiter."

"Oh my God! Oops, I hope he takes it professionally." She was nearing the end of her second or third glass. "I think I might have more wine tonight. Can you drop me off at home later?"

"You should have ordered the bottle and spared us the waiter's charm."

"You!" she laughed. "How do you not crack everyone up at work?"

"It's our little secret."

"You're quite the secret monger, aren't you? But you still haven't told me, what's she like? Does she have a name?"

"Helena. Hey, if I drop you off at home, what about your car?"

"I didn't drive here, hun. Helena, ey? That's a pretty name. Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

She scanned the room and all she saw were others like Nadia, seeping into the night via their liquor. She was mildly disgusted but also intrigued.

"Have you ever before?"

"Ever what?"

"Been with a girl?"

"Not really."

"What does that mean?"

"I might have kissed Sally Briar in matric, or the year before."

"The captain of the water polo team! Wow."

"Yep, Sally Briar."

"She's some top exec in London now. Gawd, high school people."

Nadia's voice trailed off and mingled with the collective chatter, which had become noticeably louder as the evening progressed.

“And what about you and the bone doctor?”

“Yaseen?”

“Yeah. What’s he like?”

“He’s a ‘modern guy’, as your mum would probably say. He’s actually divorced and lives alone.”

“So you’ve already fucked him?”

“Like I said, boner doctor.”

“Wow!” She reached for a piece of crispy eggplant from one of the platters and dipped it in some tarama. Some of the pink glob ran off. Disgusting. She placed the dunked eggplant on a side plate and covered it with a napkin. She noticed Nadia watching her handling the food with suspicion.

“And you, doll? When was the last time?”

“That concierge in Istanbul. It was awful.”

“You and your randoms. I hope Helena is less awful.”

“That’s if anything even happens.”

“At least she won’t be a random, right?”

By the time they finished dinner, Nadia had drunk more glasses of wine than would fill a bottle and slurred her words sloppily. In general, she held herself together well enough, but her condition was still off-putting.

“When did you get the car?”

“You’ve seen it before.”

“Real sexy. I’m still driving my dad’s old Scooby-Doo.”

Nadia let out a roar of laughter and drew down the window. “Scooby Dooby Doooo.”

“I always hated that car. Your dad was such an outdoorsy wanker.”

“Come on, lighten up babe.”

“What are your parents going to say about you coming home drunk?”

“I’m far from drunk. Besides, I’m in the cottage now. My own little house. You wanna come in for a late-night lick?”

Nadia made a V with her index and middle fingers and stuck her tongue through.

“You’re disgusting.” She shoved Nadia into her seat. “Put on your seat belt.”

“Oh, excuse me.”

“Seat belt, Nads! Jeez!”

“Yes ma’am.”

After dropping off Nadia, she drove slowly down the street towards the lake. It might have been Akeel, maybe someone else, who had mentioned that the area around the lake close to the restaurant and public toilets was a cruising spot. Men always had their things. Was there a particular cruising spot for her? Was cruising still a thing?

She dimmed her headlights and drove slowly around the lake, trying to make out any activity around built structures and bushes. All she saw were some geese huddled together and a few rowboats moored to the strong metallic frames.

She rounded the bend furthest from the lake, which curved around the sports fields. The road ahead was dark. Massive walls topped with electric fencing barricaded large apartment complexes from the area and each other. She took the slipway at the end of the fields, just before the Jan Smuts intersection. Crawling over the speed bumps, she noticed that this road was even darker than the one she’d come off, and was lined with tall,

ominous-looking trees. She pulled up at the forested area leading up to the tennis courts and turned off the car.

She thought of the song, "The Trees", by Pulp. She closed her eyes and pictured Jarvis Cocker, the only man she ever genuinely found "sexy", singing and dancing on stage. She reached for the small buckle of her belt and undid the clasp. Slowly, she slid her fingers down her slacks and felt the soft flesh of her recently waxed pubic area.

Suddenly, Jarvis disappeared and Helena appeared. This time, Helena stood with her back to her, looking seductively at her over a shoulder, her neckline elegantly extended. But again, as she approached Helena, she began to move away, slowly at first, then rapidly until she disappeared.

She couldn't even maintain a fantasy. She redid her belt then reached for her phone and pulled up the song. After the short violin intro, Jarvis began to sing:

"I took an air rifle, shot a magpie to the ground and it died without a sound/Your skin so pale against the fallen autumn leaves and no one saw us but the trees."

She sneaked into her apartment, as if she'd been the one drinking, and turned on the floor lamp closest to the door.

"God, you scared me." She found her mother sitting at the dining table, rifling through a string of prayer beads.

"Sorry, dear. I can't sleep."

"Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Have you eaten?"

"I had dinner with Nadia."

"How is my Nadia?"

Her mother smiled warmly, but beneath the smile she sensed something uneasy.

"Are you OK, mum?"

"I'm fine, love, I just can't sleep."

The stale air carried a foreboding energy. "May I open a window? It's a bit stuffy in here."

"Sure."

She walked around the table and leaned over the sideboard. On it, she noticed some framed pictures of she and Akeel when they were young. She glanced at the pictures as she adjusted the blinds and unlatched the window.

"Have you spoken to Akeel recently?"

"I haven't. Is he OK?"

"I forgot to tell you, he called to ask about whether you had that box of our childhood photos."

"I do."

"Mum, I think you need to get a phone with WhatsApp."

"Please, don't start with this again. It's late. I'm too old to learn these new gadgets."

"OK, but don't you want to be able to communicate with your son?" her frustration began to bubble to the surface.

"He'll get hold of me in time, you know him. I'm not worried. He's probably very busy."

The trust that her mother was so easily willing to give her brother was infuriating. How had he earned it?

“Yeah? Well, I wish he’d show some sign of caring.”

“He does care, Azra, in his own way. Like how you have your own way of caring.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Of course I do, he’s my only son.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know when you might see him again?”

“I’ll see him again sometime soon. Are you OK? Is something the matter?”

“I’m going to pray then go to bed. Mum...” She searched her mother’s face for something, she didn’t quite know what. Maybe something like comfort or reassurance, but all she saw was dependence and hopeless resignation.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” She stood up. “Should I leave the light on?”

“Please switch it off.”

Her mother stared dead ahead with a dull expression on her wrinkled face. She felt a heaviness and grave uncertainty in her mother’s presence.

She rolled out her prayer mat and stepped on to it. Doubt entered her mind. Why was she so driven to do this? Did she really feel some deep connection to God, or was it mere habit? Although she was aware that a deep connection could be cultivated only through repetition, she felt that the answer to her question was somewhere in between. How frustrating.

She raised her hands and went through the motions. Standing and reciting scripture from memory in a language she didn’t understand, then bending over, with hands on knees, standing up briefly then falling to the ground in full prostration – complete submission to what she’d been taught was an unfathomable being.

What would happen if she simply stopped praying, if she drank alcohol, if she slept with a woman? Nadia seemed better off for not following religion. Why had she remained so steadfast over the years in any case? Wasn’t it this faith that had led her mother to a life of dependence?

She finished the prayer – head to right shoulder, then to left and back to centre. She cupped her hands over her face. Was Nadia really happy, though, anaesthetising herself with alcohol and sleeping around?

Person/spirit in the bush who sees Jerry M through a drug portal – II

I pull up my pants and resign myself to being constipated for the rest of the night, and possibly most of tomorrow. I can still see nagapie eyes but they don't bother me as much any more. I'm calm. The tall, dark man in city clothes seems to have come as close as he can. I'm not sure what he wants or if he's even real, but he's just standing there, in a state of suspended animation, as it were.

How should I proceed? If he's a mere apparition, I should be able to walk straight through him, but if he's solid, I'd have to walk around, and that might be awkward. I reach out to touch him, but he steps back quickly and looks at me menacingly. It seems he's now standing on guard, ready to pounce. He seems unarmed. "Hullo, can you hear me?" He says nothing and looks ahead blankly, into the middle distance.

I keep seeing this poes in the bush. Every time I take hit, it's there. It could be a bitch, I'm not sure. I try waving it away but it does not move. I've never seen this thing before. It might be a ghost, or, like, an ancestor. Maybe it can help me to get more money. I square up with the ghost. It's saying something but I can't make out what.

I take another hit, then I hear Plaz laughing, then crying. That fool has too much emotions, too sensitive. I turn around and look at him lying on the floor and there's snot and gob coming out the sides of his mouth and nose. He's holding his knees to his chest and saying something like "sorry mama", but then he starts laughing.

I look ahead again to the ghost standing in the bush. It's now waving. "Haai, man!" I shout out, but it can't hear, it just stares blankly back at me, holding what looks like a roll of shit paper. I'm confused and irritated with Plaz's crying and laughing. I'm leaving. If I start walking now, I'll make it to the park before the sun comes up.

"Hey where're you going? Masekind!"

I break out laughing and can't control it. "Masekind" I say to myself, laughing harder each time I say it. I walk over to Plaz and kick him. "Fokof, jou naai." I kick him again, harder this time. I hear the echo of my tongue clicking. That doos just rolls around the floor, crying and laughing.

It's dead quiet outside except for some dogs barking. In the distance, I hear an ambulance siren. I walk towards the sound. The thought of being on the highway excites me, so I walk as quickly as I can down Marlboro. I stop at the Shell and buy two loosies from one of the workers. He looks at me like I'm crazy. I take my cigarettes and move along. I find a tap close to the toilets and drink a few gulps. The worker scolds me for opening the tap but I'm long gone by the time he can do anything. Poes.

Every now and then a Metro cop comes speeding down. They always have the fastest cars – Beemers, GTIs, STs. How fast would I be going? 180? 200? I'd need a nice car to hit that speed. A hatchback like the Merc that pretty bitch drives.

Today I'll get into the building. Yesterday I saw a way close to the back entrance, hidden from the sight of that Zimbabwe fuck who stands guard. I must get there when it's dark. When I'm there, I'll climb up the gutter pipe along the wall. When I reach the top, I'll hold the gutter with one hand and hold on to the corner of the garage roof, then step over the electric fence and on to the ledge. When I'm on the ledge, I'll balance and turn around, on to the wall and jump. I'll have to be quiet. Ja. When I get over the wall, I'll hide somewhere in the parking lot and check my watch until it turns to 07:00. I know which car to look out for and which flat to go to. I know what I need to do.

Another car speeds by. It looks mean, like the car on that show *Knight Rider* they used to play on SABC 2. Today is my day, I can feel it. I saw that ghost again. Even though it gave me strength, I hope it was for the last time. By the time the sun goes down again, I will be a rich man. Fuck Vilakazi, I don't need him. I'll find my own way around. I pick up speed, feeling good about the score I'll make today.

I pass the Corlett offramp and head towards Atholl. I'm feeling fresh and enlightened, like Vilakazi's university bitches would say.

Fuck, I missed the pretty bitch driving out. My watch says 08:03. I stand up and walk quietly around the big dustbin I fell asleep behind. I walk softly in the shadows. Lucky for me, the garage isn't bright. I can hear the Zimbabwe fuck talking loudly to some bitch on the street.

Not far ahead, there's a doorway with sunlight pushing through. Past the light, I see green. It looks like the only way out. I walk with my back to the wall, passing the fronts of parked cars, listening for any movement. I hear some footsteps and duck under the bumper of a 3-Series. I can smell that it's still new. The people living here have too much money. I want some of it. It's only fair to take it from them if they won't share.

The footsteps stop and I hear doors unlocking, then a door opening and closing. The car starts up. It sounds like it's just a few metres from me but I can't be sure. I get a rush when I inhale the exhaust fumes. I think about the session last night with Plaz. When I have enough money, I won't need to hang around that poes just to get a fix. I stand up again and

look over the bonnet to see if everything is clear. There's light coming into the garage but it fades when the car leaves and the big door closes.

I look around and everything seems still except for that Zimbabwe fuck who's now talking on his phone in their language. I have just a few more cars to move between until I get to the entrance. I push on slowly with my palms flat against the wall and my arse scraping against it.

Finally, I get to the entrance and it's not as bright as it was from further away. I look ahead and see no one, then stick my neck out and turn my head around the doorframe. I see a pathway with lawn on either side, leading to a passage. I snap my head back in and take a deep breath and look around me. Still no one. I look again and see just before the passage there's a small hallway with lifts, and only at the end of the passage there's the stairs.

I'm going to have to take the stairs not to be noticed, but it's a long walk from here.

In the passage, I duck and walk below the short wall while listening for anyone on the ground floor coming out of their flat. I hear nothing from the guard's entrance, so I chance it across the pathway.

The air is sweet. I hear the pool pump not far away and look to the building. Everything is still. I wonder how many people are at home in their flats.

The sweat that built up on my forehead is now running down the sides of my head. Only now I think about whether there are cameras in the building. My heart is racing. If there were cameras, they would have already spotted me; someone would be outside looking for me. My mouth is dry.

At the end of the passage, I crouch in the small corner between the half-wall and a pillar. I shoot up with my back against the pillar and see the stairs directly across. I'm almost there. I taste the sweetness in the air. I leap over to the stairs, climb the first flight and hide in the corner of the landing. I take the front of my T-shirt and wipe the sweat off my face. I climb the next few flights of stairs quickly, taking two, sometimes three steps at a time until I get to the third floor.

Crouching down again, I close my eyes and can see that pretty bitch walking here every morning. I wonder if she'll picture me when she walks here when she comes home. What will she see? I move along like I did on the ground floor. I count one front door, then another. I hope there's no padlock on the inside of her door. Slowly, I hold my hand out to

the handle and feel the cold of the metal in my palm. I press it down and push against the door lightly. It opens.

Person/spirit in the bush who sees Jerry M through a drug portal – III

The howl of some creature reverberates through the ridge. I wonder if it's in pain, but it sounds as natural as anything out here. Could it be a dog? Improbable. But based on what I saw – was it hours ago? Days? A whole month? – I can't be certain what's probable and what's not.

I walk slowly, carefully, trying to feel my way over the terrain, which is intermittently flat and rugged. I've already stubbed my toe on a rock and scratched the shit out of both my ankles on vines and thornbushes. There I go again, talking about shit. It seems it's all I can think of in this state. Was the man I saw earlier, the city fellow, a ghost? An omen? Of what? Constipation? Is there a god of relief in any mythology? If there were, I would pray to it. I would ask it for deliverance. A sweat builds on my brow as I inch forward in the darkness.

Suddenly, my midriff collides with a thick, low-hanging branch and I'm winded. I try take in the thick, damp air. Trying to regulate my breath, I picture myself surrounded by fern trees. I open my eyes and mingled in the darkness I see the tall, thin city man again.

He's opening a door, slowly, and entering an apartment. It's light and airy, very neat, and has parquet floors.

I regain my breath and squat down low. I feel something happening in my bowels, some movement. I don't want to interrupt it so I stay squatting with my pants on.

I take a few steps into the flat. There's an old bitch just standing there, just looking at me. Her lips are trembling. She tries to say something but I don't hear. Before I know it, she leaps at me. I grab her by the throat. She's hitting me on my sides but I can't feel anything. I squeeze her throat harder and press my other hand on her mouth. The windpipe is firmly in my grip and I squeeze again. I move in closer. I squeeze again, harder this time, and look into her eyes. She takes her last breath. I feel powerful.

I release my grip and she falls to the floor. I step over the dead old bitch and walk down the hallway. I go down the passage and enter a room. I find a duffel bag in the cupboard and start filling it with things.

Person/spirit in the bush who sees Jerry M through a drug portal – IV

I shoot up, pull down my pants and squat again. Finally, release. A soft, slimy turd slips out, then another. I've never felt so grateful in my life. I lost the bog roll a while back. What will I wipe with? I don't care. I revel in the great relief washing over me. For an instant, I leave my body and see myself, sitting in the darkness, taking a shit with a large, gratified grin on my face. Even the city fellow has disappeared.

I scrape some dirt off the ground and use it to wipe my arse. I stop when I feel something scratching against the sphincter. I stretch the backside of my jocks to wipe off any excess dirt.

The apparition appears again, standing tall and proud. He, too, has a grin on his face. There's a pile in front of him but I can't make out what it is. I say a prayer of thanks to him, my god of release, my omen of shit. "Thank you, sweet, sweet shit god!" I proclaim, unable to think of anything else to say in praise. When I can, I'll write down something more evocative, something that will honour him adequately.

I walk slowly, triumphantly. Looking up and ahead, I see the first rays of daylight settling on the horizon. If my eyes had played tricks on me, my bowels had surely come to the rescue. As for my mind, it's left in the awkward twilight of lucidity and insanity. Is that not the ideal condition in which to receive revelation? Are prophecies not justifications for this exact state of mind?

I think for a line of praise to my god but, again, I can't find one. Damn the deity who cannot inspire praise and seeks it only in momentary, perfunctory actions! How selfish, how short-sighted! But how benevolent, nonetheless, to allow relief in such trying circumstances.

I hear the shrill cry of a young cormorant. Discontent with hunger, most probably. Perhaps someday it, too, will be visited by the god, my god, of release.

“Dearest Haroun,” began the reply from Justine. He was surprised to have received one, let alone to find it in his inbox first thing the next morning.

“It’s so great to hear from you! This is so strange, but I was actually going to get in touch with you. I’ve had an offer from our emerging markets division to work in Johannesburg. Can you believe it? I’m seriously considering taking it up. I’d love to hear your thoughts (sooner rather than later, I hope). XoXo.”

The soft thrill he got from reading Justine’s email coincided with the chiming chorus of the song playing through the Celestions. “Floating on a Highway” by Nat Vazer, who seemed playful and charming, if her Spotify profile picture was anything to go by.

Suddenly, somehow, things were working in his favour. It was going to be a good day even though he was hungover and feeling stupid.

A dense odour had settled in the packed train car, a mixture of sweat and cigarettes, with hints of various shampoos, soaps, colognes and perfumes. Scent Neapolitan. Because it took him so long to get ready for work, he had to stand from Rosebank. He yanked at his iPad, which was wedged tightly between the front of his thigh and the buttocks of a large man standing in front of him. He resisted the urge to read Justine’s email again, leaving it as a treat for when he settled into his desk.

He had been meaning to call his sister for a while. “Call Zahra.” He set the reminder and wondered if he’d end up doing it.

Some seats freed up after Sandton. He pounced on one. The large man shot him an unimpressed glance. The girl sitting next to him was talking very loudly on her phone about someone whom she thought was “sexy but not beautiful”.

“You know, if it’s not in your genes, it’s just not. But if it works for her Insta, hey.”

He turned to look at the girl, who rolled her eyes as she spoke with a morning crackle in her voice. Probably 20, maybe 21, light brown hair still damp from the shower. He wondered at which stop she’d get off, pinning her as a student who lived in Joburg but studied at UP. Commerce?

She got off at Midrand.

He started his reply as soon as he sat down at his desk. "Hey Justine!" Too eager? He tried to get his breathing in line with the blinking cursor but failed. Before he knew it, he was out of breath. The phone offered a better distraction. He scrolled through WhatsApp, stopped at his chat with Meg and tapped on her profile picture. For a moment he got lost somewhere between those blue eyes and his recollection of their last tryst. Work boners were the worst.

It was best to leave Meg and continue scrolling. He stopped at the chat with his sister and impulsively tapped the little phone. As usual, she took forever to answer.

"Hey."

"Zahra! I've been meaning to call you for ages. Are you busy?"

"I'm always busy. What's up?"

"Not much. Just wanted to say hi."

"OK. Hi. Why didn't you come for lunch at mum and dad's last weekend? We could've chatted then."

"When are you going for lunch again?"

"Not sure. You're going to have to wait a bit more to pull your two-birds tactic."

"What can I say, I'm a busy man."

"You work in government, Haroun. You're never busy."

"That's a stereotype."

"If you say so. Look, I have a meeting I should already be in."

"Nice to hear your voice."

"Sure. Oh, get hold of your nephew, he says he hasn't seen you on PlayStation for a while, whatever that means."

"Before you go. I have a favour: Could you send me a number of someone you know who deals with adoption?" He bit his lip.

"Okay. Sure. I'll have a look and get back to you. Is that all?"

"Yes, thanks."

"OK. Later."

He immediately doubted whether it was a good idea to have brought up adoption with Zahra. She'd soon be yapping away on the phone with their mother. So what? Even if they did find out, his parents would be supportive, as always. There was nothing to be

secretive about. He inhaled and exhaled, feeling something only midway between tension and relief.

“Hey Justine!” The draft stared back at him. Keep it brief, he told himself as he continued. “That’s wonderful and surprising news! Was thinking maybe a call would be better to chat about this? Let me know (but remember the time difference!) – H”

He didn’t yet know what to make of Justine’s news, but couldn’t help thinking that, apart from the job, she might have been interested in rekindling their old flame. But so much had happened since then. So much and nothing. He sighed, and with the kind of mild, semi-hungover abandon he’d woken up with, clicked send.

“Hi, Haroun! You good, mate?”

He waved back at Lesiba, hoping his colleague wouldn’t want to engage further.

“Les! All good, thanks. You?”

Lesiba edged closer into his office. He was impeccably dressed, as usual, but his pants were always slightly too tight. Their division’s open-door policy was rigid in its demands for inclusion.

“The boss circulated your guys’ post-Budget report. Some interesting points.” Lesiba nodded as he spoke. His large, thick-rimmed glasses slid down the bridge of his nose.

“Oh yeah? Well, it’s an interesting Budget. And the press seems to think so too.” He raised his hard copy of the *Business Day*, delivered each morning without fail before he arrived. It was more of a prop on his desk than anything.

“Front-page news.”

“Treasury grilled on ‘excessive’ bailouts”, read the headline, which was hopelessly general and not particularly gripping.

Lesiba slid his glasses back up and took a sip from his mug on which was written in a loud orange font “I’m a vegan...”, then, in a smaller cursive typeface below “... in case I haven’t yet told you today”.

“Hey, cool mug!”

“It’s not mine. I took it off the drying rack.”

Lesiba raised his eyebrows and dropped his upper lip, then laughed in a way that was meant to include him in the joke. Would he thus become an accomplice in one of the most serious of all the trivial office offences?

“Oh shit, you better return that mug when you’re done. You know how people around here get about their tableware.”

“I know!” he laughed again, louder this time. “Anyway, mate, I’ve got to get back to work. Let’s do lunch sometime, OK?”

“Sure. You just let me know when.”

“I have this sit-in with Budget Office for the rest of the week. So early next week, maybe?”

“Yeah, next week.” He waved Lesiba off. “Don’t forget the mug.”

As expected, the search term “Adoption agencies Johannesburg” rendered “About 1 500 000 results”. He would have to wait for Zahra to get back to him. This was the sort of thing that worked properly only through referrals. He clicked the top search result anyway and was led to a page detailing “the adoption process”. After completing just six steps, according to the website, “the baby/child is officially legally adopted and has the same rights as if he/she was the biological baby/child of the adoptive parents”.

He scrolled further. A short section on “Who is allowed to adopt?” indicated, at the very end, that “a single person can adopt a child”. He bookmarked the page with genuine excitement.

He looked over his laptop screen and through the doorway. There was a certain placidity about the office. Every minute or two, someone would walk by, mainly in the direction of the kitchen.

His next assignment was on what they called IPPs – independent power producers – and their scalability in a market dominated by “dirty energy”. Of course, that was not a term he’d use in the paper since government itself oversaw one of the biggest culprits in the production thereof.

He opened a new document in Word. Perhaps primed by his brief chat with Lesiba and the newspaper article, he typed “Budget” in bold and highlighted it in green. He often thought of how he’d respond if someone asked him about his “process”.

“I begin by opening a blank document and typing seemingly unrelated words,” is how he might reply if he were smooth, wanting to sound creative and interesting. Maybe it’s how he would have replied 10 years ago, when he felt he still had something to prove in that regard.

But no one asked him back then, or even before that when he played in the band. He doubted he'd ever be asked. The few interviews he was involved in with the band were completely hijacked by Dane, who was always desperate for attention. "Yeah, you know, I have the songs and the rhythms down and the guys basically play along to that and fill in the gaps," he recalled the lead singer once saying to some blogger, which had irked him.

The blogger had nodded with keen interest, the way such idiots do. The memory made him cringe. How goddamn interesting everything was when he was young. How everyone around him constantly did such interesting things.

The stationary cursor in his Word document blinked gently, patiently, against the blank screen. The single word on the page drew attention to itself. It seemed lonely and cornered between a hard, invisible margin and the vastness of white space.

"I don't believe it. She replied?"

Percy wrapped his thick lips around the rim of his glass and sucked out some beer. He seemed disappointed.

"I can barely believe it either." He scanned the bar. Same old bar filled with the same old people. At the vibier adjoining restaurant, people sat at tables of two, three and four, ordering their starter focaccias or whatever, seemingly content, smug even.

Percy lit another cigarette. He resented that Percy's disgusting habit had forced him to sit in the cramped, malodorous smoking section.

"I actually can't wait for this week to be over," he said, finally.

"Why so glum, Harry? You should be happy."

Percy exhaled a jet of smoke in his direction.

"Happy about what?"

"Your old girlfriend is coming here. You pretty much have things all set up without having to do much. She's about to just fall into your lap, literally!"

"I'm not so sure how I feel about that."

"I'm not following, Harry. The other night you were going on about how you wanted to know things from her. I even tried stopping you. You know, to save you from embarrassment. And now..."

"I know, it's just –"

"Just what? What's up with you?"

"God, yeah, I'm sorry, man. I must seem pathetic."

"Acknowledgement is the first step to recovery."

Percy took another drag and exhaled in his direction.

"To the weekend, huh."

"I think I'll give Meg a call, see what she's up to this weekend. What do you think?"

"Great idea! I think it'll take your mind off things. Off Justine."

"What are your plans?"

"I'm an artist, I don't make plans."

"Hey, speaking of which, how's your project coming along?"

"It's coming along. I'm almost ready to send you those pieces of writing. Are you ready to receive them?"

Immediately, he became suspicious. "I guess so. Yes, I am ready to receive your writing."

"You're going to have to be a little more enthusiastic, mate, I don't just share work with anyone before it goes up for exhibitions."

"I await your masterpieces with eager anticipation. What's it with 'mate'? Second time today."

"I'm not following."

"You just called me mate."

"Did I? You know how things stick. We have to be dynamic with language. Sometimes that means allowing it to wash over you without paying too much attention."

"Is that your writing strategy?"

"More or less."

"Now I really can't wait to read it."

"That's the spirit. You want another round?"

"I have work."

"On Meg?"

"No, like, real work."

"Oh, do you mean for government? Don't make me laugh."

"We do have the greater good at heart."

"If that's what you need to tell yourself to feel better. Anyway, I'm going to stay here with or without you. There's a hottie at quarter past twelve who's been checking me out since we got here. Don't look."

"Quarter past twelve isn't a location in that sense."

"It is in my world. Now go away if you're going."

He stood up and turned around slowly, taking care not to look in the direction he assumed Percy was referring to. Life seemed so simple for his friend: meet up with your mate for drinks after work and hook up with some stranger later at the bar. It went well, he supposed, with Percy's idea of letting things simply "wash over" you.

He stood on the pavement and took in the evening air. To his right, a table of four spoke giddily among themselves. Sweat rolled off their amber drinks, which shimmered in the moonlight. Some laughter came from a table somewhere. He reached for his phone.

"Hey Meg! How're you doing?" he typed quickly, greedily, and hit send immediately.

He closed Percy's document, which had taken him four days of unfocused reading to get through (on the train, at work, evenings on the couch). He was unsure what to make of the writing. It seemed good, maybe evocative, but it was all nonsense. What would he say to Percy, that he was impressed? Did his impression even matter? It was already attached to a concept that was, in the high-end commercial art world, golden.

He wondered how many times Percy had been asked about his process and whether, by now, the artist had a rehearsed statement on the matter. Now he supposed Percy would need to devise a new script for his writing process. He could already see the inches of newsprint praising the artist's "refreshed vision of language".

He'd arranged a video call with Justine for the weekend. Until then, he didn't know what to do with himself. Work was slow going to nonexistent; no one even pressed him for a firm deadline. He'd taken the 2pm back to Joburg and was home by 3.

"Hey! Just finished reading your translations. Great stuff! Want to get a beer?"

What else was there to do but drink? He figured he'd meet with Percy and tell him how wonderful his writing was. Once Percy's ego was stroked and he was sufficiently softened and disarmed, he'd steer the conversation to himself.

"Harry! Yes, let's meet downstairs in about 15 minutes, OK?"

"Great."

"You're going to have to come up with something to say about your writing process."

"God! To be honest, I don't know how I wrote that stuff. It just came to me."

"Like a revelation?"

"Exactly!"

"That's impressive. Any interviewer will eat that shit up."

"Trust me, if they're interviewing you for an arts piece, they'll eat any shit."

"I wouldn't know. Something seems different about this place."

Percy sat up and scanned the bar. "I can't see anything different."

"There," he pointed straight ahead, "they switched those two prints around."

"How observant."

"I have a video call with Justine on Saturday."

He noticed Percy's his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“OK.”

Percy hid behind his phone and began to scroll.

“I don’t know. I need your help.”

“What? With the lighting? Do you need soft lighting for your video call?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Isn’t it clear to you? How can it not be?”

“What should be clear to me.”

“Look, the only reason she replied to your stupid email and agreed to have a stupid video call with you is because you’re her landing hook-up.”

“What the fuck is that?”

“You know, when you go to a foreign city where you know no one yet, it’s good to have at least one person there, even better if it’s someone you know you can hook up with.”

“A landing hook-up, huh? That would actually suit me just fine.”

“I hope so, Harry. I hope you don’t develop, or redevelop, feelings for her while she’s using you, while she becomes, let’s say, better acquainted with Joburg. You know how crazy Western women get down here.”

“I doubt that any feelings will be redeveloped.”

“Good. You can have some familiar instead of strange for a change. And knowing that a final goodbye is on the cards – that’s easy street.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You mark my words. She’ll move on when she finds what she really came here for. Now, tell me more about my writing. What did you like in particular?”

"Sorry Justine, you broke up there for a second. Can you hear me now?" He lifted the iPad from his lap and placed it on the coffee table, giving her a wider angle of the living area.

"Yes, I can hear and see you now. Wow, your apartment looks cool. Will you take me on the full virtual tour later?"

"Maybe, we'll see." He looked at the image of Justine's face. Through the pixels and unflattering light of the café she was in, she was still beautiful.

"For some reason I was expecting your hair to be different."

"Still the same old me."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere on Prince. I had to get out, my flatmate's new girlfriend is killing me!"

"So you moved to Manhattan?"

"I had to, you know, once I got a real job."

"And all that convincing you did to get me to move to Brooklyn. All for nothing."

"I know, right?"

Her upper lip crimped as she said that. It was something he had always found sexy.

"So, this new job?"

Someone in the cramped little coffee shop leaned over her camera. Justine reappeared after a brief closeup the person's underarm. "Sorry, you were saying."

"I was saying that you look good."

She moved a hand down the side of her face, clearly flattered.

"You do too."

"So, tell me about this job."

"I'm not sure if you know but I started working at DB a couple years back."

"DB, that's cool. What division?"

"I started in the back office and eventually moved to front, now they want me in emerging-market investments."

"I might know someone at DB, not sure where. It's been a while since I've —"

"It's all already set up for me."

"OK."

"The reason I wanted to speak was to see if you'd be open to seeing me when I arrive."

He stared into the screen, slightly annoyed at how fucking right Percy had been. He faked a smile.

“Hey, Harry, you still there?”

“Still here.”

“You froze up there for a second.”

“Of course I’d like to see you when you get here.”

“That’s a relief. After how things ended in Brooklyn, I wasn’t sure.”

“I should apologise. I shouldn’t have just upped and left that way. I should have spoken to you about it.”

“It was a dick move, but hey, I’m over it. We’re older now. Wiser, huh?”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Anyway, do you know yet when you’ll be here?”

“They’re just sorting out my work permit or visa, or whatever. I’m hoping to be out there by late next month.”

“That soon.”

As if a switch had been flipped, Justine’s mood had changed from pre-tears to childlike excitement. “I’m amped!”

“I think you’ll like Joburg.”

“‘Joburg’? Is that what the locals call it?”

“You’ll come to find, Mizz Brooklyn, that as you New Yorkers have ways of naming things, so do we Joburgers.”

"Haroun, my baby."

His mother answered in her gardening gear. The image was shaky and in the background he saw that she was moving around the house.

"Hey, mum, I hope I'm not bothering."

"Not at all, dad and I are just busy in the garden."

He felt calm for the first time in days. The effect of his mother's grace, he figured.

"That's nice. What are you two busy with now?"

"It's hot today, hey?"

Finally, she found a spot on the kitchen counter to put her phone.

"I haven't left my flat yet."

"You should get out. Come over. We were just talking about you earlier. Dad remembered something funny about when you were little."

"What?"

"I don't suppose you'd remember that first big toy car we gave you. You must have been about four."

"Four years old? Of course I don't remember. I can barely remember things that happened yesterday."

"I guess it'll just be between your father and I."

"I guess so. Hey, here's something for you, do you remember Justine?"

His mother looked puzzled as she mouthed the name and tapped a finger on the side of her head. "Justine. Have I met her?"

"Not physically. You met her like this, on a video call, while I was in New York."

"Ah, right, yes! I do remember. The very pretty young woman, with the dark hair? What about her, son?"

"She's coming to work here, in Joburg." He felt like a young boy again, relating something exciting to him yet trivial in his mother's grand old world.

"That's nice. So, are you going to come over today, then you can tell us all about your friend?"

"Maybe some other time. Hey, mum, have you spoken to Zahra recently?"

"Yesterday. Why?"

"No reason."

She felt a chill running up her spine the entire day at work. She had not experienced something like it before. The thought of calling her mother had crossed her mind, but she was buried in work. Besides, what comfort would the old woman have offered her in any case?

To try calm her nerves, she went through the getting-home spiel: she refusing dinner, her mother insisting, she making up some excuse to retreat to her bedroom, kicking off her shoes and arranging them next to the bed. Then, her impulse to cleanse and pray. She was an animal, living on pure instinct.

As soon as she opened her eyes again, the uneasiness crept back. How annoying that she allowed it distract her from completing the final tasks for the day. She shook her head from side to side. It made no difference. Best try to hack away at the last bit of work, however long it took her.

Fuck the law of diminishing returns, it didn't apply to animals. Or did it? "Pace yourself," is what Claire, her first real boss and mentor, would say. But how could she when the distance was unknown and unrelenting, and when a nervous uncertainty had taken root. She looked to her side. The Vortex swirled ferociously.

She needed to get home, she needed her bed, but she needed to get this done first. She was in a bad dream where it was impossible to get anything done, where everything went in circles. She pounded a fist into the desk. "Fuck!" How weak and pathetic she was.

She glanced at herself in the rear-view mirror. Haggard. Dried up. The skin at the corners of her bloodshot eyes had folded over and the short vertical lines between her eyebrows marked out a permanent frown. "Awful. Ugly." She shifted into reverse.

The road leading up to St Andrews was eerily still, not a soul about. The wind carried an autumnal chill and rustled the leaves of the trees lining the pavements. From inside the car, it looked as if the trees were floating in a liquid more translucent and slicker than water. She drove up to the intersection, expecting Bonga to pop up. Even he had abandoned the streets. The orangey glow from the streetlights made the bobbing trees menacing, like they knew something.

"Ugly." She turned up the volume. An obliquely arranged electronic song played belligerently, adding effect to the gloom. She looked at the display but could neither make out the name of the artist nor of the song itself. Everything on the display was blurry.

Even the M9, usually so familiar and pleasurable to drive, was unwelcoming. A thick layer of black goo had settled on its surface and clung to her tyres. She crawled up Oxford. Would she ever get home?

Strange, the apartment door was unlocked. She pushed it open slowly. It emitted a sharp creak. A dense darkness pervaded the space. Her mother usually left the lamp on in entranceway if she went to bed before she got home from work. Why was there no light? She took a few more steps into the apartment and turned on the lamp.

Ahead of her, just a few feet away, lay her mother, her mouth agape and her eyes half closed. There were two bruises on either side of the old woman's throat.

She was on her knees, trying to undo the clasp of her handbag to get to her phone.

"Please answer, Nadia, Goddamnit, please answer."

Nadia answered on the third try. "Azra, what's up?"

"I just got home, and –"

"Breathe, angel. Just breathe and try to tell me what's going on."

It took everything in her being to settle enough to construct a sentence. "It's my mum. She's lying here, in the passage. I think she's dead."

"Now, hang on, before we jump to any conclusions, have you checked to see if she's breathing? Have you checked her pulse?"

"No. I just got home."

"I'm coming over now, just hang in there, OK?"

She crawled closer to her mother's body and held out an arm. She rested her palm on her mother's face. "She's cold. She's lying here cold," she said into the phone after Nadia had hung up.

Her mother seemed neither at peace nor struggling, not there but not completely absent, not free – tangled in limbo. It was the indeterminate space that her mother occupied that scared her the most. There was no way to interact, yet there her mother was, in her deathly presence, oblivious and haunting. She rested her head on her mother's cold thighs. "Aren't you going to ask me what I've eaten today?"

Her tears would leave a wet patch on her mother's dress when she eventually got up off the floor. She cleared her nose. For the first time that day, she felt something warm. She snorted, part joyful, part disgusted, in the thought that it took resting her head on a dead body to feel life. Was this relief? She was struck by guilt immediately.

The sickening mix of emotions inside her eventually bubbled into laughter. "What have you eaten today, Azra?" She laughed again, swinging one of her pumps around her forefinger.

"Nothing, mum, I've been too busy tripping over your dead body!"

Her laughter trailed off into sobs. She dropped the shoe and landed in a heap on top of her mother's body. She pictured herself and Helena walking barefoot, shoes in hand, in a verdant field at the foot of a mountain, surrounded by wildflowers.

She heard knocking at the door. She didn't know how to respond. The door handle dropped and Nadia walked in, flanked by two men in blue jumpsuits. She sat up.

"Nothing, doctor," said one of the men to Nadia. "We're going to have to call the cops."

Nadia nodded and gestured to the men to go sit in the lounge. She coaxed her friend up to her feet.

"I'm so, so sorry. God, I'm so sorry."

She woke up in Nadia's bed with her friend sitting beside her. "Hey, shit, what's the time?"

"Hey, hey, just try to relax, OK. I called your office and told them what happened."

"What happened, huh? What happened?"

"Shh, don't worry about anything." Nadia said, coddling her friend.

The sunlight coming through the window was blinding. She closed her eyes and felt the warm tears rolling down her cheeks. Her body was sore, like she'd been beaten.

"Here, take a sip of this." An older woman held a spoon of some hot liquid to her mouth.

"No, thanks," she moved her mouth away and looked to her side. "'Nadia."

"Nadia will be back soon, my love."

The sunlight had faded since the last time she sat up. She looked to the side table. Thank God, her phone was on and it still had some charge. She dialled Nadia.

"I'm on my way back home."

"What's going on?" she started sobbing again, involuntarily.

"Don't worry babe, your mum's body has already been moved from your flat. They want to do an autopsy. Unnatural death."

"Body? Wait."

"Just sit tight babe. Is my mum there?"

"No."

"Hey look, I've also spoken with the cops. An inspector needs to see you. I told him what I know, but they need a statement from you as well. They're still busy canvassing your building."

"What the fuck, Nads?"

"I know, my angel. Just sit tight, I'll be there in, like, two minutes."

Was it in these situations that people especially turned to liquor and other substances to distract and numb themselves from the utter anguish they were experiencing? She scanned Nadia's bedroom. It was a dizzying blur of picture frames and clothing draped over various pieces of furniture. She flopped on to the bed and forced her eyes to open wide. Her view was filled with the exposed wooden beams of the roof. She pictured herself hanging from one of the beams. Every thought was laden with death and nothing else.

"Have you tried getting hold of your brother?"

"Not yet."

"Where is he?"

"I'm not sure."

"You sure you don't want any tea? It's chamomile," Nadia bobbed the teabag in a large mug.

"No, thanks. Hey, can you get me a phone charger?"

"Mine is in the kitchen, I think."

Nadia looked frazzled in an old T-shirt and sweatpants, her long black hair loose and unbrushed.

"Don't you need to be at work?"

"I've taken off to be with you. Don't worry about anything, OK? How will you get hold of Akeel?"

"I guess I'll text the last number he texted me from. If that doesn't work, email."

Nadia returned with a white cable. "Shit, I'm not sure where the plug thing is. Check there," she pointed behind the side table.

She stuck her hand down the side of the bed, annoyed with Nadia's untidiness. "I should go back home. I should probably go."

"No ways. You're not going anywhere."

She looked at her friend and could tell that Nadia had no other intentions but to be helpful and to "be there for her". Yet, she couldn't stand being pitied. She felt pathetic.

"What about the funeral arrangements? I need to do that. We'll have to bury her straight after the autopsy."

"My dad is sorting it all out. Don't worry. Please."

"Where will the body leave from? I'll have to go home to sort things out, to get it ready for people."

"Hey, just try to calm down. I told you, my dad is arranging everything. The body will leave from here, people will come here."

She wasn't sure exactly which people would come, but they always did, especially for funerals. She was sure to see people she either didn't know or hadn't seen for years. She braced for the intrusion.

"I'll have to go back home sooner or later," she said under her breath, with the now ubiquitous well of tears beginning to spill over from her eyes.

"I know, babe, I know. Let's just take things as they come for now, OK?"

She resented how she was made to feel so out of control. Why was she disallowed from having control over something so personal? Why did it have to be left up to a man to do? She wished it were all over.

She reached for her phone. A red bar in the tiny battery icon in the corner indicated 2%. "I'm going to send you the number Akeel last texted from," she said to Nadia. "Is your phone charged?"

Nadia looked at her, puzzled. "My phone?" she patted the bed around where she sat. "Fuck, where is my phone?"

She lifted the sheets and noticed that Nadia had changed her into a pair of sweats and a Patagonia T-shirt. "You lost control of your life so you bought some sweatpants," Jerry tells George in an episode of *Seinfeld*. She giggled through her tears and peeled the soft sheets from her body. Was that the pilot episode?

"Hey, what's so funny?" Nadia searched her cluttered dresser, rifling through various tubes of face and hand creams, worn underwear and other knickknacks.

"It's probably in your car." She looked at Nadia, who again seemed puzzled. "Your phone, it's probably still in your car."

"Oh yes, you're right, it's probably there."

"Hey, where are my clothes?"

"I've given them to Gladys to wash."

Strange that Nadia had her clothes washed but couldn't do the same for her own.

"Will Gladys put my clothes through the washer, do you know?"

"No idea."

"It's a silk blouse."

Nadia abandoned her search and took a few steps towards her. "Don't worry about it babe."

Annexed to the main mosque was a small room with a metal table in the centre. Two long pipes, affixed with taps at each end, stuck out from the table, which was dotted with rows of tiny drainage holes across its entire surface. Her mother's body lay on the cold metal table, bruised and stitched from the autopsy earlier. The bruises around her neck were still visible and had turned a sick yellow.

She, Nadia and Nadia's mother, along with two older women she didn't recognise stood around the table, ready to perform ghusl on her mother's body.

Nadia took the lead. "We need to all lift from one side to get the material under," she said, referring to the calico lying folded in a square beside the table.

She was impressed by the way her mother had kept herself, not a single stray hair around her pubic area, her legs or under her arms. If she hadn't seemed at peace when she last saw her lying on the passage floor of the apartment, she looked at peace now, as if she had somehow come to terms with her own death.

Once the body had been dried, four women moved to the right side of the table and lifted it while Nadia unfolded the fabric and placed it underneath. She could barely believe the sheer weight of her mother, even as three others helped lift her side.

The smell of camphor crowded her senses, moving beyond smell to taste and touch, and a deep association with death and solemnity. Never had she pictured herself in this situation.

As expected, Nadia's parents' house was filled with people she either barely knew or didn't know at all. Her mother's body lay in its shroud on the floor of the lounge, which had been cleared of most of the furniture. She and Nadia sat by its side and were surrounded by women counting their prayers on beads.

She felt choked in her scarf, clasped tightly to her throat with a metal brooch. She had still not been back to her apartment. Mixed in with the immense dread she felt was an added fear that she would never be allowed to go back home. Her life had changed forever.

David had texted her earlier. Something about sympathy and condolences and being in everyone's thoughts. "Take all the time you need."

All she wanted now was to get back to work, to get out of this terrible situation. But, she knew, all she was allowed to do was sit it out, go through the motions. Once her mother's body was whisked away to the cemetery by the men who would eventually put in it the ground, there were still three more days of mourning. Only then would any consideration for her needs be given.

She looked up and released the sodden pink tissue she had pressed against her face. It tumbled down the scarf, on to her lap and landed on the floor beside her. In almost no time, a box of tissues appeared before her, held by an outstretched arm of someone unknown. Nadia held her hand throughout. Her mother's burial was scheduled to take place after the night prayer. Even as a girl, she found the idea of burials after dark macabre.

All around her, she heard the incongruent whispering of prayers, soothing only in their repetition. She whispered some of her own. Rote recitation could only provide comfort.

A few minutes before the body was to be picked up, Nadia's mother unfastened the shroud around the face for the final viewing. It was the last time she would ever see her mother's face. That alone sank her insides to a depth she never imagined was possible. She let out a groan then a deep wail as she got on to her knees and leaned in slowly to kiss her mother on the cheek. "Goodbye." She wiped the deluge of tears from her face and settled back down on to the floor. It was the most defeated she'd ever felt.

Four men, all dressed in white robes, one of whom she vaguely recognised as her cousin, walked into the room with the green casket used to transport bodies in the burial coach. Two of them, one at each end, removed the lid and set it aside, while the other two

positioned themselves on either side of the body. She hoped, as a final courtesy to a woman who had suffered indignity throughout her life, to her last breath, that those men would handle the body with care, until she was interred. Finally, then, she thought, she'd be left alone for eternity. Is that what "resting in peace" meant? To be alone in an unfathomable blackness, forever?

"Yeah, she's already been buried. You know how it is, the sooner the better, so they say."

She had barely managed to compose herself after her mother's body was taken to be buried when Akeel called.

"I've booked a flight, I should be there within a day or so. This is so fucked up."

"Where are you?"

"I'm still in Germany. Cologne."

"I see. There's really no need to rush back now, Aki."

"What? No, I want to be with you. God, Az, fuck. Are you OK?"

"I'm not OK. But Nadia is with me. I'll be staying at theirs for the next few days."

"I think that'd be best. I'll see you soon."

"Sure."

She wanted to scream and shout at him. If he were in front of her, she'd want to gouge his eyes out. It was about the hundredth time someone had asked her if she was OK, yet it didn't cease to be the most idiotic question.

The mourners who gathered had steadily streamed out of the house. How many times during the day had she heard "If there's anything you need" from people she didn't know? What could she possibly have needed from them? What could they possibly have given her in any case?

Her eyelids hung so heavily over her eyes, she wasn't sure how they even stayed open. She stumbled out of the main house, trying to unfasten the clasp at her throat. She needed to get that scarf off her head; she needed to find the bed in Nadia's cottage; she desperately needed sleep to escape from this nightmare.

“So Zahra is your sister. Wow!”

Gabrielle took a sip of her coffee and scanned him with an interest he was unsure what to make of.

“Hard to believe, right?”

“No, no, I can see the resemblance. She’s a beautiful woman.”

“How do you know her?”

“We have dealings every now and then. You know, lawyers.”

“Honestly, I have no idea.” He pushed up his shades.

Was she hitting on him? Why did she agree to meet him on a Saturday morning? Was this a date?

She reached into the satchel that was slung over the back of her chair and took a suspiciously long time to get whatever she needed out of it. The tops of her handsomely proportioned breasts showed. Her skin had a delicate and inviting sheen. He looked away just in time. Two young boys played in the water feature at the centre of the square. They seemed happy, carefree.

“Zahra said you can help put me in touch with a good adoption agency.”

“I have a few in mind I think would suit you perfectly.”

“Good. But please, don’t inundate me with options, I can be very indecisive.” Boners over Saturday morning coffee in public squares were the worst.

“Of course. It’s why I wanted to meet with you in person, to get a feel for you so I can put you in touch with the right people. Once you choose the agency, I’ll handle all the legal stuff.”

“OK, great. Do you have the details of these agencies here? Maybe I can select one right now, while I’m with you.”

“Sure.”

She flipped open her iPad and placed it between their cups.

“I’ve done a lot of work with this agency.” She pinched the screen to zoom into its logo.

Her nails were lacquered in a velvety purple. Sexy.

“They’re very good, you know, superefficient.”

He glanced at the screen and looked up at her. She had a tiny beauty spot just above one corner of her top lip.

"OK, efficient is good, I guess. What about the other one?"

She tapped on the iPad a few times. "Actually, this one might be more suited to single execs like yourself."

"It's a no-brainer, then, right?"

"I must warn you, though, there's more red tape for single people. Here, take a look. I'll give you some time to read through."

He'd grown immediately bored by the mention of the term "red tape". At the same time, he felt as if he was caught up in a sales pitch, where Gabrielle was selling not only a premium adoption agency, but herself as well. He wasn't opposed to the idea of taking the full package.

"Yeah, I see," he said as he skimmed, "if you think this is the one for me, let's go with it." It was useless trying to pretend his judgement wasn't clouded by an impulse to pursue his sister's lawyer friend.

"OK, that's great, yeah. I'll email them with all your details and they'll be in touch."

"Easy as that?"

"For now, yeah. But just so you know, you're going to have to do your own research and attend group sessions."

"Group sessions?" he took off his sunglasses but put them back on immediately. The midday sun was blinding.

"Like a support group for prospective and newly adoptive parents. It's more of a forum. I've heard it's extremely valuable."

"OK."

"I'll text you a link. Just get on their mailing list and take it from there. They meet every two weeks."

"Twice a month, that's doable."

"I can't emphasise enough how important it is."

"Got you."

She flipped the iPad closed and slid it back into her satchel. She folded her hands on the table and scanned him. "You know, these group sessions are important to find out if you're sure about even adopting in the first place."

The thought of ordering a beer right then had crossed his mind. Might as well get off the mark for the day. But some sense prevailed and he decided against it. "Thanks for taking the time to meet with me, especially on the weekend."

"Don't mention it. Your sister and I go way back."

"I must get going." He stuck out his hand, which she met with hers palm down.
Classy.

"Lovely to meet you, Gabrielle."

Why was she staying at the café? Did she have another meeting straight after theirs? What kind of person was Gabrielle beneath that polished façade? Under any other circumstance, he would have tried to find out.

He dialled Percy.

“Prince Harry, to what do I owe this honour?”

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“Ugh. Fuck off.”

“Do you want to get a beer?”

“At this point it’s more of a need than a want.”

“Are you aware that it’s nearly one?”

“And I got home at 6am. What’s your point?”

“Shall we meet across the road in, say, 15?”

“Where are you?”

“Heading back down from Rosebank.”

“Let me put on some pants.”

The Saturday lunch crowd was boisterous, oblivious even, to the looming Sunday Scaries. He felt welcomed nonetheless by the laughter and merriment from the tables on the pavement. His prior meeting with Gabrielle was way too sober. For a while, at least, he would be able to put the seriousness of his adoption plans on hold.

He was surprised to see Percy already seated and waiting. How inviting. He pictured the characters of *Cheers*, Norm Peterson particularly, rooted in his stool at the edge of the bar, beer always in hand. Luckily, it was just Percy who knew his name there, not everybody.

The sun was setting. He had lost count of how many beers he’d had.

“Hey, I forgot to ask, have you already done the paintings?”

“What paintings?”

“For your writing.”

“I haven’t even started.”

“But I thought the writings were translations of the paintings?”

Another punter bumped their table on her way to the bathroom. The bar area was at capacity. Thick smoke hung just beneath the ceiling and the sour smell of spilt beer permeated.

“They are!”

“But how can they be if the paintings aren’t done yet?”

“Come on, Harry, it’s a concept. I’m thinking of using the writing to inform the painting. Trippy, huh?”

“I guess.”

He drained the last bit of his beer and closed his eyes. His earlier meeting with Gabrielle was now distant. He was happy to have created that distance, thanks to beer. But the memory of her tits, still close. Beery boners on barstools were the best.

“Taking a young nap there, are we?”

“Huh? No, I was just —”

“Let’s go back to your flat, man. It’s getting a bit noisy here.”

“I have whisky.”

“I know.”

“Dear Haroun,

Thanks for your interest in our agency...”

The email went on. He was too hungover, no, still drunk, to see straight let alone read the email properly. Some forms attached to look at, a form to pick up at Home Affairs and fill out, a meeting at their offices. He got the gist.

“... one of the most important and fulfilling journeys of your life. Best wishes, the Family Connect team.”

He downloaded the attachments. Maybe a reply would stand him in good stead. It was the least he could do, he figured, in the face of the agency’s efficiency. “Good day, Thanks for your prompt email, your agency has come highly recommended. I will be available next week, on the 18th, say 2pm, to meet. Let me know if this will be possible.”

He hit send and pulled up Gabrielle’s text. The way she looked in her profile pic was exactly how she looked in real life, except in the pic she wore a black halter top. Thank God, no boner – one perk of the hangover. He followed the link and tapped About. “Stronger Together,” the About section began, “was founded in 2008 as a space for adoptive and prospective adoptive parents to learn.”

He scrolled to the end of the page. “We strongly advise prospective parents to attend our workshops.”

He’d entered a discourse now, he knew it: Care, love, respect, communication, wholesomeness. Fuck.

He signed up for the newsletter. The auto response came immediately. “Welcome to the Stronger Together family.”

The sun had already shone on Kruger's hat and the president's shadow was now being cast eastwards. How did Kruger and his boers manage hangovers? Did they also crave to get on a train and head home? He'd get there soon enough.

What types of people would he encounter on his "adoption journey"? Desperate ones, probably. But what was desperation if not a desire to have a mirror held up to oneself? So it was okay to be desperate. He recalled Percy's writing. The main title was *Vague Desperations*. Was all that nonsense about him?

He went through his emails and reopened the document. Some words caught his attention: "the little man in his shell", "unease and disease and mindfulness", "randomised perversions" and "veiled obnoxiousness". What. The. Fuck.

He tried finding some reason in the artist's writing. Maybe it was just a reflection on human desperation in general. Maybe it wasn't as pointed as he thought. Maybe he was just being paranoid. He gave Percy the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it was time for a post-hangover thought experiment: apart from the slick marketing and associative status his gallery afforded him, would people need had to have had an animalistic affinity to Percy to consume his work? Was this identification with him because they recognised their own desperations in it? Were their desperations, after being branded by the artist, their cultural leader, "vague", assuaged or even negated as OK, or normal? He could see the importance of Percy's work in that sense – the artist as the bearer and representative of all desperation. Did he, too, not look to Percy to relieve his own desperations?

But, unlike Percy and his crowd's, his own desperation to find some sort of affirmation in his early middle age was becoming less vague. Maybe the only thing that was vague at this point was his conviction. But this, he figured, would be shown up only at the group sessions. Like Gabrielle said, the sessions might be a filter for him to figure out if he genuinely wanted, or even needed, to be a parent.

Ugh. Jumbled thought experiments went nowhere. Maybe doing some real work might help.

"Independent power producers," he continued the section he had started the previous day. "over the coming decades, will not only face issues of concentration of ownership, but are likely to run into problems of scalability, not on the demand side, as expected, but on the supply side, for the following key reasons."

The long-term economic viability of IPPs in the face of possible state ownership. Riveting. There was, nonetheless, a vein of comfort that went with words and it lied in their malleability. That they could be manipulated to fit into an architecture, a framework – however bullshit that might have been – was almost as gratifying to him as was making music. Meaning didn't really matter, did it? It was all just officialese anyway. Unlike Percy's nonsense, his was the type that quietly reinforced the monolith – The State (like that horrible song) – rather than drew attention to its grandeur.

"To cancel membership, the scheme requires a certified copy of the deceased's death certificate." She left the email and scrolled through her inbox. She wasn't sure how medical aid had already found out about her mother's death, but that wasn't of immediate concern. Across from her, in her own apartment, sat her brother, and to his left, their father. She was uncomfortable, as if she were being subjected to an inquisition.

When she returned from Nadia's parents' house, it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The only difference was that her mother wasn't there.

"Did it happen here, in this flat?" her father asked, finally.

He seemed disgusted as he scanned the room.

"Yes." She looked up from her phone. Akeel had placed himself in a mediatory role. She was infuriated that he'd brought their father to her apartment after having expressly told him not to. She was violated by the lingering presence of the man who had choked her mother to death in the passage and now by these two men.

"Dad, do you want some tea?" Akeel stood up and walked towards the coffee table.

"No, thank you, Akeel."

Her brother looked to her. She shook her head.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to pay my respects."

"Respect," she snorted, "you have no idea what the word means."

"Now look –" her brother interjected.

"Don't you even try."

The old man stood up, adjusted his belt then flattened his shirt along his chest. "I don't need to be here any longer. Akeel, let's go."

"Dad, come on, just sit back down. At least have some tea before we go."

"I won't have tea in a place I'm not welcome."

"You're right," she looked into his eyes, which, even after all these years, were unrelenting in their cruelty. "You're not welcome here, even if you apologise."

"Apologise? For what?" he raised his voice.

She was transported back to her childhood, how he'd shout and swear at their mother for the pettiest of things.

“Your arrogance is still astounding.” She puffed out her chest, emboldened by something essential.

“I don’t have to listen to this. Akeel, I said –”

“You ruined her life. For 30 years she stuck with you, through your abuse.” Tears began to flow. “Then you kicked her out, with nothing.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ll never understand what was going on between your mother and I.”

“I understand perfectly, Dad. You used her, enslaved her. Then, when you had no more use for her, you threw her out, like a piece of garbage.”

Her father stepped closer to her and drew his hand. She anticipated a slap but it didn’t come.

“Akeel. Let’s go. Please.” Then, “I will never apologise to you, for anything. You don’t deserve it. You’re a disobedient woman.”

“And you are a pig!”

Akeel lunged to stop their father from slapping her. “OK, OK, let’s go,” he said, lowering his father’s hand.

She settled back into the wingback, but the adrenaline running through her caused a constant shudder.

“I hope this is the last time I see you,” she said.

“I’ll call you, Az, OK?” Akeel was visibly shaken himself.

“Shut the door behind you.”

She sat down and googled “how to get a death certificate”.

She couldn’t stop the tears. Her primary caregivers had abandoned her; she was completely alone. Crying was her only source of comfort now, basic as it was.

"Can I come in?"

She stood at door of David's office. He looked up with his phone cradled between his shoulder and ear.

"Hey, can I call you back?" He said to the person on the other end. "Azra, of course, come in. We weren't expecting you back at work so soon."

"It's been a week."

"After what happened, what you've been through, a week seems hardly enough."

"I thought it best to just come back, to take my mind off things."

"If that's what you want. But I strongly suggest you make an appointment to see one of our counsellors. Do you have the wellness centre's details?"

"I do, and I will see someone. For now, I just wanted to let you know that I'm back and needed to find out from you where should I pick up from again."

"Shit, sorry. Please, come in, have a seat."

He pitied her, she could tell.

"Before, you know, what happened ... you were very thorough, as always. The juniors picked up on how you like things done and were able to continue and report back every second day. One junior is really on top of things. Helena, do you know her?"

"Helena, of course."

"Things are still a bit of a shit show." He pointed to his computer screen then picked up a pen and spun it between his fingers, "But you know how it goes, I don't need to tell you."

"Sure."

"If at any point you're not feeling up to it, just let me know, OK? We're all here for you. I'm finding it hard to deal with myself. That level of desperation, it's sickening."

"Thanks David." She lifted herself from the chair. "Oh, hey, I need to go to Home Affairs sometime this week."

"Of course. Take one of the juniors to help if you need."

"Thanks, but I'm sure I'll manage by myself."

"It's good to have you back."

"Thank you." She had never seen this side of him before. Kind, caring, affectionate. It suited him.

The tears started up again. How much longer would it be until she'd stop crying, and until people would stop pitying her? She hated that she was now the person at work whose mother had been killed in a burglary.

She wasn't familiar with Malibongwe Drive, but Google Maps told her that Randburg Home Affairs was the least busy and easiest to get to from her office. So she set off, crossing Jan Smuts then heading down 7th Avenue Parktown North, which inexplicably became 6th Street as it bisected Greenside and Parkhurst. The more she ventured into the northwestern suburbs, the more she realised she'd been done in by Google, and that the Alex Home Affairs was probably closer and easier to get to on the highway.

After what seemed like dozens of traffic lights and busy intersections, she reached Malibongwe, along which, according to Google, she'd still need to travel another five kilometres.

Fuck. She opened Spotify and queued a song by Cassandra Jenkins called "Hard Drive". On the nose, she knew, but it was the spoken-word beginning of the song that had grabbed her when she heard it for the first time a few days back.

"A security guard stopped me to offer an overview on phenomenal nature/She said, 'sculpture is not just formed from penetration. You see, men have lost touch with the feminine'/And with her pink lipstick and her Queens accent/She went on for a while about our president."

The song faded as she pulled into the parking lot. It was, indeed, a hard drive. She parked directly ahead of a tower in the neighbouring campus that resembled a gigantic concrete funnel. Immediately, she was approached by some men flashing photographs through her window. She shooed them away, but one of them persisted. "Hello, my sister. ID photos?" he called out as she emerged from the car.

She slammed the door shut and caught a glimpse of herself in the window. Apart from the lightness of her exposed skin, on her forehead and between her lower nose and chin, she was covered in black. She grimaced and turned to face the man. "No, thanks. But can you point me to the entrance?"

The man looked back at her, puzzled. "Entrance is that way, ma'am." A small queue had already developed at the entrance.

"Thanks," she said, unable to move.

"You OK, ma'am?"

The man's voice was a distant echo. She was immobile and unable to respond. She wished that everything around her would simply disappear, that she'd be left alone. She thought about her mother, now more than two weeks dead and buried. The insects had already begun to burrow into and consume her body. Maybe her mother's spirit was in the white space of nothingness she had wished for. Or was she in a deep blackness? Either way, a void seemed more comfortable than where she was.

"Ma'am, can I help you?"

She heard the man's voice again, clearer this time. She looked at her watch. Not much time had passed since she had parked, but it might as well have been an eternity.

"No, thanks." Her whole body trembled.

"Hi Helena. I'm not coming back in this afternoon. Please tell David." She stared into the screen for a while but didn't send the text.

Once again, tears began to well up. She heard only the soft crunch of the leather seat as she sobbed.

"Shame, you don't look so good. Are you sure you don't want to come stay with me for a while?" Nadia took a sip of her wine.

"I'm OK, thanks." She was uncomfortable in the bar, but she wasn't there without a reason. "Hey, I think I should have a drink. You know, to 'take the edge off.'"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." She waved to get the bartender's attention.

The place was teeming with an after-work-drinks crowd, mostly men who resembled David.

"Jack and Coke. Double."

"Jack and Coke, huh? Where did that come from, babe?"

The bar became noisier at first, but as time wore on the noise flowed into a constant, sea-like wash. She entered a space where nothing mattered, where there were no consequences. A lightness infiltrated her body.

Nadia's lips were moving but she couldn't make out what her friend was saying. The sound of her voice melded into the all-absorbing sea of noise. She felt a certain sense of accomplishment, like she deserved this numbness after so many years of perseverance.

"Babe, babe."

Nadia's voice was discernible again. She felt a tug on her arm.

"I'm going to the bar. Do you want another drink?"

"Yeah."

Funny, she didn't remember moving from the bar to a table. She watched Nadia walking to the bar in slow motion, swaying her hips, still wearing her doctor's uniform from earlier. "Doctor on call," she said to herself.

At the bar, a stranger cradled Nadia's ass. Nadia looked back and gave him a wink. Is this how it was, Friday nights come along, people get together and drink, and women allow men to be inappropriate. Was this the game? Her current state made it acceptable.

She felt around the cheap black coat she'd been wearing since her mother died. The text she hadn't sent to Helena about not going back into work was still there. She deleted it. What should she say to her now?

“That bar is quite a ride, Az!”

Nadia brought their drinks down with a thud. She was visibly excited and clearly having fun.

She placed her phone screen-down in her lap. “Sure looked like it.” She’d lost count of how many Jack and Cokes she’d had, but it couldn’t have been too many. Nadia had been getting them since she finished her first one and she was sure that her friend wasn’t making them doubles.

“Who were you texting?”

“No one.” She pressed the lock button and put the phone back into her coat pocket.

“I see. OK. Hey, what happened with your little friend at work?”

“Yeah, that was before my mum was killed.” She laughed but felt herself choking up again.

“There’s literally not a moment that goes by each day that I don’t think about it. It’s just horrible.”

“It’s OK. Things will get better in time.”

“I suppose.”

A guy about their age stumbled by and tapped their table. “Hey there,” he said. A sour stench emanated from his pores. His eyes were bloodshot and his striped Polo shirt bore hideous wet patches under his armpits. Nadia seemed enthralled by the intrusion.

“Hey hey,” Nadia said.

“You gals wanna dance?” He said, swaying his hips with his hands on either side in a deranged hula-girl motion.

Nadia looked at her. She shook her head. She could see the troll’s friends in the background, laughing and cheering him on.

“Yeah, I wanna dance!” Nadia got up and offered her hand to the stranger. She looked back at her friend.

“Have fun.”

She reached back into her coat pocket. She needed to be smart but not too smart, serious but not goofy. Surprisingly, she felt a lot more light-hearted than the moment before the troll had arrived to drag her friend away. “Paradise City” blared around the bar.

“Take me down.” she typed into the chat and hit send without thinking. It was an obscure reference for someone as young as Helena, but the Jack Daniel’s had given her no reason to overthink things.

“Down where?” came Helena’s reply not two minutes later.

“To the paradise city!”

“Where the grass is green and the girls are pretty?”

She’d hardly had time to be impressed when another message came through.

“Where are you?”

“The worst bar in Joburg.”

“Can’t be. *I’m* at the worst bar in Joburg.”

“Are there any good bars in Joburg?” She looked up from her phone and saw Nadia approaching.

“Guns N’ Roses! When last, babe?!” Her friend was flushed and out of breath.

The group meeting wasn't quite the sickeningly supportive circle jerk that he anticipated. But at the same time, it wasn't not that. He sensed much of the kind of earnestness that at times made him doubt whether it was genuine. Luckily, he had drunk some whisky before he arrived.

The session, titled "Are you the one? Getting to know yourself before adopting", was set to start in 20 minutes, which gave him time to mingle. He stopped at an info table near the entrance. A greying woman sat with her hands folded on her lap.

"Hi," he said to the woman, "this is my first meeting."

She smiled and lifted one of her hands. "Hullo, yes, I think most of the people here are first-timers as well."

"I see. I'm Haroun."

"Pam, nice to meet you."

"Are you one of the organisers?"

"Yes, I'm involved with the Johannesburg chapter of Rays of Hope, based in Hillbrow."

Maybe his initial assessment of the false earnestness was misplaced. He scanned Pam's face. She had gentle features. "Which of these pamphlets should I start with?"

"Here, this should ease you into things. You'll probably get through it before the session starts."

"Good to meet you, Pam."

There was an attractive-looking woman sitting by herself, reading one of Pam's pamphlets. He walked over.

"May I?" he motioned towards the chair beside the woman.

She looked up from her pamphlet. Her hair was wild and curly, an intense black. She had thin eyelashes and small eyes, and her skin was pale against the black of her bush of hair and the clothing she wore.

"Sure."

A sparkling tennis bracelet hung from her thin and elegant wrist.

He sat down and resisted the urge to take out his phone. It had vibrated a few moments before. He was eager to see who had messaged him but he had to sit put. There would still be time after the meeting to get a drink with Percy.

He noticed a label on the woman's left breast. "Jolene" written in black marker. He hadn't taken her for a Jolene. He settled into the metal-framed chair and began to think of other, more suitable, names for her.

She crossed her legs. Her silky black stockings had little hearts printed on them. Maya or Mila, maybe even Hannah. Was it rude not to label oneself at the sign-in desk upon arrival? He got up. Jolene glanced at him, inspecting the source of the disturbance.

"My name tag." He wasn't sure she'd heard him or even cared. The meeting was just about to start.

The seat next to Jolene had since been taken so he had to sit next to a fat couple at the back.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Why resist?

"Wanna meet up for drinks after your AA meeting?" Percy had texted.

He regretted having told the painter about the meeting.

"Should be done within the next hour or so."

"Take your time, Harry, find yourself ..."

The lights dimmed and the wall ahead was illuminated with the title slide of the session. The question, "Are you the one?", stared straight at him.

"The first thing to ask yourself," the presenter, whose name was Precious, said, "is 'what am I doing this for?' Over the years, we've encountered many people who want to adopt for reasons that are maybe not entirely in the child's best interests."

She gave them time to scan the next slide, which had what looked like a stock image in the background: a child and an adult in a field, clear blue skies and full golden sunshine. The child, a little girl, with a broad, happy smile on her face, looks up to the adult, a man whose entire frame has an aura of wholesomeness, with outstretched arms.

Precious continued: "So we need to have the best of intentions, not just for ourselves, but for the child, who is ultimately the more vulnerable one in the relationship."

Was this possible for him? To transcend his own wants, to put someone else before himself? Was selflessness ultimately what Precious, or anyone else whom he'd spoken to about this, would point to? Although his reasoning was facile, it seemed accurate.

But there must have been some room for want. He looked around the room. They were like himself, these people – more wants than needs.

He took the break with Jolene on the veranda of the scout hall where the meeting was being held.

"It's been a long process for me. I keep coming back to these meetings, starting from the very beginning. I guess it's complicated."

Jolene exhaled a thick layer of smoke from her hand-rolled cigarette.

"How long, exactly?"

"You mean my interest in adoption?"

"Yeah."

"It's a long story."

The whisky he had carried in his bloodstream into the meeting had since worn off. He just needed to get through Precious's concluding remarks after the break. He joined Jolene in her intense stare at the parking lot while she finished her cigarette. She was dark, mysterious, and sexy.

"It was nice to meet you, Haroun. I'm sure we'll get to know each other over the coming months." She winked, dropped her cigarette butt to the ground and stubbed it out with the point of her red pump.

The room reeked of cigarettes after the break. That people still smoked was beyond him. He scrolled through his Gmail as Precious started another slide. A new message from Justine, sent two days prior. How did he miss it?

"Hey Harry! How've you been? Just thought I'd update you on my arrival. It's confirmed, I'll be there April 17. So excited! Xoxo J"

"What's important to remember," Precious's voice trailed back, "is that you can only learn from the others around you. Most people here are in the same boat. This process is meant to be facilitative, not instructive."

How many times had he heard that line?

Should he offer to pick Justine up from the airport? Did people still do that? He wasn't sure, but it seemed the polite thing to do. Precious was on her last slide, "Conclusion and take-aways". Suddenly, he began to doubt Justine's intentions. Were they friendly, or did she have another, perhaps more sinister, agenda? Maybe one involving revenge?

He tried to focus on Precious's slide. Why the paranoia?

"So, when we reconvene in two weeks —"

She went on about open communication. He literally couldn't take in any more.
“Thank you” in periwinkle blue appeared against the same stock image at the beginning of her presentation.

"Can I come with you to the next one?"

"No. I mean, I'm not so sure, Percy. It's a serious thing."

"I'll be serious."

"Why do you even want to?"

"If you haven't yet noticed, I'm a keen observer of desperation."

"So you think it's desperate to want to adopt? You think I'm desperate?"

"No to the first question and yes to the second."

The mood in the bar was mellow, expected for a Tuesday night. He looked at the fresco directly across from where he sat – not badly done but not great either – of the Manhattan Bridge from the Brooklyn side. Justine would be amused. Maybe he'd bring her here straight from the airport. It was just across the road from his apartment.

"Hey, Harry."

"Yeah?"

"How's work? Are you still on that report about solar power?"

"I'm impressed, didn't think you'd remember."

"If other regulars here didn't know better, they'd think we're married!"

"I submitted the preliminary report. There was some news around it."

"OK, that's enough, now I don't care."

He was content drinking without having to engage further with Percy. A familiar song blared through the speakers, but he couldn't make it out. The waiters began their closing-up ritual.

"We're about to set the date for my next solo. Late May, probably."

"Oh, right, your exhibition. How's that coming along?"

"I'm focused. Working nights mostly. The days are just, you know. Oh, and the gallery loves those translations. They're dying for the whole concept."

"Of course they are."

Percy Moloto, their shining fucking star.

"They might even give me cash for some sculpture I'm thinking of doing – to build the actual machine."

"Awesome."

She couldn't tell if she was dreaming or if Helena was really there with her, in her bed. She lay dead still. Was it even past midnight yet?

Her mind played back images from the previous night: a small table in the corner of dimly lit restaurant off Jan Smuts Avenue, Helena's eyes sparkling as the flame of the oil lamp danced, rosé wine, Helena stroking her neck in the back of an Uber, she and Helena intertwined on the bed moving in ways she didn't know were possible, the ecstasy of when she came for the first time in whenever.

Was she already regretting it? She wasn't sure. Her mind couldn't settle on a single thought. In the darkness, she made out a silhouette and heard the soft lull of Helena breathing.

Nothing to worry about, right? If the clerk could be cool about it, there was no reason for her not to be. They had met after office hours in a location not at all related to the office. She went back to sleep.

"Sorry, I'm an early riser."

She found Helena prancing around nude in her kitchen.

"What are you doing?"

"Making something to eat. I hope you don't mind."

"Yeah, sure, if you can find anything. I haven't been to the shops in a while."

How free and open and comfortable in her own body Helena was. Since her mother died, she had come to appreciate not having anyone in her space immediately after she woke up.

"I found some rice cakes in that cupboard, and some cream cheese in the fridge. Do you want some tea?"

"No, thanks."

She walked over to the counter where Helena had laid out two rice cakes and the tub of cream cheese.

"I'd check the expiry date on that if I were you."

The water in the kettle began to rumble.

Before she knew it, Helena had stolen a kiss and she was locked in an embrace.

"Good morning!"

"Morning." Only then had she noticed that the clerk was a whole head shorter than she.

"I don't think I'll make my usual 7am start." She looked at the microwave. For such a stupid appliance, it held time precisely.

"I don't think anyone expects you to in any case."

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm sorry, I must seem so forward."

"Not really. I mean, I don't mind. It's just that it's been quite chilly in the mornings. It's technically autumn, you know."

"I don't mind the chill. It's better than the summer heat here, don't you think?"

Not even 15 minutes and they had already started talking about the weather.

"Would you like to borrow some clothes? I'm not sure anything of mine will fit you, you're so tiny."

“It’s alright, thanks. I’m going to finish my tea and head home for a quick shower and change. My place isn’t too far from here, actually.”

“Where do you live?”

“Rosebank.”

“OK then. Close the door properly when you leave. The guard will buzz you out downstairs.”

“See you at the office.”

Although it was a Wednesday, the “hump day”, the mood at work was sombre. She felt a chill, even though, because of a sudden mid-autumn heat wave, people had reverted to their summer clothing. Even Mei, whom she had seen just after she’d stepped on to the floor but avoided, was dressed down in a frumpy, borderline-nightie blouse.

She hadn’t yet noticed if Helena was in. There was still a mountain of work to get through, but she somehow felt removed from it. She disliked having a “valid” reason to be disengaged from the audit, but she wondered if she had ever been truly interested in it to begin with. Her reality had begun to fray at the edges. She looked ahead at the interns’ hub – all mannequins, dressed up but lifeless, smudged and grimy, nonetheless. The Vortex swirled beside her.

Would she ever regain her ability to concentrate? What was the point anyway? She googled images of chocolate cake. Eventually, something of interest showed up, a meme: two undressed Barbie dolls on top of a layered chocolate cake, brown icing smeared over most of their bodies and faces, one doll bent over and the other’s hand stuck up the bent-over doll’s arse. The caption: “And I never got asked to make the cake again.” The Barbies still had on their little pink high heels – the mark of a true pornographer. She hated chocolate cake and didn’t understand how eating it had become a means for women to suffocate their sorrows, which were caused mainly by men.

The Vortex swirled with greater intensity. She wondered if that’s why its frame sat about five degrees askew. She wouldn’t get up to straighten it. She had to leave it as is, as proof that everything was fraying at the fucking edges, that things were just not right, that there was no levelling out.

Suddenly she could relate to the drawing, possibly even the artist. The tone was distraught and the form unwavering in its nihilism. She’d never thought of art in this way, but it made complete sense now.

“Hey Az!” A message popped up on company’s internal platform. What the fuck? No one ever used that.

She had to respond to appear not to be ghosting Mei, although she was.

“Hi. How are you?” She had to steer the conversation off the platform.

“Sorry I messaged here, but you haven’t been responding on WhatsApp.”

“Sorry, let’s move to WhatsApp.”

Her phone vibrated less than a few seconds later.

“Sorry.” she replied to Mei’s googly eyed emoji, above which were about five others, yet unread, asking how she was.

“It’s OK, I understand.”

How “understanding” everyone around her had suddenly become.

“What’s up?” Was she being too cool? Perfectly understandable.

“Just checking in. Do you want to get coffee downstairs?”

She simply couldn’t face Mei. Her guilt, frustrating that it was there in the first place, was layered. First, she felt guilty for not replying to Mei’s texts over the past few weeks. Second, her thing with Helena had made her feel generally edgy around the office. Mei would pick up something immediately. She’d smell Helena’s pussy on her breath.

“Sorry, but I’m still trying to get my head around things at work. I didn’t realise how a week off would set me back!”

She felt guilty even in this exchange, first for lying to Mei about being under pressure from work (she wasn’t, not really), and second for being phony by affixing a mood-matching emoji (sweaty face) to what was, in essence, an excuse.

“That’s OK, I totally understand. Let me know when you can meet up, OK?”

The tears began to form once again. Her battle would be won when they dried up for good.

“Did you get to work on time today?”

She didn’t find Helena’s familiarity invasive but wondered if it was appropriate. But, then again, who really cared? What did it matter?

“Depends...”

“I had a great time last night.”

“Me too.” A simple full stop. That might stem the flow of their chat. She’d resolved to at least look through a risk assessment summary, compiled by Helena and her group of clerks, which they had submitted at the beginning of the week. David had tasked her to do it if she was up to it.

Her amusement with the realisation of things fraying at the edges had now transformed into anger. Had she become the office pity fuck?

David, pitying her, had assigned her an easy, if not perfunctory, check, while Helena had literally been fucking her. The tears came back, this time with a vengeance, and the screen became a flood of washed-out pink and blue pixels.

She’d email David. Although she appreciated his concern, she’d appreciate it even more if he’d not insult her, no, even better, not patronise her by giving her work that he could do himself in passing, at the end of the day. It didn’t really count as work, the way she saw it.

No, she couldn’t do that. Why bother, anyway?

She fished out her earphones, neatly encased in their white pod, relatively protected from her anger. An abrasive song by Dry Cleaning, abruptly and without much ceremony, entered her head. “Unsmart Lady”.

Why had every song lately become so damn relevant? It was even as paranoid sounding as she felt. Was Spotify’s algorithm also in on the pity-fuck conspiracy?

“Leave me alone!” was what she wanted to shout at the broker whose call had woken her. Instead, all she did was reprimand him for calling so early and ask why he needed her mother’s death certificate in the first place.

“Once you obtain the certificate, I can submit it as proof to your medical aid. Then you’ll no longer be billed for the deceased dependant.”

She hung up and crashed back into the pillows.

Until then, her personal finances had hardly been a concern. But maybe starting to think about them would provide a real-world anchor to which she could attach goals, however small, that would help her get out of bed.

In the infinite wisdom of the algorithm, she had been recommended podcasts that offered advice like this, the most crucial being that it’s best to conquer your fears by facing them, like, head-on.

All she had to do was get up and go to Home Affairs with greater resolve than her previous attempt. The only question was when. When David had asked if she was “sorted” the last time, she made an excuse about it being too busy.

“Take all the time you need,” is what he kept telling her. She was benched for the rest of the audit anyway.

“Find purpose in the simplest of tasks,” affirmed Erika, the perky host of *Survive 2 Thrive*, her new favourite podcast. “You’ll be surprised by what that can spark.”

Taking things at face value, she’d begun to sense, was part of finding that purpose. There was no need for overthinking and the complications that arose from it. Fuck music and the complications it brought with it. Also, she’d noticed that since her waning interest in the higher pursuit of being critical, the influence of that pesky little nihilist within who’d been visiting her uninvited for some time was diminishing.

Although she still had a sense that her mind was cluttered with anxieties, they were being compartmentalised and ignored, if only momentarily. That ignorance was so kindly managed by Erika and her cohort.

“That you’re even thinking about getting out of bed today is an affirmation that you want to be alive.”

She surveilled the garden from between her bedroom curtains. Not a soul out there. She wondered when Neville's husband would make his way for coffee on the bench.

Driving out of the building one Sunday morning, she noticed several "For sale" signs sticking out from the pavement outside the entrance. Had her mother's death sparked this sudden rush to sell? Doubtful. She hardly left the building on weekends, which is when show days usually were. For all she knew, a cluster of "For sale" mushrooms popped up at the entrance every Sunday.

Looking down, it was hard to imagine her mother's killer prowling the lawns before entering the building on that horrible day. The garden seemed too calm, too peaceful.

Without her in it, the bed stood as a monument to her accomplishment. She'd go back to Home Affairs soon.

“Dear Haroun,” the email from Family Connect began, “We were pleased to hear from Gabrielle about your continued interest in adopting.”

Scroll-reading the rest of it, he gleaned that he needed to go to Home Affairs, no, the Department of Social Development, no, definitely Home Affairs, to pick up a form, fill it out and send it to the agency.

Although Google Maps suggested the Alex branch, he’d take a slow drive to Randburg through the leafy near-northwestern suburbs.

He texted Lesiba at around seven thirty, a polite enough time on a Friday morning to notify a colleague of his plan to take a long weekend. The truancy game was made easier than usual by a boss who was munching down buffet meals and taking group selfies, all thumbs up, at a 4-star hotel and conference venue somewhere in northern Europe. His only hope was that Lesiba didn’t have the same plan. Who would he tell then?

He’d not left the kitchen island since he woke up, a story in Vox about a flesh-eating parasite in Australia stared at him from the iPad screen, unread.

She planned to leave her apartment at 8am, hoping to get to Home Affairs shortly after it opened.

“If civic docs is what you need, this is where you go. It’s like in life – you’re born, then you get married, then you die. Isn’t that funny?” She was affirmed by Malebo Mabaso’s Google Review of the Randburg Home Affairs branch. Malebo was, after all, ranked Local Guide Level 5.

So far, she had only been born and would most likely skip the middle step and go straight to the last. Her mother, however, had completed all the steps plus the bonus round of divorce.

She was calmer in the car this time around. Erika’s latest episode, which she had saved for the drive, was about emptying the mind. “For us to occupy a peaceful space, we need to allow only peaceful energy in. Negative thoughts don’t serve us, all they do is pollute our space.”

She was then encouraged to “experience the idea” that spaces emptied mindfully were renewed spaces, to be nurtured with kindness. Pause for contemplation.

She passed a few strip malls demarcated by red or green palisade fencing. The strip mall closest to Home Affairs housed The SexXx Shoppe and a Domino’s, among a few other businesses she couldn’t make out. Approaching the Home Affairs parking lot, her eyes were once again drawn skywards to the concrete funnel tower ahead.

She pulled up into a sunny parking spot. An ID-photo hawker was approaching fast. It wasn’t the one who had asked if she was OK the last time.

“ID photos?”

“No.”

She gripped a plastic folder containing the BI-1663 form that Nadia had mostly filled out, a copy of her ID, a municipal bill as proof of address, and a Pilot BP-S Fine.

Her watch said 08:22. A huddle had already begun to form at the main entrance.

“What you here for?” A voice barked at her when she got to the front.

“Death certificate.”

The official’s expression softened slightly. She despised his pity, however miniscule.

“Let me check your documents.”

He rifled through the contents of her folder, snarling as he clicked his tongue and sucked at his teeth.

“Name, surname, ID number, telephone number and signature here.”

He smushed his forefinger into a page of his ring-bound register.

She did as he asked.

“You must go to births, marriages and deaths. Just down there, on the other side.”

She looked in the direction he pointed. The office stood at the opposite end of the compound, directly across from the checkpoint. A line had formed from the entrance of the office to about halfway up the pathway leading to where she stood. She walked towards the queue.

"ID photos?"

"Huh? No I'm looking for a bloody pen." His car was a mess.

"You going for ID?"

"I need an adoption form."

The man lowered his snaps and peeled away.

"Fucking hell, where's that pen?"

All the contents of the centre console were now on the passenger seat: dozens of crumpled flyers for car repair and tyre shops, a condom with a purple wrapper that said "Love Glove", a spaghetti ball of corded earphones and other cables. Two pairs of 3D movie glasses. Still no pen.

"You know where I'd be able to get the adoption form?" he called out to the ID-photo man, who lingered near the front of his car.

"You see that gate? Ja, go there."

The snake of people hadn't grown much since she had become part of it, just one tired-looking woman behind her holding a baby swaddled in a yellow blanket.

She noticed a man at the entrance negotiating with the guard who had checked her documents. He was lanky and had tousled, ear-length hair. He was gesturing to the guard, asking if he could use his pen. He hadn't come as prepared as she, but somehow he seemed unfazed. Was this a person who'd successfully emptied his head?

He began making his way in her direction after what looked like an altercation with the guard that involved much direction-pointing. The mid-morning sun was at his back and the excess of light gave him an aura. He walked with a slight hunch and took large strides, which gave him a goofy kind of charm, she supposed.

He wasn't sure he was joining the right queue. When he asked the official at the entrance where he was pointing exactly, the official just said "yes" and asked for his pen back.

Passing by a small face-brick office building that stood southeast from the front desk, he began to doubt his decision to head to the office directly opposite the main entrance. But that doubt was quickly neutralised when a woman standing in his chosen queue caught his eye.

Dressed in all black and with large sunglasses drawn over her face, she immediately reminded him of Jolene from the support group, but with tamer hair. But she also seemed more interesting than Jolene. Unlike Jolene, with her short skirt and black silk stockings, the woman in the queue wore slacks and a long, bulky coat whose cuffs covered most of her hands. She maintained an elegant stance while tapping a foot and clutching a plastic folder to her chest.

"It's very quiet here, everyone will probably leave around lunch anyway." Finally, a response from Lesiba, followed by a Simpsons-yellow thumb-up. Funny.

Bored in the queue, he searched "correct way to hang horseshoe". Because he was distracted by the woman in black standing two metres away, he managed to read only as far as the blurb of the article that Google threw up as the top hit on the subject. It became increasingly unlikely that he'd learn about how a horseshoe could either attract or repel luck just by the way it was hung.

A woman cradling a baby bundle stood between him and the woman in black. A couple had just arrived behind him.

He turned to the couple. "I'll be right back."

The man nodded and the woman scanned him suspiciously, chewing her gum with great purpose.

He sidestepped the woman with the baby and stood beside the woman in black, facing her profile.

He received no immediate response to his tentative hello. Did she have earphones in? He couldn't be sure. Her hair covered her ears. She could have been deaf. Or, more likely, she was ignoring him. He tapped her arm.

She shuddered when she felt a touch on her body and turned sharply to face the intruder. When she saw who it was, she regretted having ogled him earlier. Those few seconds were all it took.

"Yes?" She pinched out an earphone.

"Hi."

"Can I help you?"

He began to speak. She tried diverting more attention to Erika's voice in her other ear than to his, but it was a frustrating exercise. Giving Erika only half of her attention was insufficient. "... in the right queue?" she heard him say as Erika paused for another contemplation.

He could have been a foreigner. Mediterranean, maybe Middle Eastern.

"This is the queue for births, marriages and deaths, see." She pointed to the sign on the front door of the office.

"I see. I need to get a B-52 from. What are you here for?"

"Death certificate."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Ask someone who works here."

"I would, but I don't want to lose my place in the queue."

"[...]"

The way he said "sorry" revoked any benefit of doubt she had initially given him. He wasn't foreign, just slow. When would he leave her alone? She looked back to the place in the queue he had come from.

He followed the movement of her head. The couple he'd asked to keep his place was still there. Now the man, like his partner, also regarded him with suspicion. He signalled in their direction to give him a moment. They didn't seem to care either way.

"I'm Haroun."

"OK." She flicked up her sunglasses and stared at his slender but manly fingers.

As he expected, she was beautiful – pale olive skin, dark almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones. A nose somewhere between button and celestial.

“Put yourself out there, you never know what might happen. You’ve got this.” By some random cosmic force, Erika’s voice beamed clearly through her headspace.

“Azra.” She stuck out a hand.

“Good to meet you.”

“Do you always introduce yourself to people so soon?”

“I think so, yeah.”

In the time that passed since they met, she had learnt that he was an economist, of sorts, who worked for the government. His job title sounded fancy but only in the way most government job titles are made to sound more important than they are.

To her, he seemed more like one of the desperate academic types she had met through Akeel many years ago – living completely in their own heads without a clue about people even though they insisted that understanding and getting to know human nature, or humanity, was their primary pursuit in life.

Nonetheless, she continued the chat because he was not unpleasant to look at despite the air of confusion that surrounded him and how dishevelled he appeared that morning. And the queue was not moving an inch.

“I’m in the process of adopting a child.”

“Do you really want to adopt? Or do you just come to Home Affairs to chat with random people who actually have to be here?”

His very presence at Home Affairs was dubious, and seemed as if it could even have been part of a joke only he was in on. He asked her what she did for a living and she told him, and he tried to relate by saying that he had a few friends who were CAs. She hadn’t bothered to enquire any further, on the off chance that she might know one of his CA friends. And the queue still hadn’t moved.

By lunchtime, he was still next to her, making small talk. The thought of sneaking her earphones back in crossed her mind, assuming he wouldn’t have noticed because he loved to talk, in an odd, moping kind of tone, about himself – what music he liked, which restaurants he ate at and where he’d previously worked. She’d heard the word “yoga” somewhere in it all.

“I used to live in New York until a few years ago.”

“I lived there too. But that was a long time ago when I was still an intern.”

He went on about where he lived and what he did while there and she told him she had been to Brooklyn only maybe once the whole time she'd been there, and she found it uninteresting because she wasn't interested in the things that people there, and those who went on about Brooklyn and how interesting it was, were interested in.

He even managed to tell her that he was in a band when he was in university, to which she had said she preferred recorded music to live music, but still asked him what the name of his band was. When he told her she was underwhelmed, unsure of what to expect, really.

He had left the line saying he was going to find refreshments and that he'd be right back. He returned with the bottle of water she'd asked for.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

People in the queue were grumpy, restive even, but they persisted, even though it seemed it was becoming clear to everyone that their day spent waiting outside the births, marriages and deaths office was going to be in vain.

A person who looked like an official walked by and was haggled by people in the line who wanted to confront her but didn't want to lose their places in it. The official just walked by, shouting something like "Ja, ja, ja ... I'm going to check what's going on," leaving everyone with a view of her quaking backside as she climbed the few stairs leading into the office, never to return.

He'd begun asking her for her number just before 3pm. At first she thought he was joking, so she ignored it and continued looking ahead, thinking about whether she'd ever stood in a queue for this long before. Surely, she'd broken a personal record.

In frustration, mostly anger, people began leaving the queue. She even heard one man shouting "voetsek" and "fuck you" to no one in particular. She assumed the insults were directed at Home Affairs itself rather than anyone in particular.

Just before 3.30pm, someone stood at the top of the small staircase leading into the office and announced that they'd been having technical problems the entire day, something about connection to the national system being intermittent, and that they would not be able to help them and that everyone waiting should come back on Monday.

With disappointment and in some instances unveiled rage, people left the line, clicking their tongues and gesturing with a kind of dejection she at once found funny and sad. She couldn't be sure if his presence beside her for almost an entire day had made the experience any better. If he hadn't been around, she would have probably listened to more of Erika's podcast, which might, all things said, have been more beneficial to her personal growth and development.

He walked her to her car even though she hadn't asked him to.

"That's a nice car."

"Thanks."

She unlocked the car to a welcoming click. Until then, her car and everything else outside of Home Affairs seemed so distant. It was as if she'd just returned from another planet. She still had the bottle of water he had got for her earlier, still unopened. Still water.

"You still haven't answered my question."

His hunching and leaning, and general gangly-ness were, admittedly, sexy.

"And what was that?"

"I asked if I could have your number."

"Oh, right."

"Well, can I? I mean, may I, get your number?" He asked, almost imploringly.

"Sure, why not? (Put yourself out there, right?)"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Give me your phone."

"Great!" That thrill never died down.

She thought of giving him the wrong number, but it was easier to remember her own, so she typed it in, with a straight-faced emoji next to her name.

"Call only in an emergency, OK?"

From a distance, at the furthest point her eyes could see, she saw a figure. Vague at first, it slowly became clearer. Like a mirage scene in a movie, the watery image materialised to reveal someone yet unknown. She began to talk but couldn't immediately make out what she was saying.

Her words, spoken but not understood, turned into black sludge that oozed from her mouth. She stepped out of herself for a moment and saw the sludge covering her chin and rolling down her neck towards her chest. She was unclothed and desperate to make her words understood.

The figure drew closer but she could still not make out who or what it was. She tried calling out, but all this did was pump more black sludge out of her mouth, which eventually made her choke and cough with a furious intensity.

The figure drew closer still. Now she could make out long black hair flowing on either side of it. Everything around her was a sickly, pale grey except the direction from where the figure came, which was bright and golden. She wanted to say something but resisted, knowing that her words would come out as black sludge and that she would choke again. She began to cry, but her tears, too, flowed black down her cheeks.

The figure stood in front of her, unclothed as well but not covered in sludge. It was clean and pure, and the light emitting from behind it was blinding. As the figure gracefully lifted a hand and reached out to touch her face, she noticed that it was her mother. She turned away and cradled her own face with blackened hands, resisting a scream that seem buried deep within.

She woke up, startled. It wasn't yet 5am. She had heard on one of her podcasts that during the grieving process, the spirit of the dead existed only in the dreams and memories of the living. There was no mention of nightmares.

A few new messages appeared on her lock screen. She tapped on one of them and was led to WhatsApp. One message appeared in a group she thought she'd already left, whose purpose was to keep some of her varsity acquaintances in touch, but whose topics had since degenerated into miscellanies mainly concerning early motherhood, which didn't interest her in the least.

This message, which had come almost a month since the last one had been sent, to no reply, was a picture of a baby at a kids' party, posted by someone in the group who now lived in Australia. Clearly oblivious to the time difference. She tapped the name of the group, tepidly named "Class of 2012", scrolled down then decisively tapped exit group.

"You left," read the last message to the group after the post of the baby.

Back in the message centre, there were two unread messages, one from Helena and the other from Haroun. She tapped on Helena's.

"Hey you," is all it said, with the lipstick-red kiss mark emoji appearing alongside the text.

She'd only sporadically been replying to the clerk's messages lately. But Helena didn't seem to mind.

"Hiya."

One grey tick became two grey ticks, which became a pair of blue ticks.

"She lives!"

"Wow. Impressed. The sun's barely even out."

"I think I've told you, I'm early riser. Besides, I've been staring at my phone, waiting for days for you to respond."

"Ha ha."

She actively avoided even making the slightest eye contact with even the preview of his message. What could he have possibly said to her that he hadn't already said at Home Affairs? He was probably asking her out now. Isn't that how it worked? Pursued by two people, no less. How exciting.

“It’s Saturday.”

Without much delay, Helena was typing a response.

“It is! Do you have any plans?”

“Not really. Maybe you can help me with that.”

“I think I might know just the thing.”

Helena began typing again and she knew what the outcome would be. But, as she was reminded by Erika and her cohort of self-help podcasters, expecting certain outcomes shouldn’t interfere with one’s *experience* of the journey. In fact, the journey itself would be more rewarding if you ditched all expectations about the destination.

She’d become intrigued by the use of the word “journey” in the content she’d been streaming. Had it become more acceptable to view life as a journey rather than what it really was – a path that merely ran its course?

How long it would take before he called her? What would she do if he did? He seemed like the type who would call and leave a voicemail.

There was a distinct chill in the air, which had snuck in over the past week or so and that had been appearing consistently in the mornings and evenings. Her journey to this point had been less than “amazing”, another word used often in the motivational content. Nonetheless, she had noticed something of a shift towards it recently.

She contemplated offering her morning prayer, which had become so ingrained in her concept of time, but decided against it. “I’m a merry sinner,” she said to herself.

The advice to “not be hard on yourself” also featured prominently in the self-help discourse. The idea was wonderfully agnostic in that it alluded to a system only of soft consequences, if any, which was palatable, easily digested and vastly different to the kinds of hard-lined ideas she was brought up on. But, in its low-stakes, agnostic self-assurance, removed from the harsh realities of consequences, was it truly nourishing, like, for the soul? Although that’s what it was said to be, she highly doubted it.

“Am I a merry sinner?” she now asked herself.

A mere return to her previous discipline wouldn’t offer any answers; her current break was too detrimental to finding any sort of truly nourishing formula.

Why had her pursuit of normalcy become like starting a skincare routine, so daunting and costly?

She looked out the window and caught sight of a large bird, probably a hadeda, in flight – singular and with purpose. If it was alone, did it have any purpose? Just one cry for the day, she told herself, just one, as the tears rolled down.

She'd been crying long enough to start forming thoughts during the spells. They were all self-pitying, these thoughts. She looked ahead to the TV her mother watched, to the side table on which her mother kept her books and prayer beads and reading glasses. She looked to the dining table where her mother sat, for hours on end, seemingly content, probably grateful for her daughter's help.

She had never asked her mother how she felt, like, *really* felt, because she was too caught up in resenting the old woman for being there. She looked to the floor, to the spot she found her mother's lifeless body. "Sorry, mama."

She could sense the old woman all around her, her scent still deeply ingrained in the fibres of the couch, traces of her footsteps still imprinted on the rugs, and the sound of her voice, faint and witch-like, echoed around the flat. Regret all around her.

She looked at Helena's message when she finally stopped crying. "I'll come over in a couple of hours and we can take it from there?"

She replied with a thumbs-up emoji.

She tapped into his message, which came at around two that morning.

"Was great meeting you the other day. How're you doing?"

He must have been drunk, messaging a stranger at that hour and asking a stupid question. She wouldn't reply to him. Ever.

Weekends had never been her favourite to begin with, but they'd now taken on a terrifying edge. Maybe Helena would come over and just want to lie down on the couch with her and do nothing. How the expectations of the journey of the day ahead with Helena were quickly unfolding into hopelessness. She went back into their chat. "Bring booze." Her contribution to the day thus far, a limp thumbs up and a request for a numbing agent.

Thumbs up to numbs up.

"Hi ma'am, I have a miss Helen downstairs coming to see you."

"Hi Henry. Yes, OK. Please send her up."

"OK, ma'am."

Was Henry even his real name or had he just adopted it when he came here from Zimbabwe or whatever?

She looked at herself in the mirror and tried to make herself more presentable.

There was no point. She had let herself go. Her hair was a mess and her face was so crap she might as well have been a man, an ugly one at that.

A few soft knocks at the door.

"Hey."

"Hi!"

Helena looked fresh, brown paper bag in hand.

"Oh, sorry, let me unlock this gate. Just had it installed."

Helena removed the bottles of Absolut and Schweppe's tonic water from the paper bag, placed them on the coffee table and made her way to the kitchen.

She stared at the bottles on the table. She had never had alcohol in her apartment before. She was impressed that the clerk didn't complicate things with a six pack of beer or some shitty alcopop.

"Vodka, great idea!"

"I'm glad you think so."

Helena began kissing her on the neck.

"I half expected you to bring beer."

"Do I look like a beer drinker?"

Helena stood up and stretched out her belly. She hardly had anything even close to a belly.

"Apparently it's the skinny ones who drink the most beer."

"How's your morning been?"

"Honestly, I fell asleep after messaging you and woke up only when you got here."

"That I can see. But hey, take your time. Do what you need to do. I'll just make myself at home."

"Really?"

“Don’t mind me, I’ll just sit here and watch TV.”

“OK. Well, there’s Netflix, just press the Netflix button, and Amazon –”

“I know how to work a TV.”

“Good, then I’ll see you soon.”

She could not remember a time when she looked more haggard, uglier. It was as if the drawing in her office, *The Vortex*, had come alive and somehow transposed itself on to her face. The wrinkles had just appeared overnight – on her forehead, around her eyes, down her cheeks and around her mouth and chin.

She ran a finger along the ridges of the wrinkles, wondering if there was any truth to the saying that grieving ages you. Not only did she feel at least 10 or 15 years older, she looked it. She pulled her hair back from her forehead with one hand and stretched out the skin with the other, then drew her thumb and forefinger closer to each other, messaging the flesh that gathered between the two fingers.

This was not good. She took a step back from the mirror with her hands on either side of her body. Not good at all. She skewed her lips and snarled, as if inspecting a particularly gruesome wound, as she drew the same thumb and forefinger down her throat, feeling into the ridges of the lines that had developed on her neck. What next, wattle?

She looked away from the mirror, horrified. Maybe a hot shower would wash away the age she'd accrued since her mother's death.

"Looking fresh!"

"Did you fall asleep on the couch?"

"Maybe, but only for a short while."

"I figured I should at least get dressed."

"You look great! How is your skin so flawless?"

Flattery, nothing more. She had seen the wrinkles in the bathroom mirror.

"It's already past noon."

"You know what that means."

"I'll get ice."

Although Justine had insisted he shouldn't pick her up from the airport, he thought he'd surprise her at the arrivals terminal anyway.

He was still bit drunk from the previous night and unsure whether he should legally be driving. Luckily, Justine's flight was scheduled to land after midday, which gave him some time to straighten out.

Azra still hadn't replied. Two blue ticks next to his message, but nothing. "Last seen today at 10:52". Why hadn't she replied yet? How long would he give it until he called? Would Justine being around just complicate matters? The way things stood, Justine was simply an old friend. He still had no idea what her intentions were with him, but his best way forward was to take things at face value. She had not mentioned anything about getting back together, neither had she hinted at it, as far as he could tell.

Azra was new and exciting, far more interesting to pursue than an ex from years ago. Besides, if what Percy said was true about "Western women", he had nothing to worry about because she wouldn't be interested in him either.

The more he rationalised, the more he was able to calm himself, and the more he was emboldened to continue his pursuit of Azra. He walked over to the balcony and for the first time noticed a chill in the air. How he wished people could be as predictable as the Joburg weather.

Although the volume was turned down low, he recognised the song playing through the Celestions. If it were any other song, it would have simply faded into the background.

"Oh, The State cut off my arms / And The State tore my eyes with her nails / Hey, I was just put on this earth / A bad wind to trash the sails of all you evil men!" Dan Bejar screeched over the band's anxious yet strangely confident arrangement. Still, the meaning evaded him, like that of Percy's translated paintings.

Was he missing something crucial in life, the piece of the jigsaw puzzle that, once in place, would bring everything into sharp focus? Would "the state" – of things, of himself – become clearer for him to make meaning and act in wisdom rather than react in ignorance?

He rubbed at his temples as the song went on frustratedly, matching his mood entirely, making sense only in that it made no sense at all. The power of music once again snatching at him then grabbing him fully and thrusting him headfirst into a maelstrom whose inherent violence was nothing more than dire uncertainty.

He scrolled to “Azra” and called. It rang out to voicemail. “Hi, it’s Haroun. We met at Home Affairs. Just calling to say hey and find out if you got my message earlier. Hope to chat soon.”

His hands were shaking and beads of sweat had developed on his forehead. “I need to change my shirt, then I need to get a grip.”

The song ended with a few mild strokes of the guitar, as if Bejar had only managed to get the beast back into its cage rather than tame it. The playlist continued to an unknown song that faded into the background.

He spotted Justine walking out of the terminal pushing a trolley with one suitcase on it. She looked rough, her hair a mess, wearing sweatpants and a ruffled sweatshirt. Zombie-like, she pushed the trolley aimlessly, headphones still on and reaching behind into her backpack for something but not finding it.

She peered up to scan the area a few times but gave up. He decided to delay contact for a few more moments, as a joke. As she walked in his direction and closer to him, he ducked into the crowd of people still waiting for their arrivals.

Finally, she noticed him after he exaggerated one of his movements. As if someone had just injected life into her, she leapt towards the crowd that he had made his way to the front of.

“Haroun!”

She kissed him on the cheek. Her eyes were bloodshot and her skin was made reflective with a thin layer of oily sweat.

“How was your flight?”

“Oh my God, worst flight ever.”

“Here, let me take that.” He took the handles of the trolley and led her towards the exit.

“I thought you’d fly business.”

“I know, right? I should have.”

“I booked economy so I could get some extra days in the hotel. It was a trade-off.”

“I see.”

He was relieved when Justine had asked him to drop her off at her hotel. She needed to shower and rest. She thanked him, almost too much, for picking her up directly from the airport instead of from the train station.

She would get in touch with him soon, when she had done all the things that constituted “decompressing”. He advised her not to attempt walking more than 500 metres from her hotel because Johannesburg wasn’t a walking city and you had to drive to get to most places. She said she didn’t plan on walking anywhere, for a while at least.

At the hotel drop-off just outside the lobby, before she got out of his car, she left her hand on his thigh for a bit longer than he’d expected. Was this a hint?

He was almost certain that Justine, his ex-girlfriend from another lifetime in New York, was not in his hometown purely for work. The thought made him anxious. He turned the volume of his car stereo all the way up.

His phone had not vibrated at all in his pocket since he left the voicemail for Azra. He felt stupid now and wanted nothing more than for the ground to split open and swallow him whole. But if it were that easy, he would have disappeared a long time ago.

Rounding the last corner before his building, he felt dread seeping into his consciousness. He guessed it was the type that first manifested in mood then entered other faculties, such as sustained thought and action, as it grew bolder.

Although he hoped his feelings of dread and resultant thoughts wouldn't become dreadful actions, he couldn't help but wonder if it was inevitable. What if this were the only clarity he'd get from the universe about "the state"?

How do you stop dreadful actions if they've already been set in motion by a mood that would inevitably influence thoughts, he wondered. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pang driving through his head, as if his body was already warning him against any attempts at philosophising, given his current state. But who was it who said, "When all else fails, philosophise"? He was sure it was someone famous, someone very well respected, possibly someone who had won an important prize or lifetime achievement award, or something.

Driving past the bar where not too long ago he and Percy sat, speaking about nothing, really, he saw people sitting at tables on the pavement. They spoke animatedly. He couldn't help but wonder if they, too, merely spoke about nothing; if they, too, were whiling away their time, hoping to one day be swallowed into a grey nothingness that held no other promise than offering the certainty that it was indeed a grey nothingness and that it did indeed swallow you whole.

She wasn't sure how she'd got to the bar they were at. It seemed Helena was totally in control of their evening, which she didn't mind. She was alive and relatively happy, if not sufficiently numbed to her experience, which gave her a kind of satisfaction at the very least.

She couldn't immediately make out the area the bar was in. She looked up from the table on which she had desperately been inspecting a Heineken logo and looked through a large window at the opposite end. The view was mostly obscured by other bodies and the smoke they released from their mouths and noses.

The bodies were mostly male, and young, probably also recent graduates like Helena. So this was the clerk's "set". She couldn't fault Helena for taking her to a place where she simply couldn't fit in even if she tried.

Somewhere within the drone of the crowd noise and the blaring music, she could pick out Helena's voice, which seemed to have become raspy. Had she been shouting all night?

Helena was speaking to a group of men, only one of whom seemed to have, as yet, found a mate, judging by how he clung to her from behind. Until then, she had no idea of the kind of power the clerk seemed to wield over men. Helena was indeed a catch. After all, she herself had been completely taken from the first time they'd met.

It appeared that Helena was explaining to the group, something about a board sport she had recently tried while on holiday. It was refreshing to see her interacting with her own kind, in the youthful and unrefined way they interacted.

She knew that the clerk was putting on a show for her, acting more mature than she was, pretending to be experienced in how to console others and be there for them. "You little bitch," she said to herself, "you don't know anything." She and the clerk made eye contact over the distance and she grinned what she imagined to be a Cheshire Cat grin, all knowing and vicious but ever so inviting.

"Come over here!"

She stood up, smoothed the lapels of her coat and walked over to the group, taking dainty steps and trying to appear sexy. "Hi," she said, covering her mouth with the fingertips of one hand and blinking incessantly. Apparently, she had read somewhere, that men, in all their stupidity, found these gestures irresistible.

“Guys, this is Azra,” Helena said, bringing her into the circle.

The young men seemed nervous as they each said hi. The girlfriend, thickset with auburn hair and a pretty face, who would probably grow more into her body only to hate it and resent her parents for what she had inherited from them, genetically, smiled a fake smile that suggested solidarity.

Helena stood next to her with one arm around her waist, which made her feel uncomfortable.

“So, what are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing much, this and that,” said one of the young men, his voice hardly fully formed yet, bearing traces of an adolescent squeak. Another giggled stupidly, while one of them took a big drag on his cigarette.

She looked at Helena and an awkward silence settled among the group. She wondered if her presence had somehow dampened the mood. The clerk looked back at her and smiled. “How are we doing for drinks?”

“That’s exactly what I came over to find out.” She looked around the group, trying to sound perky, wondering if Helena had known them or if they had just met.

“I suppose we do all need drinks,” Helena said, “let me go.”

“No, no, I’ll go.”

It turned out that everyone, including Helena, wanted beer, except for the girlfriend, who was drinking water because she was the designated driver. She stepped between other groups and some stragglers on her way to the bar. Everyone talked incessantly but without much intensity. It was all a parody.

She leaned against the bar and placed both her elbows on it, in no rush to get the bartender’s attention. She looked ahead into a Bailey’s mirror hanging just above the surface area on the inside of the bar she was sure there was a name for. When it came to drinking, everything had a name.

In the mirror, between the lettering and the logo, which depicted an Irish countryside, she could see most of her face. Although it was mostly obscured by the smoke and reflections of other people standing around at a distance, she could still see the wrinkles, viciously scored on to her face by grief.

She inspected the tops of her hands. They, too, seemed weathered, like those of an old woman. She moved her hands away and lifted her elbows off the sticky surface of the

bar counter. Reaching into the pockets, she felt a bunch of keys in one hand and her phone in the other.

She began by scrolling through emails she had already read, refreshing incessantly but knowing that nothing new would appear this late on a Saturday night. Tiring of that, she switched to her call log and saw that he'd tried calling. He left a voicemail, obviously.

It was way too loud in the bar to listen to it. She switched to WhatsApp and opened Haroun's unanswered message.

"You awake?"

It was almost 1am and she had 6% battery left. The grey ticks below her message soon turned to blue. "Online" appeared below his name, then "typing..." in italics.

"What a great surprise! Yes, I am awake."

"Can you drive?"

"Yes, why?"

"Come pick me up." She tapped the plus sign and shared her pin.

In no time, she had received a message from him saying that he was outside the bar and that she should come out because he was double parked. She looked towards Helena, who was still in the thick of things with her group of friends, hardly paying attention to anything else going on around her.

She slipped out of the bar, feeling accomplished. She thought she'd sobered up nicely, but who could tell, really?

She saw him sitting in his car – was it an Audi? – tapping anxiously on the steering wheel, constantly checking the rear-view mirror. He was probably over the limit. She'd better hurry; if the cops caught him, there went her ride.

She knocked on the window and expected him to roll it down, in which case she'd act like a hooker in a movie and ask him what he's looking for tonight, papi. Instead, he reached across and opened the passenger door. How rude.

"Hey, get in, there are cops everywhere."

"Yes, sir."

He turned off the hazards and moved towards the intersection. She looked out the window and saw someone, a young man, probably one of the punters at the bar she had just been in, throwing up on to a shopfront next door.

"What brought you here, of all places?"

"I'm fucking one of the interns at work."

"Makes sense. Where am I dropping you off?"

She didn't want to answer immediately. Instead, she got a good look at him. His hair, wavy and dark, was greasy. He had a lot more beard than when they had met. His long, slender forearms, exposed by means of rolled-up shirt sleeves, were hairy but his hands were nonetheless delicate but manly at the same time.

"Do you always wear dress shirts on the weekend?"

"If you must know, I was in bed when you called and had nothing on. This shirt was the first thing I grabbed."

"Well, it looks nice."

He drove slowly.

"I'm glad we're not going to Randburg." She reached for the volume dial on the centre console.

“Randburg. Why would we be going there?”

“Home Affairs, remember?” She turned up the volume. Not the type of music she’d listen to, some screechy male singer with a good vocabulary but very clearly sad. “What is this?”

He couldn’t hear her.

He turned the music down as the car slowed to a halt at a red traffic light.

“So, where to?”

“Killarney.”

“OK.”

For the rest of the trip, she contemplated whether to ask him up to her apartment. What difference would it make, she thought, sleeping with two people in one day? It was probably the best outcome in any case, having a woman and a man – the pinnacle of choice.

Tomorrow, when she was alone, she would sit and weigh the experiences in terms of benefits and shortfalls, profitability/return, gross margin, net margin, return on capital employed. Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation.

Somewhere along the way he had asked her which building she lived in and when she told him, he said he knew it well because an old friend used to stay there. She wished he wouldn't talk, because when he spoke, he suddenly became insufferable. Always some friend somewhere.

When they reached her building, he parked in the street just outside the front entrance. She didn't know whether he expected to come up or if he just wanted to hang out in the car and talk.

"Do you want to come up?"

"Sure, I mean, if that's what you want."

She looked to the front entrance, where the night guard sat, the small screen of his TV flickered and illuminated his face in the darkness. From outside, she couldn't tell if he was asleep. She couldn't remember the last time she had come home this late.

The night guard sat up when she buzzed herself in. He squinted his eyes and the overhead light magically flashed on and illuminated the entire entrance hall.

"Good evening, ma'am."

She had never met this guard before. She moved closer to his desk and inspected him, for no reason other than to find his nametag. Dumí.

"Hi Dumí. I don't think we've met. I'm Azra. I live in number 34, on the third floor."

Dumí stood at attention. "Oh. Yes, miss. Yes, yes."

Was he guilty for having been caught sleeping on the job?

"OK, then. Good to meet you, and have a good night."

She turned to Haroun and tilted her head ever so slightly.

While waiting for the old lift to descend, she grabbed him by his belt and pulled him closer to her.

She ran the fingers of one hand through his hair and brought his mouth to hers and kissed him wildly. He reached around her waist with one arm and held her chin with his free hand and kissed her back.

Then the ding of the lift as it reached ground. They straightened themselves out.

She looked back at Dumitru, who stood dead still, staring at them. She winked at the guard and stepped into the lift.

As the doors slapped shut, he watched as she took a deep breath and sighed it out, as if the curtains had just come down on a performance. He was ambivalent about his lift boner.

He lifted the covers as gently as he could to not disturb her as she slept stiffly on her side. When last did he have to gather his clothing in a strange apartment in the wee hours? He had no way of telling what was where: briefs, pants, shirt. And the damn socks and shoes?

He also wasn't sure what he'd do when he found his clothes. He didn't want to simply creep out and never speak to her again. He wanted it to be more than a one-night thing. But now his head was pounding and all he wanted was to go home. He pictured himself on the walk of shame across the hallway, then in the lobby, eventually having to ask the guard, not without some embarrassment, to let him out.

His best plan of action, to facilitate further interactions with her, was to find his clothes, get dressed and wait for her to wake up. Where would he wait? The lounge? The dining area? Surely that would be creepy, to find some guy dressed and waiting at your dining table.

But where were his fucking socks? He searched around in relative darkness, with the clothes he had managed to find bunched up and held over his crotch. The only light he had was a sliver of predawn that snuck its way through a gap in the curtains.

He spotted one sock lying limp against the skirting under the window. As he moved to pick it up, he noticed the other lying not too far from it. He had a vague recollection of removing his shoes in the hallway as he entered, so he stalked, the bunched-up clothes still held to his crotch, across the room, as silently as possible. When he reached the door, he noticed a rolled-up prayer mat standing against the side of the cupboard. She didn't strike him as religious.

She turned over and felt around beside her. Relief. He was not there. She reached for her phone, which had run flat. She needed water.

She tugged at the charging cable lying on the bedside table and stuck it into the phone. It would take a while before her phone revived itself. She thought about whether Helena had been trying to get hold of her and if the clerk had been worried. She sensed a presence in her apartment. Great, he had not left after all. If he were indeed still around, she hoped to God he wouldn't try and make breakfast.

She picked up a pair of pyjama bottoms on her way to the bathroom. Oh, Mama, she thought, your sudden departure has turned me into my true self – a fucking slob.

Avoiding eye contact with herself in the mirror but failing, she splashed water over her face, then crouched over and, cupping one hand, took large gulps straight from the tap.

Time to face the guy in her apartment who overstayed his welcome, but not before checking her phone. The sliver of red within the tiny battery icon indicated that it had only just managed to resuscitate itself. She tapped into her messages and was surprised to see none from Helena. Just one unread message, from Nadia, at 3am. Thinking about you. Hope you're good. Blah, blah.

She knew he was still there. She could smell it.

"You're still here."

He closed the old magazine he was flipping through and flung it on to the coffee table. It skidded on the surface and fell to the ground.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I'll get that."

He reached over the coffee table but stumbled. Luckily, he caught himself just before collapsing and tumbling over it and crashing into the TV.

She was annoyed at first but then became amused.

"I'm glad you find it funny."

"Thanks for not falling on to my TV."

"Now that would've have been a complete fuck-up, wouldn't it?"

"What are you still doing here?"

Her complete switch from hot to cold had startled him.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just wanted to say that I really enjoyed hanging out last night."

"You could've texted me."

"I wanted to tell you in person."

"I guess now you have."

As Erika explained in one of her podcasts, establishing boundaries leads to a greater sense of self and, in turn, self-respect.

"Yeah. I guess I have. I'll be on my way then."

Despite being kicked out, he held hope in her giggling and the fact that they had slept together. She'd want to see him again, he knew. Something told him she'd be worth the effort.

Also, she found, establishing boundaries might be easier for her than most other people. Some would call her approach cold, so what? At least she was in control.

"Have a nice day." She said, finally, as she saw him out.

"I'll text you."

"The guard will buzz you out."

It felt like ages since he last sat at his desk. It was a mess. He reached over his laptop and bundled some loose sheets of paper. Ugh. What was the point? But if he were to pursue the pretty girl who lived in the neat apartment in Killarney, he'd have to start tidying up.

Tidiness begins with stacking. He reached for other documents and miscellaneous sticky notes littered around his workspace. Once he was done stacking, he'd begin picking up the bits of stationery flung across the surface that seemed more like debris than functioning items. There were a few pens and some highlighters; a large stapler, lying on its side, which looked like it had been in the department for decades; there was a staple remover, newer than the stapler; and a large, yellowing 12-digit Sharp calculator, which he hardly used.

He picked up an orange sticky note on which on the letters "strfkr" were written in blue pen. He crumpled it up and tossed it under his desk. It didn't get close to landing in the bin. Why was he doing this again?

"What were you doing there, mate?" Lesiba inspected him with a bemused expression.

"Oh, Les, hey. I'm just tidying my desk."

"Nice, I like the sense of pride and ownership."

He couldn't tell if Lesiba was just fucking with him but he thanked him anyway.

"Did you manage to sort out what you needed to at Home Affairs?"

"Home Affairs?"

"Last Friday."

"Oh, right, yeah. Home Affairs. No, actually, they were having some system problem so."

"But you said you just needed to collect a form?"

So he was just being fucked with. "You know how it goes, fucking Home Affairs."

"Anyway, the boss is back today. I wonder what he has in store for us."

"I wonder."

Lesiba was still using the vegan mug. He'd clearly assumed ownership of it and probably considered it a prized item in the silent war for petty office dominance. Why would Lesiba want to provoke discord?

"You OK? You seem distant."

“All good. Just thinking about what the boss man might want next.”

“I guess we’ll soon find out. See you in the meeting.”

“Later.”

There was something about the low-stakes nature of most things going on in his life that, instead of being a source of comfort, was unsettling. Although he had shown interest in adopting, he had not yet committed to anything; although his ex-girlfriend was in the same city, and seemed to want to rekindle something, he had not yet responded to her advances; and although it was possible for him to do important things at work, he simply chose not to.

The only word to effectively diagnose his current state was “languor”. He was languishing, simply going through whatever gentle and inconsequential motions presented themselves to him at any given time. Was this the early onset of the midlife crisis his therapist had been warning him about if he didn’t – didn’t what? – if he didn’t completely turn his entire life around to become an active participant, an *agent*. What a fucking mission. Therapy was a joke, in any case.

He had read somewhere that there’s a critical distinction between mere rumination and self-awareness, with the former leading only to an endless loop of languishing. The latter, however, entailed working on those identified aspects of languor to turn them into meaningful joy. Love, he had also read, was generative. The more you give, the more you’re likely to receive. All bullshit. Why was he even thinking about this?

He stared into the locked iPad screen, black yet reflecting his own face. “You are a failure.” He unlocked the iPad and set a reminder to make an appointment to see his therapist. Even their sessions were loose and unregimented.

Dineo, an underling whose cubicle was directly across from his office, was a recovering alcoholic. It was the first thing she’d told him when she started at the Treasury. She had a printout of the Serenity Prayer tacked on to the cubicle divider beside her monitor.

“God, grant me the serenity –”

Just then, a woman in high heels walked across their workspace towards his boss’s office. What business did she have there? Was she going to be in on their upcoming meeting? Serenity Prayer boners were promising.

His thoughts drifted to Azra. He had never met a CA like her before, not like the ones he knew, whose profession had gradually shaped them into cardboard cutouts of their younger selves who might have been idealistic or even vibrant but instead chose a path of least resistance into normalcy – spouses, children, dogs, large properties, etcetera.

“Look, if you’re going to get bored and complain the whole time, I’d rather you not come.”

They sat at their usual table, looking on to the pavement.

Already into his fourth or fifth round, he watched the sun go down and the cars go by, capsules transporting their occupants to larger capsules, where they’d spend their nights, encapsulated, in the relative safety and comforts they’ve afforded themselves simply by driving this route to and from work consistently.

Who was it who said, “Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds”? He sipped his vodka with the blind adolescent hope that it didn’t linger on the breath. Percy seemed to be in a pensive mood, probably stoned.

“I want to come, Harry. Don’t worry about me. Did you do your homework?”

“I think we should get an Uber. I’m not driving there.”

Percy nodded and continued his brooding, or stoned contemplation, or whatever it was he was up to.

He checked his messages even though he knew she hadn’t replied. He scrolled to Justine’s name. Was she still decompressing? For someone who seemed so enthusiastic about seeing him, she had been awfully quiet.

“So, how’s Joburg treating you?” He couldn’t help himself. He buried his phone deep into his pocket.

Damnit! Were Percy’s translated paintings addressed to him, an ode to his desperation? Or had he himself manifested the desperations that Percy wrote and/or painted about?

Either way, he couldn’t escape the thought that Percy was judging him. Was he the artist’s unwitting case study, an embodiment of the desperation the painter purported to be such a keen observer of?

“Hey, Harry, do you think the folks at your meeting are going to think we’re adopting together? I mean, I’m clearly gay and you – fuck, look at you.”

The scout hall seemed ominous from the unlit pavement, perched on a foundation of rocks excavated, like, a hundred years prior. Although he could see few figures standing and chatting on the veranda, which was lit in a dull yellow, he couldn’t recognise them. He wondered if Jolene would be there.

"A scout hall, how quaint." Percy slammed the car door shut and began his ascent.

"Are you going to sign in?"

"Of course!"

The way Percy was dressed would raise any alarm bells at an adoption workshop: tight black three-quarter length slacks; long silk blouse, tattered in places, with a pattern of multicoloured feathered pens in the primary colours; and large, unlaced combat boots.

"OK, go over there. That lady, her name is, fuck, what *is* her name? It's Patsy, or something like that."

Percy began to laugh very loudly.

The couple standing a few feet away, the man in a grey suit and the woman in a black suit, looked scornfully at them through wire-rimmed glasses. He waved at them but they turned up their noses and turned their backs in unison.

"Strange."

"Do you know those idiots?"

"Go sign in, see you in a bit."

As he entered the hall, he saw Jolene leaning against the wall, speaking with a couple. He waved and made his way there. Why was everyone carrying folders?

"Jolene, how are things?" he cut between Jolene and one half of the couple.

"Hey," she gestured for the customary introductions. "I'm sorry, I've totally forgotten your name."

"Harry."

He shook the hand of the man, tall and slender with late-stage balding and the woman, also tall and slender, her long blonde hair pulled tightly over her head.

"Mitch. Hi."

"Donelle."

"Good to meet you."

He looked back at Jolene, who wore a black pantsuit. Her hair was wild and crashed over the lapels of her jacket, which he noticed had shoulder pads.

"How are things with you?" she asked.

"Yeah, good." He lied. What was he supposed to say?

"Mitch, Donelle and I were just discussing our homework. What did you think?"

"Homework?"

“Wait, don’t tell me, dog ate it?” said Mitch, laughing and encouraging the others to laugh as well.

The three of them laughed an uppity laugh as he tried to disguise his ensuing whimper.

They continued laughing, and with that, his interest in Jolene had waned to the point of loathing.

“You know, I’m actually quite far into the process.”

He could tell they were suspicious.

“I might actually be a proud new dad within the next few days.”

“Really?” Jolene raised a thin eyebrow that looked like it could have been mostly pencilled in, badly.

He spotted Percy speaking with an older woman who could have been one of the organisers. He seemed to have been behaving well enough, although he couldn't be sure of the kind of things he was saying.

"Yeah, really," he said, finally, to the three fuckers in front of him.

"I have a really good lawyer. Her name is Gabrielle."

"Would that be Gabrielle Sheer?"

Trust Mitch and Donelle to have the same fucking lawyer.

His vodka buzz had just been sucked dry by these vampires.

"Yeah, that's right. Gabi Sheer. Wow, small world."

"Indeed. Great lawyer, but –"

Just as Mitch raised his all-knowing finger to draw his attention to something, Percy came to the rescue.

"Great bunch of people you have here, Harry."

"Percy! This is Jolene, Mitch and Donelle." He tried to diffuse Percy's swashbuckling entry.

He looked behind the painter only to notice that he had left a fair bit of consternation in his wake, from the old woman he saw him speaking with earlier, and a few others, including the couple in black and grey suits from earlier. What had Percy been going around saying?

"Oh, how nice," Percy offered his hand, palm down. No one shook it.

He and Percy burst out laughing without abandon.

"I think it's about to start. Shall we?"

Donelle clutched on to Mitch for dear life and the couple walked off in haste. Jolene followed and flashed him an intense, disgusted stare.

"Shall we?" he said to Percy, mimicking Mitch's uppity tone. He and Percy locked arms.

At that point, he was compelled to adopt whatever clownish reaction to the crowd that his friend had. It seemed Percy had read the room more deeply than he, and his reading suggested that these people, wallowing in their desperation but coated in a veneer of snobbery and self-importance, were not worth the effort of affording decency to.

"I'm so glad I came," Percy whispered to him. They eventually found seats at the back. The couple sitting beside them seemed hardly appreciative of their arrival.

"What the hell have you been up to?"

"What do you mean, 'up to'?"

Percy stared at his shoes, obviously concealing a laughter that threatened to erupt into a thunderous roar.

Patience had taken the podium and began readying her presentation the same way she did in the introductory session.

"Who's that?"

"That's Patience."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Patience began, "I'm glad that most of you have returned. Let's get straight to it. If you've completed the exercise in preparation for this session, by now you'd already know that this evening we're going to be splitting up into groups to make our engagements more intimate and meaningful."

He stopped scrolling and looked ahead. He was in high school again, sitting with a sinking feeling in his stomach, anticipating wrath for not doing his homework.

"I warned you, Harry."

The man sitting beside Percy shot him a lower-your-voice stare.

"How the hell did you know I had homework?"

"How the hell didn't you know!"

A "ssshh" came from somewhere close by, possibly the row in front of them.

"You shush," said Percy.

He noticed that Patience had stopped her address and was looking directly at them.

"Please, gentlemen," she said calmly, "let's continue with what we came here for this evening."

He nudged Percy, fully aware of his regression into this prepubescent state but feeling powerless to stop it, let alone wrest control of it. He was glad Percy had come along. Somehow, he felt that what had transpired until then had put things into perspective, however embarrassing it had been.

They remained in their seats as the other participants broke off into groups. He anticipated a reprimand from Patience. Percy stared at the ceiling without an apparent care in the world.

The exit was shut for the session and there was no one at the information desk. He was stuck, trapped, watching uninteresting theatre until intermission at least. All he could do was be *that* member of the audience, the one who'd tapped out and was merely waiting to leave. Should he apologise for arriving drunk, or should he simply skulk away into the night, never to think about or be seen on the adoption scene again? The latter option was tempting, but he felt the need for at least some redemption, of dignity mostly, especially since he had sobered up considerably and shame had begun to replace his drunken belligerence.

"I think I'm going to apologise."

"To who? For what?"

"To Patience. For arriving drunk, for not doing my homework."

"Don't be stupid. No one gives a shit."

Patience was making her way over. By then, he and Percy's presence had fallen into stark contrast with the rest of the participants, who diligently engaged in their sharing exercise in groups of four or five.

"Gentlemen. I see you haven't broken off into a group. That's fine, but have you been discussing the exercise?" She looked directly at him.

"I'm afraid not."

"And how about you? Were you even at the previous meeting?"

"No. I tagged along with him, just to see, nothing more."

Patience's body language had now become firm. "Must I remind you of the purpose of these meetings? You do know that they are voluntary? You are under no obligation to be here if you're not serious about adopting."

“Ja, ja, ja,” said Percy, “there’s no need to remind us. We would actually like to leave as soon as it becomes possible.”

“Well, sir, you know where the door is. I can assure you that it is not locked.” She pointed in the direction of the exit.

Percy stood up and dragged the plastic chair on the linoleum floor, which emitted a shudder and screech.

“Thanks for your understanding, ma’am.” He tried salvaging the situation, but it was useless, Percy had destroyed any means of redemption. He turned and followed Percy, who had already stomped his boots halfway across the hall.

“Shall we?” Percy crooked an elbow above his hip, inviting him to link arms.

He ignored the gesture. He was angry, but he knew that it wasn’t Percy who caused his anger.

For the first time that night, he felt at ease. Finally, back at the bar, his happy place. By then he’d already rationalised their behaviour at the meeting. Percy had only brought out what he’d been feeling, or not feeling, all along.

The truth was that he didn’t want to adopt. He liked the idea of finding purpose in parenting, but in practice, it would probably just be rubbish. Not for him. He was glad that all it took was attending two meetings to figure that out.

He wanted to tell Percy that he was grateful to him for prompting this realisation, but he didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. After all, what his recent behaviour had shown was that he was desperate for some kind, any kind, of affirmation. His expression of gratitude, he knew, would only serve as yet another accomplishment in the painter’s extensive list of proofs that he was indeed desperate and pathetic.

The streetlights cast an orangey glow over the pavement. He took comfort in the dullness, in the abject incompetence of the lamps to truly illuminate. He likened this effect to Percy having been the catalyst for his realisation. The artist didn’t aim to enlighten. All he did was shed partial light, which served only, in all its refractory abilities, to obfuscate and stir up inner turmoil.

He decided not to check his phone. Fuck it. If they didn’t want to respond, then fuck them. He became paranoid that word would somehow get out to his sister, via Gabrielle, via that arsehole Mitch, that he had behaved badly at the support group meeting.

“Harry.”

“Yeah?”

“May 20. Save the date.”

"Who's Haroun?"

She tilted her phone away from the clerk's eyeline.

"No one. I mean, he's just this guy I met at Home Affairs."

"Sorry, did you say Home Affairs?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to get ready for work."

Helena drew the curtains and let in an abrupt flood of sunlight. Temporarily blinded, she was annoyed that she now had to squint at her phone. It had been more than two weeks since she and Haroun slept together. She was surprised he hadn't yet been in touch.

"Hi. How are you?" she hit send.

He didn't respond immediately. She was surprised again.

Helena was already dressed and ready when she got out of bed. By then, the clerk had become used to the fact that there was simply no food in her apartment, so there was no dance around breakfast. She knew that on some level she was probably malnourished or at least heading in that direction, but she felt fine. More than fine, in fact. The end of two relationships, with her mother and with food, had coincided.

It had been a while since she prayed. As a girl, she was taught at madrassah that the prayers of those who had intoxicants running in their bloodstreams were not accepted. Based on this, she had no reason to pray because her prayers would be ignored. That one could so easily be cast out from something they had devoted a large part of their life to was deflating. Madrassah was also horseshit. Waste of time.

Her supply of black clothing seemed endless. The cheap Macy's coat she'd been wearing every day had become the perfect coverall.

"Oh, hey. It's you." Why hadn't Helena left yet?

"Who else could it be? Your friend from Home Affairs?"

"His name is Haroun."

"Ooh, hunky Haroun."

"How're you getting into work?"

"Uber, as usual."

Based on what she learnt from the many cheap romance novels she'd read, situations like these almost always backfired. There was never a peaceful solution in a love triangle, no matter how amiable, tolerant, cool or permissive all the players pretended to be.

But maybe the chaos would be necessary. As Erika would say, chaos is helpful – it would point her to an “underlying truth”, or at least a “coherence in desire” that would later translate into ambition.

“Hey! All good, thanks. So nice to hear from you.”

“Yes, it's been a while.” She typed immediately.

In less than two minutes, she felt some steady vibrations in her palm. She hit the green button.

“Hi.”

“Thought I'd rather call while I'm in the train. I hope you don't mind.”

“It's not like I have a job to go to or anything.” She pictured herself in a dated romance novel or a cheesy 90s RnB video, twirling the cord of the receiver between her fingers, biting her lip, wearing just panties and bra.

“Are you still at home?”

“It's OK, I have some time now.”

In the 20 minutes or so that they spoke, he had caught her up on the goings on in his life, at times in painful detail. The main thing was his decision to abandon his adoption plans. She learnt that the decision wasn't easy and that it was made after some ordeal, which he said he'd prefer not to discuss on the phone.

"I thought you were joking about the whole adoption thing anyway."

"I might have well have been. But hey, at least I met you because of it."

"Why was meeting me such a good thing?"

"I think we have a deep, like, connection."

It felt crazy to be speaking to him, not only because it was so early in the morning on a weekday, but because it was strange how willing he was to disclose such intimate details about himself on public transport. She also couldn't say whether she shared his sentiment about their deep connection.

He told her that a friend of his was having an exhibition soon and asked if she'd go with him to the opening

"Art is really not my thing, but I'll see. Can I bring a friend?"

"Can I take you out for dinner in the week?"

"Sure. But you need to get back to me with a plan because I'm looking for patterns in chaos to translate my desires into concrete ambitions."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"This is Hatfield Station," she heard in the background, coming from his side of the line.

"Hey, I've got to go. Speak to you in the week, OK?"

Maybe he was projecting, or imagining things, but he sensed that Justine sensed he was holding back on telling her that he'd met someone and the chances of them getting back together were slim. Was that what she even wanted? Why the hell did he take her to a Chinese restaurant, of all places?

"You remember Jimmy, right?"

"Jimmy?"

"The chef, our friend."

"Oh Jimmy, yeah, right."

"He's married now. Can you believe?"

"Wow."

"I know, right, like *the* biggest commitment-phobe."

"His wife must be great."

"Wife?"

"Right, sorry, husband."

"Are you OK? You seem someplace else."

"Sorry, long day at work."

"Oh, one of my colleagues, Kat-lee-go, is that how you say it?"

Her attempt at pronouncing the name was terrible.

"He's, like, the funniest guy."

"I'm glad you're making friends."

"Joburg is an odd city, very odd. But at least the people are friendly, right?"

"So I've heard."

Although he had reached his fill making small talk with Justine, he hadn't yet ruled out the possibility that she might still be interested in going back with him to his flat. Boredom boners in Chinese restaurants were so-so.

She squirmed from beneath him the second he came and began reaching for her clothes.

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah, why?" She pulled on her jeans.

"No reason. I thought you might want to stay the night."

"Oh, sorry Harry, I can't. I have an early start tomorrow."

“Of course, totally.”

“It was great catching up, though.”

She was now fully dressed.

“We’ll hang out again sometime soon, OK?”

No hard feelings, no feelings at all. Eat when you’re hungry, sleep when you’re tired, fuck when you’re randy.

“Hey, it’s my friend’s exhibition opening next week. You should come.”

“That sounds great! Send me the details, OK? Oh wow, the Uber is already here!

Later, Harry.”

He stood close to the gallery entrance, in full view of the introductory panel. "In this sense, to bridge the gap," one of the middle paragraphs read, "between what the artist views as his textual and visual (that is, tactile) selves, the paintings seen alongside their translations represent a certain wholeness of being as well as an established artistic practice."

The paragraphs that followed were dedicated to the stage Percy was at in his career, focusing heavily on a certain refinement he had supposedly acquired, and went as far as to map out the trajectory of his career, which, accordingly, held greater success, greater acclaim and possibly greatness itself. He supposed this was normal for an exhibition of any kind of seasoned artist, as a kind of affirmation of their status and expertise in their field.

He'd been to similar events in his own field, although they had never been in recognition of his work; rather, they were dedicated to the work of the people whom, over the years, whether directly or indirectly, told him what to do. He hoped that if there were ever cause to celebrate his own success, the wine wouldn't be from a box. He sipped on the sour grog.

"What are you doing standing there all by yourself?"

"Congratulations! This looks amazing."

"Have you reserved any yet?"

"There are a few I have my eye on. I'll have my agent speak to yours."

He caught himself leaning heavily on one leg and handling his wine with a limp wrist. The "gallery stance" was real and not simply a fiction contrived by art world haters.

Percy wore a flowing cream linen two-piece suit that in any other context would make him appear to be part of a cloning cult. He had ditched his combat boots for an elegant pair of leather sandals. Of course, leather sandals. But wasn't he cold?

He recalled Percy telling him that his outfit for the exhibition was custom made for the event by one of his fashion designer friends, the name of whom now escaped him, but whom he was sure was among the crowd or about to be. Percy truly was embedded in this crowd; not once did he not have someone to schmooze while they stood there.

"You look good."

"Oh my God, there are two Wednesday Addamses heading in your direction."

How the hell did Percy know who she was?

"Later, Harry."

“Hey, wait, I wanted to –”

Azra and Helena had come into full view.

“Hi.”

She stepped to his side and pulled Helena closer to her with one arm around the clerk’s waist. “Haroun. Helena.”

Percy’s reference had just clicked. She and Helena were dressed almost identically, in all black. Their makeup and hair – a wash of white paint on already pale skin, dark eyeliner and lipstick, their hair in bobs. If it weren’t for the different lengths of hair, it would have been hard to tell the two apart, but she was the taller of the two, and gaunter.

“Helena, good to meet you. I’m so glad you made it,” he said to Azra.

“Yeah.”

He was unsure how to proceed. She seemed frail and absent. Was she on something? He sensed a kind of hostility from Helena. He was confused by the dynamic that had just presented itself.

She hated having to rely on another person to remain standing, but it just was what it was.

“Let’s take a walk around have a look, shall we?”

“Great idea.” Helena adjusted Azra’s arm around her waist.

He led the way. Maybe there was some hope left after all.

But just as he began celebrating the minor success, he noticed Justine at one of the refreshments tables, arms linked with those of a tall, bulky and strikingly handsome man. He decided against waving for her attention.

By then, the gallery had filled up to what seemed like near capacity. He was now in a lose-lose situation. He trudged through the crowd with the two Wednesdays, stopping every so often to pretend to be either looking at a painting or reading one of Percy’s translations, which, he noticed, hadn’t been edited much since he’d read them.

Her arm was still around Helena’s waist. She seemed like an invalid.

“Would you like to go outside, for some fresh air?”

“Sure.”

He took her by the hand and she finally let go of Helena. To his surprise, this was met with no resistance. Instead, Helena turned to regard one of Percy’s paintings, glass of box wine in hand, taking a gallery stance.

He seemed to be lecturing her on the pavement but she could barely make out what he was saying because she became distracted each time a car drove down 7th Avenue.

“Hey,” she pointed out, “the road to Home Affairs.”

He didn’t seem to notice, or care.

“I wish you would tell me what the matter is.”

She heard him talking but felt unable to internalise his words. How long had she known this person, who thought he was familiar enough to be demanding something from her? Mostly, his words sounded like nothing more than a drone.

“I do think we have something.”

His drone sounded desperate.

“What is it?”

“Harry. Harry,” she heard a woman’s voice calling out from a distance.

The woman who had been calling the name was standing right beside her on the arm of Othello.

“Harry, I thought that was you,” she heard the woman say. She felt the palm of his hand on her shoulder but was unable to immediately locate him.

“Who’s Harry?” she asked the handsome couple. Was this slur going to stay with her forever?

“Oh, hi, Justine,” she heard him say. But where exactly was he? Was he standing right in front of her? He was a blur to her. “Blur man,” she said. “Blur man. Ha ha!”

“I’m sorry,” said the beautiful woman, in her beautiful voice, with her beautiful statue beside her. “Am I interrupting something?” The beautiful woman looked at her, of all people. Was that pity on her face?

“Yes, we’re,” he looked at her, his palm was still planted on her shoulder. Good thing, because if it wasn’t, who knew how far she’d fall.

“We’re just in the middle of something here. Oh, shit, sorry, this is Azra. Azra, this is Justine.”

“Blur man.”

The beautiful woman introduced her statue as Kat-lee-go and snuggled into his tree-trunk arms. Oh, to have a stallion, she thought, then laughed out loudly. It was the stuff of her romance novels.

"It was good to see you, Harry," she heard the beautiful woman say.

"Harry," she said, mimicking Justine's accent. "Who's Harry?"

In fragmented moments, she heard him say "look" and "like" and "seriously" and "meaningful". Somewhere in it all there was "I believe everything happens for a reason". So many words coming out of him, like a burst pipe, words, words, words, spewing on to the pavement.

He went on with his words, but she was constantly distracted, if not by the cars then by the leaves rustling on the trees or the streetlights or the people walking by, anything else. Even the insects crawling underfoot, meagre as they were, would draw her attention from him, this blur man who was just out of focus for her.

"Please, I'm begging you."

Still, she couldn't respond.

She removed his hand from her shoulder and placed it beside the blurred outline of his frame. She patted the top of the hand, which was as blurred as the rest of him.

"You can have your hand back now."

Epilogue

The master called my name and now I'm ready to respond. I creep slowly on the pavement, holding my side. My hand there is sticky and I can't feel my leg. I let myself fall to the pavement, thinking it will be easier to crawl than to limp around in the darkness with nothing to hold on to.

A stray dog approaches but stops about two feet away. He takes some time to think and decides to rather cross the street. I laugh out loud but my chest is tight so I break out into a cough. I want to call the dog back but I've lost my voice in the cough. "Come back here," I want to say, "come back and comfort me, you dirty fucken dog."

The pavement is more like gravel than concrete. There's never been proper concrete pavements here, not like the ones in the suburbs. My hands fall hard on the ground every time I try move. I struggle to hold my side and keep moving. When the hand that's holding my side hits the ground, it leaves dark patches on the gravel.

When I still lived with my bitch mother, she once found some goods in my bedroom. I got home from the shebeen and she was sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me, looking angry. She asked me what those things were and I told her it's none of her business and she must fuck off. She told me that my soul was black and I laughed at how stupid she sounded. Of course my soul is black, I told her. I took my stuff that night and left and never saw her again.

As I crawl on this pavement in Alexandra Far East Bank, I see that my blood is also black. I feel myself becoming the blackness, the darkness, that until now I've seen only in parts, through my bitch mother, through this fucken city and all the people in it. I can say now, now that I am about to leave this place for good, that I truly hate it. I am filled with hate; I've only ever known hatred.

I try to catch my breath but it's fast escaping me. There's no point fighting it. I lean against a concrete rubbish bin that the guys use to make fires in to keep warm in winter. They stand around the fire and talk big stories about their great plans and how they're going to get rich. Where are they now? Are they also crawling on pavements, like me, towards their masters, towards ultimate darkness?

I close my eyes and through a tunnel I see that poe in the bush again. It can't see me; it's now talking and laughing, looking happy with its red cheeks and fat fucking neck, sitting by a woodfire and rubbing its palms together. Still, I am not sure. Maybe it is a god, but what god would come to me? And what kind of god is this?

I catch a view of the street lying ahead in the darkness. If I didn't know this street, I wouldn't be able to picture what it looks like, with the shit water flowing down and plastic packets floating low in the air like the true birds of the township, of this whole city, not far up in the sky looking down on everyone, like the rich people in their tall, shiny buildings.

My eyes close again and I see the face of that old bitch I strangled in her flat. When was that? I can't remember now. Her eyes were round and brown and innocent, and when she took her last breath, she breathed out with relief, like she was happy. But I could see then that she was not going into the darkness, like I am now. Was she going to the light? There's no light.

I laugh but the cough starts up again. I howl not to be heard by anyone here. I howl because I am the master's dog and my time has finally come to obey his command and return to him. I howl because I've turned into an animal.

I hear my master calling again, louder than ever. "Come here!" he says. I take my hand from my side and leave the wound to face the darkness and the rough gravel and the street, covered in shit.

I watch as the blood seeps and spreads on to my clothes, bathing me in blackness. I touch my face with my bloody hand and smear the blackness across it, hoping that this will speed things up. I taste the iron of my black blood and feel strong, not in this body but in my darkening spirit, which will carry me beyond this city, beyond that fat fuck's bush and beyond my past, into a future where my hatred is never questioned and my black soul laughs in my bitch mother's face.

Pop, Paranoia and a Pornographic Nexus: Reflecting on a Not-Nailed Production

paranoid adj. 1. relating to or exhibiting extreme distrust or suspiciousness. 2. relating to or characterised by delusions.¹

paranoia n. 1. a paranoid state.¹

¹ Definitions as per American Psychological Association's *Dictionary of Psychology* (2015).

Spill it Out (Oh No!)

Absolute Bearing is the second official album by Philadelphia pop band Work Drugs. It was originally released on Bandcamp in July 2012 for streaming and/or download as a 10-track digital album. Over the years, other streaming apps like Apple Music, Spotify and YouTube Music have included “Pluto (Smooth and Swanky Yacht Club Mix)” as the album’s 11th track. The original version of “Pluto” is track 3, followed by “Boogie Lights” at 4, then the title track, “Absolute Bearing”, towards the middle at 5. If the title track signals the beginning of a smooth comedown for the rest of the album, track 4 is where the album and band – well – light up.

As the name of the song suggests, and as we learn from the lyrics, it has much to do with pornography, specifically the themes explored in *Boogie Nights*, the 1997 Paul Anderson film starring Mark Wahlberg and Julianne Moore. It’s not immediately clear why the band modified the name of Anderson’s film to get their song title, but the modification works well enough, if only to prime us for the first verse: “They don’t even know your name/Anonymous blood and carnal gains/Playing hide and seek, our love is buried in cocaine (sin pays).”

That’s about as abstract as references to porn and the Anderson film get. From there on, the less subtle chorus dominates: “Spell it out or swallow your pride (oh no)/Spell it out or swallow your pride (oh no)/Spell it out or say goodbye/Just look the camera in the eye.”

At 3:58, as the build-up to the song’s trumpet and sax flourish kicks in, we hear the words “watching you, watching me”, sung by the band’s lead vocalist Thomas Crystal, layered and on loop. Along with Crystal’s singing, we hear “you’re gonna be a star”, also on loop, sung by guest vocalist on the album Aermote, aka Rachel K Haines. (On more listens, depending on which version of the song you’re listening to², it could be either Crystal or Haines, or both, or even other members of the band – or other guests – singing the lines.)

The first part of the layering adds to the air of paranoia circulating around the song (i.e. that is it is mainly concerned with being watched). The second part, perhaps in recognition of this, is saying that in spite of this, there is a payoff, whether it be basic (carnal) or complex in the way fame (being a star) can make things.

²Apart from the original on *Absolute Bearing*, versions of the song appear on *Delta* (2013), a remix album containing dance versions of songs from other albums; and *Cayman Islands Sessions, Volume II* (2014), a compilation of acoustic versions of songs, also from other releases.

Once we listen to the song fully and acknowledge that it is, in a way, essentially a reflection on paranoia, a plausible reason for the modified title becomes clear: Work Drugs were paranoid about being sued for a copyright infringement. However, through this paranoia, they got to tell a double-sided joke, which could be seen as a decent enough payoff. The one side of the joke is that simple modifications, like changing single letters in titles, often suffice to stave off potentially large and unnecessary complications. The other side is that through finding an “in” – a point of accessibility – through paranoia, the band was able to parody and extract themes from a film that is already in itself a paranoiac parody of the porn industry.³

Whether or not the joke lands is irrelevant. What does seem relevant, though, is that a band like Work Drugs, so unashamedly pop in their approach to making music, and so negligible in terms of critical reception, was able to riff on paranoia and find humour in doing so. By the time it popped into my head in October 2021, “Boogie Lights” had been lying dormant in my memory for at least 8 years. What made me recall this song other than that I thought it was funny?

On the other end of the pop spectrum – the more serious, critically acclaimed end – there’s a darker and less jokey, but nonetheless funny, paranoia. It’s one that wasn’t necessarily born in the internet pop world, where memes are made from simple modifications. It’s a brand of paranoia that came into being through years of experimentation and the discomforts with a sense of being that arise from it. Its net effect is a jaded funniness, desperate and self-deprecating, but clever and incisive at times.

The Bad Arts⁴

Like, when people talk about being ‘engaged’ with the audience, I’m not exactly sure what they mean. Do you mean like a carnival barker? Like, ‘Step right up, get your red-hot art!’⁵ – Dan Bejar

³ See Connor (2021), an enlightening feature about how a fictional pornographic actor who was first conceived in a DIY mockumentary film by Anderson, who was at the time still in high school. The character was developed in the following years to become the protagonist in *Boogie Nights*, which went on to be nominated for three Oscars, including Best Original Screenplay for Anderson, at the 70th Academy Awards in 1998.

⁴ “The Bad Arts” is track 2 on Destroyer’s fourth studio album, *Streethawk: A Seduction* (2000).

⁵ See Runco (2012). This was Bejar’s response to Runco pointing out that to many people, Bejar comes across as disengaged during shows, leading the interviewer to ask whether Bejar actually likes performing.

Destroyer's discography kicks off in 1996 with the ramshackle 16-track album *We'll Build Them a Golden Bridge*. Fast-forward 24 years, to 2020, and we find the polished, almost proper, *Have We Met*. If looked at cursorily as a collection – that is, to give all 17 releases to date⁶ (13 full-length albums, four EPs) a listen in chronological order – the word “disorientating” might come to mind.

For example, if you listened to *Streethawk: A Seduction* (2000), then to *Kaputt* (2011), you'd get a sense that you're listening to the same band but in another dimension. Where *Streethawk* plays out like a folksy retelling of the goings on in a generic, gossipy indie/art scene somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, *Kaputt*'s instrumental reverb accompanied by Bejar's barbituric vocals put the band in a place I can conceive of only as an eternal afterlife. Determining whether that afterlife is a heaven, a hell or simply nothing is purely subjective, and those determinations are obviously open to interpretation.

What's not left open to interpretation, though, is that *Kaputt* is Bejar's, and by extension the band's, statement of submission to pop. In a 2012 interview, in response to a question on having previously described the album as “distinctly pop”, Bejar is quoted as saying that the distinction he wanted to make was that he was going out of his way to adopt “a very consistent approach to production, where nothing punctures the reality – or fake reality – of the album and what you're listening to from beginning to end.”⁷

According to Bejar, keeping the “fake reality” unpunctured is central to making pop music, supposedly because it creates a fantastical dimension and provides a means of escape, or dimensional shift, for both musician and listener. This clarifies his observation in the same interview that pop is essentially a “producers' genre”. The implication here, given Bejar's 15 years' experience with making music that was mostly considered indie/art rock until the release of *Kaputt*, is that it's the logical direction for any musician who has been in the game for long enough.

If Bejar's drive for unwavering consistency has led the band to an eternal afterlife, those who see it as a heaven would point out the better and endless possibilities of a producers' genre, where the only limitations that exist are ones that arise in the studio and

⁶ This was the band's total output at the time of writing. However, in January 2022, Bejar announced a new album, slated for release on 25 March 2022.

⁷ This is the same interview with Runco (2012), in which Bejar also refers to pop as a producers' genre and iterates that he sees “rock and roll as pop music”.

not necessarily through paranoia about how one is received by a particular audience or other human frustrations and anxieties. When identified, these limitations are effectively dispensed with through technical expertise. In this sense, there are no insurmountable challenges and there are no real limits to what can be produced. It's much like having the luxury of a fully decked-out, purpose-built lab in which to synthesise a highly addictive escapist drug for mass distribution.

If this afterlife is seen as a hell, *Kaputt* was Destroyer's event horizon.

The band now finds itself consumed by the black hole of pop, with no access to other genres or subgenres and the forgiveness that they generate through cult followings.

Another way of looking at it is that, through Destroyer, Bejar has produced himself into an endless loop that is neither frustrating nor satisfying. It's a view I tend to adopt because it simply *is what it is* – complete in some ways but also unresolved, appealing but perhaps also disgusting. If Bejar had indeed entered a musical afterlife or another dimension with *Kaputt*, he's not lost there, he just doesn't know where he is⁸, which seems to be what he wants. It's a place of deliberate disorientation, where Bejar has always seemed comfortable – confident even – in any case but could not find full expression through old Destroyer apart from the noticeable differences in sound in some songs from album to album up until *Kaputt*.

The Bad Arts (continued)

Streethawk was reissued by Merge Records (the label Destroyer has been signed on since 2002) in April 2010 in celebration of its 10-year anniversary, almost a full year before the release of *Kaputt*. The reissue is interesting and sad. Interesting because it's the album I always use to compare old Destroyer with new Destroyer (that it makes for a good comparison leads one to wonder if this was the label and/or band's intention all along with the reissue). It's sad because the enthusiastic responses the reissue received didn't use hindsight to their advantage.

⁸ This is in reference to the Talking Heads song "The Lady Don't Mind". I see Talking Heads lead singer David Byrne and Bejar in a similar light – musicians that have over time managed to transcend the boundaries of genre to a state where consistency in production is all that seems to matter.

For example, in a *Pitchfork*⁹ review of the album upon its reissue, Paul Thomson hails the album as a milestone in the musical trajectories of Destroyer and Bejar. Not far into the review, he claims: “Every [Destroyer] record since *Streethawk* has felt like either an extension of its successes or an outright rejection of its excesses.”¹⁰ What I think Thompson means here is that back in 2000, *Streethawk* heralded Destroyer’s sonic deliverance – it put things into perspective for Bejar and the band, and listeners as a result; and it made sense of Destroyer as a project.

Strangely, Thompson’s review does not mention *Bay of Pigs* (2009), a two-track EP released eight months before the reissue of *Streethawk*, which features an extended version of “Bay of Pigs”, a single off *Kaputt*, and “Ravers” a reworked version of “Rivers”, the eighth track on the band’s eighth full-length, *Trouble in Dreams* (2008). As with “Boogie Lights”, the modification of the song title by changing a single letter is funny and works well to prime us, or at the very least it prompts us to look over our shoulders to see whether Bejar is skulking about, peddling his proposed new sound.¹¹

Bay of Pigs was a clever release and deserves a mention here, firstly because it gave us a taste of what was to come in January 2011 on *Kaputt*, and secondly, through “Ravers” (track 2), it demonstrated, quite literally, how the band destroys itself after one album only to reconstitute for the next. Not acknowledging this is another sad thing about Thompson’s review and the reception of *Streethawk* as the “epitome” of Destroyer.

“Ravers” sounds like it could be off *Kaputt*, but the lyrics are so recognisable from *Trouble in Dreams* that it’s hard not to see past Bejar’s obvious tactic (intended joke, perhaps?) – to ease us into the reading of the new Destroyer. By giving us something familiar lyrically yet sonically different to the original, it’s as if Bejar is indeed engaging with us, if only from the shadows, despite his posturing otherwise. In this sense, the EP serves as a narrow yet sturdy bridge between two dimensions: Destroyer up until *Trouble in Dreams* and Destroyer from *Kaputt* onwards.

Bay of Pigs, then, is a message of continuity rather than a signal of complete departure. This is funny because, in conveying this message, the EP is – ironically and with a

⁹ *Pitchfork* wasn’t around when the album was first released, so it had no previous record/review of it. It used the reissue as an opportunity to do its first review of *Streethawk*.

¹⁰ See Thompson (2010).

¹¹ See Petrusich (2017). In her review of *ken* (2017) for *Pitchfork*, she describes Bejar as “... slinking around in the shadows, checking to see if you’re paying enough attention.”

hint of paranoia about how this new Destroyer will be received – a departure from Bejar’s pre-pop habit of setting self-destruct timers on the band.

The State

If *Bay of Pigs* is a bridge between old and new Destroyer, *Trouble in Dreams* would be an abutment at the old Destroyer end. It’s an album Bejar himself admires but admits to being “not-nailed”. According to him, the album was part of a process of reinventing himself; it helped him transition to becoming the pop singer-producer he is now.

He is quoted in a 2015 interview as saying: “I didn’t know how to sing the songs on *Trouble in Dreams*, the vocals did not come easily to me. And that disconnect between the writing that you love and are really proud of, but the fact that the song still doesn’t work, that was really informative for me. It was kind of the death knell of a version of myself as a writer [and the start of me] becoming more of a singer.”¹²

Bejar has never had trouble with lyrics, especially on this album – it features some of his best writing (some would say poetry). At the time, for example, he considered “Shooting Rockets (from the Desk of Night’s Ape)”, an eight-minute epic set in the middle of the 11-track album, his masterpiece in terms of writing. Feeling the gravity of those lyrics was what was informative for him. He’s quoted in the same interview as saying: “It [‘Shooting Rockets’] was a heavy piece of writing and I was writing outside of myself, maybe above myself. And maybe that’s one of the reasons I had a hard time singing it – I was punching above my weight.”

The five songs leading up to “Shooting Rockets” are so varied that by the time we get to track 6, our suspicions that *Trouble in Dreams* is a compilation album containing previously unreleased material are almost confirmed. But the suspicion arises much earlier, when we hit track 3, “The State”, a thoroughly unlikeable song that rambles along for just less than 4 minutes. When the song ends, it leaves you neither satisfied nor eager to continue listening. For almost 12 years after the release of *Trouble in Dreams*, I’d skip it

¹² See MacGovern (2015). This interview was shortly after the release of *Poison Season* (2015), the follow-up to *Kaputt*, which wasn’t received by critics in quite the same way.

when listening to the album. But in spite of featuring my least-favourite Destroyer song, *Trouble in Dreams* is still one of my favourites from the band.¹³

When I eventually became amenable to “The State”, if only to listen to *Trouble in Dreams* as a whole, I started to understand what Bejar had been talking about in interviews since *Kaputt*’s release. *Trouble in Dreams* was an album that, through whatever difficulties he and the band experienced while making it,¹⁴ had revealed a path to clarity. If we look a bit deeper into it as a “transition album”, we see that it is a site of struggle between the old, which is desperately trying to hold on; and the new, which, in its nascence, is indifferent to the hang-ups of the old but is nonetheless willing and capable of not only defending itself, but spotting its opponent’s weaknesses and exploiting them.

In this context, “The State” is the third round in an 11-track fight for dominance. I tend to think that the old wins the round, but, in doing so, weakens itself for the rest of the fight. By the time we get to the final track, “Libby’s First Sunrise” – an ode to vacantness that touches on the central themes explored further in *Kaputt* both lyrically and sonically – the old is completely floored with no sign of resurgence.

So I began to see my least-favourite Destroyer song as something of a cornerstone in the abutment, and probably the best example/manifestation of Bejar’s growing pains leading up to *Kaputt*. It’s also *the* song that says if you’re not willing to let go of old Destroyer, you’re not going to care much for the new; it’s the old’s meanest stand and a middle finger to the impending change. If you like the song, if only as an obscene hand gesture, go back and keep your memories of the band there; but if you disliked it enough to ignore it for 12 years, you’ll find a future with the band in its afterlife, as I have.

Regardless of what it is or isn’t in the context of Bejar’s transition, the song’s lyrics are inherently paranoid (“Oh, The State tore out our hearts/And The State exposed our hearts,” Bejar howls in the song’s disjointed second verse). Based on my experience listening to the band, I’m confident in my assumption that in this song, Bejar is exploring the inherent humour in paranoia. The song plays out like a satirical amalgamation of famous works by Edgar Allan Poe (“A bad wind to trash the sails of all you evil men!” Bejar sings in

¹³ It contains at least three songs that feature on my list of the top 10 Destroyer songs to date – “Dark Leaves Form a Thread” (track 2), “Shooting Rockets (from the Desk of Night’s Ape)” and “Libby’s First Sunrise” (track 11).

¹⁴ See Wenzel (2012). In this interview, Bejar admits that “*Trouble in Dreams* was the most fraught [Destroyer] record in the making of it. From beginning to end.”

the opening verse) and Franz Kafka (“I look like a fucking monster with this wing,” he blurts out in the final verse)¹⁵, which themselves could be considered satirical and deeply paranoid.

It seems that in spite of the shift that Bejar noticed in himself, one constant in his work is paranoia, whether it be around reception, audience engagement or as a humoristic device in his lyrics. But how does it all work together? Do listeners need to be paranoid themselves, and aware of the singer or writer’s paranoia, for the joke to land?

Common Denominator

Towards the end of October 2021, Work Drugs released their latest album, *Pride and Competition*. After having a look at four platforms on which the album was released (Apple Music, Bandcamp, Spotify and YouTube Music), it’s unclear how the band originally intended the album to be ordered. On Bandcamp, it shows up as a 21-track digital album, but Spotify and Apple Music present it as a “two-disc”¹⁶ release, with Disc 1 containing 10 tracks and Disc 2 containing 11. However, like Bandcamp, YouTube Music –the most popular music streaming service among US adults¹⁷ – presents it as a straight 21-track album.

Is it just by chance that Bandcamp – the band’s spiritual home, its birthplace – is aligned with YouTube Music this way? If we look at the popularity of YouTube Music and extrapolate from there that, as an American pop band – one that has never seemed to have the same kinds of frustrations with form that Bejar has – Work Drugs would naturally gravitate to and find alignment with more mainstream platforms. Does the vacuum of pop have an almost natural, cosmic even, way of ordering of things – a dharma, if you like?

Two things point to this. First, Work Drugs, a band that kicked off almost exactly 15 years after Destroyer, was born in the age of the internet, which itself is something that has been central in solidifying our understanding of pop sensibilities, especially those around digitised modes of production. As a digital native, the space Work Drugs occupies is primarily online, whether on Bandcamp, social media platforms or streaming apps. In these

¹⁵ The most obvious being Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Poe’s *The City in the Sea*.

¹⁶ A strange concept in itself since the album streams from track 1 to 21 with no break between the discs, as would be the case with physical releases such as CDs or vinyl records.

¹⁷ See King (2021) for a breakdown of the most popular music platforms in *Digital Music News*. In addition to the US, YouTube Music is the most popular music platform in France and India. What’s surprising, though, is that Bandcamp doesn’t feature on any of these lists.

online spaces, the band engages with its audience so that when they play live, one would assume that audience engagement in the traditional sense isn't a concern for them. (Although, based on footage scattered around YouTube, Work Drugs seem to be more gregarious than Bejar). In this sense, we could consider Work Drugs an "unashamedly" pop band. That is, one that is aware of the red pill¹⁸ but unwilling to take it because that would mean having to forgo all the comforts offered within the pop matrix it was born into.

Second, "going pop" was Destroyer's logical destination only in retrospect. Remember, the band kicked off in the mid-90s as a traditional art/indie/experimental rock project. Bejar was by no means a digital native; the term apparently had not even been coined back then.¹⁹ Yet, through a dimensional shift induced by a reinvention of self, Bejar gravitated to pop (particularly its emphasis on consistency in production), towards this place I consider to be Destroyer's afterlife. It's not a place of bliss, but it's not one of strife either. Here Destroyer's sound is neither solid nor formless. It would seem that Bejar has come into his own as a shapeshifter in the pop cosmos.

Pride and Competition is Work Drugs' 35th release since its debut, *Summer Blood*, in 2011.²⁰ That's about double the output in less than half the time when compared to Destroyer. Is this the consistency Bejar was talking about? It can't be because in the case of Work Drugs, their consistency has resulted more in middling out than in innovation. Release after release, they sound the same to the point where their output is not as much anticipated as it is merely expected. This is very much unlike Destroyer. Bejar's compulsion to experiment and constantly question where he is, as a singer and a person, makes me keenly anticipate his albums to see where he's taken the project and the kinds of reactions this draws from critics and fans.

In spite of this, I still see one obvious connection between these bands: myself. It would seem that, as the end consumer, I am the common denominator. Is the joke ultimately on me for trying to find a connection between two vastly different bands and

¹⁸ In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the red pill is used as a device to articulate that there is a difference between the fake reality in which the protagonist, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), is knowingly living in, while the blue pill signifies an erasure of that knowledge and a return to the state of living obliviously in an unpunctured fake reality.

¹⁹ See ICDL Europe (2014), "Definition of 'digital native'". According to its website, ICDL Europe is dedicated to "raising digital competence standards in the workforce, education and society" by offering digital and IT-related certification programmes.

²⁰ According to Work Drugs' Bandcamp profile. (See <https://workdrugs.bandcamp.com/>).

their paranoia-induced jokes, however shallow and/or deep they might be? Is what I'm finding funny even intended?

Proof of Concept

Around the same time *Have We Met* was released, I had an idea and some notes for a novel I wanted to write in the third person. It's a narrative style I've had limited satisfaction with in the past,²¹ but one I needed to get a handle on to be able to do justice to my idea, which involved exploring paranoia and perhaps finding the humour in it. Based on my notes and the narrative arc I had in mind, I expected wild inspiration to follow from all the authors, and indeed bands, I had read, listened to and admired.²² I imagined a storm to break and for the funniest of situations to flow forth.

But instead of a storm or a killer climax like the one on "Boogie Lights", what showed up was a spirit of reason with an unsubtle message about time. When it arrived, it looked down, tapped its wrist and shot a stern expression my way. "It's wonderful to have this idea and all these notes," it told me, "but do you have the time to put them all together into something coherent, or even worthwhile?"

Luckily, the spirit arrived to help me while I still had time. Although annoying at first, its stoic presence grew on me and became helpful in structuring the time I had left to *produce* something. That is, in Bejar's sense of the term, making something with the aim of creating an unpunctured "fake reality" from beginning to end.

Once that seed had been planted and the spirit received my desperate buy-in, it presented me with options, the most useful being conceptual and one that influenced my mindset as I began the drafting process when I finished writing the manuscript²³: the hardly implausible notion that my novel-writing endeavour was actually a desire to participate in a type of pornography. Maybe it was merely coincidental that the entire period in which I did this project was under various levels of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, which meant that I

²¹ I cringe whenever I revisit my short stories *The happy one* and *Pepi's Awakening*, written in the third person, to present them as proof of work. Both stories were published by *itch*, an online creative writing journal affiliated to the Wits School of Literature, Language and Media. See Patel (2015) and Patel (2017).

²² The original bibliography in my draft project proposal contained authors ranging from Chinua Achebe and Albert Camus to Roald Dahl, Aldous Huxley and William Shakespeare.

²³ This happened at the end of April 2021. The original word count was 89 922.

was required to submit parts of the manuscript every two weeks or so for two years and literally look the camera in the eye while I did it.²⁴

But, then again, maybe the coincidence was useful (convenient even) in that it played directly into my desire. As I began to work closely with my spirit of reason and the conceptual framework it proposed – in the context of a global pandemic and the acute sense that it created of being watched – I realised that as a writer I am both exhibitionist and voyeur. I am an exhibitionist by virtue of my inclination to do the MA in the first place, pandemic or not. My desire to write a novel in this way had something to do with the prospect of being watched and read by a captive audience, in this case my MA class. I am a voyeur because it was enticing for me to watch others. To add another dimension, it's possible that, like me, seminar attendees also got a kick out of being watched. In this process, I also willingly exposed myself to being recorded by any possible means (literally) and made myself available to being projected.²⁵

Another conceptual framework that my spirit pointed out was the transactional nature of the writing engagement that I had signed up for. This in a way might have spurred my desire to be watched and to watch others and, as was the extraordinary case with Zoom seminars, watch others as they watched me. There were cash and credit components to the transaction. Settling the cash component was the easy part. The credit component, however, was less straightforward. Basically, when I signed up, the institution staked me an idea of credibility that was within my grasp to own one day. I grabbed at the idea and it grew on me over the two-year period. I began to like it, a lot, enough even to continue into the second year. I might have got so caught up that I'd forgotten one important fact: that what I thought I owned was still on loan and needed to be paid back.

To pay it off and claim that stake to credibility as my own, I had to satisfy all the institution's needs, which included proof that all outstanding fees were paid up, and that a manuscript and this document were submitted within the agreed upon deadline. All of

²⁴ After just three in-person seminars between early February and early March 2020, the lockdown restrictions were announced and the rest of the MA course was conducted via Zoom. The main devices I used to log into seminars (video-on not mandatory but encouraged) were a 10.2-inch iPad and a 13-inch MacBook Pro, the former with a front "selfie" camera and the latter with a built-in FaceTime HD camera.

²⁵ Here's a scene from the theatre of paranoiac possibilities: For all you know, someone on a Zoom meeting might be viewing you, just you, in full-screen mode on their device, with their camera turned off, and recording you with another device (phone, tablet, you name it), and could, very easily, project that recording to an audience of their choosing, or simply save that recording for their own collection.

these needs are reflected as “milestones” on the institution’s student self-service portal. That the institution sees its needs as my milestones makes the loan agreement even more complicated. Nevertheless, for a nominal compounding rate on a borrowed portion of the institution’s credibility over 24 months, the selling points were that: I would attain a level of satisfaction with the guidance I received during the course and am confident to practice what I’ve learnt for “self-betterment”, essentially through potential financial gain; and I would attain approval in the form of a master’s degree, physically rendered as a certificate bearing the institution’s literal seal.

As with commercial banks, I have a strong sense that the real fat for the institution lies in the interest it accrues from the loan packages it sells. The interest being that the institution simply and relatively cheaply adds my work to its store of knowledge. In return, it hands a title over to me. Is this fair? On the face of it, yes. The agreement is seen through when the institution is satisfied; and I am satisfied when I get approval from it.

But what if my desires have gradually shifted over the two-year period? What if what I want from this project extends beyond financial gain and a printed sheet with a seal of approval? If what I’m now looking for lies outside of the institution’s ambit, the real question is whether the idea of credibility that I’ve just paid off will carry me to that place. If it doesn’t, has the loan agreement I’ve seen through worked out to be more expensive than I had initially thought? If the institution takes the fat and I’m left with an empty tank before getting to a destination, am I not the ultimate loser?

There’s a big *but*: a next level of satisfaction beyond that which could be derived from getting approval is not mentioned, least of all guaranteed, by the institution. Even with the guidance it offers, at no point was I offered anything in the way of a refuelled tank once the course concluded, let alone a half-decent response to questions from others (some well-meaning) about publication or public recognition.

But it wasn’t recognition or fame that I was after. What I sought was more along the lines of showing myself, seeing others show themselves, watching others watch me and in the process finding out what the net effect of the transaction with the institution was. Where did all this take me, as a writer, yes, but also as a person trying to make sense things in the context of an extraordinary global event that illustrated, in the most literal of terms, that my paranoia might not be as misplaced as I thought?

Seeing Paths²⁶

Not linking writing the novel with any notions of fame, mainly by virtue of it being done as part of an institutionalised process, left me with other ways of gauging where I was as a writer and a person. This was in spite of the loan agreement I ended up getting myself into and the resulting paranoia I had about being a loser, and in spite of my paranoia about having to look the camera in the eye while submitting to my own needs and those of the institution.

The central question here is around whether what I seek is a projection of my desire to produce my own work merely for the sake of filing it within my own personal collection, or whether the end goal involves something more, like having my work being part of a larger, more “exposed” collection than my own.

I can see four main paths to clarity in this regard. The first is entirely insular and from the perspective of being a collector, specifically of digital documents, more specifically, of my own writing. Over the years, for no reason that I can think of other than being a compulsive documenter and filer, I’ve written various types of things (short stories, dialogues, monologues, poems, even another novel) not with the intention of having them printed or published to exist in the world, “in physical form”, only to be read/seen by others in some indeterminate future in which I no longer existed. These documents were created for the purpose of being written records, fragments of my “life story”, to be stored as part of a digital collection that existed inside a regularly (perhaps neurotically) groomed personal filing system.

In this sense, the writing I’d been doing until I signed up for the MA was more about adding to my personal collection – my store of life’s records – than wanting to have it, and myself in the process, exposed. This was, however, still done with the ultimate desire to only “one day” be exposed, albeit from the comfortable position of not actually being around to endure, in person, whatever indignities are involved with feeling exposed. With this kind of collecting, as is the case with most collecting, satisfaction tends to hinge more on how objects fit into the collection rather than on the singular objects themselves. Their beauty is often taken for granted and they live under the condition of always being available

²⁶ This is in reference to Parquet Courts’ song, “He’s Seeing Paths”, a frantic and paranoid song about delivering weed on a bike in New York.

for review. As such, my store of writing, not including this project, is lying in a state that could be appreciated as a collection at some time in the future, if ever found.²⁷

But, upon reflection, doing the MA forced me to expose myself in the old-fashioned, uncomfortable way, my exhibitionist tendencies notwithstanding. As part of the learning process, I was given no option but to lay myself bare (on screen in this instance, coincidental or not). Recognising it essentially as a learning process rather than a destructive force has made me see this exposure as instructive, the end goal being the acquisition of knowledge. I now know something more about my drive to write (to record and/or document), file and store other than it being done out of mere compulsion. I know that this drive has something to do with my desire to participate in a pornographic nexus of voyeurism and exhibitionism. I know that this desire abides with an overarching sense of paranoia that might, in all honesty, be the essence of the “fake reality” that I’m trying to keep from being punctured.

From here, the next three paths to clarity are simple in their practicality – they provide reflexive outlets for applying this knowledge. One, the production of the novel in the context of watching and being watched (i.e. being exposed) required there to be little to no distinction between writing and editing. Rather, in relation to Bejar’s statement about pop being a producer’s genre, what I needed to do – at the micro level of preparing for regular seminar submissions and responses to classmates’ submissions, and at the macro level of drafting the novel – was always keep in mind that what I was doing was producing (i.e. creating a production) and not simply writing and/or editing in a vacuum, as I had been doing in the past.

Two, when the writing-editing distinction was negated, consistency became my primary objective. Once again, I found relevance with Bejar’s reflection on the difference between *Kaputt* and *Destroyer*’s releases prior to it. During the post-manuscript drafting process, (the phase of production where much paring down took place²⁸), consistency was key. Mostly, it meant adopting a method through which I’d read chapters, or parts thereof, repetitively until I found some way forward in terms of what should be omitted and how

²⁷ There is a strong possibility that this personal collection might simply go unread to a time where .docx files, PDFs or Google Docs can no longer be read by any available technology, let alone by other people. By then, the collection will have turned to nothing.

²⁸ This process was prompted by many minutes of seminar time spent learning about my tendency to overwrite. My knee-jerk reaction, which I think was ultimately for the better, was to cut, leading to the shedding of nearly 40 000 words between the manuscript and the final submission.

sentences, paragraphs and chapters could be rendered as lean as possible. The idea here was to get from point A to point B in the quickest way possible, especially in light of my spirit of reason's unsubtle message about time.

Also, from the outset, as stated in my project proposal, my main stylistic aim was conciseness and clarity. In practice, I found this to entail consistently removing what I learnt were obstacles, or complications, in the text to enable the narrative to move along.

The next path to clarity was an almost unconditional acceptance that certain trade-offs must be made when consistency is the primary objective. As is the case with Work Drugs, the trade-off is seemingly obvious – their output, however prolific, lacks quality. The shine of originality, or any sort of novelty, on their releases has worn off since *Absolute Bearing*, which featured “Boogie Lights”, a song that, through its ability to not puncture the fake reality that it was ultimately making fun of, managed to remain funny over the years (to me, at least). In Bejar's case, the trade-off seems to have swung in the opposite direction, where adopting a consistent approach to production led firstly to Destroyer's sound entering a new, I would say better, dimension, and secondly to Bejar himself realising a healthy transition from writer to singer.

My experience lies somewhere in the middle. I feel that the recognition of what I was doing as a production – rather than a compulsive act of recording and/or documenting, filing and storing – signalled a valuable education: it took me ever so slightly away from being the paranoid person to locating myself as more of a writer about paranoid people and the situations they might find themselves in. I also feel that through adopting a consistent approach to the production process, the overall quality of my output was improved, if only by means of having produced a novel that is quicker to read and less bogged down in the unnecessary detail I had come to learn was overwriting.

However, in spite or perhaps in light of these positive outcomes, I cannot claim that the novel, as a production, feels resolved. As such, I'm left with a sense that this production is not nailed, much like Bejar's sense about *Trouble in Dreams*. So is my main trade-off, then (for learning more about the root of my desire to write, recognising that this desire can be expressed by means of thinking about writing, novel writing specifically, as a production and applying a rule of consistency as a means of making the production) being left with a feeling of dissatisfaction with what I have produced?

After all this pathfinding and clarification-seeking, it's difficult to reconcile dissatisfaction as one of the results, let alone as a legitimate source of frustration. There must be enough fuel left in the tank to at least get to the next petrol station.

Labyrinthitis²⁹

It might be the case that many producers (of music, literature or art) see it this way – that because their productions are done within the realm of paranoia, they are neither resolved nor satisfying. As funny or not funny (or as intended) as the jokes may be, operating in this context always creates doubt, whether internal in the form of frustrations about how the production will be received, or external in the form, for example, of those factors that determine how the production is collected and stored once it is received. Here lies the flaw in seeing a shift towards pop production (i.e. approaching production with a drive for unwavering consistency) as a heaven. Human limitations are never simply or easily dispensed with, whether they are acknowledged (as in Bejar's case) or not (as is seemingly the case with Work Drugs). Instead, they seem to exist precisely to be overcome without knowing exactly where that act of overcoming might take you.

Wasn't it indeed the MA that helped me acknowledge my limitations and articulate my desire to initiate a search for paths to clarity? The biggest difference between this project and others is that this one has been read either as a whole (by my supervisor and proofreader) or in parts (by my classmates) and collected by an external entity (the institution). It is the level of engagement with this project that sets it apart from my others and affirms its existence as a production rather than an act of compulsion. I suspect that this difference is the net effect of my transaction with the institution, and one that will play a significant role in how I proceed as a writer (and a person) from here on.

Does this confirm my paranoia about the pornographic nature of my relationship with the institution? I would say "yes" without much hesitation because what are productions of projections of desire called if not pornography? But I wouldn't consider the nature of the transaction to be exploitative. This is because I've learnt that rather than seeing the master's degree as a cover used by the institution to mask the losses it inflicted

²⁹ This is a condition caused by infection and characterised by the inflammation of the part of the inner ear called the labyrinth. Symptoms of labyrinthitis include vertigo and a loss of hearing. (Cedars-Sinai Health Library.)

through its agenda to extract knowledge, it's probably healthier to think of the MA as informative, the way Bejar ended up seeing *Trouble in Dreams*. I can now see the real value in the MA through its design – how it prompted reimagination and rethinking, not just of my writing, but of the perceptions I've held of myself as a writer. If Bejar and Destroyer's example is anything to go by, when rethinking is set in motion, reinvention often shows up; and in this company, portals to new dimensions open up, as was the case with *Kaputt*.

If I look at this project as my *Trouble in Dreams*, like Bejar, I've definitely felt a shift in my being during its production. Maybe this is because the entire process was fraught with difficulty, either in the form of having to adapt to new ways of doing things in the face of an unprecedented global event (and all the fears and paranoia that arose from it), or in recognition that, for me, learning is never easy (I'm a slow learner³⁰). Although I've experienced a shift, mine is not like Bejar's in that my creative modes didn't transition as his did (from writer to singer). I don't consider myself having shifted from writer-editor to producer, for example. Rather, my shift has more to do with perceptions of time, as pointed out so sternly by my spirit of reason towards the end of 2021.

The most honest, and perhaps furthest-reaching, question here is whether I am able to perceive time in ways that could give me a sense that my productions in future are resolved. Literally, this could mean giving myself enough time to execute the plans I have for whatever ideas for productions I might come up with. This would entail building realistic expectations into these plans. On a less literal level, this could involve more focused meditation on timing – orchestrating the various components of productions in ways that yield a sense of them being nailed. In essence, a more authentic sense that these productions end up creating realities, however fake, that remain unpunctured from beginning to end. As any singer or comedian will attest to, timing is everything for a song to hit a groove or for a joke to land. If asked how they manage to get their timing right, they'd probably tell you it's impossible to explain, that it just happens. For me, when timing is concerned, it seems more of a case of realising when it is happening and learning from that experience to apply it more consistently across the production.

³⁰ *Slow Learner* is, incidentally, the title of a collection of early short stories by Thomas Pynchon, who is famously quoted as saying: "There is no literature and art without paranoia. Probably there would be even civilization. Paranoia is the world. It is the attempt to make sense of what has not."

In Bejar's pop afterlife, the things he seemed to have been concerned with in the albums leading up to and including most of *Trouble in Dreams* have been pared down. They manifest only as whisperings rather than boisterous pronouncements of lost or unrequited love, or wry observations about art scenes or in-crowds.

On the cover of *ken* (2017), there's a checkerboard of staircases leading to a pixelated and/or bleached-out oblivion. In the top right corner, we see the word "Destroyer" clearly but we don't see Bejar himself. When we reach "Ivory Coast" (track 9), we get a sense of what's happened to him. From a netherworld, he repeatedly sings, "Good things come to those who wait forever," until the song finally dies at 4:49. The next time we see Bejar, he's on the cover of an album whose title should have a question mark but doesn't.

It's not clear what Destroyer's new album, *Labyrinthitis*, holds in store for Bejar, the singer, the band as a project and we the listeners. It seems, though, that he has kept true to the unwavering ethos of the band, which is to destroy itself and reconstitute as something different but still recognisable. The album's title and cover art are not suggestive of the "sophisti-pop" genre that has been attached to the band since *Kaputt*. The cover art is a folksy watercolour painting in the same style as that of *Trouble in Dreams*, and the album title is referencing an ear infection. Is it meant to imply that what Bejar has been hearing about his music up to this point has induced an infection, that the music contained in the album is likely to cause an infection, or that it was produced conceptually as a projection of an infection?

The latter seems to be the case. In a press release announcing the album in January 2022, Bejar included some notes about a pre-released single off the album, titled "Tintoretto, It's for You". He is quoted as saying: "I had an idea of writing a couple lines on the idea of 'mystery' and 'going nowhere' as they are two of my favourite themes. That and the Grim Reaper and being pursued by some silent, unnameable thing that constantly lurks one foot to the left of you. Especially as the world's decay becomes increasingly less abstract."³¹

With this, we are given an idea that although the new album still explores the same themes that Bejar has always been concerned with, paranoid as they are, this exploration is

³¹ See Farrell (2022).

taking place in a more literal, perhaps less sophisticated, way than he has done since *Kaputt*. When listening to “Tintoretto, It’s for You”, I couldn’t help but notice a strong connection with “The State”. Although it’s not immediately as unlikeable as “The State” was back in 2008, it’s as disjointed, frantic and – as Bejar recently pointed out – extremely paranoid. Should we assume that the singer has travelled back over the bridge to revisit his former self? The idea is not implausible. Maybe Bejar has returned to the site of his old struggles because he’s experiencing another transition. To what? Only time will tell.

I find it strange, though, that the new Destroyer album was released not long after I completed my own project. If it had been released just two weeks earlier, it might have helped me find resolution, or at least a few decent responses, to some of the questions I’ve asked here about my future as a writer.

References

American Psychological Association. (2015). "Paranoia". In *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. p. 778. American Psychological Association. Washington, DC. Also available: <https://dictionary.apa.org/paranoia>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

American Psychological Association. (2015). "Paranoid". In *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. p. 778. American Psychological Association. Washington, DC. Also available: <https://dictionary.apa.org/paranoid>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Anderson, P. T. (Director). (1997). *Boogie Nights* [Film]. New Line Cinema.

Anderson, P.T. (Director). (1988). *The Dirk Diggler Story* [Short film/Mockumentary]. Self-produced by Anderson, P.T.

Cedars-Sinai. No Author. "Labyrinthitis". In Cedars-Sinai Health Library. Available: <https://www.cedars-sinai.org/health-library/diseases-and-conditions/l/labyrinthitis.html#:~:text=Labyrinthitis%20is%20the%20inflammation%20of,symptoms%20go%20away%20over%20time>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Connor, D. (2021). "The Dirk Diggler Story: Boogie Nights' Prequel Explained (& How To Watch It)". In *Screenrant*. Published: 12/12/2021. Available: <https://screenrant.com/dirk-diggler-story-boogie-nights-prequel-mockumentary/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Destroyer. (2009). "Bay of Pigs" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Carswell, D. & Collins, J. On *Bay of Pigs*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2008). "Dark Leaves Form a Thread" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Bragg, N., Loewen, T. & Rose, F. On *Trouble in Dreams*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2008). "Libby's First Sunrise" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Bragg, N., Loewen, T. & Rose, F. On *Trouble in Dreams*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2009). "Ravers" [Song]. On *Bay of Pigs*. Bejar, D., Bois, T., Carswell, D. & Collins, J. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2008). "Rivers" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Bragg, N., Loewen, T. & Rose, F. On *Trouble in Dreams*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2008). "Shooting Rockets (from the Desk of Night's Ape)" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Bragg, N., Loewen, T. & Rose, F. On *Trouble in Dreams*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2000). "The Bad Arts" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Collins, J., Morgan, S.M., Wood, S. D. & Zumpano, J.A. On *Streethawk: A Seduction*. Misra/Talitres. Reissued (2010) by Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2008). "The State" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D., Bois, T., Bragg, N., Loewen, T. & Rose, F. On *Trouble in Dreams*. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2022). "Tintoretto, It's for You" [Song]. Written by Bejar, D. On *Labyrinthitis*. Merge Records.

Farrell, M. (2022). "Destroyer Dances with Romance and Terror on 'Tintoretto, It's for You'". In *Flood Magazine*. Published: 11/01/2022. Available: <https://floodmagazine.com/97785/watch-destroyer-tintoretto-its-for-you/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

ICDL Europe. (2014). "The fallacy of the 'digital native'". In ICDL Europe Policy and publications. Available: <https://www.icdleurope.org/policy-and-publications/the-fallacy-of-the-digital-native/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Kafka, F. (1971). "The Metamorphosis" (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir). In *The Complete Stories*. Pp 114-164. Schocken Books. New York.

King, A. (2021). "What are the Most Popular Music Streaming Services?". In *Digital Music News*. Published: 30/03/2021. Available: <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2021/03/30/most-popular-music-streaming-services-2021/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

MacGovern, K. (2015). "The Spin Interview: Destroyer's Dan Bejar". In *Spin*. Published: 03/12/ 2015. Available: <https://www.spin.com/2015/08/destroyer-dan-bejar-interview-poison-season-new-album/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Parquet Courts (performing as Parkay Quarts). (2013). "He's Seeing Paths" [Song]. *Tally All The Things That You Broke EP*. What's Your Rupture?

Patel, A. (2015). "The happy one". In *itch*. Published: 27/07/2015. Available: <https://www.itch.co.za/archive/issue-14/item/1546-the-happy-one>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Patel, A. (2017). "Pepi's Awakening". In *itch*. Published: 20/03/2017. Available: <https://www.itch.co.za/component/k2/item/1921-pepis-awakening>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Petrusich, A. (2017). *ken* Album Review. In *Pitchfork*. Published: 20/10/2017. Available: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/ken/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Poe, E. A. (2015). "The City in the Sea". *The Essential Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Pp 485-486. Race Point Publishing. New York.

Pynchon, T. (1984). *Slow Learner: Early Stories*. Little, Brown and Co. New York.

Runco, P. (2012). "Destroyer. Pornographer. Bejar." In *BrightestYoungThings.com*. Available: <https://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/destroyer-pornographer-bejar>. Published: 12/06/2012. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Talking Heads. (1985). "The Lady Don't Mind" [Song]. Written by Byrne, D., Frantz, C., Harrison, J. & Weymouth, T. On *Little Creatures*. Sire.

Thomson, P. (2010). "Remastered and reissued editions document Dan Bejar's early period, when he grew into the unique, beloved songwriter he is today." In *Pitchfork*. Published: 19/04/2010. Available: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14141-city-of-daughters-thief-streethawk-a-seduction/>. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Wachowski, L. and Wachowski, L. (Directors). (1999). *The Matrix* [Film]. Warner Brothers.

Wenzel, J. (2012). "Bringing in the String Section with Dan Bejar". In *Vice*. Published: 06/06/2012. Available: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yv5bnj/chunklet-to-go-go-bringing-in-the-string-section-with-dan-bejar->. [Last accessed: 07/03/2022.]

Work Drugs. (2012). "Boogie Lights" [Song]. Written by Jim, T., Nyhan, M. T., & Thomas, J.B. On *Absolute Bearing*. Bobby Cahn Records.

Work Drugs. (2012). "Pluto" [Song]. On *Absolute Bearing*. Written by Jim, T., Nyhan, M. T., & Thomas, J.B. Bobby Cahn Records.

Work Drugs. (2012). "Pluto (Smooth and Swanky Yacht Club Mix)" [Song]. Composed by Nyhan, M. T., & Thomas, J.B. On *Absolute Bearing*. Bobby Cahn Records.

All music releases cited

Destroyer. (1996). *We'll Build Them a Golden Bridge* [Album]. Tinker, Scratch Records.

Destroyer. (2000). *Streethawk: A Seduction* [Album]. Misra/Talitres.

Destroyer. (2008). *Trouble in Dreams* [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2009). *Bay of Pigs* [EP]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2010). *Streethawk: A Seduction* (Reissue) [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2011). *Kaputt* [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2015). *Poison Season* [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2017). *ken* [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2020). *Have We Met* [Album]. Merge Records.

Destroyer. (2022). *Labyrinthitis* [Album]. Merge Records.

Work Drugs. (2012). *Absolute Bearing* [Album]. Bobby Cahn Records.

Work Drugs. (2012). *Delta* [Album]. Bobby Cahn Records.

Work Drugs. (2014). *Cayman Islands Sessions, Volume II* [Album]. Bobby Cahn Records.

Work Drugs. (2021). *Pride and Competition* [Album]. Self-released.