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Still Life - A Novel and Reflexive Essay

Pier Myburgh

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Dissertation (Creative Writing).

Johannesburg, 2007.

ABSTRACT

The largest part of this thesis is a novel called *Still Life*, which explores the mourning process of a mother who loses her baby, and the effect it has on her life and her marriage. The novel alternates between the present and the past (which is 23 years before) so that it illustrates the mother's reaction to the death of her baby at the time of the death, and her personal development (or lack thereof) many years on.

The second part of the thesis is an essay, which reflects on grieving in general and the expression of grief through literature, as well as some of the aspects of the writing process, with particular consideration given to the development of plot, the choice of point-of-view, symbolism, the ending and the choice of writing in a second language.

Key Words

Novel

Death

Baby

Mourning

Grief

Relationships

Plot

Point-of-View

Symbolism

Animals

DECLARATION

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

Pier Myburgh

----------day of ----------, 2007.

PREFACE

There was a murmur in my blood of a story I had to tell. It was caused by a boy who almost did not exist; whose presence was so fleeting that I wondered at times whether he was just a figment of my imagination. But he demanded I make him real.

I could not have written this novel without the encouragement of my supervisor, Dr Michael Titlestad. He shared his considerable knowledge with kindness and love, through which his passion for the written word became infectious. His criticisms were persuasive, honest and gentle, and they spirited me on to write to the best of my ability, even when the thought of continuing at times seemed too much to bear.

I would also like to thank my fellow class members and faculty for their input and thoughtful comments, particularly Dr Gerrit Olivier, who provided meticulous and invaluable advice which went beyond the call of duty.

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Still Life

A Novel

By

Pier Myburgh

Chapter 1

Petra held her breath as she opened the glass door of the walk-in fridge, reached in and quickly grabbed a bottle of wine. She tried not to look at the impala head that sat on the shelf next to the wine, but she could see it from the corner of her eye. It had been wrapped in clear plastic. As if killing it was not enough. As if it needed to be suffocated too.

She poured herself a glass of wine and took it with her to the stove where she started stirring the risotto in the pot. She sipped the wine as she watched the rice bubble away. Adding more stock, she continued stirring, slow circles, round and round. Then, on a whim, she poured the rest of the wine from her glass into the pot. Her face was damp with steam and she wiped it dry with a dishcloth before pouring herself another glass.

It had been two days since Rupert returned from the hunt. He had brought home the impala head and put it in the walk-in fridge next to the wine. The fridge was two metres deep with three rows of shelves along three of the walls and they used it mostly to store drinks: Coke Lites, soda water, tonic, bitter lemon and white wine, which they carefully organised from expensive to cheap. To get to the expensive wine she had to walk right into the fridge and let the door slam shut behind her. There was a release button, a toggle to push, and she could open the fridge from the inside if she ever got locked in, but she always just grabbed a cheap bottle next to the door. She could reach in and take one with her eyes shut.

“What’s for supper?” Rupert said behind her.

She swung around and saw him standing there in his blue suit and a blue tie with tiny pink pheasants that a friend had bought in London and given him for his fiftieth birthday earlier that year. His cufflinks were miniature balls of pink and blue silk thread.

“Do we absolutely have to have that in the fridge?”

“Oh, it’s not so bad, Petra.”

“Not for you, perhaps.”

“I’ve arranged with Piet that I’ll take it in on the weekend. But if it annoys you so much, you’re welcome to do it before then,” he said, pulling off his tie. “It’s only an hour’s drive there. Then you simply drop it off and come back.”

She couldn’t be bothered to answer, so she turned her back to him and stirred the pot once more even though the risotto was done.

“It’s not as if you’re doing much else anyway,” he said as he walked out.

She dished up some risotto into a warmed plate, lit the candles on the table, poured him glass of wine, dressed the salad and left it all ready for Rupert. Then she called him to supper, poured herself another glass, took her wine and went to her bedroom where she shut the door behind her.

The next morning she saw that he had put the head in the freezer after she had gone to bed. To make space for the head, he had removed her frozen precooked meals and left them on the kitchen counter. The food lay in puddles of water that dripped over the lip of the counter and into a drawer that had been left slightly ajar. Some water had trickled along the wooden side of the counter and onto the floor below it.

She felt the plastic packets of food, but most of the meals had already defrosted and were soft under her touch. She threw away a lasagne she had made the week before and some mince she had prepared for bolognaise. There was oxtail, which she put in the basin and which she would cook that night. She wiped the water from the counter and wrung out the cloth. She cleaned the drawer and the side of the counter. Then she cleaned the floor next to the counter and wrung out the cloth again and washed her hands and went to get dressed.

Two hours later, Petra balanced an opened map on the steering wheel as she turned left into a busy road, squeezing in between a truck and a taxi with a smashed front bumper. The one headlight was missing and wiring hung from the socket, but the other light flashed at her.

The Coleman cooler box slid on the backseat of her car. She could hear the head inside it shift before the box tilted over and got stuck in the space behind her seat. She quickly looked back and saw that the lid had opened slightly. Switching on the hazard lights and slowing right down, she tried to push the box back onto the seat with her one hand, but it was too heavy. There were no verges onto which she could pull off. The taxi behind her hooted.

She had never travelled this road before. The traffic crept along and she was stuck behind the truck, which was filled with live chickens that were packed tightly together in crates. She could see them through the open slats as they sat there, one crate on top of the other, teetering dangerously. Behind her the melting ice dripped onto the mat.

She put the map on the passenger seat, lit a cigarette and opened her window. Noise and exhaust fumes rushed into the car, but when she closed the window again, the smoke from her cigarette hung in front of her eyes and she had to squint to see through it before it dissipated.

Outside, a dog with protruding ribs and a lolling tongue slunk into the shade of an old café advertising Omo on its peeling walls. Faded clothes swayed feebly on makeshift washing lines that had been looped from shack to shack, and children played amongst the washing, kicking up dust.

The impala was to become Rupert's fifth trophy. There were others more impressive; a gemsbok, a kudu, a wildebeest and a warthog already hung on the walls of his conference room. He liked to take clients there to discuss their portfolios. Said it opened up channels of communication. It was still his ambition to hunt and kill a buffalo. But since this was only an impala, and since it fitted into the cooler box, and since he was busy, she could take it on the back seat of her car.

On the one side of the road the shacks stretched as far as she could see, and on the other side were slabs of industrial buildings. Through a gap in the buildings she glimpsed, far in the distance against grassy hills, the red roof of a farmhouse and a windmill.

When she opened the window again to toss out her cigarette stub, she could smell the stench of the chickens. Wet feathers and shit. Just then the taxi behind her, overloaded and weighing down on its wheels, passed her on the inside. It swayed and bounced as it accelerated over the grass and gravel next to the eroded

edges of the road. Then it swerved back onto the road, squeezing in between the truck and her car. She slammed on the brakes.

Finally she saw the sign: *Still Life, Taxidermist - 1 km.* It was a huge sign, written in orange on black. There was a spray of holes in the sign, where someone, probably after drinking, had used it for target practise, and the holes let through the light. On her radio they played a rock version of *White Christmas.* She switched it off.

After a kilometre she turned into a large, dusty area. There was no shade for her to park her car in, so she stopped close to the door of the building. To the left of the entrance, four boys, barefoot and dirty, were playing marbles. One of them, thin and knock-kneed, stood bent over, staring intently at the ground in front of him. In his one hand he held the marble he was about to throw, dead still in the air. His other hand pressed onto his thigh to support him. His shorts were too small and his T-shirt was torn at the back, but the baseball cap he wore back-to-front looked clean and new.

She stood next to her car with the door still open, but she dared not shut it lest she broke his concentration. Then he flicked his marble and with a clink knocked away another one. He turned around, smiled at her, and swaggered towards the wall, where he leaned back, arms crossed over his chest and one foot up against the wall behind him. He watched the game with hooded eyes, but she had a feeling he was watching her too. She felt that he was taking her in, sizing her up, just as she had done to him a moment ago.

She opened the car's back door and pushed the cooler box back onto the seat. The floor mat was wet with water. Hopefully not blood. The box was too big and heavy for her to carry alone.

"Excuse me. Please can you help me carry this?" she shouted to the boy and his friends.

The boys stopped their game and turned to look at her.

"It's too heavy. I can't manage it on my own."

They looked up at the one leaning against the wall, but he didn't move. He said something to them in their language. Someone sniggered and only the smallest boy glanced back at her again when they continued with their game.

She wondered whether to take the head out and carry it in its bag, but she worried about her white linen suit that had already become crumpled with the drive. She could feel the dust between her toes and she knew that her high-heeled leather sandals would get scuffed in the gravel. She left the head in the car and went to find the taxidermist.

The smell inside the shop was overwhelming. It reeked of fatty skin and hair, of disinfectant, chemicals and salt. A rancid, wild smell. She tried to take shallow breaths, but she couldn't escape it. Already she knew she would smell it even when she drove home; it was in her hair and on her clothes.

She couldn't see anyone.

"Hello," she called. Her eyes started adjusting to the light. She was in a large rectangular room with a bare cement floor that was damp, as if it had been washed down, and had not yet dried out. Skins and heads of all sorts of dead animals in varying stages of being recreated were scattered around the room. In the centre

was a large concrete bath and in it floated more skins. She recognised a zebra, a kudu and what looked like a gemsbok.

"Can I help you?"

Then she saw them; there were two men. One was sitting at a table, behind a wire and fibreglass form. He seemed a bit older than her; his hair was grey, but it was long and he had pulled it back into a ponytail. His beard was neatly clipped. A little way to the left of him, a young man looked up at her from where he sat on his haunches on the cement floor. In his hands he held a hide that looked hard and grey. His straight, black hair was unwashed and it hung loosely around his face so that he seemed to be peeking at her through a stringy curtain. She walked towards the older man.

"I'm Petra Wales. I'm just dropping off an impala. My husband has spoken to you?"

"Ah, yes." He stood up and placed the chisel he had been holding into a tray of tools. "I'm sorry I'm so dirty," he said, but still he leant across the table and stretched out to shake her hand. "Piet Jordaan." His naked forearms were covered in a fine, white dust. His hand felt remarkably soft.

On the table were photographs of a springbok that had been shot. A smiling hunter crouched beside it where it lay in the veld. In his one hand he held a gun and with the other he had taken the springbok by its one horn and awkwardly pulled its head up from the ground for the photograph. Next to the photos were anatomy drawings of the antelope, with measurements carefully added in pencil. She stepped closer to have a better look. A large book, opened to show a springbok in different poses, was balancing precariously against a jug of water.

“I didn’t know that’s how you did it,” she said.

“Yes,” Piet said. “This is the part I love. Every animal is different and I try to show that. I like to show the movement.” He picked up his book of drawings and flicked through them for her. “It’s a science and an art, you know.”

She had never thought of taxidermy as a science or an art, but she didn’t say so.

“Some hunters want me to improve their animals; fix torn ears and cover up bad shots. I do it, but I don’t like to. Nature is perfect as it is.”

She nodded and looked at her watch. “I’ve left the impala in the car.”

“Let me write you a receipt and then my son will help you get it.”

The man on the floor was still sitting on his haunches as if it were a most natural way to sit. He looked up at her and swept his hair behind his right ear in one smooth movement.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Petra.”

He got up. “Hi. I’m Ruan.” He wiped his hands on his jeans and then he showed his palms to her. “I don’t think you want to shake these.” He smiled and there was a slight gap between his front teeth and, unlike his father, he spoke fluent English with only a hint of Afrikaans.

She smiled back at him. “No, you’re right.”

“Come,” Piet said.

She followed Piet to his office at the far end of the room. He was wearing flip-flops, and in the quiet her heels clumped loudly on the cement floor. Beyond the bath with the floating skins was a table that had a brown and white spotted hide on it. The hide had been spread out and it was smothered in cream and the

hair was greasy and it stuck to the grey skin under it in lumps. There was a large, open tub of cream with hair in it. Petra slowed down.

"We use the cream to soften the hides that had been dried and salted. It looks worse than it is," Ruan said next to her.

She nodded, but Piet had already disappeared into the office, so she moved on, away from the rancid smell.

The office was a mess. Papers were strewn over an old wooden desk. A mug, half full of cold coffee, stood on a book, and on the desk were ring marks where it had been placed before. A small, fake Christmas tree, waist high, stood in the one corner of the room. The baubles, all of them silver, seemed new, but the tinsel had thinned and in places the string showed through. Wads of cotton wool had been pushed in amongst the plastic needles. The golden star at the top had lost most of its glitter and it was too heavy for the tip of the branch on which it had been stuck, so that it seemed to balance precariously, tipping to one side.

"I'm sorry the office is such a mess," Piet said.

"I like your Christmas tree."

"You do?" He straightened the star. "It's the first tree we've made in five years. I'm afraid the decorations have become a bit worse for wear."

"Still, it's the thought."

"My wife used to make a tree for us. She was in charge of the office before she got sick."

"Oh."

“I couldn’t do the tree after she died. Every year I thought I might, but then I didn’t have the heart. But this year Ruan agreed to join me in the business and we’ve decided to make one again.”

Suddenly he seemed embarrassed at his confession.

“Well, here it is at last.” He brushed his hand over his beard and she saw that he bit his fingernails. He smiled. “I still can’t stand paperwork.”

“Oh! Look at these,” she said.

On the desk stood rows of plastic bottles with eyes in them. All shapes and sizes. She thought of the boy with the cap, who was playing outside. She imagined he would love to make up a game of marbles with them. It would be fun to win a lion’s eye with the flick of a wrist and the eye of a warthog. Such power! Some of the eyes were tiny and glistened darkly, like caviar. She wanted to feel the eyes, roll their glassy coolness in the palm of her hand. She put her hand into a jar holding large yellow-brown eyes with slit pupils. But they were made of plastic and flattened at the bottom; designed for pasting onto fake heads. She was disappointed for the boy. Still, she was sure he would have liked to have one. Perhaps she would give them each one.

“Yes. The eyes. I also love the eyes,” Ruan said next to her. A strand of hair had slipped out from behind his ear and hung across his cheek.

“Can I take some? I’d like four. Would you mind? I can buy them from you.”

“Help yourself,” he said. “We have plenty.”

He watched her and she chose three different ones, and before she could choose a fourth, he took one from a bottle that stood next to the telephone and handed it to her.

“This is my favourite,” he said.

The pupil was dilated and black and the iris around it was a deep yellow that faded towards the edges. She would give it to the smallest boy.

She folded her hand around the eyes. Piet handed her the receipt and she left with Ruan to fetch the impala. When they passed the table where the skins were being softened she paused and watched him walk ahead. The one pocket of his jeans was torn. She thought to call him back, to ask him some questions about the softening of the hides, but he was already waiting for her at the door. Behind him, against the wall just inside the entrance, stood the completed bust of a giraffe. It was taller than him and quite beautiful, and she reached out to stroke it and it felt soft and smooth under her palm.

The boys were no longer playing outside. She looked around, but the parking lot was completely empty. Some scuffmarks in the dirt showed where they had played their game and a brown footprint was left on the wall, where the leader had stood with his foot up and watched her.

“It’s on the back seat on the driver’s side,” she said. She pressed the remote to unlock the car, but then she realised that she had never locked it in the first place. She stood back for Ruan to open the door. He leaned into the car and unclipped the lid of the cooler box. But then he turned around abruptly, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” She pushed against him to see.

The opened lid was splattered and dirty. Some pinkish liquid had pooled up in one of the back corners of the box. It smelled slightly metallic. She saw drops of blood that had not yet dried on the leather upholstery next to the box. Against the driver's headrest was a small, dusty handprint that had been carelessly left there like the spoor of a little wild animal. The head was gone.

"Oh hell! Shit." Her throat felt dry. "There were boys here, playing marbles." "Oh," he said.

"They must have stolen it. My husband will be furious."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know there were kids outside."

"What a thing to steal!" She felt sick and there was a throbbing in her ears. "What am I going to tell him?" She looked around, as if she might see the children, perhaps hiding and laughing at her. Then she turned to Ruan. "Can't we just use another impala head? You must have loads of them in your shop. Rupert doesn't have to know, he won't even know the difference."

Ruan looked straight at her. "I wish I could help, but I really can't do that. It's not how we do things around here. You can tell him to phone us, if you want to. I can explain it to him."

Her eyes stung. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She climbed in the car and he shut the door for her. She put the key in the ignition and started the engine. Then, with the car idling, she rolled down the window: "What do you think they'll want to do with it? Will they eat it?"

He tilted his head to one side and shrugged. But then he smiled at her with just a lift of the right hand corner of his mouth.

She rolled up her window and pulled away, and in her rear-view mirror she saw that he was still standing there. He ran his hand through his hair. Then he turned and walked back into the shop.

That night Petra took the oxtail out of the oven. The iron pot was hot and heavy and she quickly turned to put it down on the counter behind her. She picked up the four eyes that lay on their flat sides on the counter next to the pot, staring straight up, and put them in her apron pocket. She could feel Rupert standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching her.

"Hi," he said.

She did not look up. "I took the impala to Piet today."

"Thanks."

"It got lost."

"What?"

"I left it in the car for a while and some kids stole it." She saw that the oxtail had become dry.

"Oh, for God's sake, Petra! I shot that myself and you just *lost* it!"

"It got stolen. By kids. To be eaten."

"It was not a tricky task, you know."

"I couldn't carry it on my own, so I went to call Piet." She wanted to explain it all to him; the boys, the skins, the eyes. She put her hand in her pocket and rolled the eyes in her fingers. Then she looked up at Rupert.

"Why don't we ever have a Christmas tree?"

"What?"

“We never have a Christmas tree.”

He stared at her, hands in his pockets. For a while he stood there, saying nothing. Then he said: “Oh, for God’s sake Petra. I really don’t have the energy for this.”

He turned to go, but suddenly he stopped and looked back at her. “Why are you cooking? We’re going out for dinner with the Bennets tonight. Don’t you remember? I told you about a week ago.”

“Oh. I forgot. What time?”

“Eight.”

Petra checked her watch. It was just after six. She scraped at the meat that had become stuck to the bottom of the pot, added more stock to the dish, returned it to the oven and switched it off.

Then she went to the walk-in fridge, reached in, and took a bottle next to the door. She held it by its neck and it was cold in her hand. She turned to go, but then she stopped, put it down again and walked right into the fridge, to where the decent wine was. She let the door slam shut.

Chapter 2

At five in the morning, twenty-three-years before, Petra rolled to her side and heaved herself out of bed. She went to the toilet and ran a bath. Sitting up in the bath with her legs wide apart, she washed her hair slowly, massaging her scalp with the tips of her fingers. Then she lay down and put her head back so that the water covered her ears and she felt the taps under the soles of her feet. Her stomach bulged above the water level and the bath had cooled down so, with her hair a floating halo around her, she opened the hot water tap with her foot, closed her eyes and listened to the sloshing in her ears.

When she sat up again, Rupert was standing at the basin next to the bath.

"Good morning," she said.

He turned to her. He had a white beard of shaving foam, and along his cheek a straight, smooth line ran from his ear to his chin. "Not just any good morning. Nervous?"

She bent forward to shave her legs, twisting her body sideways to make room for her stomach. There was a jab against her bladder and for a moment she paused with the razor above her shin.

"Petrified," she said. "But I can't wait to meet him."

Rupert finished shaving and rinsed out the basin. Then he leaned over the bath and kissed her on the cheek. "You'll be fine. Come on, hurry up now."

He helped her up and, with arms opened wide, he held out a towel for her. She stepped out of the bath and he wrapped the towel around her and when she leaned into him her stomach pushed against his, and she felt the baby kick. Rupert

smiled and said that he could feel that too, and he put his hand on her stomach and they waited until the baby moved once more.

The early morning light filtered through a creeper outside their bedroom window and it cast watery shadows onto their bed. Petra put on a tracksuit and dried her hair, while Rupert watched her from where he stood against the door, holding her overnight bag.

“I just want to check the bag,” she said.

“Don’t be silly. You’ve been checking it for a week. We need to go.”

In the garage he swung the bag into the boot of his Porsche. Then he opened the door for her and waited as she lowered herself into the bucket seat. The door closed with a soft thud and bumped against her arm. She shifted in the seat.

The jacarandas that lined their street had started to drop their flowers and the road had become a lilac river. Rupert let the car idle while he pushed a button and waited for the roof to fold away. The air was fresh and new and as he drove off, the jacaranda flowers popped under the wheels of the car.

The roads were quiet and Rupert drove fast on the highway. Leaning forward in his seat, he changed gears rapidly until he reached the fifth gear, when he finally relaxed and sat back. The wind rushed cold into Petra’s face and her eyes watered. She opened her knees and locked her fingers under her stomach to support it and hold it still. With her knees touching the dashboard in front of her she felt the car’s vibration in her seat.

“Don’t you think it’s weird?” Rupert said. “In a few hours’ time we’ll have a baby. I feel as if we’re fetching a new puppy.” He glanced at her. Then he quickly stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers before returning his hand to the

steering wheel. “By the way, I’m having cigars and drinks at the *Bulls and Bears* tonight.”

Petra smiled at him. “So have we agreed on Sam? It’s your last chance.” She had to speak loudly to be heard above the roar of the engine.

“If that’s the name you want. Next time I’ll choose, okay?”

“But remember, just Sam, not Samuel.” Her hair whipped across her face.

“Sam it will be.”

The parking lot at the hospital was large and almost empty. Rupert drove generous loops over it, crossed the H that demarcated the helicopter landing area, and stopped in front of the emergency entrance.

“Express delivery,” he said with a grin. “You go in and do the paperwork and I’ll park the car and bring your bag.”

Petra opened the door, swung out her legs and with both her hands pushed down onto the seat to lift herself out of her almost crouching position. Pain from a pinched nerve shot down her right leg, so she stood still for a while to let it pass.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, pulled herself straight and shut the door.

Inside, she completed the documents, informing the hospital that she was twenty-three-years-old, she was a beautician, she had medical aid, she had never had an operation, she was not allergic to anything, this was to be her first baby, it would be a Caesarean, and yes, Mr Wales would be responsible for all accounts.

Then she went upstairs to the maternity ward, changed into a hospital gown and waited.

There were three other beds in the ward, each with a cot beside it. Next to her, a woman sat up in her bed, leaning against the pillows. Her pyjama top had been unbuttoned and it hung loosely at her sides. She cradled her baby against her naked stomach, holding his head in her hand and turning his face towards her one breast. The breast was enormous. A nurse stood next to the woman and, with her thumb and forefinger, pulled at the nipple that was puckered and shiny. The baby's mouth opened wide.

The woman looked up and Petra quickly turned away. In two other cots babies slept in pink cocoons. Petra wished Rupert would arrive with her bag so that she could unpack her things and check the clothes and nappies one last time.

Five days earlier, during a routine scan, her gynaecologist had said: "I'm afraid your baby has gone and wrapped the umbilical cord around himself."

"Is that dangerous?"

"It's really nothing to worry about." Dr Green had squeezed her shoulder. "Happens all the time. Anyhow, I specialize in problem deliveries, so everything will be okay. Last week I delivered triplets and the one weighed just over a kilogram, but they're all fine."

He wiped the gel from her stomach and turned to Rupert. "Just yesterday I delivered a baby that was nine weeks prem because the mother's blood pressure had nosedived. It was a tough call to make, but it was the right one. That baby had to come out or they both would have died."

"Nine weeks early!"

“Yup. She’ll spend at least seven weeks in neo-natal ICU. But she’s a girl, so she should make it. Girl babies are stronger than boys. Such a prem boy would have had a much harder time.”

“So, our baby will come out the sunroof?” Rupert asked.

The doctor laughed. “I’ve never heard that before. Yes, it’ll be a Caesarean. Two weeks early is the norm, so I’ll see you guys on Monday first thing, okay?”

Then the doctor had torn a strip of paper from the machine and handed it to Petra. She gazed at the black and white picture to recognise something of her son, but he was just a fuzzy oval and all she could identify was the cord that lay like a thick worm across the paper. Still, she folded the photo carefully and put it in her purse.

The baby next to her sucked noisily and the woman sat back and the nurse walked away. Then, finally, the ward door opened with a hiss and Rupert and the doctor came down the long passage towards her. Rupert held the overnight bag lightly in his hand.

“Guess what,” he said as he plopped the bag onto the bed. “It’s Dr Green’s birthday today. And it’s a big one. Forty. He doesn’t look too bad for an old guy, hey?”

“Happy birthday,” she said to the doctor. Then to Rupert: “What took you so long?”

“Sorry, my darling. I bumped into him in the parking lot so we had a quick look at the Porsche and before we knew it we were discussing Harleys. I think it’s a mid-life crisis,” Rupert said with a nod in the doctor’s direction.

“Guilty as charged.”

Petra tried to smile, but then she said: “Okay, can we focus on the baby here?”

“Right,” the doctor said. “I’ll run you through the procedure. Firstly, the anaesthetist will give you an epidural. It might be uncomfortable, but it’s not sore. Once that’s done, I will make the incision and deliver the baby. The paediatrician will check him, I’ll sew you up and then you go to the recovery room for a few minutes before you meet hubby and son back here in the ward. It all takes about half-an-hour. Okay?”

The doctor left and Petra unzipped the bag. She took out her pyjamas, a book on newborns, her toiletries. Sitting on her haunches, she packed them into the trolley next to her bed. “Won’t you pass me the rest of the things, please?”

Rupert lifted a baby-grow from the bag and held it out before him. He felt the fabric, put it to his nose and rubbed it against his cheek. Then he folded it again and handed it to her. He pulled out a bootee and stuck his thumb into it.

“It’s so small,” he said.

In the theatre, Petra sat sideways on the operating table. Dr Green stood in front of her and pressed her head against his body to hold her still. Some chest hair that stuck out from under the neckline of his tunic brushed against her face. She felt the anaesthetist’s fingers push lightly against her spine. Then there was a sharp jab in her back. Rupert groaned.

“Don’t pass out on us yet,” Dr Green said. “We haven’t even started.”

A dullness spread to her legs.

“All set,” the anaesthetist said. “Let’s help you to lie down.” He leaned over her to place her in the right position. His glasses slid down his nose and he pushed them back up with the knuckle of his forefinger and from such a close distance, she could see that his one eye was more magnified by his lenses than the other. She looked away.

“Can you feel anything?" the doctor said.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Good, because I’ve already started.”

There was a tug at her stomach and Rupert took her hand.

Then the anaesthetist said: “Do you want to see?”

Before she could answer, he slipped his hands under her shoulders, slid them down her back and lifted her upper body, giving her no choice at all.

From the red mess of her stomach she saw her baby’s head. His small, wet face was turned towards her; his mouth and eyes were tightly shut. The doctor lifted the head and, with a quick turn of his wrist, unwound the umbilical cord from his neck. Then, using both hands he pulled and the baby lifted from her stomach. Out came shoulders and arms stretched out wide with hands opened and fingers splayed. Out slipped a tummy and his legs were pulled up with his feet turned in pigeon-toed. Slippery and smooth he slid out of her until he hung suspended from the doctor’s hands with the grey cord looping downwards from him into her.

“Wasn’t that fantastic?” the anaesthetist said.

The baby screamed.

The paediatrician took Sam to a table against the opposite wall. He turned to her: “You’ll have him in a second. I’ll just clean him up, weigh and check him. Soon he’ll be all yours.”

She lifted her head and strained her neck to see her baby, but Rupert was leaning over the table with his camera, obscuring her view. So she lay back down again and squinted past the equipment that stood next to her bed and watched the doctor’s back as he checked her boy.

At last the paediatrician turned to her and gave her a thumbs-up. Then, while she was still being stitched, he brought Sam to her and lay him down on her chest. The baby was tightly swaddled and Petra pushed the blue flannel away to see his face. She wrapped her arms around him.

Rupert peered over her shoulder. “It’s a lucky thing he looks like you.” Holding up the camera he said: “Smile, Mummy.”

She blinked at the flash.

Then the paediatrician said: “There’s just one small thing we have to sort out. It seems he has a little water on the lungs. It’s very common with a Caesar, nothing to worry about. He’ll go to neo-natal ICU for a short while and then I’ll bring him down to you in the ward. Okay?”

Rupert leaned down and kissed her on the mouth.

“I’ll go with him,” he said. “I won’t be long.” He turned to the doctor. “I’ll come with you. Is that okay?”

The doctor had already taken the baby and was at the door.

“Of course,” he said.

They left, the door closing with a hiss behind them, and she waited. Dr Green told her she had a beautiful son. A machine beeped behind her and a nurse took her pulse and metal tools clinked in metal trays. The doctor asked the nurse if she'd had a good weekend and the nurse said it was quiet, thanks. At last they were done. When they wheeled her away Petra looked out for the neo-natal ICU, but she could not see it from where she lay in the rattling bed.

The doctor never did bring Sam down to the ward. Babies were sometimes born with pneumonia. No-one quite knew why. They put her in a private room, and for a week she expressed milk, which they froze. She visited her baby in ICU and watched the readings that flickered on the machines next to her child's bed. It was good when the readings went up, and sometimes they did. She would stay there until her breasts became too swollen and she had to leave to fill more bottles, which she managed to fill quite easily. The bottles were marked with her name and the date, and they were stored next to the others in the freezer. Rupert would visit during his lunch hour and they would sit side by side, looking at Sam together. For a week they did that, until one morning a nurse placed a screen around his cot and someone called Rupert at his office and told him to come now. But before he could get there, the nurse removed all the tubes and Petra watched his colour change from rosy to lilac to light blue to grey.

Chapter 3

Inside the walk-in fridge, Petra instantly felt the chill on her skin, but she took her time and read the labels of the bottles on the top shelf, where Rupert kept the imported wines, before she chose one called Cloudy Bay. She liked the name.

The bottle was slippery with condensation, so she held it tightly against her body with her right hand and pushed the release toggle with her left. When the door did not open, she put down the bottle, wiped her right hand dry on her trousers and tried again. It stayed closed. A fan whirred above her head and ice had formed around it. In a panic, she banged against the glass door with her fist and pushed again. Both hands this time. Still nothing.

"Rupert!"

Shouting and leaning into the door with her left shoulder, she slammed the toggle again and again. The glass door was icy against her naked arm.

"Rupert!"

Then she stopped and forced herself to take long, slow breaths. She put both her hands on the toggle one more time and gave it a turn as she pushed against it with her whole body. Slowly and deliberately.

The door clicked open and she stumbled into the kitchen that was warm with the smell of oxtail. Rupert had put on rock music and the heartbeats of the bass and drums throbbed through the house.

She walked to the bedroom where he sat on the bed, reading. Their dog, a Ridgeback, sat on the floor next to the bed and Rupert stroked its head gently,

softly twirling the dog's ears in his fingers. When she turned down the music, he looked up from his book.

"What now?"

"I just got locked in the cold room. The release button jammed. Didn't you hear me call?"

"No. Sorry. Are you okay?"

"I got a fright. I guess I panicked, but I hate that door. I told you ages ago there's a problem with that door."

"Why don't you take a shower, Petra. I'll go after you." He glanced down at the book lying in his lap. Sting's autobiography. Then he looked up and smiled vaguely at her. "Okay?"

She undressed next to the bed where Rupert continued reading, and left her underwear on the duvet beside him. Then she opened the hot tap of the shower and immediately climbed in. The water was still cold and she gasped with the shock of it, but she forced herself to stay there. Slowly it became tepid, warmer and then very hot. She stayed under the scalding water until her scalp burned and her skin had turned red.

She finally adjusted the temperature and started washing herself when the dog appeared at the shower door and licked the glass. She opened the door and stuck out her hand. Water ran down her arm and dripped off her fingertips. The dog licked her fingers and his tongue was soft and warm and it felt good, so she cupped her hand and let him lap the water that pooled up in her palm.

While Rupert showered, she put on a black shift dress and clipped on a string of pearls. The dress was a narrow cut and she struggled to pull herself up into the high seat of Rupert's four-wheel-drive.

The restaurant was full when they arrived. Petra scanned the tables. She had never met David and Marianne Bennet, who were clients of Rupert's from Cape Town. In the car on the way to the restaurant, Rupert had told her that the Bennets were stopping over in Johannesburg before going on to Zanzibar to celebrate their anniversary. He said she would like them; that they were such interesting people. He told her that they both had their pilot's license and that Marianne was an expert at yoga, and that they were loaded.

A Japanese waitress in a kimono led them to a table where a man with dark, thinning hair and deep-set eyes sat next to a striking woman. They got up and kissed Petra on both cheeks. The man was shorter than the woman, who was very thin. She was wearing a sheer, embroidered and sequined dress in sapphire blue that hung loosely from her shoulders to her knees. Her black hair was long and curly, and she had loosely collected it up in a clip. On her feet she wore beaded sandals. Her only jewellery was a lapis lazuli ring on her index finger and she wore very little make up. She looked deliberately bohemian.

Petra sat down opposite her.

"I'm pleased to meet you at last," she said to David. "Rupert often talks about you." She flushed. "Nothing involving business, of course. Just about your hunting and shooting and so. I believe that's how you met each other, right?"

"Yes, I think it was about five years ago on the Millers' farm in the Eastern Cape. We shared a hide one morning during a duck shoot." He turned to Rupert.

“Remember how cold it was then? We were freezing our butts off waiting for the ducks to fly over and you thought it was a good time to tell me what a great portfolio manager you were. I don’t think you shot a single duck that day.”

“I got the big duck though, didn’t I?”

“Hell, you talked so much I just agreed to give you money so that you could shut up!”

They all laughed.

“But, so far it’s been one of my best impulse decisions,” David said. “Where’s that waiter. I’m dying for some saki.” He waved his hand about. “Shall we have saki all round?”

“I’ll just have some mineral water for now,” Petra said.

David ordered a bottle of warm saki with three cups and a bottle of sparkling mineral water.

“Don’t you drink?” Marianne asked.

“I’ve never really developed a taste for rice wine. I’ll have some white wine later.”

To the left of Petra, against the wall, was a fish tank of live crayfish. It was not a very big tank, but it was quite full. On the one side, some of the crayfish stood on top of each other, their bodies pressing against the side of the tank, showing their pale yellow undersides. They tap-tapped against the glass with antennae and feet. Little black eyes stood rigidly on stalks. One of them had fallen onto its back and was unsuccessfully trying to right itself by curling and straightening its tail. Its legs waved about pointlessly.

“Isn’t that cruel?” Petra said.

“One could say they’re used to it.” David answered. “They are just crayfish, after all.” He turned to the others. “Do you know the joke about the crayfish being boiled alive, and the cook saying that it’s not cruel, because they’re used to it?”

“Yes, yes. Please don’t tell it. You are so bad at telling jokes,” Marianne said, and they laughed.

“How’s work,” Rupert said to Marianne.

“Well, it’s been difficult. The NGO I’m involved with has had such a rough time with the distribution of ARVs to rural areas. And even when they do get them to the clinics, the people can’t get there to receive them. And every day there are more Aids orphans and more infected children.” She frowned and shook her head. “It’s an impossible situation.”

“What do you do for the NGO?” Petra asked.

“Oh, I investigate the relevant charities that apply for funds and make recommendations to the Swedes – they’re the ones providing the money.”

“Have you been to Sweden?”

“I go to Stockholm quite often; about three times a year. It’s really beautiful. What do you do?”

“I was a beautician. Well, I still am, I guess, but I don’t see that many clients nowadays except to do the odd favour for a friend. I take care of the house; we entertain quite a lot at home which requires a lot of work. And I walk the dog. You know how they say that behind every successful man is a caring wife?”

“That’s nice.”

“I hope you don’t mind, Petra, but I’m going to eat one of your crayfish friends,” David said. “Not many restaurants offer live crayfish sashimi and it’s a real experience to eat.”

“Of course not,” she said. “I sometimes eat crayfish too.”

When the food arrived, David’s meal consisted of a whole crayfish on a white plate. The crayfish was still completely intact, except that its legs had been removed and the top carapace of the tail had been cut off to expose its opaque flesh, which had been cubed and left in the bottom half of the carapace that now functioned as a dish.

“Look. You can’t get fresher than this,” he said and poked the cubed flesh with his chopstick. It pulsated almost imperceptibly.

“Oh my God, it’s still alive!” Petra blurted out.

“Wait, I missed that,” Rupert said, leaning forward.

David picked up a cube and held it in his chopsticks over the centre of the table so that they all could see it throb, before he put it in his mouth.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve seen that,” Rupert said.

“Do you want to try some?” David offered.

“Honestly, no. I couldn’t,” Rupert said with a laugh. “Enjoy.”

The animal’s antennae had been left on and Petra saw that they were still moving; very slowly the left feeler stroked David’s shirt pocket as he sat forward in his chair. She could not take her eyes off it. It moved so very slowly; up, down, up, down. Then it stopped.

“That’s disgusting,” Petra said.

“I don’t think it has any feeling,” Marianne said. “It’s just a motor reflex, in the same way a chicken runs around after its head had been chopped off. Eat them like this or drop them alive in boiling water, who’s to say which is worse?”

“Well…”

“Tell us about your trip to Zanzibar. I believe it’s your fifteenth anniversary?” Rupert interrupted.

“Yes it is, which gives us a good excuse to go on an exotic holiday.”

“Do you have children?” Petra asked her.

“No. David and I decided not to have kids. He said he couldn’t stand the sticky handprints they leave all over the house, isn’t that so, honey?” She winked at David. “Jokes aside, we wanted to do other things with our lives, like travel and see the world; listen to Wagner in Germany, taste wine in France. We’re going to India at the end of the year. We couldn’t do half the things we do if we had kids. And you?”

“No.”

“Well, then you know what I mean,” she smiled.

In the car on the way home, Petra lit a cigarette.

“That’s easily the worst meal I’ve ever had to witness.”

“Yup, it was quite eccentric.”

“It was disgusting.”

“You could have been a bit more subtle about it. They are my best clients, you know, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Must we pretend it’s normal? I’m sure he does it for shock value anyway. He probably would have been disappointed if I wasn’t shocked.”

“It would just be nice, in future, if you could think a little before you speak. Entertaining my clients is not the same as chatting to a woman having a facial.”

When they got home Rupert went straight to bed. Petra closed the curtains, let the dog out for a pee, filled his bowl with water and put him to bed. She put a blanket over him and, leaning down on her knees beside his basket, she stroked his ears and told him he was a good dog. Then she checked the messages on the answering machine.

The first message was from her mother. She could hear piano music in the background.

“Petra? Hello? Oh, it’s the machine. Remember to come tomorrow. I’m just phoning to remind you that tomorrow is Wednesday. It’s Ma. That’s all. Bye.”

There were three short beeps before the next message. She recognised the voice immediately.

“Hi, Mr and Mrs Wales. It’s Ruan speaking, Piet’s son,” he hesitated, “the taxidermist. I’m just phoning to apologise for what happened to the impala. We really value your business, Mr Wales, and we want you to know that we are very upset about it all. It’s never happened before. Anyway, if you decide to continue using us, we’ll be happy to do your next mount at cost. Please don’t hesitate to call if you have any questions…”

He left a cell phone number. Petra rewound the tape and listened to the message again. She imagined him talking on the phone with his head perhaps

tilted to the side and his hair falling over his cheek. She opened her notebook and scribbled down the number. Then she erased the message.

Chapter 4

Petra held her baby and cupped her hand around his feet and put her finger in his fist. But the baby would not grip her finger and Rupert talked softly and he held his hands out towards her, so she uncurled her arms and felt the little body roll away from her chest and handed him over.

The door of the neo-natal ICU closed shut behind them. Rupert and Petra walked down the passage, passing through shafts of sunlight that slanted through the windows and reflected off the polished floor. At the other end of the passage a double door that said *Theatre* opened and a nurse came briskly towards them, pushing a cot with one hand and holding a drip steady with the other. They stepped aside to let her pass. Petra's breasts ached and they felt heavy. A thin trickle ran down her stomach.

They went to her room where Petra packed her pyjamas, the book on child-rearing and her toiletries back into the bag. When they walked through the ward to leave, she felt a woman stare at her. She looked up and the woman quickly looked away.

Outside, Petra carried the bag as they walked past rows of parked cars to the far end of the parking lot. Rupert's car was hot from the sun and the seat burnt her legs, but she closed the door, kept the windows up and held the bag on her lap. She stared out the window at the buildings that slowly rolled past.

When they arrived home her mother, Marili, came out of the house and was at the car even before Rupert had turned off the engine. She lifted the bag from

Petra's lap and dropped it on the floor of the garage. Then she helped Petra out of the car, pulled her to her chest and held her tightly.

"Oh my darling girl, my sweet child."

A dry, rasping sound came from Petra's throat.

"I don't know what to say to you."

Rupert came around the car and picked up the bag that lay at their feet, but as he turned to go, Marili touched his arm. "I'm so sorry," she said.

He did not speak, but nodded and quickly turned away from them so that they could not see his face. Marili took Petra by the hand and led her into the kitchen.

Her mother made a pot of tea and gave them toast with honey. Her blonde hair, which had streaks of grey in it, was swept away from her face and tied into a clip at her neck. Her nails were cut short for the violin, but they were painted red. On her fingers she wore her wedding band, as well as an opal ring her husband had given her when Petra was born.

They sat down at the kitchen table and looked at their cups of tea.

Then Marili said: "I'm sorry, but I have to talk about it." She started to cry and turned the opal ring on her finger around and around. "I need to understand. How is it that a baby can be born with pneumonia?"

"The doctors don't really seem to know," Rupert said. "They say it happens to ten percent of all babies. Most babies don't die, but Sam…"

"I don't know if maybe I did something wrong." Petra's voice was hardly above a whisper.

“Oh Petra, don’t you believe that!” Marili got up. She sat on her haunches next to her daughter’s chair and hugged her around the waist. Then she shifted onto her knees, held Petra’s face in her hands and kissed her eyelids, first the one, then the other. She took her by the shoulders and straightened her arms to look Petra in the eyes. “Sad things, terribly sad things, sometimes just happen.”

The toast on their plates had grown cold.

Holding Petra’s hand, her mother quietly discussed arrangements with Rupert. She would speak to the priest about a service. Rupert nodded. People would want refreshments; she would provide something to eat. Thank you, Rupert said. Should they come to the house after the church? Of course. Would Rupert please take care of her girl?

Petra got up from the table, went to her room and shut the door. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at her feet. Then, too exhausted to take off her shoes, she lay down, pulled the duvet up high so that it fell cool over her face, and closed her eyes.

She woke when she felt the mattress move beside her. It was already dark outside but the curtains had not been drawn. Rupert put down a cup of tea on the bedside table and leant over towards her.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

“You’ve slept a long time.”

“Oh.”

“Your mother says bye. We didn’t want to wake you. She’ll come around again tomorrow.”

"Okay."

Rupert's eyes were red and his face looked puffy and tired.

"I've brought you some tea."

"Thanks."

He stroked her hair. Then he said: "I don't think I can do this again." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat.

She said nothing.

He lay down and put his arm around her. "We'll do other things, my darling," he said. "Many interesting things. We can travel. Go anywhere we want to."

She rolled away from him and faced the other way.

For two weeks they received flowers. Flowers from friends, flowers from colleagues, flowers from the doctors and staff at the hospital. White orchids on the kitchen table, mixed bunches in the hall, baskets of flowers that stood on the floor. Lilies and daisies and roses and baby's breath.

The day she fetched her son's ashes, there were flowers that wilted and needed water and flowers that rotted from too much water.

She opened her diary and flipped past the pages that were worn and dog-eared and scribbled black with appointments for facials, manicures and massages. There were telephone numbers for confirmations in green and amounts charged to clients in red. When she reached *Friday 20th*, she read on the page that had no other appointments: *Fetch Sam's Ashes.*

It was almost lunchtime when Petra got up and dressed and left the house.

“Can I help you?” the man behind the counter said. He smiled at her so she had to smile back.

“I’ve come to collect some ashes,” she said.

“And the name?”

“Sam Wales.”

He nodded and walked to the adjacent room, still politely smiling as if he were a dry-cleaner and she had just come to collect her coat. On the black marble floor his reflection followed him upside down, feet connecting with feet as his steps echoed in the empty space.

Her hands felt chilly, so she put them in her pockets. She felt a tissue there, crumpled up and hard, and clutched it in her fist. On the counter was a large arrangement of red and white carnations that had been wrapped in plastic, with a name tag pinned to a white bow. She closed her eyes and, with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, squeezed the bridge of her nose.

When the man returned, he put a little box, the shape and size of a toddler’s shoebox, on the counter between them. It had been wrapped in the brown paper one would use to cover a boy’s schoolbooks.

“Please sign here.”

With narrow hands and long, neat fingers, the man slid a release form over the counter. So she signed her name, wrote ‘*mother*’ next to ‘*relation to the deceased*,’ and carried her son to the car for the first time.

The box felt too small and too light. Important things should be heavier, she thought. She wanted to strain and sweat under the burden of it, but instead she

carried Sam with two hands in front of her as if he were an offering. At the car, she held him tightly in one hand while she fumbled in her handbag for her keys with the other. Her fingers grabbed at lipstick, more used tissues, the small plastic nametag that had been cut off at the hospital and given to her at the last moment. The strap of her bag slid down her shoulder, so she put the box on the roof of the car to find her keys. She did not take her eyes off it.

Inside the car, she put the box on the passenger seat and turned the key in the ignition. She listened to the hum of the car's motor. The box could so easily slide and fall to the floor, so she picked it up and put it on her lap, snug against her stomach. Then she clicked the seatbelt around them both before she carefully pulled away.

When she arrived home, she found Rupert sitting on the bedroom floor, even though it was not yet five. The smell of gun oil stung her nose. His head was bent over one of two new shotguns that he had bought three months before. The other one, smaller than usual, just right for a boy, lay on a newspaper next to him. It was a bargain, he had said when he had brought it home. He would teach his son himself. They could go shooting together. Their son could learn to be a good shot with that gun.

"You're home early," she said.

"Oh, hi. Yes. I'm going wingshooting this weekend. Remember?"

She shook her head.

"Some guys from work invited me. I asked you on Monday. You still said it was a good idea."

She stood there with the small brown box in her hands. He was holding an oily rag.

“Oh.”

“I’m just cleaning these and then I’ll be off.” His fringe flopped over his forehead and he tried to push it away with his dirty hand. He had taken off his wedding ring and it lay in some spilt oil on the newspaper in front of him. He peered down the barrel of the gun and held it up to the light with one eye closed.

“What should we do with the ashes?” she said.

He lowered the gun. She held the box out towards him.

“I’ve just been to fetch the ashes.”

“Oh, I didn’t know. Are you okay?”

“I thought we could take it with us next week when we go to the coast, and scatter it in the sea.”

“Why? We don’t live by the sea. It’s not where we normally are.”

“Oh.”

A dirty smear ran across his cheek. “We could bury it in the garden, and plant a tree,” he said.

She shook her head. “What if we move? What then?”

He looked down, ran his hand across his face and sighed. Then he looked back up at her.

“I don’t know Petra. I don’t know what to do with ashes. Don’t they have those walls one puts them into? At a church?”

She stared at him. Then she walked past him, stepping over the smaller gun, and went to her cupboard where she opened a drawer. It was a tidy drawer with

panties and bras at the back, vests and socks in the front. She tucked the box snugly between her underwear and carefully closed the drawer.

That night it rained. She listened to the thunder which kept her awake, and she listened for Rupert's breathing, but he was not there. Then she listened to the rain some more and it never stopped. It was still raining when the hadedas called over her roof and she fell asleep at last.

It was mid-morning when she woke up. The rain had stopped and the clouds had lifted, so she made herself a mug of coffee and went outside in her pyjamas. Her garden had become overgrown; it had become lush and green with cold shadows on the lawn. Smaller plants were dwarfed by shrubs that had grown wild with branches that hung limply with the weight of the rain on them.

She finished her coffee. Then she took her sports bra from the drawer where Sam lay and put on an old tracksuit. In the garden shed she found an axe, a saw and some shears. The shed was cold and damp and her eyes watered with the smell of fertiliser and poison. She had no gloves.

She started chopping down the bignonia that darkened her bedroom window. The branches that supported the creeper were thick and tough and gnarled and twisted, but she lifted the axe high over her head and brought it down on the plant. The wood splintered away. Some orange-red trumpet flowers popped from their little stems and lay uselessly at her feet. She stepped on the spliced branch; it cracked as it snapped under her weight. Then she bent over it and pulled with her bare hands until it finally broke off. The bark of the plant was rough and her hands bled on the inside of her thumbs. While she sucked at the cuts, she noticed how

the creeper's upper limbs had curled themselves around a drainpipe. Some flowers waved from the gutter like witches' fingers. With heels dug deep into the soil, she pulled it away from the gutter. It cracked and screeched, and when it finally gave way she fell backwards, collapsing on the grass under the weight of it.

The house looked naked and broken without the bignonia. Scars of grey cement showed where paint and plaster had been ripped away from the wall. The drainpipe hung loosely in its brackets. Her ears hummed and it took a while before she heard the phone ringing.

"Hello Petra," her mother said. "How are you, my darling?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm doing some gardening."

"That's good. Gardening is good."

She told her mother that Rupert had gone away for the weekend and that it was nice to have the house to herself; that she enjoyed the quiet.

"Rupert is taking me to Cape Town next week," Petra said.

Marili hesitated. "I'm pleased, Petra. You should get away."

After the call she returned outside and cut back a eugenia with its red berries. She pulled out and divided a clump of clivia, even though they were still in bloom. There was a jasmine that hung heavy with flowers and the smell was overpowering and sweet and even though there were new buds forming, some of the flowers had browned, so she cut it away. Finally, she pulled out the impatiens she had planted three months before, but that had already become lanky in the shade.

When she was done, she piled all the plants on top of some old dead wood in the middle of her lawn. She fetched some newspapers, stuck it in amongst the

branches and the wood, and set the whole lot alight. Ghostly, the grey smoke swirled up and disappeared into the clouds. The fire struggled with the green wood and the plants hissed and sighed. So, she fetched a half empty bottle of paraffin and, with an outstretched arm, poured it on the cuttings. The flame that had moved slowly along the moaning branches, licked at the paraffin and at once exploded. Petra stepped back and watched the fire with its dancing flames that left her face hot and dry.

Rupert came home the next day covered in dust. He dropped his duffel bag from his shoulders and kissed her lightly on her cheek.

“How was your weekend,” he said.

“Not too bad. I did some gardening. And yours?”

“Okay. Gardening’s good, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

He went to the car and fetched their old polystyrene cooler box. He wearily put it down on the kitchen floor.

“Here are the birds,” he said. “I think there are about seven. We just shared them out evenly between us. We should have them cleaned tomorrow.” Then he turned and went for a bath.

She opened the lid and looked at the small pile of guinea-fowl inside. Unplucked, their beautiful dark-grey feathers with white speckles looked soft and warm, but when she touched them they felt cold. They lay in the box haphazardly; heads crooked awkwardly, eyes half-open.

She went to the bathroom where her husband lay in the steaming water, eyes closed. She took off her clothes. Without a word she climbed in and sat, knees

held tightly against her breasts, facing him. He did not open his eyes, but he turned his palms up and she took his hands. She pulled him up until their knees met. With bent backs they leant forward, towards each other, until their foreheads touched. As she put her face in his neck, his shoulders shook and she rocked him gently from side to side.

Chapter 5

The morning after supper with the Bennets, Petra, as always, cut a grapefruit for Rupert. She felt the firmness of the fruit's skin under the blade of the knife before it gave way. The split grapefruit wobbled on the plate. She cut around the edge of the pink flesh, separating it from the skin. It was five minutes past seven. Her cell phone was plugged into its charger, and the green light showed that the battery was full.

When she divided the grapefruit segments with the tip of the knife, some of the juice spilled and formed a small, pink pool of liquid in the bottom of the plate. Her fingers stung from the citrus, so she licked them, and the juice of the fruit tasted bitter-sweet. Then she made herself a cup of coffee, checked her cell phone for messages, and took it with her to get dressed.

Standing in front of the mirror, she brushed her hair and pulled it back from her face into a low knot. Her hair had become coarser and the streaks that were once blonde had become darker, but it was still thick and smooth. She leant forward towards the mirror and inspected her face. Two deep frown lines ran vertically between her eyebrows and when she smiled wrinkles radiated from the corners of her eyes. With her forefingers she smoothed out the skin between her eyebrows and saw what she looked like ten years ago. She let go and stood back from the mirror. Her phone lay on the counter next to the coffee.

She put on her make-up with circular sweeps of her fingers. She smiled to accentuate her cheekbones and highlighted them with blusher. Then she lightly outlined her eyes and put on mascara and cleaned up where the mascara had

smudged. Not too much lipstick. Then she put on jeans, a white T-shirt and sneakers. She wore no jewellery.

It was already hot outside, so she flung open the door that led onto the stoep. The potted flowers she had planted on the patio were meant for shadier gardens than hers and already they drooped in the heat. She gazed south towards the horizon, where clouds were building up, but it seemed unlikely they would reach her within the day. With her cell phone in her pocket, she connected the sprinkler head to the hose pipe, and she watered the plants until the water started dripping from the bottom of the pots and she could smell the damp soil.

At a quarter to nine, she fetched the number she had jotted down the night before, sat down on the top step of the stoep and lit a cigarette. It was a mild brand and she could barely taste it, so she broke off the filter and drew the smoke in deeply until her chest burnt. With her ring finger and thumb she removed a speck of tobacco from her tongue.

Then she dialled the number.

“Ruan Jordaan speaking.”

“Hi Mr Jordaan. Ruan. It’s Petra Wales speaking. I don’t know if you remember me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You very kindly phoned last night.”

He said nothing.

“Well, I’ve thought of giving my husband a gift to make up for losing the impala, and was wondering whether you have any skins around. You know,

possibly from clients who have heads mounted but don't use the skins? Perhaps there's something I could buy for his office which he can use as a rug."

"Oh…"

She took another drag from the cigarette. It made her head spin, so she tossed it onto the step and killed it with her toe.

"Can I meet with you, perhaps to look at some of the skins you have? I could come out to your shop."

"Well," he hesitated. "Most of our clients take their hides as well." There was a tinkering in the background. "But we have a few of our own here. They're not much though; I think there are a zebra and an eland. That might be a good one, 'cause it's nice and big."

"Yes, I'd love to see that."

"I'll have to speak to my dad, but it shouldn't be a problem. We also have a black and white cow hide." He laughed. "But that's probably not what you're looking for."

"No," she smiled. "That won't be wild enough for Rupert. Can I come out to your premises and look at what you've got?"

"Sure. Hey, wait. I'm doing a delivery on Friday for a client in Hyde Park. I don't know if you live close by, but I can throw the hides in the car and meet you then, if that suits you."

The water from the pots had converged to form a rivulet that snaked towards the edge of the stoep. But it had already started to evaporate in the heat, and soon it would be just a line in the dust.

Petra suggested a small coffee shop with easy parking. He could leave the skins in the car, she could buy him a coffee and they could look at the skins afterwards.

"That's great Mrs Wales. Around eleven?"

"Sure. Please call me Petra."

After the call, Petra opened her diary to Friday and wrote *Ruan*, even though she knew she would remember anyway. She wondered if he was writing it down too.

She picked up the old cigarette stub and flung it into a shrub nearby. Then she packed her beautician's bag, put the dog outside, set the alarm and left to visit her mother.

The old age home where her mother lived was an ugly, square, face-brick building with white burglar bars covering all the windows. Barbed wire ran along the top of the outside wall. But it was in a tree-lined street and sometimes, if you were lucky, you could hear the children's voices from a school nearby.

Petra put down her bag, smoothed her hair back from her face and adjusted the clip in her neck before she opened the little garden gate. The latch was rusted and she had to jiggle it back and forth before it unlocked. It creaked on its hinges and slammed shut behind her. A slate flagstone path led to the front door.

"Hello, Mr Sander," she said to an old man who knelt next to a bed of marigolds and shasta daisies that had been planted beside the front door.

Although it was hot, he was wearing brown corduroy pants, a khaki cardigan and a tweed cap. He did not respond, so she lightly touched his shoulder. He

looked up, with a nod raised a soiled hand and, with his thumb, lifted the brim of his cap.

"Your garden looks lovely," she said.

He smiled, pushed down onto his trowel to shift the weight on his knees, before he continued turning the soil around the plants, pulling out weeds and carefully placing them on a little heap beside him.

Inside, the air was cool. She passed the communal lounge where three people sat very close to the television, some men played cards and a woman with a knee length skirt and a string of pearls pushed her walking frame closer to the window. In the middle of the room, two men in overalls stood on aluminium ladders, taping loops of green and red tinsel to the ceiling.

She walked down a long, carpeted passage with windows overlooking the street on the one side, and doors on the other. When she reached the fifth door, she heard the sound of a solo violin.

She stopped at once, held her breath and listened. For a moment she thought that her mother was practising; that she was again standing with a straight back, feet planted firmly apart, cheek resting on the instrument. But then an orchestra joined in and she smelled the boiled vegetables that seemed to always cling to the walls of the place. She took a deep breath, knocked and let herself in.

"Hi Ma."

Her mother sat in a wingback chair that stood next to the bed. Her body looked small and was almost buried under the cushions that were meant to support her. The multi-coloured, knitted squares of the blanket that was tucked tightly

over her lap and around her legs, were stretched and faded. She held her hands on her lap, the left hand holding the right to stop it trembling.

“Oh, hello my darling. I was worried you weren’t coming. I never know whether you get my messages on that machine.”

“I always come, Ma. You don’t have to leave messages to remind me.” She turned down the volume. “You’re listening to Beethoven’s violin concerto. Does that mean you are feeling well today?”

“It’s Bruch. Have you come here to annoy me?”

“I’ve come to beautify you,” she teased “and I’m delighted I don’t have to sit through Lieder or Callas. It puts me in a bad mood. Actually, I’m sure it depresses you too.”

“Depressions are necessary. They build character.”

Petra smiled. She walked past her mother and straightened the two tapestries of ancient farm scenes that hung on the wall behind the bed. From the bed she could see into the blue bathroom. The non-slip mat in the bath was wet and had mould on it, so she quickly wiped it dry with the towel and hung it over the bath before she sprayed the room with air freshener.

Then she opened the bag. She took out her mother’s favourite products; mint-scented exfoliating foot gel, peach foot mask and lemon-scented moisturiser. A fruit salad for her feet. Her hands received a subtler menu of rose-scented products. Her mother recently insisted on keeping her fingernails pearly pink, in keeping with her age, but her toenails, hidden by her slippers, remained blood red.

“It’s almost twelve. Time for my midday drink. Will you join me?” her mother said.

Petra went to the dark ball-and-claw display cabinet next to the TV and took out a bottle of brandy and two tumblers. The familiar smell of tobacco, wood and alcohol that seemed to be trapped in there forever enveloped her. She poured the brandy level to the inscription that had been engraved into the glass. *Marili Wessels en Paulus Coetzee, 1959.* Two linked wedding bands were etched under the date. She gave one glass to her mother.

“I can’t believe you still have these glasses.”

“They’ve outlived your father. They’ll probably outlive me too. Then you can have them.”

“Don’t say that Ma.”

“But you may only drink good brandy from them and you have to toast me each time.”

Petra laughed, gave one glass to her mother and lifted her own. “To you then. And Pa.”

Then she filled a plastic tub with warm water and carefully carried it to her mother. Kicking off her own shoes, she knelt down next to the chair and washed her mother’s feet.

“So, how have you been?” her mother said before taking a small sip of her drink. Her fingers curled tightly around the glass and she held it against her breast to steady her hand.

“Oh, I’m okay, I guess.”

Petra cleaned off the red nail varnish. Under the varnish her mother’s toenails were yellowed and thick. Bunions stuck out at the knuckles of her big toes, which were bent towards the outside of her foot, pushing all the other toes

sideways too. She massaged her mother's feet with the gel, gently pushing and flexing them. The feet felt cold in her hands.

"An odd thing happened to me this week. I took an impala head to the taxidermist for Rupert, and some little boys stole it out of my car. I think they wanted to eat it."

"Good for them."

"Well, it got me into some trouble. Rupert was less than pleased."

"Why were you playing courier anyway? Surely your husband can cart around his own dead animals."

Petra did not answer. She rinsed the gel off her mother's feet, applied some of the foot mask and carefully placed them on a folded towel. Then she shuffled on her knees to her mother's side and took one hand from her lap. She poured some of the rose crème into her palm and smoothed it into her mother's hand, massaging each finger individually. She could feel the dark brown growths that had become bigger with time and that now covered her mother's hand, like the parasites she sometimes found in her garden, on leaves that curled and withered.

Her mother sat back and closed her eyes. "That's nice."

Turning her mother's hand around, palm side up, she rubbed the crème over her tiny wrist, where the veins bulged blue under the skin, up her forearm and all the way to her elbow.

Then she sat back on her haunches and drank her brandy. It burned its way down her throat, past her chest and into her stomach. In the background, the violin scurried up a scale, higher and higher it climbed, until it hovered, as if only just

holding on, before it freefell to where the cellos could catch it. She took the other hand.

Eventually the music stopped. Her mother sat very quietly, her mouth slightly opened, her eyelids so thin that they seemed almost transparent. Petra continued in silence, gently wiping the mask off the feet and painting the toenails.

When she was done she got up and looked at her mother who sat sleeping next to her glass of brandy, her feet with the red toenails stretched out beside the waiting slippers. She quickly packed up. Impatiently.

“Ma, I’m done.” She spoke close to her mother’s ear.

Her mother opened her eyes as if she had been awake all along and looked at her hands and feet.

“That was quick.”

Petra picked up her bag, leant forward, put her one arm around her mother’s shoulders and pressed her cheek against her hair. It felt soft and thin.

Her mother hugged her, holding tightly onto her, so that she had to ease herself out of the embrace.

“Bye Ma. I have to go. I’ll see you on Sunday, okay?”

“Then you’ll stay longer?”

“Then I’ll stay longer.”

She hurried to the door, turned to give a quick wave and slipped into the passage.

Outside, a dry wind was blowing. A small woman with a scarf around her head stood in the middle of the lawn holding a plastic shopping bag. She fished

some bread out of the bag and scattered the crumbs at her feet where fat pigeons darted about, pecking at the grass and at each other.

Petra leant against her car and fumbled in her bag for a cigarette. Two huge lavender-grey bird droppings lay splattered against her windshield. She turned her back to the wind and hunched forward, cupping her hand over her cigarette. Dust and leaves swirled around her legs and a strand of hair flicked across her face. When she finally managed to light her cigarette, she turned her face into the wind before she opened the door and quickly climbed in. Then she rolled the window down a fraction and started the car.

Chapter 6

A week after Rupert had returned from the guinea-fowl shoot, Petra packed for the beach. She packed a caftan, one tracksuit, a pair of jeans and a pair of black pants, two skirts, four T-shirts, walking shoes and a pair of sandals. She packed her sponge bag, a warm sweater for the nights and a book-club novel she knew she would never read.

"Take this one," her friends had said, pressing it into her hands. "It's a fun holiday read."

Then she took six sets of underwear and three pairs of socks from the drawer where Sam lay. On her dressing table was the camera that Rupert had used, with its half-full spool that still needed to be developed. She would not take any other photos with that spool, so she put the camera in the drawer next to the brown box and when she closed the drawer, she could hear the box slide and it bumped against the side of the drawer with a soft thud.

At the airport Petra followed Rupert as he pulled their suitcase with one hand and held their tickets in the other. Men in suits carrying briefcases and newspapers walked briskly past them. There were families with trolleys piled high with bags, prams, and sets of golf clubs. With a shrill voice a woman announced boarding times, departure times and called for people delaying flights in English and then again in Afrikaans.

"It's busy today," Rupert said as they joined the queue at the check-in counter.

“Yes. I wonder if it’s school holidays.”

Ahead of them in the queue was a group of older people with white blazers that had *Fairway Bowling Club* stitched onto their pockets. They each wore blue pants and white shoes and carried small leather bags. A man opened his bag, took out one of the balls, wiped it with a cloth and put it back again. At their feet lay tog bags and vanity cases. One of them, probably the captain, counted the tickets in his hand and then the members of his group, pointing a finger at each one of them.

“We’re missing someone.”

“It’s Anne,” a woman in front of Petra said. “Oh there she comes.” She waved her arm above her head. Then she turned to someone beside her: “She’s always late.”

A small, grey-haired woman held her head down as she made her way towards them.

“Come stand here Anne,” someone said, when she joined the group.

Rupert sighed and looked at Petra and raised his eyebrows at her. At last the group had checked in and Petra and Rupert were in the front of the queue. Rupert handed over the tickets, and the woman behind the counter clicked the keyboard with long nails and said she could not seat them together.

“But I’ve pre-booked the seats,” he said, leaning forward against the counter.

“It doesn’t show on the system.”

“Can you not move someone who is flying alone?”

She looked past him at the queue behind him and said, no, the flight was very full and their priority was to seat children with their parents.

“It’s just a short flight,” Petra said. “It doesn’t matter.”

The bed-and-breakfast they stayed in was set against Table Mountain. On their first morning, Petra woke when Rupert turned on the light to read. She lay on her side and watched the clean, cream carpets of their room. It had been a month since Sam died. The carpet had been vacuumed on the diagonal to create neat, regular lines in its thick pile, as if it were a freshly mowed lawn. Footsteps, hers and Rupert’s, crossed over the pattern from the door to their bed and from the bed to the bathroom

An hour later, Rupert closed his book, stepped more footprints onto the pattern and pulled back the curtains so that a broad swathe of light fell across the blankets.

“It’s a beautiful day,” he said. He unlatched the window and took a deep breath. “Don’t you love the air here? There’s so much oxygen.”

From the bed, Petra had a view of Table Mountain. She could see the clouds roll over the top of it like endless, huge waves that might thunder over her and wash her away, down the mountain’s lower slopes and into the sea. But they never reached her, rolling instead like dry ice blown across a stage, over and over, and vanishing against the dark rocky ridges of the mountain.

“So, shall we go to the beach?” Rupert said.

“I think it will be windy.”

“It’s not windy now.”

“When there’s cloud on the mountain, it means it will be windy.”

“We can go to Clifton. It doesn’t get the southeaster.”

There was a glass table in the one corner of the room that had a tray set for coffee. Rupert put filter paper into the percolator.

“It’s been a month,” Petra said.

Rupert tore open a sachet of ground coffee, poured it into the filter, checked the water level and turned on the machine. “I know,” he said.

While the machine gurgled he put on some swimming shorts and pulled a T-shirt over his head. He packed towels into a bag, a financial magazine, a cap and sunglasses.

“Are you coming?”

She pushed off the blanket. Her stomach was still slightly rounded and when she lifted her arms to tie up her hair, she could feel the scar pull, and after she had dressed, she could feel it brush against the fabric of her caftan. The percolator puffed and hissed in the corner while Petra covered her face and neck with sun cream and put on her hat.

In the car on the way to the beach, Rupert said: “I’ve been thinking it might be nice to buy a small place here. A sort-of weekend getaway. What do you think? We could get something to renovate. It could be a nice, new project for you.”

She snapped her head around and looked at him.

“Sam was not a project, Rupert.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“He was not just something to keep me busy.”

“Oh God, Petra.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. In silence, Rupert found parking in the road that snaked high above the ocean, clinging to the cliff and the white apartments that rose up against it. They climbed out of the car and, in silence, he took the bag from the back seat and walked ahead of her.

She stopped and looked at the scene far below them. Four little bays spooned each other with curved spines of rocks separating the beaches. Rocky vertebrae jutted into the water that sparkled in the sunlight.

She took off her shoes and followed him down the many narrow steps that led to the beach below, where ice cream vendors walked up and down amongst the crowd shouting: “Cold, cold drinks! Ice cream lollies!” Where people tanned their bodies and chased after balls and walked in bikinis from one beach to the other, zigzagging between the rocks, and where yachts swayed gently in the distance.

When Petra reached the beach, Rupert had already spread out two towels close to the water’s edge, sat down on one of them and opened his magazine. She dropped her shoes onto the other towel.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said.

The water was icy and the tide was coming in. Her feet ached from the cold, but she stayed on the wet sand so that every now and again a wave would rush up to her and the white foam would swirl around her ankles, until at last her feet felt numb. The hem of her caftan was heavy and wet, and as she walked it whipped against her legs and clung to her calves.

When she reached the end of the beach, she touched a rock and turned back. At the towels Rupert had dropped his magazine and was gazing at the water. She sat down next to him.

Right in front of them a little girl toddled beside her mother. The mother was chatting when a wave rushed in and swept the child off her feet. When she got up in the shallow water her nappy was wet and covered with sand and she screamed. Still chatting, the mother leant down over the child, took off the nappy and put a pink plastic toy in her hand. Then she picked her up, hugged her and put her on her hip so that the girl's naked bum nestled in the cradle created by the crook of her arm and the curve of her waist. The child put the fist that clutched the toy to her mouth and sucked on it.

"Two Rand for a cold Coke!" a vendor called as he approached them with his cooler box slung over his shoulder. He looked at Petra and she shook her head. The mother shifted her child onto the other hip.

From the right, not very high above the water, an aeroplane appeared. It droned as it trundled along, pulling a banner that advertised holiday accommodation. The little girl took her fist from her mouth, opened it and pointed at the sky, and the toy tumbled into the shallow waves.

The child's scream was instant and piercing. She pointed to where the toy had fallen and the mother rushed forward, but the water had already receded and it was gone. Rupert got up and walked to the water's edge.

Petra watched the water and in the next wave the toy appeared again. Rupert grabbed at it, but it tumbled away from him. Reaching for it once more he lost his balance and fell onto his knees, smacking at the water, stretching for the whirl of

colour in the waves. He was wet and there was sand on his legs when he stood up again and gave the toy back to the mother. The woman said something to him. He laughed and shook his head, and he lifted the front of his T-shirt to wipe the water from his face.

When he got back to Petra, he picked up his things and said he wanted to go.

Back at their room, a breeze stirred the trees outside their windows and the clouds kept pouring down the mountain. By the time the sun set, the windows rattled and the branches of the trees shook. When they parked outside a restaurant that the guesthouse had recommended, litter lifted from the gutter and swept past her legs down the road, and the car door jerked from her hand before she could close it. In the days that followed the wind blew dust into her eyes, drying out her skin, and her hair was forever tangled, and the moaning of it never stopped.

They were seated together on the flight home. Rupert read an analyst report, writing comments in the margins as he went along. She opened her book that was set in France, read a paragraph and closed it again. She would perhaps call some clients in the morning and tell them she was back. She paged through the in-flight magazine. Maybe she could set up her work at home. She leant her head against the window. Below her, clouds dotted the hazy, brown earth that had patterns farmed into it.

It had rained while they were gone. The ivy that grew on the sidewalk outside their house had started to creep up against their boundary wall. Twigs and leaves lay in puddles at their front door. Rupert took the suitcase to their bedroom and Petra went to the kitchen and turned on the kettle. The house was dark, so she

drew back the curtains that had been closed for the holiday, and opened the back door.

"We've been burgled," Rupert said behind her.

She turned around. "What?"

"They've taken the TV and the video machine, as far as I can see. The hi-fi is also gone." He picked up the telephone and dialled. "The bedroom is a mess. I'm calling the cops so don't touch anything."

She went to the bedroom. The window where she had cut back the creeper had been smashed and opened and shards of glass lay scattered on the carpet beneath it. One curtain had been pulled half off its rail and it hung limply to the floor. It had rained in through the open window, leaving sodden the upholstered chair that stood beside it. On it was one of her shoes and a dress in a coat hanger.

Petra stepped over their bedding that had been pulled off the bed and left in a pile on the floor. The mattress was resting against the bed, as if it had just been delivered, or was about to be taken away. Their bedside tables had been emptied and the lamps that used to be on them were gone.

Rupert's cupboard was open, and from where she stood she could see that his suits had been taken. Spilling from her cupboard were shoes, jerseys, shirts and dresses, and amongst the mess lay the sort of lid that would fit a small shoe box, and next to that were shreds of brown paper and away from it all, in the corner of the room, lay the bottom half of the box. It had probably been tossed there, hitting the wall. A thin layer of powdery grey-white had settled on the clothes, the carpet and the skirting board in the corner. When Petra crawled on her knees along its trail she saw that the burglars had stepped footprints in it.

She picked up the box and sat on her knees, held it against her chest and rocked and rocked. For a long time she sat there. Then the doorbell rang, there were men's voices in the passage, and when they came into the bedroom she stopped.

"This is my wife, Petra."

She stood up with the box in her hands.

"I'm Constable Burger. Hell, they've made a bit of a mess here." He walked over to the window and peered outside. Then he asked questions, which Rupert answered while Petra waited, and when he asked her which of her personal items were missing, she said some jewellery and a camera. That was all.

When Rupert took the policeman to the lounge where the TV had been stolen she fetched a dustpan and a small broom. She would brush the ash off her clothes and gather it together on the carpet so that she could scoop it back into the box. But it mostly stuck to the carpet and the bristles of the brush, so that what she had in the dustpan was mixed with dust and lint and dirt.

On her knees, she tapped the brush against the dustpan to clean the bristles, but the ash hung suspended in the air before her. Dropping the brush and the dustpan, she bent forward and rested her forehead on the carpet. Then she lay down on her side, pulling up her legs. Her arms were bent so that her hands rested in front of her face. Some ash had settled on them.

She sat up. It was very quiet in the room. Her hands looked lightly gloved. She lifted her right hand to her face, and it felt smooth when she stroked the back of it against the skin of her cheek. When she pulled it lightly across her lips, she hardly breathed.

Far away was the rumble of the policeman's voice. She had to get up so, with both hands, she pressed onto the floor and moved herself onto all fours, where she paused to rest; head down with her hair curtaining her face. She could see each nodule of the carpet's pile under her. At last she heaved herself up, walked out the door, down the passage and into the kitchen.

The broom cupboard smelled of shoe polish, and the vacuum cleaner had stickers on it from the last time it had been serviced. When she pulled it past Rupert and the policeman, the wheels rattled on the tile floor, and Rupert stopped talking and he looked at her.

She shut the bedroom door, pulled the cord of the vacuum cleaner to its full extension, plugged it in and switched it on. The motor whined as she pushed it along the carpet with long strokes, back and forth, back and forth. She removed the head and ran the nozzle of the hose along the skirting board so that a clean, white line appeared in the grey. The machine wailed and there was a crackling in the hose as she bent low over her work, and her back ached and her face was wet and she tasted the salt that ran from her eyes and her nose. But she had to keep going, so she put the head of the vacuum cleaner back onto the nozzle and, in a slow rhythm, she removed the footprints. There were patterns left in the carpet when it was all done.

Chapter 7

Petra had chosen a small coffee shop for her meeting with Ruan. Six tables fitted snugly into the rectangle of the place. Against one of the short ends was a tiny kitchen, fronted by a glass counter that held an industrial coffee machine and displayed pastries and cakes. Customers could read the newspapers and magazines that were stacked next to an old backgammon board.

The coffee shop was busy. She quickly checked herself in the huge mirror that covered one wall before she sat down at the only available table. A waiter brought her the menu.

"Will someone be joining you?"

"Yes. I'm a little early."

The waiter had a pierced tongue and three earrings in one ear. He removed two place settings from the table, leaving her own and another opposite her.

"I'll have a cappuccino while I wait, please," she said.

He strolled over to the counter and set about making the coffee. While he waited for the milk to froth he played with the stud in his tongue, flicking it in and out of his mouth and letting it click against his teeth. She looked away.

To her left sat a couple with brochures spread out between them. The woman was elegantly dressed, but she wore lip liner that was too dark and her eyebrows had been plucked into unnatural arcs.

"The children's passports have expired," she said.

“We’ll have to get new ones immediately then; it can take up to six weeks.” The man looked at his diary. “We might not have enough time. Best we apply for emergency passports. Just in case. Can you do that today?”

Petra’s coffee arrived.

“Don’t we need visas for Chile?” the woman asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure? I’m almost certain the Raubenheimers had to get visas when they went to Brazil.”

“That might be so, but Brazil is not Chile.”

“I would have thought it would be the same…”

“I’ve checked, Linda.”

The woman picked up a travel guide and flicked through it. She found the chapter she was looking for and started reading, running her finger down the page.

“No, we don’t need visas,” she said.

The man sighed and signalled to the waiter for the bill.

Petra looked at her watch. It was five to eleven.

She started reading the menu; it was a large, laminated cardboard, and the food items had been written in cursive. It was the usual coffee shop fare, so she put it down and went to find a magazine instead. Hovering over the pile, she picked up a woman’s weekly that advertised a special beauty section inside. She put it down. There was a business daily with a headline about rising interest rates; a tabloid showed an emaciated actress in a bikini and red letters across the page said: *TOO THIN!*

She glanced back, saw that the woman with the eyebrows was watching her, quickly grabbed a sports magazine and returned to her table. On the cover a smiling cyclist sat upright on his bike, arms thrown up in victory.

Just as she sat down, Ruan walked in. He hesitated at the door, saw her and walked straight to her.

"Hi. Sorry I'm late. Whenever it rains the traffic comes to a standstill."

"Hello. You're not. I'm always early."

Ruan was taller than she remembered. He wore a white shirt with long sleeves that were unbuttoned and rolled up a few turns. The seams of his jeans were frayed and on his feet he wore brown loafers.

He sat down and she gestured to the waiter.

"I'm having a cappuccino," she said. "Would you like one?"

"Thanks." He turned over the magazine that she had put face down on the table. "Do you cycle?"

"Well…no. And you?"

"A little. A group of us go out twice a week in the early morning. I'm not much good at it, but it is fun."

She ordered the coffee.

"Do you mind if I eat something?" he asked. "I'm starving."

"Go ahead." She pushed the menu towards him.

Without looking at it he asked for scrambled eggs on toast. Then he said: "I hope your husband wasn't too upset about the impala."

"He was, but it wasn't your fault. Luckily it was only an impala."

"It's a good idea to give him a hide. I hope you like the ones I've brought."

The coffee arrived and Petra passed him the sugar. At the table next to them the couple had left and two young women, students perhaps, sat down. They laughed as they tried to set up the backgammon board.

“It’s a nice place,” he said. “Quite a change from where I work.”

“Your work is interesting.”

“Interesting good, or interesting bad?”

“Both, I guess. It’s very creative. I don’t think I could handle the physical side of it though.”

“You get used to it. The part I hate is dealing with the clients.”

As soon as he had said it, he put his face in his hands. Then he slowly looked up at her, swept his hands over his eyes, pushing his hair back from his forehead and holding it there.

“Oh God, I don’t know why I said that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I was actually referring to the hunter types.”

“It’s really okay.”

He let go of his hair and it fell messily into a middle parting. He glanced at the girls next to them, scooped a teaspoonful of foam from his cappuccino and put it in his mouth. He put down the teaspoon. “What do you do?”

“I’m a beautician.”

“Really? I once had a girlfriend who was a beautician.” His eyebrows almost met in the middle, above his nose that was narrow, but quite crooked, as if it had been broken once before. When he smiled little lines appeared around the corners of his mouth.

The waiter brought his breakfast on a large, white plate and set it down before him. Scrambled eggs balanced on triangles of toast. Three rashers of crisp bacon had been placed at an angle against the egg and bread towers, and the rim of the plate had been decorated with chopped chives.

"I'm sorry," Ruan said to the waiter. "I don't think I ordered bacon."

"The scrambled eggs always come with bacon. Look." The waiter pointed to an item on the menu that was still lying on their table.

"You're right." Ruan picked the bacon off the dish, put it on his side plate and handed it back. "Thanks."

After the waiter had left, he said: "There should be a ban on waiters with pierced tongues."

"You don't eat bacon?"

"I don't eat meat."

"You must be kidding me."

"Nope."

He cocked his head slightly to the side and smiled at her. Then he cut some of the egg and toast and put it in his mouth. He looked at her while he chewed.

"But you eat eggs," she said.

"Yup."

"And you drink milk."

He nodded and took another bite.

"Fish?"

He shook his head. "No faces."

She sat forward in her chair, closer to him. “You do realise how odd that is?”

“Why? Just because I work with dead animals doesn’t mean I want to eat them.”

“No…”

“Do undertakers eat their clients?”

“No,” she laughed.

“When you give someone a back massage, does it make you hungry for steak?”

“Okay, okay. I get your point!”

Petra sat back, put her one foot up on the seat of the chair and hugged her leg. “What made you stop eating meat?”

“I once dated a veggie, in fact, that beautician I mentioned earlier. I did it to impress her. She left me anyway, but the habit stuck.”

“She obviously had no taste.”

Ruan smiled at her. Petra looked down and fiddled with the sugar. “Was that a long time ago?”

“About four years. I think Dad told you my mother died? Well, I was nineteen then and I helped him in the business for a while, but we didn’t get on. Fought about the smallest things. So, I went to England with a friend to get away. We worked odd jobs for two years. Construction sites, mostly. That was when I met the veggie.”

“I’ve never lived in another country.”

He ran his fingers through his hair and blushed slightly. “I’m talking way too much. What about you. Have you got children?”

“I had a baby once, but he died.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago. Twenty-three years, actually.”

They sat in silence for a while. Then she waved at the waiter. “Should we look at those hides?”

Outside it had stopped raining, but water sped along in the gutters and every so often a gust of wind shook the jacaranda tree under which Ruan had parked, causing the droplets that clung to the branches to shower onto his car.

When Ruan opened the boot, the gamey odour of the hides blended with the damp smells of tar, exhaust fumes and foliage outside. He pulled out one of the hides, pushing back another that threatened to fall out along with it. Then he unfolded the skin and held it opened in front of his body.

“This is a springbok,” he said. “It doesn’t belong to us, but the client said he’ll sell it. Actually, it’s from the buck my dad was working on when you visited us.”

She nodded. He held it up a little while longer, for her to have a good look, before he folded it up and returned it to the boot.

“I’d like to show you the eland.” He leant forward and moved aside some hides until he found the one he was looking for. As he dragged it out of the car another skin tumbled from the boot and fell onto the road. Petra stepped forward

to pick it up. It was already quite wet, but when she tried to shake it out, it was too heavy for her, so she awkwardly bunched it back into the car.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“This is not easy,” he said.

She turned to see him leaning against the car with his arms wide open above his head, holding the front legs of the eland in his hands and raising his knee to support the rest of the hide. She laughed, grabbed the hind legs that flapped around his raised foot and stood back.

He dropped his hands and they held the eland, legs splayed open, between them.

“It’s huge,” she said.

“Yes. It’s a beauty.”

She gazed at it a while longer. Then she folded her side of the hide in half, vertically, like a sheet to be ironed, placing leg upon leg. She smiled at him and waited for him to do the same. Then they each took hold of the folded section and pulled it straight between them, giving it a little shake, before she stepped forward and handed him her end. She stood very close to him, with her hands held up against his, as he struggled to take the hide from her fingers.

“It would be easier to do this somewhere dry,” he said.

“Yes.”

She did not move away from him.

Chapter 8

The sheets of notepaper that lay on the table in front of Petra were white and thick, with a coarse vertical grain that she could feel under her fingers. In the top left-hand corner their address had been embossed in black. There were matching envelopes. A page had been torn from a writing pad and on it, in Rupert's handwriting, were the names of people they had to thank. Petra shoved away the paper, folded her arms on the table and rested her head on them.

But she had decided to write the notes that morning, so she sat up, took a page from the top of the pile and picked up her pen. Although it was a good pen, it was a ballpoint and when she started to write, it was dry. She scribbled loops on the list until the tip was warm and the ink flowed smoothly, and then she traced over the first letter again.

Dear John and Kathy

Thank you so much for the beautiful flowers and your support during this difficult time.

With love

Rupert and Petra

She put the note to one side, drew a line through the names *John and Kathy*, and pulled closer another sheet of paper. She thanked family. Colleagues and clients. It would be cathartic, Rupert had said. She thanked friends for visiting, for sending flowers. Her hand cramped, so she put down her pen and stretched her fingers and made a fist, and stretched them again.

Dear Andrew and Nicola

Thank you so much for the beautiful flowers and your support during this difficult time.

With love

Rupert and Petra

She thanked the priest for his beautiful words at the service. She thanked the doctors and nurses at the hospital. Then she got up and walked through the house, but the house was quiet, so she carried on. She looked up all the addresses and wrote them on the front of the envelopes, before she sorted the letters, separating the ones she would hand-deliver from those to be posted.

At lunchtime Rupert came home. “Come,” he said. “The insurance company has given me the go-ahead to go shopping for new stuff. You can help me choose.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“I’ve taken the afternoon off. We can have lunch.”

“I don’t feel well. I’ve written all the cards.”

“Well done.”

“You don’t have to be mean.”

“I’m not.” His mouth was set in a firm line.

She turned away from him.

“I’m trying, Petra.”

She nodded.

Her handbag was on the kitchen table next to the addressed envelopes. She hesitated before she said: “Are we going to Sandton?”

“Yes.”

"Can we pass by the hospital? I want to deliver a thank-you note."

He took a deep breath. "Okay, we'll do it afterwards."

She found the note addressed to the hospital staff and put it in her bag.

They used her car with the bigger boot and Petra circled the parking lot twice before she found an empty parking bay far from the entrance of the store. Outside the automatic sliding doors, at a little table, sat a woman with a money-box and a banner that read *STOP CHILD ABUSE NOW*. The woman was wearing a purple cardigan even though it was quite hot, and she had a scarf around her hair that she had tied under her chin. She shook the box as they approached her and said: "Help the poor children." Petra glanced at her and looked away again, but as they passed her, the woman said: "Give something for a child."

They walked through the doors, passing people who were leaving, and behind her she could still hear the woman shaking her box at them. It was bright inside the store and music played from loudspeakers; lively pop songs that were interrupted only for announcements, or advertisements of specials.

Petra followed Rupert down an isle of food processors, toasters, kettles and vacuum cleaners. They cut across another isle which smelled of chlorine and fertilizer. The music stopped and a Mr Daniels was called to the fridge section.

They arrived at the television section, where seven different sets were on display and had been switched on to the same news item. There was one with a larger screen which Rupert liked, and a salesman in his grey and red uniform flicked to a sports channel and then to the test pattern to demonstrate how clear the picture was. Rupert asked Petra what she thought and she said she didn't mind

either way, so he said that they would take it. The man smiled and told them it was a good choice and he wrote his code on the box.

Then Rupert said they needed a sound system; he would like something with good frequency response and low distortion. The man smoothed his hair back and patted it down over a bald patch. Petra asked Rupert if they would get a tape deck, or a CD player and Rupert said, why not both, and the man overheard them and said that he could help them, but that digital technology was taking over and soon all music would be available on CD. Still, they had some good stuff on tape, Rupert said.

The man put his hand on a small, black unit with speakers that were long, narrow tubes that stood on the floor. A thick golden chain rolled down his wrist and jangled against the metal of the hi-fi. “This is state-of-the-art. And it takes three disks.” He slid in a disk and turned the dials and music blasted over the noise of the store. A young couple who had been waiting their turn, moved closer to see.

“You can hear there’s no distortion on the low frequencies,” the man said. Petra felt the pulse of the bass. Rupert smiled at the salesman, and the man switched off the demo and wrote his code on the box.

Mr Daniels was called to the fridge section again. There were people with moaning kids, men and women testing other gadgets, trolleys rattled, a mother yelled at a child and the child screamed.

“Can we go now?”

“In a moment.” Rupert put his arm around her shoulders. “Where are your cameras?” he said to the man. Then he turned to her. “Let’s just get a camera. We’re here now. It’s the last thing, I promise.”

The man pointed to where the cameras were. It was not his department. He smoothed his hair again and turned to the waiting couple.

The cameras were locked in a cupboard with glass sliding doors. Rupert asked to see one with a strong zoom; perhaps a 100 – 400 lens. They could take up photography, he said to Petra, as he held up the camera to his eye and focused the lens. Perhaps they could go on a course together. He handed the camera to her.

“It’s very heavy,” she said, so the salesman suggested a small, light camera with a fast and accurate auto focus and a built-in flash. Yes, it would be more practical for travelling, Rupert said. The man showed them how it worked and loaded the film into the camera, and the film was included in the price.

When they left the store, the woman at the table again shook her tin at them and Petra dug in her bag for coins and she dropped them into the slot.

“Bless you,” the woman said.

They loaded the TV and the hi-fi into the car, locked it and went to find a table at an Italian restaurant next to the store from where, if they sat outside, they could keep an eye on the car. Rupert put the box with the camera on the table and the waiter took their order, and when his beer and her lime and soda arrived, they drank it.

“Man, I’m excited about the hi-fi,” he said. “Don’t you think it’s great?”

She nodded and they were quiet again. He turned the glass in his hand and read the logo on it, while she watched the people at the other tables.

Diagonally behind Rupert sat two women with shopping bags at their feet. They were about Petra's age and they were sharing a bottle of wine. The woman facing Petra had blonde hair, like her own, that she wore down to her shoulders. She wore sunglasses and she held a cigarette between her fingers, and her nails were manicured. She sat back and laughed, and as she did that, she glanced at Petra, but she did not seem to notice her. The woman pushed her sunglasses onto her head, sweeping her hair away from her face, and she was quite beautiful. As she chatted her hand formed an arc in the air with the cigarette smoke trailing a circle behind it, and the tip of ash had lengthened, but it did not break off. Petra pushed her own sunglasses onto her head.

"How are things at work?" she said to Rupert.

"They're okay."

"It's nice that you've got the afternoon off."

"I probably have to go back a little later."

"But you will go with me to the hospital?"

"I said I would."

Rupert opened the box and took out the camera that was not much bigger than his hand. He pushed a button and there was a whir, and a flap opened and a small zoom lens automatically extended from its silver casing. He closed the cover again and the lens retracted.

"It's a great little camera," he said.

"Let me see."

He gave it to her and she turned it over in her hand.

"Why don't you try it," he said.

She opened the flap and looked through the viewfinder and she placed Rupert in the blue frame and he smiled at her. But then, moving only slightly, she focused past him, on the woman behind him. The woman took a drag of her cigarette and when she laughed, the smoke billowed from her mouth. Petra squeezed the button.

"Yes, it's very easy," she said. Then the food arrived and she closed the camera and put it in her bag.

"We should keep it in the box, together with the manual," Rupert said.

"It's safer in my bag."

He did not argue and they ate and after the meal she drove them to the hospital.

In the car, Rupert turned on the radio and there was a song that she used to like, but she had heard it too often and she knew that the tune would later turn in her head. She glanced at her watch. Visiting hour would be over soon. A blue car in front of her switched on its indicator and changed lanes, so Petra did the same. She hoped Susan would be on duty; she wanted to give the card to her. The break lights in front of her flashed, so she slowed down. There was another nurse who was always sweet to her: Vicolene, or Veronique. The indicator on the blue car flickered again; on off on off. The song had stopped and immediately another one started. Veronica, that was it. She put on her indicator. But Susan was the one who had turned off the machines and removed the tubes. Susan was with her when she had picked up her baby, and the baby was so light. Rupert yelled next to her, but that couldn't be, because he was not there at the end, and even though he came soon after, he did not see it happen. There was a screech and someone hooted,

over and over, and Rupert grabbed her arm and she was in the car again and she slammed on her brakes and the hi-fi on the back seat slid and bumped against her chair.

"Jesus, Petra! What the hell do you think you're doing!"

Right next to her door, so close that she could roll down her window and touch it, a car had stopped. A man got out and he came towards her, yelling at her with waving arms.

They were in the middle of an intersection and other cars had to edge around them to cross over and some of them hooted too. The man outside her window was still shouting and Rupert told her to get out, that he would drive. But she had stopped in time and there had not been an accident so, when Rupert apologised to the other driver, the man pulled away. Petra climbed out and walked around the car, ignoring the people who watched her, as she sat in the passenger seat and shut the door.

At the hospital, Rupert stopped in a bay reserved for doctors.

"You can't park here," she said.

"I'll wait in the car."

"Please don't. Please come with me."

"I can't, Petra."

"I'm sorry about my driving."

"It's not that."

She walked down the passage alone, towards the yellow door with the porthole window and the sign that said *Authorised Entry Only.* She opened the

door. A nurse she recognised, but whose name she could not remember, the one who always wore a long plait down her back, came up to her.

"Hello," Petra said.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Petra Wales. I had a son here, about six weeks ago."

"Oh. Yes. Of course," she said, but she looked at Petra as if she could not quite place her.

"Is Susan here?"

From one of the cots Veronica called: "Oh, Mrs Wales. Shame. How are you?"

"I'm okay, thanks." Petra stepped into the ward. "I've brought a card to say thank you."

"That's so sweet. You didn't have to. Susan has just gone to fetch something. She'll be back soon." There was a beep and Veronica turned and checked a reading on the machine next to her, and she noted something down on her record sheet.

Sam's cot, it was the second one of three that stood to the left of the door, had a new baby in it. He was very little with soft, dark hair and he was lying naked on his back, on a piece of sheep skin, with his legs flopped open and his arms up, next to his head. His fingers were slightly curled in.

The machine at Veronica's cot beeped again, faster. "I need some help here, Kathy," she said, and the one with the plait rushed over.

The baby in Sam's cot lay quite still. Petra walked closer. There was a monitor clamped to his toe and there were suckers stuck to his chest and a drip

was secured with bandages to his one arm. His hand rested on a small, stuffed toy; a yellow puppy with a red ribbon and floppy ears.

"I didn't know we could have toys," she said, but no-one seemed to hear her.

The baby's mouth was open and his lips glistened and his chest fluttered lightly with his breathing. The nurse with the plait walked briskly past her and disappeared into a storage room next door. The baby's foot stirred.

Petra put her hand in her bag and the camera was cool under her fingers. She felt for the button to open the flap and when she pushed it, there was a whirr and she looked at Veronica, but the nurse took no notice of her. Barely breathing, she took out the camera. The baby with his toy fit into the viewfinder perfectly.

When the door behind her opened she slipped the camera back into her bag. Then she turned around and told Susan that she thought of them often and of how kind they had been and that she has just come to deliver a card to say so, and here it was, but that she could not stay longer, as Rupert was waiting for her in the car.

At Veronica's cot things had calmed down, so Petra waved at her from the door and Veronica thanked her for coming. "Shame," she said. "You didn't have to."

Chapter 9

They had driven for half-an-hour when Petra followed Ruan down the panhandle and parked her car behind his. The walls of his garden cottage were covered in creeper and it needed to be trimmed around the windows. A ginger cat that had been sleeping on the doormat woke up with a start, sprinted across the grass and jumped onto a low wall that separated the cottage from the main house, from where it watched them.

Ruan unlocked the door and walked in ahead of her, quickly pulling back the curtains that had not yet been opened for the day.

“Sorry things are a bit of a mess,” he said.

Petra stood in the door of the open-plan room. To her right was a kitchen with a small fridge and a two-plate stove. A bicycle with a helmet slung over the handle bars was leaning against the wall. She put her bag down on the kitchen counter next to the kettle and an opened plastic packet of sliced bread.

In front of her was the sitting area; a wicker sofa and chair with cream and navy striped cushions faced a television. On the coffee table an unwashed mug stood on a pile of magazines and a pair of jeans hung over the back of the chair.

“Would you like something to drink? I can make you some coffee. Or there’s beer.”

“I’d love a beer.”

Behind the sitting area, against the back wall, was a double bed with plain navy covers. The bed had been made, but the pillows still carried the indentations

of the previous night's sleep. There was one bedside table with books, a framed photograph and a lamp.

He took out two beers, filled one glass and handed it to her, along with the bottle that still had some beer in it. Then he took the jeans from the chair and flung it into his closet.

Petra sat down on the sofa and took out a cigarette. She held it in her fingers for a while before she put it in her mouth. Then, without lighting it, she took it out again and returned it to the packet.

"I like your place," she said.

"The rent's okay."

They both drank their beer. Outside it had started to rain again.

"It's raining again," she said. "I like rainy days." She picked at the label on the beer bottle, pulled it off and folded it, over and over, into a little square. From the kitchen, muted by her bag, her cell phone rang.

"Do you want to get that?"

"I'm sure it's nothing."

The phone stopped.

"Thanks for the trouble you took with the hides. Have I said that?"

He smiled. "No."

"I worried that you might be irritated about having to meet with me."

Ruan stood up, took the beer from her hand and put it down on the coffee table. Then he pulled her up and walked her to his bed. She sat down on the edge of the bed with her feet neatly together, her hands folded on her lap. He gently pushed her down, backwards. Then he lay down on his side next to her with his

head propped up on his hand. Slowly he ran his forefinger down her face; down her forehead, between her eyes and along her nose, following the furrow from her nose to her lips, over her chin, all the way to the hollow in her neck.

His hair had fallen across his face, and she pushed it away with her fingers and tucked it behind his ear. She let him unbutton her shirt, lifting only her shoulders, one at a time, for him to pull it off. She pushed her heels against the side of the bed and heard her shoes drop to the carpet.

The rain drummed onto the tin roof. He took off his shirt. Then he knelt on the floor by her feet and, over her jeans, he ran his hands up her legs, past her knees that were bent over the edge of the bed. His thumbs pressed against the inside of her thighs. When he reached her waist he stopped, pushed himself up on his hands until he was over her, his chest close to hers, almost touching. Her phone rang. Watching her, he slid his knee between her legs, opened her thighs and pushed up hard.

She grabbed him by his hair, and pulled him down. She kissed him and felt the gap between his teeth. She gripped her legs around him and they rolled over. Once, twice. She unbuttoned his jeans, then hers, and pushed them off. She pressed her face into the hollow between his shoulder and his neck and she smelled the sweat on him. He shoved a pillow out of the way. Then he linked his fingers into hers, and held down her hands above her head; a frame around her face. She saw his hair sweep a rhythm above her, and his eyes were green, and he never closed them, so she closed hers, and when he collapsed onto her, she pushed up against him to feel the weight of him.

Then all was still and they lay on the bed next to each other, not touching, saying nothing. She put out her hand towards him. He took it, sat up and opened her arms and legs so that she lay spread out, naked, before him. Slowly, he lowered himself onto her, placing his chest onto hers, spreading his own arms and legs to match hers, covering her whole body with his. She took hold of his wrists and held him there.

She felt cold when he rolled off her.

"I'll make us some tea," he said.

She turned onto her side towards the bedside table and pulled the duvet up around her.

From a simple wooden frame, a young, dark-haired woman looked at her. On her lap she held a small boy, dressed in a blue dungaree and sucking his thumb. From his fist dangled a soft toy.

"Is that your mother?" she said.

"Yes. It was my first birthday." He picked up the photo. "Apparently it was a huge celebration. You know, I almost didn't make it; I was born with pneumonia and spent my first four weeks in ICU."

Petra took the picture from him and sat up. For a while she looked at the woman whose long hair had been blow dried into symmetrical waves away from her smiling face. Her shoulder-padded floral dress had pulled up past her knees and had become scrunched in her lap under the baby's bottom.

Ruan got up from the bed and went to the kitchen.

In the photo, the boy's face was turned towards his mother.

Petra could hear Ruan filling the kettle. There was a clatter of porcelain.

The yellow fluffy toy in the child's hand was a little stuffed dog with floppy ears.

She could hear the suck and pull of the fridge door as Ruan opened the fridge and took out the milk. She held the photograph closer to her face and peered at it. Her mouth felt dry.

Around the yellow puppy's neck was a fraying red ribbon.

Petra turned over the picture. There was a low hum in her ears. She glanced towards the kitchen. Quickly she unclipped the hooks, removed the back panel, slid her nail under one corner of the photo and pulled it away from the glass.

She looked up again and saw Ruan scoop the teabags out of the mugs and slop them into the bin.

Her hands shook as she returned the back panel to the frame and put it face down on the bedside table. Once, twice, she folded the photo, until it fit in the palm of her hand. Then she flung off the duvet. "I have to go."

"What's wrong?" Ruan said, looking up from behind the kitchen counter.

She dressed quickly, tugging hard at the zip of her pants. Then she pushed the photo deep into her pocket. She found her shirt on the floor next to the bed. It was inside out. She flipped it over and pulled it on, but the sleeves had become tangled and she struggled to force her arms into them.

"I'm sorry. I must go."

A wave of nausea came over her and she tasted the beer in her throat. She picked up her shoes and held them in her hand.

"Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head. She could not talk, did not want to open her mouth. She grabbed her bag from the kitchen counter, opened the door and ran to her car with the rain pelting down on her. She did not look back at Ruan again.

When she reversed down the panhandle, the car engine whined in her ears. Once in the street, she turned left and at the next stop sign turned left again. Her cell phone rang. The windscreen had steamed up, so she leaned forward and quickly wiped it with her flat hand. She turned the heater up high. Hunching over the steering wheel, she peered through the circular smear she had created on the glass in front of her. Hot air blew into her face and dried out her eyes. The rain thundered onto the car, while the windscreen wipers uselessly marked time. Fast. Left right left right. Water gushed along the sides of the road. She took a sharp turn to the right. Nothing seemed familiar. Somewhere in her bag her cell phone rang again. With two hands tightly gripping the steering wheel, she let it ring.

It was almost two hours later, just before four o'clock, when she pulled into her own garage. She turned off the ignition. The garage door rattled as it rolled down behind her. Then silence. The heater's fan no longer whirred. The wipers had stopped halfway through their arc and stood upright in the middle of the windscreen. She could no longer hear the thundering rain. The light that automatically switched on when the garage door opened, had automatically switched off again.

Petra folded her arms onto the steering wheel, rested her head face-down on them and sat in the gloom, quite still. Although it was too early for him to be home, Rupert's car stood parked next to hers. She turned her head sideways and

looked at it, her cheek and hair wet on her arms. The luxury four-wheel drive, which Rupert used for hunting, was blacker than the darkness in the garage.

Suddenly she felt cold; wet and chilled to the bone. She took the keys from the ignition, but when she opened her door, it slammed into Rupert's car, leaving her little more than a hand's width to get out. She pulled the door shut and screamed. Then she opened the door again and rammed it into Rupert's car. Hard. Over and over. And the first sound was a dull thud, but after the third time the pitch changed and the banging rang out and she stopped when it became a scraping, a screech of metal on metal, or fingernails pulled down a blackboard. Crying, she quietly shut her door and clambered over the gear stick to get out on the passenger's side.

She felt her way through the dark garage, past ladders and boxes, to the kitchen door, where she hesitated, pulled the sleeve of her shirt into her hand and wiped her eyes with it. Once inside, she hung up her keys. Her sleeve was smeared with mascara. From the passage, with nails scraping the floor, her dog skidded into the kitchen to greet her. She stroked his ears and told him to sit, and when he did, she crouched down beside him and said that he was a good dog. Then she heard Rupert's voice.

"I think that's her now. I don't know. Thanks for you help."

The dog stood up again and, with a wagging tail, put his nose in her crotch. She pushed him aside, walked past the walk-in fridge and out of the kitchen. Sniffing at her, the dog followed closely behind. She was half-way down the passage when Rupert came out of his study.

"Petra! Where have you been? Everyone's looking for you."

She did not answer.

“Jesus. Look at you. Are you okay?”

She nodded.

Rupert looked tired. He was barefoot and his shirt was no longer tucked in. He had taken off his cufflinks, but had not rolled up his sleeves, so they flapped loosely around his wrists.

“You look terrible. What happened? Have you had an accident?”

“No, I…”

“Well, where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to get hold of you for three hours! I thought you’ve had an accident in this rain, or something!”

“I was out, Rupert. Just out.”

She tried to walk past him, but he took her by the shoulders and turned her to him. “Why didn’t you answer your phone? For three hours. I was worried sick, Petra.”

“I got lost. I went to see the taxidermist. To buy you a hide to say sorry for the impala. It was a surprise.”

“But why didn’t you call? Or answer your bloody phone.”

She started to cry. “I don’t know! I just didn’t! I got caught in the rain and I couldn’t find my way home. I’m cold. I want to bath.”

He dropped his hands.

She went to the bedroom and locked the door behind her. Shivering, she took the photo from her pocket and unfolded it, smoothing out the creases that now ran through the baby’s face. She pulled off her damp clothes and left them in a pile on the floor. Then she went to her cupboard, opened the second drawer from

the top and reached in, under her bras and panties, all the way to the back the left-hand corner.

Chapter 10

The morning after her visit to the hospital, the radio alarm went off at ten to six. It was set to the English station and there was a short sermon and a prayer and then the pips for the news. There had been a bomb in the city centre and three people were killed and the President vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Rupert pushed off the duvet. “Hell, I better get to work; the market’s going to go crazy.”

Petra stayed in bed and listened to the weather. Rupert’s portable Reuters bleeped from his bedside table. With his toothbrush in his hand, he rushed over from the bathroom. He checked the Quick Quote, cursed, stuck the little machine in his pocket and went to finish his teeth. At six thirty he left for work.

On the radio were interviews with eye-witnesses, the police, bomb experts and families of the victims. Petra fetched the camera from her bag. There were ten exposures left on the film, so she pointed the camera to the carpet and pushed the button ten times, until she heard a click and a whirr as the film wound up. On the radio they played an instrumental version of a Sinatra song. She took the cartridge out of the camera, zipped it into an inside pocket of her bag and got dressed.

She went to a shopping centre close to her house, where she had to enter through metal detectors and there were soldiers to check her bag. The centre had just opened for the day and the photo shop was still empty. She put the film on the counter.

“Hello,” she called.

A chair scraped on the floor in the back of the shop and a woman appeared, wearing latex gloves and holding a long, narrow strip of negatives.

“I need to have this developed,” Petra said.

The woman nodded and turned to peg the negatives next to others on a line behind her; a row of limp streamers. She took the cartridge from the counter, dropped it into an envelope, and wrote down Petra’s details. Her red nails showed through the opaque gloves.

“It will be ready in an hour,” she said. Then she looked towards the door. “These soldiers make me nervous.”

Petra nodded. “Please don’t lose it.”

“The film? Of course not. We’ve never lost anything before.”

There was a coffee shop close by where Petra could wait out the hour. On the table was an ashtray made of tin, but it had been painted a royal blue, and in it had been painted a simple, yellow sunflower. When the waiter brought her coffee, she said: “Do you perhaps have a cigarette for me? Just one. I’ll buy it from you.”

“Sure.” He dug in the pocket of his apron and pulled out a packet of cigarettes, which he offered to her and she took one. She put the cigarette in her mouth. The filter felt soft against her lips. He flicked his lighter and she leant forward towards his hand and he lit it for her. On his thumb was a ring and the nail was long and she asked him if he played the guitar and he said yes, he had just started a band, and when she thanked him, he smiled at her and said it was only a pleasure.

With her hand, she brushed her hair back from her forehead. Her lungs burnt and her mouth tasted foul, but her head felt light, and when she exhaled she

watched the smoke curl before her face. With her forefinger she tapped the cigarette against the ashtray, and the ash broke off in a grey-white cylinder that lay, light as a feather, on the petals of the painted flower.

When the hour had passed, she paid for her coffee and left money for the cigarette and a good tip, and went to collect her photos.

"I hope there isn't a problem," the woman said. She had taken off her gloves and her painted nails were chipped. "There seemed to be only two photos?"

Petra nodded and opened the envelope. "Yes. I just needed these."

"Oh. Okay. I was worried."

The woman watched her while she checked the prints. Rupert's shoulder showed up a dark shadow in the corner of the one photo, but the other one had come out well; the edge of the cot almost perfectly framed the photo and the picture was clear and the colour was good.

"Is that your baby?"

Petra looked up. The woman was leaning forward over the counter. Her hair had been dyed and the roots were growing out black, and they needed touching up. Petra's mouth was sour with the aftertaste of coffee and tobacco. A fan had been switched on, and the row of negatives fluttered gently in the draft, and they were a glossy brown, and when they caught the light, they shimmered weakly. They were alone in the shop.

"Yes," she said. "It's my baby."

"Is he sick?"

"He died."

"Oh. Sorry."

The woman frowned and did not say anything more. She rang up the amount and Petra put away the photos and paid and wished her a good day. Then, at a kiosk next to the exit of the centre she bought a packet of menthol cigarettes and a disposable lighter.

On her stoep at home, she lit a cigarette. The menthol tasted cool and it was easier to smoke. She studied the baby; the shape of his face, his nose, his lips. She could see a lot of Rupert in him. She straightened her arm and looked at the photo from a distance. But his mouth was from her side of the family. She ran her finger over the picture. Perhaps, if only he had a chance, his hair would have grown out blonde.

The doorbell rang and it startled her. She stubbed out her cigarette, slid the photo under the ashtray and went to open the door.

“Oh, Ma.”

“Hello Petra.”

Her mother was wearing a tracksuit and takkies and she carried a small, plastic bag.

“Come in. Aren’t you teaching today?”

“My violin students all played their exam yesterday, so I’ve given them the day off. I thought I’d take you for a walk. It’s so beautiful out.”

“Where?”

“Just around the suburb; it doesn’t have to be far. Or if you want to, we can drive to Zoo Lake and walk there.”

“I don’t really feel like walking right now. I’ve just come home from the shops.”

Marili stepped closer to her. “Have you been smoking?”

“No. Not really. Just a little.”

“Ai, Petra.” She put her arm around Petra and turned her towards the kitchen. “Okay, we don’t have to walk.”

Petra filled the kettle from the tap and turned it on. Then she took out two mugs and put teabags in them. A line of ants marched in the groove between the counter and the wall and some of them had gathered at the base of the kettle. She squashed them with her thumb.

“I’ve brought something for you.” Marili pulled a book from the bag and gave it to her. It was an Afrikaans book of poems, *Passieblomme,* by Totius. Inside the cover was a blue envelope with a card. Petra read it and put it back in the envelope.

“Thanks, Ma.”

“You must read the poems, Petra. Totius suffered terribly. Two of his children died within two months, imagine that. His baby boy of meningitis when he was only one year old, and two months later his daughter was struck by lightning. His poems are beautiful and they will help you.”

Petra put the book down and poured hot water into the mugs. “Okay, I will.”

The line of ants kept coming along the groove, but when they reached the kettle, they seemed confused and some stopped and felt with their feelers around the dead ones, while others turned back, and a few went around them and continued up the side of the kettle.

Marili picked up the book and flipped through the pages.

"Listen to this: *As ek oor bleek-verlate sand, oor duine in skemerdonker land - die dood se velde – oplaas moet gaan, dan sal hul spoortjies voor my staan!"* She looked up. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Please don't, Ma."

"Just this last verse. *As ek dan oor die sand moet gaan, dan hou ek op die spoortjies aan; totdat ek, waar dit haas verswind; hul albei eind'lik eind'lik vind."*

Her mother closed the book. "You'll see him again, Petra, I do believe that. He's left footprints for you to follow, just like Totius said, and one day you will follow them and you'll meet him again. And maybe Pa will be there too."

Petra nodded. Her throat hurt and there was thick mucous in her mouth. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and her mother pulled her closer and kissed her cheek and spoke into her hair: "But that's not now. You have a husband and you must live again and make plans for the future."

She turned away from her mother, took the teabags out of the mugs and slopped them into a plate.

"You can have another baby, my darling."

Petra leaned forward over the counter and rested her head against the overhead cupboard. Brown liquid drained from the teabags onto the plate.

"No, I don't think we will."

"Okay," he mother said. "It's too soon to talk about that. I'm sorry."

They took their tea and went outside. The smashed pane of the bedroom window had been fixed, but the wall still showed where the bignonia had been.

The stump of the plant stood knee-high below the window and it was jagged and a strip of the bark had been torn away, but already new shoots were forming on it.

Marili put her mug down next to the ashtray. “I can get an extra ticket for the symphony concert on Thursday. They’re playing Beethoven’s violin concerto and the soloist is meant to be fantastic. He’s from Poland. Why don’t you come with me?”

“That will be nice, thanks.” Petra moved the ashtray away from her mother. She took the photo and held it face-down in her lap.

“They’ve employed a new conductor, who’s really good. He gives a little talk before the concert about the music; to make it more accessible to the public. We should go to the talk to support him.”

“Sure, Ma.” She hesitated. “I went to collect a photo of Sam today. Do you want to see?”

“Of course I do. Is that what you have there?”

Petra leant forward, handed her mother the photo and watched her study it.

Marili looked up. “He was beautiful, Petra.”

Petra moved to sit on the arm of her mother’s chair and she leant against her and they looked at the photo together.

“He was so little,” Marili said and her voice broke. Then she smiled. “He would have looked like Rupert.”

“Yes.”

Her mother took her hand and squeezed it. “Thanks for showing me. You must keep it safe.”

After Marili had left, Petra put the photo into the card her mother had given her and slipped it back into the blue envelope. Then she put the envelope back into the book of poems and left the book on the table beside her bed.

Chapter 11

Petra pulled the faded, blue envelope from under her clothes, closed the drawer, sat down on the carpet with her back against the cupboard and pulled her knees to her chest. It had been months since she had looked at it. Turning the envelope, she lifted the flap.

She still kept the photograph inside the card her mother had given her. She knew exactly what the photo would feel like; her fingertips remembered the cool, shiny surface of the picture. The back of it would have a slightly coarser grain under her thumb. She could identify this photo from others with closed eyes; she knew the exact thickness of the photo paper, the size of it, how the edges had become worn and sticky, like an old, used pack of cards.

She pulled out her mother's card. It felt too thin and too light, but she opened it anyway and stared at her mother's writing; a slanted scribble she knew well: *My Darling. I have no words, but I'm sorry. I hope this little book will help you. All my love, Ma.* She dropped the empty card into her lap, widened the mouth of the envelope and peered inside, but the photo was not there. She stuck her fingers into the envelope and felt around, as if it might have inexplicably shrunk, have inexplicably become invisible.

Thinking that perhaps the photo had fallen out, she opened the drawer again and felt around, messing up her neatly packed underwear. Arguing that she had stupidly not returned it to the envelope, but instead had put it in another drawer, she flung open the top drawer and lifted her T-shirts. Nothing. She emptied the bottom drawer, dropping jerseys at her feet.

Then she slammed the drawers shut, picked up the empty envelope again, stuck her fingers inside once more and tore it open at the seams. She tried to remember the last time she had looked at it. Perhaps she had been interrupted, yes, by the phone, and had carried it off and left it somewhere else in the room. Perhaps she had sat on her bed to look at it, and had put it amongst the books and magazines that towered on her bedside table. Perhaps she had locked it away, safely, with her jewellery.

Still naked, she opened the safe. She checked through piles of magazines and flicked through books, holding them by their spines and shaking them out before dropping them onto her bed. She pulled out the drawer of the bedside table and tipped it over. Reading glasses, some hairclips, lubricant, an old diary and scraps of paper spilled to the floor. Kneeling down amongst it all, she spread it out with a flat hand, quickly turning over the pieces of paper she knew were not the photo anyway. She felt under her mattress, lay flat on her stomach and looked under the bed.

At last she stopped. Then, on all fours she crawled back to her cupboard, found Ruan's photo on the floor and sat down amongst her jerseys to study it.

The ribbon around the puppy's neck was definitely red. But then, a part of it was obscured by the boy's arm. She vaguely heard a knock at the bedroom door. Ignoring it, she held the photo closer to her face and peered at it. Perhaps the ribbon was orange. It could have faded over time. Actually, it could even have been brown. It was difficult to tell.

Again a knock at the door, louder. The handle being tested.

"Petra, I need to talk to you."

If only she could find her own photo, she could be certain.

“Open the door!”

Surely hundreds of soft, yellow puppies with red ribbons were sold then.

“Petra!”

But such a coincidence.

Holding the photo in her hand, she got up and unlocked the door.

“Jesus, Petra.”

Rupert, with the dog behind him, stood in the door and scanned the room. The dog pushed past him, nudged the door wider with his nose, and crossed the room to the opposite side. At the window he turned a circle, rubbing his body against the curtains, before he finally settled down.

She held up the photo to Rupert. “Would you say the ribbon around the toy’s neck is red or orange?”

He looked at Petra, who stood naked, with a photo in her hand. He shoved her hand away. “Look at this mess. What the hell is going on with you?”

“Please just tell me what colour the ribbon is.”

She pressed the photo towards him again.

Rupert glanced at it, then took it from her and studied it more carefully. “Where did you get this? Who is this?”

“I was looking for something. You know that photo I have of Sam? I can’t find it anywhere.” She started to cry. “It’s so frustrating. And I really need to check something.”

“We don’t have that photo anymore,” he said.

She shook her head.

He took her by the arm and led her towards the bed. “I threw the photo away, Petra.”

She stopped and turned to him. His bottom lip was cracked and he licked over it with his tongue. Then he said something else to her, but the sounds he created seemed delayed and too low to reach her ears. She thought he was saying something about them, about Sam, his forehead carved into deep lines, but it made no sense at all. Standing on the magazines, he pulled her towards him, very slowly it seemed. For a while she let him hug her, but then the pressure of his grasp smothered her and his shirt buttons bruised her breasts.

“You fucking bastard!” She pushed hard with her forearms against his chest. “You fucking shit!”

He grabbed her wrist. She twisted to free herself from his grip but he held on tightly.

“Stop it, Petra!”

“It was the only thing I had of my child!”

“Not your child,” he screamed at her. “Our child!”

“Why would you do that to me?”

“I did nothing to you. Not everything is about you.”

“So why then? Why?”

He let go of her wrist and started walking out the room. Then, halfway to the door he stopped, turned back and shook Ruan’s photo at her.

“Look at this! You think you’ve found your child? Is that it? You’re losing your mind, Petra. It’s all been a lie. We never had a photo of Sam, remember? The camera got stolen, remember?”

He stepped towards her, kicking the magazines away from under his feet, until he was quite close. A vein, blue and jagged, ran from his left temple up to his hairline and disappeared into his side parting. She wanted to press it down with her finger.

"It was just a photo." His voice cracked. "I thought it was harmless. That it would help you, in the beginning. I thought you understood that. That you also knew it was just a lie." He swallowed. "Something to hang on to. That it would pass and we'd move on."

She stared at him.

"But it didn't pass for you," he said, faster now. "It's been more that twenty years, for God's sake and you're still going on about that photo!"

"What does it matter to you what I do?"

"I'm left with nothing, nothing!"

"Oh bullshit. You have hunting and fishing. And you bring home dead things. Always more dead things. You just love dead things, don't you!"

"You have to stop now!"

Petra sat down on the bed and looked straight at Rupert. Like a child, without covering his face, he sobbed. At first the sounds he made frightened her, embarrassed her. But then she felt calmed by his crying. She waited for him to quieten down.

"When did you throw it away?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. Then, with both hands, he dried his face. "What does it matter? A few months ago. I don't know. July."

She looked down at her hands. Then, realising that she was still naked, she pulled the duvet around herself. He sat down next to her and he put Ruan's photo in her lap.

"I can't do this anymore, Petra. I'm so tired of it all."

Staring at the wall, Petra fingered the photo, feeling the creases where she had folded it earlier that day. She looked down at the woman with the blow dried hair, all the while running her forefinger down and across the photo, smoothing it out. It was growing dark outside and in the dim light she struggled to see the smaller details in the picture. Rupert sat next to her, quietly, watching her.

For a long time they sat there on the bed. Neither of them spoke. Then, finally, she got up and pulled on a night dress. She switched on the bedroom light, walked to the window, shooed away the dog and drew the curtains. Then she went to the bathroom where, without looking at the photo again, she dropped it in the bin, amongst balls of used cotton wool, some tissues and an old lipstick.

Chapter 12

It was almost dark at six thirty on the evening after her mother's visit. It was not yet autumn, but it had suddenly turned cold and there was a smell of sulphur and wood fire in the air and when Petra breathed there seemed to be too little oxygen to fill her lungs. She closed the windows.

She kicked off her shoes and sat on her bed, and paged through the book her mother had given her. It was a thin book and it felt light in her hands. She read about a boy's last whimper, a girl who was dead in an instant, two graves that the sun could not reach. Like a river in flood the words kept on coming. There was the fear of sleeping and the fear of waking, the quiet over suppertime. Her feet felt cold, so she pulled the duvet up over her legs. And there were only forty-two pages, but they were bitterness and hope, and the river carried with it all it could tear from its banks.

The front door opened and Rupert called her name and there were other voices too. She closed the book.

"She's probably in the bedroom," Rupert said. "I'll call her. There are beers in the fridge and other drinks in the lounge; second cupboard on the right."

He looked flushed when he walked into the room. He stood next to the bed, smiled and pulled the duvet off her legs. Then he leant forward and kissed her and he put his tongue in her mouth and she tasted the beer on him. She pulled away.

"Today, I'll let you know, was our best trading day ever."

"Really?" She put down the book.

“Not our best this month, or this year. Our best in the entire seven years’ existence of *W&F Trading.* How about that!”

“That’s great, Rupert.”

“We’ve had a couple of drinks at work, but I invited Donald and Kate over so that you can celebrate with us. Come, we’ve grabbed some pizzas on the way here.”

“Oh. You go ahead. I’m coming.”

After he had left, she combed her hair. She splashed her face with water and wiped clean the mascara that lay smudged under her eyes. Then she quickly brushed her teeth and put on some lipstick. They were laughing in the lounge. She looked into the mirror and pulled her mouth into a smile. Then she took a deep breath, but the air was thin and something caught in her throat and it made her cough.

They were drinking red wine when she joined them and Rupert had put on a CD of Dire Straits.

“Hi,” Kate said. “Long time no see.” She was wearing a blue skirt that stopped mid-thigh, with a matching jacket, and under her jacket was a pink and white shirt with French cuffs. Her hair was dark, and she wore it in a slick bob, and on her ears were pearls that were set in disks of silver and gold.

Donald stepped forward and kissed Petra on both cheeks. “I hope we’re not intruding,” he said.

“No, not at all. I was just reading. I hear you had a good day.”

“It’s all in a day’s work. You win some, you loose some.” He was tall and he stooped a little and he smelled of cigarettes and aftershave.

“The Don is always so modest,” Rupert said, handing Petra a glass of wine. “We made a killing. We read the market and we read it right. You can say it, Donald, it’s just us here.”

“I’m surprised,” Petra said. She sipped her wine and the first taste was tart in her mouth, so she drank some more. “Didn’t the market fall on the news of the bomb?”

“At first, yes,” Donald said, “but then it went up, because people thought it had overreacted.”

Rupert cut in. “So we shorted the shit out of it, and when the US trade figures came out, man, it fell out of bed and,” he laughed “the life companies started selling like the lemmings they are, and we just sat back and waited, and by this afternoon they were throwing the stuff at us.”

“You have such a way with words,” Kate said and they laughed and Kate took off her jacket and threw it over the back of a chair. “What a day.”

“Actually, this calls for tequila.” Rupert disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a tray of four shot glasses, sliced lemon and salt. Petra shook her head.

“Sorry, my darling,” he said. “Compulsory.” He tapped salt onto their hands and they stood in a circle and downed the tequila and sucked on their lemon slices and Petra shuddered.

Then they sat down and ate on their laps and Petra listened to them speculate on who had lost money that day, and Rupert poured them each another shot of tequila. At the first twangs of a new song, Donald jumped up and turned up the volume. He told Petra it was the new company song, and he played air guitar and

Kate pulled her up and they all danced and when the refrain came, the men sang: *Money for nothing and chicks for free. It aint working,* and they all laughed and Petra laughed with them.

Afterwards, when Donald lit a cigarette, Petra fetched hers and she lit one too. She bit into the filter and placed her lips over the groove she had created, and she saw Rupert watching her and her head felt light and she smiled at him.

They danced some more, the four of them, and once Kate put out her hand, and she took it and Kate pulled her in and under her arm she went and Kate spun her out again, holding on firmly. She followed Kate's lead and she had to move her feet fast to keep up. When the song ended, they stepped away from each other, and the boys clapped and they both laughed and reached for their wine.

They did not dance to the next CD. Donald and Rupert discussed work, and Kate sat next to Petra on the floor with her shoes kicked off and her legs folded under her. She balanced her wine on her lap. "How are you? I mean generally."

"It's been rough. But I'm okay, thanks."

"I know how you feel. My sister also had a miscarriage recently."

Petra's tongue felt thick in her mouth.

"I didn't have a miscarriage."

"Yes. Of course, I know." She stretched her legs out in front of her and flexed her toes. "I just mean that it must be that same loss of expectation, you know?"

Kate's teeth had become stained by the red wine.

"Well, I don't know how your sister feels," Petra said. "But I'm not just feeling a loss of expectation. My baby was not just a blip on a sonar screen."

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I carried him full term and he was born and there was nothing wrong with him.” She got up and steadied herself against the coffee table. “He had pneumonia, a bacterial infection, but that was all.” She glanced at Rupert and Donald. “I can show you what he looked like.”

“No, it’s okay,” Kate said, but Petra went to her bedroom anyway and found the envelope, and when she came back, she took out the photo and her hands shook.

“I really didn’t mean to upset you,” Kate said. She glanced at the photo.

The music had stopped, and when Petra looked up, she saw that Rupert was watching her. He came over to them and took the photo, and he looked at it and the room was quiet.

“It’s late,” he said, and he gave the photo back to Petra.

Kate picked up her jacket. “Yes, tomorrow will be another big one.”

After they had left, Petra changed into her pyjamas. She wiped off her lipstick and mascara and dropped the soiled ball of cotton wool onto the counter. Then she splashed her face with water and it trickled cold down the front of her chest and she shivered. Rupert was already in bed. She dried herself in front of the mirror. Leaning forward, she held up her hair at the back, to form a bob, and she cocked her head and smiled. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said to herself. Her eyes were red and her temples throbbed.

She brushed her teeth and went to the toilet, and when she got into bed, she lay on her back and the bed floated when she closed her eyes. Rupert moved up

against her and he put his leg over hers and he ran his hand over her breasts. His leg was heavy and she made a little move so that he would take his leg off her. She turned her back to him, but he spooned her, and she felt his knees behind her knees and he slipped his hand under her top and up her stomach.

"I love you," he said.

She did not answer, but she let him roll her onto her back again, and when he slid his hand under the elastic of her pants, she did not stop him.

His fingers passed over her scar and it felt both dead and sensitive and her head ached and she opened her legs and he licked his fingers to wet her. Then he rolled onto her, and the room spun and his breath was on her face, so she turned her head and on the bedside table was the book of poems.

And next to the book was the lamp and beyond the lamp was the wall with her cupboard, and a strip of moonlight shone through a gap in the curtain and it lit up the door that led to the passage. She closed her eyes as the bed thumped, and she floated down the passage and into the spare room next door where small red and blue aeroplanes turned, but she could not hear the lullaby for the breathing in her ear.

And when he shuddered and collapses onto her, the aeroplanes stopped their turning and the door closed shut again, and all was quiet. After a while, he lay beside her and he kissed her neck, and with his thumb he wiped her eyes and he asked her why she was crying, and if he had done something wrong.

She shook her head and said, no, she was fine. But she felt clammy and cold, so she reached for the duvet that had been pushed to one side. Rupert was lying on it and she could not pull it up. He lifted himself onto his elbow, took a

corner of the duvet in his hand and held it with an outstretched arm, so that he looked like a large, winged creature. Then he brought down his arm and folded it over them both. She turned onto her side, towards him. He drew her closer and her face was in his chest and his skin felt warm, and she slept.

Chapter 13

It was two days before Christmas. Petra lifted her apron from the hook behind the kitchen door, slipped it over her head and tied it at her back. Then she opened the door of the walk-in fridge, leaned inside and took a large ham from the bottom shelf. It was heavy, so she cradled it in both arms against her chest. The plastic felt sticky and cold against her skin.

She put down the ham on the kitchen counter, stuck the point of a sharp knife into it and ran the blade under the plastic; from the tip of the bone, along the side and over the swollen belly of it. The plastic peeled off like blistered skin.

The dog got up from where he lay against the door, walked to the counter and stretched his neck, sniffing.

"No Rigby," she said.

She found her biggest pot and poured some cider into it. Then she peeled an onion, sliced it in half and dropped it into the cider. The dog sat down, alert, watching her.

From outside, through the quiet of the house, Petra could hear a high pitched sound. It was barely audible at first, just a thin layer that hovered over the silence. But gradually it got louder until the whine seemed to enter her body.

She went to the window and looked outside. Down the street, about two houses away, a gardener with a blue uniform was blowing leaves from the gutter. In a slow rhythm he swung the machine above the ground, sending up clouds of dust before him.

Petra closed the window. From behind the glass she watched the man for a moment, uncertain whether she could still hear the machine, or whether it was just that the memory of the sound had stayed with her.

She decided to turn on some music to forget about the leaf blower outside. She wished they had Christmas carols, but they did not so she flicked through her collection, hesitating over a cello concerto, before she chose Chopin nocturnes instead.

On the CD cover the pianist sat very upright at the piano. For a while she studied his face, his beautifully curved nose. He had been captured in a moment of absolute stillness at the start of the recital. His head with wavy, grey hair was slightly bent forward, his eyes were closed and his hands hovered lightly above the keys. She wished she could have been there, at the performance. She wished she could have known that moment. Could have known him.

She put down the cover, turned back to the counter where the dog sat and chopped three carrots into chunks and put them in the pot. A couple of cloves. Then, resting both hands on the pot she stood quite still and listened to the music. The pianist's fingers released the notes, slowly at first, one by one, as though they were beads on a string. But then the string broke and the beads dropped to the ground, faster and faster, and she could almost feel how it cascaded through her fingers until she stood there empty handed.

Through the closed window she could still faintly hear the wail of the leaf blower. It crept up her spine and lodged itself in her brain, until even the blood under her skin seemed to vibrate with the frequency of it.

She scraped the chopping board clean into the bin and rinsed it under the tap. Then she walked out the back door, through the garage and into the street.

“Excuse me,” she called.

It was hot outside. The man had cleared the gutter in front of the neighbour’s house and was approaching hers. He continued with his head down, steadily swaying the machine before him, from left to right and back again, as if he were holding a metal detector and looking for a treasure on a beach.

“Hello,” she called again, waving her arms above her head from where she stood outside her garage gate with her apron on.

The man looked up at the sound of her voice, searching. Then he saw her, smiled and lifted one hand in greeting, before he looked down again to continue with his work.

For a moment she thought to leave it and to go back inside. But the noise and the billows of dust rising ahead of him had to stop, so she went right up to him and waited for him to turn the machine off.

“I can’t take the noise,” she said.

He stared at her, so she went on.

“You are making too much noise.”

He pointed with his thumb to the house behind him. “Mr Murray said I must blow the leaves.”

“There are barely any leaves here. Anyway, you are just blowing it about. It must be easier to sweep.”

The man shrugged. “You must talk to Mr Murray.”

Petra felt herself blush. A trickle of sweat ran down her back. Without saying anything more, she turned around and left. She was not even halfway to her house when the man switched the machine on again.

The kitchen felt cool and the music had stopped. From the far end of the room she could hear the soft thudding of the dog's tail. A wet stripe glistened on the floor from the counter to where he lay with his paws on the ham.

"Rigby!"

With ears back and watching her, the dog quickly tore off a large chunk of meat. Then, with fat hanging from his jowls, he skidded past her hand that swiped across his rear.

"Bad dog Rigby!" she shouted at him.

She picked up the ham from the floor and sliced away where the dog had bitten it. But with the piece cut from it the ham had become misshapen, too deformed for Christmas, so she wrapped it in plastic once more, opened the door of the walk-in fridge and placed it back on the bottom shelf.

Then she untied the bow at her back, lifted the apron over her head and flung it onto the kitchen table. With a clatter, three of the eyes Ruan had given her fell from her apron pocket. She scooped two eyes off the table, bent down and found another that had fallen to the ground and settled against the leg of a chair. She stuck her hand into the apron pocket and felt for the fourth one.

She held the eyes in her fist just as she had done at the taxidermist. Then she opened her hand and stared them. Ruan would not call her, she knew that. For a moment she considered sending them back to him, perhaps with a note explaining herself; apologising. But they fitted so neatly in her palm and her fingers could

wrap around them perfectly. She tilted her palm carefully from side to side. The eyes rolled in her hand, but she could control them and when they threatened to fall she quickly closed her fingers around them again. A few times over she did that.

Then she went to the bedroom, unlocked a small safe at the back of her closet, uncurled her fingers and dropped the eyes amongst her jewellery; a diamond tennis bracelet, diamond drop earrings and an opal ring her mother had given her.

Back in the kitchen she opened the freezer. There was a leg of lamb, some sausage, shop-frozen fish fillets and bacon. There was soup, frozen in Tupperware, a roll of pastry, petit-pois and five dark red bundles of guinea fowl. She took out three of them and placed them in a tub of boiling water to defrost. She would cook them slowly in the oven, with bacon, mushrooms and red wine. Rupert would be pleased. She would bone them that day and finish off the dish on Christmas morning while Rupert fetched her mother.

The birds had been in the oven for almost an hour when the doorbell rang. Petra had not been out since speaking to the gardener that morning. It was probably the neighbour who had come to see her about that. Walking to the door, she ran the morning's conversation through her mind. She wondered if she had been rude; what story the gardener had told about her. She did not want to see the neighbour, or to discuss her actions of that morning. The noise was unacceptable, she would tell him that. Yes. She had a right to complain.

When Petra opened the door, it was not Mr Murray who stood before her, but an old woman, tall and thin.

“Oh. Hello. Can I help you?”

The woman had a handbag hooked over her arm and in that same hand she held a tissue. Her hair was grey and cut very short. She wore slacks and a loose green shirt that was buttoned to the top. From her elongated earlobes hung heavy silver hoops that swayed continuously as her head jiggled from side to side.

“I’m Hantie Bierman. Are you Petra Coetzee?” the woman said. She rolled her r’s in the way that people from the Swartland often did, but which made her sound naïve, as if her voice belonged to a different, younger, body.

“I’m Petra Wales now. What can I do for you?” Petra glanced at the car parked in the street. Surely the woman had not driven herself. But there was no-one else with her.

“Ag, Petratjie,” the stranger said to her, as if she had known her all her life. She pronounced Petra’s name the Afrikaans way; the way her parents had meant it to be and the way her mother still said it. With the tissue clutched tightly in her hand, she quickly swiped under her nose.

Petra expected her to say more, but the woman just stood there, waiting. A light breeze blew some late jacaranda petals that still lay on her front steps into the house, and she felt a chill as the air moved over her skin. The street had grown busy and commuters sped noisily past her house, but they were the early ones. It would still be a long while before Rupert came home.

Petra opened the door wider and stepped back.

“Do you want to come in?”

The woman went in and Petra closed the door behind her. Standing in the entrance hall she said: “Now, what is it I can do for you?”

“I’m Hantie,” the woman repeated. “Marili probably told you about me. We were very good friends.”

Petra nodded although her mother had never spoken of Hantie before. She could smell the guinea fowl roasting. She would have to take them out of the oven soon.

“I lived two rooms away from her. The home wanted to phone you but I said news like that should not be given on the phone. I said I would drive here and tell you myself. I’m lucky I can still see well enough to drive.” She shook her head as if disagreeing with herself. “Anyway,” she started crying. “That’s what Marili would have wanted, I said.”

The woman wore green pumps that matched her shirt. She looked at her tissue, dropped it in her bag and started digging for another one. Petra took her by the arm, led her to a chair and sat her down.

“I don’t understand,” she said, even though she knew she understood very well. She felt as if they were acting in a play, the old woman and her, and she had to continue reciting her lines. She fetched the woman some water from the kitchen, turned off the oven.

“Such a terrible thing,” Hantie said. Then she told Petra how her mother had not gone to supper, but how no-one took much notice, because she often missed it, preferring to eat something light in her room instead. They all knew that she sometimes liked to just eat a piece of fruit before she went to bed. But when she didn’t appear for breakfast either, another friend, Jenny, who often shared a table

with her, asked the attending nurse to look in on Marili. Just to see if she was okay and to ask if she wanted breakfast to be sent up to her room. She always had a slice of toast with marmalade and a cup of coffee. It was the nurse who found her on the bathroom floor, thank goodness for that. Imagine if it had been one of the cleaners; that would have been terrible.

Petra nodded and frowned, and she thanked the woman for coming and told her how much her mother had appreciated their friendship. Yes, she would be okay; her husband would be home soon. Yes, her mother was a special person. Then she walked the woman to her car, paused to thank her again, squeezing her hand on the front step, and waved as the car slowly pulled away from the kerb.

She took the guinea-fowl out of the oven. The pot was heavy and black and when she took off the lid, steam rose from the dark-brown parcels. She spread a newspaper on the counter next to the pot. Then she probed a bird with her finger, and it was soft and warm, but not too hot for her to handle. She turned it and, with the tips of her fingers, she started to pull the flesh from the bones. The meat she returned to the sauce of the pot, with the bacon and the mushrooms, but the bones went onto the newspaper. She was crying when she felt through the birds with her fingers, until there was only meat in the sauce, and the bones lay scattered next to the pot. And the meat would be good with potatoes, but the bones were too small even to feed to the dog. She folded up the newspaper, and carried the parcel with outstretched arms to the bin, where she threw it away.

Chapter 14

There was still a taste of wine and garlic in her mouth when she cleared away the pizza boxes. The empty wine bottles clunked against the bottom of the bin and on top of them she tipped the ashtrays. Rupert had already left for work. The house reeked of stale cigarette smoke and it made her eyes water, so she opened the front door to let in some air. She went outside, around the door, and bent down to clip the door to the wall. When she turned back, she saw that their post-box, an open-backed square built into the front garden wall, had post in it.

The cold from the night before had settled in, and through the grey layers of fog the sun had become a full moon. They had said on the radio that the fog would burn off. She stuck her hand into the post-box. A cobweb that had not been there three days before brushed against her knuckles, so she quickly pulled her hand back, but the web had stuck to her skin and it pulled away from the wall, clinging to her wrist. A small spider scuttled from the box. She shook her hand, but the web remained stuck, so she picked it off with the tips of her fingers, and wiped her fingers against the wall. Then she took out the post.

There were brochures from two estate agents, a handyman's card, a pathologist's account and an envelope with the name of a children's home on it, which she recognised. She had a year before, once, donated money to the home, and they had since sent her junk mail; monthly letters updating her with news of the children, their names, ages and milestones. Simon had been potty-trained, Klara had lost a tooth. And it always included a self-addressed envelope for more donations.

She put the pathologist's letter on Rupert's desk and took the rest of the post with her to the kitchen and threw it in the bin. Then she washed the ashtrays and the glasses, wiping red lipstick from the one rim, cleaned the table in the lounge, straightened out the cushions and puffed them up.

By eight o'clock she was done. She showered and dressed, and by nine o'clock there was nothing left for her to do, so she made herself a cup of coffee. She went to Rupert's office and called her mother, but the phone just rang, and she was probably teaching. She could go for a walk as her mother had suggested, but it was cold and she had just showered and she did not want to walk alone anyway. She drank her coffee and stared at a graph that Rupert had posted against his computer. Then she picked up the telephone and called the beauty salon where she used to work.

She did not recognise the voice that answered the phone. She said her name and asked to speak to Ruth, but the woman said all the therapists were busy and perhaps she could help her, did she want to make an appointment?

No, thanks, she said. She would try again later.

She put down the phone, turned over the pathologist's letter and tore open the envelope. The salon had already employed someone else. The account for tests done on patient Sam Wales was R500, and even though it had been sent directly to the medical aid, Mr Wales remained responsible for the payment thereof. She phoned Rupert, but he was on the other line, and there was yelling in the background, and Kate said things were mad; he would have to call her back.

The draft through the house was cold, so she closed the front door. Then she went back to the kitchen and put her empty mug in the basin. It did not take them

long to replace her. The bin was full and the lid could not close properly, and the smell of it filled the room. She tugged at the plastic to pull out the bag, and the bottles knocked against her legs when she took it outside. As she pushed onto the rubbish to compress it so that she could tie a knot in the bag, she noticed the letter from the children's home. She fished it out and blew off the cigarette ash.

Leaning against the wall outside, she dropped the self-addressed envelope back into the rubbish, and read the letter. There were photos of three babies, a group photo of toddlers in bright sweaters and another of twins, who were about two years old, and who had arrived the month before. And the letter said they were frightened of adults at first, but already they had settled down nicely. And there was a prayer for God's little children and a notice of upcoming fundraising events, and a telephone number at the bottom of the page.

The fog had lifted and a grey loerie cackled from the neighbour's tree. Petra went back inside and called the number. She was put on hold for the matron and she ran what she would say over in her head, her breath racing. She transferred the phone to her other ear and dried her palm on her leg.

At last she was connected. She told the matron her name, and she said that she had received their mail, and she wondered if they needed help. And before the woman could answer, she offered to play with the toddlers for perhaps an hour a day, not all of them at once, that would be too much; maybe three or four children at a time.

"Are you a mother?"

"Yes, well no."

There was a pause, so she again moved the phone to her other ear and wiped her palm against her jeans. She explained about Sam, her throat constricting. It's been so recent, but she needed something to do, and she wanted to give something back, and she had so much time now. The matron interrupted her and said of course, they needed all the help they could get; when could Petra start? And she said she could be there by eleven o'clock.

She stopped at a stationary shop that was on her way to the children's home. There was not a good selection of children's books, but she found two that seemed fine. She picked up plastic action figures and put them down again. She hovered over puzzles and watercolour paint sets, but took four boxes of crayons and paper to draw on instead. At the till was a wicker basket with soft toys; dogs, tigers, elephants and cats, and she thought the children would like them, so she chose one of each.

A mulberry tree outside the home had dropped its fruit and the bricks of the parking area was stained a dark purple. Petra parked far from the tree. The front door was barred by a security gate through which she stuck her hand to ring the bell. Down the centre of the door ran a narrow strip of thick, yellow glass, and the shape of the person that moved behind the door was distorted by rows of bubbles set in the pane. A girl of about fourteen opened the door and unlocked the security gate.

"Hello Tannie," she said. She had strawberry hair and freckles, and there were balls of fluff on her jersey.

Petra stepped onto the carpet of the entrance hall, where there were two armchairs and a coffee table with a pot plant, a bible and some copies of Dutch Reformed Church magazines.

The girl told her that the matron would be there shortly. She offered Petra water, calling her ‘Tannie’ again, and Petra smiled at her and said no thanks, she was fine. The girl waited with her and Petra did not know if she should talk to her, and what she should say. When the matron appeared, the girl said: “Here is Mamma Sandra now,” and she greeted the matron and left.

“Hello. I’m Sandra Pretorius. That was Christelle. She’s one of the responsible ones.”

Petra put out her hand. “I’m Petra Wales. Thanks for letting me come.”

“Thank *you*,” Sandra said. Her fingers did not close around Petra’s hand. “We are so understaffed; it’s a blessing when God sends us a helper.”

Petra followed her down the long passage, through a dormitory that had cheerful curtains and eight beds, with the name of a child stuck on the wall above each bed, and into a play area.

The floor was covered with yellow linoleum tiles and some children were lying on blankets and sucking on finger biscuits. A woman was changing a nappy and the air reeked of baby oil and poo, and when she put down the child, he ran wildly through the room, screaming. Two other children stared at a TV that flashed with the sound off.

The matron called four of the children. One of them was the boy with the changed nappy, who had calmed down, and the other three were girls. She told them that Tannie Petra had come to play with them and that they had better be

good, or next time she would choose another child, and one girl said: “ja Mamma, dankie Mamma,” and they all followed her to another room. Petra clutched the bag of toys.

The room was small and it had a cut-out carpet and three chairs, and against the walls were open shelves that were labelled according to age, and clothes were stacked in them.

“I’ll be in my office if you need anything,” the matron said and she shut the door behind her.

Petra moved the chairs to one side, and sat down on the floor with her back against the wall.

“Come sit nicely. I’ve got a big surprise for you.”

They all sat down and waited.

“First you must tell me your names.”

The boy said his name was Bertie, and he moved closer to her.

“That’s a nice name.”

He climbed onto her lap.

“And what is your name?” she said to the next child.

The child said her name was Ruby and she tried to get onto Petra’s lap too. She pushed against Bertie and Bertie pushed back, and the other children moaned and said they also wanted to sit there, and Bertie pinched the girl who tried to squeeze in on the other side of him, and she screamed.

Petra picked them up from her lap, and she told them that she would not play with them if they did not behave. She said that one should not hurt each other, and she hugged the crying girl.

At last they calmed down, and she dug in her bag for the soft toys and gave them each one. They hugged their toys, and the girl who had been pinched kissed her elephant and squashed it tightly against her chest. Petra took out one of the books she had bought and showed them the cover.

“This is a story about animals, just like the ones you’ve got. Do you want to hear it?”

They nodded, and Ruby jumped up and said “ja Tannie, ja Tannie.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you to be quiet.”

The child sat down, and Petra read the first page and showed them the picture. It went well, so she smiled and read some more. But after four pages, Ruby said she wanted the elephant and she tried to grab it from the other girl. Petra ignored her and read on, but then Ruby threw her cat against the wall, and Bertie laughed and threw his own toy too.

When she told them to stop, she raised her voice, and Bertie started to cry and he said he needed to pee.

“It’s okay, you’re wearing your nappy,” Petra said.

“I don’t want nappy.” He started to pull at his pants.

“Let’s draw. Do you like to draw?”

She rustled the shopping bag. Bertie stopped complaining. She took out the paper and crayons and put them down on the floor in front of each child. She said they could draw pictures of themselves, so that she could remember them until her next visit.

“You won’t come again.” Bertie said.

“Of course I will.”

The third girl, who had been quiet all along and whose name Petra could not remember, picked up a crayon and started eating it.

“No. Look, like this.” Petra placed the crayon in the girl’s fist and closed her own around it and drew a circle on the paper. “See? There is your head. Let’s give you some eyes.” She drew smaller circles in the big one. “Now you try.”

The girl pulled the crayon across the paper, looked at the line she had drawn, and did it again.

“Good!”

She scribbled some more and Petra turned to help the next child.

“Steffie is eating the crayon again,” Bertie shouted.

The girl had bitten the crayon in half, and she was chewing it and pits of green sat in the spit around her lips.

“I said no!” Petra forced her mouth open and stuck her forefinger in and fished out the crayon. She had no tissues, so she wiped it on a piece of paper and then on her jeans. “It is not for eating!”

The girl started to cry.

At last the children were fetched for lunch. The matron thanked Petra and asked her how it went, and Petra said it went fine. So the matron said she would choose other children the next day, to give them all a chance, and should she have them ready by eleven o’clock again? And Petra said she was sorry, but she already had an appointment then, and she also wasn’t sure about the day after, as she did not have her diary with her, but that she would call to let them know.

At home she went to the bathroom and washed her hands with soap. She took off her jeans and her shirt and threw them in the wash. Then she splashed her face with water and ran her fingers through her hair. In the mirror her face was pale and her lips had no colour and her hair hung limply past her shoulders. She put on red lipstick and lifted her hair at the back. A bob would suit her nicely too.

It was only one o'clock, so she called her hairdresser, but he was fully booked for the afternoon. He could fit her in the next morning around eleven, and she said, yes, that would be great.

When Rupert's alarm went off the next morning, she got up and pulled on her gown. While he showered, she sliced a pawpaw and scooped out the pips that rolled off the wooden board like shiny beads. She cut a wedge of lemon and put it on the plate next to the pawpaw. Then she boiled the kettle and spooned coffee into a plunger, and when he came through, the table was set ready for him.

He asked what she had planned for the day, and she said she had arranged to have her hair cut.

"Have fun," he said, and kissed her and went to work.

She cleared the table and dressed. After she had tidied their room, she put washing in the machine and straightened the towels in the bathroom. Then she left, in time to browse the shops close to the salon.

"Hi Honey, I haven't seen you for ages My God, look at you. We need to fix this up!"

Petra smiled. "Yes, I've let myself go a bit."

He sat her down and fiddled with her hair.

“So, what do you feel like doing with your hair?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I should have a short bob for a change.”

Andrew turned around and picked up a magazine and quickly flicked through it.

“There are bobs and there are bobs. Look.”

He put the magazine on her lap.

“This is what they are wearing on all the catwalks this season. You can wear it slick, like this, or you can mess it up a bit for a more casual look,” he turned the page, “like this. What do you think?”

She nodded.

“And I’ll put some colour in your hair. Just a few highlights, to complement your skin tone.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you have a manicure while I do that? You might as well use the time.”

“Okay.”

He turned to a woman who was sweeping hair from the floor. “Lizzy, two coffees here please. And call Paulina. I’ve got a mani for her.”

For an hour Petra sat while Andrew mixed some hair colour that looked like blue mud, and he took strips of hair and painted it and folded it up in layers of tinfoil, and while he was busy, a small woman massaged her hands and lay them on her lap and she cut her fingernails and filed them, and Andrew spoke about emigrating to Australia where they were looking for hairdressers - his lover had

already found a job - and they would live in Sydney, but he was not sure whether he was ready for such a commitment.

Then, with her hair sticking out amongst the foil, he put her under a dryer next to another woman and they both looked like extras from a science fiction movie, and Petra laughed and told the woman so, but the woman only glanced at her in the mirror before she cast her eyes down to the magazine on her lap again.

Andrew turned on the dryer and set the timer and it hummed in her ears. Perhaps the woman had not heard her. The salon was busy. On her left, three ladies stood at a row of basins, washing the hair of heads tilted back. Behind her, in the mirror, she saw that Andrew had already seated someone else, and he was leaning over his customer, touching her hair, pulling it lightly this way and that, and when the woman said something, he picked up the same magazine he had shown Petra, and he turned the pages and showed the pictures, and the woman nodded and he put his hands on the woman’s shoulders and smiled at her. Then he turned to mix the colour and Petra reached for a magazine.

Chapter 15

Petra turned on lights in the house and poured herself a brandy. It was already past seven o'clock but she did not expect Rupert soon; there would be drinks after work. She pulled a sweater over her head, found her cigarettes and went to sit on the stoep in the dark. She did not call Rupert to tell him the news of her mother.

It was cool outside, but the tiles on the steps were still warm under her naked feet. She lit a cigarette and drank her brandy. From the far end of the garden a cricket chirruped.

She had phoned the old age home earlier that evening. Her mother was at the undertakers, they had said. She watched the tip of her cigarette glow in the dark. They had offered to keep her room for a month, to give Petra time to clear things out, but after that someone else would move in. There was a long waiting list; they hoped she would understand.

She picked up her lighter and ran her finger over the wheel so that it sparked. Then she flicked it again and held her thumb down. The evening air was still, so the flame held steady and a small halo of light radiated from it. When she narrowed her eyes and did not quite look at the flame, she could see the halo more clearly. She had, that afternoon, found the undertaker's number in the telephone directory: *Burger's Funeral Services, Braamfontein.* She had not been to Braamfontein for many years; there had been no good reason for her to go. The steel of the lighter became hot and it burnt her thumb. She would keep her mother's violin. Perhaps even learn to play it.

She was drinking her second glass of brandy when Rupert came home. He called hello as he opened the kitchen door.

"Hi," she answered from where she sat on the step.

She heard him put down his briefcase and listened to his footsteps in the passage. She could hear him open drawers and knew that he was changing. Then the toilet flushed and the shower was turned on. At first the water splashed loudly and she knew that he was standing with the shower door open, testing the temperature. After a while the door slid closed behind him and the water became a dull rap in the background that she could almost not distinguish from the drone of traffic in the distance.

"There you are," he said, suddenly behind her.

She started, turned. "Oh. Hi."

His hair was wet and combed back and she could smell the soap on him. He pecked her lightly on the top of her head. But then he stepped back immediately, as if he had been pushed away. He glanced at the brandy beside her and for a moment they were quiet.

Then he said: "I see my car took a bit of a knock yesterday."

It was not an accusation. It was as if they both expected him to mention it.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

He nodded.

"I'll have it fixed."

He nodded again.

Another cricket, this time closer to her, joined in with the first one. From their hiding places in the dark they screeched at each other across the distance of the lawn.

"Mamma died today," she said. "Well, yesterday. Someone came to tell me this afternoon."

"Oh God, Petra." He sat down beside her. "You should have called. I would have come home sooner."

She shrugged.

"What happened?"

"It seems she had a stroke. In the bathroom."

"I'm so sorry."

Rupert reached over to her and took her hand. His palm felt warm against hers. Without a sound she cried in the dark. When he laced his fingers between hers, she folded her fingers down and gripped him, squeezing tightly until her hand ached and she could feel the little bones of his knuckles shift under her fingers.

"What must happen now? What's the procedure?" he asked.

She picked up her brandy and his hand dropped onto her leg.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to see the undertaker tomorrow."

"I'll come with you."

"No." She fidgeted with her glass. "It's okay, Rupert. Thanks."

"I see," he said.

When Petra left her house the next morning a light breeze stirred the leaves of the trees that lined the road, waving her on as she went past.

She drove into Braamfontein and glanced at the address that she had scrawled on a piece of paper the night before. Leaning forward over her steering wheel she tried to read the street names, but the traffic was heavy and the lanes were converging and the names on the kerb stones had faded. She knew she had to turn soon; that if she continued straight she would end up downtown.

The road she swung into was narrow. She inched past cars that had double-parked with hazard lights on. Ahead of her a truck was being offloaded while an armed guard kept watch. She stopped for a woman who crossed the road with a shopping bag in one hand and a baby wrapped in a blanket on her back. Just then a group of boys, young men really, walked past her window, laughing. She checked that her handbag was out of sight, on the floor at her feet, and locked her door.

Then, on her left, a car pulled out of a parking bay. She flicked on her indicator at once, parked her car and looked out of her closed windows. Across the road she saw a street name against a wall, but it was not the one she was looking for. She should have had a map. Clutching her bag tightly against her body, she climbed out of her car and walked up to the guard with the gun.

"Can you help me please? I'm looking for Burger's Funeral Services."

"It's the next street down," the guard said.

"Is that where Burger's is? The funeral place?"

"I know it. Yes. But it's that way." He pointed behind her. Then he looked at her clothes, her bag. "It's far to walk."

The truck that was being offloaded almost completely blocked the road. Office furniture piled up on the sidewalk beside it. The driver of an oncoming car stuck his hand out of his window and folded in his side mirror as he slowly edged past the truck. On both sides of the road the traffic was building up.

“Thank you,” Petra said.

Then she turned around and walked off in the direction in which the guard had pointed. She swung the strap of her handbag over her neck, held on to it and kept her eyes down. Watching her feet, she stepped past the straight legs of a man who sat against a rubbish bin, begging. The bin was overflowing and tins and plastic bags lay strewn around him. She had almost to step over him.

After she had gone a block, she found the street she was looking for and turned right. It was a wider, cleaner road. She let go of her bag and it bounced against her hip as she walked past an old building with an entrance of black and white floor tiles, an old wooden door and sandblasted windows. She saw her reflection in the window of a pawn shop that displayed used watches and jewellery.

Two blocks later she stopped at a café and bought herself some water, dropping her change into a charity tin that stood next to the till. By the time she greeted a fruit vendor sitting in front of a school that was closed for the holidays, her bag was hanging from her shoulder and she was swinging her arms at her sides.

At last she saw the building. It was set back from the road and it had a large parking area where people milled about. Some were climbing into their cars, while others were already slowly driving off. Three people dressed in black stood

smoking under a tree while not far from them a woman helped an old man cross the road. He had his hand hooked into the crook of her arm as he shuffled along beside her. The woman bent her head down towards him and said something, but his eyes remained fixed on some point in the distance.

Petra walked past a fake rock from which water trickled into shallow pond. Ahead of her a huge wooden cross hung against the outside of the face brick building, above a glass double door. She gazed up at it as she approached the entrance. Then she walked under the cross and, with her flat hand, pushed against a rainbow that had been pasted on the glass of the door.

Inside, a woman with blonde hair looked up from where she sat behind the counter. Her hair was cut short at the top but at the back it hung down to her shoulders. It had been highlighted with orange streaks.

“Hello. I’m Petra Wales. Coetzee. I’ve come to see my…my mother passed away. She was brought here yesterday.”

The woman nodded. “Hello. My name is Liesa.” She stood up and shook Petra’s hand. She was fat and wore a blue chiffon blouse that stretched across her breasts. She tugged at it. “Let’s go to my office.”

They arrived at a door that said: *Silence. Consulting with Bereaved.* The woman shut the door, sat down behind the desk and gestured to Petra to sit down too. She pulled a document from a pile of papers in front of her and paged through it, pointing at certain items in it with the tip of her pen as she went along. Then she looked up.

“My deepest sympathies to you and your family. Here at Burger’s we hope to support you and guide you through this difficult time.” She pointed to the forms

in front of her. “Your mother’s old age home has already supplied us with a lot of the information we need, so you and I just need to finalise some of the personal stuff.”

Petra nodded.

“Like whether you want to bury the deceased or have her cremated?”

“Cremated.”

“Have you thought of a date yet? We can do it this Friday, if that suits you. We are usually not busy on Fridays and that will give you enough time to get the family together.”

“That’s fine.”

The woman made a note on the form.

“We will have her ready in the viewing room an hour before the service if anyone would like to say their final goodbyes. Is there anything specific you would want her to wear? Did she request anything?”

“I don’t know. What is she wearing now?”

The woman looked at her. Her blue eye shadow matched the blue of her shirt.

“I’m sorry,” Petra said. “I haven’t thought about that.”

“It’s okay. You can let me know later, or just drop something off.”

She made another note. Then she sat back and pulled at her blouse where it had become stuck under the folds of her breasts.

“You need to choose a coffin. Do you want to do that now?”

“A coffin? For a cremation? Does one need to?”

“Well, the deceased is placed in a coffin of your choice. I’m sure you’ll like the ones we have here.”

Petra followed the woman to a small room with a red carpet and heavy red drapes that hung against the walls even though there were no windows. Six coffins were set out in a circle. Four of them stood angled against the wall with their lids closed while two others were on the floor and had been opened to show off their interiors. The one closest to her had been lined with white satin, while the other was done in cream and had the additional option of a lid that could be fully opened or kept half closed. Like a stable door at the back of a kitchen. On a table in the middle of the circle stood one small coffin, about a metre long. All of them had elaborate brass handles and fittings.

“Isn’t there a standard coffin for cremations? Something plainer?”

“We can take off the handles if you like. They are mostly used for burials. But the price remains the same.”

Petra touched the white satin in the coffin next to her. It had been ruffled in voluminous pleats that looked soft and extravagant and that felt cool and smooth under her fingers. Then she noticed a loose piece of satin, a dress of some sort, which lay in the bottom of the coffin within the folds of the lining. She leant forward, reached in and pulled it out.

“What’s this?”

“That’s the robe we would use if the deceased was not wearing anything specific. Many people nowadays choose not to dress their loved ones. You’ll see that it matches the satin in the coffin.”

With straight arms Petra held the robe up in front of her. The white satin had been embroidered in gold around the neck and a motive of twirls ran from the curve of the neck down the body of the robe to end in four evenly spaced golden tassels at the waist. She turned the robe around, but there was no back to it. It was not a dress at all; just a single, flat piece of fabric, to be placed on top of the body.

Then, as if measuring a dress for herself, she brought the garment closer, bending her arms so that her hands touched her shoulders and the neck of the robe sat at her neck. It was very long and it hung heavily down the length of her body, all the way to the floor, where the satin dropped in soft folds onto her feet. She looked up at the woman.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

Still Life

Reflexive Essay

BACKGROUND

Prior to attempting this novel, I had written and published (amongst others) two short stories, *A Story about Sam* and *Still Life*. Although I wrote them as independent stories (they had different protagonists) and almost a year had passed between the writing of each one, I felt that they were somehow connected. Upon reflection, I realised that the main characters in *Still Life* were actually the same main characters as in *A Story about Sam*, but many years on. Once I had realised that, I wanted to fill in the gaps. Although *Still Life* (the novel) is not autobiographical, I did draw on personal experience. I, like my protagonist, had a baby who died when he was five days old.

GRIEVING

Because *Still Life* explores the effect that the death of a baby has on the lives of the parents, and specifically on the life of the mother, who is the main protagonist, I had to consider the grieving process carefully before writing the novel.

Much has been written about death and grieving, of which probably the most influential has been Elizabeth Kübler-Ross'(1997) *On Death and Dying*, in which she identified the now famous stages of coping that a dying patient is likely to go through after finding out that he is terminally ill. The five stages are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and hope. Kübler-Ross' stages are now used by psychologists to help not only dying patients, but also to

treat people who have suffered other forms of loss, and for the process of grieving.

Most people who have experienced trauma have come across the ‘stages of recovery’ at some point or another. Critics of the stages hold that they are rigid and that they *‘set up unreasonable expectations of the behavior of patients, families, and nurses.’* (Germain, Carol P. 1980)

But as Kübler-Ross originally offered it, patients can move back and forth between the stages, become fixated in one stage, omit some stages, or go through the stages in order. (Germain, Carol P. 1980) The stages are something for the victim to hold onto; a map, if you will, for the journey into the unknown territory of life after trauma. It is the misinterpretation, or rigidity of interpretation, of Kübler-Ross' staging theory that places a responsibility on the victim, and an expectation on people close to the victim, of how mourning should progress.

Particularly problematic, I believe, is that the last stage ‘hope’ has evolved in other psychological literature to become ‘acceptance’ or even ‘adapting and renewal’ (Deits, Bob. 1992). This suggests closure, a word adored by pop-psychologists, and something that we have been taught to strive for. In my opinion it is a naïve view of life; that there must be a happy ending. That we have come to believe that grieving must follow a set pattern, and that we must try to live up to that expectation is clear from Deits’ claim:

> *The day will come when you will know deep inside that you have recovered your balance, completed your journey through grief and are ready to get on with a good and full life. On that day, you will be a stronger person than you have ever been before.*
> (Deits, 1992. p50)

We are expected by those around us to reach that final stage at all costs, so we suppress our emotions to get there, or use crutches, like travelling, work, alcohol, or as in this novel, a photo. It is an expectation which places a duty on the victim to reach that happy place, or (is the tacit warning) be deemed a failure, a drama queen, unhinged. It would be more satisfying if the last stage could evolve to be 'acceptance of change', so that it does not necessarily mean acceptance of the trauma or the death, but instead acceptance of the change of circumstance as well as acceptance (by the victim and, hopefully by those around him or her) of the change that it brings about *within* the victim.

I wanted to write about the tension between an outer life that must go on, and an inner life that remains frozen. I wanted my protagonist to change, but not necessarily to accept or renew. I tried to sketch a character who seems to cope; who behaves in a way that is, on the surface, acceptable, but who has, beneath the surface, become stuck in one of the earlier stages of mourning.

The one consequence of trauma (which two women who had also lost children warned me about at the time of my own child's death) is that it places tremendous

strain on a marriage or a partnership. It is evident that men and women mourn differently and that it creates problems between couples:

> *Differences in the way men and women grieve can cause serious problems for couples. Men may be more silent, believing that they must be strong for their wives and children. Women are usually more open in expressing their grief and a woman may interpret her husband's stoicism as meaning he didn't love the baby as much as she did or that he doesn't understand what she's going through. The husband, on the other hand, may feel that his wife is too involved in grieving and can't move on. Many relationships don't survive the loss of a child and end in separation or divorce.*
> (Diaz, Margaret R. 1995)

Although I did try to point to the differences in approach to mourning between Rupert and Petra, I did not want to dwell on them too much. Instead, I wanted to explore the grieving manner of one person, and the choices that she makes during that initial vulnerable period of mourning, and how those choices would affect her for the rest of her life. It would probably be more correct to say that *all* people mourn differently. People have different wiring, different thresholds of emotional pain, and therefore will experience trauma differently. I hope that my book will encourage the reader to consider what ‘normal’ grief is, and to perhaps realise that there is no such thing. Grieving is intensely personal; it can only be done alone. A victim of trauma cannot really share his process, he can only hope for understanding; not of *what* he is going through, but simply that he is going

through something life-altering and traumatic, and that people need to cut him some slack.

Parents who have lost a baby at birth are set apart from other bereaved in that outsiders often don't acknowledge the importance and significance of their baby's death and don't understand their need to grieve. (Kohner, Nancy & Henley, Alix. 1997. p81) This is possibly a hangover of earlier times when there was not the expectation there is nowadays to give birth to healthy babies; where the death of a baby at birth was just one of the many risks of parenthood. The expectation to give birth to a healthy baby, with little risk to the mother, has only developed during the second half of the 20th century and in relatively financially secure western societies.

> *Late 20th-century American parents who experience the death of a young child do so in a socio-historical context in which a child's death is statistically less prevalent than in earlier historical periods. During Puritan and Colonial periods, for example, death was omnipresent in everyday family life with almost half of all children dying before reaching adulthood. In 1900, one half of all parents would have experienced the death of a child: by 1976 only 6% would. With these shifts in occurrence, the death of a child has come to be viewed as a devastating loss from which a parent may never fully recover, instead of a normal hazard of parenthood.*
>
> (Farnsworth, Elizabeth B; Allen, Katherine R. 1996)

The frustration felt by parents who lose infants is twofold: Firstly, there is a lack of understanding for the grief, as stated above. Secondly, because the death of a baby is no longer a natural part of life, people find it difficult to talk about it naturally; they have become fearful of it, uncomfortable in its presence.

> *Though death is a social fact, many social scientists have pointed out that dying is regarded as deviant behavior in the medical subculture as in the larger American society.*
>
> (Germaine, Carol P. 1980)

People have lost their natural ability to console such a mother (a woman who loses an infant at birth, or shortly thereafter, is often *not* regarded as having been a mother at all) so their consolations (if given at all) are based on advice rehearsed; repeated platitudes that are aimed at 'fixing' the problem. They have lost the language for death:

> *Americans tend, for the most part, to deny death and to use euphemisms for death rather than the words dying, dead, and death. Contemporary parents are situated in a social context in which open discussion of death is taboo.*
>
> (Farnsworth, Elizabeth B; Allen, Katherine R. 1996)

Such is the problem that psychology books often create separate sections to discuss infant deaths, still births, or miscarriages, where they are at pains to explain that such losses rightly deserve to be mourned. Society often still expects mourning to be appropriate to the age of the child. Diaz (1995) reminds the reader

that the degree of loss or pain felt by the family is not proportional to the size or age of the baby. '*Parents losing a day-old infant don't feel lucky because he died sooner rather than later.'*

Society's reaction to the death of an infant was important to me when I wrote *Still Life*, because the reader, as a product of the society he lives in (where there are certain expectations with regard to which behaviour is acceptable and which is not), may react negatively to a protagonist who he believes is behaving inappropriately. I was very aware that I ran the risk of alienating the reader from my protagonist, and tried to find a way to tell the story that would elicit sympathy, yet avoid sentimentality.

The fact that the death of my child prompted me to write is nothing new. Psychotherapists will invariably urge patients to write about their traumatic experiences. Austrian-born British psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein (1882-1960), made a connection between the '*depressive position*' and the artist's ability to form symbols. This followed from her study of child psychology, through which she developed the technique of play therapy (which is now used world-wide) and which tries to uncover children's unconscious motivations through the use of play and drawings.
(http://www.webster.edu/~woolflm/klein.html)

She held that the pain of mourning was the basis of creative activity, through which the child (and this was extended to the artist) restored lost internal and

external objects and lost happiness. She said that painful experiences of all kinds sometimes brought out new gifts in people, who would take to painting, writing or other productive activities under the stress of frustrations and hardships.
(Kimura, Keiko. 2005.)

The works of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf serve as well-documented examples of this link. The unresolved grief suffered over the deaths of their parents (Plath's father, and both parents in the case of Woolf) are often cited as the reason for their obsession with death in their writing (and in their own lives.)

I had the urge to write about my trauma, but I needed to find the correct genre in which to express myself. I have read, and been influenced by, a variety of works by artists who have lost children and who have chosen to express their grief through writing, each in his or her own way. These works can loosely be divided into two sections; those that use symbolism (poetry, song writing, fiction) and those that are realistic (autobiography, essays).

Isabel Allende (1996) who wrote an autobiographical account, *Paula* while taking care of her comatose daughter before she died, said in an interview that '*the most important book in my life is and will be* Paula*. Because it saved me from suicide. It saved Paula from oblivion. In a way, it's a celebration of life. A celebration of the things I care for: family, life, love. It's not about death, really.'*
(Richards, Linda L. 2007)

Bryce Courtenay (1993) also wrote a biography, *April Fool's Day* about his son, a haemophiliac who died of AIDS after an infected blood transfusion. He said: *'I had no choice, and it was without question*[…]*the single most difficult thing I have ever done. And if I ever had to do that again I wouldn't write another word, it was just too hard.'*
(Thompson, Peter. 2007)

The Afrikaans poet, Totius (1982) wrote a collection of poems, *Passieblomme* about the deaths of his children. In the foreword of the collection he said that some of the poems had been in his drawer for some twelve years, and had not been published due to '*modesty where it concerns a personal and intensely lived grief.'*

Marita van der Vyver (1992) lost a baby in the early nineties, after which she wrote *Griet Skryf 'n Sprokie* a novel which seemingly had nothing to do with the death of a child, but which she said she had written as a release from the grief she felt after the tragedy. Only in 2006, more than ten years later, did she publish a novel, *Stiltetyd,* which directly dealt with the grief of a mother after the death of her daughter.

Eric Clapton's song, *Tears in Heaven,* which he wrote after his four-year-old son fell to his death from an apartment window, taught me just how powerful a simple image or symbol can be in conveying a complex emotion. This short song with its

simple questions about heaven touches on so many of the grieving parent's hopes and fears and anguish. It is an excellent example of John L'Heureux' advice:

> *To avoid melodrama, aim for a restrained tone rather than an exaggerated one. A scene with hysteria needs more, not less control in the writing: keep the language deflated and rooted in action and sensory detail.*
> (Burroway. 2003. p81)

In *Astonishing Splashes of Colour* by Clare Morrall (2004), the protagonist, Kitty (whose baby had died), gets on a bus and sits for hours, going round and round on a circular route. She also visits a school to collect her son, Henry – a seemingly normal act until the reader realises that she does not have a son. Her depression becomes clear through her actions rather than her words, and her state of mind through the symbolism of the circular route she stays on.

In a recently published collection of essays called *At Risk,* Sarah Nuttall (2007) wrote an account of her own experience of losing a baby, in which she explained her feelings of anger and grief. While it is a sensitively written essay, it did not linger with me in the same way that any of the other works mentioned above did, and I think it was because it was too realistic an account of her loss; I felt sympathy for her, but remained largely unmoved by the story, even though I had suffered a similar fate. I felt that her story lacked the creativity that is needed to transcend beyond the boundaries of the self.

Even though I had written some (fictional) short stories about the death of a child, I still felt that there was more that I needed to say. I did not want to write an autobiographical account; I don't write journals – it seems to me an activity too self-indulgent and too revealing. I felt that I could best explore the complexity of emotions that follow such a trauma through the genre of the novel; where it was no longer about me, and I could imagine what my feelings might have been had I lived a different life with different circumstances. I felt that I would have better insight into my subject if I looked through the lenses of another, and added what I learnt by doing so, to what I already knew.

We all have sad stories to tell. It is through the creative process; the use of symbolism, the creation of a character unlike any other, the stretching and testing of emotional limits, that just another sad story can be told to such an effect that it reaches out and affects its many and varied readers, and leaves them with something worth considering. Writing about my own experience in such a way proved to be cathartic. Indeed, it was through writing that I finally grieved.

PLOT

Of course, to tell a story you have to make things happen. Even when you are writing a character-driven novel, you have to show your characters, test them as it were, through a series of events. When I decided to write a novel, I had only an idea of an emotion, or a state of being, that I wanted to explore. I had no plot, except for the two short stories that I had previously written. I wanted to explore

certain aspects of my character, and the plot had to make that possible. So, the character did not act within a plot structure, instead the plot was developed around the character. The plot was the support act.

There were two aspects related to plot development that troubled me: the credibility of the plot and the pacing of the action.

Credibility

I wanted to create a character who was unstable, but who still remained within the realms of normality. I wanted her to be an unreliable narrator, but still elicit sympathy from the reader. I did not want to merely write a sad story about the loss of a baby; something more needed to happen to set it apart. On the other hand, I had to avoid melodrama, and the events had to remain credible.

To achieve this, I tried to think of what would be one hundred percent awful, and then pulled back from there. For example, it would have been a hundred percent awful for her to lose everything, so she lost her baby, the ashes and the photos, but she kept her husband, and found a substitute for the photos. It would have been one hundred percent awful if she had stolen another baby in the hospital, so she stole only the image of another baby. It would have been one hundred percent terrible if Ruan actually was the baby she had photographed, so I left it open as only a possibility. (In my proposal I suggested that he *would* be the baby, but was luckily discouraged to make such a close connection by the course supervisors

who had read my proposal.) The plot had to survive the “oh, do me a favour” test. I hope it does.

Pacing

The problem I had with pacing was linked to the method I employed in working out the finer detail of the plot, so I’ll firstly elaborate on that.

I divided the plot up in two parts. There was the larger plot, the suspension bridge, which spanned the novel from beginning to end. I did not start writing until I had that in place. Then there was the detailed plot; the trusses that supported the bridge. At first I found the prospect of adding in all the detail overwhelming. I felt confident that the bigger arc of my plot would satisfy the need for conflict, crisis and resolution, but there had to also be smaller episodes of ‘*conflict, crisis and incremental change’* (Burroway, p43) which I still had to work out.

I have had some practise in writing short stories, so I decided to divide my novel into chapters that could almost function as short stories themselves, but that would build upon each other within the bigger arc of the plot. I did not pre-determine each of these chapters before I started writing (although I obviously had an idea what some of them would be about). This method worked well for me, as the bigger arc gave me enough to hold on to so that I did not lose my way, while the action within each chapter remained unexplored in my mind until I wrote it, which

allowed for me to discover the story as I went along, and which in turn kept me interested.

The short stories I have written in the past have all been around 2 000 – 2 500 words. I studied and worked as a journalist many years ago, where I was taught to keep my writing tight. I seem to have learned the lesson well, which is great for journalism, but can create problems in creative writing. I find it difficult to write elaborately or florally. I've not yet managed to paint verbal tapestries.

Because I approached each chapter as a short story, each chapter turned out to be (completely coincidentally) around 2 000 – 2 500 words. Since I had quite a bit of action to get through in most of the chapters (to comply with my rule of having mini conflicts, crises and incremental changes), my seeming inability to write longer did not leave me many words with which to slow down the pace!

An added problem was that I had chosen to write from a point of view that was very limited in interiority, so I could not slow down the pace by accessing the minds of my characters. Everything had to be shown, and everything that was shown had to have a reason. To show characters in this way, characters have to do things, and the things they do cannot be gratuitous – their actions have to be meaningful as a means of characterisation - and that inevitably increases the pace.

I had to learn to stretch out the action. Prof Etienne van Heerden once advised me on how to slow down the pace of a story. He told me to imagine a camera attached

to the head of the protagonist and to follow the protagonist with that camera and write down everything it sees. I tried to follow that advice.

I happily discovered that another decision I had made about the structure of the story had an unexpected positive effect on my pacing problem. The novel had to span 23 years for the plot to work. There would be sections set in the past (23 years ago) and sections set in the present. I decided to alternate the sections chapter by chapter, so that the reader would expect a pattern and be grounded in that respect. Alternating the chapters in this way meant that the line of action was broken at the end of each chapter. It created a natural pause in the narrative at the end of each chapter.

POINT-OF-VIEW

The most common criticism I've had from people who have read the novel has been that the narrator lacks interiority. This of course relates to the point-of-view (POV) of the novel.

The objective POV '*restricts your knowledge to the external facts that might be observed by a human witness; to the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.'* (Burroway, p259). The limited third person POV is one *'in which the author can see events objectively and also grants himself or herself access to the mind of one character'* (Burroway. 2003. p258).

But what happens when the narrator does not have access to her own mind? I wanted to write a story about someone who had become numb with shock, and who was in essence an unreliable narrator. If I had written in the limited third person POV, I would have given my character access to her inner feelings which she did not have. I wanted to use the POV to accentuate her numbness, and I feared that passages of interiority would be unrealistic and jar. It would be out of character for this narrator and therefore intrude upon the novel as the opinion of the author.

I wanted to sketch my character as realistically as possible; without telling the reader who she was. The reader must discover her by what she observes, how she does things, what she says - or what she doesn't do or say.

E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* says:

> *For human intercourse, as soon as we look at it for its own sake and not as a social adjunct, is seen to be haunted by a spectre. We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion.*
> (Forster, E.M. 2000. p69)

It is exactly the knowledge that we can never *quite* know someone, which keeps relationships interesting. Even when people *do* tell us what they feel, it may not be the whole truth because they edit what they say for our benefit, or because they

don’t quite know what they feel themselves, or their truth may change from situation to situation.

Only in novels do we get definitive answers as to *who* someone actually is - and I think that's unrealistic, not true to life, cheating, if you will. No other art form allows the artist such short-cuts. I wanted to portray life as I see it; *with* the uncertainties, the gaps in understanding one another. Of course language cannot portray life as it is. The different approaches employed by writers all fall within a certain set of conventions, and so does mine, but I tried to choose the approach that suited my take on human relations best.

Janet Burroway (2003, p260) said this about Hemingway’s short story, *Hills Like White Elephants* (which was written in the objective POV.):

> *The reader is allowed to discover what is really happening. The characters avoid the subject, prevaricate, and pretend, but they betray their real meaning and feelings through gestures, repetitions, and slips of the tongue. The reader, focus directed by the author, learns by inference, as in life, so that we finally have the pleasure of knowing the characters* ***better than they know themselves.*** [my highlight]

I had an email debate about the POV issue with a friend of mine, Carel van der Merwe, who had recently published his debut novel, *No Man’s Land,* (which had received favourable reviews) and who felt that Petra should have more interiority – at least in the sections before the baby dies. When I used Hemingway’s Hills

and of course Raymond Carver's short stories as examples of successful objective POVs, he answered as follows:

> *The objective POV works fine in a short story that is concerned with a single incident, as in Hemingway's Hills. Here there is no concern with character development over a period of time…A character driven novel aims to show the development of a character or characters over a period of time. I think it is a nigh impossible task to illustrate this just by using the objective POV, even though it is a noble ambition. There are so many complex factors at play in the psyches of characters over time – I cannot see how you can express the full range of human emotion in this way. Can you point me to one character driven novel dealing with deep emotions such as Petra's that takes place over a period of time where this has been successfully achieved?'*

I had to accede that besides Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogies (1993, 1994, 1998) I did not know of any.

Does that mean that the objective POV can only be effective in a short story, or a novella at the maximum? Can it only keep a reader's interest for a shorter piece of work? Is it true that in a novel it would become boring and lose its effect?

I think it makes for exciting, rather than dull, reading. The reader has to access himself to access the character. It's not necessarily relaxing reading, but it adds a

different dimension to reading. The character of the objective POV writer has to be as well developed as the character of the third person limited POV writer, but the objective writer has to find other ways to show his character. In fact, it takes the dictum of "show, don't tell" to it's fullest. The writer does not have the privilege to *tell* the reader what motivates his character; he has to *show* the reader. In the third person limited POV we see the action, then whoops, we're conveniently in the mind of the character, and then we see the action again. It's as if the author says to the reader: "Do you *get* why the character just did this or that?" Chekhov, in a letter on the subject of literary style said:

> *Best of all is it to avoid depicting the hero's state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero's actions.'* (Quoted by Francine Prose in an essay, *Learning from Chekhov*. Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001, p 55)

Whether my work is too long to sustain an objective POV (it is short, falling somewhere between a novel and a novella), or whether it uses the objective POV effectively enough, is a moot point, and something I will have to address in further revisions.

David Madden said in his essay, *Point of View:*

> *The reader must feel that the point of view through which all elements reach him is the inevitable one for this story...The point of view you employ should express something in itself – it should not seem to the reader to have been arbitrarily chosen, or chosen as the easiest one for*

> *you to use. Your choice should be, in every way, so effective that the reader feels it is the only possible choice, the inevitable choice.*
> (Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p249-263)

Of course, the test in the end is whether the book worked or not - the author is not around to defend his choices, noble as they may be.

SYMBOLISM

Wikipedia describes symbolism in literature:

> *In literature, "symbolism" may refer to the use of abstract concepts, as a way to obfuscate any literal interpretation, or to allow for the broader applicability of the prose to meanings beyond what may be literally described. Many writers - in fact, most or all authors of fiction - make the symbolic use of concepts and objects as rhetorical devices central to the meaning of their works. Brielle Gibson and James Joyce, for example, used symbolism extensively, to represent themes that applied to greater contexts in their contemporary politics and society.*
> (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism#Literature#Literature).

There are a variety of literary devices that writers employ to add depth to their work. This may range from the use of similes or metaphors, used simply to describe an object more clearly and creatively, to the use of the extended

metaphor, a suggestive connotation, that becomes representative - a symbol of - a character or an emotion.

> *Good description is symbolic not because the writer plants symbols in it but because, by working in the proper way, he forces symbols still largely mysterious to him up into his conscious mind where, little by little as his fiction progresses, he can work with them and finally understand them.* (Hills, Rust. 2000. p30)

One of the means by which I could develop my protagonist within the objective POV (other than through her actions and speech) was through symbolism. By that I don't mean that I consciously chose certain symbols, instead the symbols chose my character. To say this might come across as ingenious; something I say to make me sound more artistic than I am, so let me try to explain myself.

Symbols are not the exclusive domain of writers. We all, in our normal lives, live with symbols. One of the most common (and therefore also the most clichéd) symbols used in writing is weather. The reason it is so often used to symbolise feelings, or states of affairs, is exactly because we all know how our moods are affected by and reflected in the weather. When we are depressed, a rainy day may compound or confirm that feeling of gloom. When we are upbeat, a rainy day may feel refreshing; we might see it as renewal, a chance to do something interesting indoors.

Writing is very close to acting. I believe that when one writes one has to *become* the character one is writing about. This does not only mean the main protagonists, but also the minor characters. One should not sit at the keyboard as an author writing *about* someone. An author is his own one-man play. Paul Johnson said this about Dickens in a *The Spectator* article:

> *He writes in a letter of being 'in a frenzy of Copperfield'. And he would jump up from his chair to pull faces in the looking-glass, then sit down again quickly to describe them in words, to breathe life into one of his characters.*
>
> (The Spectator, 1 September 2007, p23).

There were times when I found it difficult to become my character, and I would suggest that those sections will be the weaker ones in the novel.

The reason I mention this here is because, once you become the character, you will see what the character sees and do what the character does. Our lives are filled with patterns; we notice the same type of things and we do the same type of things over and over. Those things become symbols of who we are; think for instance how cartoonists find that *something* that symbolises their subject and use it as a means of characterisation. As Flannery O'Connor says:

> *In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself, and when this happens they become symbolic in the way they work…of course this is never stated…*[the reader] *makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that*

he makes the connection, but the connection is there nevertheless and it has its effect on him.

(Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p16)

There were a number of symbols in my novel. Some of them I used only once, because they were specific to a scene and not part of Petra's overall consciousness: the Christmas tree, for instance. But others were repeated because they were an integral part of who Petra was: animals - the killing, eating and recreation of them; the walk-in fridge; the eyes; gardening and the garden.

An object cannot be used purely for the sake of being a symbol. O'Connor says this about using an object as a symbol:

It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface.'

(Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p16).

The symbol must also be *in character.* For instance, if a character knows nothing about and does not care for gardening, as far as the reader can see, it would be out of place to represent that character by using plants or gardening. It is not something which that specific character would notice, or relate to.

All the literary devices used in a novel must fit together harmoniously to create a coherent whole. As far as my writing is concerned, I would venture that the devices that I thought about and specifically contrived to enhance a scene are the

ones that don’t work, and that I will have to remove in future revisions. I will have to be strict with myself however, for even though I know they don’t work, they are my babies; the proof to myself of my own cleverness.

An example of this is perhaps where I describe the four bays of Clifton spooning each other with the rocks jutting out like vertebrae. I love the image, but it probably does not belong in this text. It jars because Petra, at that point of the novel, would not have noticed the bays in that way, and so it is out of character. I would go so far as to say that such similes or metaphors are dishonest. They are not coherent with the text and the careful reader will see the author intrude upon the text and the characters. Literary devices that are honest will evolve with the character and from within the character; without forethought. I would like my writing to be judged on those.

The symbolic role of animals in Still Life

Animals, dead and alive, play a large role in the novel, so I would like to discuss their use as symbols. Their appearance in the novel developed organically; I did not mean for them to be there as symbols. Instead, they appeared because animals, and their use to us as humans (as companions, food, sport, or decoration), has interested me for most of my life. I became a vegetarian in 1975 and have since then not eaten meat, fish or chicken.

In JM Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, the central character says in a lecture which she delivers on animal rights:

> *Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, live-stock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.*
> (Coetzee, J.M. 2004. p65). See also an article by John Lancaster called *A Will of His Own*; The New York Review of Books, November 17, 2005. Volume LII, no 18. p4.

This is indeed a view I was taught by my father at the age of ten – and although it has always been too fanatical for my blood, I do believe that people's attitudes towards animals reveal something about their characters.

In *Still Life*, I tried to use animals and the characters' attitudes towards them to help me develop my characters. To describe natural and man-made objects in a manner that endows them with human feelings, thoughts and sensations, is called the pathetic fallacy or anthropomorphic fallacy.

> *The term was coined by the critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) in his 1856 work Modern Painters, in which he wrote that the aim of the pathetic fallacy was "to signify any description of inanimate natural objects that ascribes to them human capabilities, sensations, and emotions." In the narrow sense intended by Ruskin, the pathetic fallacy is a scientific*

> *failing*[…]*Literary critics after Ruskin have generally not followed him in regarding the pathetic fallacy as an artistic mistake, instead assuming that attribution of sentient, humanising traits to nature is a centrally human way of understanding the world, and that it does have a useful and important role in art and literature.*
> (http://en.wikipedia.org//Pathetic_fallacy).

I use the pathetic fallacy on a number of occasions - most extensively when Petra gardens: the creeper's flowers wave from the gutters, and the plant screeches when she cuts it, and when she burns the cuttings, the plants sigh and moan. Through the pathetic fallacy I transfer Petra's emotions onto the plants. This has a dual function: it is less sentimental and hysterical than it would have been if Petra were to screech and moan (she is incapable of such emotion anyway), and there is irony in the way that she inflicts the same pain onto the plants which she ostensibly wants to nurture through gardening. She is doing unto her garden as was done unto her.

My use of animals in *Still Life* is not, however, an example of the pathetic fallacy: I did not give my animals human capabilities, but instead stripped the consciousness of my protagonist of humanness, of inner reflection, and used animals and her relation to them to reinstate such inner complexity for the reader. Petra's human characteristics are portrayed via the animals and other inanimate objects around her.

I will touch on a few examples. As Petra cooks her meals, she struggles with the turmoil within herself. In the beginning of the book she cooks a risotto, with which she is fully involved, adding wine to the pot and sweating over it. But as she becomes more desolate, so she cooks more carnivorous meals, and they fail: nobody eats the oxtail, the ham is stolen from her by her dog (her surrogate companion) before she can add it to the pot, and when she cooks the guinea-fowls her husband had shot, she comes to the realisation that she, just like the bones she discards, is of no use to anybody.

In the crayfish scene, I tried to hint at some inner light when she questions the cruelty of the crayfish tank. On the surface she is blunted, but it is indeed her companions, who do not question the morality of eating a crayfish alive, who are blunted. My comment here is not so much on her seemingly cruel dinner friends, but rather to allude to *some* inner awakening within her. It is shortly after this meal that she will contact Ruan.

Ruan is a taxidermist – a trade that holds strong connotations of the visceral. Petra does not want to go to the taxidermist, yet it is here that she sees the physical evidence of love (the Christmas tree) that her own home lacks. She also discovers that, while on the surface it is an off-putting trade, it has some beauty to it. She feels a connection with Ruan, who recreates animals (beautifies them, in the same way that she as a beautician beautifies people), while she feels very distant from Rupert, who views animals as object for him to enjoy; for hunting and eating.

I tried to avoid the usual stereotyping around taxidermists and hunters, animals and meat. So Ruan is a vegetarian, and Rupert is in fact a loving, though emotionally distant, husband. Although Petra questions the crayfish' fate, she cooks up meaty dishes (in an attempt to create a 'normal' home.)

THE ENDING

John Mullan in a review of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* said:

> *The ending of a novel is often where it seems most artificial. Characters are rewarded or punished; problems, happily or unhappily, solved*[…]*A short story does not have to answer the questions it raises; instead, it can be an episode snatched from life, its ending explicitly provisional.*
> (http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1322148,00.html#article_continue).

The idea that a novel has to be resolved at the end is also forwarded by Rust Hills:

> *After having spent so long with the characters, the reader of a novel*[...] *is not adverse to a long "afterward" or "conclusion"*[…]*The contemporary novel*[…]*doesn't go in for this much, but one feels somehow that it should*[…]*the reader feels he has a right to know the outcome in full, the details of what happened to them finally. One resents a novel ending with just a suggestion of the outcome.*
> (Hills, Rust. 2000. p106-107)

Although I knew what event would lead to the end of the novel (Marili's death), I had not, at the time of starting the final chapter, worked out exactly *how* it would end. It's been suggested to me that the structure of the novel (and of Petra's development) is circular; that we end where we began. But I think the structure (and Petra's development) is better represented by a spiral. Although the death at the end mirrors the death in the beginning, it is not another death of a child, but the more natural passing away of an ageing parent. Likewise, even though Petra's character does not develop in a straight line - she does not add up experiences and learn from them and move on – she also does not remain completely unchanged by her experiences, as a circle would suggest; instead, there is a slight shift in her as she is confronted with her mother's death and becomes involved with the subsequent funeral arrangements.

Since my novel is character driven, rather than a plot driven, it could not have a final and clear resolution. Francine Prose quotes from Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on Chekhov.

> *The story does not really end, for as long as people are alive, there is no possible and definite conclusion to their troubles or hopes or dreams.*
> (Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p58)

An ending I admire and that has influenced my writing is that of Khaled Hosseini's (2003) *The Kite Runner,* where there is no summary, or certainty, of the characters' emotional destiny. Instead, there is only the smallest glimmer of hope for a new beginning. I was surprised, however, to find during a casual

internet search of *The Kite Runner* that the majority of people who posted comments on the book were dissatisfied by its ending. Many of them had hoped for a happy ending and wanted to know ‘what happens in the end’.

So, I expect some flak for my ending too. Petra cannot provide us with a happy ending; that would be out of character, and although I did not mean to deliberately obscure the ending, I wanted to leave it open-ended, because people are by nature ambiguous.

When Petra measures the shroud and says “I’ll take it” she takes on her mother’s death, the death of her child, and she accepts her own life. Of course it also alludes to depression and possible suicide. I do not think the reader has to choose any one of these explanations; all these possibilities can exist within one person, and I believe they do in Petra. It is not a happy ending, nor is it one without hope.

THE PROCESS

I am a very slow writer; of the plodding along variety. I have never experienced the joy of having words ‘spill’ from me, as I’m told happens to some writers. There were many mornings during the writing of *Still Life* that I sat down for three or four hours at a stretch and wrote only one paragraph. I would regard 250 words as a good morning and 500 words as exceptional.

Rather than pointing to the obsessive nature of my personality, I prefer to think that my slow writing is due to the fact that English is my second language. I was brought up and educated in Afrikaans, although I've always worked in English; first as a journalist at the Financial Mail and then as a stockbroker. Although my English is adequate enough, I don't have the lexicon, or the depth of idiom, that I might have had if English were my mother tongue.

My writing, I have been told, is sparse, stripped, or minimalist. Although this obviously is a result of *what* I choose to express - which is a conscious decision I make depending on my subject - it is also a result of *how* I express it. I write short, simple words and short, simple sentences, mostly, I suspect, because I can't write in English in any other way. Why then do I add to the anguish of writing by choosing a language I am not proficient at?

In a European Commission internet essay on second-language authors, Anthony Gardner says that most authors adopt another language as a conscious response to the possibilities it offers as a means of expression, and a way of redefining their relationship with their own country.

It was not so for me. Afrikaans offers me as many possibilities of expression (if not more) as English does, and there is a growing demand for Afrikaans authors in South Africa. Carel van der Merwe (2007), author of *No Man's Land*, was requested by his publisher to translate his work into Afrikaans so that it could be published simultaneously with the English version he had originally written. Prof

Etienne van Heerden advised me to write in Afrikaans, as the publication possibilities were so much greater. An author who had been published, and well received, in Afrikaans had a better chance of becoming published in English, he said.

My choice to write in English was influenced by the fact that I lived in America for one year, and it was during that year that I started to write fiction. Gardner also says:

> *In other cases,* [of second-language authors] *the decision to switch languages is purely pragmatic. Asked recently why he chose to write in French, Andrei Makine, the Russian writer who astonished the literary Establishment by winning the Prix Goncourt, replied simply, 'I live and publish in France: the choice of writing in French is therefore quite logical.'*
>
> (http://www.europe.org.uk/index/-/id/219/)

I regard language first and foremost as a tool with which to communicate with other human beings. Afrikaans is a beautiful and expressive language, but it carries a tremendous amount of emotional baggage. Afrikaans authors are often called upon to reflect on their political past and their language's future. Their motives for writing in Afrikaans, and choosing certain plots, are often second-guessed within the political context of our times.

I do not feel a particular connection to the Afrikaner clan; the fact that I'm Afrikaans is a practical result of my mother being Afrikaans (my father is Danish and speaks very little Afrikaans at all). I do not speak a particularly beautiful Afrikaans - my language is filled with anglicisms – and so my writing will not really benefit from an artistic point of view. If ever I were to write in Afrikaans, it would be because the story needs to be told in Afrikaans. It would be a conscious choice I would make to forward my plot and characterisation – in much the same way as I would choose my point-of-view, or where to start the novel.

Probably the best known second-language author is Joseph Conrad who, at the age of 21, when he arrived in England, was able to speak only a few words of English. Within ten years he started writing Almayer's Folly and he went on to become one of the most respected writers in the language.

> *But according to Conrad's autobiography,* A Personal Record, *his ability to write in English was 'as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself.' Rather than choosing English, he continues, 'it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language…if I had not written in English, I would not have written at all.'* (http://www.europe.org.uk/index/-/id/219/)

Writing in English forces me to think about almost every word I use. I have constantly to look up synonyms (I could not write without the help of my Barbara Ann Kipfer (2000) *Flip Dictionary*). Because I cannot express myself in elaborate

sentences, I have to decide carefully what it is I want to describe, to ensure that my simple sentences carry the full meaning of what I'm trying to say. I read every sentence out loud to myself, until I am sure of the rhythm, and I will rewrite it until my tongue does not trip over the words. When I start a new day of writing, I will reread (out loud) everything I had written the day before, and iron out the mistakes that had slipped through; such as the inappropriate use of prepositions, split infinitives, and so on, so that by the time I finish a chapter, I have already revised it several times. I cannot move on with mistakes accumulating behind me, and by reading my work over and over I become clearer on what it is I am trying to say.

And so it is that writing in a language with which I'm not entirely comfortable has taught me good habits. Revision is not something that I do only at the end of my creative process; it is part of the process. To me it is as Jesse Lee Kercheval describes it:

> *The rhythm of revision is rather like marching: left brain, right brain, left brain, right brain. Your critical sense alternates with your creative sense. You assess the work with a cold eye, then reenter the creative world where all things are possible.*
>
> (Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p239)

If you would indulge me, I'd like to end by quoting from Lorrie Moore's essay *How to Become a Writer.*

> *First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age-say, fourteen. Early, crucial disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam and a husband who may be having an affair. She believes in wearing brown because it hides spots. She'll look briefly at your writing, then back up at you with a face blank as a donut. She'll say: "How about emptying the dishwasher?" Look away. Shove the forks in the fork drawer. Accidentally break one of the freebie gas station glasses. This is the required pain and suffering. This is only for starters.'*
>
> (Diogenes, Marvin; Moneyhun, Clyde. 2001. p41)

Upon reflecting on my work for this reflexive essay, I have become convinced that the novel is not complete. One writes often by the seat of one's pants, forging ahead on a wave of instinct. But now that I have been forced to verbalise what it was that I wanted to achieve with *Still Life* (the emotions that I wanted to express and how I could best express them have finally crystalised in my mind) I know that the sense of completion and euphoria I felt after writing the last word was premature. There is always the risk over-working a text, but I feel that true revision can start only now that I have taken a step back and looked at it from the outside in. And it will probably never feel complete – the 'truth' for the novel will

remain elusive; the closer I get, the further it will move away, just out of reach. And at some point I will have to stop and call a truce. But therein lies the drug and the joy of writing.

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