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THE CAUSE OF HELL AND OTHER STORIES

A novel by Rachel Solomon

As part of the requirement for a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts by Research in Creatrive Writing. submitted to the Faculty of Arts, School of Literature, Language and Media, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to four beloved people:

To my partner, Matthew, for helping me untangle that ball of wool.

To my friend, Michelle, for reading my first draft.

To my parents, Lyn and Vernon, for their love and support.

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"Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery."

— Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand

'Even in death man cannot escape his life. One's death is a product of one's life, a reflection of the way one has lived. And that, above all else, is the cause of my hell.'

- John Fowler, *The Cause of Hell*

FOREWORD

September 1970

I have never met John Fowler, but I know that he is one of the greatest writers that almost no-one has read. I received his unfinished manuscript for *The Cause of Hell* in the post one afternoon; it was sent to me by an anonymous person. (I note here that it is unfinished, because I want to make it clear that the book is as it was left by the author. No changes have been made to it.) The package did not have a return address or name and it came with a single piece of paper on which was written the words *Please publish*. I can only guess who may have sent it to me — perhaps it was his wife, Florence, or perhaps it was a university colleague who had a copy. It is impossible to know who sent it, except for the fact that it certainly wasn't sent by John Fowler himself. In February of this year, John Fowler, editor, poet, writer, killed himself. I do not know the reasons for doing this, but they can be guessed at assuming that the content of this book bears any resemblance to Fowler's own life.

While Fowler had previously had two collections of poetry published, this book is (presumably) the first time he ever delved into prose writing. He gained minor attention for his poetry, (and even less for his short stint as editor for *The Johannesburg Quarterly*), but I believe that it is his prose — this book — which shows his real artistry.

It has all the markings of great literature — naturally captivating prose, the seemingly effortless ability to penetrate through the humdrum of human life and expose the trauma of the human condition buried within and, most importantly, it contains an inescapable sadness. Fowler's genius is different to those famous writers who have made palatable the manic, bipolar writing frenzies (think Jack Kerouac's On the Road): Fowler's genius is slow, concentrated, methodical. *The Cause of Hell* was fifteen years in the making, fifteen years that Fowler spent writing, editing, rewriting and editing

again, his 600-page tome on death, sex and women, most particularly the mother character, around whom these obsessions with death, sex and women revolve.

When Fowler's mother became ill, he moved back to his hometown of Upington to oversee her care. When she eventually stabilised, she was moved into an assisted care home and Fowler married Florence (previously his mother's nurse) and the two moved to Florence's family home on a Dorper sheep farm in the small community of Dorperland. There Fowler spent his days in his study, meticulously piecing together his first attempt at fiction.

At the age of forty-six, John Fowler used a shotgun to take his own life. At the prime of his writing life — a published poet, editor and teacher and near the end of his most massive writing project — one can only guess at the amount of pain and anguish that would be enough to force someone to end his life and in so violent a fashion. It seems to hold true, then, that all great artists are tormented souls and I can't help but wonder whether his work becomes more valuable that he is no longer living. Were he still alive he might, as writers are want to do, write another book, publish another poem, edit another newspaper, thus making *The Cause of Hell* yet another comma in the sentence of his life, of the literary world, instead of the full-stop it is, the resounding period to end all periods.

I have wondered, too, if it was not Fowler himself who sent me a copy of his manuscript. Perhaps, in the hours before his death, he became afraid that the world would forget him — as it has with so many — and so he sent out a part of himself into the ether to be immortalised in print. And perhaps it was not only fear of being forgotten by the world— of being overwritten, overlooked — but a fear of forgetting himself. He had been a man with high ambitions and a clear career trajectory and yet a visit to his mother one year caused him to curl in on himself, to drop the multitudes of projects he had been pursuing simultaneously and obsess over one piece of work for close to two decades.

In this book he explores a suffocating relationship between his unnamed narrator and his mother — an obscenely religious woman who attempts to stifle any hint of sexual or creative energy in the narrator by convincing him that it was a mark of the devil — and how that relationship seems to manifest time and again with every woman

the narrator meets. What results from this is not an abstinence from sex or thinking about it, but an obsession with it. The ensuing guilt, shame and fear then become a slow-releasing poison that eat away at the narrator, destroying him from the inside. I know better than to confuse an author with his characters, but the similarities between Fowler and his unnamed man are so numerous that I confess to reading this book as semi-autobiographical. So little is known about John Fowler, that perhaps I have done so — made this confusion — precisely because I am so desperate to know more about him. It goes against all the rules of reading fiction, but I think that the words expressed in *The Cause of Hell* come straight from Fowler himself, as an expression of his inner turmoil.

And so, perhaps just before he took a shotgun to his own head, he had a sudden moment of clarity and was finally able to see how much of himself — the true Fowler — he had lost not only to his obsession over the physical task of completing his manuscript (Fowler was a perfectionist), but also his obsession with the unchangeable forces in his life. Perhaps, because of this, in a final, desperate moment to reclaim some part of himself, he sent me that manuscript. Perhaps he could not bear his life on all fronts to come to the same end — to disappear without truly have been known and so instead of allowing his manuscript to fester in his desk draw, he addressed it to me and dropped it into the mailbox.

I cannot think of a reason that Fowler would have chosen me to publish his work — as I mentioned, we had never met. When I received his manuscript, I had never heard of him and neither had most of the world. I aim to change that with the publication of this book. I believe with every fibre of my being that John Fowler deserves to go down with the literary greats. But you do not have to take my word for it; read and find out for yourself.

— *Linda Liebermann, September 1970*

THE POET OF PIGEON VALLEY

September 1975

School has just finished and Jonny Smarts and I are walking over to his house for the afternoon. Jonny's name is actually Roberto and his surname is not Smarts but Joubert. Jonny Smarts was given that name by his sister, Alexa, because she is a fan of irony.

I go over to Jonny's house often, but not more than three or four times a week. Johnny's father is bad tempered in general and would be naturally inclined to kick me out the house on a good day (he says I remind him of the weasel that used to gnaw holes in his grandmother's stockings). Since most of Mr Joubert's days are bad days, I have to be careful when I visit.

Mr Joubert is constantly embattled by his own behind; he is either constipated or incapacitated on the toilet with apocalyptic diarrhoea. I have learned not to visit on the days that Mr Joubert is constipated — usually Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays— since the buildup inside of him makes him more cantankerous than usual. Mr Joubert spends the rest of the week crying out on the toilet, pants down in relief, while from his asshole a hot sonata bursts forth. Mr Joubert is a fundamentally nicer person after a visit to the toilet, so these are the days I visit and sometimes on a Sunday when Mr Joubert is giving his asshole a rest and takes a nap on the couch.

It is really because of Alexa that I go over to Jonny's house at all, although I tell him I am there to help him with his Maths. Jonny is a good guy, but he is stupid. Sometimes people are too stupid to get on with, but Jonny is too stupid to dislike. He never does anything intolerable, but he does embarrass us sometimes— us being me and a few other guys at school. We are all poets in this group; except for Jonny. We meet most breaks and sometimes after school to read and discuss our poetry. Me and one of the guys even have plans to start our own poetry magazine, since there isn't one of real consequence around. And none of us see an inch of ankle. The girls are not keen on Jonny because he is too big and lumbering and they don't seem keen on poets at all. One or two of the other guys get a little, but that is because they don't volunteer to read out their poetry assignments in class. After I did that, one girl called me 'faggy' and offered to lend me some of her tampons. Well, that didn't bother me. Simply more material. Now she is the central focus of a poem entitled 'The Buck-Toothed Bint of the Back Row.'

As we walk, Jonny is telling me about the beating he got the time his dad caught him trying to mark the washing line post after the dog had just pissed there. I've heard it five times already, but I let him carry on. Jonny is a good guy, but he is a stupid guy. When he talks it's like the words are tipped out by accident and every sentence is punctuated with a puzzled pause, as if he has to take the time to work out how the words got into his mouth in the first place. That and the fact that he is a serious mouth breather — taking short, shallow breaths in through his nose and then exhaling them with a wet, rattling sound through his fleshy lips — means that it takes Jonny a long time to finish stories. I like this about Jonny's company; it gives me the time to think my thoughts without being hassled for a response like I am by the other guys and teachers at school. By the time we reach his gate he is only now at the part where he pisses on the washing line.

'And then your dad shows up and marches you to the bathroom with your Wilson hanging out.'

'Have I told you this before?'

'Only once. Traumatic stuff.'

Besides our mutual ability to repulse females, Jonny and I have nothing in common. He is a massive hulk of pale flesh and muscle with a generally glazed look across his face and a slackness about the mouth. His lips are wet and pink while the skin around his nose is dry and flakes onto his shirt. I have to remind him to dust himself off every so often and we both watch the skin flakes fall and then get caught in the air. Then there's me. I am about half Johnny's size, skinny and dark. I have toothpick arms and legs and a concave chest. I think this is because my mother smoked all through her pregnancy. Even now Noelene jokes that I have an ashtray between my shoulders. Sometimes she pretends to put a cigarette out on me. When I flinch she laughs and calls me sensitive. I know I am sensitive, because I am a poet. I don't pay much mind to her. She is a complete gin-head and she'll wish she had read my poems when she had the chance, before I am published and have started a new movement.

*

Me and Jonny make an unlikely pairing. He obeys me completely; he is like a sweet, massive dog. His sister Alexa is also extremely ripe. When we get to the Joubert house, Jonny discovers he has forgotten his keys at school. I tell him they don't call him Jonny Smarts for nothing, but he doesn't get it. Anyway, who should open up for us, but Alexa herself. She is wearing a mini-skirt and a turtle-neck sweater, both tight and black. Her hair is sleek and dark around her ears like wet tar. Her green eyes are lined in black and her lips are red. She's sophisticated. Mature. A university student. Nothing like those Musgrave girls with their peach-fuzz legs.

While I start to develop a problem in my pants just looking at her, she looks like she has just seen a couple of dogs shits walk through the door. Jonny and Alexa don't greet each other, but I feel there is some kind of warmth between them in any-case. Me, though; Alexa

looks right into me with wolf eyes. Eyes like a hound straight out of the Siberian fucking wasteland. Eyes that look like all they have seen for a long while has been ice and desolation and more ice. I feel made of glass, like her gaze could shatter me. Jonny tries to tell her that we need to do homework in the kitchen, but she informs him that this is where she is painting her nails and that we can sod off. She sits back down at the table with a cup of black coffee. Like always, I find it hard to look away from her, but I also know that looking too long at Alexa makes her violent and so I have to play it cool by following Jonny into the lounge.

Sitting on the couch is Mr Joubert. He is superbly fat and is in his usual garb; a short-sleeved, blue t-shirt and khaki short-shorts. He's leaning back with his hands behind his head, watching the rugby highlights over his stomach. He does not look to be in trouble with his ass today. In fact he looks unusually relaxed with his feet up on the coffee table.

'Dad,' Jonny says, pointing at the coffee table. Mr Joubert raises his fleshy hand and we have to just stand around waiting. The heavy floral curtains and the over-abundant doilies make me feel slightly dizzy and so I sit down on an equally floral couch. It seems that this action in the corner of his eye causes Mr Joubert to notice me.

He grunts and rolls his eyes, 'Oh, Christ.'

But he has not called me a stinking gypsy nomad and so I think I am potentially in the clear and not likely to be kicked out any time soon.

'Dad,' Jonny tries again. 'We have to do our homework.'

Mr Joubert points at the TV and says, 'Rugby.' And sure enough a new match starts on the TV almost like he conjured it there. Jonny tries again to protest — which I think is most unwise, but not as unwise as it is for me to talk to Mr Joubert at all, so I keep my mouth shut — and Mr Joubert throws the remote at Jonny and screams at us to get out. The Jouberts have only a small house and very little table space since they don't appear to do much writing or reading. So really the only place where Jonny and I can sit down together at a table is on the

second floor at the chest of drawers in the passageway between all the bedrooms. We sit down at the chest of drawers, Jonny hulking over the surface like a giant in a miniature house and me sitting off to the side, peering over the top like a small kid.

At school, our Maths class is split into different levels, so when I go off to my C-stream classroom near the library, Jonny goes down to the Sports Ed office where they do the E-stream lessons. Looking through Jonny's incomplete class exercise books and the number of homework exercises he has yet to hand in to the teacher, plus the quality of what little equation work does exist — well, it's even worse than I feared. I suggest we start with the worksheets due tomorrow, so at least he doesn't fall even further behind. After only five minutes, though, it becomes clear that Jonny doesn't know the first thing about a sin graph and thinks that BODMAS is the name of the Maths teacher.

I shake my head and cry. 'Jonny boy, we're gonna have to go back to the beginning!'

So we go all the way back. We go through the very basics of algebra for a good few hours and by the time Jonny has come to grips with the fact that sometimes letters can be numbers, but only in Maths, Jonny is mentally fried and my patience has completely exhausted itself.

As Jonny goes over his equations, I am stuck thinking about doilies. Doily hanging over the TV, doily on the coffee table and on the pedestals, doily on the chest of drawers, doily under the magazine stack. Although I can write a poem at the drop of a hat about almost anything and you can bet it will be good quality, I am quite surprised to feel a poem being brought on by the Joubert's lounge decor. The closed windows, the floral couches, like the inside of a coffin: The stifling stuffiness. No! I catch myself. No alliteration! Not ever! I shudder as I think what the other guys would say if they knew I had flirted with alliteration, even if briefly. It was only a month ago, after all, that I had met with the other guys — Barry, Matthew, Michael and D2, as we call him, because he is the second David to join the group — and we had decided

unanimously that we would not tolerate alliteration and assonance was even worse. Amateur stuff, we had agreed. I am by no means an amateur and so the this involuntary inclination has me quite shaken.

*

There is some hustling and bustling coming from the nearest room — Mrs Joubert's room — but I am so involved with Jonny I don't really take any notice of it. We pack our books away and the commotion becomes a lot more apparent. As we are about to go back downstairs, the door to Mrs Joubert's bedroom opens and out comes that wrinkled old carrot, this time wearing what looks to be a tutu. Upon second glance, I see that it is not a tutu, but a pink, sequinned mini-skirt and a pink strappy top in which a pair of dog's eyes droop sadly at me, wanting to be petted.

Mrs Joubert squeals and pulls me into a hug, pressing her sagging chest into me and shaking me so that I can feel every lump and bump through my clothes. It is truly awful. But I know that if I can get through it I will be fed like a favourite son and I will get to see Alexa again. Mrs Joubert tells me that we are having steak for dinner and asks me to get the sharp knives out of the bottom drawer of the cabinet in the dining room. Then she kisses me on the cheek and dances down the stairs, twinkling her fingers at me over her shoulders.

In the dining room, Alexa is reading magazines at the table and Mrs Joubert is setting the places around her, careful not to her.

'Knives in the cabinet, darling,' Mrs Joubert says, pointing behind me.

I glimpse Mr Joubert through the lounge doors as I walk towards the cabinet. He is still engrossed in the TV. He has pulled his enormous stomach up towards his chest with one hand, cradling it like a baby and is wiping the forefinger of his other hand along the exposed, sweaty red seam. The sight is hard to look away from.

Next to the base of the staircase is a large cabinet that I have always thought looks very old and impressive. Certainly nothing like anything in my mother's flat, which is full of hand-me-downs and charity shop purchases. There are two bottom drawers to the cabinet. I open the right one first and find the knives I am looking for. I take out five. Before straightening up I feel an impulse to open the drawer on the left, for no particular reason. Inside it is a stack of papers, some electricity bills. Underneath all of that is a book. I take it out, turning it over in my hand as I go to dump the knives on the dining room table. It is an interesting little book. Not very tall but plenty thick and weighty too. It has a bright orange cover with a little black illustration of a coffin on the front, underneath which is the title, *The Cause of Hell*. It is written by someone named John Fowler. The name isn't familiar, which is strange since most poets' and authors' names are familiar to me even if I haven't read them.

I read the back of the book. Just some quotes from other writers about the tragedy of his genius. I read the publisher's page. *First published by Liebermann Press House.* I skim the foreword — written by the head of the publishing house — and focus on the first page of the narrative. I believe the first line of the first page is all you need to know if the book is readable or not. By the words written in the first line of the first page, I believe this book to be not only readable, but potentially highly readable.

The man who thinks the thoughts in this book is dead.

I snap the book shut and put it in the inside pocket of my school blazer, which causes the left side of my body to hang low and to even it out I have to slip one of Mr Joubert's beers into my right inner pocket. I look like I am afflicted by a particularly nasty bit of gravity, but at least I am not lopsided. The spot where Alexa had been sitting at the dinner table is empty. Her coffee mug has a mouthful of cold black liquid left in it. I steal a sip, trying to align my

lips perfectly with the crusted lipstick on the rim. I expect to feel a sensual swill down my oesophagus and into my belly, leaking down into my loins, but all I get is cold and bitter liquid in my mouth and the taste of strawberry and play-dough. When I ask Jonny where Alexa has gone he tells me she has gone on a date with her boyfriend, Ian.

Ian. I know the man. He is a plumber. I hate plumbers. Disgusting, uncivilised people. No moral codes. We discuss plumbers often in our poetry group, which we have named the Pigeon Valley Poets, since we like to meet in the dark, lush recesses of the Pigeon Valley Park around the corner from the school. D2 also hates plumbers and Michael hates electricians, but Barry doesn't mind either and only Matthew actively likes them. I feel very sad that Alexa is not here. I had been planning to tell the story of how I had received detention for correcting the teacher's butchered recitation of a Blake poem, but now there is no point.

I've seen more of Alexa than I expected to — that gorgeous stomach! — but I can't help feeling so disappointed and empty I could cry. It's not the boyfriends; I wouldn't expect anything less from such a beauty. No, it's just that she is gone. That she's left. I feel her absence like I was hit in the stomach — No, like I was punched a few hours ago and am left with this swelling ache that will never subside, to be aware of it at every moment of my life; sitting, walking, laughing. I will have to learn to live with this hurt, I know there can be no healing from it. I want nothing more than to curl up in my room in my mother's flat, to listen to my mother get steadily drunker at the kitchen table, to smell the month-old ash trays littered around the place — really make my bed in this cold, lonely life of without, of never, that I feel swelling in the very centre of my being, spreading slowly outwards. My head is foggy and I am only vaguely aware that Jonny is speaking to me, but his words make no sense. They are wet and mashed and all I can feel is that she is gone. A door slams somewhere in the Joubert house. I blink.

I know Alexa. If she has gone out, she will probably be back in the middle of supper. She knows that it will upset her mother. I have managed to console myself. The coldness recedes from my limbs and is replaced with sweet buttery warmth. My cheeks are burning and again I feel like I could cry, but this time from happiness.

I sit down and Mrs Joubert pours me a glass of wine from the ice bucket on the table.

She winks at me and says, 'Our secret?'

I wink back, 'Of course.'

*

On the one hand I am a bit jealous of Alexa. Mrs Joubert treats me like her favourite son and calls me handsome and puts her hand on my shoulder and my leg and she has also pinched my ass once or twice when I've been standing in the kitchen telling her about my poetry. But when Alexa gets home, all that stops and then it's like I don't exist. Alexa can have whatever she wants — Mrs Joubert runs herself silly making sure Alexa has whatever she wants — but I have to make my own juice and sandwiches and cut my own mangoes. On the other hand, when Alexa gets home it is like an electric surge is moving through the house — deadly and selfish — and this gets me going like there is fire in every sinew in my body, burning me up with this hot, determined energy to do *something*. Usually after seeing Alexa it is a tossup between writing a poem or masturbating.

*

In the middle of the table is a huge dish of steak strips, a loaf of garlic bread, roast butternut, broccoli and buttered peas, buttered potatoes and mashed potatoes and a huge green salad. Sitting across from me, Jonny has already dished up two huge servings of everything. We all eat in silence, except Mrs Joubert who blathers on about a host of trivial things, like her plans to redecorate the lounge. I zone in and out, unable to take my eyes off the empty chair

next to Jonny, where Alexa should be sitting. I eat slowly so that when she returns, I have reason to stick around. Every now and then I sense that Mrs Joubert is waiting for me to say something, so I go with, 'Oh, really?' and that seems to work fine because then she's off again, talking about how when she was a teenager all she wanted was a purple waterbed.

A loud, wet fart rips through the evening and Mr Joubert's face is washed of all colour. I have never seen a look of such pure terror before. He leaps up from the table, kicking his chair out behind him, grabs his ass and runs like a crab with a gimp leg to the downstairs bathroom. The rest of the evening plays out to the tune of Mr Joubert's cries as his insides explode into the toilet.

Mrs Joubert is sloshed now and doesn't take any notice of her husband's animal screams. She continues to paw and knead at me like a sad old cat. Somehow my wine glass never empties. I imagine the red liquid swishing around in my belly, keeping all the roast chicken and mashed potatoes afloat. Mrs Joubert brushes my hair over my ears, her talons scraping against the cartilage with a papery sound.

'You look so handsome in your blazer. So smart. Not like all the other big lugs, running around with a ball in their hands and nothing in their noggins.'

I tap my head and say, 'The greatest muscle in the body. But I suppose we're all born with different gifts.'

'Very wise, darling, very wise.'

At that moment, Alexa walks in the front door. She is wearing new clothes; a pair of high-waisted jeans, a green shirt that shows off her shoulders and a pair of brown boots.

Mrs Joubert leaps up from the table. 'Oh, hello darling! You look gorgeous! Did you have fun?'

Alexa swings her shopping bags onto the kitchen counter and eyes Mrs Joubert. 'Mum, are you wearing the clothes I had when I was fifteen?'

Mrs Joubert pats her skirt down. 'Well, I thought since you were throwing them away anyway... Well, don't you think they look nice on me?' Mrs Joubert twirls.

Alexa doesn't respond and sits down with a magazine from her shopping bag.

'You keep such terrible magazines in the house. I just had to go and get some Vogues and some Cosmos at the mall. The thought of coming back here and reading another Home and Garden made me practically ill.'

'Oh, yes, I know. I've got to get some new subscriptions. But that's why you're here, darling, you help me with all these things,' Mrs Joubert giggles and waits for Alexa to smile but she doesn't. 'Well, you just give me the list of the magazines you'd like and I'll make sure to get them.'

Silence.

'Hungry, darling?'

Alexa surveys the table. 'God, mum. How much oil do you cook with?'

'Too much, I know darling. Thank God for you, you keep me on track. What do you want, darling? I'll make whatever you want. A few celery sticks? I think we have peanut butter.'

'No, I've gone off my appetite just looking at this. Just make me some coffee, I'm exhausted.'

'Of course darling. You do look a bit drained. Long day?'

'The mall was an absolute nightmare. Just packed with fatties. I swear, we were almost steamrolled in the foodcourt.'

Mrs Joubert sets a cup of instant black coffee down in front of Alexa. 'Well, maybe all that walking is good for them!'

Alexa shrugs.

'Well, who all was there, darling?' Mrs Joubert keeps trying.

'The usual.' Alexa keeps flicking, but then adds, 'Dennis and Tracey are back together.'

'Oh my God, really?' Mrs Joubert leans forward and squeezes Alexa's wrist. 'What happened? Didn't he cheat with that girl, Nicole? Oh, Tracey must be out of her mind!'

Alexa flings her off crossly, 'Jesus, mother. You're such a cheap gossip. It's none of your business, you know.'

Mrs Joubert sits back in her chair quietly. Her painted face looks like it is melting. I feel sad for her, but I also feel Alexa's disgust.

'Yes, of course,' Mrs Joubert says in a soft, weak voice. 'Well, darling, I am off to bed I think. I've had a few glasses of wine and I'm feeling quite fuzzy now.' Mrs Joubert gets up and pushes some stray hairs out of her face. 'Darling, could I get my credit card back?'

'I'm going out with Ian again tomorrow. I need it,' Alexa says, still looking down at her magazine.

'Ok, sweetheart. Have fun. And don't worry about tidying up or anything, the maid will be in tomorrow.'

'Wouldn't dream of it, mother,' Alexa says.

Mrs Joubert goes up the stairs as if she is stepping on cotton wool and Alexa lights a cigarette right there in the dining room.

God she is fantastic.

She makes me think of silver and copper, shiny metallics. She glows with something completely her own.

She's monstrous, she's horrific.

The kitchen clock ticks through the evening as Alexa smokes and flicks through her magazine, Jonny finishes off the whole chicken and goes off to bed, leaving just me and Alexa in complete silence. I could sit here all night, looking at her.

Picking up her box of cigarettes in the table (and ignoring the Camels in my pocket pressing into my thigh), I ask 'Can I bum one?'

She flicks her green eyes up at me under heavy eyelashes, then shrugs and says, 'Sure.'

(How many times have I masturbated in the mirror, imagining that my hand was her mouth and those green eyes were looking up at me from under my balls? How many poems have I written about her beauty? If she would give me the time, I would spend every minute reciting them to her.)

I light a smoke — menthol — and we smoke together quietly for a few minutes. This, I picture, is what being with Alexa would be like. Except I would be writing poetry and she would be reading a piece of great literature, not a Vogue. But we would be smoking and quietly together always.

I can't stop myself. The moment is too perfect. I blurt out a line from a poem I have written about her, called "And so Isis."

'What?' Alexa recoils in her chair.

'Looking at you inspires poetry, Alexa.' Besides the slight wobble in my voice, that came out just as I have practiced it at home.

Alexa laughs. 'Poetry, huh? What are you, gay or something?'

'I think I could make you happy. I see you. Your family doesn't see you. Your friends don't see you. But I do.'

Alexa puts her cigarette out in her mother's mashed potatoes. She walks round the back of me and slides her hands down my chest, over my pants and grabs my crotch hard. 'With this tiny thing?'

I'm hard as a rock now.

She laughs and walks over to the staircase, lighting a cigarette as she goes. Before she disappears at the top of the landing, she pauses and says, 'Go home, poetry boy,' with something in her voice that I feel was affection or maybe sympathy, but either way I feel warm and lonely at the same time — an oddly familiar feeling.

Alone now, I feel again as if I am in a museum or haunted house. The place has a discarded feel now — the TV is still blaring, the food is on the dinner table, Alexa's plate completely untouched — and I feel somehow as if being here now makes me guilty of something — like a crime was committed.

I push my chair in and shut the front door quietly behind me, trying to quieten my steps along the slate path so they don't sound so much like the footsteps of an intruder escaping. The walk home is long — about forty minutes — but I walk it often and I find it pleasant to walk alone at night.

*

The block of flats Noelene lives in is along a winding road, across from a retirement village. Normally there are prostitutes under the bus shelter outside the village, but tonight there look to be legitimate commuters waiting for the last bus to the outskirts of town. The guard hut is empty as usual. To fool any criminals around, I jiggle a key in the broken lock of the pedestrian gate, walk through and then do the same jiggling act to lock up. All the residents of the building do this when they enter or exit — they do this rather than get the lock fixed.

The whole third floor stinks of cigarettes. The flat is quiet, which is unusual. I feel relief as I close the door behind me. My plan for the night ahead is only starting to unfold in my mind — I will steal one of my mother's cigarettes from the carton under the sink, I will make myself a strong cup of hot chocolate and I will settle down into bed to read this John Fowler book — when the landline rings. Only one person calls this number, my mother's brother in Jo'burg, George. I answer quickly, not wanting him to wait. On the other end it is not George but Woogy, the bartender at the Keg and Weasel.

'She's out of it, kid. You've got to come pick her up.'

I can hear a woman shrieking in the background, some muffled laughter, dim cowboy music. I check the key basket, but unfortunately the keys to my mother's cream Toyota Corolla look back at me, present as anything. 'How'd she get there?' I ask.

'With Simon. Listen, she's causing a problem. Just come and get her.'

When I get to the Keg and Weasel, I can hear my mother's voice before I have even opened the door. She is shrieking at two men across a pool table, holding two cues above her head, stumbling out of the way every time one of the men tries to take them back.

'Come on, darlings,' my mother slurs, stepping from one foot to the other, shaking her hips. 'Come and get 'em.'

The men shake their heads, put their heads in their hands, tell her to quit messing around, tell her to give the pool cues back.

I watch the scene and don't want to approach. I don't want to admit I know her. But Woogy has noticed me arrive and he makes a face that says, You see? Do something!

Well, I don't know what to do. Noelene is not the type to listen to anybody when she doesn't want to, especially not her son and especially when she has been drinking.

'Mom,' I say, walking up to her. 'Come on, let's go.'

'Oh!' she shrieks with happiness and turns on me, dropping the pool cues. 'Look who it is! My baby!' And she covers me in kisses and hugs me tight. I think maybe she will listen if she is feeling this loving towards me, so I try again.

'Yes, it's me. Come on, Mom. Let's go.'

'Hold on, baby. These two were about to buy me a drink, weren't they?' She looks at the two pool players. They shrug at each other and one of them says sure, he wouldn't mind buying her a drink.

'Sit tight, get a coke or something. Mummy's gonna be a while,' says one of the guys and he hands me a few coins. I look down at the coins in my hand and then up to see Noelene moving towards the bar with the man's hand around her waist, her leather skirt hitching up around her thighs as she walks. I try to approach them again, but my mother's eyes go that certain shade of dark brown that means I should back off and wait till they change colour again. With nothing for it, I sit down in the corner of a bar and get a packet of chips and a Coke.

I watch as Noelene does a shot of tequila and then falls into the lap of the man next to her. Then for another three shots she kisses the three other men sitting at the bar. After that she stumbles off to the bathroom and the man at the bar laughs and points her out to his friends. I don't remember much else for a little while. I stare at the back wall at a gap between the slot machines, letting my mind go perfectly blank and trying not to notice what Noelene is doing. It happens that I have so perfectly perfected the art of the blank stare that I am late to notice the ripe lady who walks across my field of vision. Tight jeans and shirt and I don't need to know much else. My gaze is pulled by a powerful magnet and I can do nothing as my head moves, against my own will, to follow her across the room. My disobedient head cranes as she is obscured from my vision by the bar counter and then it is my disobedient body that gets up out of the chair to walk around the bar to get a better look.

The girl turns her head to look at me and I start thinking of something clever to say, but she is already laughing. Although I am known as a very funny guy, I am sure I haven't said anything yet. I look closer and see that the girl is not looking straight at me but somewhere beyond me, as if she can see through me. Just then I am hit in the back of the head with something large and heavy, with such force that I go flying forwards towards the bar and only just manage to stop my head smashing into the tabletop. Before I can turn around, a flurry of small fists collide against my head and shoulders and arms and then it is the handbag again, which I now recognise to be the first thing I was hit with.

'Disgusting pig!' my mother shrieks. 'Just! Like! Your! Father!'

She times every word with a blow to the upper body. Then she grabs me by my hair, drags me out the bar and into the car, forcing me into the passenger seat. She kicks the lever to slide the driver's seat forward so she can reach the controls and takes off out of the deserted parking lot with screeching tyres all the while screeching herself. As she runs three red lights and I cling to my seatbelt for dear life, Noelene lectures me on the evilness of men. She informs me that all we do is follow our cocks around and cock everything else up. She says that's what my father did and look where we are now — no money, no husband, no father and that little tramp got all of it just because her nipples didn't hang so low. She swerves to avoid another car and snakes between two pedestrians crossing the road in opposite directions, so that they leap out of the way and then shout and curse us until they are just specks in the rear view mirror. Noelene is still going when we get home and she carries on up the stairs and into the flat. I know at this point she doesn't need me there and so I leave her in the kitchen, yelling to herself in the kitchen as she pours a drink.

Now I am faced with a dilemma — to masturbate or write a poem. I have a lot of energy jammed up in my body — I have pretty much had an erection since I saw Alexa this afternoon. I could get some real work done on just the legs, but I have the stomach too. On the other hand, leaving the Joubert's house this evening, I was touched by a sense of monstrosity. Like I have just spent the evening in the company of a family of carnival freaks and I think a really good poem can come of that. Generally I approach poetry and masturbation the same way — I go over the material I have and string together a very sort of preliminary storyline. Then I just start at the beginning and work it all the way to the end, tweaking and twisting bits and pieces in whichever way feels right. And usually I pick the exercise I am going to do by seeing what moves first — my dick or my pen.

I close my eyes and think about the Joubert's house, rugby on TV, Mrs Joubert's hair, some legs, a stomach — no, no that is for later, another time, not now — potatoes with butter. A few good lines come to me — this is good, this is where it starts, this is how it goes, now to just relive the moments so I can work them in together. And then I remember fetching the steak knives from the cabinet downstairs and the book with the bright orange cover that blinked at me like cat's eyes at night.

I pull out the pinched Fowler book and start to read it under the red angle-poised lamp next to my bed. It had been a fifth birthday present from my father. At one time I loved everything red. As I read I find it strange that I should be enjoying prose so much. It's not that I don't read it — nay, every great poet must have in his arsenal a healthy dose of prose and fiction — it's just that only poetry has ever captivated me like this before. I read all through the night, until the birds start to chirp and my eyes can barely take it anymore. I fall into a brief and un-consenting sleep.

When I wake up it is nearly time for school and I get dressed without thinking. Noelene is asleep at the kitchen table, still clutching her gin bottle. I walk to school with my head bent down to read the open book in my hands. As I near the school gates, I make a decision. Instead of veering right, I go left onto a thin dirt trail that disappears into the forest. I make sure to go deeper into the forest than usual, so as not to run into the other Pigeon Valley Poets.

I spend the next week— a total of five school days, that first day having been a Monday — in Pigeon Valley Park, alternating between reading until I feel my eyes are close to shrivelling up like dried fruit and falling out of my head and masturbating until my dick is raw and peeling. When I think I am too tired to continue reading, when I can no longer keep my eyes open, I think about Alexa — those eyes, those legs, that stomach — and I am lit with new fire that burns in the pit of my stomach. Some moments this fire travels up to my head and I

can see clearly again to read. Other times it travels down to my balls and there is only one thing to do then.

*

The first few pages of Fowler's book don't have me much impressed. Sure, there was a good opening line but anybody can write a good opening line. Not just anybody can sustain that, though. The book is about a guy who kills himself and it starts at his funeral. He is something like a spirit or a ghost, hovering over the church and watching and listening to everyone talk about him. It's quite boring in the beginning. I have never been to a funeral, but I can say with fair certainty that it is pretty standard to talk about a dead guy at the dead guy's own funeral. So the mother is telling someone about what a weird kid her son was. I think maybe that is pretty strange at a person's funeral — aren't people supposed to be missing him? Talking about what a good guy he was? The dead guy's sisters aren't being very nice about him either. They're telling their friends how he used to sit outside their bedroom doors while they were busy with their boyfriends. Everyone else at the funeral — the maids, the policeman, the neighbours — they're all scheming about why the guy killed himself. Someone says it's because he was too much of an intellectual. Someone else says it's because his father left. Another one says it's because his mother blames him for his father leaving.

Just by those first few pages I am starting to get the idea that this guy had a lot of problems with his mother. And his sisters. And his father. It all feels vaguely familiar, although I myself don't have any sisters. In fact, Jonny and Alexa are the closest things I have to siblings. Still, I think if this was what this guy's life was like, I don't blame him for killing himself.

About halfway through the book I become a little perturbed at how similar the dead guy's life is to my own and I think that looking at who his mother is, the dead guy really had no chance in life. By the end of the book and the end of that week, I am convinced that John Fowler is the greatest writer that ever lived.

When I finally leave Pigeon Valley it is late on a Friday afternoon. I feel like a consider visiting the Jouberts, but dismiss it when I feel that familiar sensation burning through my chest and down my arms — I can feel a poem coming on. I walk back to my mother's flat, Fowler in hand, going over the lines of poetry as they come into my head. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a line of my own poetry and a line I am remembering from Fowler's book. Everything seems to have taken on the same sound, the same texture. It all tastes the same when I speak the words out loud.

Noelene is not at home, but I run to my bedroom and lock the door behind me just in case she comes back tonight. As I put pen to paper, the words that come out are not what I expected, not what I had been going over on the walk home. Usually I can write four or five poems in a sitting, but tonight I can only write one poem and it takes all the strength I can muster. I call it "Ashtray Chest." One of the lines had involves resting a lit cigarette in the grooves between my ribs. I sit back and read it, looking at the words on the page as if they are brand new to me. These new words are darker. Heavier. I feel that all the words I have written before this night belong to someone else, a child with no real world experience. In a frenzy I search through my room for any scrap of writing, any single line of poetry that was written before tonight and I destroy it. I pile the pages on my desk and one by one I set them on fire in the metal bin.

In the light of the burning paper, I say the words Fowler's man said before he hanged himself.

'De Novo.'

*

Monday morning has never felt so exciting. I could barely sleep thinking of how my life has changed since discovering Fowler's book. I feel like a man now. No more pretending. I don't have any more chest hairs and my testicles haven't descended any further, but I feel like

I have come back from a war with my soul and have emerged older and wiser. I have been debating all weekend whether or not to share Fowler with the other Poets. I feel he belongs to me and yet I cannot do the others the disservice of keeping him a secret. So I have prepared a reading for them to introduce them properly and we make a plan to meet at Pigeon Valley after school ends.

Jonny is not at school today, which I find strange since there is a big rugby game this afternoon and he one of the star players. I don't want to come across too queer, so I ask a classmate about his absence under the guise that Jonny has something of mine that I want to get back. The classmate — Helen with the fat ankles — tells me that Jonny hasn't been at school all week. This I find even stranger, since there is no way Mr Joubert would let Jonny skip a whole week's worth of rugby practice. I put Jonny out of my mind for the time being, for I have to prepare for my meeting with the Poets.

When I arrive in Pigeon Valley, they're all there waiting eagerly. It is known but not spoken that I am the leader of the group, so naturally they have not begun the meeting without me.

'Men,' I say as I stand in front of them. They regard me with suspicion, as I usually being the meetings by saying Poets. 'It is time for our humble group to advance to the next stage. We can no longer be a bunch of children sitting around and reading poems about flowers to each other. I have had an awakening over the weekend and I have become a man. I want to bring you all to this new place with me, where we will *dive into the depths of our own souls and write about what we see in those hellish places*.' I recite Fowler's line from memory, but it does not stir them.

'What?' D2 says, as the others shrug and look confused.

'We have to make a decision.' I sit down on a rock and pull out Fowler's book. 'Are we going to remain boys who write poetry, or men who face the truth head-on?'

There is more silence as they stare without comprehension.

'The name of this book is *The Cause of Hell* and the man who wrote it is John Fowler,' I hold the book up and show it to them. 'Remember this, because from now on we study nothing but Fowler. As far as we are concerned, he is a god and only he can take us from boy poets to men of truth. Now listen.'

I read to them from Fowler's book, propped open on my knee, as the soon-to-be-men stare at me like children at a play group.

The mother is giving birth to the son. It's a painful, near 48-hour delivery, and almost everything that can go wrong, does. I come out the wrong way round, her umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, (later, I would tell my psychologist that this was the first time she had tried to kill me), she shat herself, and so on and so on. She hates me as soon as she sees my little dick pop out of her. She had prepared herself for a girl, with her genetics, her talent, how could she birth anything other than a pageant princess? But here I am, blue and swollen and crying for her, clawing at her breast, but she finds me disgusting. She won't hold me. The father fell in love with someone younger and prettier than her. And after all that suffering, the terrible heartbreak and loss, the physical and emotional pain, this is what comes out of her. She hates me. I look like my father. From a young age she teaches me that looking at women is evil, disgusting, a trait for the weak. She teaches me that when a man looks at a woman with lust, it is the devil controlling him, that it is not natural. She tells me that to look at a woman and picture her naked is no different to picturing my mother naked, and do I want to do that? No, I answer truthfully. While I am a child, all of this makes perfect sense to me. I cannot imagine ever wanting to picture a woman naked, what for? There are much more interesting things to imagine, like the inner-workings of an aeroplane engine or what my dad smelled like. But as I get older, this becomes more complicated and when I develop a crush on Sarah from

my Maths class, I cry every night and feel as if I am being burned alive. I have no choice but to masturbate the frustration away, all the while crying and thinking of my mother, asleep with rollers in her hair in the next room.

I finish reading and close the book. 'Each of you will get this book for one week. I was able to read it more than twice in that time, so a week should be perfectly fine for all of you to read it at least once. Once the first man has finished it, he will hand it to the next and give us a review of his reading. Who wants to go first?'

No one puts up his hand.

'It's not even poetry,' D2 says, his nose curling like he has smelled something bad.

'Of course it's — ' I say, but Michael interrupts me.

'That's prose if ever I heard it.'

'Listen, you small-minded weasels. It's not about poetry or prose, it's about *truth*. This may be prose writing but all truth is poetry. After reading this book I wrote the greatest poem I may ever write. Don't you understand?'

'Well who is this guy anyway?' Larry wants to know.

'His name is John Fowler,' I repeat, trying to keep my patience. 'He is a one of the most famous writers of our time.'

'I've never seen him in the library before and I've been through all the F's,' Larry says.

This is a good point and something I have not considered until now. I have not seen Fowler's name anywhere except for inside of Mrs Joubert's cabinet, but I don't want to seem unknowledgeable now.

'Do you really think the school would keep a book like this on its shelves? They want to keep us children. Never-Men. Don't you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Did anyone understand the passage I read?'

'Not really,' Matthew says. I am not surprised by this, as he is the worst poet in our group after Jonny who doesn't even write poetry. 'Why is he wanking over his mom?'

'He's not — ' The other guys start to laugh — guffawing idiots.

'Enough!' I yell and stand up. 'There will be no more meetings of the Pigeon Valley Poets until every one of you has read this book and understands the changes that have to be made.'

'I thought we were the Pigeon Valley Men now,' D2 says and they all fall about.

'Good day!' I stomp off. I did not expect this idiocy from them. I thought I might have to explain a few metaphors here and there, maybe help them understand the pains of manhood, but I did not think they would have reacted like this. Especially D2, as he is the second best poet in the group after me. I feel particularly disappointed by D2. It will be strange to not meet with the Poets, but I can't be around infants who don't want to grow up. All they want to do is carry on writing about the mountains and the sunshine, but I want the real things. The dark stuff that is almost too much to carry. But they laughed at Fowler's words and they may as well have been laughing at me. I can't abide that. But what Larry said has really rattled me. If he is the greatest writer, why have I not heard his name listed next to Faulkner and Fitzgerald?

I spend the next day at the public library, not wanting to waste my time at the school. The librarian has not heard of a writer called John Fowler. I think I cannot trust her and so I investigate the F's on my own. After three hours of searching, I find Fowles, John and my heart skips a beat and then sinks into my stomach with disappointment. One little consonant makes all the difference.

It irks me that I cannot find Fowler listed amongst the greats. That is not only insane, it is unjust. I think of the idiots from this afternoon who call themselves poets. I am willing to give them another chance, but I don't think that they deserve it. I know if Jonny had been there that afternoon, he at least would have had my back even if he didn't understand a word I was

saying. The thought of Jonny reminds me that I intend to go and visit the Jouberts. I am curious where Jonny has been all week, but mostly I want to catch a glimpse of Alexa again. So, even though it is fully night now, I make my way to their house.

*

Mrs Joubert is in the kitchen drinking tea and on the phone. She looks to be in an excellent mood and squeals with delight when I come in the house.

'Oh, have to go, Sherry! Have to go!' Mrs Joubert pulls me into a huge hug, her bones stabbing me all over.

'Oh, you don't know what's been going on here, darling. Dreadful. I've missed you so terribly!' She kisses me all over my face.

'Where's Jonny been all week?'

'Oh, darling, it was the accident, you know.'

'Accident?'

'Hungry darling?' she asks, turning away from me.

'Sure.' I could never turn down Mrs Joubert's cooking. 'But tell me what's going on.'

'Oh, eat first, darling. Don't want your tummy getting upset.'

So I wait for Mrs Joubert to heat me up some meatloaf and beans and I wolf it down so that she will start talking.

'Ok,' I show her my empty plate.

'Any more, darling?'

'No thanks, Mrs Joubert.'

'Well, really it was all Alexa's fault,' Mrs Joubert starts, sitting down on a bar stool next to me. 'She came homed drunk as a skunk one evening. She had been out with that Ian again, super chap, I really liked him. She starts yelling and shouting. I couldn't tell you what had her so upset. Anyway, she was crying and carrying on and I said to her, I said, Alexa, darling, at

least wait for Ian to leave to make such a racket. And that seemed to upset her even more, though I couldn't understand why because all I was saying was that she would never keep a man if she carried on behaving like that. I was only giving her some advice. So then she threw a plate on the floor! It shattered everywhere. Chaos, I tell you darling, absolute chaos.' Mrs Joubert clears my plate and brings me some juice and biscuits.

'So anyway, Jonny was feeling quite blue because he got cut from the team and he wanted a packet of chips to make him feel better. Usually I keep little snacks and morsels around for guests but it just happened that night that I didn't have any. And Mr Joubert wasn't here because he was quite devastated about Jonny getting cut and so he was out at the pub. Well my Jonny was so upset and I would have offered to take him down to the garage but I don't drive darling, because of my anxiety, you know. So, Alexa said she would drive Jonny down to the garage to get some chips. Well, almost as soon as they left I became very tired — I'd had such a long day, you know — and I went to sleep. Then in the middle of the night the phone starts to ring and wakes Mr Joubert up and put him in a terrible mood. So he pulled the phone cord out and we went back to sleep. Then it was the next morning, or maybe the afternoon, I remembered the phone. I plugged it back in and, well, immediately it began to ring! It was the hospital and they said that they had Jonny and Alexa there and that they had been in an accident the night before.'

'Can I have some tea? I want to dunk my biscuits.'

'Of course, darling.' Mrs Joubert goes to the kitchen and talks to me over the counter while she makes my tea. 'Apparently, they sped through a robot and ploughed straight into the back of a tow-truck that was turning right ahead of them. The tow-arm pierced straight through the windshield on the driver's side.we went to visit as soon as Mr Joubert got home. Well, let me tell you,' Mrs Joubert sits down at the table and hands me my tea and extra honey because she knows I like the honey to settle on the bottom of the cup so that I can drain it afterwards,

'it was quite a sight. All these sick people, coughing, it smelt like death in there. I was really afraid I was going to catch something. I think these hospitals aren't very clean, you know.'

'No, not very clean.'

'So they call us through and Jonny and Alexa are in different wards. Jonny is fine, he has a few bruises and cuts and something happened to his knee but he was smiling as big as ever and he seemed quite happy to be lying in bed. And he was getting plenty of ice cream too!' Mrs Joubert's smile drops. 'But my poor baby, the doctors say it will be a while before he can play sport again.'

'But how is Alexa?'

Mrs Joubert puts a hand over her mouth and looks away, shaking her head. 'Darling, just terrible. Her face is all mangled. She's covered in bandages. She was in a coma for three days. They really thought she was going to die.'

I can't imagine what 'all cut up' looks like. I try but I can't. I'll have to see her.

'Is she home from the hospital yet?'

'Oh, yes. She and Jonny are upstairs. The doctors say that she needs plenty of rest and peace and quiet. She just sleeps most of the time anyway — quite boring!' Mrs Joubert laughs. 'But Jonny is awake now if you want to go up and see him?'

'Yes, I think I will.'

'Ok, darling. Take him up these, won't you.' Mrs Joubert hands me a packet of salted chips.

I open the packet and tip the contents into my mouth as I walk up the stairs. When I get to the carpeted landing, I crumple the packet up and throw it into a large vase. Mr and Mrs Joubert's bedroom is at the far right end of the hallway, Jonny's bedroom is in the middle, facing straight down the stairs and Alexa's bedroom is the far left. Jonny's door is open so I go straight in and find him lying in bed, reading a book.

'Jeez, did that accident mess you up so bad that now you like to read?'

'It's got a lot of pictures,' Jonny puts his book down and smiles. His smile looks a bit crooked but then I think maybe it's always been crooked and I never noticed.

'How are you feeling, Jonny-boy?'

'I feel pretty good. I can eat whatever I want, I don't have to go to school. My dad isn't allowed to shout at me because the doctors say that any stress could lead to an emotional break-down. I don't even care about my knee that much. I hate rugby.'

'So, tell me, Jonny-boy. How is your sister? Your mom says her face is all messed up. Is it true?'

Jonny nods. 'It's pretty bad. That thing went right through her eye. It was hanging out the socket. I had to hold her eye in her head.'

I nod, picturing it all and I start to feel that fire being stoked in my belly and that familiar tingle in my finger tips. Jonny and I chat a bit more, pleasant stuff. He wants to know how school is and if anyone misses him. I tell him sure, everyone was wondering where he was. I can see that Jonny is starting to get tired. I tell him I will come and visit him tomorrow and I will bring him some cream cheese 'n chives since his mother only keeps lightly salted around. I close Jonny's bedroom door behind me. The dark corridor towards Alexa's room beckons me. Only a peek, I think.

I step quietly over to her door and pull down on the handle and push as gently as I can, cringing as the hinge squeaks and the wooden frame creaks. It is so dark that at first I can't see anything, but then a white, pillowy form on the bed starts to emerge. I think it is part of the duvet, but it is Alexa's head, all wrapped up in bandages so that it is elongated and twice its usual size. Bits of black hair poke through the bands in tufts, like stubborn grass growing between bricks. On her bedside table is a glass of water with a straw in it, a bottle of pills and a bowl of cold liquid that looks like it used to be stew.

A croaking sound comes from inside the room. It sounds different to the creak of the door. I listen. I am curious now. There it is again, that croaking sound. I cock my ear to it and listen. This time I narrow it down. It is coming from the bed. From Alexa's head. I look behind me and down the hallway and see nothing, so I step gingerly into Alexa's bedroom, beckoned by the croaking. As I get closer I realise that she is trying to speak. I put my ear to the gap in the bandage where her mouth should be and I am able to make out the words through the croaking.

'Go. Away.'

At that my body starts to burn up and I have to get out of here. I run out of the room, back downstairs and out of the house, flying past Mrs Joubert who calls after me.

As I leave the Jouberts', I have no idea where I will go but I know that I will get wherever I am going very fast because I cannot stop running. It is like I have been injected with pure adrenaline; my extremities are all hot, I have this anxious, gurgling excited energy inside me. The only thing I can think of to do is run. So I run. I run past the mall and the tyre shop and the Catholic school.

The fire in the pit of my stomach continues to burn, spreading up and down my body. I remember Alexa's bandages and I feel my dick move in my pants at the same time as I nearly throw up. I run down an alley called Manor Way and stop behind the rubbish bins outside of a townhouse complex to vomit onto a mince tray covered in flies. When I have nothing left to throw up, I dry retch until my stomach hurts. Eventually I am able to wipe the puke and spit off my mouth, but the images of Alexa's bandages return to me almost instantly. My stomach is empty and cramping and yet that fire continues to burn. I look down and discover I have an erection. I realise it was there the whole time I was vomiting. I crouch down and masturbate onto the puddle of puke that has started to run down the street in long, creeping wet fingers.

When I am done I zip my pants back up and continue running down Manor Way which comes out onto the bendy road around Pigeon Valley. I know what I must do now.

I run into the forest, past the empty spot I met with the other poets this afternoon, deep into the valley, until I arrive at the clearing where I have spent the last week reading Fowler. As the sun finally cedes to darkness, the moon provides just enough light to write by and again I put my pen to paper. Steady at first touch, it is nonetheless another ten minutes until the first word comes to me. Another ten minutes until the second and on like that. Again it takes me all night to write this poem. Every word is laboured over as it must meet two obligations: it must accurately represent all that I felt and saw in Alexa's bedroom just now and it must be as difficult to heave as Fowler's words, as difficult but necessary to carry in the heart. As I head home in the early hours of the morning, I understand what makes Fowler truly great. It is his proximity to tragedy, monstrosity, to horror. For him it is his mother, his sisters, his neighbours. Humans in general. All of that became clear to me when I looked at Alexa this evening.

I forget all about the other Poets, how they laughed at me, at Fowler. They don't deserve the enlightenment. The next day I go back to the Jouberts', eat some lunch, chat with Jonny and peek in on Alexa. Alexa is in the same condition as the day before, except no croaking as she is fast asleep, so I am able to take a longer look at her while she lies there. Yellowy-pink gunk is seeping from beneath her bandages and she smells like antiseptic. She is still wearing her hospital bracelet. There is a new bowl of soup next to her bed. I see that she has been prescribed some very heavy pain medication. The lid is off, the bottle is still mostly full. No one will notice. I palm a few and drop them in my pocket. On the floor next to her is an empty milkshake cup from McDonald's. I listen to her breathing for a little while, watching her chest move up and down. The duvet comes up to just under her chest. She is wearing a white t-shirt. I think I can almost make out the shape and colour of her nipples showing through the material; small, sharp and brown. But they may just be shadows. My stomach twinges with what feels like

panic and sends vibrations straight to my balls, as if the two are connected by steel strings which are strummed when I look at her. I feel full of something heavy and urgent. I put the *Vogue* and *Cosmo* magazines I brought with on her bedside table and trot down the stairs with her untouched soup.

'Oh, she won't eat it. Even with a straw. She only wants milkshakes and ice cream,' Mrs Joubert takes the bowl from me and puts it on the floor. A chihuahua in a pink jersey appears out of nowhere and begins lapping it up.

'That's right, pretty girl,' Mrs Joubert coos. 'Who's a hungry girl? What do you think darling? We just got her this morning, straight from the breeder. Isn't she gorgeous? I'm naming her Minnie, isn't that hilarious?' Mrs Joubert grabs Minnie up into her arms and kisses her face. 'Who's my baby? You are! Yes that's right, you are!'

I hate small dogs, especially chihuahuas; their poppy-out eyes and tiny heads disturb me. I think it is an ungodly combination. I say goodbye to Mrs Joubert, who is letting the rodent lick her mouth — disgusting — and start heading to Pigeon Valley. I read another passage from Fowler. This one is about the dead guy as a small boy, being locked out of his house by his father. I see empty milkshake cups, soiled bandages that I want to unwrap. I write another poem, this one ejaculating out of me heavily in starts and stops and then I masturbate into the green mulch and fall asleep until morning.

I wake up in the midmorning and go straight home to sleep, but Noelene is awake at the kitchen table and is in a surprisingly good mood. She offers me a cigarette and for the first time ever in my life, I sit with my mother at the kitchen table drinking wine and smoking. She asks me questions — real questions — about school and who I am seeing. I don't tell her about my poetry anymore, I only made that mistake once and I got a cigarette on the neck for it, but I tell her about my girlfriend, Alexa and my friend, Jonny. She is in such a good mood that I even tell her about Mrs Joubert and we laugh at the image of her kissing a chihuahua in a pink

jersey. Noelene even tells me some things — that her boyfriend who was stealing all our lightbulbs has run off with the woman from the flat below and that one of her uncles has died and she is thinking of going back to Richmond for the funeral.

'Will you come?' she asks me, slurring and holding my hand.

'Of course, Mum!'

After that we both agree that it is time to go to bed. She kisses me on my forehead, some yellow, foul-smelling spit drips from her mouth onto my cheek and we close our bedroom doors. I sleep easily again, this time drifting off as I write the dedication of my book,

To my wonderful mother.

Noelene does not mention her uncle again.

*

For the next while I continue this cycle of visiting the Jouberts', peeking in on Alexa, reading Fowler and then carving out my poems in Pigeon Valley. Only once or twice more do I catch Noelene in such a loving mood again, which is ok by me since I woke up the morning after feeling very strange. Eventually, Alexa stops sleeping so much and she starts to talk with me when I peek in on her. I have taken to bringing her magazines and milkshakes, as she seems to respond best to those items.

One afternoon I am heading up the stairs and can hear sobbing coming from Alexa's bedroom. Mrs Joubert is at the top of the landing wiping down picture frames.

'Is that crying?' I ask, looking towards Alexa's bedroom.

'Yes,' she sighs. 'She's been at it all day. Bloody noise. Mr Joubert couldn't hear the TV earlier.'

'Why don't you go in?'

'Oh, she needs her space. She's perfectly fine.'

I enter her bedroom gingerly, tapping my knuckles on the door as I go in. Alexa flings her duvet over her head when she sees me, but I have already seen her. Is this what love truly is? I need to go to my rock immediately.

Her bandages have been removed. The left side of her face is like pink play-dough that has been pressed into shape on her by a toddler. A huge, ravine-like purple scar goes from the middle of her forehead, across the empty, sewn-up socket where her left eye used to be and down to her jaw line, pulling the left corner of her mouth all the way down with it. It is like two different faces have been stitched together; one is the gorgeous face of the girl with the brilliant green eyes, the other is of a monster with nothing but gaping, fleshy holes for eyes and a mouth.

She is more beautiful now than ever. I want to take her in my arms and cradle her like a baby. I want to tell her everything is going to be ok. And then I don't know if I want to write about her terrible face or cum on it.

'Alexa?'

'Go away!' the bundle on the bed cries. She starts to sob again.

'Don't be afraid. You look beautiful.'

Alexa says nothing and continues to sob.

'Listen, I'm here. I'll be here. I can see you're not ready to talk yet and that's ok. When you are ready, I'll be here.'

I leave the magazines and the milkshakes on the bedside table and head back downstairs, trying to stop myself from running. I shout goodbye on my way out. In Pigeon Valley I masturbate before starting to write and then manage a wondrous two poems. In bed, reading over my poems from the day, I can't think of a single edit I would make.

I keep going back to Alexa, coaxing and coaxing, talking her into coming out from hiding. It takes a while, but eventually she bares her face openly around me and soon I am the only one allowed in her room besides Jonny, although truthfully I don't think that either Mr or Mrs Joubert have any inclination of going in there anyway. By this time, too, all my coddling and milkshakes have taken their toll on Alexa and she has become pitifully fat and depends on every word of affirmation from me. Her last brilliant green eye is hidden behind fat puffy eyelids and her lips are tucked inside chubby cheeks. The empty eye-socket too has developed fatty growths of its own which hang off her brow like fleshy christmas baubles.

One afternoon I am sitting at the foot of her bed while she sucks down her fourth milkshake of the day and flips through a *Cosmo*, when Mrs Joubert bursts into the room.

'Going out tonight, to the Church social gathering and I haven't got a thing to wear!' Mrs Joubert starts rifling through Alexa's cupboard and pulls out a long emerald dress. 'You don't mind, do you darling? It doesn't fit you anyway. See you later sweethearts!'

And Alexa breaks down crying again, which means that I have to do a damn good job of hiding my excitement because I know that later I will have at least one superb poem. And I am right. It is like that for the next few weeks: after every visit with Alexa, I get a burst of renewed creativity and energy and off I go. As Alexa lets me in nearer and nearer and I see the vulnerability underneath the monstrosity, my poetic prowess grows and grows and by the end of my grade ten year, I have amassed an impressive collection of which I think even Fowler would be proud.

Just as I have forgotten all about the other Poets, I have forgotten to care about the mystery of Fowler's origin. Where he comes from or why I can't find him in any libraries or newspaper articles matter less to me than the soul of his book, which is right in front of me, as real as I am. It speaks to me, so why should I care where the voice comes from? But I do. I

know I am destined to be a real writer — like the Poets will never be — but what if I turn out the same, just a name in a drawer, lost in time?

One morning when I am visiting Alexa, she hands me her *Cosmo* magazine and points out an advert printed across one of the inner pages.

The newly formed Liebermann Press House, run by artiste Linda Liebermann, announces the first year of the Liebermann Prize for Emerging Writers, which will be awarded on an annual basis.

Calls are open for unpublished writers of any age and gender to submit their manuscripts for consideration.

Entries in poetry and fiction are accepted.

There is no restriction on genre, but manuscripts must be book-length, to be published as either a collection of poetry, short stories, or as a novel.

The winner of the award receives R5000, publication of the submitted manuscript (subject to potential editorial changes) and a year's funding towards completion of another manuscript. Funding includes housing, meals, transport, etc.

Submit to Liebermann Press House Offices, at enclosed address.

'You're a poet, aren't you?' Alexa asks.

The coincidence is too much too bear. I have never believed in fate or destiny, but what else can this be? What other explanation can there be? The same people who published Fowler, my idol and inspiration for my best work, are looking for new writers to publish. I don't want to say that I am destined to be his successor, but what else can I believe?

I have to leave. Right now. I have to go and read Fowler. I have to write. I have to become who I am meant to be. I have what I need. I look at Alexa.

'Thank you,' I say and I mean it sincerely. 'I have to go now, but I will be back.' I think she can sense I am lying.

'Where are you going?' she says in a high, strained voice. 'Can't you stay a bit longer?'

I look at her fat face, trembling with fear and I stand up.

'No. I have to go.'

I turn to leave, but her hand reaches out and tugs on my belt. I turn back to her and she places her hand on my crotch. This is not like the night when she grabbed me and called me gay, this is desperate and full of fear.

'Just a little longer?' she whispers with tears in her eyes.

She breaks my heart. I let her unzip my pants and put my dick in her mouth. She sucks me furiously, trying to pull some part of me into her. She screws her eye shut but I keep mine open and fixed on the hole in her face. When I finish, she swallows it all. A guy at school told me that cum is like bubblegum and it takes seven years to digest. I feel glad that she will have something to remember me by

Alexa cries as I kiss her goodbye on her forehead. I can hear her sobbing all the way down the stairs and as I leave the house without saying anything to the rest of the Jouberts.

At home I take every harsh word Noelene says, every bottle of wine she sends flying at my head, every cigarette she tries to put out on my arm and every unexpected moment of tenderness and I put it all down on paper. I spend weeks writing new poems, tweaking old ones, chipping and chipping away — a word here, a comma there — until finally I have thirty poems, sodden with my life, dripping of Fowler. The horror and the beauty finely intertwined. I find it hard to comprehend that I have created this thing. I title it after the first poem, *Ashtray Chest*. I submit it to the Liebermann Press House and it is a terrible four months of silence that follow.

I do not go back to visit the Jouberts — I have said my goodbyes. I do not continue going to school. I spend my days in Pigeon Valley, reading my own poetry side-by-side with Fowler's book. I still have not read the foreword. All this time I do not doubt for a second that I will win the award. There is a certainty in me that I cannot explain.

When word finally comes, I am not surprised. My bags are already packed, the letter to Noelene is already written. I have won the award and I am needed in Johannesburg straight away. The Liebermann Press House has a gruelling few weeks of publicity events planned for me and I need to be briefed immediately. I plan to sneak out the house, but Noelene is awake and sees me. I drop the letter on the table in front of her and leave. She does't ask where I am going or when I will be back. At the bus station, I pick up the tickets that have been bought for my by the Liebermann people and while waiting for the bus, I read my letter over and over. When the bus arrives, I find myself a seat by the window so that I can be the first to see the Johannesburg skyline.

STRAIGHT OFF THE DEAL

February 1983

It is around five on a Sunday morning and I am lying awake after having spent another sleepless night on Charlie's floor. Charlie's apartment is only one room, really and he is asleep on the bed, snoring loud as anything. I have three thick blankets for a mattress, but I can still feel the uneven wooden planks poking me in the back and I am trying to ignore the sound of the wood borer. They are making a noise like so many thousands of microscopic rain sticks being tipped back and forth. We ran out of beer and cigarettes last night and I now find myself quite sober. It is too early for the shops. Xin has started keeping the downstairs fridges locked since the time Charlie and I got it into our heads to fill the bathtub with white wine and get in fully clothed. Cigars don't taste as sweet as when you are up to your chest in Chenin Blanc.

The problem with being sober is that it leaves space for thinking. What I am thinking about now is how I got to be here, sleeping on Charlie Herriot's floor, no money and no friends, probably an alcoholic and definitely a chain smoker and not having written a word in eight years. What I am wondering is how I became a failed writer with only one book under my belt.

After becoming the first ever winner of the Liebermann Prize I pretty much had it made. The manuscript that won me the award was published in 1976 and *Ashtray Chest* became a big hit. I was awarded my prize at a huge ceremony that was covered by all the local newspapers

and magazines and afterwards the Liebermann people had me on a non-stop schedule of book launches and literary panels and festivals and charity events. Everyone wanted a piece of me. I felt like a rock star. I felt like I could do no wrong. Like anything I touched magically turned to gold. The funding I won kept me up at a nice little apartment for a year or two and covered all my food and drink needs. For the first time in my whole life I couldn't think of a single thing I was lacking. After *Ashtray Chest* was published, I started working on another collection. I wrote like it was my day job. I woke at six every morning and did a few hours of writing at my desk before I was whisked away by some Liebermann intern to attend that day's events. After I'd had dinner with someone from the industry, I would return and do a few more hours and then go to sleep sometime around one or two in the morning. I was pretty happy with this routine, until I started spending time with some real artists and they showed me how much of a puppet I had become.

At the events I attended there were many regular features, but there was one guy who seemed to be everywhere and know everyone. The guy's name was Charlie Herriot. He was around sixty, fat and balding and was always having to mop his sweating brow with the handkerchief he kept in his pants pocket. He was a book editor. I had heard stories of writers getting into fist fights over who would get him to read their stuff. He was unmarried, slept with more women than I have met in my life and was a heavy-weight drinking champ, too. Charlie was at one of the events I was speaking at to promote *Ashtray Chest* and he had approached me after I'd come off stage.

'Feel like a fag?' he'd asked me in that English accent that didn't seem to match his appearance. I only smoked on-and-off then, but I knew Charlie was a big-shot and I didn't want to look stupid, so I said yes. I followed him outside and joined a large group of strange looking people. People with all kinds of coloured hair and bizarre clothes. I thought they had looked like a group of Tibetan monks or something like that. As I joined the group, the smell of

marijuana hit me strong in the face, closely followed by the smell of urine and then a sweet floral scent which turned out to be the perfume of the woman next to me. She was gorgeous. Tall and pale with dark hair. She somehow reminded me of Alexa, before the accident. She was wearing a short black dress and black boots and I couldn't stop staring at her as Charlie introduced me.

'Meet the poet who won the Liebermann Prize, but we won't hold that against him. More important is the fact that he's responsible for *Ashtray Chest*,' Charlie had said, lighting a cigarette and handing it to me. I took it and inhaled, nodding.

'That was you?' the dark haired woman next to me had said in a a throaty accent, her voice heavy and rounded. She seemed shocked. 'But you're so young.'

'Only on the outside,' I had replied and the woman had smiled at me.

A tall skinny man called Andrew looked me up and down and then said, 'This one's going to need our help.'

I didn't understand what he meant but I joined in when everyone laughed. Charlie went around the group, sounding off names and occupations and books written. It was all very impressive and intimidating. There were poets and journalists and novelists and and short story writers, painters and sculptors, actors and directors and playwrights and one woman there had just had her libretto performed in New York to rave reviews.

Charlie took some kind of liking to me and after that night he started calling me up regularly to join him and his friends. As the weeks and months went by, I no longer felt intimated by Charlie's group. I felt like one of them. The relationships between all of us were somewhere between siblings and lovers.

There was Robin Filak and Georgia Reinke, the two novelists who were never apart and who some people suspected were lesbians. The woman in the short dress whose perfume I had smelled that first night, was Eva Scheib from Poland. She wore only black and was a master

of haikus. Her finance, Raul Plymouth, was a trust-fund beneficiary who had no interest in literature. He liked to drink and was infamous for starting fights with anybody who looked at Eva in the wrong way. Then there was Tabitha Wain, an undergraduate English student. Although older than me she would follow me around like a lovesick puppy and eventually I had to sleep with her just to make it stop. Andrew Haigh was a painter who worked mostly in oils but did also dabble in print making and metal etchings. He was very elaborate and told long winding stories I'd worry would never end.

Charlie and his crew were always between finishing one project and starting the next and seemed to thrive on alcohol, coffee, nicotine and various other drugs. Whatever their intoxicant of choice, it only seemed to make them better artists. I didn't like to smoke dope as Eva did, or snort cocaine with Charlie, so I started to drink. And not the schoolboy drinking I had done with Jonny Smarts in Durban, either. Real, grown-up drinking. I found I liked it and that it did make writing easier at first, although the mornings were hard to handle. After a while I started having a little top-me-up beer or whiskey to take the edge off. Soon I couldn't get out of bed without it.

We spent a lot of time at a Chinese restaurant called The Mayflower, owned by a friend of Charlie's called Xin. Xin let us have the place after closing and sometimes he would join us although he couldn't speak much English. His seven year old, Arthur, would sleep under the table. I don't know where his mother was. Charlie lived in a small room above the restaurant and didn't have to pay for beers, although Xin made sure the rest of us did. In those moments we were all grateful for Raul, who would hurry to pick up the bills in an effort to stay relevant in the group.

Charlie was flat broke although he worked non-stop. I was still working on my poetry collection, but not as I had been before. I carried a notebook around with me wherever I went. In the beginning I wrote in it furiously, hardly talking and trying to take down every word I

heard before the conversation moved on. As time went by I stopped writing in it and I simply picked up my notebook on my way out the door as thoughtlessly as I would put on a pair of shoes. I would then try to recall from memory everything that had been said and work it into a poem, but alcohol was starting to mess with that too. My memory got worse every day. Then I stopped writing poetry altogether. Come to think of it, I stopped writing anything at all.

I didn't worry too much about that. My time was much better spent talking and arguing with Charlie and the others. They encouraged me to stop attending the Liebermann's 'pony shows,' as Eva had called it. And so I did. Because I wanted to be a real writer, like Charlie's friends were real artists. I was becoming a better writer with them than I would ever become sitting on those stuffy panels and attending those dinner parties where people only seemed interested in you if had some connection to the Liebermanns. It started to dawn on me that the Liebermann people — I had still never met the directors — were in the business of plucking young artists before they had fully flourished and moulding them into well-behaved dogs who would sit and stay on command. I refused to be dressed up and paraded around, my genius used for the benefit and profit of others. I started dodging all attempts by the Liebermann people to contact me. Shortly afterwards I received a few letters in the mail from the Liebermann people and a few other publishing houses who had tried to contact me. They informed me that they were rescinding any offers made to secure the publishing rights to my future works. They wished me luck.

I started openly criticising the whole publishing industry and the Liebermanns to anyone who would listen. Interestingly, the more brazenly I spoke out against the whole 'pony show,' the more interested in me Eva became. And Raul wasn't exactly blind to it but he couldn't do anything. Eva did whatever she wanted.

Before I left Durban I had not even had my first kiss. I had never seen the breast of a woman who had shown it to me voluntarily — unwieldy bathing suits at the beach and Playboy

magazines being my main opportunities up until then. I had talked big in front of the other Pigeon Valley Poets, but the truth was much more pathetic. Many afternoons at school were spent hunched over the urinal in the third-floor boy's bathroom, masturbating furiously as I watched the girls' hockey team walk towards the field for practice, their short skirts flapping behind them. But I had to endure none of that once I became a real writer.

I spent enough time around Eva that eventually she relented and we began sleeping with each other for a month or two. When Raul found out he dragged me outside The Mayflower and beat me senseless. I had a broken nose and rib and was covered in bruises for weeks. Nobody did anything.

'You know how Raul is,' was all Eva had said.

Every time Raul found out Eva was cheating on him and he beat the guy up, Eva would get all frothed up and go running back into his arms. Then Eva and Raul were like some teenage couple in love for the next few weeks — kissing in public and holding hands and nuzzling their necks — until Eva got bored and went off with someone else again. At first I thought I was heart-broken when Eva dumped me, but then I wondered why I couldn't do exactly what she was doing. In the beginning I had thought that the best thing about winning the prize was the fame. Then I thought the best thing about the fame was the money. After I met Charlie, the best thing about the money was the parties and the booze and, after Eva, the best thing about the parties was the girls. As soon as I learned that women in this scene were weak to the debauched writer type, I had my pick of women.

I switched girlfriends faster than I could learn their surnames. As soon as one became too attached I moved on to the next. But I never double-timed any of them. That sort of behaviour is for men like my father. The first real coward I have ever known. Once I'd experienced an orgasm that didn't come from my own hand I began to crave sex. I loved cumming, but I liked the process that lead up it more. I enjoyed the chase. The feeling of

conquering a woman. The small physical moments that made me feel real and present. The taste and smell of their pussies — unpleasant at first but like beer I learned to love it. The moment their nipples went from soft to hard. The red creases from wearing a bra all day. After a while, though, all of this became run-of-the-mill and even orgasms lost their thrill. They were horizons I was constantly running towards, but when I finally did reach them, they were empty and seemed to disintegrate as they were happening. But still, as soon as they were done I would be chasing the next and so on it went.

After the Liebermanns and the other few publishing companies dropped me — I think one may have been called Paper Tree and I remember laughing with Georgia and Robin about how pretentious the name was — I went broke pretty quickly. I couldn't pay my rent and after six months or a year of being in arrears, I was out on my ass with nowhere to go, my onetime best-seller tucked under my arm. I called Charlie up and he agreed to let me come stay with him until I got back up on my feet. That was three years ago.

*

Although it is cramped in his little apartment, it has been nice to have a friend. Charlie starts to stir and rises with his usual hacking cough. He is shirtless and his boxers are two or three sizes too small for him, the unbuttoned fly pulled taut to reveal flashes of mottled pink flesh and grey pubic hair as he stomps and grunts his way to the bathroom. I get up too and reach for a cigarette but remember we are all out. Charlie pisses with the door open and the sound of his urine stream hitting the water fills the room.

It has been eight years since the whole gang has been together. The whole world has changed. Xin's son, Art, is fourteen now, covered in pimples. Robin and Georgia got together and moved away. Raul finally got sick of Eva and left her and a few months later she was found by her maid, hanging from the ceiling fan. I didn't feel too sad but I do miss the attention every now and then. Andrew got some big opportunity overseas and opened his own art gallery. After

everything it is just me and Charlie left, drinking at an empty table in The Mayflower while Xin cashes up behind the counter. Charlie has become older and fatter and has lost the charm that made his unsightly traits seem likeable. He owes everybody money and the spouse and child maintenance from his three wrecked marriages have bled dry whatever little resources he had left. It is only to the good nature of his friend Xin that he even has this little shit-hole. I don't think Charlie realises how much the world has changed and he continues to go out every night but comes home thwarted because there aren't any people left who share his vision for artists and writers like there used to be. He still does some editing work for people who remember how he used to be, but nobody new will work with him.

'Beer?' Charlie asks when he comes back in.

I shake my head.

'Fags?'

I shake my head.

He is desperate now. 'Coffee?'

I make us two cups of instant and we sit at the small table in the kitchen rubbing our temples. .

'You're meant to be in charge of groceries,' Charlie says. 'I can't keep coming home to no tipple and no fags.'

'It's not a thing, Charlie. We'll go out to the shops in a bit. We just have to wait an hour till they open.'

'It's the principle of the thing. That's your job. You make sure there's booze. That's all you have to do.'

'What's the big deal? In an hour I'll —'

'No, no, no.' Charlie puts his head in his hands. He looks ancient and tired. 'We can't go on like this, kid.'

'Charlie, you're losing it, man. It's just an hour, sixty little minutes. Just hold off the crisis for another three thousand six hundred seconds and we'll have you sorted.'

'Kid,' Charlie looks up at me. 'I'm kicking you out. I love you, but you've gotta go.'

'Not again with this.' Every time Charlie sobers up her tries to kick me out.

Charlie opens up his arms and gestures around him. 'I'm going to die here, like this. We both know it. Truthfully, I look forward to that day. But you don't have to. Come on, kid. You're a poet. Go and be one. I'm done for. This place is my coffin and I aim to lay down in it alone.'

He usually doesn't go straight for the jugular like this. It is effective. Although I know that he will forget all about this nonsense once he has a drink, I get worked up anyway.

'Listen, I don't need to go anywhere to be a poet. Right here is where I belong. With you. Talking about things that matter. Not out there with those asshat bigwig idiot fraudsters who'd publish a turd if it drew a big enough audience.'

'None of this matters.'

'It all matters! This is what it's all about! What do you want me to do, Charlie?'

'I don't know! Go out there! Knock on some doors! Slip a few poems into some mailboxes! Christ! Do anything, kid!'

'You're sober, Charlie.' I stand up. 'I'll be back with some booze and some cigarettes in a bit, then you'll feel better.'

As I jog down the stairs and out the back of the building I hear Charlie calling after me.

'I'm serious this time, kid. When you get back, you're out!'

Outside, the birds are only just starting to chirp and the sun is struggling to get up. It is a grey morning, fine drizzle hangs in the air. I pause for a moment, unsure what to do. I can't go back to the flat and I can't just stand here. I figure I may as well just start to walk and when the bottle stores open, I'll be first on the street to know.

I feel sorry for Charlie. Working is his only real passion and he seems to be falling apart without it. But he is moving towards the age of obsoletion, so what else can really be expected? He is nearly seventy now and soon he won't remember who I am or be able to tie his own shoe laces. People get old and their lives stop, it is not an unexpected thing.

The real tragedy is me.

How old am I now? I lose count. Possibly thirty, but twenty-six feels more accurate. My one success was *Ashtray Chest*. It was meant to be the start of it all, but it was the end. And all because I refused to play dress up for those corporate hucksters pretending they knew what it took to write. They didn't know how to appreciate a work of art. All they knew how to do was fluff it up and sell it. I never thought about my childhood being remarkable in anyway until the Liebermann people started telling me that I should forget about my poetry because it was my childhood that would sell my book.

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My life didn't start out so differently from anyone else's: I lived in a medium-sized town, an only child with both a mother and a father and a pet border collie. My father, Les Jones, worked as a repair man; he fixed fridges, washing machines, dishwashers, stoves, ovens. He could speak the language of machinery, was fluent in the dialects of electric motors, rubber belts and moving physical parts, but he was so distanced from his inner self that he found it unbearable to get too emotionally close to anyone. What that meant for my mother and I was that when my father was not out working (and I remember thinking that it was interesting how many fridges suddenly needed to be re-gassed in the middle of the night), he was out drinking, either with friends or women whom he pretended (to my mother and himself) were friends. His dedication to the study of moving physical parts was such that, when I was six years old, he simply didn't stop moving — he never come home from a night out.

I realise that my mother had been expecting him to disappear some day, because when he didn't come back within the week, she sat me down and said, 'Daddy's gone. He's not coming back. No use crying or asking questions.' So I didn't cry and I didn't ask questions. I didn't feel the need to. I hardly knew the man. There had been times when Les had been at home where I felt so thoroughly uncomfortable in his presence, so aware of how my limbs moved as I walked to the kitchen to get orange juice, of how awkward my gestures were, of how weak my arms were as I struggled to pour liquid from the 1.5 litre carton without shaking, that I was relieved to hear my mother say that I would never have to experience him again.

I have been lost in thought as I walk. The shops along the street are starting to fill with life. People are arriving to unlock the front doors, 'closed' signs are being flipped, floors are being swept. I know a good bottle store not far from here where I can usually get credit. I think I will just keep walking and see where I get to. I am enjoying the burning in my legs and lungs and temples — the pain from not walking or smoking or drinking recently enough.

My mother's name is Noelene Simms. She had been pretty when she was younger — I have seen the pictures — but her looks disappeared soon after she had me and so I can only ever think of her as a sallow-faced, thin woman with pain in her eyes. She'd been sixteen when she met Les, who was twice her age. My mother's mother was a nurse and so she was out of the house at strange hours, for long periods of time and her father was a businessman who split his week between Johannesburg and Cape Town and then came home on the weekends to his family in Richards Bay. This meant that my mother was often at home alone. One day, one of the appliances stopped working (it may have been the freezer, but it has been a long time since my mother told me this story and we were both quite drunk when she did).

Noelene got out the Yellow Pages to find the number of a repairman. She called and Les Jones agreed to come over that afternoon to take a look.

As I say, my mother was quite pretty — nothing spectacular, nothing memorable, but I can understand how she may have been able to hold a man's interest for a moment — but my father was incredibly handsome. He was strong from the physical labour his work required: all the heaving, hefting, pulling and carrying of heavy house-hold appliances had toned his back and arms and chest muscles, such that they were visible even through his baggy workwear. He had dark hair and high-cheekbones that on any other man might have seemed feminine, but on him evoked some distant, glittering memories of Hollywood leading men and the age of chivalry and refined masculinity that throbbed with virulent potency. It's no wonder my mother became infatuated with him.

Once Les had fixed the freezer (or whatever it was), he continued to visit Noelene. He loved the attention, although I think that he would have been as happy getting it from anyone, anywhere and it was not necessarily special to receive it from my mother. Within ten months of having met each-other, Noelene was pregnant. It was too far along to be aborted and eventually she had to tell her parents. Her mother was worried, concerned, but her father was furious. There was only one option; Les would have to marry her. Les came up with every excuse under the sun not to — he even took to the truth in telling Noelene's father that he had no feelings for his daughter and that she was just a bit of fun — but to it all, her father had only one response: Marry her, or we go to the cops, have you forgotten she's underage? So they were married. Begrudgingly, the couple started their life together. Noelene's father bought the two a house — where Noelene spent most of her time and where Les would spend most of his time trying to escape from — and gave the couple a small-but-substantial sum of money to get their lives started. Three months later, I was born into this happy family.

At first, my mother tells me, Les was quite taken with his new baby. But that only lasted a day or two. I was an irritable baby, constantly screaming and my mother says that by the first week she was at her wit's end trying to sooth me. To make things worse, I would vomit and have diarrhoea every time my mother breastfed me. She took me to the doctor, who couldn't find anything immediately wrong and instructed my mother to feed me by bottle. She says it broke her heart, thinking that there was some essential part of her that I wouldn't take in, couldn't and if I did it made so sick she was worried I would die. Les couldn't take the reality of a baby which involved screaming, vomiting and shitting, or the reality of a wife. He withdrew completely from us and I spent the next six years watching my father walk in and out of our life like we were the extras on his movie set, low-down invisible nobodies who only got within touching distance of the lead act when he needed us for something.

To cope with it all — the loneliness, the helplessness, the rejection from both her newborn and her husband — my mother started drinking and smoking. As far as I know she hasn't stopped, although it has been over six years since I last saw her. At my last count she was taking in at least one bottle of crackling wine and at least one box of cigarettes a day, at the very least. I very rarely saw her drink or smoke less than double that amount. When my father left, she was taking in that much and more.

My mother refused to work and so put me through school, paid utilities and paid for her alcoholism using the money her father had given her. Two years after my father left and my mother's money was on the verge of running out, a lucky card was dealt us and my father was killed in a car crash. We had no idea where he'd gone, or what he'd been doing since he left, but one day an insurance man came to the door with a check. Apparently, some days after I had been born, my father — in what was surely a moment of insanity — had taken out an insurance policy on his life. I have never been able to find a reason why he would do that. In any case, my mother got a fat stack of money, sold the town-house and moved us into a two-

bedroom flat in a building located in the Durban's industrial area, some two-hundred kilometres away from Richards Bay.

My grandparents understood the move to be my mother's way of cutting ties with them, which I suppose it was. She informed them of her plans to relocate only after the sale had gone through and she had put down the deposit on the new flat. My grandparents hadn't been particularly present during my childhood — my mother says they hated to see how vulgar she had become (vulgar was the word she used) — and so they mostly kept away except for Christmas and some birthdays. After we'd moved, there were one or two phone calls, but then those stopped and I never heard from or saw my grandparents again.

That is the story the Liebermann people wanted me to tell. I told some of it, but they wanted it in even greater detail. They wanted me to really hit home how I had been abandoned by the only male figure in my life, how the mother figure withdrew from reality and was only concerned with escape. Eva Scheib was right. It really was a fucking pony show. Now I can't think of anything worse than having gone along with the whole charade with the publishers' hands up my ass making my mouth move.

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The bottle store is up ahead on the left. It is run by a guy named Mr. Khan. That is how he introduces himself and he always speaks in the third-person. He is just turning the sign to 'Open' when I walk up to the door.

'Mr Khan,' I say, extending my hand as I enter the shop. He doesn't take it.

'Mr Khan is not fully open yet. Not even the till is ready.'

'Are the beers cold? The cigarettes on the shelf and ready to be smoked?'

'Yes, but—'

'I seem to have forgotten my wallet. I'll have to take out some credit.'

Mr Khan grabs his hair and rushes behind the counter. He slams a giant book open and flips through ten or so pages. 'Look! Look what you owe Mr Khan! Already there is too much!'

'Come on, Charlie's your friend isn't he? He'll pay you back. We're just having a rough time at the moment.'

Mr Khan softens but tries to stay mad. 'Ok. After this, no more Mr Nice Khan!'

I pick out a few beers, a bottle of whiskey, a nice looking vodka and four packs of smokes. Mr Khan moves a pile of books off the counter to make space for my haul and my eyes catch on a bright orange spine in the middle of the stack. I lunge and rip it out of Mr Khan's hands, sending the other books flying and knocking two beer bottles to the floor where they shatter and flood the floor with yellow, foamy liquid. As soon as I have it in my hands I know it's not what I thought it was. It's too thin. Too light. The pages are too small. The cover is the wrong shade of orange. Just as I am coming to terms with this loss, Mr Khan is slipping in the beer and pushing me out the door.

'Out! Out! Out! And don't come back to Mr Khan!'

I am back out on the street before I even realise what's happened. Mr Khan slams the door behind me, a car hoots, but I don't hear any of it. I walk slowly back in the direction I came from, my head whizzing with thoughts I didn't expect to be thinking.

Of course that wasn't it. What business would that book have just sitting on Mr Khan's counter? Although my copy of Fowler's book is sitting tight with my stuff at Charlie's apartment, I can't help seeing orange spines everywhere. It keeps finding me, even when I am not looking for it.

I had modelled myself on John Fowler. I wanted to be just like him. I admit it now, *Ashtray Chest* was my best attempt at imitation. But what had happened to John Fowler? Nothing. He'd killed himself before *The Cause of Hell* was published. He wasn't the greatest writer who had ever lived. He was just a man who had died before anyone even knew he was

a writer. I didn't want to be like that. I was chasing much bigger, livelier dreams. People were going to know my name. I wasn't going to go and live in hiding. I wasn't going to produce only one worthwhile piece of writing which I would never even see fulfilled. What did I want to model myself on someone like that for? A coward. I stopped listening to the voice in my head which spoke in what I imagined was Fowler's voice; slow, deep, pensive. It was around that time, too, that I had started hanging out more with Charlie and his crowd and stopped writing as much. I haven't thought about Fowler in a long time. His name feels weighty and important in my head.

It's bizarre now, as I walk, to think that I knew so little about the man and yet I based my entire life on him. All I know about Fowler came from that foreword to his book, written by someone from the publisher. The same publishing house which ran the competition I won in 1975. The coincidences still seem meaningful. I know he had one or two poetry collections out and was just starting his career when he disappeared for sixteen years and then killed himself. I never wondered what happened to him. Why he disappeared for sixteen years. Why he would kill himself. I assumed all great writers eventually get to a point in their careers where they kill themselves. I hoped someday I would have a reason to kill myself. Then I would have really made it. I still think about it every now and then — about killing myself — but I don't think I've earned it. One bestseller just doesn't cut it.

I arrive back at the door to The Mayflower. It is still closed for business but open to Charlie who is sitting at one of the tables with a long-haired guy called Martin who sometimes comes around to do cocaine with him. Charlie says he is his banker, but somehow Martin just doesn't seem like the type. They are drinking beers and smoking cigarettes. I sit down and help myself to both, nodding at Martin but not saying anything.

'Empty-handed?' Charlie asks me.

I shrug. 'Mr Khan was very serious today.'

Xin is away and Art is running the restaurant for the day, so he leaves the 'Closed' sign where it is and joins us at the table. The four of us spend the day playing a few hands of cards, with cigarettes gritted in our teeth and drinking nearly the entire contents of The Mayflower's alcohol fridge. A couple people come by, but we point to the sign on the door and resume our business. By the evening, Art is vomiting in the kitchen sink and the rest of us are only really starting to drink now. Art passes out behind the counter and we start another hand of poker. Because everyone is broke we play reverse stakes in that everybody puts in their worst offerings and the person with the best hand gets them. Charlie puts in his debt at Mr Khan's. Martin puts in his drunk offer to volunteer at a homeless shelter. I put in my mother's postcard which has been needing a response for a few months now.

I deal this round and get a pair of kings and two spades, which normally isn't too bad off the deal, but in this situation it's terrible. Charlie discards three and Martin gets rid of one. If I'm not careful I might end up with three of a kind. I get rid of a spade and pick up a two. The second round starts. Martin bets a load of laundry and Charlie puts in his dirty dishes. I can't think of anything to add.

'Fold.'

'No folding, kid. You fold and you take the pot,' Charlie says.

'Come on, man. You must have something shitty to add,' Martin pushes his hair back.

'I don't have anything at all.'

The two are silent.

'Well,' says Charlie. 'Rules are rules, kid. Pot's yours.'

Out of nowhere I start to feel nauseous. I almost don't recognise the feeling. I stand up and rub my chest.

'That's it for me. I'm going to bed.'

Charlie looks up. 'Here?'

'Where else?'

'I meant what I said this morning. You've gotta go, kid. I packed up your stuff. It's behind the counter.'

'Charlie, enough of this. I'm tired. I feel sick. I'm going to sleep.'

'Kid, if you try to enter my apartment I will beat your fuckin' ass.'

'Where am I supposed to go?'

'I don't know, kid. I don't know. I just can't be party to this anymore. It's not healthy, you living with me and wasting away. I'm old. My time is done. You're young. You've got a whole life left. Don't throw it away living like me.'

My blood is boiling. 'That's all well and good, Charlie. But where am I supposed to go? You think throwing me out onto the street is going to be good for my health?'

'It's better for your health than staying with me.'

I am drunk and furious and hurt. I don't know what else to do except go and pick up the bag that Charlie has packed — a depressingly small bag — and storm out of The Mayflower into the night.

I picture curling up in a doorway, using my bag as a pillow and it doesn't seem so bad — almost poetic — until I actually find a doorway and it is occupied by a crumpled man smelling of shit. Disgusted, I figure there has to be at least one doorway in this city I can spend the night in. I walk down Charlie's road, down the next road and the next, but all the doorways and entrance stairs and alcoves I come across already have tenants. I stop looking doorways, which I now consider to be a luxury. Any old hole-in-the-wall with a roof overhead will do. A few hours go by and I find nowhere to lay my head. My legs ache and I drag them behind me as if through mud. Finally I arrive back to the first doorway I came across. The man has shifted in his sleep and opened up a space in the back-right corner against the door. Me being a slight

guy, I figure I can probably fit in next to him if I fold my knees to my chest, keep my head angled to the left and rest my feet one on top of the other just under the door-handle. It is not comfortable, but I am so tired I drift off to sleep almost immediately.

The next morning I am kicked in the head by a man in a tie.

'Get the fuck out of here!' the man yells, continuing to kick me as I scramble to pick up my bag. He is still yelling as I run down the street. I only stop running once I have turned a corner and I am confident he can't see me.

Although that was not the worst night of my life, it is definitely up there. I lift my arm to scratch my head and catch whiff of my armpit, which smells worse than the guy I just slept next to. For some reason, my underarm stink causes me to start crying. The kind of tears I don't remember having since I was a kid and I didn't know if my dad would come home or not. I sit down on the ground and cry hot, pulsing tears, keeping my face hidden from the people walking past me.

Suddenly I remember — maybe there is someone who could help me. I find a payphone and find the number in the directory for my uncle George, my mother's brother. I have always known he's lived here and yet I've never made contact.

When George answers, he doesn't ask any question and comes to get my straight away. George arrives in his cream Toyota Corolla I remember from my childhood and smiles when I get in. He looks the same as always, if a little aged. His stomach is a bit fatter, his eyes are a bit wrinkled, his hairline has receded. On the way, he doesn't ask me where I've been and why I haven't called. He doesn't mention Noelene. He talks about his son, Hector, who is six now. He tells me that he is happy to see me. I keep quiet as we drive into a nice area with big houses all around and stop in front of a two-story building with boarded up windows.

'This is where you live?' I ask, hoping he says no.

'No. I'm renovating this place to rent out. It's not finished yet, but you can stay in the bottom flat as long as you need.'

He walks me in and gives me a small tour of the place.

'Up there is the main flat,' he points up a staircase. 'We're planning to rent that out as soon as possible. Through here,' he opens a door to the left of the stairs, 'is the smaller flat, where you'll be.'

It's just a big room with a brown couch, a TV and a small table, a bathroom and a kitchenette. 'This folds out,' he pats the couch. 'It's not much, but it should be OK for now. We're planning to fix it up soon.'

We are both silent.

'I'm sorry, I'd take you to my house but Helen's parent's are here for a month. We don't have any rooms.'

'This is great. Thank you.'

'Call me if you need anything. I come by here often, too. And I've told Helen all about you. You're welcome any time for dinner.'

'Thanks, George.'

When George leaves, I lock the door behind him and lie down on the couch. The bareness of the place reminds me I have no smokes, no beer and no Mayflower downstairs. I fall asleep, fully clothed, thinking the same thoughts I did yesterday morning. How did I get here? How did I get to the point where my entire life can fit into one bag, where even in reverse poker I have nothing to bet. As I lie here, one new thought comes to me. I know how I got here. Because of John Fowler. I wanted to be a big writer just like him. I bet everything on becoming him. But I had no hand and I folded.

LITTLE BRIDLE

May 1983

I am filleting a particularly troublesome tilapia when I get the phone call that Charlie has died. I know Terry is in the back watching me and that if I pick up the phone too quickly, he will think I am taking a personal call and if I leave it to ring for too long, he will tell me I am lazy. It is a very fine line with Terry. I let the phone ring for not too long and not too short (five rings in total) and then I pick up. It is a Thursday so I am expecting the flurry of Friday fish-orders to start.

'Terry's Fish Shop.'

'Hey, man. It's Martin.'

I freeze. A personal phone call. I can sense Terry's moustache twitching behind me, like the hide of some animal waiting to pounce.

'Yes?' I whisper.

'I've been trying to find you for a week.'

'I've been here.'

'Charlie died, man.'

Charlie was always playing on the edge but I didn't think he'd topple anytime soon.

'He died?'

'Yeah. Heart attack.'

'How'd you find me?' Behind me I hear the scrape of a wooden chair on tiles. Footsteps.

'I called a few people. It wasn't hard to figure out. Anyway, the funeral is this weekend. You better come.'

The footsteps are approaching.

'Of course,' I say and I hang up the phone.

A pair of massive hands clap down on my shoulders, sending a jolt through my body. But it is not Terry. It is his wife, Gloria. She is a massive woman, fat and loud.

'Did I hear somebody died?' she says into my ear. I can almost hear her jowls wobble as she talks.

'Yes. An old friend.'

Gloria squeezes my shoulder. 'Poor baby! Do you need some time off?'

I consider it. 'Maybe. I'll need time to grieve.'

'What I wouldn't give for some time off. I work like a pack animal in this place—'

And away we go. Gloria continues to huck in my ear, following me around as I go about my usual routine, putting new bags in the bins, checking the orders for the day, preparing the countertops for the endless skinning, gutting, filleting and deboning that is going to happen.

Today Gloria is wearing a quilted dress and the squares are barely holding on by their seams. She reminds me of the pork cuts you see hanging upside down in a butcher's window, string pulled so tight it might slice right into the flesh. She is not only a talker, she is a close talker.

As usual, Gloria manages to work her endless physical ailments into the conversation and although I know it is coming, I don't look away when she lifts the hem of her skirt to show me the swollen red and blue thing connecting her foot and her calf which used to be her ankle.

When I don't retch and run away as I would normally, Gloria seizes the opportunity and lifts her skirt higher to show me how the veins are all inflamed, all the way to her upper thigh.

Thankfully Terry calls me into his office. He is reading a newspaper at his huge, gleaming desk. He bought it as a piece of junk at an auction, real cheap, then restored it himself. No one else is allowed to sit at it. When it comes to actually writing or doing anything that a desk is usually good for, he does it out in the kitchen. He himself is Greek, a small man, shorter and thinner than his wife, with an impressive white moustache and white hair slicked down to his head. He prefers not to talk when at all possible. Terry motions for me to close the door.

'Was personal phone call?'

'Yes, a friend died.'

'Ok. This time, ok. But you are worst employee I ever had. Really. Terrible. It take longer to get the job done when you here. The only reason I never fire you, is because of George. George is friend but I don't care for you.'

'I know. I don't either.'

'Ok. Then you work, or you don't get in my way. Busy day today. Many orders. No fucking around.'

'Yes sir,' I say and stand up to leave.

As I am closing his door behind me, Terry shouts. 'And stop taking fucking money from the register!'

Terry is right. It is a busy day. We get more than the usual number of takeaway orders for lunch and nearly double the normal amount for dinner. By the time shop close comes, I am exhausted. When I get home, the first thing I do is light a cigarette and open a beer. Instant relief. I feel I could just melt down into the couch.

*

I have been living at the flat my uncle George is renovating for three months now. It's not so bad. I am on my own most of the time since he lives with his wife and son at his own home. Sometimes I have gone over for dinner, but Helen doesn't like me drinking so much in front of Hector so I don't go often. Sometimes George comes to see me, but he doesn't stay long because he is always having to pick Hector up from after school sports or fetch groceries for Helen on the way home.

It doesn't surprise me that Charlie is dead. He was near seventy, had bad smoker's lung and did a line of cocaine after every meal. He warned me three months ago that he was probably on his way out, but I just assumed it was his way of cutting ties with me as neatly as possible. Now he is really dead. I feel a bit put out that Martin gets to be the one phoning people to let people know. I was the one who lived with him all those years. That should have been me.

I spend the next day at work worrying about who I will see at the funeral. As I wipe fish guts off on my apron I hope no one asks me what I have been doing with myself lately. I rehearse every possible scenario I can think of.

In one, Robin Filak will tell me she has won the Booker Prize three years in a row and that her wife, Georgia, is on the board for some other prestigious literary award. When Georgia asks me what I have been doing since they moved to London, I'll say that I am running a poetry magazine and that I have a few of my own collections out already. When she asks me what they are called, I will have to tell her that I wrote them under a pseudonym and I don't want to expose myself.

In another, Eva Scheib will be alive and well. She will not have the tell-tale ring around her neck and her fiancé, Raul, will have hung himself instead. When Eva tries to hook me by reading one of her haikus, I will be there with a more beautiful girl than her and I will rebuff her advances.

In still another, Andrew Haigh will look miserable and defeated and he will tell me that he has lost all of his money, that he has lost the will to paint and that he is surviving by flipping burgers in a fast-food joint. Everyone will then start to reminisce on my debut collection of poetry, *Ashtray Chest* and marvel at what a prodigy I was.

After that last scenario fizzles to an end in my head, I blink and suddenly come to. As if I have woken from a blackout, I find myself standing over the toilet with my pants down, erection in one hand and *Ashtray Chest* in another. I finish off by reading the words aloud to myself as I sputter into the toilet bowl.

*

The funeral is being held at The Mayflower. It is not the first time I have walked into The Mayflower and had a drink before nine a.m, but usually Charlie would be beside me. And there he is, at the far end of the restaurant, peacefully asleep in the open coffin, next to a table loaded with a fine selection of booze and cigarettes and even some snuff tobacco which Charlie liked to have from time to time. Between me and Charlie and the booze is a room of people drinking and laughing, some crying, while in the corner a fat, bearded man plays the bagpipes. I start to make for the booze, keeping my eyes averted from anyone who might want to catch my attention, when someone stops me.

'Alright?' Martin asks me. He has brushed his hair back into a ponytail and is wearing a button-up white shirt, rolled up at the sleeves.

'Sure,' I say. I shake his hand. 'Pretty sad, isn't it?'

Martin shakes his head. 'No room for sadness here, man. Not on account of Charlie. He would have wanted us to party. And party we will. What's your poison?' He gestures to another, smaller table, on which all manner of drug is neatly lined up for consumption. 'Charlie was partial to the white stuff but we've got something for everyone.'

'I'll stick to the liquids for now.'

'Cool, man. Well everyone is here. They've all been asking about you.'

My stomach drops.

'Catch up with you later,' Martin says. 'We're gonna do a couple speeches later.'

There are people all around, but I put my head down and walk. I pour myself a very large brandy, down it and then chase it with a beer. Feeling a little more at ease now, I start to walk around the place. In the middle of the room I spot them. They're all there. Andrew, Robin, Georgia, Tabitha, the bald guy with the unnatural amount of facial hair who draws caricatures of you without asking and Willem and Sara — the ageing hippy couple with kind faces. There are a couple of others I recognise from the literary scene, but I forget their names. Charlie's presence is markedly absent from the group. Without him — the fierce editor who followed no man's rules — the group is without a leader. Without him, this odd assortment of people is untethered. They are like a bunch of buoys in the ocean, bumping up against each other by mistake. I take a deep breath, trying to remember my lines and I approach them.

Contrary to my worry that people would be clambering over themselves to talk to me, I join the group without being noticed, slotting in between Robin and Andrew. Across from me, Willem is nodding and listening to Robin talk, while Sara's eyes pan over the group, pausing briefly on my face and crinkling with a polite but vacant smile before moving on.

To my left, Robin is telling the group how she wouldn't attend one of the events for the launch of her new book, because it was being sponsored by some big corporation which used child labour in Indonesia.

'Well done, Rob,' Andrew says. 'I've dealt with similar concerns in my new series of paintings — on show at the New York Met now. Not child labour but wildlife extinction. Rhino poaching in particular. I just love how phallic the horns are. Like great big cocks right on their

faces. I do a lot of visual play with the idea of dismembering. Disempowerment. I won't say how but you really should take a trip and see it if you can.'

He talks for another ten minutes, his slight arms gesturing as though moving through water. Everyone is transfixed. This is the Andrew I remember. There is never too tenuous a connection to be made, never too little reason to talk about himself.

Although no one has recognised me, the longer I stand here, the more conspicuous I feel. They are all talking now, about their careers and achievements and awards. As they list off their accolades, all I can think about is having spent the last six or seven years of my life drinking and smoking on Charlie's apartment floor, talking endlessly about books but never reading one let alone writing one. Even worse is that Charlie kicked me out and I had to be taken in by my uncle like a little kid. Still worse than that is the fact that I had to get a job. And not just any job. I always told myself that if ever I decided to take on employment outside of writing my poems, that it would be as an editor or a publisher, or something like that. Something literary-related. Word-adjacent. Instead, I handle fish five days a week for an angry little man and his bloated wife. I have never felt as far away from who I thought I would be as I do now. To be noticed now would be more embarrassing than if I'd just disappeared completely.

I am about to leave when Sara shouts my name out. The whole group goes quiet, turning their heads left and right to find me, but no one does. Sara shouts my name again and points at me and this time everyone in the group locks on to me. The same procession of expressions flicker across each of their faces; confusion, recognition, uncertainty, disbelief. Andrew's and Robin's jaws fall open and I am suddenly able to see myself as they see me.

When they knew me I was six foot and a bit, thin but healthy. Now I could be taken as a short guy, due to the years of slouching. All the drinking and smoking has left me emaciated, with a long and sallow face covered in malnourished looking stubble. I haven't changed my

hair. It is still brown and I still keep it brushed back from my face, but it is mostly dirty these days as I have found that three or four days of grease has a much better hold than gel. I could be any Tom on the street, or Dick on the train, or Harry in the grocery store. No wonder no one recognised me at first.

That spell is broken as Sara continues to squeal my name and then runs over to hug me. Her nimbleness takes me by surprise, as does her warm and fleshy body which I had expected to be bony and saggy with old age. Now everyone starts to call my name and they are pulling on my shirt and yanking on my arm, trying to get a turn with me. In the chaos of the hug and the voices and the bodies, I slide a hand onto Sara's ass and find it as expected: full, but hanging rather low in her large panties.

Sara laughs and leans back to look at me. 'I thought you looked familiar!'

As soon as Sara lets go of me, Robin and Georgia slide into her place, giving me a double hug. I had always fantasised about being with both of them at the same time. Next are Andrew and Willem with smiles and handshakes, then Tabitha approaches timidly and gives me a side-hug. Although older than me she still feels as prepubescent as she did the night I slept with her. Caricature man slaps my back and I shrug him off; I have no time for jokers. Sara hugs me again, shaking me. I think she has had a soft spot for me since the time I got drunk and told her that my mother used to put her cigarettes out on my arm.

'So?' Andrew shakes his head, looking incredulous.

I nod. 'So.'

'Oh, god!' Sara smacks my arm. 'How long has it been? Five years?'

'Eight.'

'Eight! Why'd you never come round, darling?'

'I didn't know you were here to come round to. I thought everyone had left.'

'Everyone except us,' Sara puts her arm around Willem's waist. 'We're still here, same as ever.'

'I'm based in London now,' Andrew interjects. 'I run my gallery there, but I'm often in Paris or New York or São Paulo, showcasing my paintings.'

'Yes,' Georgia says. 'We often see you when you come to the states. We're in Boston. Robin runs the creative writing program at Boston University and I'm still just an author, peddling away at the keys. My latest book has been on the bestseller list for nearly three months now.' Georgia smiles.

There is silence as we all look at each other. I know they are waiting for me to tell them about myself, what literary success I have had over the years, but I can't bring myself to speak.

'So,' Andrew forces out the words. 'Which of your masterpieces have I missed? I haven't seen your name in a while, although I don't have access to the local market anymore, being in London.'

In a panic, I run through the scenarios I rehearsed the night before.

'Possibly a few.' I feel a sweat coming on. 'But I wrote under a pen name, so you wouldn't have known it was me.'

'Oh?' Andrew looks dubious. 'I'll have to get hold of them. What's the pen name?'

'I don't want to say in front of so many people. I'll get my agent to send you a copy.'

'Come on, you're amongst friends.' Andrew gestures to the group. 'Who here will keep his secret identity a secret?'

Everyone laughs and nods. Tabitha raises her hand. Only Sara looks concerned, her mouth downturned at Andrew. I cast around for a name, but my hesitation is suspicious and I know now that nothing I say can save me and yet I have to say something.

'Hector George.'

Andrew gives a wry smile. 'Good name. Very strong sounding. A masculine collection of letters if ever there were any. I can't say I have seen that name in the bookstores, but like I said, I don't hear much about the local scene anymore.'

At that moment, Martin comes to my rescue by standing on a table near Charlie's body and announcing that the floor is open for anyone who wants to say something. As everyone turns to look at him, Sara grabs my arm and pulls me away from the group into a corner.

'God. He's still a prick, isn't he?' Sara smiles at me.

'He's a successful prick.' I light a cigarette and Sara plucks it from my fingers, takes a drag and then inserts it between my lips.

'Sure, but that doesn't mean we have to enjoy his company. Now, listen hon,' she says, her tone changing. 'You're looking sick as a dog. Are you working too much? Or working too little, perhaps?'

Suddenly, everything just comes tumbling out.

'The latter. I don't know what I've been doing for eight years. It's all a drunken blur and I don't remember having much fun.'

'Well,' Sara say, 'lucky for us writers there is no such thing as wasted time. Every moment we spend thinking we should be doing something else is more material, another weapon in our arsenal.'

I think of Andrew and Robin and Georgia and even Charlie when he was live, with their endless projects, their ceaseless momentum.

'The problem is that I've got no goal,' I say. 'Nothing to work towards. You've got your plays and Georgia writes practically a new book every month. Andrew is always painting or flying somewhere. I don't have anything. I'm just drinking myself to death, obsessing over the time when I used to write poetry. I'm afraid,' I pause and take a drag of my cigarette. 'Afraid that this is it for me. Afraid that one book is all I have in me. Afraid that I'm running on empty

— on fumes — and that I'm going to break down in the middle of nowhere and disappear forever.'

Shit. I must be drunk.

'Oh, honey. That's every artist's fear. That we'll never produce anything worthwhile. And then we do, the fear is that we'll never do anything else worthwhile. And it goes on and on like that until we die. It's that fear that keeps us going. Sometimes the lulls between projects are longer and that gives that fear space to grow. Don' let it squash you. Use it.'

'That's not it,' I say. 'I just don't feel like I have anything in me. There's nothing there.'

'Well, look at John Fowler. He only had one real book in him and that took everything he had to write it. And when he was done, he was all finished up. Completely drained. And he killed himself. But Fowler was at the end of his life. He was an old man. You're still young. You're not a kid anymore but you've got time. Just stop putting so much pressure on yourself.'

I haven't hear half of what she has said. As soon as Sara said the name Fowler, my ears started ringing like I had a school-bell in my head.

'Fowler?' I ask. 'You know about John Fowler?'

Sara looks dumbfounded. 'Well, of course I do, honey. You talked about him all the time.'

'I did?'

'Well, sure. Whenever anybody asked what you were reading or who your biggest influence was or if you had any recommendations it was Fowler-this and Fowler-that. Don't you remember? I'd say you were mildly obsessed.'

'And did I say all that stuff about him killing himself? About only having one book in him and it draining him?'

Sara continues to look dumbfounded. 'No. How could you know that? No, my husband said that. Willem went to university with him. The two of them and Graham Abbott ran a poetry

magazine together. Don't you remember any of this? You have definitely been drinking too much.'

I want to ask some more questions, but Sara is tugged away by a fat man in a sequin crop-top and a leather trench coat.

'Funeral duties! Listen, try to have some fun. Or, just sit in the corner and kill your self.' Sara shrugs, smiling and disappears into the crowd. Speeches are still going on. Andrew is up on the table now, telling what looks like a very long story.

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What Sara says is true. I was completely obsessed with Fowler and would talk about him constantly. But I don't know what I talked about since I didn't really know anything about him. I didn't know that about Fowler — what Sara had said. I didn't know that writing *The Cause of Hell* had drained him. I had a much more romantic picture in my head. In my head Fowler was deposited on the earth like some kind of messiah and when he had finished what he came to do, he didn't so much as die as he was welcomed back into the universe. I pictured a big chasm in the sky opening up for him and Fowler walking calmly into the abyss, the horizon closing shut behind him.

Now that I have had one or two thoughts of my own about disappearing, I know it to be a lot less picturesque than I imagined when I was seventeen or eighteen. I have pictured myself driving my car off a bridge, imagined the crunching of metal and glass and the airbag exploding with such force that it breaks my neck before the car even hits the ground. I have imagined hanging myself from the staircase railing at my flat, but the rope snapping or the wood breaking and having to live the rest of my life knowing that I couldn't even get suicide right.

Back when I was writing — really writing — I felt so alive. I felt like Fowler incarnate and that the world would open up for me just as I thought it had for him. But now I

am sick as I consider the fact that perhaps *Ashtray Chest* was my *Cause of Hell* and that I should have disappeared after I wrote it, just as Fowler did. I haven't managed to kill myself, but I am disappearing. If it weren't for people like Sara, who seems to really like me for some reason, I might be rendered completely invisible. I might look in the mirror one day and see only the wall reflected there. But why would Fowler have wanted to disappear in the first place? He was a success. People knew his name. No one knows mine. If there is anyone who has a reason to disappear forever, it's me. So why haven't I? Why Fowler? What happens to a man to get him to that point?

I can't believe I never thought to do it before, when we were all part of the same group and we saw each other practically every day. I have to talk to Willem. It feels urgent to me that I find out what happened to Fowler. It feels life and death.

Willem is laughing as he watches Sara twirl around on the fat man's arm. They are dancing to imaginary music and Willem claps his hands to keep the make-believe time.

'Hey, kid,' Willem says as I pull up next to him.

Kid is what Charlie used to call me, even up until I wasn't a kid anymore.

'It's really good to see you,' Willem pats me on the back

'Yeah.' I look at him, trying to figure out what I want to say. He is average height, but I still look straight down onto his thinning head of hair. The pale, spotted scalp showing through reveals his age more than his face does, somehow. I don't know how to say it, so it just comes out.

'Why did John Fowler kill himself?'

Willem is taken aback. 'God, that's a question. Where did that come from?'

I shrug. 'I've just been talking to Sara about him. I guess there are some things that I have started to wonder about, that I never asked you.'

'Yes. He was a good friend of mine at the university. Him and Graham. Back when you first arrived in the city you carried his book under your arm everywhere you went. You talked about him like you were preaching gospel. I did try and talk a little about him with you, but you didn't seem interested.'

He's right. I didn't want to hear anything about the real Fowler. All I wanted was the illusion I had created.

'I'm interested now.'

'Ok,' Willem turns to face me fully. 'Let's sit down.'

We take two chairs and place them in the corner of the room so we are out of the way, hidden behind the wall of bodies.

'So, you want to know why he killed himself?' Willem asks.

'Yes.'

Willem shakes his head. 'I don't know. I wasn't there for the last fifteen or sixteen years of his life, so I really don't know why he decided to do that. I can tell you what I know about him, though.'

'I'd like to hear it.'

'Well,' Willem folds his arms in thought. 'I met Graham as an undergraduate student and we became friends first. John came to the university later on, as a postgraduate. We all studied literature and writing. John and I were poets and Graham was more interested in the business side of that whole world — publishing and marketing, that kind of thing. We talked a little about starting our own poetry magazine, but that sort of fizzled out as we finished studying and the three of us got jobs teaching at the university. Graham ran the school literary magazine and John and I taught poetry and writing.

'As an undergrad, John had been dating a really nice girl called Margery Schoën. Margery was brilliant. She was a maths student, one of the few females in her class. She was

German and had extremely strict parents who would only condone their relationship if they were married. So John and Margery got engaged and they stayed engaged until John disappeared.

'As I said, John and I were both poets, but he was the only one who seemed to have any success. While we were working at the university, John had two collections of poetry published. I was extremely envious. He made me look bad,' Willem pauses to laugh. 'But really, I was always impressed with John's work ethic. He was always on-time to lectures, always made time to consult with his students, never returned an essay or a test that wasn't marked fairly or didn't contain really detailed and thoughtful feedback. He was the same with his poetry. John wrote every day. He was calm and methodical about it. He didn't mind labouring over a line for a week or even a month. That kind of thing drove me insane. I was manic where he was controlled, deliberate. But that's just the kind of guy he was. He spoke slowly. Everything he did was thoughtful and considered. He was never rash or brazen or reckless.

'So, anyway. We thought that the three of us — John, me and Graham — would make a good team to run a poetry magazine. I would write and solicit entries, John would edit and Graham would publish and sell the thing. It was good fun and it went well for a few years. We got some big names in. We published a lot of new poets. We felt like we were really contributing to the scene. Then John started, I don't know, losing it a bit. He started showing up late to classes, forgetting to set assignments, missing spelling errors and punctuation in the magazine drafts. It happened gradually, so no one really noticed. This went on for about six months, maybe a year. Then, one day, John said he had to go and visit his mother. After that, he just never came back. Margery was completely heart-broken. He had left without saying anything to her. I tried calling, writing letters, but I never heard from him. I left it for about five years. I had my own things going on. One of the major things was that I had met Sara and we were going to get married. I wanted John to come to the wedding. I knew his mother lived

in Upington, so I went there and asked around for him. Turned he was living on a farm in Dorperland, about three hours from Upington.

'When I got there, he was surprised to see me and, I have to admit, not very happy. I remember thinking that this was not the friend I knew from university. He had always been quiet, a bit reserved, but now he just looked completely flat. Like something had sucked the life and soul out of him. We spoke a little. He told me that his mother had been very ill and that he had spent the last five years caring for her at her house in Upington with the help of a nurse. John didn't talk much about his personal life, but I remember feeling back in university that he had a difficult relationship with his mother. I never heard anything about his father or siblings, if he had any. His mother got worse and had to be moved to a full-time care home. He married his mother's nurse, Fiona, I think it was—'

'Florence.' I remember from the foreword to his book, written by the same people who had published my book.

'Yes,' Willem continues, 'Florence. That was it. He sold his mother's house and moved to Florence's family farm in Dorperland, where they, believe it or not,' Willem lets out a little laugh, 'were farming Dorper sheep. It was a tiny little community. I think there were a grand total of about six houses in the area. Florence brought us some tea while I was visiting. She was lovely. Not as pretty as Margery had been, but seemed very sweet. She certainly loved John. That was plain. I asked him if he was still writing. He didn't say much. When I brought up the wedding, he told me directly that he wasn't going to come. He wished me luck. I could tell he wanted me to leave, so I shook his hand and I left. I never heard from him again. In fact, the next time I heard about John was sixteen years later, when I learned that he had killed himself. Shortly after, his book was published. I read it, of course. Brilliant. Not strictly poetry, but there was something poetic about it. It was strange, though.'

'What was?'

'Well, in the foreword to the book, the publishing lady had said that she had been sent the unfinished manuscript anonymously, shortly after John's death. I just don't think that sounds like John. The John Fowler I knew would never have submitted anything to anyone in an unfinished state. He was proud of his writing. He worked hard on it. He didn't suffer the same insecurities the rest of us did. He wasn't arrogant, but he knew he was talented. And he would never have sent it anonymously. He liked credit for his work. So perhaps he was a bit arrogant,' Willem smiles. 'The John I knew would have been mortified that something of his had been published incomplete.'

'But you said that he started slipping a bit, when you knew him. Missing deadlines and spelling errors and stuff.'

Willem nods. 'Yes, I suppose. Something happened that changed him. I don't know what. He changed. Maybe it was caring for his mother. Maybe it was her dying. I don't know. I do think it has something to do with his mother. His whole book is basically about his relationship with her. I remember reading it and thinking, god, this woman sounds awful.'

'Yeah,' I agree, remembering about how reading Fowler's book had made me think about my own mother.

When I first discovered Fowler — back in 1974 or 1975 — what had captured me was the similarities between myself and Fowler's narrator, a nameless dead man who watches over the people in his life as they and he reflect on his own suicide. As Willem talks, I begin to understand that Fowler's narrator is not so distanced from Fowler himself, that *The Cause of Hell* is really about Fowler's own death, before it even happens.

'Still,' Willem continues, 'the really strange thing is how that Liebermann woman got involved with it all.'

'Liebermann,' I repeat. 'Liebermann Press House. I won their writing prize, you know. I never met her, though. Linda.'

'Yes. Now, remember that Sara and I have been around a long time. Don't mean to toot our own horns here, but we knew most important people back then and Linda wasn't one of them. She seemed to just pop out the woodwork one day and bam! She owned half the town. So, if John did send his manuscript to someone — which I highly doubt he did — it surprised me that of all people it was to Linda Liebermann There were other people who made more sense. He could have sent it to Graham, who was still running the poetry magazine we started. It just didn't make sense. Surprised Charlie, too, when I told him about it. He didn't know John but he couldn't stand Linda. Oh, if you got him going about the Liebermann people, trust me, you'd wish you'd never brought it up.'

'Well, no one in the group seemed very impressed that I had won the Liebermann prize.'

'Oh, no one doubted your talent, it's just that we got sick of their whole charade.'

'I remember Eva used to call it a pony-show.'

'Exactly. With them, you had to be really connected to get anything published. You had to be willing to scratch a couple of backs. It stopped being about the writing. And because they were so wealthy and they seemed to own everyone and everything, if you weren't published by the Liebermanns, it was like no one else would touch you. When you met us, we'd all been battling with their monopoly in one way or another and most of us decided that the best thing would be to withdraw from the whole scene completely.'

'Except Charlie.'

'It was Charlie's whole life,' Willem shrugs. 'He didn't feel like Charlie if he didn't sit around bad-mouthing Linda Liebermann with us but then show up to an event later that evening to schmooze with one of her new literary stars and talk philosophy with undergrad students. He wanted a piece of everything.'

Willem and I nod at each other. My throat burns. I need another drink. I'm about to suggest as much when Andrew starts heading towards us.

'Willem,' I shake his hand. 'See you around.' Before Andrew approaches, I have ducked off into a group of people and am snaking through the crowd like an expert guerrilla, skirting round Robin and Georgia and the others. My goal now is alcohol. I take a few shots of tequila, I can't remember how many, down another brandy and crack open a beer. The restaurant starts to feel a little claustrophobic then and I decide the only thing that can help is some fresh air and a cigarette. Just as I get to the front door, I am intercepted by Tabitha. She is short and spotty with long dirty-blonde hair and although she is a gaunt little thing, she has quite a distended belly that looks hard to the touch. I suppress the urge to rap on it with my knuckles.

She looks up at me with those sad eyes that make me want to simultaneously pet her and push her aside.

'Hello, Tabitha,' I say, praying she is not still in love with me.

'Hi,' is all she says in her small little voice.

We stand there just looking at each other. I wish she would say something or get out of my way. She was always doing this kind of stuff back in the day. Following me around and not saying anything. When we slept together that one time I thought it would make it stop, at least drain the tension a bit. But it only made it worse. Then I had to resort to being mean to her.

Christ sake, what do you want? is what I am about to say before the tequilas and the brandy finally come over me in a wave so strong I am knocked over. Next thing I know, I am sitting on a bench outside with a glass of water in my hand and Tabitha sitting next to me.

'What happened?' I slur, throwing water down my chest as I try to drink it.

'You fainted.'

'Jesus. Did anyone see?'

Tabitha nods. It's been a while since I've been this pissed and have had a pure and true blackout. I have just been getting drunk and going to bed like a reasonable person.

I finally get to light my cigarette but when I take a drag my mouth fills up with saliva and all those tequilas bubble back up my throat and I vomit onto the floor between my legs. Tabitha continues to stare at me with those eyes. I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and test out another drag. This one goes a bit more smoothly. And Tabitha is still staring at me. Fine. I can stare too. I can't believe how thin her lips are.

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When Martin taps me on the shoulder, I stumble back off Tabitha, pulling a long string of spit between our mouths. She wipes my vomit off her chin and blushes, looking up at Martin.

'There you are, man,' Martin says. He doesn't care what has just been going on with Tabitha. 'It's getting really narcissistic in there. Wanna go somewhere else?'

'Sure,' I say. 'I'm far too drunk to go to sleep and way too sober to stay at this party much longer. I think Charlie would understand.'

'Of course he would. We're going to his favourite place. Come on, let's find a cab.'

'You're leaving?' Tabitha asks.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I'm sure I'll see you around.'

As we start to walk off, Tabitha's little voice calls out behind us. 'I can drive you!'

Martin and I exchange looks. Neither of us can turn down a free ride. Tabitha drives slowly and in complete silence while Martin and I smoke cigarettes in her car and finish the beers we brought with us from The Mayflower. When we get to the Grand Plaza, we head straight up to the second floor.

The name of the club is *Lolita's*, the L a profile silhouette of a naked woman sitting with her knees bent up slightly and her back arched. At the door, a huge bouncer pats me down again. As soon as the doors open, I feel blinded.

It is like fireworks have gone off inside a black hole. I can only see as far as a foot in front of me at a time, except for a split-second every heartbeat, when the entire club is revealed in the bursts of blue and yellow and red and green lights. As we walk towards the tables in the smoking section near the back, the lights illuminate scenes around me for just a moment before they are swallowed up by darkness again. A topless woman on her knees on a table, her hair thrown back. A pair of legs point glittery high-heels straight up in the air. Two naked women lean against a bar with their hands on each other's hips. A man in a loosened tie is being pulled behind a curtain by a disembodied hand with long, pink nails. An old man sits alone with his back to the stage, watching sports on the TV in the corner. A waitress in a corset carrying a round of shots. On the main stage, a blonde woman wrapped around a pole.

We find a table, Martin and I get a round of tequilas and whiskeys and Tabitha just sits there. Martin and I light cigarettes and for a long time no one talks. A loud, bass-heavy track comes on and the DJ screams into the microphone, his voice distorting as he announces the main act of the night, Animé. I strain to look, but I can't see the stage from where I am sitting, my view blocked by a table of fat men and the girls who are crawling in their laps. It's almost too loud to be pleasant, but I let my mind relax and eventually the music starts to hush. My eyes adjust to the flashing lights and I enjoy just looking around.

That's what it is.

The most erotic thing about the club isn't the fact that the women are naked, it's not the grinding, it's not the phoney interest they pay us. It's the flashes. The illuminated moments. The scenes which change from one flash to the next. It is like the blinking of your own eyes as your peep in on a girl you like; you know you shouldn't be watching but you can't help it. You watch a girl, you blink, the light flashes, she's gone. You blink, another girl appears. You blink, her stockings are down.

But look long enough, keep your eyes open when the blinks come and it's a whole different story. Right now I am watching a brown-haired woman in thigh-high boots and a g-string, sitting on a young boy's knee. He is bouncing her up and down like a baby. Her bare breasts bounce in his face, he sticks his face between them, she laughs. He puts one of her breasts in his mouth, she shakes her head and pushes him away. He pulls out a note and tucks into the front of her g-string. She gets up, turns around to face him and throws a leg over to straddle him. She leans back and pulls his face towards her chest and he continues sucking her breasts. I watch this go on a while. Eventually the boy has no more money and the stripper kisses him on the cheek and leaves. I continue to watch her as she prowls the club, draping herself over men, tugging at them as they walk past. A yellow light flashes and I can see the wrinkles around her eyes, the sagging at the corners of her mouth, the c-section scar across her lower belly. That's why they flash the lights. So that you don't see everything all at once.

My hearing tunes in and out and I catch little snippets of conversation around me. Martin's eyes are darting around the room manically, trying to keep tabs on every ass, every thigh, distracted by every jiggle and shake. We get more drinks, we smoke more cigarettes, Martin and I get a lap dance, Martin send a few bottles of expensive wine over to a table of women who are not strippers and they drink the wine without coming over to talk to him. Martin is pretty pissed off about this fact, but I tell him that is part of the risk you run when you send unsolicited wine over to strange women. They might not talk to you even after drinking it. Later on, one of them does approach the table, but it is to address me and not Martin.

She says her name is Michelle. She is tall and thick-set, with shoulder-length blonde hair. Her face is ok-looking, though I know the light in the club can be quite flattering. We talk a little, she tells me about her job and her parents, none of the details of which I can recall. Michelle seems to find me genuinely funny and laughs at everything I say. Eventually Michelle's friend comes over reluctantly and is forced to sit next to Martin who keeps to talk

to her even though she does not look at him once. Tabitha, on the other hand, stares at Michelle and I the entire time without blinking.

'What's her problem?' Michelle is standing behind me with her arms around my chest, nuzzling my neck.

I shrug. 'Dunno.'

Michelle leans round and sits on my lap and we kiss with wet, slavering mouths for about forty-five minutes. Tabitha doesn't look away once. Sometime during this, Martin taps me on the shoulder and says he is leaving. When I come up for air later, it is just me, Michelle and Tabitha left. Michelle's friend seems also to have disappeared.

Michelle and I decide we should go back to her place, since she has an actual bed and I only have a sleeper-couch. I tell Tabitha we are leaving and she trails behind me and Michelle as we walk with our arms around each other's waists. When we get outside the casino it is pitch-black and the parking lot is empty except for a few cars belonging to the veterans who are still inside fighting the good fight against the slot machines. Michelle and I split off left towards a cab and Tabitha peels right to her car without saying goodbye.

Michelle gives the cabbie her address and the guy gives her a price in the triple digits.

'What!' Michelle shouts. 'That's ridiculous! You're ripping us off!'

The cabbie turns around, his face slack. 'You got any other options?'

Just then, there are lights of another car heading towards us.

'Yes,' I say and pull Michelle out of the cab.

I jump in front of the oncoming car, which screeches to a stop. Tabitha's face is stricken white behind the steering wheel.

I walk round to the driver's side and lean down into the window. 'Listen, Tabby, this guy is trying to rip us off. Could we catch a ride to Michelle's place?'

Tabitha stares at me, her face dropping. She doesn't say no, so I call Michelle over and we get into the back seat together.

Michelle gives Tabitha her address. 'You know where that is?'

Tabitha nods and starts driving. It is a ten minute drive to Michelle's and we kiss the entire way there.

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We arrive outside a nice-looking house with a well-manicured front garden. Michelle tells Tabitha to stop the car and she hops out, heading up the path.

'Thanks, Tabby,' I say, patting her on the shoulder.

I meet Michelle at the front door of the house and before we go in, she pushes me against the door and we continue kissing and pressing up against each other. It is only a few minutes later that I hear Tabitha's car drive away.

The noise breaks my concentration. 'Come on,' I say, with my hand on the door-handle, waiting for Michelle to unlock.

'No, no,' she says. 'This way.'

Michelle leads me to the left of the door, round the side of the house, up a narrow path between the house and a concrete fence and to a small cottage in the back garden.

'This is your place?' I ask as she gets her keys out.

'Yes, my landlords live in the main house.'

Inside, I trip over a minefield of squeaky toys, rattles, a miniature skateboard, some clothes, colouring-in books and pencil crayons.

'Sorry,' Michelle says, kicking the stuff out the way. 'My kids are so messy.'

I am too drunk to register whatever panic does well up inside me then. Instead, I ask for the bathroom.

'Second door on the right, down there,' she points.

I stumble down the corridor, sending lego pieces flying.

'No, no! Second door! That's my kid's room! They're sleeping!'

'Sorry,' I whisper, moving down a door and turning the light on. Inside, the tub is filled with laundry and the tiles are peeling off the walls. There is a small, child-sized turd in the toilet and I can't bring myself to piss onto it. Instead, I piss into the sink, looking at my reflection in the mirror. Jesus, I look old. Old and drained, like my life-force is running out of me in my urine.

Maybe this is what Fowler looked like when Willem went to see him. Maybe he looked as anaemic and hopeless as the man looking back at me now. But Fowler wasn't hopeless. Willem said he had been writing then. He must have been busy with *The Cause of Hell*. How could a man in the midst of completing a literary masterpiece be drained and hopeless? I don't understand. Fowler was already a successful writer when he disappeared. If he had only lived, he would have been even more famous. Why would a man like that kill himself and why would someone like me still be alive? If he disappeared and died, I can't imagine what is in store for me. I always wanted to turn out just like Fowler and now I am worried I will.

From the darkness beyond the bathroom, Michelle calls my name softly. I try to put Fowler out of my mind by pulling on my penis in order to harden myself. But my own face in the bathroom mirror keeps coming back to me and makes me soft every time. I stand outside the bedroom, my hand pumping in my pants, desperately trying to recall a pair of breasts from my past. Eventually I decide I am hard enough and I enter the bedroom.

'Take off your clothes,' Michelle says.

I do as she I am told and drop my clothes around me feet. I kick off my shoes as I climb onto the bed. She reaches a hand out to stroke me and pauses when she find my penis flaccid.

'Oh,' she whispers. 'We'll fix this.'

Michelle spends an agonising fifteen minutes sucking me to no avail. Every hint of an erection dies as soon as it starts. Fowler will not leave me alone. I see my own name on an unfinished manuscript. I picture my own face being blown away by a shotgun.

'Are you gay or something?' Michelle asks, frustrated.

'Just give me a minute.' I turn my back to her and curl up into the foetal position, screwing my eyes shut, forcing Fowler out of my head. I masturbate furiously, my hands dry, refusing to let my soft penis win. After a few minutes I hear Michelle start to doze off next to me, but I keep going. Swift, quick swipes, up and down, ignoring the chafe that is starting. Finally I feel I am hard enough to enter her, so I roll over onto her and shove it in before Fowler comes back. She wakes up and grabs my hips, pulling me into her. We are both so dry that it doesn't go in immediately and I have to give two hard thrusts. Immediately there is a sharp pinching feeling around the head of my penis, then a slight burning and all of a sudden it is like a dam has burst and it becomes wonderfully wet and slippery. I slide in an out of her with ease, though my penis feels quite numb which I put down to the alcohol. Because of this I am able to perform for what feels like hours without cumming. Eventually we are both tired and we agree to call it quits and go to sleep.

Michelle kisses me on the cheek and heads off to the bathroom to pee. A few minutes later she bursts back into the room, crying and apologising.

'I'm so sorry,' she sobs with her hands over her face. 'I'm so embarrassed.'

'What's going on?' I am bewildered.

'I'm covered in blood. I think I started my period.'

'No big deal. It made good lube.'

Michelle groans and turns over.

'I'm just gonna go clean myself off,' I tell her. In the bathroom, I look down. It is like a murder scene. My entire dick is scarlet, purple even and the blood has run all the way down

my legs and dried in the hair. I go to piss in the sink and the burning in the head of my penis starts again, but this time like the whole thing has been dipped in petrol and set on fire. I pull my foreskin back and where it would usually be attached to my penis by a thin ridge of skin, there is nothing except a big tear. The burning is worse when I do that and the blood wells up at such a pace that within seconds the white sink turns red. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. With my dick in my hands, I ran back into the bedroom and feel around the floor for my clothes.

'What are you doing?' Michelle asks.

I find my socks and wrap them both around my dick. 'I've got to go.'

Michelle starts to cry again as I pull my pants up and slip my bare feet into my shoes.

'I'm sorry. It's so disgusting,' she cries. I don't correct her.

'This was fun,' I say as I pull my shirt on over my head. 'Which way to the freeway?'

Michelle gives me directions in a strained voice, thick with tears and phlegm and muffled by the pillow over her face.

'Thanks. I'll call you.'

I run out of there, tripping over the same toys I tripped over when I came in and I don't stop running until I have hit the freeway. I walk through the night as cars speed past me, whipping up my jacket and holding onto my crotch and praying to god that this is the way back to George's.

LINDA

March 1974

Kitty was born with the umbilical cord tangled around her neck, sometime after midnight on a Tuesday. Kitty's mother, Linda Brown, was a stone-faced 17-year old who had learned early on in life that no one would care if she cried and that it didn't make the hurt go away anyway and so, even in the 37th hour of labour, she barely registered the blue-faced infant emerging from between her strong legs. She didn't bat an eye when Kitty was rushed away into the incubator and she almost didn't hear the doctor telling her that Kitty had died.

After Kitty died, Linda became very depressed. She had not known who the father was and she had no friends to comfort her. She was living with her parents and they offered only criticism. Linda's mother, Mrs Brown, was a house-wife, a church-goer and a stern believer in family values, but she did not know how to love. Mr Brown, Linda's father was a successful businessman who was often away for work and for whose attention she would have to compete with her mother when he was home. Linda's parents were embarrassed by their daughter and agreed that the best thing for everyone would be if Linda continued to live with her parents and raised her baby there — quietly.

But now that the baby was dead, Mr and Mrs Brown could not see any reason for their grown-up, unmarried daughter to be living at home. They told her that this was an opportunity

to find a good husband — heavens knows the kind of man she would have ended up with if she'd actually had the baby. No good, respectful man would have willingly taken on a bastard as his own. But now that the baby was dead, there was no reason she shouldn't start to look for a good husband.

Linda could not disagree with her parents, but for very different reasons. She would be miserable if she continued to live at home, her mother side-eyeing her from the kitchen sink, her father incapable of emotional nuance and both of them insistent that her depression was simply a matter of pulling herself together and getting on with it already. She had graduated high school with no prospects of going to university and no 'aptitude for work,' as the school career counsellor had put it. While pregnant, she had spent many nights rubbing her belly, poking at the small elbows which pushed out at her, thinking that life would certainly be a lot easier if she wasn't having a baby. But now that the baby was dead, Linda couldn't see any problem in getting a husband. She had a good face, she knew that. Dark, thick hair. Olive-undertoned skin. Nose rather on the large side, but with a charming rounded end that detracted from its size. Perhaps her best feature were her eyes, which were big and black. Linda liked them best because they made her seem thoughtful even when she was thinking nothing at all.

*

Linda agreed to let her mother start setting up dates with some men that her father worked with. They were mostly older men who were so boring and full of themselves that Linda could hardly sit up straight while they talked and would inevitably end up slumped in the couch, staring up at the ceiling. Linda's mother would elbow her in the ribs, as her mother insisted on being present for the meetings and would smile graciously and apologise for her daughter's behaviour, citing immaturity as a prime factor. Skilfully, Linda's mother would then spin Linda's immaturity into an advantage, this being that she was still young and had many

years ahead to be a good wife and plenty of energy to have three, four, even five children if the man preferred a bigger family. Still, there were no takers and Linda's mother reported back in detail what the men had said about her in private after the meetings were done.

'She's extremely dull,' the one with the red eyes and thick, oily red nose had said.

'She doesn't have much of a cheerful disposition,' said another with large hands that scared Linda.

'Perhaps if she were a blonde, or perhaps just had rosier cheeks,' said a man older than her grandpa.

Mrs Brown was extremely disappointed and Mr Brown was embarrassed by her behaviour. These were all colleagues of his that he had to do business with in the future. Disgusted at the thought of being married to any of the men she had met, but terrified of being trapped in her parents' home for the rest of her life, Linda told her mother that she would try harder and asked her mother for some advice.

'Smile more. You have a good face. Use it. And don't forget to laugh with your whole body — they like that. Make sure to twinkle your eyes and halfway through the meeting, reapply some lipstick. You could also try crossing and re-crossing your legs. But make sure not to look restless. You must be graceful and attentive, but not too keen.'

Linda tried to hold all of this in her head during the next meeting. His name was Peter Liebermann and he was at least 15 years older than her. He had been a filing clerk in her father's office and had progressed through the company and eventually got involved in stocks and was now a multi-millionaire with a big house and many cars.

'As far as choices went, Peter wasn't too bad. He had gentle eyes, didn't look like much of a drinker and she couldn't imagine him beating her.

'Not so hot on him being a Jew, you know. But some things can't be helped. He's a fine man nonetheless,' Linda's father said.

Linda supposed she could imagine being able to stomach him in the future. This Peter was probably her best bet at some kind of future outside of her mother's and father's house. So, Linda smiled and laughed with her whole body and twinkled her eyes and put on more lipstick and crossed and re-crossed her legs and tried to look graceful all the while not being too keen.

'He liked you! He wants to come back!' Mrs Brown clapped after Peter had left.

*

A few more meetings that went the same as the first and Peter asked Mr and Mrs Brown for Linda's hand in marriage; without hesitation they agreed. Linda's parents were ecstatic and threw a huge engagement party to which all of Linda's father's colleagues and their wives were invited. My Brown schmoozed the room, a glass of whiskey in his left hand like a gyroscope, cigar in his right, soaking it all up like sunshine, while Mrs Brown took up station in a red arm chair and entertained the court of clucking hens which grew larger as the story of her daughter's engagement became more intimate with every sip of gin. If there were any questions about how Linda felt about all of this, they were directed at her parents, who were the clear authorities on the matter. Only Peter seemed to be at all interested in Linda; he couldn't take his arm off her waist or his eyes off her face. He smiled constantly, but seemed bashful and uncertain how to conduct himself with Linda on his arm. Peter didn't direct Linda around as she had seen her father do with her mother, steering her body with a strong grip; instead Peter held on to her loosely, with clammy fingers, as one does when holding down a cloud.

After Mr Brown sternly refused a Jewish wedding, Peter and Linda were married in a Methodist church that was so plain, Linda felt out of place in her finely embroidered dress. The reception was the same party Linda had been to a thousand times before; she smiled and danced and laughed at the stories told about her, but never got to tell any herself. Peter couldn't have been happier or more proud of the wife he had acquired. Meanwhile, Linda had to keep telling herself that maybe she would learn to love him.

Linda and Peter's first night as a married couple was spent at a five-star hotel owned by a friend of her father's. They had an apartment suite to themselves, which included a huge bedroom that opened onto a balcony through double doors of solid oak, to reveal a spectacular view of the park and lake, behind which the city skyline seemed golden at every time of day. Peter insisted on carrying Linda over the threshold of hotel room doorway and said it didn't matter when Linda told him that was generally only done once the couple had bought their first house together. Seeing that this bizarre act was very important to Peter, Linda agreed to be hoisted up into his arms and carried into the apartment. For a moment, as Peter nudged the door open with his foot and nimbly manoeuvred them through the door, Linda felt happy. But when Peter tried to put Linda down, he stood on the end of her train, jerking her backwards and causing her to twist her ankle.

Linda was not surprised by the sex. Peter clambered onto her and breathed hot air into her neck and whispered her name in her ear. Although unpleasant, Peter was gentle and it didn't take long for him to finish. Peter fell asleep soon after and Linda stared into the ceiling until the morning came.

*

One prospect of marrying Peter, one which she had been looking forward to for months now, was being able to move out of her parents house. As was tradition in her family, Linda had to wait until after her honeymoon before she could start packing up her belongings and get out of there. Peter and a few movers hauled her boxes and suitcases out to the truck, while Linda took a last walk around the house. Her father was away and her mother was busy in the kitchen, slicing a meatloaf.

'Goodbye, mother,' Linda said, as if she were reciting a line from a play. The words did not seem natural on her tongue.

'Be a good wife, Linda. I'll call you in the week.' Mrs Brown gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek and patted her shoulder. Although the words said between them held no particular gravity and although Linda was only moving a few minutes away, there seemed in the kitchen the feeling that they would never see each other again. And they didn't see each other again, at least not until the funeral many years later.

Peter's house was located in a wealthy suburb on a dark and leafy road. Linda looked about as they drove and saw on either side of her huge houses behind high walls which were dotted with private security huts and guards. Linda was nervous, but then looked at Peter in the driver's seat, smiling and felt sure that she would not be imprisoned in her new house. She dismissed her fear and instead focussed on the grandness that was awaiting her; her own mansion behind a big wall, with her own guards. A house of her own, to be in charge of. Luxury she didn't have to feel she was borrowing; even now the muted colours and confines of her parents house seemed to be an entire world away. The air was different in her new neighbourhood. It was thicker, more sustaining. All of a sudden she started to laugh and Peter got such a fright that he looked at her and laughed too. Their laughter died down just as he indicated to turn up a long driveway that disappeared into a forrest.

As they drove up the driveway and were swallowed up by the luscious trees, a massive lawn unfurled to their right. Towards the far end of the lawn was a lap pool filled with algae. Looking onto the swampy mess was a big, Victorian era house that looked just like the one from which Linda had packed up and left.

'Here we are,' Peter said. 'It's not much to look at. I work so much, I've really let the maintenance slip. But that's all sorted, now that...'

'Now that I'm here,' Linda finished.

There was a moment of silence as the two stood looking at the house across the lawn. Linda felt her heart sink.

'Well, shall we?' Peter gestured with his head as he had a suitcase in each hand and a box under each elbow.

Linda followed behind Peter, carrying just her handbag and a slim weekend bag she had received as a fourteenth birthday gift. At the truck, the movers were unlatching the double rear doors and starting to pile up her boxes on the gravel. As they walked across the grass towards the house, Peter talked nervously.

'I have really been meaning to put in a walkway, here. We can't have you traipsing over grass in your heeled shoes. And I really should phone someone to come and have a look at the pool. Do you like to swim? Perhaps we could put a heater in, for the winter. Once it's all cleaned out, of course.'

They paused at the front door, which was taller and heavier than most. Peter tried to reach into his pocket without dropping any of the things he was carrying.

'Oh, come on,' Linda said and stuffed her hand into his right trouser pocket and plucked out the keys. She unlocked the door and pushed it open with surprising ease. The interior was well-lit, but a long entrance corridor was preventing her from making anything out in detail. Linda marched across the threshold and down the corridor, leaving Peter behind her, trying to figure out how to get the round shape of a man and some baggage through the rectangular hole in the house.

The house was all boxy, all the rooms separated from each other by intrusive dividing walls. The kitchen was its own room, as were the two lounges, four bedrooms, two dining rooms and four bathrooms. Light flooded in through huge Victorian windows, but was cut short with all the unnecessary walls and created corners in which many shadows could gather. Peter showed her to their bedroom; a double sleigh-bed was pushed up between two huge windows. At the foot of the bed was an ornate kist, on either side of which were two plush wingback armchairs. It was something like a princess's room.

'Do you like it?' Peter sounded nervous.

'Oh, yes.'

*

Quite suddenly, Peter had to go to Cape Town on unexpected business. He felt terrible leaving her alone, especially in the first week, but it was a company emergency. Linda assured him that she would be ok.

'In fact, this could be a good thing. It will give me time to make the place my own.'

After Peter left, Linda didn't really know what to do with herself. All of her things were still in boxes, her clothes still in suitcases. She felt as though she were house sitting for a stranger.

'Pull yourself together and get on with it,' she told herself. She had made the decision and this was her life now, she had better start living it. So Linda went into the bedroom and unpacked her clothes into the empty cupboard next to the one filled with Peter's shirts and shoes. When she was done there, she went into the library and unpacked her small collection of books onto a bookcase that measured up to her waist. The rest of her boxes were filled with trinkets and odd things she had collected over the years, mostly from her childhood. Framed photos of her parents, one of her bronzed baby shoes, a book she had written in the fifth grade for an English project. She placed these things all about the house, trying to insert herself wherever she could see a gap. When that was done, she felt tired and lonely and went to sleep before the sun had set fully.

Now Linda had nothing to do but fill her time with chores. The more she explored the house, the more work she saw was needed. The pool needed cleaning. The windows needed repainting, the curtains were full of dust and mothballs, the doors were swinging wildly on loose hinges and in many places the skirting was either rotting or missing entirely. Linda called

the various experts to come in and fix the problems. At first, she was worried about how she would pay for all of the improvements, having no cash on her at all. But in the end that didn't prove a problem, as saying 'Mrs Liebermann' seemed to have the bill settled immediately.

When Peter arrived home to find the house in such an improved condition, he was elated.

'Look at you!' he said, impressed with how comfortable Linda had become in the house and looking forward to his life with her as his wife.

Linda and Peter settled easily into this way of life; Linda took it upon herself to begin improving the house bit by bit and Peter enjoyed seeing her do so. Although he did notice that she became quite despondent when there were no more chores to be done, he simply put this to her love for running the house. Eventually, with the house as improved as it could be, short of knocking it all down, Linda dismissed the garden service, the pool service and the housekeepers and picked up all the responsibilities herself. These chores kept her busy from at least seven in the morning until well after dark and she went to bed exhausted, but with a quiet mind. All Peter noticed was that when she was busy, she didn't seem quite so sad. He didn't mind her calloused fingers or the red mud that stained her soles, as long as she wasn't sad.

One year after they were married and Linda had moved in, Peter had to go away on business for five weeks. He was very sad to go and would miss her terribly, while Linda only repeated the words back to him but didn't mean them. When Peter was gone, Linda found herself so bored without the additional tasks of cooking for and cleaning up after an additional person, that she took to repeating the same chores just to keep busy. It was when she was outside, scrubbing the linen curtains by hand, that she head a woman's voice.

'So what are you, the maid?'

Linda sat up, looking about her. Behind her was the house, in front of her the driveway and all around were trees and fence. Feeling uncanny, but sure she had indeed heard someone speak to her, Linda replied into the air.

'No, I'm the wife.'

'That's what I meant,' the voice said.

Linda got up and started walking towards the part of the fence where she thought the voice had come from. Behind a tree, the fence dropped to about waist-height and leaning against it was a round, frumpy woman in an oversized t-shirt, with wooden beads around her neck and her greying frizzy hair pushed back from her face by a woollen headband.

'Oh, hello,' Linda said. 'What'd you mean by that?'

'Only that you seem to sweat like a slave for your husband.'

Linda bristled. 'I'm not a slave. I like to be busy. There are things that need to be done around here.'

'Can't you be busy doing other things? Things you like to do? Worthwhile things?'

'And what would you consider worthwhile, if it isn't keeping a house fit for people to live in?'

'Oh, I don't know. Read a book. Write a poem. Sleep. Whatever you want.'

'But that's all just sitting around!'

The woman shrugged. 'Oh well. I just had to come and say hello to you. I've been writing about you for the last year and suddenly it didn't feel right anymore. I came to help you.'

'What do you mean you've been writing about me?'

'You're in my book. One of my characters is based on you. She's a very sad housewife who can't seem to find anything she's good at or enjoys, so she does house work until her hands bleed.'

Linda was intrigued. She had read a few books in her life, but most of the titles on display at her parents house had been there just for show.

'I didn't realise there were actually writers out there, writing books.'

'Oh, yes! Quite a few of us, actually.'

'And that's all you do?'

'That's all I do. Besides other things when I want to — like go swimming, or go for a walk, or listen to music.'

'And when do you take care of your husband?'

The woman laughed. 'Never! Kill me before I shackle myself thusly!'

Linda had never heard anyone talk like that before. Her mother would have fainted, her father would have called the mental hospital.

'My name is Bernie. Bernie Stevenson. What's your name, dear?'

'Linda Liebermann.' Linda's voice felt small, she was scared of and excited by the madwoman Bernie.

'Well, Linda. If you ever feel like just sitting around, I run a creative writing circle on Thursday evenings. Right here at my house. Climb over anytime,' Bernie smiled and traipsed back into the jungle.

That week, Linda couldn't stop thinking of Bernie and her creative writing club. She was distracted during her chores and kept having to reel her mind back in. It was the first time in a long while she had been able to daydream and this alone gave Linda pause to think that perhaps Bernie and her club were worth investigating. That Thursday, Linda went over to Bernie's house. For some reason, Linda felt more comfortable going over the wall than knocking on her front door; so, in her clean jeans and shirt, Linda vaulted herself over and into the garden.

Bernie's house appeared out of nowhere, where Linda thought she was approaching another thicket of green, there was instead an entire house. Cars were parked all up the driveway. Suddenly Linda just wanted to head back over the wall and scrub the living room curtains again.

'Hey! House wife!' Bernie shouted through a window, her face poking through the burglar guards, a room full of strange faces behind her. 'We've all seen you, no going back now!'

'Pull yourself together and get on with it,' Linda steeled herself. She drew herself up to her full height, pushed her hair behind her ears and marched up to the front door like she meant it. Before she could knock, Bernie flung the door open and pulled her inside.

'I knew you'd come,' Bernie steered her past a large black mask on the wall, veering into the room on the right. 'This is my oasis.'

Inside was an enormous teak dining table and all around it were mismatched chairs and stools; a velvet armchair, bar stools, wooden rocking chairs, a tree stump. And sitting on all of these mismatched chairs was an even weirder assortment of people.

'No formal introductions now, you can learn names as we go. Sit, sit.'

Linda sat on a white Tiffany chair with white legs, next to a long thin man in round eye-glasses. The man leaned over and squeezed Linda's knee and said, 'Welcome!' Linda smiled tightly and nodded.

'Shall I continue' asked a bald headed woman in monk robes.

Bernie nodded and hushed the group. Then the woman began to recite a poem in which she likened her vagina to a murderous octopus which ensnared its victims in its wriggling legs and then swallowed them whole.

When the bald woman finished her recital, everyone clapped and Linda found herself clapping the loudest.

'Wow!' Linda breathed, the words jumping out her mouth of their own volition. 'Genius! Just, genius. The image of the octopus... against the farm scene... Wow.'

'Well, it looks like the newcomer understands what it's all about, then,' Bernie said with pleasure.

'Completely,' Linda continued to clap. 'Though I did have one thought.'

Bernie looked at the bald woman who nodded and said, 'Please.'

'Well,' Linda land back in her chair, all eyes on her. 'At one point, I thought that perhaps the image of the mechanical plough at the watering hole didn't really match the idea of the fragile female you describe in the last bit of the poem. Maybe this was just me, but I thought the octopus seemed strong, brave, rebellious, not so brittle.'

'Ha! Linda's hit right on it, hasn't she!' Bernie clapped loudly. 'Did you hear what she said, Emmeline? Stop trying to write a poem and write your poem!'

Emmeline laughed and hung her bristly head in her hands. 'You're right. Of course you're right. Thank you Linda.'

And this time everyone clapped for Linda, who sat brimming. Bernie clapped and nodded at her, smiling knowingly.

The other students went around the table, reading their pieces — chapters, letters and poems — and Linda had something insightful and astute to say about all of them. This was the first time that Linda had felt skilled at anything and the first time anybody had wanted to hear her opinions, let alone a whole room full of people who wanted to hear them. It was addictive, this feeling.

Every Thursday after that first class, Linda kept coming back, eager to talk. After each class, she headed home so filled with adrenaline that only a stiff whiskey could put her to bed. One night, once all the students had left and it was just Bernie, Linda and an older Muslim man

named Mo left sitting round the table, they opened a bottle of wine and Linda told them the story of how she had come to live next door.

'That's quite a life,' Mo said when she had finished. 'When are we going to hear some writing about it?'

'I don't know. I've tried to write things before, but I much prefer to think about the things other people have written.'

'Aha, so I thought,' Bernie said. She pointed at Linda. 'Do you see? That's your art. Don't ever think you have to write a poem or paint a picture to be an artist. No, no, no. That's your art right there.'

And Linda, Bernie and Mo all nodded wisely into their glasses.

*

When Peter finished his five week business trip, he arrived home to find his wife a completely changed woman. Although she had never run out to meet him at the car before, he was half expecting her to be there waiting with a kiss when he arrived. Oh well. He dragged his suitcase towards the house, only mildly aware of the new wooden deck which had been installed while he was away. When he arrived at the front door, he could hear some strange music coming from inside. He opened the door and the sound of a woman's voice accompanied by drumming and some rather ethnic type of string instrument blared out at him.

Almost afraid to go inside, he shouted from the doorstep. 'Hello?'

And then this creature like a white bat shot out of the library from where the noise was coming and was running towards him. With half a mind to slam the door in its face, he faltered on his feet and fell over backwards. Then the bat was hovering over him, laughing. He recognised his wife's face.

'Linda?'

"Yes, silly. Come on. Up.' She hoisted him to his feet. She still had the same lovely face, but it looked different. Perhaps it was the clothes; she was wearing what looked like a pair of white men's trousers and button up shirt, with a huge black gown on, like the kind one would wear during an academic procession.

She smelled like smoke.

'Have you been smoking?'

'What? Oh, no. That's my friend Bernie. Occasionally she'll have a cigarette with her wine but she doesn't really smoke, you know.'

'No, I'm sure.'

'Well, listen, Peter. Welcome home. I was just on my way out. I'm attending a poetry reading at the university with Bernie this evening and I've said I'd drive everyone so I really need to take the big car. I've been waiting for you to get home. Could I have the car keys, please?'

Peter blinked at her. Not wanting to hand them over, but not able to come up with any words to explain why, he handed them to her like a dumb mute and then watched her saunter away across the new deck, get into his car and screech into reverse down the driveway.

For a while Peter stood in silence. Then, quite suddenly, he became aware of the awful music coming from inside and went into the library to shut it off. Only, the library wasn't the library anymore. All the furniture had been changed around. In the corner of the room was a turntable, he removed the needle, reading the words Annie Lennox around the centre of the album. When it was quiet, he could think about what had happened here. What used to be his private library, was now an office space of some kind. Where there used to be a tall bookcase, there was now a deep mahogany desk, covered in books and papers. Peter went over, picking up a paperback, Invitation to a Beheading. Peter placed it back on the table just as he had found it, not wanting to give away his snooping. Scanning the papers on the desk, they all said 'by

Linda Liebermann' on them and Peter picked up words like 'poetic flair' and 'Kafka-esque.' Intrigued and confused Peter read a little more, but stopped when he got to the sentence, 'The prose smells of that Larken-esque loathing of those who enjoy life, but the lusting over their ability to do so.' Feeling quite sad and alone all of a sudden, Peter didn't want to read anymore. He made sure that all of Linda's things were in the state he'd found them and then went to unpack his things in the bedroom. Thankfully, the bedroom was still the bedroom.

Linda did not come home until late that night. When she got into bed she smelled lightly of alcohol and sweat.

'Where did you go?'

'I told you,' Linda turned her back towards him. 'To the university for a poetry reading.'

'I couldn't help but read some of the letters on your desk. Have you fallen in love with someone else? Someone who you can write letters to about the books you like?'

'What?' Linda turned over to face him again. 'Those are letters to the newspaper.'

'About what?'

'I read books and write to them about my opinions.'

'Oh.'

'So don't worry. There's no one else.'

Not feeling particularly reassured, Peter reached for her in the dark. 'I was thinking. I'd like to have a child.'

Linda was quiet a little while. Eventually she spoke. 'Ok. We can do that. We can start trying for a baby once we've remodelled the kitchen.'

'The kitchen?'

'Yes. Don't you think it's drab? If we knocked down the wall between the living room and the dining room — well, it would just flow so beautifully. Reinvigorate the space. Do you see?'

Peter didn't see. He didn't understand how a room could be invigorated in the first place. Instead of saying what he was thinking, he said, 'That sounds wonderful.'

'Oh, it will be. Just you wait. I've got it all in my head.' Linda leaned over, kissed him on the cheek and then shuffled back to her side of the bed, leaving a great dark distance between them.

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One year after Peter came home to find his wife a changed woman, she was pregnant with his child. As they had agreed, they had only started trying for the baby after the kitchen had been remodelled. The walls had been knocked down and now the belly of the house was just a wide open space, the rooms demarcated only by the furniture. Peter felt seasick in this new house, but it pleased him to see Linda so happy, even if she felt further away from him than ever.

While they had not shared many interests before, her new friends and hobbies were more alien to him than he could have imagined possible. Feeling it his duty to take part in her life, Peter attended most of the events she hosted in their new house. He did not feel comfortable joining in on the jokes and had never heard of any of the writers that these people seemed to be on first name terms with. One or two people were tolerable, but that Bernie made him feel queer. Whenever she looked at him he felt terribly guilty and he didn't know why. One night, Peter made the mistake of asking Linda why her friends had to dress so strangely. She had scoffed at him and called him small-minded. Peter did not make the mistake of critiquing her new life again. Where he felt ousted as a husband, he did on the other hand feel that Linda respected him as a business person. She respected that it was what he was good at and that without it — well, she wouldn't have been able to knock down all these walls or host all these parties. While he couldn't count on feeling desired by Linda, he could count on her to host his investors to a good home-cooked meal and to not wear anything funny or talk too much about

Lareken-Esque stuff. Peter often thought to himself that other men may have been nervous about a woman like this having their child, but it just made him realise that Linda would, as always, do an excellent job of playing the role of mother. This was a hollow thought, only comforting on the surface and so Peter didn't care to dwell too long on it.

During her pregnancy, Linda continued to remodel the house — knocking down more walls and putting up glass and metal and oiled canvases instead — and to host and attend the events that seemed to give her so much purpose. When Linda's water broke, she had been critiquing a poet's choice of font in the front room of the house. With unusual authority, Peter demanded that everyone leave, including Bernie and then drove his wife to the hospital. After only an hour and a half, Linda and Peter's daughter was born. As was custom in his family, the naming of the baby girl was the mother's choice. When it came time to name their daughter, Linda was distracted by a newspaper article. Peter tried to interrupt her, but she shushed him and so he had to wait quietly for her to finish, while their daughter slept in his arms.

When eventually Linda looked at their daughter, she felt nothing. She had not felt at a loss for words since before that first meeting at Bernie's house. But now, looking at her baby, her mouth gaped open and where words would usually have fallen out quite naturally, nothing came. She could only look at this baby, which felt nothing like her own and think back to a baby that she had known before, in someone else's lifetime ago.

In the end, she could only think to call this second baby Kitty.

KITTY

September 1992

My mother finally kicked it in June of this year. Alcohol poisoning. Her death passed without much event. George was too depressed to spare any emotions for Noelene and I was too consumed by Fowler to care. Her funeral came and went and I spent it lying on my sleeper couch, reading passages from Fowler's book and trying to identify the same spots in my life where things had gone wrong. My obsession with Fowler began as a flickering consideration, like an ember only starting to catch, but has now grown into a raging fire that has consumed my entire life.

Since discovering Fowler's book, *The Cause of Hell*, I have read it maybe forty or fifty times looking for clues to his disappearance. I can almost recite it by heart. I feel as though I come across new inferences and new symptoms and new causes with each reading. I see more of myself reflected in his words every time I look at them, understand more of my own past. As this insight grows exponentially, so too does my concern that I will end up the same way Fowler did: Pouring all of myself into some menial task, my soul draining away with every page added, until it is finished and so am I.

I don't know exactly what it is that I want to find out, I just want to unveil the murkiness surrounding Fowler in both his life and his death. My feeling is that I will know what it is when I find it out. Until then, I just keep going.

I have looked everywhere I can for information on him. I have tried and failed to locate the two collections of poems that were published before *The Cause of Hell*. With the help of an old stalwart of the literary scene, Willem, I managed to track down a couple copies of the poetry magazine that he ran alongside Fowler and another friend, Graham Abbott. But Fowler only ever receives cursory recognition since he did none of the actual writing, only the editing. Willem has told me all he can and Abbott has moved to New Zealand. I found a postal address and sent him a letter, but have not received any replies. I have checked libraries and newspaper archives and have found a half dozen or so articles written by Fowler fans. They all wonder the same thing as I do; what exactly happened to Fowler? But they seem content with the answer remaining a mystery, while I am not. I don't think the writers of those articles have quite as much riding on the answer to that question as I do.

Of course there are many differences between Fowler's narrator and me — my father abandoned us and died while his only abandoned him, my mother was an atheist alcoholic while his was a puritan Christian, I had no siblings while he'd had three snippy sisters, my mother and I had been poor while he and his mother had not.

But there are similarities, too: We both grew up in small towns with a tight-knit and interfering population; both of our mothers had made us feel like dirty, depraved, deranged animals for being attracted to women and had taken out their anger on us for our fathers leaving, flipping violently between unconditional, smothering love and venomous loathing; we both feared intimacy with women but were simultaneously possessed by the need for it.

I am starting to think that perhaps I have been wasting my time looking for Fowler. No one who is alive can provide me any new information and everyone who is dead seems to have

taken all the details with them to their graves. It does seem a lost cause, but calling it quits now would feel like sentencing myself to disappear in the same way he did. What I need is time. Time and money. If I had both of those things I wouldn't have to work at The Fish Shop, I'd have my days free to investigate and I wouldn't need to worry about getting the money I need for things like beer and cigarettes.

It is a Friday night which is usually casino night for George. He has liked this routine ever since the accident. He's got restraint, though, George does. He only goes once a week. That's better than some. Some people are there every night no matter what. Those are the ones that are just too weak to control their compulsions, too addicted to the game of probability. Gambling isn't for me. I go sometimes with Martin, who likes Black Jack, the slot machine and the girls at the strip club on the upper level of the casino, but I will always rather have a drink than play the odds. Martin has commented that they're the same thing and I guess the argument could be made if one was looking to make it, but I'm not.

I have not heard the usual screaming in a good few hours. The animal cries and crashing of bottles and glasses and plates hitting the floor and walls have been such a feature of life for the last three years that its absence makes me wonder if everything is alright upstairs.

Since George became depressed, he has taken his Friday night casino visits very seriously. He has cancelled plans with his parents to go and gamble. He has left work meetings early to toss the dice. So when the time passes that George would usually leave for the casino and there are no signs of stirring upstairs, I become genuinely concerned.

It is unprecedented for me to visit George. If we see each other at all it will be in my flat where we share a quiet beer and don't talk about our feelings. Other than that George will walk through without greeting me and disappear upstairs for days on end. We have lived around each other like this for three years, a silent understanding between us that we aren't to disturb the other man's mania. But his silence up there is worrying.

Slumped on the couch, remote in one hand, the other hand down my pants, I decide I will check on George once *Basic Instinct* is finished. Catherine and Detective Nick are having sex. They stop and talk about their futures and the camera moves back to reveal the ice pick under the bed. I like this movie not least because of the vulva scene but also because it has two endings to two possible storylines. In one story Beth is the killer and in the other it's Catherine. Both are simultaneously possible and it is up the viewer to decide which storyline and evidence is most compelling. I am contemplating this double-ness, the role of perspective and the catastrophic consequences of our decisions when there is a thumping sound from upstairs, like something heavy and human hitting the ground from a height.

I spring up with unexpected agility considering all the beer I've had and race up the stairs taking them two at a time. My thinking is that he has finally had it and he has killed himself. Why did I have to wait until the end of the movie — I've seen it before!

George's front door is locked. I scream his name, banging on the door with my fists and kicking it with the side of my foot. I pause to listen for sounds of life. Nothing. I rattle the doorknob. I slam my shoulder into it. I walk a few steps back across the landing and then throw my entire body into it. It doesn't give. I listen again. Nothing. If he were alive the noise would surely have woken him. He must have done it. He couldn't take it anymore. He was being eaten up alive. I have never had to deal with a death in person before, so I am not sure what the protocol is. I wonder who comes first, the ambulance or the police. As I am walking down the stairs playing out what I will tell the paramedics, there is a sound at George's door and I hear a click.

I turn and see George standing there blurry eyed in his boxer shorts. He does not look like he has been dead recently.

'What's going on up here?' I walk back to him. 'I was about to call emergency services.'

George rubs his head. 'Just had a serious nap. Come in. I want to talk to you.'

I enter his apartment somewhat reluctantly. I'd only wanted to check he was still alive, not go in for a whole conversation. Conversations have only ever gone bad for me and I worry that this one may end with me finally getting kicked out.

George finished renovating this upstairs flat first and it has all the fixings for a really nice place. Unfortunately for the flat, a depressed man lives here. It looks like he has just moved in. There are still unopened boxes lying around. Books have been half-unpacked onto the bookcases. The sink is full of mismatched cutlery and bargain-store crockery. It also looks as if George has been sleeping on his couch despite the fact that the place has two bedrooms. A mess of duvets and crumpled pillows are strewn across the couch. On the floor are beer bottles and ashtrays and pairs of underwear and socks and pants.

We sit down at the dining room table together. George pushes a stack of papers out of his way and sits at the head of the table. I light him a cigarette. He takes it and gestures to the pack of warm beers on the table. I take one.

'What was that noise earlier?' I ask nervously, trying to steer George away from whatever he wants to talk to me about. 'Sounded like a body hitting the floor.'

'It was,' George says. 'Fell off the couch.

'Ok, so you're alive at least. I was thinking that — '

'Listen to me. I want to say something. I've been having dreams. Vivid dreams. Of the night Hector died. He is out in the street kicking a soccer ball around, just like it really happened. He is trying to hit Mrs Rieker's postbox. He's standing there, right in the centre of the road, lining up the kick. He's concentrating real hard. The night is quiet and dark. It's just him and the postbox. He doesn't hear the car at first. When he does, it's too late. He turns just as the screeching tyres are upon him, but when he turns, it's not Hector but you.'

'Me?'

'Yes, but when you were nine. The same age as Hector. I can see it so clearly. I always wake up just as the headlights illuminate your little face. Like some terrible spotlight.'

'Man, that's dark. Maybe you're having too much tipple too close to bed.'

'No. I know what it means.'

George gets up and disappears into one of the bedrooms. He comes back with an envelope in his hand.

'Here.' He hands it to me.

Inside it is a cheque. For a fair bit of money. Not as much as I had won for the Liebermann Prize, but enough so that my first thought is that I don't have to work at The Fish Shop anymore.

'What is this?' I ask.

'I've been saving that,' George says with a strong face. 'For Hector's twenty-first. I don't know what to do with it. You may as well have it. You're an orphan now and I am no longer a father.'

'You think this is what your dream means?'

'I know it is. I don't want anything to do with that money. It was meant to be from father to son and now you're as close as I've got. Just take it.' George's lip trembles. 'Please.'

George doesn't have to ask me twice. I pocket the envelope and start telling him a bunch of crap about the good causes I will use the money for, but he doesn't want to hear it. He looks relieved just to have the envelope out of sight. We share a few more beers and then George makes it very clear that he wants me gone.

*

George has always been generous — with his time and his money. Back in Durban, when my mother had drunk away the insurance payout from my father's death and couldn't get a job because of her migraines, George had sent us cash every month. I admired George when

I was a kid. I still do. He speaks in clear English, even when he is pissed, unlike my mother who would slur her words through furry teeth even when she was dead sober. When I lived in Durban, George lived in Johannesburg and worked in logistics, which he said was basically just 8 hours a day of making lists and his work often required him to fly to to the port city. If he was in Durban for a few days he'd stay at my mother's and I'd order takeout to make sure there was dinner for him when he arrived, instead of our usual meals of sandwiches and canned beans since my mother despised cooking and it infuriated her when I tried to do it. I'd set the table all fancy and decant the burgers and pizza into the nice serving dishes that were buried at the back of the kitchen cupboards. Then George would arrive with his shirt unbuttoned at the collar, his tie loose, his sleeves rolled up and give his sister a wet kiss on the cheek and me a huge hug. He was fat and sweaty and his hair was thinning, but to me, this was a man. Even my mother got excited when George came over, she'd start crying and referring to him as 'her blood' and would grip his forearm so tightly across the table that I think it made him uncomfortable. At the dinner table I'd get pissed with my mother and George, listening to George talk about his business trip and all the lists he had made that day and cringing as my mother tried to speak about her day as if it was comparable. I knew that it was only a matter of time until my mother flipped and I'd get kicked out, so I said nothing and hoped they wouldn't notice me.

'George, I've had it up to fucking here with it,' she'd say, shooting her arm up above her head to indicate the level of here-ness, but forgetting that her whiskey was still in hand and sloshing it down her arm. 'Oh Jesus Christ, fuck. You see what happens? I can't get anything done, nothing right. It's those damn dogs next door. They don't stop. All night they go on and on and on. I can't sleep! I'm mentally exhausted, George. I tell you, I'm fatigued. I get no sleep. And this one doesn't respect me —'

'Yes I do, mom — ' I'd interject.

'Yes I do, mom,' my mother would screw up her face and mock me in a terrible high-pitched voice. 'You see how he is?' My mother would turn on me. Her breath stank of booze and cigarettes and her hair was flat, but her voice was barbed and venomous, 'Why don't you fucking tell him, lie to your uncle now, tell him where you go in the evenings!'

'I have a study group — '

'Oh, fucking bullshit! Little snake! I'll tell him, then!' My mother would back to George. 'He's got another family, isn't that right? While I am fucking working and slaving all day to pay for his fucking school and his books and his food,' (none of which was true) my mother would pause to sling her whiskey down her throat and when she snapped her head back she continued screaming, 'while I am carrying this family through the mud, on my fucking back, do I complain? No! But this little shit is out every night, having dinner at the Jouberts, ooh-la-fucking-la! And I'm here, waiting for my child to come home, but I have to eat alone every night while he is out stuffing his face on champagne and lobster and fillet fucking mignon!'

At this point my mother would throw her glass at me, but I had become so adept at predicting these moments that I would duck before the glass even left her hand.

George would look at me and say 'Clean it up, boy.'

But really I knew he was saying, 'She can't help it.'

Then my mother would start crying and George would tell me to go to bed. I'd lie upstairs in my room in the hot dark night, listening to my mother and George talk into the early hours of the morning. I could never hear what they were saying and I never tried to eavesdrop. My mother would cry intermittently and George's soft tones would soothe her, then they would laugh, then silence, then crying again. The truth was, I was spending every night at my friend Jonny's house and I was eating fillet and being fed cream puffs and sweet tea by his mother. I always felt on those nights, lying there in the dark, that I didn't really exist, or if I did

then it was only as two pricks of light where my eyes should be, not quite puncturing the darkness but suspended somewhere in the middle of it, completely surrounded. On nights like those, when the darkness brushed up against me in my single bed with the piss-yellow covers, there was no space for lies and I couldn't pretend that I didn't want a life of fillet steak and cream puffs.

*

With the money burning a hole in my pocket, I head straight to one of the late-night banks that will cash a cheque after five but will take quite a large commission from you. After that I go over to Martin's, as just about the only thing I can think to do now is go on a bender.

Martin has moved into the flat above The Mayflower, which used to belong to a friend of ours and where I spent a good few years sleeping on the floor. I enter through the front of the restaurant, walking past a couple of diners and Xin, the owner, who is taking their orders. He doesn't seem particularly happy to see me and has trouble replacing the saccharine smile as one of his guests asks about the Egg Fu Yung.

Through the kitchen and up the stairs, the door to Martin's apartment is ajar. I walk through and find Xin's son, Art, now twenty-three, squatting below the window smoking a cigarette and reading a magazine on the floor between his feet. He looks up, cigarette dangling from his lip, greets me with a nod, but returns immediately to his magazine (a Hustler). Martin is stretched out on the couch, asleep with beer in hand. I stand above him appraising him like some kind of Sleeping Beauty. His lanky frame carries what looks like like a second-trimester growth around the mid-section, but otherwise is thin and un-muscled. His white shirt is unbuttoned to his chest and stretched hideously across his stomach. He has grown his light brown hair out to below his chin and his beard is as patchy as trampled shrub and in places reveals the bare, acne-afflicted skin I think he is trying to hide. He is a dishevelled looking person, but his flat is immaculate. I feel a brief sense of shame remembering the pigsty Charlie

and I turned the place into. I can remember even now, clear as day, the time when we spent nearly five weeks drinking without leaving the flat: The garbage bags were piled so high around us that we had to dig out pathways in order to navigate the place. We had felt like a couple of explorers and had spent the weeks calling each other 'Livingstone.' Despite Martin himself smelling and looking like crap, his flat is clean and uncluttered and the place smells like the inside of an air freshener.

Martin works for some financial consultancy company doing some fancy shit with numbers and money. Something so fancy that he was the only one hired to do it. A one-man department with no university degree or formal education of any kind, a numbers wizard snorting powder off the ledgers at midnight. Martin is so good at what he did that he keeps making more and more ridiculous demands, but they are so scared of losing him that that they gave him whatever he asked for. He comes and goes when he wants to, sleeps on his desk, earns an obscene amount of money and still chooses to drive his shitty Honda around. I often think that he must be incredibly bored, but that he simply never lets himself sit still long enough to notice it.

I nudge Martin awake with my foot and his blue eyes flash open, wide and staring behind his small, round glasses. He sits up and takes a swig of his beer without hesitation.

'Hey, man,' he says. 'We were just getting ready to go out.' Art nods.

'Yeah, I can see that.' I sit down next to him and grab one of the beers from the case on the table. Winking Duck. On the front it has some Chinese writing in green and gold, under which is a picture of an androgynous duck in a sailor hat, smacking its ass and winking over its shoulder at me. It tastes like bubblegum and yeast.

'Look at this.' I hand Martin the envelope of cash and tell him the whole story. Once I finish, Martin looks impressed.

'This is a lot of money,' Martin says.

I nod. 'I'm thinking that I wanna take off work and put some real time into looking for Fowler. I feel like if only I know what sent him off the edge, I'd be able to relax. Get a good night's sleep.'

Martin shakes his head. 'Listen, man. You know what I think about all that. It's chasing ghosts. Trying to catch smoke in your bare hands. Looks solid from far away, but once you get close enough you can't see it or touch it. That's what will finally do you in. No,' Martin hand me back the envelope. 'Tonight is not the time to pursue your own end. I know what we've got to do tonight. Something real.'

*

The next morning, Martin, Art and I wake up in his car which is parked out of The Grand Plaza. By the smudged stamp on my wrist and the lightened load of cash in my pocket, I deduce we spent the night at *Lolita's* and probably fell in love with five girls a piece. We get back to Martin's, stinking and he gets an emergency call from work and has to head into the office. Xin is furious that Art has been out the whole night and comes thundering into the apartment to pull his son away and back into the kitchen. I'd planned on spending the day drinking with either Martin or Art, but my only option now is to head back to my own house.

I get home and pause at the bottom of the stairs to listen for life coming from George's apartment. When I hear what I determine it to be a half bottle of Jack clinking against the rim of a tumbler I feel all is well up there. That tinkling glass sound has wet my appetite and I pour myself a stiff brandy and sit back down on the couch as if I had not left it at all last night.

On the table near the door, a month-old pile of post beckons me. One envelope in particular calls out the loudest. I heave myself off the couch and open the envelope. I have received one of these every year for the last sixteen years, but I have never seriously considered the proposition they have contained until now. Inside it is a stiff white card. The writing on the front reads:

As a previous winner of the Liebermann Prize for Emerging Voices, you are hereby invited to attend this year's award ceremony which will be held on **Saturday 26 September 1992 at 18.00** in the City Museum of Art, Main Hall.

The prize winner will be announced on the evening, with drinks and a buffet to follow. See reverse of this card for nominees and program outline.

Yours in the cultivation of literary excellence,

Linda Liebermann

Director, Liebermann Press House.

Part of my research into Fowler has involved trying to get some face-time with Linda Liebermann. About ten years ago I spoke with someone — Willem — who had studied and worked with Fowler and had considered him a friend. Willem raised some suspicions about the whole Liebermann institute as far as Fowler's disappearance and death was concerned. He didn't accuse Linda of murder, but he had highlighted a few things that didn't make much sense and to which there could be no clear-cut answers. Most of his concerns arose from the foreword that Linda Liebermann wrote to Fowler's book, *The Cause of Hell.* I went home after speaking to Willem and after reading the foreword, I came away with the same suspicions.

One of the major things Willem noted was that Linda Liebermann claimed to have received Fowler's unfinished manuscript anonymously. The sender did not identify him or herself, but attached a note to the manuscript begging for it to be published. Willem said two things were unusual about this claim: The first was that Fowler would never have let anyone see his unfinished work. He was proud and a perfectionist, perhaps even pedantic. Willem noted that the second thing seemed unusual for the same reasons: John Fowler would never be caught begging for his work to be read or published, even if it was finished.

'Well, what about his wife, Florence?' I had asked Willem. 'Couldn't she have sent the manuscript to be published? Maybe she wanted to save some part of her husband from dying. From obscurity.'

Willem had shaken his head. 'Florence was lovely but she didn't think for herself. She worshipped John and she did whatever he told her to. I suspect she would have rather died herself than to go against his wishes.'

Willem had given me the address in Dorperland at which he had visited Florence and Fowler when Fowler had been alive and I had sent a number of letters over the years but had never received a response. After that failed, I turned all my interests to Linda Liebermann. I have sent letters, called her secretaries, camped out in her office waiting room and done nearly everything I can think of to try and get a response from her. Nothing.

Over the last few days I have been obsessing over the inconsistencies Willem noted and I have read Linda's foreword over and over, trying to find something new in her words. I had been absent-mindedly reading her foreword yesterday or the day before and I wasn't trying very hard to decipher any new meanings but it was just then, when my brain was foggy and unfocused, that something new jumped out at me from her words.

"At the age of forty-six, John Fowler used a shotgun to take his own life."

I haven't been able to find out the circumstances of Fowler's death in any detail, so how would Linda Liebermann know that? I had dug up Fowler's obituary from some old newspaper but it had not mentioned a shotgun, only that he had died and was leaving behind his widow, Florence. Linda Liebermann seems to have access to some secret information source unavailable to the rest of the world and I want to know what, or who, it is.

I have only been able to some part-time digging into all of this over the last decade or so. I squandered all my prize money and had to take a job to get by, so between working and drinking — both necessities — I have barely any time left in the day.

I take out the money in my pocket and count it — not enough to live lavishly but certainly enough to be able to meet my liquor requirements. Before I think too long about it, I pick up the phone and dial the number for The Fish Shop.

It's a Saturday which means Terry's grandson is working over the weekend and it is him who answers the phone.

'Terry's Fish Shop.'

'Brandon, let me speak to your grandfather.'

Brandon puts the phone to his shoulder and screams to Terry that I want to talk to him.

'What he want?' I hear Terry shout back.

'What do you want?' Brandon asks me.

'I want to quit,' I tell him.

'He wants to quit!' Brandon shouts.

'Ok, no problem! Good riddance!' Terry shouts.

'He says no problem, good—'

'Yeah, I heard him.'

I keep the receiver on my ear but press the switch on the phone down to end the call, then I dial Martin's office number.

'Yep?' he answers.

'I've just quit my job. I have a stack of money and I have a woman that needs questioning.'

Martin doesn't miss a beat. 'And where do we find this woman?'

'She's hosting a party tonight. Free booze. If it's anything like the scene used to be, there will also be young girls dying to get with older men with well-paying jobs.'

'Well,' Martin says, 'that sound like just the kind of party I'd like to attend.'

*

I am already onto beer five by the time Martin shows up. His approach is announced well before its arrival by the characteristic clunk and grind of his Honda Civic hatch-back which hasn't been serviced since sometime in the mid-seventies. I get into the passenger seat and am immediately passed a beer by Art from the back seat and a prescription-grade central nervous system stimulant from Martin in the driver's seat.

Martin apologises for being late and explains that somebody has gotten into a big lot of trouble for putting a sizeable amount of money into places it doesn't belong.

'I've just spent the day making sure some rich dudes get even richer and don't go to jail for it either,' he says careening down the winding road at such speed that we both lean to the left and right as he hugs the corners. 'We miss anything?

'No,' I light us both cigarettes. 'Maybe the ceremony. But I'm not interested in that anyway.'

'Then what are we going for?' Martin screeched to a stop at a red robot.

'I want to talk to Linda Liebermann.'

'Oh, christ. This? You are wasting your time, man. Nothing you find out will satisfy you. You're like an addict, man. Chasing that unattainable high. She's just going to dodge your questions like she always does. And then what? You're gonna be right back where you started but this time there won't be any more doors to open.'

'Stop pontificating and just drive.'

'I'm driving, I'm driving.

Martin swings out of the stationary queue of vehicles and into the emergency lane to travel in the wake of a speeding ambulance. We make it all the way to the highway like that, then it is just a short two-minute drive until the offramp, then a four-way stop, then a right-turn and we are there. All the event parking right outside the museum is taken and we have to park

down the street and walk back up. There is a chill in the air tonight. The cold bites our hands as we lift cigarettes to our mouths and march forwards with Art trailing behind us.

'I didn't even get an award ceremony,' I say as we enter the property through a wrought iron gate. 'I just got interviewed in the newspaper and sent on my way.'

'And a bunch of money. And your book published. But besides that, nothing.'

'Exactly.'

I give my name to the lady at the door. She finds me way down on the list.

'My plus-1,' I say as she looks at Martin. 'Kid in need,' I tell her as she turns to Art. She shrugs us through. We walk into the entrance foyer of the museum. Behind the reception desk an older woman who is still quite beautiful smiles at us.

'Just through there,' she points towards a pair of huge wooden doors.

I nod back and Martin raises an awkward hand in the air. Our footsteps on the tiles are inordinately loud and gives the place an eery feeling as we walk towards the muffled noise coming from behind the doors. There is something uncanny about being in a place like a school or a bank or a museum after dark; daylight seems to fuse the physical structure and its inhabitants into one being, whereas the setting of the sun changes something inherent in the building and makes the place into a ghost of its former self. Even now when I can hear so much life coming from beyond the doors, there is the sense that the place is just a shell and the life that occupies it is only temporary.

Beyond the doors the lights are dimmed low and it feels as if we were entering a fireplace on its last log, but as my eyes adjust I see that the party is in full swing. We have clearly missed the ceremony; a spotty kid is being photographed with a tall, dark-haired woman and an ageing man. I recognise the man from my interview sixteen years ago, but not the woman, who I assume must be Linda. My courage fails as I look at her. She is confident and

domineering, steering the older man around like a puppet. I decide a full tour of the place is in order before any confrontations should be attempted.

A band is playing on a constructed stage at the far end of the room and nearly two or three hundred people are milling around; chatting through the legs of a sculpted adonis, admiring the oils on canvas that perforate the walls, browsing the pamphlets and books for sale on the stands and tables, peering and tilting their heads and laying hands on each other's shoulders and laughing and nodding as each of them deliver a monologue dressed up to look like conversation.

'There it is,' Martin says. I follow his gaze. The bar. We each get a whiskey, mine a double.

'So what now?' Martin asks.

'I don't know,' I say. 'I guess I'll wait until she's more or less on her own.'

Martin shakes his head. 'Waste of time, man. But while we're here we should at least try and enjoy ourselves. We're not paying for the drinks.'

So we hover around the bar and get steadily drunker. The bartender doesn't want to keep serving us but he has to. Martin and I are relishing it. We order more drinks than we can finish, more than we can carry. We spend most of the night there, shambling around the periphery of the party, knocking back whiskey and stepping outside to smoke the cheap cigarettes that we love so much as they crackle when they burn. As we get more intoxicated our circle of comfort seems to be expanding and at some point I look up and find that I am fully immersed in a conversation with some young guys in tweed jackets and that Martin and Art are away in the distance. Martin is chatting up two women who looked absolutely disgusted by his attention and Art is grinning with droopy eyes as he clutches his second beer. Martin is doing that thing where he twirls and yanks on a patch of his beard and bites his upper lip with his bottom teeth.

'The tour guide was spectacular. We had to get right onto our bellies and crawl through the tunnels, just like the Vietcong did.' Dale, I think his name is, finishes his story of his travels in the mysterious East.

'Sounds mysterious.' For some reason I shout the words.

Everyone looks at me.

'What?' Dale asks.

I dismiss him with an unnecessarily large wave of my arm and wobble my way back to the bar. I check my watch. We've been here nearly two hours already. My heart starts to beat hard in my chest. The world comes into ultra focus. I think that Martin's pill has started taking action. I begin to feel sick, like I might vomit. My forehead is burning up and I can feel a sweat coming on. I order a brandy to quell my queasiness and a whiskey to fix my fever, then I lean against the wall and try to visualise how the conversation with Linda might go. In my head she is approachable, willing to talk about Fowler and can answer all my questions; she knows why he disappeared from the poetry world, why and how he killed himself, what the deal was with his mother and she has a stack of his unpublished work that she wants to give me. She can give me the names and phone numbers of all the people she has spoken to so that I can verify her story. And then, she will dismiss her husband and invite me to her sprawling mansion where she will ply me with alcohol and put a hand on my leg that I will not push away.

I have this daydream often — the part about going home with her is new, added immediately after I laid eyes on her full-figure. I have kept my eyes on Linda Liebermann the whole time she has been waltzing around, schmoozing. Finally she hugs some people goodbye and I leap towards her, intercepting her before she can join the next group of admirers.

She has an assortment of colourful scarves wrapped around her head and is wearing an unidentifiable piece of fabric that be either another scarf or a curtain, but nonetheless hugs her

figure flawlessly. I stumble into her path so determinedly but have failed to say anything, so she is forced to speak first.

'Hello. Are you alright?' She smiles at me. Her teeth are bright white. It is a beautiful smile but for some reason I don't feel like I can trust it.

'Linda? Liebermann?'

'Yes.'

'Fowler?' I am so drunk that I can only really manage one word at a time.

She steps back. Her smile drops. 'I'm sorry?'

'John Fowler?'

She narrows her eyes and tries to step past me. 'Excuse me.'

I block her. 'I'm doing some research. On Fowler. I have some questions I'd like to ask. When you have the time.'

'I'm sorry, but I really don't know what you're talking about.' She tries to leave but I block her again.

'You don't? But you published his book. You wrote a foreword. How did you get the manuscript?'

'That was a long time ago. And if you actually read my foreword, then you'd know that I received his manuscript anonymously and I really don't know anymore than I wrote about. Now, please.' She uses her forearm to push me aside, like I am a dirty railing she doesn't want to touch. 'Get out of my way.'

I watch her make her way towards the man with the white hair, who looks stiff and uncomfortable in his suit. Linda, however, replaces her scowl with a smile so seamlessly that I think I am the only one who notices. It did not gone the way I'd hoped and I am ready to leave. I try to look for Martin or Art, but my eyes keep coming back to Linda who is always

surrounded by people and laughing and waving her wine glass around holding court. One time when I look over, a girl of about sixteen or seventeen appears behind the group.

She stands at the back of the group cracking pistachios. A skinny little thing in an all-denim suit, she pockets the shells and drops the nuts into people's glasses as they walk by. I watch her for a while, cracking the nuts. Nobody notices her and she uses this to her advantage. She is able to drop four pistachio nuts into an old lady's glass before Linda turns around and pulls her back into the group.

The girl looks like Linda. They both have the same colour hair, the same pale, smooth skin, the distinct lack of cheekbones. But where the woman is full and soft, the girl is flat and stick-straight, her body made of hard lines and sharp angles. While I find my eyes drawn to Linda's full, junoesque curvature, there is something quite magnetic about the girl. I try to keep my eyes on the red and black floral embroidery of her denim jacket, but soon she is lost in the crowd. I feel too sick to walk around so I remain by the bar keeping watch for either the girl or Martin, entertaining myself by playing a solitary game in which I take a sip of whatever I am drinking every time someone doesn't approach me.

Not long later, after I have thrown up in my mouth and swallowed it again, she reappears with a splash as two pistachios land in my whiskey glass.

'What are you planning to do with those?' I slur, barely able to keep the bile down, but feeling inexplicably happy that she is here.

'With what?' she asks, still cracking pistachios and completely unperturbed by me.

'The shells in your jacket pocket.'

'Oh. I was going to leave a trail on my way to the bathroom. Or use them in a self-portrait. Or maybe I will varnish them and make earrings.' She looked at me and dropped another nut in my glass. 'What do you think?'

'Terrible ideas. How old are you?'

'Eighteen. It was my birthday yesterday. How old are you?'

I am relieved. 'Thirty.' Immediate guilt. 'Thirty-five. Happy birthday.'

'Thanks. Well what would you do with pistachio shells?'

'Probably throw them away.'

'And that's why you haven't written a thing in such a long time. You have no imagination.'

Her response nearly shocks me into sobriety. 'How do you know that?'

'What? That you haven't written anything, or that you have no imagination?'

'Either. I don't know. Both.'

'You won the Liebermann Prize for Emerging Writers in 1975. You were eighteen. Your poetry collection, *Ashtray Chest*, was published in 1976.'

'Yes.'

'So that was sixteen years ago. I'm only guessing that you haven't written anything, but I can't know for sure, so I suppose what I should have said is that you haven't *published* anything in a long time. But if you haven't published in that long, it might be fair to assume that you haven't written anything in at least half as long. As for your imagination. Well, it's only conjecture, but your poetry seemed to be all about your mother. I'd think that you'd have exhausted that topic after your first book and if you haven't been able to write anything since then... Well.'

'Yes,' is all I can think to say. I stare at her and this doesn't seem to make her remotely uncomfortable. She meets my eyes with an unbroken gaze of her own.

'How did you know all of that? About me winning the prize and when my book was published. You weren't even born then.'

'I dunno. I just remember stuff.' The girl looks over her shoulder; Linda is furiously beckoning her over.

'Is she your mother?' I ask.

'Yes.' She drops another nut in my glass. 'I've got to go.'

I watch her leave, this time feeling as if I am losing something important.

Martin walks up to me then, loping in that way that only he can: his legs seem to be taking very short strides, but his torso looks to be gliding through a windy day, unattached to the rest of him. He is dragging the nearly unconscious Art behind him.

'Two numbers,' he said. 'And this guy's done for.'

'Not too shabby.' I noticed that the bottom buttons of Martin's shirt had come undone to reveal his rounded, hairy underbelly. 'Let's get him out of here. It's turned fucking depressing. These people are way too far gone up their own asses.'

I look around, hoping to spot the girl, hoping to spot Linda, feeling helpless. What would I do if saw either of them again? 'Yeah. Let's get out of here.'

As we leave the museum, we each take hold of Art, dragging his feet along the ground between us.

'So did something happen?' Martin asks over Art's dropped head.

'Sort of. I can't be sure. Maybe. Probably not.'

We are halfway back to the car when Martin stops. 'There is an adolescent girl chasing after us.'

We turn around to see the girl running full-pace towards us, a piece of paper in one hand and a pen in the other. Her cheeks are flushed pink. She slams to a halt in front of me.

'I'd like to come and visit you,' she holds out the paper and pen to me. 'Write your address.' And as an after thought, she adds 'Please.'

I let go of Art and he swings to the ground so hard that Martin almost doesn't catch him before he hits concrete. I write the number and street name of George's house down on her

piece of paper and give it back to her. She folds it up four times and puts it into the inside of her jacket pocket. Then without saying goodbye she turns around and sprints away.

'That seems like something,' Martin says, adjusting Art's dead weight on him. We both stared at the dark portal in the museum fence through which the girl disappeared.

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When the girl shows up at George's place two weeks later, it is the middle of the afternoon, sometime around three. I have just gotten back from having a drink with Martin and was planning to have a nap before spending the evening out again. Just as I lie down there is a knock on the door.

She doesn't wait for greetings or even for me to ask her in. She waltzes past me, stops in the middle of the room and turns to face me.

'What do you think?' she lifts her hands up to her ears.

She is wearing pistachio shell earrings, varnished and hanging from a string of wooden beads which are attached to her ear by a small silver hook.

'Very nice. Possibly the nicest pair of pistachio-earrings I have ever seen.'

She smiles, but then her expression changes abruptly to one of irritation and she sits down on the couch.

'You never asked my name.'

'I know. You know mine and I don't know yours. It's very unfair. I have been thinking about that. But I had to wait until you came to visit to find out. And I didn't know if you'd come. I'm very glad you did.' I sit down next to her. 'So, what is your name?'

'Katherine. But I prefer to be called Kitty.'

'And who calls you Kitty?'

'No one.'

And in that instance, I understand something about this girl that I don't think anyone else does. Certainly not her mother, who paraded Kitty around the event like a dressed-up doll and certainly not her father, who seemed like he hardly wanted to occupy his own skin. I understood that Kitty has a very specific view of herself, one which is probably accurate — she didn't seem like someone to foster inaccuracies even about herself — but which wasn't shared by the people around her. I knew how something like that could rip you apart from yourself day by day, until you no longer know what version of you you are trying to return to.

'Can I get you something to drink, Kitty?'

She opts for instant coffee, no milk, no sugar. When I return with the drinks she is already off inspecting the place. She is scanning the shelved wall of books, rifling through the papers on my desk, peering into every drawer in the room. I look around the apartment and feel like I am seeing the place for the first time — the stained brown corduroy couch and the mottled green carpet, the ashtray layered like a cake with cigarette butts, the crushed beer cans in the corner. Embarrassed, I sit down and wait for her to finish. While looking through the videos Kitty asks why we have copies of so many kids movies.

'They belonged to my Uncle George's son, Hector.'

'Oh,' Kitty says sadly. 'Belonged?'

'Yeah. He died.

'Oh. Where's your bedroom?' she asks.

'You're looking at it,' I gesture to the fold-out couch we had been sitting on.

'Where does that go?' she points out my apartment door and into the hallway, at the staircase.

'That goes up to George's flat. He bought this place to renovate and rent out as two separate apartments, but never finished the job. Now he lives up there and I stay down here.'

Kitty sits down next to me again. 'Why does he live up there? Where is Hector's mother?'

'They're not together anymore. Couldn't handle the stress of Hector's death. That's what I think, anyway. George has never said anything like that.'

'What's there to handle?' Kitty asks. 'He's dead, isn't he? How does someone who's not there have an impact on two people who are there?'

I don't know where to start. 'He was their son. I'm sure there is some blame and resentment and guilt between the two. It's like a cancer, it eats away at trust. You have to have trust.'

'Why do you have to have trust?'

'I don't know. I think it's important to feel like there is someone out there who's in your corner.'

'Do you have someone in your corner?'

'No, not really. Do you?'

'No.'

After that we watch a movie — *Blade Runner*. The opening to that movie has got to be one of the most beautiful in cinema history. Large white print declares the place and time to be Los Angeles, November, 2019. An aerial image of a city at night comes into view, dotted with millions of lights, huge explosions of red and orange detonate across the city. The camera fades into a close-up of a brilliant blue eye, in which the city lights and explosions are reflected.

I give Kitty a lift home that night and drop her off outside a huge brick fortress with four garage doors and surveillance cameras everywhere. When I get home, I see that she has only drunk half of her coffee. I pick it up and smell the greasy lip-print on the rim of the mug. It smells like citrus.

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NO HORSE IN THE RACE

November 1992

Kitty is no beauty. She is small and thin, no thicker than a twelve-year old boy, dark nondescript hair that some days looks like pieces of twine all hanging in a row and other days like a sheet of black satin. No cheek bones, low, pointed nose, small mouth good for lemon-sucking.

Kitty talks endlessly and without solicitation, but never about herself. Never about her feelings. Never about her mother. She cannot say enough about the most obscure of topics - like the population of some remote island or how the inventor of the candle became such by petting a barnyard animal too close to a pile of flint stones - but she never talks about herself. She is like a very amusing robot that I enjoy watching, whose circuitry I enjoy getting to know.

I have spent many afternoons distracted from my writing, imagining her childhood. I see a flurry of birthday party invitations mysteriously lost in the mail, hot tears at the spill of blood into pubescent panties. Because she doesn't have sex with me, I also think that maybe her father or her half-brother from her father's previous marriage or even the family rabbi slipped her a finger at some point. But this is only one of the narratives I turn to. There are others, between which I alternate depending on my mood. In another, Kitty has murdered her parents and is adopted by an ageing farm couple who die shortly thereafter of a cow

stampede right through their living room; Kitty is then raised by that very same herd of cows who teach her the arts of the Sullen Silence, the Slow Blink and the Pursed Lip.

I am thinking this as I look at her across the table. It has been two or three months since Kitty moved in with me. She came to visit me one day and simply never left.

'I agree,' Kitty says, looking up from the stack of papers. 'The real mystery is how Linda is involved in all of this.' She pushes the papers aside and reaches for the mug in front of her but discards that as well. We're having coffee at a place down on the corner of two streets and as usual Kitty has ordered the biggest hot drink on the menu and then let half of it get cold. She won't touch it now. She's averse to tepidity.

'That's the thing that pulls all of this together,' she continues. Her eyes drift upwards and she starts to rattle off dates from memory. 'From 1943 to 1948, John Fowler studies at the university in Johannesburg. In 1948 he gets a teaching job and works there until 1954. Sometime in that period he gets together with Willem Coetzee and Graham Abbott and they start a poetry magazine called *The Johannesburg Quarterly*. Willem writes and finds entries, Fowler edits, Abbott publishes and distributes. All this time, Fowler has been engaged to a girl called Margery Schoën and they have plans to live together as soon as they are married. At the end of 1954, Fowler tells Margery that his mother has taken ill and he has to go and visit her in Upington. He disappears. No one hears from him again until February of 1970, when he commits suicide by shooting himself in the head with a shotgun. In September of 1970, his book *The Cause of Hell* is published by the Liebermann Press House, headed up by my mother.

'Besides the question about who sent her the manuscript and why, what really confuses me is how she got that bit of detail about the shotgun. You've shown me all the articles and newspaper clippings you've found on Fowler and that little tidbit isn't mentioned anywhere except for the foreword that Linda wrote to the book.'

I am startled. I haven't told Kitty about my concerns over the shotgun detail. She has come up with that all on her own. Although her body may be weak and reedy, her mind is not. Kitty has — I don't know what to call it — something akin to a photographic memory; once she knows a thing, she knows it forever. Kitty knows by heart the end-credits for every TV show and movie she has ever watched. She knows the lyrics to every song she's listened to, the words to every book she's read, every speech she's heard. If you give her a date from a hundred years ago, she can tell you what day of the week it was. It's more than photographic, because Kitty can use all of those memories, all of those things she can never unknow, which become hardwired into her being, to find the patterns inside them and solve them like puzzles. For this reason, Kitty has taken to my Fowler mystery with a ferocity I did not expect. I find this both reassuring and upsetting, as she has managed to make sense of the disjointed facts I have gathered over the years where I could not and she seems to enjoy the mystery more than I do, too.

Kitty has been sliding off her seat so she pushes herself back up and her feet kick out in front of her like a child. She swings her legs as she continues to talk.

'I know my mother. I know she will do almost anything for attention. I haven't ever caught her in a direct lie but her whole persona is fabricated to get her what she wants. I wonder, then, if she really does know something we don't, or if she made up this whole story about Fowler and the shotgun to sell the book. Still,' Kitty folds her arms on the table and rests her head on them, 'that doesn't answer the question about the manuscript. How did she get it if neither Fowler nor his wife could plausibly have sent it?'

'Well—'

'That is, assuming that neither Fowler nor Florence did send it. They could have. Fowler in a moment of terror and weakness, Florence in a moment of decisiveness. What's ruling them out? Just that we don't think they did, or could have, or would have?'

'It's possible, but —'

'That's just speculation. And dependent on an intimate knowledge of the individuals and of human behaviour.'

'Yes, which neither of us—'

'No, we don't. We've got to focus on the facts and on real people that can answer real questions. We have to start from the inside and work our way out to hypothesis. It makes no sense to do it the other way around.'

I stare at her. 'How do we do that? Where is the inside and where is the outside?'

'Isn't it obvious? We have to go and speak to Linda. She's at the centre of all of this.'

'But I already spoke to her. She didn't give me anything.'

'Ha!' she rolls her eyes. 'Well that doesn't mean anything, does it? She's far too intelligent for you.' Kitty jumps to her feet, picking the papers up off the table. 'Let's go. I need to look at my wall.'

*

Kitty is walking in front of me on the uneven concrete, placing one foot in front of the other over the cracks like a tightrope walker.

'You know what your problem is?' Kitty says ahead of me, hopping over a large crevice in the pavement.

'I suppose you'll tell me.' I light a cigarette.

'You've got no ambition. You used to, back when you were a poet. I've seen your book. You won the prize. You must have worked hard. But you romanticised the whole writer thing and now you think any work you have to do is too much work. So you don't do anything. You're happy just sitting and stinking of whiskey all day. And it's the same with this Fowler business. You want to know what happened to him, ' she makes air-quotes with her scrawny little fingers,

' "so that you can save yourself from the same fate." But are you even trying? Doesn't look like it to me. Even when you say your life is on the line, you have no ambition.'

Over the last few weeks Kitty has proven herself to be a disgusting know-it-all.

'It's one of the symptoms of ageing,' I respond. 'Trust me, when you leave your teens behind you'll feel it.'

'I doubt it,' Kitty sticks her arms out for balance. 'I don't have any silly ideas about what I want to be when I grow up. I just like puzzles. I like solving them. Finding all the little pieces and taking my time to put them in the right places. I like waiting for the connections to reveal themselves, because they always do. I'm not interested in the meaning behind it all like you are. That's your weakness. It means you've got room to fall. To be disappointed. But I don't.'

Worse than being a know-it-all, Kitty is also a gloater.

Kitty stops in front of a sign-pole with a board bearing the newspaper headline: *Parliament to hold caucus on 10 November*.

'Did you know,' Kitty says in a semi-daze, staring at the sign-pole, 'that there is an Amish community of mixed Japanese-Russian descent, occupying a small and inconsequential area in the Caucasus Mountains?'

I stop behind her. 'No. I didn't know that.'

'I'm not surprised,' Kitty stretches out her arms and continues to walk. 'They don't listen to music or churn butter, either.'

'Jesus, do they at least drink vodka?'

Kitty doesn't register this as a joke and launches into the history of potatoes. She does not excel in areas like social etiquette and humour. On her second or third day staying with me, she told me that when she was nine years old she realised the futility of trying to be liked and decided to pour her energy into feeding her brain instead, which is hungry, always hungry. She reads book after book, absorbs fact after fact and is perhaps the most knowledgeable person in

the world, simply because of her inability to unknow a thing. Like an unused limb, the muscles which worked the last remaining specks of sociality and basic human-ness have withered away. Kitty is very smart but not very nice. She is sharp with her words, often expressing opinions which ought remain thoughts, laughing at the wrong points in jokes and not understanding the value in some embarrassment every now and then. And it is particularly these things which I like so much about her and at the same time find completely intolerable.

I know she feels the same way about me, although we have not yet had an interaction which would make me think there is anything about me that she actually likes. It seems that it is Kitty's natural disposition to be annoyed, even hateful. She is perhaps the only person I have ever met who is at her happiest when completely enraged. I do my best to keep her irritated, which is to keep her happy and this is pretty easy for me since Kitty is quite happy to remind me that I am incredibly irritating.

Further down the road we pass a small bookstore on the left that, somehow, even though I have walked this street frequently, I have not seen before. Through the smudged and grimy display window it looks hot and dusty, overcrowded with books. As I do at every bookstore, I pause to scan the titles I can make out. Losing the battle with my compulsion, I call Kitty and signal to her that I am going to go inside. Her shoulders slump and her face breaks into a scowl. She is unhappy to have the plans changed. I know she will be a nightmare for the rest of the day but I have to brave it. I have to examine every shelf until I can confirm that it is definitely not here, at this bookstore.

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It is a cramped little space that looks much bigger from the outside. A pair of eyebrows raise at us from behind a stacked counter and then disappear again. Books are crammed into every available gap, bargain bins of books selling for R5 and less clutter the centre of the store and only one shelf is reserved for 'New Arrivals' which seem to be mostly

made up of books published around the 70s. I look around and see that Kitty is in the non-fiction section with an encyclopaedia in one arm and tugging at another with her free hand. Her mood seems to have lifted somewhat. I wander aimlessly around the bookstore for a while, not letting my eyes linger too long on any particular title. Trying to fool myself, I drift closer and closer to the poetry section, pretending to myself that I am not really looking for what I am looking for, like I am not really doing what I came here to do. In the poetry section, I glimpse the greats — Blake, Barrett Browning, Cummings, Dante, Dickinson, Eliot, Heaney, Keats, Larkin, Milton, Neruda, Pound, Rimbaud, Thomas, Whitman, Yeats — the list goes on. I feel myself grow small. I walk slowly to the contemporary section — Billy Collins, Robert Creeley, Deborah Diggs, Edward Hirsch, Lynda Hull, Robert Pinsky, Adrien Rich. I am at the S section. Schraufnagel, Sidlehurst, Simmons, Spires.

My name is not there. Just a dark crack between Simmons and Spires.

I am not surprised, but I can't help feeling disappointed. I wonder if, maybe, it's been misplaced. Put on some random shelf somewhere in the shop. Those eyebrows don't look like they keep a fastidious organizational system anyway — I spotted a few Byrons in the R section, a dictionary on the young adult shelf.

There is no reason the book would be here. It was only one book, published in 1976. An eternity ago. I haven't done anything since then, there is no reason to think that a bookshop — especially an independent, out of the way one like this one — would keep a single book, a single publication, by a one-hit-wonder who was never heard from again. It makes sense. It makes perfect sense. But still it snips at me. I start to feel the shop close in around me, pushing tight against my body and I want to leave but I can't: I have to continue looking until I am completely sure.

In the non-fiction section, Kitty is sitting on the floor with two encyclopaedias open in front of her. I ask her what she is doing. She tells me that she is comparing two different

versions of the 15th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I don't ask why. In between the autobiographies and reviews and science books, I come across a couple of Paul Austers; *Moon Palace, The Country of Last Things, The Music of Chance*. Next to him is a comparative guide to selected psychology texts.

My book is not here. It never is. Each time I enter a bookshop, hoping to find a little sign of my existence, wedged between some obscure titles and each time I leave feeling more invisible than ever. I feel panicked and need to be in the comfort of my flat with a cold beer in hand.

'Come on,' I say to Kitty.

'No! I still have N through Z to go!' Kitty wails, throwing her head back.

'I need a drink.' I don't wait for her to throw a tantrum (I know the unfinished-ness of her task is going to rattle her) or for her to get up and follow me. I walk straight out the bookshop and start motoring home.

'Fine!' I hear Kitty scream from behind.

The bookshop had been cold, a rickety air-conditioner grinding away in the back. When I step outside I am engulfed in the heavy, dry air of the summer drought. The sunlight reflects blindingly off the light-coloured pavement and as I walk I feel my clothes and hair and lips and eyes go crisp, as if I have been left too long in an oven. When I am nearly at the intersection — where I turn left to go to the flat — Kitty comes running and catches up to me.

'It turned out ok in the end,' she says, returning to her tight-rope walk. 'There are 26 letters in the alphabet and M is the 13th; I stopped exactly halfway. I can do N through Z on another day, letters 14 to 26. So that's ok. It's all even.'

'That's great,' I say and mean it. Kitty is fundamentally more pleasant when she feels balanced.

*

The next morning I wake up to the sound of Kitty's voice. This in itself is not unusual. I have woken up many times to find Kitty sitting across from me, already halfway through her lecture on exactly what she thinks is wrong with me. But this morning sounds different. There are distinct pauses between her sentences. She sounds like she is replying to someone.

'It's going fine here, thank you.

'Yes.

'Thirty-five.

'No, he doesn't.

'No, he isn't.

'It's possible.

'I agree.

'This Thursday?

'Alright. Goodbye.'

'Who was that?' I ask, sitting up.

Kitty puts the phone down. 'My mother.'

'Linda?' My heart beats a little faster. 'What'd she want?'

'The question is what did I want. I called her to get us invited to dinner this Thursday night.'

'Dinner? Why? What were you talking about?'

Kitty sits down on the couch next to me and tucks her knees up under her chin. 'Well, first she was surprised to hear from me because when I left her house I said I'd never come back. Then she asked me how it was going. Then she asked me if I am living with a boyfriend. She asked how old you were. She asked if you had a job and if you're molesting me. Then she

asked if she knew you. Then she said that maybe it would be a good idea for her to meet you. She suggested dinner this Thursday and I said we'd be there.'

'We've met before. Doesn't she remember?'

'She knows who you are, but I haven't told her who I'm with.'

'Well, why do you want us to meet anyway? I got the sense you didn't want anything to do with her.'

'God, you're observant, aren't you?' She stands in front of her wall — the part between the TV and the bathroom door to which she has fixed what looks to me to be a complete mess of papers, photographs, notes and newspaper clippings, all connected by lengths of red string or, in some cases, red pen lines drawn directly onto the wall. 'Keep up, idiot. We've got to ask her some questions. She's at the centre of all of this, remember?'

'You're her daughter, can't you just drop in for coffee? Do we have to make a whole thing about it?'

'Me dropping in for a friendly visit would be even stranger than if I didn't call her at all. Even when I was a kid I had to make appointments to spend time with her.'

'Christ,' I rub my eyes, 'Ok. Well I've already asked her everything important I could think of. I asked her about the foreword she wrote. I asked her how she got the manuscript. She snubbed me on all counts.'

'And how did you ask her?'

I scratch my head. 'I don't know. I just came out and asked her.'

Kitty puts her hands over her face, exasperated. 'You see? Pathetic. Just leave it to me. I'll get it done properly.'

*

The night of the dinner, Kitty wants to drive to her mother's. She is in a particularly petulant and vile mood which can only mean she's excited about the evening. I am unsure

whether she is more excited about finding out more about Fowler or about getting to interrogate her mother.

She hops into the driver's side and pulls the chair forward so her legs can touch the pedals.

'I want my chance now because you'll just get even drunker and make me sit in the back so you can pretend to be a taxi on the way home.' She reaches down the right side of the car and pumps the lever that lifts the seat up.

I twist around in my seat to guide her as she reverses. 'Fine, fine, fine. You've got space. No you're still fine. Just go straight. Straight. Straight.' Kitty reverses us into a street lamp with a crunch of metal that sounds fatal.

Kitty leaps out the car and runs around to the back. 'Oh my God.' Then she turns on me. 'You idiot! You were supposed to be watching!'

I sigh, exhausted already. We were just supposed to go to this dinner and ask a few questions. Now Kitty's got a reason to be defensive and that can make her nearly unbearable. I get out and join Kitty at the back of the car.

'Back lights are out. This thing,' I grab some kind of coil mechanism that is hanging out and pull on it gently, but there is some resistance from somewhere in the belly, 'looks pretty important I'd say. Maybe a liver or a gall bladder.' A bit of acid reflux brings back some of those eight beers I drank earlier. 'Is the gall bladder important? What is cod liver oil?'

Kitty bangs her little fist on the boot of the car. 'Stop it! Be serious! How are we going to fix this?'

'Listen, I have a bad feeling about this.' And I do. Maybe I don't want the answers I'm looking for. Maybe I don't want to hit another dead-end. Or maybe it is my own gall bladder playing up, but there is something about tonight that doesn't want us to go to this dinner. I say so.

Kitty sighs and approaches me. 'Oh so that's what this is about?' She strokes my face gently. 'Scared of what we'll find?'

I nod. Her palm is soft against my stubble.

'Well too bad,' she says through gritted teeth. 'I want to go.'

'It's my car,' I say. 'I'm not going and neither is my car. If you want to go, you find your own way there.'

Kitty's face, small and angular with not much flesh on it, starts turning red. She is pursing her lips and blowing her cheeks out so hard it looks as if her head might explode. I grab her arms and hold them at her side to prevent the flurry of little punches that usually come after such a face. Her wrists are so thin I worry I am hurting her. I release my grip. A major mistake. One of those little fists shoots straight out like a jack-in-the-box and she punches me right in the balls. I drop to my knees as she gets calmly back into the driver's seat and tries to start the car. I have a moment of true terror where I think that Kitty may just run me over me. But it's too painful to get up, the ball-ache having now moved into my stomach and throat so that every time I try to open my mouth a bit of bile threatens to burst out. I resign myself to being run over by this mad woman. I close my eyes and give myself over to the light.

I feel a tap on the shoulder. When I open my eyes Kitty's face is looming up close to mine.

'Changed your mind?'

'Yes,' I gasp, my voice returning to me as the searing pain turns into a dull thud.

'We'll go?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' Then she holds up the car key which has been snapped in half. 'Call Martin.'

Martin shows up without questions and Kitty and I squeeze into his two-door hatch. I sit in the back so that I can stretch out my balls. They are all swollen and throbbing. I look in my pants, one is blue.

'You've really bruised me this time.'

'Oh, you're such a baby!' Kitty turns around and pats my knee.

*

It takes us twenty minutes to get to the Liebermann's place. Between the two of us Martin and I have finished the six-pack of beers he keeps in the car for emergencies and smoked what felt like a cigarette a minute. When we arrive at the address, the street is lined with cars and there is music coming from behind the massive walls.

'I thought we were just coming for dinner?' I say to Kitty.

'Yes, I thought so too.' Kitty frowns, her chin dimpling. 'Looks like she is having a party. Come on.' She walks towards the pedestrian entrance gate of the house which is guarded by an official looking man in a hat.

'Party?' Martin says in my ear. 'Think I can come, then?'

'Let's see,' I tell him.

'Hello, Jeremiah,' Kitty says stiffly. Oh Jesus, she is trying to be friendly. When she does this, her face goes slack like a stroke victim.

'Hello, miss.' Jeremiah smiles and nods at her, then eyeballs Martin and me. 'Your friends?'

'Oh, yes!' Kitty trills and places a sweating hand on Jeremiah's shoulder.

Martin mouths, *What is she doing?*

I raise my eyebrows and shrug, turning back to the horror scene that is Kitty trying to be social.

'What is going on here tonight, Jeremiah?' Kitty asks, cocking her head to the right.

'Mrs Liebermann is having a party.'

'When did she decide to have a party?'

'I don't know miss, I only found out about it this afternoon. My shift was about to end and she asked me to work extra tonight.'

'Well, thank you, Jeremiah. We'll be going in, now.'

'Them too?' Jeremiah looks over at Martin and me.

'Yes, them too. Thank you, Jeremiah.'

Martin and I nod to Jeremiah as we pass but he remains skeptical looking.

'Lucky you're fucking the daughter, eh?' Martin grins as Jeremiah buzzes open the pedestrian gate.

*

I don't correct him. She's my girlfriend and we live together, but we're not having sex. Kitty just doesn't get those urges. But me — those urges are attached to my joints like puppet strings and I obey them without thinking. I have someone that I fuck — her name is Animé and when those urges come knocking, I get it all out with Animé before going home to Kitty. Kitty knows about Animé, in fact she was the one who introduced me. Animé had babysat Kitty when she was a young kid and they still kept in contact every now and then. One night Kitty suggested that we go visit a strip-club Martin and I were already quite familiar with. Animé worked there as a dancer and still does.

'So what did you think of her?' Kitty had asked me after we'd left.

'She seems like a lovely person.' I wasn't sure how to respond. Kitty had just come into my life and I wasn't sure if I could tell her that all these weeks of nothing but masturbating had not been good for my self-esteem and that just the sight of Animé has put wicked thoughts into my head? I didn't know how she would react.

'I meant more, what do you think about having sleepovers with her?'

'What?'

'Sleepovers. I don't want you pawing at me all the time. I thought maybe you could go and do that to her, instead. And then when you come home, we can just go to sleep. It's very irritating trying to fall asleep with you trying to press that soft little thing into me every night.'

'You *want* me to have sex with her?'

'Of course. Why else would I have introduced you? Don't you want to have sex with her?'

'Well, sure. Who wouldn't? But this is a bit strange, isn't it?'

'I don't see what's strange about it. It's the perfect solution to a problem we both have. You won't bother me with that thing of yours, I can get some sleep and you won't get the headaches that you complain about endlessly. What's strange about that?'

'Nothing, I suppose.' I couldn't find a fault in her thinking. 'What makes you think she would want to sleep with me anyway?'

'There's no guarantee. She and my dad used to have sleepovers sometimes, so I thought it may be worth at least asking. But if she's not interested, we'll keep looking. There's bound to be someone out there.'

'Bound to be.'

When we got home, we went straight to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night Kitty woke me up by hitting my repeatedly over the head.

'You see?' she said, turning on the light. 'How am I supposed to sleep like this?' She gestured towards her lower-half, into which, in the depths of my sleep, I had tried to insert my flaccid self.

'This is untenable,' she said. 'Just sort yourself out and stop bothering me.'

'There's nothing I can do — ' I paused, then flipped my penis up and out of my pants. 'Do you mind if I — ?'

Kitty shrugs, turns off the light and says, 'Just don't get any on me.'

*

I am thinking about Animé's big bouncing tits as we enter the Liebermann property. Across the threshold of the pedestrian gate is like crossing over into another world. The huge house is like elegant crystal, everything inside it and around it looks expensive and fragile, just like the guests. The property is completely choked with people, standing in small, elegant clusters, laughing like ice in a glass and gesturing for the whole world to see. The garden is lit with fairy lights, Chinese lanterns, those stand-up torch things. Like on Survivor. All the women are wearing large beaded necklaces, huge black coats, head scarves and glasses and carrying interesting handbags. The men are in waist coats and blazers, some are wearing hats, most are wearing glasses and all of them have one hand in the pocket of their chinos and are either nodding in agreement with, or are the ones themselves making interesting, nuanced observations about something.

Martin, Kitty and I hesitate on the outskirts of the party, watching, unsure what our first move should be. We've come here to talk to Mrs Liebermann, but now that we were here, I think a collective sense of un-belonging settles over us. Suddenly, Martin shouts something about a bone and then runs off towards a woman from his office who turns and starts walking in the opposite direction when she sees him coming. Then Kitty notices the chocolate fountain on the verandah.

'Excuse me,' she says and walks over to lower her head to the base of the fountain and laps up the liquid chocolate like a little cat. The people around her grimace and move away, shaking their heads in disgust. One woman has to stop her child from copying Kitty.

I look around the party. I don't immediately see Mrs Liebermann, so I take this as a sign that I should find myself a drink and have a smoke before taking any big investigative steps. I

light a cigarette as I walk into the house, exhaling that first drag all over someone's baby. The woman gasps and is about to say something, but I get there first.

'What's you baby doing at this kind of party anyway?'

The woman pulls her baby up against her chest and walks away with a hurumph.

I eye the interior, looking for the glint of a whiskey bottle. Near the kitchen is a stupidly big dining room table and chairs made out of dark wood that looks as if it might actually still be growing, across which all the drink is strewn in an orderly mess. I make a beeline for the amber-coloured whiskey bottle, which looks gorgeous in this light. I pour myself a drink, down it and pour a second. I notice a numbness beginning to spread in my extremities which usually means I am about three or four more drinks away from passing out. I pat my lips to make sure they're still there. They're present, but cold and hard feeling. I had better find Linda Liebermann before the numbness spreads too much further.

The lounge, dining room, kitchen; it's all one big open space without walls or doors or even very tall furniture to demarcate the areas. This kind of openness gives me the chills. There are wooden masks on the walls, huge clay pots everywhere and big blotches of colour on framed canvas hang imposingly over the whole scene. Food is scattered across the kitchen counter; bowls of hummus and tahini, plates of flatbread and roasted butternut, about four different kinds of salad, a deflated red pepper lying on its side that has probably seen better days, a bean salad in a bowl that looks recently crafted at a ceramics class. I think I hear Annie Lennox over the speakers. A bright orange woman with flowers across her forehead walks past me, offering quiches off a cricket bat.

'Fuck off,' I say, enraged by the cricket bat and her orange-ness, but which don't stop me from admiring the healthy shake of her orange thighs as she says 'Fuck you!' and walks away.

'Need another drink?' A voice says behind me.

I turn around to face Linda Liebermann. Her smile drops as she recognises me.

'You?' She twists to look at Kitty behind her who is wiping chocolate off her mouth with her sleeve. Linda looks back at me. 'You're the one my daughter has shacked up with?'

'Unfortunately, yes.'

'Well,' Linda says, imposing a gracious smile onto her stern features, 'we're so glad you could come.'

'Where is Mr Liebermann?'

'Oh, he's around somewhere. It's mostly business at these things and he's not all that interested. He leaves it to me to make the decisions.' She smiles. 'So, the offer still stands. How about a drink?'

'Sure. I'll have what you're having.'

'Oh, I enjoy it all,' she smiles and lays a bejewelled hand on my arm. I pour us both a stiff whiskey, watching her carefully as she takes a sip without wincing.

'Well, how long has it been? We bumped into each other at the award ceremony a few months ago, but I was in such a rush I couldn't stay very long and talk. I'm so glad to see you.' I believe her but I try not to. 'Tell me, how is your writing coming?' She brushes a crumb off my jacket.

I wince, but for some reason something compels me to tell the truth. 'Not well. I've lost it a bit, so to speak.'

Linda tilts her head. 'Oh? Pity. You showed so much promise.'

'Well, I have certainly learned a thing or two since then.' I drain my whiskey and fill the glass to the top. 'I learned that the Liebermanns are pretty hot to pick up young, promising writers but even quicker to drop them if they don't play by house rules. I found that interesting.'

Linda's smile stretches wider, dementing her features. 'Well, why on earth would we keep someone on board who is intent on making a mockery of the whole institute of literature?'

'And that's exactly what it is to you people. An institute.'

'And what is it to you, darling? A life?' Linda laughs, her features dementing. 'Some life you're leading. You smell like dirty clothes and dejection. You look like it, too. Maybe you should have played by the rules a little more closely and you wouldn't need to come around here, chasing after lost dreams.'

We stand in silence together, staring each other down.

'Well, I that's all there is. I should be getting back to my party,' Linda looks around and waves at someone.

I can't see Kitty anymore but I need to keep Linda around before she disappears. It might be impossible to get her alone again.

'What's with the orange chick and the cricket bat?' I ask.

'Oh, Sanguine? She's performing a live art installation piece about the reconciliation of traditionally feminine and masculine roles into one body.' Mrs Liebermann looks off at Sanguine who is huddled in a corner behind her quiches, trying to patch up the bits of paint that have sweated off under her armpits. The paint has started to sweat off between Sanguine's ass cheeks as well and I can spy a sliver of flesh poking through. She sticks a finger between her cheeks to spread the paint. I'd like to stick something in there and help her shake off the rest of that ridiculous getup.

At that moment, Kitty appears.

'Hello, mother,' she says as stiffly as she greeted the guard earlier.

'Oh, hello, darling,' Linda squeezes Kitty's shoulder. 'So glad you decided to come. We were going to do a dinner but then we thought, why not make a thing out of it. I didn't realise this was your boyfriend here. I know him. He used to be one of our writers.'

'Yes, yes, he's no longer a writer, everyone knows that. Come on mother,' Kitty tugs on Linda's sleeve. 'I want to talk to you.'

'Should I—' I start to ask Kitty.

'No, no, you stay where you are. Come on, mother.'

The two Liebermann women disappear into the house and I am left standing on my own with nothing to do but grab a quiche off Sanguine's cricket bat as she walks past.

*

Some time later, I don't know how long it's been, Kitty appears next to me.

'So?' I ask, swallowing my fourth quiche of the evening. 'How'd it go?

'You know how I said Linda plays roles, that she takes her parts very serious?'

'Yes.'

'Well, she was laying on the mother-act so thick I could barely get a word in about Fowler. All of a sudden she was interested in my feelings and asking how I am. She even said she misses me,' Kitty grimaces. 'Then she dragged me over to a group of people and went on for ages about how proud she is of her wonderful daughter. And then everyone started asking me questions about where I live and what I'm doing and when I finished school. In the chaos of it all, I looked around and Linda disappeared. She was gone, just like that. I walked around a little. Came across my father in their bedroom, asleep in the armchair. Eventually I found Linda. She was way out the back with another group of people. When I went up to her she told me to go away. "Mummy's busy," she said, as she always used to when I was a child.'

'Hm. So even Kitty was bested by the terrible Linda Liebermann.'

Kitty scowls. 'I wasn't bested. I was hidden from. There is a difference. ' She makes a grunting noise and balls up her fists. 'She knows something or she did something, but she's not going to tell us what. Let's go. I need to rearrange some things on my wall.'

'Ok. Where's Martin?'

'I don't care,' Kitty waves me off and starts walking towards the gate to the outside world. 'I'll see you at the car.'

I find Martin with his tongue down the throat of the woman from his office. I tell him we're going and he removes himself like an endoscope being pulled out of a body.

Back at the car, Kitty is leaning against the bonnet gesturing wildly and talking to herself. Martin unlocks and she climbs into the back.

'Where to go from here? I knew she wouldn't talk easily, but not that she wouldn't talk at all. This changes the whole centre. Where to go from the beginning? Where to move out from? There has to be another middle. He's got the address that Fowler and Florence used to live at. Maybe they still live there. Maybe they don't. We could drive to Upington. Get directions to Dorperland. Even if they house is empty the neighbours might know something. We could put an advert in the newspaper. If anyone knows anything, they'll contact us.'

Kitty continues like this the whole way home. When Martin drops us outside our flat, she walks past my dead car and through the front door without saying goodbye.

Kitty goes and stands in front of her wall, her hands on her hips, nodding her head, still muttering.

'Where is the new centre?' Kitty takes her finger and makes spiralling shapes. 'Where is the new middle?'

I sit down on the couch, grab a beer from the cooler box next to me which also serves as a side table, light a cigarette and lay my head back. As usual, everything Kitty said about me was right. I don't have any ambition. Somehow I feel that if I don't find out what happened to Fowler, the same thing might happen to me — and even that is not enough incentive to actually do anything about it. Kitty has no horse in the race and yet there she is, throwing all her effort into it. Fowler is all I can think about, he consumes me like water does a sinking ship. But all I do is drown when I should be like Kitty, frantically kicking my arms and legs to reach the surface.

Kitty rips all the papers off the walls and stacks them neatly by size. Then she throws it all up in the air and watches as they come fluttering down to land randomly around her feet. She stands above them appraising the paper fall and nodding her head at something only she can see and understand. Then she sits crosslegged on the floor starts with her usual business — writing on sticky notes and slapping them haphazardly to pages, tearing pages in half and sticking two different pages together with sticky-tape, taking to the articles and photographs and newspaper clippings with a red pen, sending arrow-headed lines streaking insanely across the pages. She arranges and rearranges the mess into different shapes, first a star and then a hexagon, then a square.

In my head I can hear Kitty telling me that I need to change my attitude, that I need to get off my ass and do something, go out and find the drive if it won't find me. I bang my fist on my knee, trying to impart some of Kitty's energy and focus into myself. I lean slightly off my ass so I can reach the book under the couch. I have long-since removed the orange dust jacket to reveal the deep turquoise hardcover beneath.

Determined to discover something new, I read the foreword to Fowler's book again. I read it a second time and by the third re-reading I have completely lost steam. I have read these words so many times they have come to lose all meaning. I can't picture them coming from Linda Liebermann's mouth. The woman who wrote this foreword was in awe of Fowler, her worship was clear — this was not the same woman who I spoke to a few months back who seemed disgusted when I mentioned Fowler's name. The water begins to cover my head and I become short of breath, suffocating. Before it gets worse, I flip to a random page and read a passage out-loud to myself, the sound of my voice soothing me.

I am not concerned with my physical death, even now as I watch my flesh rot and fall away from the bone. I don't care about my body being disembowelled and embalmed and

pressed with powder and other things, of decomposing and becoming worm food. I care about that moment when I will cease to exist in the world. I have always felt that if I left something behind, something concrete, something that would speak for me in my absence, I would continue to exist in some way. My greatest fear has always been to disappear without a trace. It was a fear that kept me awake most nights when I was alive and with which I will have to live all my life now that I am dead.

'Sshh!' Kitty whips around with a terrible look on her face. 'I'm trying to concentrate. Practice for your reading group another time!'

Reading Fowler has had the opposite effect intended. I don't feel renewed with passion or dedication. I simply feel overwhelmed with hopelessness and fear and it has given me a headache. Fowler always gives me migraines. While Kitty continues to mess around with her charts and diagrams, I get up and go and sit at the little table near the window and pull out *Ashtray Chest* from the drawer.

Is it healthy for one to fall asleep every night, eight or twelve beers under, reading poetry one wrote sixteen years ago? Because that is what I do. From back when I had promise. I was a genius. Then something happened. Maybe it was winning that award — maybe it happened too soon. Maybe it was leaving my mother behind. Maybe it was because I couldn't live with what I had let happen to Alexa. No, not let. Encouraged. But none of that seems plausible anyhow. At the time it felt right. It all made sense. It still feels right, only I failed my opportunities. Somehow I managed to squander my perfect tragedy — premature success, an alcoholic mother, the maiming of my first love. I often think, imagine what a real artist could do with that. That's enough to live on for the rest of your life. The stuff of truly glorious fucking art. I had the formula, all the variables worked out, the ratios were weighted perfectly and yet somehow, it all exploded in my hands.

I shove the book back into the drawer. I feel sick. A tumbling, pounding, hollow sickness in my gut.

Kitty shrieks something unintelligible, breaking into my thoughts.

For the first time since we have been together, I shout at her.

'Will you shut up already!'

Then I lie down on the couch without bothering to unfold it and fall asleep with my hands over my face.

UPINGTON

June 1995

I wake up in a bedroom I don't recognise amongst stiff sheets and pillowcases. I sit up, my head swimming. It is not unusual for me to not know where I am first thing in the morning so I don't think much of it. I wonder where I was and what I did last night. Looking around, I see the pillow next to me has a slight indentation from what looks to be only a very small head. This room looks like something from a hotel pamphlet. Opposite the bed is a walk-in closet. There is an ajar door in the closet through which I can see bright white tiles, possibly a bathroom. I realise I am in Kitty's apartment.

After Kitty moved in with me — more than three years ago now — she got got a job with the medical college almost immediately after she finished school. She has no medical knowledge or training to speak of but the heads of department use her particular talents for spotting errors and making sense of seemingly disparate factors to their advantage. She loves it. She can comb through a thesis up for publication and by morning she will have all the editorial and statistical faults laid out in graphs and tables, indexed perfectly and suggestions for improvements and replacements written out in full. Even though she has never complained about money or ever threatened to leave, she keeps getting raises. The school knows that losing her would mean training a dozen less intelligent students to do her job so she is currently

earning more than most doctors. This works out fine for us, because she doesn't care about money and I am down to my last couple of cents.

After a couple of years she saved up enough money to buy an apartment in a nice part of the city — far from where we lived with my uncle but even further away from her parents' house. When she was packing up to move, I asked her if she would mind if I came with her since I didn't exactly get a formal invitation. I took her shrug as an emphatic yes.

I hear mumbling from the kitchen and then the distinct sound of Kitty getting excited about something: a high-pitched 'eeeeeee' that comes somewhere from the back of her throat. It sounds like a mosquito getting too close to your ear. With my vision clearing up and my disorientation dissipating, I swing my legs out of bed and in the process knock over a beer bottle, still half full. I pluck it off the ground before losing too much of the liquid then sweep the small yellow puddle under the bed with my foot. I walk down the hallway, sipping on the warm beer. Kitty's little voice echoes off the tiles.

'Yes.

'Oh, really? No record at all?

'Oh, no. Everything?

'Yes, we've been trying to find her.

'Well, we have an address for a house in Dorperland. We've sent letters but never received a response.

'Oh. That makes sense, then.

'Yes, please. Both, if possible.'

I don't know who she is talking to, but I know what she is talking about. I slam the beer bottle down on a table as I enter the kitchen. At the noise, Kitty jumps and turns around. Her face goes white when she sees me.

'Put that phone down!' I point my finger at her and yell.

'Thank you, goodbye,' Kitty squeaks into the receiver and then hangs up.

'Who was that!'

Recovered from the fright I gave her, colour begins to flood her face again, her eyes begins to narrow and a scowl starts to form.

Oh, shit. In an attempt to maintain control of the situation — before Kitty decides to flip out and start throwing glass beakers at me as she is want to do when her face looks like this — I ramp up to gain the upper hand.

I storm towards her, pointing my finger in her face. 'Who were you talking to!'

Kitty walks up to me and presses her forehead into my finger. 'Get that disgusting sausage away from me!'

I press harder into her head. Quick as a flash, she grabs my hand and bites down on the tip of my finger.

I scream and jump back, pulling my finger out of her mouth. 'Jesus!'

Her incisors are sharper than usual — sometimes I wonder if she files them — and they have pierced my skin.

'I told you to get it out of my face!' she says.

'Don't try and derail me. Who were you talking to?' I suck on my finger to draw out the tiny drop of blood.

'Why should I tell you? You told me you didn't want to hear about it.'

'I told you to leave it but that doesn't seem to have stopped you. Who was it?'

'Listen up, Jack,' Kitty says and starts wiping down surfaces in the already-spotless stainless steel kitchen. 'You don't tell me what I do or who I speak to.'

Kitty has started calling me 'Jack' ever since she watched a movie where a couple of mafiosi went around saying 'Listen up, Jack' to everyone they talked to.

'I know you were talking about Fowler!' I slam my hand down on the counter.

She continues to polish the glass stovetop without flinching. 'Buzz off, fly.'

The clock above the fridge tells me that I am now four hours late, which is pushing it even for me. I storm back into the bedroom, get dressed without showering and then down another flat, old beer before heading back into the kitchen.

'I'm going now,' I say sharply, shrugging my jacket on. 'You had better get this out of your system before I get back.'

Kitty has her head in the oven and doesn't look up as I walk out the apartment, pulling the door closed behind me.

*

Over the three years Kitty and I have lived together, she has become just as obsessed with Fowler as me. Perhaps even more so. Helping me track down Fowler became her favourite game. She read everything I had on him — newspaper articles, magazine interviews, all his published work, the unpublished material I had managed to find, everything — and because she knew all of it, all at once, it made sense to her in a way it never could to me. At first I was envious of that fact. After all of these years, all the time I had spent enveloping myself in his life — first wanting to be exactly like him, then wanting nothing to do with him — I still did not know the man that I both loved and hated. But Kitty did not love or hate him, she simply knew him. For Kitty it wasn't life and death as it was for me. For her, it was the biggest puzzle she could ever have hoped for — but it was a big puzzle with meaning. The big exam at the end of term. The one that counted for everything. A chance to really flex her mental muscles. She was manic with her excitement. But six months ago I told her the search was over, that I had wasted enough of my life on the invisible man. She was devastated. This was the biggest puzzle she'd ever tried to solve and she hadn't completed it yet. Nothing made Kitty so unstable as something unfinished.

I forbid her to talk to me about Fowler anymore — it was making me insane, angry, more depressed than ever. I would go to Animé for some release but black out and wake up to find her with bruises all over her body, crying. And Kitty became so obsessed with the tiny details, drawing out huge, complicated diagrams on our walls at home, sticky notes everywhere that it made me sick. I felt claustrophobic everywhere I went. I found no haven anywhere. It had to stop. All of it. I made Kitty take it all down, put away all the papers, wash the walls clean.

No more talk of Fowler.

She had fought me bitterly. I couldn't stop her obsessing over it in private but I at least got her to stop bringing it up with me. I haven't been able to forget about him as easily as I have pretended to. He still enters most of my dreams. If my mind is quiet for too long then lines from his book will surface to fill the void and they will repeat in my head all day like a song on the radio.

I have had to go back to working at Terry's Fish Shop. The money that uncle George gave me after his son died is all gone. I have managed to squander it all. But I haven't returned to washing fish guts off the floor for the paycheque. Kitty makes more than enough to support the both of us with some change. It is the boredom I am trying to escape. I have learned that the best way to bring on those long and terrible nights in which Fowler fills up every crevice of my mind and turns me to read his book and my poetry side-by-side, looking for points of similarity and departure is to sit still for too long with nothing to do. In an honest conversation between me and the mirror one day, I realised I would happily sacrifice my pride in order to escape one more day of this hell.

*

It's a pretty pallid afternoon. The roads and buildings and even people are not fooling anyone; underneath all the cheap paint and perfume, it's grey, grey, grey. When I get to the shop

Terry is behind the register taking a customer's order. He cuffs his chin at me — his way of politely telling me to fuck off in front of a patron. I change into my white overalls and plastic apron, slippers, gloves and hairnet.

When I relieve Terry of the register duty and he manages to keep the smile on his face right up until the last bell chimes as the the door shuts behind the customer. Then his face drops and he brings his wrinkled face so close to mine that I have to fight the urge to kiss him on his great, white moustache.

'You know what time?' Terry bristles. His breath smells of cigar and coffee.

'I know I'm a bit late.'

'Late? You show up nearly in time for lunch break!'

'Well, that's lucky, isn't it?'

'Idiot!' Terry cuffs me on the head and storms into his office at the back of the shop.

Five minutes later he comes out again, shuffles up and down muttering to himself, scratching his head and lighting and re-lighting the same cigar. Then he goes back into his office and comes out with a huge black bag stuffed with papers and drops the bag in the bins outside the back door. He returns to his office, admires his empty desk for a while, then comes out, closing the door behind him, and sits down at the filleting station to read his newspaper.

When Gloria arrives back a little later in the afternoon she goes straight into Terry's office and comes out screaming. It turns out that all that rubbish was actually Terry's attempt at bookkeeping in the early stages of the shop and he had absentmindedly made her the promise that today he would sort it out. Gloria's shrieking goes on for at least a quarter of an hour. Terry replies with silences. He is a grumpy old coot who doesn't take too well to his space being invaded; he likes fish and that's about it.

Because I showed up so late to work, the day is over before I realise it. I don't want to go home. Kitty will be sulkily watching her shows or reading her books and that will make for

a highly unpleasant evening when all I want to do is relax. Even now in the brief moments where I am not busy doing something, blurry images of Fowler are starting to creep back into my consciousness. I could call Martin. But I don't feel like going to a strip club to watch him sniff powder off a dancer's ass and then start lamenting what he sees as the collapse of capitalism. I start driving just for something to do. The city whirls past me. I try to read every sign and look at every person I pass to displace Fowler. The phrase *dancer's ass* is in my head and now I'm thinking of tits and ass and I know where to go.

When Animé opens the door for me, the first thing she does is pull down the collar of her shirt to show me the bruises around her neck. Her blonde hair sits in tight curls around her ears. The sun is hitting her so that her pink freckles glow warmly as if illuminated from within her milky skin. That makes me think of the pink nipples on those full breasts.

'I'm sorry, baby,' I push past her into the room and take her in my arms. I can feel her stiff resolve melt away as I envelope her. 'I'll be gentle,' I say into her neck. We push her university books off her bed and fall onto it together.

A few hours later, when I say goodbye, she looks sulky. 'Say hello to Kitty for me.'

'I won't,' I blow her a kiss and drive away.

It's around ten now and I still don't want to go home. I stop at a payphone and call Martin but after a long time there is no answer. I have no money. I was relying on him being able to spot me, but if I have to go out alone I will need to go home first and ask Kitty for some. It looks to me like I won't be able to avoid sleeping in my own bed tonight.

*

When I walk in the door, Kitty is in front of the spice rack with a ruler, making sure all the contents of the spice bottles are level.

'Hi,' I say.

She holds up a finger to me, finishes what she is doing and then turns. 'You stink! Fish or pussy?' Her face is all scrunched up in disgust.

'Both,' I say. 'Listen, I'm a little short and I'm going out. Can I have a few notes?'

'No.' Kitty folds her arms. 'Something's happened and you're going to sit down and listen.'

For some absurd reason I panic thinking Kitty is pregnant. But unless there has been an immaculate conception I don't see how that is possible.

'The person you heard me on the phone to this morning was a woman called Alice. She is the secretary at the Upington police department.'

'I knew it!' I half launch myself off the couch.

'Sit!' Kitty hits my head, pushing me back. 'I phoned the Upington police this morning when you were sleeping. I can't believe I'd never thought to do it before and frankly I'm a little embarrassed. Anyway, I spoke to Alice who was still the secretary back when Fowler died. His death was handled by their department since Upington is the only major centre within three hours of Dorperland with both a police department and a fire brigade, not to mention a public library. Alice said she remembered the Fowler case.' Kitty's rolls her eyes up to the ceiling as she does when she is about to recall something verbatim.

"The policemen — I think it was Officer Snyman who first reported, I can't remember his partner's name — they got the call. So they went to the victim's house in Dorperland, established the cause of death as suicide, took some photographs and then came back to the department here in Upington in order to make a preliminary report and return with a senior detective to collect evidence. Shortly after the detectives left Dorperland to come back, one of the neighbouring farmers called to report that the victim's house was burning down. The police and the fire department were at least three hours away, so there was nothing that the Dorperland farmers could do except to watch the house burn to the ground. "'

'Ok? So what? I don't want to hear any of this.'

'So? Don't you get it? The reason Florence never responded to any of our letters was because she never received them. We were sending mail to a house that doesn't exist.'

I stare at her.

'The house burns down before detectives can return to collect evidence and and you don't want to hear about it? The shotgun — '

'Could have been ten metres long and bright pink! Kitty, I've told you. I'm not doing it anymore.'

'But there's something else —'

'No. Enough. Now are you going to give me some money or not?'

Kitty swipes the beer bottle off the table with her arm. It shatters on the floor sending bits of brown glass scattering everywhere. 'Go and drink yourself to death with somebody else's money.'

'You're insane!' I shout at her, but she can't hear me. She is sitting cross-legged in front of the TV and has turned the volume right up.

I shove my arms back through my jacket sleeves, ripping a seam somewhere. Kitty's purse is where it is usually is; in the cutlery drawer amongst the steak knives. Glaring defiantly at the blaring TV, she doesn't hear me open the drawer, unzip the purse and pull out two crisp notes. I don't even think she hears the door slam.

Luckily there is a twenty-four hour bottle store down the road from the apartment. I stop in there and spend Kitty's money on a six-pack and a box of cigarettes. Luckier still, there is a bench just outside the bottle store. In the current climate this bench seems as good a place as any to spend the evening. It is all wrought iron and hard wooden slats, but for my purpose it should serve me fine. The night is chilly but not cold enough for my jacket so I take it off bundle it up into a ball, stretch out lengthways on the bench and place my jacket under my head

for a pillow. With my head bent forward slightly against the metal armrest, I am just vertical enough to sip my beer without choking.

I light a cigarette and blow the smoke out above me, watching it disappear in the yellow haze of the street lamp. The light seems to pulse brighter and larger the longer I stare at it until the lamp is gone and the glowing orb consumes the whole night and, suddenly, I am hovering above my seventeen years old self, sitting at my little desk in my dark room in my mother's apartment. In the background Noelene is slamming cupboard doors and kicking over the dining room chairs because one of her boyfriends had come over earlier and made off with her stash of vodka. I watch myself cover my ears. I remember this moment. I remember that the banging and crashing from the kitchen was louder than the words on the page. I thought that if maybe I blocked my ears I would be able to concentrate. I can't remember what I was doing. I try to go to the right a little to see over my shoulder and I move like I am floating. I must be made of thought particles traveling through the air. I can see the desk now. I am hunched over a piece of paper, writing a poem. The paper is a mess of scratched out words and scribbles. I put my head in my hands. Stuck to the wall in front of the desk is a cut out page from a magazine. It is the advert for the Liebermann Prize for Emerging Writers. At the end of that year I would win that prize, but I remember feeling in that moment that it was hopeless. I remember thinking: This is try-hard. Unsubstantial. Pointless. Strained. Second-rate Larkin or Thomas. Actually, not even anything near as skilled as that. I felt embarrassed reading the words. I scoffed at my attempts to edit — did I think a synonym for 'travesty' would save that line? Did I think a full stop instead of a comma would make a difference? I watch myself crumple the page up and throw it in the bin and then go over and lie on my bed. I stare at the ceiling and then pull John Fowler's *The Cause of Hell* out from underneath my pillow and I start to read. The dust jacket of the book is bright orange, growing redder every second until it turns into a glowing ember and the book starts to burn.

I wake with a start on the bench. I try to spit my cigarette out but it has burned down to the filter and melted some of my lip skin to it. I rip it away from my mouth, sending ash all down my shirt. The peak of my lips are burned and raw. I lick them, wincing and run back up the street, back to Kitty.

She is still watching TV with her arms folded in front of her. I turn it off and sit down next to her. She turns to me, about to complain, but then recoils at the sight of my face.

'Are you wearing lipstick?' she asks.

'Never mind,' I say. 'You said there was something else. What is it?'

'What?'

'You were about to tell me something else you'd found out, but I cut you off. I want to know what it is.'

'Why?' Kitty asks sceptically.

'I got a strange feeling just now. Like, if don't give this another shot something bad may happen. In my dream the book was burning and then I woke up with my lips on fire. I don't know. But I'm scared. I don't mind telling you that. I keep getting close to something only to have my legs cut out from underneath me. I feel I have to try anyway.'

'You've never been this close before.'

'Close to what? Close to missing documents and no one who actually knows anything? This is what I'm talking about. I—'

While I'd been talking Kitty had walked over to a table and retrieved a piece of paper. She puts it down in front of me. 'You've never been as close as *this*.'

It's a letter.

Dear Kitty,

I saw your advert in the newspaper. I didn't realise people were still interested in my husband. I would be very glad to talk to you about him. Please feel free to contact me.

Regards,

Mrs Florence Fowler

I read it a few times over. The name of the addresser sticks in my mind like a badly written sentence. I look up at Kitty.

'What is this?'

'It's a letter.'

'I can see that. Why is this letter signed from Florence Fowler?'

'Because it is.'

'How can that be? Did you really put an advert in the paper?'

'Yes,' Kitty turns and fetches a newspaper clipping. 'Here.'

Two enthusiasts in search of any information RE the writer, John Fowler. Please contact immediately.

'How can you be sure the person who responded to this is really Florence Fowler?'

'It is. I know it.'

'When did you do this?'

'Well, I put the advert out a few weeks ago but the letter just came this afternoon while you were at work.'

My incredulity turns to rage at the thought of her sending and receiving secret letters behind my back. 'How could you have done this? I told you I didn't want —'

'And I told *you* that you don't tell me what to do. You said you wanted to see this. You don't need to be involved if you don't want to, but I'm going whether you come with or not.'

'Going where?'

Kitty stares at me, her mouth falling open. 'Are you *daft?* To Upington! To talk to Florence!'

'I don't know how you can believe this is real. It's probably some joker who saw the advert and felt like wasting someone's time.'

'It's not a prank. There's a landline number next to the return address. I called it earlier this evening. It went to the front desk at an old-age home. They said Florence was sleeping but that I could call back tomorrow. And that is what I'm going to do. I'm going to call her and then I'm going to make a plan to visit her.'

'This is happening too quickly.'

'Not quick enough,' Kitty says. 'Or would you rather wait around another ten years?'

My eyes glaze over and I stare vacantly at a point just beyond Kitty's head. 'In my dream I was seventeen again. I was busy working on one of the poems that won me the Liebermann prize. Only I couldn't finish it. My mother was was just about tearing the house down. I couldn't think with the noise. Then I read from *The Cause of Hell*. My mind went silent. I remember the passage. Near the end of the book. The dead man was listening to his teachers talking about how much promise he showed and that he never lived up to his expectations. What a pity, the said. What a waste. After all that, he didn't turn out too differently to his father.'

'Stop that,' Kitty says crossly. 'It annoys me when you go like that. All far away. I'm trying to talk to you. Are you going to come with or not? If not, you won't stop me from going. I'll ask Martin to come.'

Half-conscious, still staring, I tell her I will come.

*

A few days later we get in the car and start driving. The drive from Johannesburg to Upington is eight hours. We pack a bag of clothes each, some snacks for the road (for Kitty some black coffee and a peanut butter sandwich, for me a case of beers, half a bottle of whiskey and a carton of cigarettes) and fight over who is better at reading atlases.

Kitty has been in a fantastic mood all week and it has been intolerable. I have missed her glowering looks and irritable responses, which have been replaced by singing, humming, toe-tapping, finger clicking and the like. She has taken out all her old charts and papers and graphs and notes on Fowler and returned them to their places on the wall, so that even in the days before this trip where I thought I might let my brain get some quiet time, the flat itself would not stop screaming at me. I spent most of the nights this week over at Animé's, who wasn't overly pleased to see me but didn't turn me away either. On one occasion I couldn't get it up. She said I must be anxious and then I got embarrassed and left. She has tried to phone me a few times but I haven't returned the call. Even Kitty, with no social skills to speak of, said it was rude that I didn't call back. I don't know how I am going to spend eight hours in a car and however long in Upington with a now self-righteous Kitty.

My spirits start to lift as I get into road tripping mood; the radio is blasting, Kitty is caterwauling along with the songs, the windows are down, I am dangling a cigarette out the car, the other hand on the gear stick and a beer clenched between my thighs. Kitty has her feet up on the dashboard. In the pale, crisp light, she almost looks pretty.

As we leave behind the city limits of Johannesburg, the landscape gets progressively flatter and shrubbier, with only the occasional tall green tree punctuating the otherwise yellow and brown expanse. The road stretches ahead of us and disappears into a small point which never gets closer. It is freeing to feel like we may just spend the rest of our lives in this car, on this road, driving towards that point. I feel so peaceful I almost feel like writing a poem, but that feeling passes as soon as I try to think of one. Then I just feel anxious and afraid.

I am still not certain of what we are driving towards, but all I can see is seventeen year old me, working day and night to model himself after Fowler. I am worried we will find out that he was just a man, like me and I am worried we will find out he was more than I could ever hope to be.

Kitty is interested in the puzzle of his disappearance. I really only have one concern: Why did he kill himself? He had just begun to break out into the literary scene, only just started making a name for himself, when he disappeared and killed himself. I didn't think about this much when I was younger but as I got older and my success dwindled I started to wonder why someone who seemed to be on the brink of an upward turn in his life would end it before it really got started. All I know about Fowler comes from his book. Judging from that we are haunted by similar demons and yet I suspect that I will never have the same ability he does to deal with it by writing. If even he couldn't stand to be alive in the face of that, I don't know what hope I have.

With my mood, the weather starts to change. What had been a dry, sunny morning is now turning into a grey, grim afternoon and things are fast losing their charm. Kitty is in a bad mood too. When I start complaining she tells me to shut up and then she spends the next hour tearing me apart for things I have done in the past or might do in the future. I know with Kitty that the best thing to do is usually to let her go on and eventually she will tire herself out but it does make the drive seem longer than it is. I can't stand it anymore and I say something, I can't remember what and by the time we approach Upington, we are bickering like a cat and dog who have been married for many, bitter years. For the last few kilometres we drive parallel to the Orange River but even that beautiful sight does not reduce our irritability.

Suddenly, the sign announcing we are entering Upington appears and relief floods over me.

'Look!' I shout, pointing to it.

'You look! You know how!' Kitty slings back. I wave her off and Kitty pulls a face like a bulldog that's run into a wall.

It's nearing six in the evening now, the sun has gone down but it is not completely black yet. We pull into a petrol station to ask directions to the Amber Fields Care Home and a young man working the pump explains how to get there in a mixture of broken English and fluent Afrikaans.

Upington is not what I expected of a town that is surrounded by arid, dry land and malnourished-looking cows. The whole town seems to be just two or three main roads, like the place is just one perfect suburb; uniform-sized houses line the clean, black streets, each with perfectly manicured lawns divided by open driveways leading into single garages. There are a few people out walking, some look as if they have just finished work and others as if they are out for exercise. Besides us there are only a handful of other cars out on the road. The windows in the houses are warmly lit as people go from room to room, switching on the lights, turning on their TVs, living their lives. Even the trees in Upington are greener and fuller than the thorny stalks found along the highway. There is a strange lushness to the town. Even the air feels wet and sticky.

It doesn't take long to get to Amber Fields which is in a cul-de-sac at the end of Amber Lane, off Main Road. It is a large, white colonial style house set far back from the entrance gate, with a large, empty parking lot. Acres of green lawn which wrap around the house and seem to span for kilometres behind it. We sign the entrance book at the guard hut, wait for the boom to open and then pick a spot near a hydrangea bush. I turn the car off and just sit for a moment. I feel nervous about going in. At length I get out of the car, stretch, straighten out my jacket, brush my hair back with my fingers and then light a cigarette.

'Are you serious?' Kitty asks, throwing her hands in the air. 'You just had one. You'll stink. They won't even let you in smelling like that.' She folds her arms.

'Just give me a minute.'

'I'm going in.'

Kitty on her own in there worries me. I throw my cigarette to the ground and catch up with her before she makes it to the door. The front room has a small reception desk and a few arm chairs for waiting and a large wooden staircase which leads up four floors. The person at the reception desk is a fat woman who looks to be in her late sixties.

'Where's Lauren?' Kitty asks as we approach the desk.

The woman looks mildly put out. 'She works during the day. I'm Jeanette. Is there something I can do for you?'

'I've been speaking to Lauren on the phone. We've come to see Florence Fowler. Which room is she in?'

'I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over. You can come back at nine tomorrow morning, after breakfast. Alternatively if you'd like to book now, you can join Mrs Fowler for lunch.'

'So what if visiting hours are over?' Kitty slams her hands on the desk. 'What if Florence wants visitors? We've been in the car all day to see her! What is this, a prison?'

I shush her and turn back to Jeanette. 'I'm sorry, she gets a little cranky at this time in the evening.'

Jeanette frowns at Kitty. 'She's very rude, you know. But Florence is likely asleep now, anyway. They don't get to sleep so easy at this age so we don't like to bother them.'

I flash Jeanette the most winning smile I can muster. Either it charms or confuses her, but either way she agrees to dial.

After a while and no answer, Jeanette puts the phone down. 'I'm sorry, it looks like she's asleep. I'll let one of the morning staff know to tell her you stopped by.'

'Ok. We're not from Upington. Is there anywhere close we can spend the night?'

She pulls out a small brochure and unfolds it to a map of the area we are in now. She points at a house two streets away. 'This is the Amber Glen Guest House. Reception is open 24/7, they do hot breakfasts and there is a swimming pool. My cousin runs it.'

I take the brochure. 'Thanks. See you tomorrow.'

'I work nights.'

'Whatever,' says Kitty.

The Amber Glen Guest House looks remarkably similar to the Amber Fields Care Home but inside it smells more like cinnamon and less like dementia and death masked by disinfectant. What looks to be Jeanette's twin is behind the reception desk and she introduces herself as Janine.

'You must be Jeanette's cousin,' I say to her. She smiles and flutters her eyelashes at me. Kitty rolls her eyes so far back into her head I think maybe this time they're gone for good.

I ask her about any available rooms and we agree on a cottage.

Janine smiles. 'Let's get you sorted out then, shall we? Name?'

'Kitty Liebermann.'

Janine pauses. 'Liebermann? Why do I know that name? It sounds familiar. Let me check.' She opens up her big book of bookings and pages through it. 'Yes. Here we are. A few weeks ago. Linda Liebermann. Interesting name. Don't hear many like that up here. Is she a relative?'

Kitty and I look at each other.

'Yes,' Kitty says. 'She's my mother. I remember now — she came up to visit my auntie. She died.'

'Your aunt?'

'No, my mother.'

Janine looks aghast. 'Oh, dear. I'm terribly sorry, darling.'

'Yes. She was a drug addict. Overdosed,' Kitty nods sadly. 'That's actually why we're in Upington. We're writing a story about her and we're trying to piece together the last few weeks of her life. Is there anything you can tell us? Anyone she may have talked to?'

'Well, she was out most of the time. But I do remember that Dot O'Neil picked her up one morning and they were gone a few hours before she came back. But I don't remember anything other than that, I'm afraid. I'm terribly sorry for your loss,' Janine reaches out and touches Kitty's hand.

'Me too,' I say.

Kitty shoots me a look then turns back to Janine. 'Who is Dot? How can we get in touch with her?'

'Oh, that's simple enough. She's the hospital administrator. I don't have her personal contact details but you can generally guarantee on finding her at the hospital.'

'Thank you. And one last thing,' Kitty says. 'Do you know the police secretary, Alice?'

Janine laughs. 'Yes. It's a very small town. Alice and I went to school together. In fact, I'll tell you a secret,' Janine brings her hand up to her mouth and feigns a whisper, 'most of the old ladies you'll see around this town went to school together.'

'Not Dot?' Kitty asks.

'Oh, no. She is quite a few years younger than most of us. And besides, she was mostly home-schooled by her parents, as far as I know.'

'Right, thank you,' Kitty says briskly and hands over some cash. 'Please book us in for a week. We may be here longer or shorter than that. We'll let you know.'

'Alright,' Janine says, clearly a little disturbed by Kitty's abruptness. 'I've booked you into the Lily Pad Cottage. Hot breakfast at eight in the dining room.'

Janine hands us our key and we are already walking out the door as she shouts behind us, 'Just turn left out the front door, follow the path round the back of the house and the Lily Pad cottage is the first on your right! Enjoy your stay!'

The cottage is quaint. Dusty but clean, ancient but well-maintained, floral print everywhere and over-furnished. It has only three rooms; a lounge/dining room with an attached kitchenette, a bedroom and a bathroom. We drop our bags on the couch and I pour myself a drink and stand in the doorway and light a cigarette. Kitty pulls a stack of crumpled, frayed papers out of my bag, then spreads them out on the dining room table.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'Looking for mention of Dot. I don't remember hearing her name in all of this.'

'If you don't remember it, it's because it was never mentioned.'

'I know that. I'm checking to see if you wrote anything down about her and then forgot, which is much more likely.'

I take a drag of my cigarette and blow it out into the night. Even smoke looks different here.

*

Neither of us are hungry when we wake up and so we head straight to Amber Fields. At the desk is a pretty young brunette with her hair pulled back tight in a ponytail, not a good look for her.

'Lauren?' Kitty asks.

'Yes?'

Before Kitty can answer, I butt in. 'You know, not many girls wear their hair pulled back like that anymore. It really showcases your face. A very lovely face.'

She smiles and puts a hand to her cheek. 'Oh. Thank you.'

Next to me Kitty groans and mutters that she wishes she had brought Martin instead of me. A little louder she says, 'We're here to see Florence Fowler. We arrived last night but—'

'Oh.' Lauren's smile drops. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Why?'

'Mrs Fowler has been taken to hospital. She had a heart attack.'

'When did that happen?'

'I'm sorry, I don't know. I wasn't here when it happened.'

'Is she ok?'

'I'm not sure. In her condition — well, I wasn't here, so I really don't know. Here, you can try the hospital.' Lauren writes down the hospital name and number on a sticky note and hands it to me.

'Thanks,' I say as we turn and walk away. 'Kitty, I told you. This is a scam. A wild goose chase. I'll bet when we get to the hospital there will be someone waiting there to tell us that Florence has gone skiing in the Alps.'

The hospital is on the other side of Upington — a whole ten minute drive. The lady at the front desk gives us directions to Florence's room. I often hear people complaining about hospitals — the antibacterial smell, the feeling of death lingering about the place, the sea of white, white, white — but I don't mind it.

'Don't be surprised if it's just a pile of pillows stuffed into the bed to make a human shape,' I whisper in Kitty's ear as we arrive at the private room on the third floor.

When Kitty knocks there is no answer. She pushes the handle down and enters. Inside the room is dark, the curtains drawn and there is a bed against the left wall. Standing at the foot of the bed is a rotund woman with short-cropped dull brown hair, who looks up with a start.

'Excuse me!' the woman hisses. 'This is a private room and my friend is sleeping!'

'Excuse *you*!' Kitty hisses back, stomping into the room. '*We* have an appointment!'

Something in the bed stirs and reveals itself to be the frail figure of an old woman. She sits up with great effort. The woman looks to be about seventy but could pass for ninety and is wearing a white night dress. She holds her thin, weak arms limply in her lap and leans back tenderly against the stack of pillows behind her. Even from here her skin appears to be hanging off of her frame like a loose costume, the fat and muscle meant to fill it out having long since deteriorated. Her short, thinning hair is like candy floss on her head.

With a slack mouth she begins to speak in a raspy, phlegmy voice. 'It's ok. I know who they are.' The woman's mouth stretches into a small, pained smile.

'Really, Florence. I don't think you're quite ready for visitors and these two — '

'Oh, Dorothy. Do bugger off,' Florence says, looking straight into the large woman's face.

Dorothy grunts and marches out of the room like a petulant elephant. At the door she turns back. 'You're not well, Florence, so I won't pay that comment any mind. I'll be back in ten minutes with some tea and then you'll need to get some rest.'

Florence beckons us over weakly and smiles as we approach. 'Kitty?'

Expecting to hear my own name, I nod, but catch myself as Kitty walks forward.

'I was worried when you didn't find me at the home that you'd just turn around and go back,' Florence says.

Kitty sits down on the edge of the bed with a bounce. 'Who was that?'

'That was Dorothy. Dot, as she likes to be called,' Florence smiles.

'Dot?' says Kitty. 'We spoke to Janine at the BnB last night. She told us that my mother was up here a few weeks ago and that she had been visited by a woman called Dot.'

'That'll be the same one, then,' Florence nods. 'That's why I was so intrigued by your advert. I —'

'I'm sorry,' I interject, standing in the middle of the room with my arms open. The other two look at me. 'But are you really Florence Fowler?'

'Yes, I am. Who are you?'

I'm floored by this. For some reason I expected her to know. 'I'm the reason this whole thing started. I'm the one who was obsessed with your husband's book. It's the whole reason I became a writer. I'm the one that wanted to find out what happened to him. She hasn't even read his book!' I point to Kitty.

'Well, then why was it Kitty and not you who put the advert out in the paper? Why was it Kitty and not you who called me?'

'I — Well — '

'Listen, I don't have time for this childishness,' Florence says. 'There are things you'd like to know and I hope I can tell you some of them. I wish it weren't here. Back at the home you could have come up to my room and I'd have some tea ready. I would have made biscuits.'

I had momentarily forgotten that we were in a hospital and that Florence was here because she had had a heart attack the night before. 'How are you?' I ask. I feel uncomfortable asking, like I will speak the words incorrectly, without the right feeling and meaning attached, but I know it is the socially acceptable thing.

'Oh, apparently I'm stable, but I don't feel too hot. I fell asleep in front of the TV yesterday afternoon. This morning I woke up in the hospital. A heart attack, they tell me. I mentioned to you I had limited time and it seems I have even less than I thought. The doctors are saying a month, two at the most.'

'But what's wrong with you?' Kitty asks.

Florence coughs and looks at Kitty with something I would call affection but it is hard to tell since I don't often see affectionate looks being addressed to Kitty. 'Cancer.'

She suddenly looks even older than she did when we first arrived. Looking at her now with the light from the bedside lamp shining through the stretch of skin hanging from her jaw reminds me of the pregnant gecko I once saw on the glass window in my school friend's house, illuminated by the the sunlight shining from behind it, its skin was turned transparent and the glowing orange orb in its belly was revealed.

'Are you sure you want us here?' I ask, hoping she will tell us to leave.

'Yes,' says Florence defiantly, staring at me with watery blue eyes. 'Someone has to tell John's story.' Florence smiles again. 'But before I go on, I do have a condition for sharing this with you.'

Ah, here it is. The scam. The real reason we're here.

'I want you to write about what I tell you and share it.'

'What do you mean, write about it?' Kitty asks.

'I want to tell John's story, but I don't want it disappearing into the void as he did. I don't want anyone taking credit for his work when he never meant for it. Do you see? I don't care how you do it, just get it out there. That's my condition. I can't hold you to it but I will trust you to be honest.'

Kitty and I keep quiet for a while. Kitty has no interest in righting any wrongs here, all she wants is the truth. So do I but there is something about what Florence is asking us to do that tugs at my stomach. For the first time in sixteen years, I make a promise I intend to keep.

'I'll write about it.'

Florence looks me in the eyes. 'Well, that brings me right to it, I suppose. Firstly, you should know that *The Cause of Hell* was never intended to be published. Minutes before John killed himself, I brought tea to his study and I set it down right next to the manuscript. There was only one copy. He never sent it anywhere. He never meant to.'

'How can you be sure?' Kitty asks. 'Might he have made another copy, decided to send it out without telling you?'

'Never.'

'Well, how did the manuscript get to Linda Liebermann, if he didn't send it and you didn't either?' I say.

Florence looks at me. 'Have you met Linda Liebermann?'

'She's a shape shifter,' Kitty says.

Florence smiles at Kitty. 'Do you believe what she wrote in her foreword to be true?'

'There is no other choice,' I say.

'There are two possible scenarios. In one, Linda simply lies about the how she learned the truth. In another, Linda fabricates the truth itself. Which one do you think it is?'

As I am about to shake my head, thinking can't this woman stop with the riddles, Kitty interjects.

'Both.'

Florence nods her head. 'Correct. She tells some lies and some truths. But why?'

I am about to shrug but Kitty jumps in again. 'Because it makes for a better story.'

'Right again!' Florence says. 'It's the stories we tell that tell stories about ourselves. Linda Liebermann knows that better than anyone. The story she tells is not about my husband, but about herself and she will tell that story no matter the cost.'

'What do you mean?' I ask, but Florence devolves into a coughing fit. A nurse happens to be walking past and comes in to check Florence's pulse, make a note on her chart and give her a glass of water.

'I'm sorry,' the nurse says. 'I think Mrs Fowler should get some rest now. She's been talking up a storm and I am sure she is very tired. Perhaps you could come back and visit tomorrow.'

'Yes,' Florence manages through the coughs. 'I do feel very tired all of a sudden. Let's talk tomorrow, Kitty. Come back in the morning.'

We say goodbye to Florence as a second nurse enters the room. On the way out, Kitty suggests that we go and find Dot.

'Let's give it some time,' I say. 'Her hackles are probably raised after you went storming in there like that.'

At first Kitty doesn't see the use in diplomacy but after a while she agrees to visit Dot tomorrow after we see Florence. In the meantime, Kitty wants to stop by the police station to talk with Alice in person. Somehow this has turned into Kitty's show.

*

Like most of Upington, the police station is close to everything else, less than a two-minute drive from the hospital. We almost miss the station at first as it looks identical to the brick-face residential houses on either side of it, the only identifier being the small black lettering on the brick which reads 'Police Dept.' We pull up next to a police car, the only other vehicle parked there. A slightly ramped walkway lined with bright green bushes leads up to the front door which buzzes open before I have even reached for the handle.

We enter a well-lit foyer, crowded with some motley waiting furniture (two armchairs, a spongey looking couch, a narrow coffee table) and go over to the reception counter. Behind the glass window another woman who looks to be in her seventies is beaming at us as we approach. I think I have seen more little old ladies these two days in Upington than I have my whole life.

' Saw you coming on the TV,' the woman says, pointing to a screen which shows footage from the security camera outside the front door.

'Are you Alice?' Kitty asks.

'Yes! How did you know?' the woman says. 'Oh!' she laughs and taps the little plaque on her desk which reads *Alice Wilkins*.

'No, not that,' Kitty says and Alice's smile becomes confused. 'My name is Kitty. I spoke to you on the phone a few days ago about John Fowler.'

'Oh!' Alice claps her hands together. 'Of course. One moment.'

Alice comes round the side of the reception counter and is no taller than she had been sitting down. Her back is terribly rounded on one side and her one nostril is smaller than the other.

'Have a seat,' Alice gestures to the couches. 'I'll put some tea on and then we can have a nice chat here.' She disappears through a door and for a while there are some bustling noises and the sound of a kettle boiling.

'What are we going to ask her?' I lean across the coffee table and whisper to Kitty.

'We?' Kitty repeats loudly. 'I know what I'm going to ask her.'

'Alright, then. What are you going to ask her?'

'I tried to talk to you about this other day but you weren't interested, so now you can wait and find out.'

Alice returns with a tray bearing a tea pot, three tea cups and a plate of crunchies.

'Officer Denton's wife makes these every week for us. Usually we don't share them with civilians,' Alice hands us each a crunchie with a mischievous look on her face. 'Now, what has got you two so interested in this case? I admit it was a strange suicide but none of the detectives seemed as worked up about it as you two,'

'A strange suicide?' Kitty asks. 'How so?'

Alice speaks with the ease of a grandmother telling her kids a bedtime story. 'Well, I don't remember everything. It was such a long time ago. But I was fairly new here so some things did stick out to me. Now, officers weren't really supposed to discuss case details with

me, but I think it was their first homicide and they were nervous and so they told me what had happened. They said the body— ' Alice pauses and looks at Kitty. 'It's quite gruesome, dear, will you be alright to hear it?'

'Oh, yes,' Kitty nods.

Although seeming a little concerned about Kitty's eagerness, Alice continues. 'Alright. The suicide was committed with a shotgun. A Winchester Model 1897, which had belonged to Florence's father and which she kept in the house. Mydaddy owned the same model. It was quite popular around here. My daddy's gun was a 16-gauge and Florence's was a 12-gauge. That's important because of the barrel length. The 16-gauge is around seventy centimetres in length, while the 12-gauge is around seventy-six. Now, John was a tall man, but I think even he—'

'Would have had trouble pointing the shotgun at himself and pulling the trigger,' Kitty says.

'My, you are clever,' Alice says. 'Quite right. Of course, there are ways to do it, if one wanted to.'

'Yes. He could have bent over the gun, like this and pulled the trigger with his toe,' Kitty mimes. 'Or he could have gotten a long piece of string and tied it to—'

'Yes, alright, alright,' Alice fusses her hands about. 'You can stop that, now. The point is that it can be done, although there is the possibility that there was someone else involved.'

'The more likely scenario,' Kitty says, sitting down.

Alice looks a little irritated now. 'Well, we don't know that. Either way, the whole situation was strange, not just the suicide.'

'You said the house burned down?' Kitty asks.

'Yes. I was at the desk when I received a call from the Fowler's neighbours, the O'Neils. They said they had Florence with them and to send some officers because she had just found

her husband's dead body in his study. I passed the call onto the two new officers — the others were out or on leave. After the officers had been gone about four hours, I got another call from the O'Neils saying that, this time, the Fowler's house was burning down. Well, I didn't know what to do. I got hold of the Chief, who wasn't pleased to hear from me as he was celebrating his sixtieth birthday and he told me to contact the fire department. So I did. When I told them about it, the man on the phone said there was nothing they could do. He said those Dorperland houses were all wood and filled with heavy, wooden furniture. They take a while to catch but when they do they burn steady and hot. He said by the time the firefighters got there the fire would have burned out. We get a lot of veld and factory fires up here. So the farmers had to do what they could simply to contain the fire and make sure it didn't spread to the livestock. The fire completely destroyed the house and cremated the body. As far as I know, only a few bone fragments and one or two teeth were found.' Alice shivers. 'By the time I received the phone call about the fire, the officers were already on their way back from Dorperland and they arrived at the station about an hour or two after that. They obviously didn't know about the fire until they got here. They looked terrified. I was worried one of them was going to throw up.'

'Why were they so scared?' I ask.

'They said the scene was a mess and they didn't know what to think about it. They wanted to come back to Upington to make an initial report, but mostly so that they could fetch another detective to take on the case. We didn't get a lot of homicides — we still don't. The process has become a lot stricter — now a crime scene would never be left unattended without evidence being collected first. But it was different back then. It's a small community and we are only a small department. Five officers in total, you know. Everyone knew each other and we thought we could trust the farmers to watch over the house. But they shouldn't have left the crime scene. They thought they were going to lose their jobs.'

'So no final report, no evidence, no autopsy?' Kitty asks.

'That's right, I'm afraid. But everyone was fairly certain it was a suicide. He was an unusual man who liked solitude and mostly they made sure he had it because he could be quite cantankerous. Nobody was surprised by the notion that he might have killed himself.'

Kitty nods slowly. 'And the initial report that the responding officers returned to file?'

Alice puts her hand to her chin. 'Now that is rather embarrassing for me. Not my finest moment. You see, a few years ago we implemented a new filing system. It was my job to move everything over and, somehow, a lost a few case files. Oh,' Alice shakes her head. 'But most of the files lost were for such minor things that nobody seemed to care — like the charge against Dennis Plymouth for dropping brass bolts in the school's water-cooler.'

'And this one,' I say.

'Yes. The case on Fowler got lost in the transition as well.'

The phone at reception starts ringing then and Alice excuses herself to go and answer it.

'What do you think?' I ask Kitty. I feel bombarded by this stream of information and I don't know what to make of it all.

'I don't know. I need to hear what Florence has to say.'

We thank Alice and head back to the Amber Glen to bide our time until we return to the hospital.

*

The next morning I suggest we head over to the hospital a little earlier and pick up some breakfast in the cafeteria. When we get to Florence's room, we find that the door is blocked by two nurses having a serious discussion over a clipboard.

'I'm sorry,' one of the nurses says as we approach. 'Mrs Fowler has had a very bad night. The doctor has said no visitors.'

'Is she alright?' I ask, my hands full of muffins and orange juice. 'What happened?'

'Are you family?' the nurse asks.

'No. We're friends. We were here yesterday morning visiting and Florence told us to come back with some breakfast. We know she had a heart attack a few days ago. Is she alright?' I ask again.

'Well, it looked like she was recovering well but then she took a turn for the worse yesterday afternoon and she's been non-responsive since then.'

'Non-responsive?' Kitty asks. 'A coma?'

'Not quite,' the other nurse says. 'I'm sorry but if you're not family we really can't give you any more information than that.'

Kitty and I turn around and walk slowly back the way we came.

'It really feels like someone is trying to keep us from talking to Florence,' I say.

'Oh, don't be ridiculous.' Kitty marches forwards like she is going somewhere.

'What's so ridiculous?' I say, trying to keep up with her. 'When we get to Upington we went straight to the care home but we weren't allowed to see her. Sleeping, they said. Then the next morning we spoke for all of ten minutes with her and suddenly she wasn't well enough to continue. Now they're blocking her room off completely.'

'Really,' Kitty says, her little arms swinging stiffly at her side. 'No one is trying to keep us from Florence. Did you get a look at her chart?'

'Yes but it didn't mean anything to me.'

'Of course not. Florence has stage four colon cancer. It's spread to her liver, lungs and lymph nodes. Surgery isn't an option and her prognosis is poor. She's opted not to do chemotherapy.'

'Ok? What's your point?' I say, still trying to follow Kitty as she takes left after right after left turn down the hospital corridors.

'Idiot. No one is trying to keep us from talking to her, she's simply dying, that's all.'

We arrive at the office door of the hospital administrator, Dorothy O'Neil. Kitty knocks before I can ask her what the plan is. When there is no immediate response, Kitty knocks again, louder and more insistently. When still there is no response she puts her hand on the handle but as she pushes down the door is jerked open from within.

Dot stands before us with a phone wedged between her ear and shoulder, the long cord trailing behind her. She purses her lips as she recognises us and then stomps back to her desk, leaving the door open. We take that for as good an invitation as we'll get from her and sit facing her desk.

'Yes, well if the codes don't match up then somebody is going to have a lot to deal with very soon!' Dot says and slams the phone down. 'Sorry about that. I thought when I took this job I'd be able to care for more people but so far all I've done is shout at people and sign order forms.'

We seem to have skipped the niceties and gone straight into conversation so I try to keep it up before Kitty pisses her off again. 'What'd you do before becoming a hospital administrator?'

'Oh, I was a nurse.'

'Like Florence,' Kitty says.

'Yes,' Dot purses her lips. 'I suppose. In those days you could either become a teacher, a nurse or a secretary. Now, what is it exactly that I can help you two with? What is it that you want from Florence?'

'We spent some time speaking to Alice at the police station yesterday,' Kitty says. 'She mentioned that the Fowlers had neighbours in Dorperland with the surname O'Neil. Any relation?'

'Yes, actually. I grew up there with my parents. We lived in the house right opposite the Fowler's. From our patio I could see their kitchen window through a gap in some trees.'

'So is that how you met Florence?' Kitty continues. 'Or do you simply hang around all your patients' bedsides?'

Dot bristles. 'Well, it's a small town. Chances are I know everyone admitted in the hospital currently. But, yes, that is how I know her. My mother was a teacher and she homeschooled me. She was a strict disciplinarian and she would often send me round the neighbours houses to do chores as a punishment. She knew that Florence was struggling on the farm. John, I think her husband was, apparently didn't help much and so I was sent over there fairly regularly to pick up the slack. At first I hated it but Florence and I started becoming friends, despite the age difference.'

'And did you have much to do with her husband?' I ask.

'No, not really,' Dot says stonily. 'There was a study off the living room where he spent most of his time. The door was usually closed. I sometimes took him some tea in the beginning but, well, anyway — I spent my time there mopping floors, doing laundry and caring for the sheep. Anyway, what's all this about?'

'We're doing a story on John Fowler.'

'A story?' Dot says derisively. 'What are you, journalists or something?'

'That's right,' I say. 'We intend to write about what we discover. We're talking to anybody who knew John before he died.'

'Well, like I said,' Dot shifts in her chair. 'I didn't know him very well. I helped Florence with the farm work and the two of us became friends. That's about it.'

'So then you were there when the house burned down?' Kitty asks.

'Yes. Everyone had heard the gun shot but that sound wasn't unusual on the farm, so we didn't think anything of it until Florence came running over, screaming and crying. No one told me directly what was going on but I managed to figure it out from what my mother could get out of Florence. My parents called the police and then they put Florence in the guest room. She

passed out from the hysterics. I helped my mother look after her. After the police left, the house started burning. We still don't know what happened but fires weren't unusual on the farm, either.'

'No, but they are unusual when there is a dead body inside and any evidence is burned to a crisp,' I say.

'If you say so,' Dot says. 'Is there anything else? I have a lot of work to get through.'

I look at Kitty. 'No,' she says. 'That's all we need to know.'

On our way out the door Dot calls after us. 'I think you should let Florence alone, too. She's dying and she doesn't need to be bothered by two nosy parkers.'

On our way out of the hospital and back to the parking lot, Kitty and I are silent. In the car, Kitty sits with her hands on her lap, quiet all the way back to the BnB. We park, return Janine's energetic wave as we pass the main building and sit down together on the musty couches back in our Lily Pad cottage.

'She's lying,' Kitty says at length.

I light a cigarette and lean back. 'You think she killed him?'

'What?' Kitty looks at me. 'No, don't be stupid. She's lying about something else. I just don't know what.'

*

I call the hospital to check if Florence can have visitors before going over there only to be turned away a second time. On the phone a guy with a very young voice tells me that Florence is awake and looking a little better today, but that she probably won't last much longer.

'Her liver is failing. She gets bouts of confusion. One moment she knows exactly what's going on and the next she's terrified and doesn't know where she is. She's falling in and out of consciousness. The next time she falls asleep she probably won't wake up. If you've got goodbyes to say, I'd suggest getting over here and saying them,' he says.

At the hospital, we pass by the cafeteria again on the way to Florence's room.

'Should we get something for breakfast?' I ask, pointing to the fridge full of freshly squeezed juices.

Kitty shakes her head. 'She won't want any.'

How the hell does she know Florence does or doesn't want? This is one of Kitty's most annoying attributes.

Thankfully there is no one blocking our entry into Florence's room today and Kitty pushes the door open without knocking. Inside, the air is heavy and stale. The curtains are drawn and the only lights are those shining and flashing on the machines next to the bed. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I am able to make out Florence's figure beneath the sheets. It's almost impossible to tell the folds in the bed linen apart from her soft, weak limbs amongst them. She is lying on her back, propped up slightly on a pillow. Her head moves slowly in our direction as we approach, but she doesn't speak and at first I am not sure if her eyes are open or closed. When we get closer I see that they are open and staring but she doesn't seem to see us.

'Florence?' I ask quietly.

She takes a short, shallow breath that gurgles at the back of her throat and continues to stare.

Kitty moves in front of me and leans down towards Florence's face. 'It's Kitty,' she says to the old woman gently. I have not seen Kitty act so softly in a long time. Perhaps ever.

Florence says nothing but starts to whimper and her hands start to shake.

'We were here two days ago,' I say. 'You had a bit of a bad patch but your nurse says you're feeling much better now. We were here talking to you about your husband, John. Remember?'

'John,' Florence whispers, barely audible. Like a membrane has been pulled back from her eye, the glaze disappears and it seems as though she recognises us. She speaks again, this time in a louder voice though still heavy with mucous. 'Yes. Turn the light on.'

I lean down and turn the lamp on next to her bed. Now I can see that Florence's skin and the whites of her eyes have gone yellow. Her lips are dry and cracked. I sit on the visitor's chair. Kitty perches on the foot of the bed like a bird.

'Do you want something to eat or drink?' I ask. 'Some water?'

'No, no,' Florence says. 'Too painful. I don't think I've got much longer. I feel very tired. It's hard to keep my eyes open. All I want to do is sleep.' Florence gurgles as she breathes. 'Terrible noise, isn't it?'

'It's called a death rattle,' Kitty says matter-of-factly. 'It happens in dying people when fluids like saliva and other bronchial secretions accumulate in the throat and the upper chest. You've probably found it very difficult to swallow. That's why they've propped you up on these pillows like this. To promote draining.'

'Kitty!' I say sharply.

'No, she's quite right,' Florence wheezes. 'Aptly named indeed.'

'Are you sure you still want to talk to us? What you're going through can't be easy. I would understand—'

Florence's yellow eyes switch to me. 'You made a promise to write about what I tell you. Are trying to break it now?'

'No, I—'

'Shut up and let her talk!' Kitty says.

'I don't have much time to waste. Better you tell me what you think you know and I'll try to fill in the rest,' Florence says.

Kitty starts speaking before I can even consider the question. 'We know that John was engaged to Margery Schoën when he worked at the university in Johannesburg. He published two collections of poetry that were moderately successful. He started a poetry magazine with Willem Coetzee and Graham Abbott. His mother became ill and he came to care for her in Upington. He never came back. Margery never heard from him again and Willem came to find him but John turned him away. We know that John's mother was moved to a permanent care facility. He married you, sold his mother's house and the two of you moved to your family farm in Dorperland after your father died.'

'Yes. John and I took a fancy to each other while I was looking after his mother. She suffered from chronic pain. The doctors said fibromyalgia but I think she just liked to make John feel bad. Everything he did or didn't do caused her pain, broke her heart, near killed her. She liked to lay it on thick, old Margaret. When John first arrived in Upington there was life in him. After a few weeks she had beat it out of him. He was a squashed man. I watched as he stopped taking his friends' calls. Stopped opening letters. He never spoke about being engaged.' Florence pauses to cough. Her eyelids close and open slowly. She tries to lick her lips but her tongue is too dry and makes a terrible papery sound in her mouth. She continues, her voice a bit weaker. 'I admit. I took advantage. Drew in close. I wanted to care for him. I wanted to show him that someone could love him. Margaret became too much to handle. Needed constant attention. She couldn't eat or walk or use the bathroom without assistance. Couldn't, or wouldn't. I suggested sending her to Amber Fields.' A faint flicker of a smile passes over Florence's face. 'The same place I was in, before this,' Florence gestures weakly to the beeping machines and medication next to her bed. 'I suggested we get married. I promised to take him away. Said we could live in my daddy's house. Far away from her. Just the two of us.'

'And Dorothy,' Kitty says. I look at her, wondering what she means by that. I agree Dot seemed to be uncooperative but she said herself she didn't have much to do with John and that she was mostly over there mopping floor.

Florence's face had darkened as Kitty said Dot's name. 'Yes. Me, John and Dot. The happy little family.'

'What do you mean?' I say. 'Dot said the most she ever did was take John some tea and help you with the chores.'

Florence opens and closes her mouth like a fish gaping for air. She seems to be getting weaker by the second. 'That what she said? Ha. No. John gave her English lessons when she was meant to be washing the windows. Closed the study door. Kept it closed for a long time. Sometimes they went on walks in the veld. Gone for hours.'

'They were having an affair? She was only sixteen.'

Kitty looks at me. 'You have sensibilities all of a sudden?'

Florence's eyes flutter closed and she seems to fall asleep. Kitty grabs and shakes her limp hand, calling her name. Florence's eyes open again and she looks about the room, trying to place herself.

'You're in the hospital,' I say. 'You were telling us a story.'

'What story?' Florence asks.

'About the day John died,' Kitty says.

'Oh, yes.' Florence takes a few, rapid breaths that don't seem to reach her lungs. 'I took him tea in his study. Twelve o'clock as usual. Pages of his book were weighted down under a brick. He was sitting in his chair looking at them. I kissed his head. Came back half an hour later. To collect tea tray. He was dead.'

'Didn't you hear the gun go off?' Kitty asks.

'Don't remember,' Florence replies peacefully. 'I went over to the O'Neil's. I had to lie down. I just wanted to sleep. Then I smelled fire. I thought the O'Neil's house was burning. I went downstairs. Saw flames through the trees. It was my house. All the farmers came to help. They couldn't do anything. Everyone was panicking. Because Dorothy was missing. They went out to look. I stayed behind. Dot came sneaking in through the back door. Covered in dirt. Smelled like smoke. I asked where she was. She said with a boy. In the veld. Asked me not to tell her parents. I asked if she knew John was dead. She said no. Looked shocked. I think she was lying. She went to take a bath.' Again, Florence's eyes flutter closed. When they open again she seems very far away. 'Oh, hello. Nice to see you,' Florence says to Kitty.

I speak quietly to Kitty. 'Maybe we should give her a break. She doesn't look so good.'

'We've got to get it out of her before she dies.'

'Who dies?' Florence asks, looking quite alarmed.

'You,' Kitty says. 'You're dying and you were telling us about your husband before you go.'

Florence seems to take the news of her death with no trouble. 'Oh,' she says. 'I see. Well, best get on with it. Where was I?'

'Dot got back smelling of fire and went to have a bath.'

'Yes. I was staying at the O'Neil's. Just before the funeral I got a phone call. From a lady. She had been trying to find me. Said her name was Linda Brown. Sounded very posh. Wanted me to post her John's manuscript. I told her it burned. Everything burned in the house. She was angry. She said she had a verbal contract with John. For the rights to publish his work. Said I didn't have it. Said it didn't sound like John. She didn't believe me. She called me names. Hung up. But I heard footsteps. Behind me. I think Dorothy.'

Kitty nods her head and mutters to herself. Thinking Florence's story is over, I am about to thank her and say goodbye when she starts speaking again.

'At the funeral. There was a strange woman. No one knew her. Dark hair. Very beautiful. Came late. Stood at the back. Gone before it was over. Six months later, John's book was published. I thought it had burned. I bought a copy. Saw the publisher's name.' Florence starts to whimper again but she continues to speak. 'I tried to contact them.'

'I can imagine how that went,' I say. 'The Liebermanns seem experts at dodging people who want to ask them questions.'

'My friend said,' Florence gasps for air, 'I should get a lawyer. Sue them. No money. The fire. All gone.' Florence's whimpering gets louder. 'Linda Liebermann. Linda Brown. The woman at the funeral.' She shuts her eyes and her hands begin to shake. Shivering, her eyes flash open in terror. 'Where am I? Who are you? Where's my husband?' Florence starts to cry, tearless sobs like a puppy that has been left out in the cold.

At that moment, Dot comes flying through the door. 'You two! If the nurses hadn't told me I'd—' she stops short as she sees the state Florence is in. 'You need to leave! Right now!' Dot runs back out the door, shouts down the hall and comes back with two white coats. 'Get out! Leave this woman alone!'

We are shuffled out of the room, the door slammed shut in our faces. Just like that our conversation with Florence is over. We decide to sit in the chairs outside her room and just wait and see what happens. Nurses stream in and out. A doctor nods at us and slips through the doors. There is some commotion down the hall. A few people run past us. But inside Florence's room all seems quiet. Calm. After a little while, Dot and the nurses come out, talking quietly amongst themselves. They stop when they see us sitting there.

'You're still here?' Dot says to us. 'I had hoped you'd be gone by now.'

'Is Florence ok?' Kitty asks.

If you want to know, she's fallen asleep. A very deep sleep. Most don't wake up again at this stage. We'll just have to wait and see. For now she's comfortable. You two will have to leave. You're not family. You can't just be sitting here. And visiting hours are over.'

She seems to have pulled out every technicality in the book.

'Why did you lie to us?' I ask suddenly.

'Excuse me?' Dot says, affronted.

'You told us yesterday that you hardly at anything to do with John. But that was a lie. He gave you English lessons behind closed doors. You were sleeping with him, weren't you?'

'Did she tell you that?' Dot hisses and points at Florence's doors. 'She is delusional! That woman is riddled with cancer and her liver is deader than she'll be soon! She'd attest to the existence of fairies right now! If you stay here you'll be loitering and then it'll be a matter for the police. So you better just get out of here. And don't bother me again. I have no interest in speaking with you anymore. Goodbye.' Dot marches off down the hallway, shouting instructions at the people she passes.

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Somehow in all of this the whole day has disappeared and the black night is visible through the hospital windows like the portholes on a ship far, far out to sea. We go back to the car but I hesitate before driving us away.

'Should we wait around? She might wake up.'

'She won't. By my guess this was the last twenty-four hours of her life. She'll probably be dead by morning, if not sooner.'

'Jesus,' I say as I take us back to the BnB. 'I can't believe this. This is so unfair. Typical of my life. Florence has been here, in Upington, wanting to tell someone her story and wasting away this whole time I was going out of my mind looking for Fowler. You put in one advert

and it gets us all the way here. I can't believe this. Now she's going to die without having told us everything.'

'What's so unfair about it?' Kitty says nonchalantly. 'You never really wanted to look. You half-assed it and you know it. The information has been here the whole time. It just takes looking at it from a different angle. And you never wanted to do that. Remember that day I told you that your problem was you had no ambition?'

'Yes. That was what, two or three weeks after you moved in?'

'Four. My point remains. You've never wanted to do the work it takes to actually get something done. You win a prestigious writing award, get a book published and then pour that all down the drain playing the writer and getting drunk. Then what do you do? You start blaming some dead guy for all your failures. You can't manage to meet your publisher's deadline so you say, well, that must John Fowler's fault. It's his fault for inspiring me to become a writer in the first place. It's his fault I became more interested in the pain and suffering of the writing life than writing itself. So it's his fault I haven't written anything. It's his fault I'm depressed and I'm a drunk—'

'Stop.'

'It's his fault I both hate and love women. It's his fault I'm terrified of disappearing without a trace. It's his fault I think about killing myself—'

'Kitty, stop.'

'It's his fault that I'm obsessed with becoming him and wanting nothing to do with him. It's his fault that I tell myself I can only go on with my life once I know what happened to him, what drove him to kill himself, so that maybe I can avoid the same —'

'I said stop, Kitty!'

'God! Do you know how pathetic that sounds?' Kitty yells as we pull up outside the Amber Glen. 'I've had to listen to that day in and day out for the last three years. Stop whining and do something about it!'

'I am doing something! I'm here, aren't I?'

'This?' Kitty laughs. 'This doesn't count! This is a bit of fun, playing detective, solving a mystery. Step up and live your life! Stop trying to figure out Fowler's footsteps before putting down your own! It's pathetic!'

'And what about you? You've been as obsessed with this as I have. You've been sneaking around behind my back for months investigating this. You're as consumed as I am.'

'But when this is solved and I know all the facts and I can put the picture together then I'll be done. I can put it back in the drawer and I'll never think about it again. I'll move on to something else. I'll figure something else out. And then you know what? I'll solve that too. I complete things. That's the difference between you and I. We both have obsessions but at least I resolve them. You just sit in them. Like a baby in a wet nappy. Did I say it was pathetic? It's disgusting.'

We stare at each other, our chests heaving. If Kitty were a normal woman this may be the point at which we start kissing passionately and then have sex in the car. But she isn't. And it's not.

'That was a good fight,' I say. 'You really hit it home on that last one. But you haven't physically assaulted me so it doesn't feel quite right yet. Not resolved, as you put it.'

Kitty her eyes. 'I hate it when you start to meta-narrate. You become even more annoying.'

'And that's exactly why he does it,' I say.

Kitty gets out the car and slams the door. I light a cigarette before following her. I consider that maybe some people would feel bad for smoking after having just seen a cancer

patient, but I don't. I feel sweet, heady relief as the nicotine courses through my body. My head starts to throb pleasantly and I can feel my limbs relaxing finally. Although Kitty is sick of me she waits for me near the path, tapping her foot.

'Hurry up!' she shouts.

The noise seems to cause some attraction from the house and the front door opens. As if it had been trapped inside and is making a break for it, light comes rushing out to swallow Kitty whole. Someone else is silhouetted in the light and is waving at us.

'Evening!' The voice is Janine's. 'I just thought I'd try and catch you when you got back. How has your day been?'

'Good,' Kitty says. 'I think we watched a woman die.'

'Oh?' Janine says uncertainly.

'You know Florence Fowler?' I say.

'Oh, God. Yes,' Janine nods. 'My cousin has just called me — she works at Amber Fields — and told me that Florence died just a few minutes ago. She got a call from the hospital and now she's got to go around phoning all the relatives. Horrible. But she's been suffering a long time. I didn't realise you knew her. I thought you said you were writing a story on the last weeks of your mother's life?' Janine asks Kitty.

'Well, they were friends,' Kitty says. 'We spoke to Florence and she was telling us a little about her husband, John.'

'Oh, I knew John. His mother was at Amber Fields until she died. He was very handsome. Quiet, but everyone could tell he was intelligent. I think my cousin, Jeanette, had a small crush on him.'

'We didn't get a lot of time to talk with Florence. She didn't say much about John's mother. What was she like?'

'Well,' Janine says, almost looking round as if worried someone might hear. 'Truthfully she was quite a nasty woman. I used to help my cousin out at the home and I had to look in on her a few times. She was the absolute worst assignment to get. She was always in pain and complaining. If it wasn't the pain it was the shows on TV. If it wasn't that it was the pudding in the dining room. She thought the nursing staff were trying to kill her. She wore dark glasses everywhere — the light hurt her brain, she said. She'd scream bloody murder if you tried to help her with something she didn't want help with and she'd scream even louder if you didn't offer. John used to visit every day but his visits decreased until he was only coming in once a month. Every first Tuesday of the month he'd be there for exactly an hour. He'd bring flowers, have some tea and then leave. Poor old dear. She was probably just a bit batty. She died about four years ago. It was just after that, in fact, that I started managing the Amber Glen.'

'Well,' I say, 'thank you, Janine. That's all very useful. I think we'll head off to the cottage now.'

'Oh! But that's what I wanted to ask you. You've only booked until the end of the week — tonight is your last night. Do you want to extend your stay?'

I look at Kitty. 'Do we? Is there anyone else to talk to? Maybe we could go to Dorperland and check out the old house. Maybe—'

'No,' Kitty says. 'That's fine. This will be our last night. We'll check out in the morning.'

'Of course. But you haven't eaten one breakfast since you've been here. I've noticed you two missing from the dining room. Come on, say you'll come for breakfast in the morning. There aren't any other guests so I'll put out hash browns and fritters. The works.'

'Yes, thanks,' I say as Kitty starts to walk away. 'We'll see you for breakfast.'

'Goodnight!' Janine shouts at us as we disappear down the path.

The front door of the house slams behind us, sucking the light out of the garden in an instant and turning the deep green of the grass pitch black.

In the Lily Pad cottage I open a beer and light another cigarette while Kitty potters around in the kitchen. I can hear papers rustling and large objects scraping across the counter. I lay my head back against the couch and stare at the ceiling. The white paint is peeling off to reveal dark grey stains on the wood. When wooden houses burn, they burn hot, Alice said. Cremating everything inside. I always wondered why the dust jacket of the book is orange when the book itself is deep blue, almost green. But Fowler wouldn't have had anything to do with that. He was dead before it was published. That kind of decision gets made by the publisher. Linda Liebermann. How would she know to make it orange? She could have been that woman at the funeral. Then she'd know. The illustration of the black coffin on the front. That had to have been her. It can't just be a coincidence. Just like me winning the prize offered by the same people who published Fowler's book. The same people who birthed Kitty. It's all come full circle. I am reminded of something Kitty said a few years ago after we tried to talk to her mother about all of this. 'I need to find a new centre,' she'd said. 'There's a new middle somewhere.' Maybe the centres overlap. Maybe there is more than one centre. The centre is Linda. Dot. Fowler's mother. Florence. All at once, all of them and none of them.

I haven't heard a lot about Margaret but she reminds me of my mother. I am not surprised by this since she was probably the basis for the mother character in Fowler's book and that mother has always read like a dead-ringer for mine. Still, hearing about the flesh and blood woman is something different. So Fowler died before his mother. I have always felt bad that it wasn't the same for me. I really didn't want to feel guilty that I wasn't sad about Noelene dying. When I was a teenager I would lie in bed imagining her getting smashed head-on by a freight-train as she crossed a railway without looking or some other grisly scenarios in which she was impaled or stamped. She would generally die by impact. I would concentrate on every little detail; how her hair was matted down across her forehead in sticky strands by her blood, or the moment when her eyes glazed over and she went limp. But then I would end up in tears,

unable to ignore the overwhelming feeling of loss and suddenly her absence was as tangible and palpable as her presence was. I would become so aware of the empty space that once contained her that I would break down in tears and start whining 'mommy, mommy' into my damp pillow. But then she would do something to remind she was still alive — like put a hole through my door with a knife or get drunk and show up at my school — and I would stop feeling bad about her being gone. Then I'd just feel flattened as if the freight-train had gone over me.

Still, that's not enough reason to kill yourself or I'd have done it long ago. Neither is ending up with a woman you didn't intend on. And nor is your writing career fizzling out before it's even got started. We've gotten closer to answering more questions than I knew I had but I feel less resolved than when we started, to use Kitty's word.

She's right, of course. She's the only reason we've gotten this far. I've been turning this over in my mind since I was seventeen years old and it's taken a little woman with far less at stake than me to get us here. If I had more self-worth I'd be embarrassed but lucky it is only Kitty who knows this. The problem is that I've been looking for a good enough reason for Fowler to kill himself and I haven't found it. So what for me, then? As a young man I worked hard to model myself on him and now what? Now I'm here and there seems only one end though it hardly seems worth the effort. 'Quit whining and do something already,' is what Kitty says. The whole point was to figure out how it all went so wrong for Fowler and then to do something different to save myself. But I've tailgated him the whole way here. Now what? With this on my mind I fall into an uncomfortable sleep.

*

Most unusual for me, I am awake long before the first light comes through the windows. Kitty doesn't look like she has slept at all. She is sitting at the little table outside the front door

with her her feet propped up, her back towards me. The light of a single lamp above the door shines down on her.

'Morning,' I say, sitting up.

Kitty grunts and waves her hand over her shoulder but doesn't turn around. Best, I've learned, is to give Kitty a little space when she's in one of these catatonic moods. In the meantime I put the kettle on and make two cups of coffee. When I drop Kitty's off at her table I notice two things at almost the exact same time: The first is that there are already three cold cups of coffee in front of her. The second is that she is reading my copy of *The Cause of Hell* and that she has dog-eared some of the pages and written in the margins.

I rip the book out of her hands.

'Hey!' she says, jumping to her feet.

'What are you doing with this? This is mine!'

'So what if it's yours? You weren't reading it.'

'Well, that's why I put it away at home, in a drawer! You had no right to take it. And look at what you've done. You've bent all the pages. And you've removed all my bookmarks. What are you doing with this?'

'I've been doing what most people would do with a book — reading it. Not keeping it hidden under the bed like the boogieman. You're just jealous.'

'Jealous of you? Of what?'

'Jealous that I understand what's going on. That you'd never have gotten here without me. That you wouldn't know what questions to ask if I didn't ask them first. That you couldn't even get an obsession done right. Give it back to me.'

I hold the book away. 'What are you doing?'

Kitty rolls her eyes. 'I told you! I'm reading it!'

'But why? You've never been interested in reading it before.'

'That's because I didn't need to. Now Florence is gone and she can't answer any more questions. Dot won't tell us anymore and neither will my mother. I think everything I need to fill in the gaps is in here. If you think you can do it, go ahead. But since I know you can't, give it back.'

I have no choice but to hand the book back to her.

She snatches it from me and thrusts it under her arm. 'Now don't bother me. I'm almost finished.' She returns to her seat and continues to read.

Christ. I am sick of following Kitty around and waiting for her to figure things out. *Quite whining and do something*. Alright. I grab my jacket and walk past Kitty into the night. She doesn't lift her head or ask where I'm going and I don't stop to give her the chance. Before I can think better of it I am in the car, heading towards the freeway with the atlas spread out across the steering wheel and my finger pressed to the location marker for Dorperland.

*

My spontaneity dies out long before I arrive, as does my pack of cigarettes. The sun rises slowly out here and by the time I take the turn-off for Dorperland it is still sitting low in the sky. I had thought that Dorperland was simply an affectionate name given to the area by locals but all the signage would indicate that it's its own little hamlet. The tar turns to dirt very quickly after I turn off the main road and I am suddenly worried my car won't be able to handle the corrugations. I see a handwritten sign with an arrow, pointing down yet another dirt road to the O'Neil Farm. I recall that the Fowler's were neighbours through a stand of trees and so I decide to keep on as I am, driving past the sign to the O'Neil's and hoping I will come to the next farm shortly. After about ten minutes I pass a large stand of trees through which, when I look over my shoulder, I can just make out a farmhouse in the previous lot. Ignoring the pangs of nicotine cravings beginning to alter my mood, I keep watch on the left side of the road for something that looks like it might have once been a house.

Shortly after the stand of trees there is a standalone barn and then a massive paddock with what looks to be about eight-hundred white-bodied, black-headed sheep, all separated into pens. The enclosure is fenced off from the road by chicken wire and wooden posts. I stop on a grass verge near a large tree, hop over the fence and walk towards the sheep. As I approach, those near me start making a terrible noise all at once. I walk round towards a patch of blackened, flat grass extending out one edge of the paddock, looking all around me as I do. There is no sign that there was ever anything here besides sheep. As I get to the black patch, I see it is not grass but brown earth that has been trampled beneath the sheep's hooves. I bend down to take a closer look and as I do, the sound of dogs barking comes floating out over the trees. I suppose that the farms will all be waking up now to start their chores. I think this looks as likely a place as any for a house to have burned down. I stand and look at the pens. They are wire and I can't see any posts or stakes sticking out of the ground to hold them in place. It is possible that the fences of the pens are attached to existing structures fixed in the ground — like the remnants of a house, for example. I easily step over the knee-height fence and into the middle of a group of sheep. They bleat louder and part around my legs. The barking seems a little nearer now. I step into the next pen and the next, parting the sheep as I go. When I reach the middle of the enclosure I kick a crumbled wall of bricks to which the fence is attached and I feel my suspicions are confirmed. At that moment two black dogs burst out of the trees in front of me, each running to one side of the enclosure and barking with a ferocity that scares me.

I am considering my options — I can't leave the pen for fear of being mauled — when a voice shouts out to me from the trees. 'Hey! Who's that?' A man in blue jeans, black boots and a cap appears, taking long and steady strides towards the sheep. He is carrying something over his shoulder.

'Hello!' I shout back, trying to look as relaxed as possible.

'What are you doing to my sheep?' the guy yells in a thick Afrikaans accent.

'Your sheep are perfectly safe,' I assure the man. Although he is now standing at the enclosure I have to shout to be heard over the barking and the sheep's bleating and screaming. 'I came looking for the old Fowler house. I was guessing it was under these sheep.'

'Fowler? No, man. They are long gone. Their house burned down.'

'I know. That's what I'm looking for.'

'It's burned. You won't find it.'

'Well, then I came to see where the house used to be.'

'Listen, come out of the paddock. You can come and talk to my dad. Besides, he will want to know why there was a guy in there with the sheep.'

'And I'll tell him what I told you,' I say, stepping back over the pens. 'Looking for a house. But I'll come with you. I could ask him some questions.' As I step out of the paddock I realise the man is actually a massive teenager carrying a shotgun. 'What's that for?' I gesture to the gun.

The guy looks at me like I'm stupid. 'I saw there was someone in the sheep paddock. What do you think?'

It seems that placid conversation with their master is all that is required for the previously murderous dogs to take a liking to me. When I shake the boy's hand — who introduces himself as Dirk — the dogs come over to sniff my legs and lick my fingers. Dirk laughs and says they are big softies and are too scared of the sheep to herd them.

'Did I wake up the whole house?' I ask as Dirk leads me through the trees and the house beyond looms closer.

'No, man,' Dirk says, throwing a stick for the dogs. 'On the farm we wake early. It's already afternoon to us now.'

The walk to the house is short and the stand of trees we pass through is narrower than it looks from the outside. As we exit the stand a big lawn spreads out before us and the dogs sprint ahead onto the patio where they gulp down water from metal bowls, splashing everywhere. Standing on the patio are two men who look very similar to Dirk, if a little younger and are dressed the same. Dirk introduces the two as his brothers — the taller, blonde one is Hennie and the slightly shorter, stockier one is Andries.

'He was in there with the sheep,' Dirk says. His brothers burst into laughter and I can't help but smile myself. 'He says he's looking for the Fowler house.'

'It burned down, man,' says Hennie, sitting back down on a wooden chair. 'A long time ago. Before we were born.'

'I have to ask,' I say, standing awkwardly in front of them as they all take seats. 'How old are you guys? You can't be older than twenty or twenty-one but I've never seen twenty-year olds that look like you.'

The brothers laugh again and Andries answers. 'I'm eighteen, he's twenty,' he points at Hennie and then at Dirk, 'and he's twenty-one. Farm stock.' We all laugh.

'Well, I'll have what you're having, then.'

'So, what's this about Fowler? You're looking for a house?' Hennie asks.

'Yes. My girlfriend and I are doing a story on the writer — John Fowler — who used to live there. Maybe you know? He disappeared this side and then killed himself. Shortly after his body was found, the whole house burned down.'

'Ja, I know about that. But not a lot. Nobody wanted to buy the land to build on because of the fire. They are very funny, the people out here. They believe in funny things. So my grandparents bought the land and my parents put sheep on it. '

While Hennie is speaking, Andries pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. I practically start to drool as the smoke wafts over to me. I think he can sense this because he offers me one. I am giddy with the first inhalation.

'So,' I exhale, feeling invincible, 'That's quite a lot of sheep you have there.'

'Ja,' Dirk says. 'Dorpers. They are a cross between the Dorset Horn and the Black Head Persian. This area is famous for the Dorper sheep, but our farm has the best. The chops or lamb braai-packs in the shops — they are probably an O'Neil product. See, most people, they just put the sheep in the field and leave them. No, that's bad animal management. There are many things that you have to look at when you are raising sheep. We are very careful here. Dad is very strict about the way they are handled. We make sure to keep their trample down so it does not destroy the pastures. We feed them properly in troughs, not just throwing maize on the ground like uncle Johannes next door. His sheep actually died because they were eating the gravel up with the maize. No, we take care of our sheep.'

Next to him, Hennie and Andries are nodding their heads stoically.

'You guys seem very proud of your sheep. Your dad would be proud. So is Dorothy your mother?'

'Ja,' says Andries. 'She lives in the town. We see her maybe once a month.'

Just then, another man walks out onto the patio with mud up to his knees.

'Dad,' Dirk says, getting to his feet. 'This guy was in the sheep paddock looking for the Fowler house.'

The man fixes me with a hard, humourless stare and I crumble under it. 'I was only — I thought maybe the structures — the brickwork—'

'Are the sheep fine?' the man says to his sons, ignoring me.

'Ja,' Dirk replies. 'He was looking at the floor, not the sheep.'

The man looks back at me and extends his hand. I shake it. 'Danie,' he says, pumping my hand vigorously. 'You're looking for the Fowler house?'

'Yes. We're doing a story on John Fowler. He—'

'Ja, I know who he is. I was a teenager when he was living there,' Danie nods his head towards the sheep paddock beyond the trees. 'It burned down, what, twenty years ago? Before you kids. So, maybe twenty-two years.'

'That sounds about right,' I stub my cigarette out into an ashtray. 'I know Dorothy was living here with her parents at the time and she had some dealings with Fowler and his wife. I spoke to her at the hospital a few days ago, but I just wanted to come and see the place for myself.'

'Well, you saw it,' Danie says, folding his arms. 'Where the sheep are is where the house used to be. It burned to a crisp, man. I lived a few farms away with my parents and even we could see the flames. It was a big fire.'

'But you didn't know the Fowlers yourself?'

'No,' Danie shakes his head. 'Sometimes I saw them driving along. Sometimes through the trees there, when I would come visit Dot. Onetime I went to the Fowler's back window to sneak Dot out the house because she was there doing punishments. But they didn't leave the house much. They had a few sheep, I remember. After that, Dot's parents bought the land and put some sheep on it and then it was me and Dot who started O'Neil's sheep meats. Now it's me and these three.'

'And I notice the farm name is still O'Neil. Didn't you want to use your surname?'

'My surname is O'Neil,' Danie says without smiling. 'I changed it when we got married.'

The five of us are silent.

'Lot's of men are doing it these days,' I say. 'Very progressive.'

'Is that it? We've got a lot of work to do still.'

I can't think of any more questions and, really, this outing was just to prove that I can think for myself and take action when needed. At least I'll be able to go back to Kitty with information she doesn't already have. What that information is, I don't know, but there is a damn good sheep story in this somewhere.

'Thanks, yes,' I say. 'Sorry for bothering you guys, I appreciate your time. I'm actually driving back to Johannesburg today so I had better get back to Upington to pick up my girlfriend.'

'Right. Cheers. Next time, you can just phone. We are listed in the yellow pages,' Danie says. As I reach the bottom of the patio stairs he shouts after me, 'And stay away from my bloody sheep!'

This time nobody laughs and I wave goodbye to the solemn foursome who continue to stare at me long after I have passed back through the trees.

'Goodbye, sheep,' I say to the mass of bleating wool. I turn my car around and head back the way I came. As I drive past the sign to the O'Neil's house, two black bakkies come out of the long, dirt driveway. For some reason I panic thinking that the O'Neil boys are going to follow me all the way back to Upington to make sure I stay away from their sheep. I accelerate and don't slow down, only feeling comfortable again when I have turned back onto the freeway and they have turned the other way. I keep this pace up all the way back to Upington, not daring to look in the rearview mirror. When I arrive back at the Amber Glen, Kitty is already waiting outside in the parking lot with all of our bags.

'Hey,' I say, stopping next to her.

'Finally,' she says, hopping straight into the passenger seat and leaving me to deal with the bags.

'What about breakfast?' I say, getting back into the car. 'We told Janine we'd come for hash browns.'

'God, no,' Kitty says, grimacing. "Let's get going. I've had enough of Upington. I want to go back to the real world.'

'Alright.' I reverse and turn left onto the main street. In no time at all we are back on the freeway with the windows rolled down. 'I just came from an even weirder place than Upington.'

'Dorperland?' Kitty says, undulating her hand in the wind.

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Because you suggested it last night and I said no. Then when I told you that you were being useless I thought that's where you'd probably go to try and not be useless.'

'Well, besides meeting some massive teenagers and getting cosy with a flock of sheep, it was entirely useless. I was hoping to find something concrete.'

'That's why I'm here. I think I've figured it out.'

'Figured what out?'

'What happened to Fowler.'

'Tell me.'

'I think Florence helped her husband commit suicide. It was her father's gun. She grew up on the farm. She'd know how to use it.'

I nod, thinking of the shotgun slung casually over Dirk's shoulder.

'I think Florence pulled the trigger on Fowler because he asked her to. Then she went crying over to the O'Neil's. Her distress was real. I think that while the O'Neils were calling the police, Dot, who was having an affair with Fowler, went over to the house and into his study. Morbid curiosity. Love sickness. I don't know. But I think she stole the manuscript on his desk and possibly other things too, but definitely the manuscript. I think she burned the house down. In her little teenage brain she didn't want to be caught. Then Florence caught her sneaking back into her parents' house. A few days later, I think Dot overheard the phone conversation between

Florence and the woman named Linda Brown, who was probably my mother. I think Dot realised there was someone out there who would probably pay a lot of money for the manuscript she stole and so she got in touch with Linda. I think it was Linda who showed up at Fowler's funeral, but not to pay respects to Fowler. To collect the papers from Dot.'

I'm a bit lost. This wasn't what I was expecting to hear. I was ready for the whole to be solved, for Kitty to have figured it out. 'But that's not the point. The point is why did he kill himself? What drove him to do something like that where, sure, things in his life weren't great but they weren't bad either. He'd only just started his writing career. He had a few tough relationships in his life. But why kill himself?'

'What do you mean it's not the point? We've got the answers to the important questions, the most important of which was how Linda got hold oft hat manuscript. All that other stuff — why he killed himself — that's completely unnecessary. I wanted to know the how of it all, the mechanics. And now I know. I don't know what I'm going to do now this is resolved. Go back to cataloguing TV shows and editing medical papers, I suppose. But it's finished now. I know the truth. I'm not interested in why Fowler did whatever he did — that's your business to figure out if you're interested. That is, if you can actually bring yourself to do anything besides travelling pointless distances to ask useless questions. But I'm not going to help you. And anyway, if you just look properly you'll find it. I don't know what it is but it's probably there somewhere, in his book.'

Kitty falls silent, watching her hand move up and down like a dolphin cresting the waves of the ocean. I think about what she has said, about it being there, in the book. I have a feeling she is right and that, somehow, in all my readings of Fowler's book, I have missed the thing I was looking for. I think back on myself as a teenager, a desperate poet. And then only a few years after that — nothing. I fell into a nothingness. I think about Kitty constantly trying to make sense of the random things around her, trying to draw patterns from the chaos. I think

of Florence in her hospital bed, dying to tell her husband's story and even of Dirk, Hennie and Andries, who were so proud of their Dorper sheep. I consider how there are so many ways for a person not to exist. Perhaps you feel like your mother never really loved you. Perhaps you feel like you succeeded once and you might never again. And maybe it's just that you no longer truly see yourself for anything you do and so you stop existing in your own eyes. You cling desperately to some long forgotten notion of yourself, something that used to feel real and you hope that that might bring you back to life.

'David,' Kitty says. 'Look.' She points through the windscreen, out across the flat, vast farmlands and towards the horizon where the faint and blurry Johannesburg skyline is starting to emerge. She screws one eye shut. 'Which one do you think is our apartment building?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'Let's just drive straight for the centre and see.'

FUNERAL

February 1970

In God's Waters Church, in Upington, a few people were gathered to listen to Pastor James McConnell give his sermon over the small pile of ash in the closed casket. The mother, Margaret — who had not left her bed in nearly ten years due to suffering from constant fatigue coupled with excruciating pain throughout her body — was sitting in the front row wearing all black and and an unidentifiable expression on her face. On her left was her nurse, on her right was the Pastor's wife, Kathy, with her hand on Margaret's knee. Then there was the wife of the pile of ash in the casket, Florence, who had been uncharacteristically stoic during the police interviews and the preparations for the funeral, but whose quiet resilience now gave way to loud heaving and sobbing and suggested perhaps something more than just grief. But since she had been the one to find the body, most assumed she was simply in shock. Her older sister, Shirley, gripped her hand tight and whispered to her constantly. The O'Neils were there, too, with their daughter, Dot. Only sixteen at the time, Dot was known around Dorperland as a somewhat precocious girl who could often be seen running in the fields with some boy from a neighbouring farm. That day, however she wore a dress of a respectable length and kept her eyes on her shoes as her mother had told her. There, too, were some of the men that had known the dead man in boyhood. They all sat in a row, clutching their wives' hands, listening intently

to the pastor's words. The rest of the people scattered around the room were some farmers from Dorperland, a second-grade English teacher, a cashier from the local grocer. Standing against the back wall was a strange woman that nobody seemed to know.

*

'We gather here to remember the life of a beloved son and husband. We acknowledge but do not dwell on the pain, the suffering, on the life that has been lost. Instead we give praise and thanksgiving for the hope of eternal life that is offered by God and known through the saviour, Jesus Christ. To him, the Lamb, we give not only our faith, but show our gladness and our joy for the life of the deceased. Let us now prepare to witness as we reflect on the promise of resurrection offered to all who are deemed righteous and worthy by the Lord our God. Let us pray.'

*

The dead man had grown up in Upington, a small town on the banks of the Orange River. He had been a good student, earning his best marks in English class. In fact, the teacher who had encouraged him to continue writing his poetry, even though the other boys teased him and his father wouldn't allow it in the house, was the same one attending his funeral. Miss Stuart was now old and had since become the headmistress of the school. Sitting and listening to the pastor use his death as an excuse to wail on about the coming of the lord, Miss Stuart noticed that the father was conspicuously absent from the gathering. It was town knowledge that he was an angry drunk who had left his family behind to go off with some young girl, but still, she thought he may have made an appearance at his own son's funeral. In the pew ahead of her, Florence was shaking violently. Though it was thirty degrees in the church — and not even as hot as it would get that day — Miss Stuart took out the shawl from her bag and draped it over Florence's shoulders. Her shaking quietened to a soft tremor and Florence's shoulders dropped in relief.

*

'I want to read to you now from The Book of Revelations, Chapter 20.

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."'

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Kathy loved to watch her husband in action. He was was so captivating. When he spoke she could feel some divine presence reaching out into the room and touching her. Every word from his lips gave her goosebumps. It was just like her husband, she thought, to offer to host the funeral of even the most unworthy. He was such a kind, generous man, but he would never take the compliments. It was all part of God's plan, he told her, every good thing he did was the Lord's doing. She tried her wifely best to remember that her husband was the vessel through which God's will passed and that her feelings of admiration should be turned to God. She tried and failed. She couldn't help but think how powerful he looked, how attractive he was when he commanded a room, how lucky she was that, amongst all the wide-eyed women who attended his services, she was the one that got to sleep next to him. She had her hand on old Mrs Fowler's knee. 'Attend to the mother,' James had told her. But Margaret didn't seem to need much attending. She was stiff as a board and stared grimly at James, but this was no different to her usual demeanour. An onlooker wouldn't be able to tell that she was the mother of the deceased. She wondered why she hadn't been told to look to young Mrs Fowler who was clearly

in a terrible state. This was understandable, Kathy thought, but she was drawing attention away from James's important words and onto herself. Kathy thought perhaps it was out of respect for the new widow; perhaps she would not have wanted to be comforted by the woman who had married James instead of her. Florence and James had been arranged to marry, but James said that she didn't have the light a pastor's wife needed, while Kathy did. That was another thing about James, he knew people so well. He could take a single look at you and tell you what you were lacking in your life. For Kathy, it had been a God-fearing husband and he had been right.

Deciding it was probably for the best that she don't show Florence too much attention, lest she think she was being smug — imagine, a still-living husband and leading the funeral to boot! — Kathy turned her face towards Margaret, who did not register that she was there. Out of her peripheral vision Kathy became aware of Miss Stuart, the old spinster teacher, leaning forward and touching Florence on the shoulders and wondered what that was about. She had not known the two women to be friendly before this, so why the sudden show of affection? So typical of small-town minds, she thought, never looking further than their own noses until something like a death or birth happened — then they could never get close enough.

*

'And what happens to those — living and dead — whose names are inscribed in the book of life? I read now once again from Revelations.

"And I saw thrones and they sat on them and judgement was given to them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark on their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Chris a thousand years."

'So we direct our attention and our worship, not to mourning John's passing, but to remembering God's power and ultimate triumph over not only death, but also evil. We show

our gratitude that all may have a chance at second life, at eternal life, through commitment to God, even in times where personal sorrow may seem like the end of the world.'

*

Pastor McConnell's words did not touch sides in Florence's heart. She was staring at her husband's casket but all she could think about was the woman with the dark hair standing at the back of the O'Neil. Florence couldn't be sure who she was, but she thought she might have an idea. If it was the same woman who had called a few days prior, looking for her husband's manuscript, Florence could not believe the audacity she had to show up there, at the funeral. *Well, she can just forget about talking to me*, Florence thought sternly. She had told the woman once already and she didn't plan on repeating herself. It was bad enough that Florence had to sit there with that girl just near and pretend that she didn't know. It was at this point that Florence had begun to sob and heave. Her chest tightened up and her throat closes and the air didn't seem to be coming in at all.

When Miss Stuart dropped the shawl around her shoulders, Florence had been on the verge of fainting. When the soft wool settled against her skin, she was able to take in a sudden and unexpected breath that brought the room around her into focus where before it had been spinning and blurry. It made sense that it was Miss Stuart who'd been the one to calm her; she was the only one who'd been sensitive enough to be able to see the genius in John's poetry; his mother was indifferent, his father tried to strangle it out of the boy and that dark woman, she only wanted to profit from it. Florence couldn't bring herself to think about the other one, sitting somewhere behind her. Florence had kept her eyes averted when she'd come into the room, but could feel her presence like a hot iron pressing into her back. *That one*, Florence thought, she may be the worst of the lot. That one didn't even understand his genius, but wanted him all for herself. Florence couldn't understand her husband's genius either, but she knew it was there.

Every night she spent alone in bed while he was working in the study she had never felt alone, only in awe. She thought of him, all through the night smashing down letter after letter on his typewriter, only to discard most of what he had written by morning, sometimes only a few lines making it through the culling and she would be so amazed by him that she would sometimes feel afraid. Once he had offered to let her read his poetry and she had been honest with him.

'I'm afraid,' she'd said.

'Of what?' he'd replied.

'I'm afraid that when I read it and I don't understand it — because I know I won't — that you will think that I don't understand what it is that you're doing. And while that is partly right, I don't fully understand what you are doing, but I know it is something that needs to be done and that only you can do it. That is what I know.'

He had kissed her on her forehead then and told her that he knew she understood. He didn't offer her his poetry to read again, but he let her do the things that she could for him. She cooked, she cleaned, she managed the farm. She didn't want him to have to worry about a thing except his writing. Where maybe that dark woman could read his poetry and that other one could give him certain other things she couldn't, no one could understand him as Florence could and no one saw into her as he had done. Sometimes Florence had felt like she didn't know her own heart or mind until John had explained it to her. And that broke Florence's heart all over again as she sat on the hard bench with her sister's hands near breaking her own; that out of all the people in this room who were feeling like they had lost something, there was no one who had lost as vital a part of their being as she had.

*

'So, like the Lamb, Jesus Christ, we must stay true to our faith, our love for God. We will be persecuted for it, surely, for those who are true are always punished for it, but we will

be rewarded. At the end of times, when the Lord Jesus comes again and Satan and his worshippers are cast into Hell, those who have been faithful will find their names in the book of life and they will be called on to live an eternal life with Jesus Christ by their side.'

*

The car accident was over a decade ago, but Margaret thought about it every day. She'd been travelling along Scott street when, out of the cul-de-sac at the bottom of Lutz which crossed over Scott, a huge dog came tearing out into the road. She'd swerved to avoid it and rammed into a tree. She hadn't been going very fast, so the worst of the injuries was done to her front bumper. She and the dog were completely fine, though the dog's owner insisted on taking Margaret to see the doctor. Dr. Swart examined Margaret, put a band-aid on her forehead and declared her even fitter than before. That night, Margaret had settled into bed, thankful that it hadn't been worse. When she woke up the next morning, however, she noticed a slight pain near her left shoulder blade. She paid it no mind and ignored the splitting headache that arrived that afternoon. By the time she'd gotten home from seeing her friend for dinner that evening, Margaret felt as if she had been run over by a bus and then forced to run a marathon. Over the next few months, the pain became so excruciating and so constant, that it was an effort for Margaret to get out of bed at all. She no longer saw friends, no longer did her own cooking or cleaning and sometimes could not manage to walk the four meters from her bedroom to her bathroom.

As Margaret sat through her son's funeral, Pastor McConnell preaching the punishment for sins being an eternity spent in a lake of fire, Margaret could only wonder what she had done to deserve this hell. Every joint in her body seared red hot. Where the bench pressed into her rear she could feel her bones grinding into her flesh. Margaret constantly checked her body for blood, the pain so terrible her instinct was to think that she was covered in open wounds. She was being burned alive. What had she done to endure this torment while she still breathed?

She had stood by John Senior, even while he philandered. She watched him beat her son, said nothing when he had shot Junior's pet dog for defecating on the carpet. And when John Senior left, she didn't shed a tear. She stood proud and strong for her son. She never remarried. She had tried to teach Junior to be a good Christian, was it her fault he had wanted to read everything else but the bible? She'd contributed what she could to the church. She sang in the choir. Why now should she burn?

Margaret had been to all the doctors. Some thought she was fabricating her symptoms for medication, others thought she was mistaking her emotional wounds for physical ones. Most were sympathetic, but none believed the pain she felt to be of serious medical concern. The doctors humoured the old woman and she consumed prescription pain-killers every six hours on the hour, but they only dulled the pain briefly. For an hour after taking her tablets, she might be able to wash her hair or put a particularly complicated pair of shoes on, but then she would need to rest again. Margaret found that the best way for her to deal with the pain, was to let her entire body go still and let the pain consume her. If she didn't move, didn't think, perhaps she could get used to it.

*

'I myself did not know John. I know his wife, Florence, to whom the church extends our greatest condolences. I know John's mother, Margaret, a God-fearing woman and the picture of Christianity. I know that sometimes in life, those of us who are close to a person can feel responsible for them, for their path, for their fate. But let us remember that every man and woman on earth fights the very same battle; every day we are forced to make the choice between God and Satan, life and death. We cannot make this choice for others, we can only decide for ourselves where we want to spend eternity. But let me say this to you now, for every man or woman who chooses God, who chooses life, that is another soul fighting in God's holy war against evil. So do not think that because those around you have fallen, that your faith has

not made a difference. We must all stay true to our own journeys and not let the fall of others lead to our own undoing. At the end of times, every man and woman will be judged for their own actions. There is no hiding from the eye of God, he who knows and sees all. Let us now not think to the past, not dwell on what has already gone and what cannot be changed, but look to the kingdom that comes and the King who sits upon the throne of judgement.'

*

Once the service was over, the congregation moved outside to the church graveyard, where the casket was lowered into the ground, covered with dirt and Pastor McConnell said a few closing words.

'Let us pray that the King will find John's name in his book of life and invite him to live in Heaven for ever.'

A few quiet tears were spilled as the soil thudded onto the wood, but the general feeling in the group was fatigue. The service had been long and emotions had been high. Margaret had not been able to make it out to the gravesite and so she sat a few meters behind on a plastic chair near the entrance to the church. Her nurse stood behind her, an ineffective shadow. Florence was no longer crying but still, Shirley would not relinquish her grip on her sister. Dot's eyes remained on her shoes and the strange woman with the dark hair had not come out of the church.

Pastor McConnell looked at the grey faces around him. He opened his arms wide and smiled, forcing others to smile with him. 'This is no time to be sad. We have mourned, we have shed our tears and now we rejoice in the Lord. Please, join us in Fellowship Hall for some tea and cakes.'

*

The congregation filed into Fellowship Hall, paying their respects to Margaret and Florence one-by-one, clasping their hands and then moving swiftly on to the middle of the hall

where the God's Waters Social Club had set up a table of cakes and biscuits, tea and coffee. Quiet and drawn now, Florence stood holding her cup of tea, a ginger biscuit balanced on the edge of the saucer, while Shirley accepted condolences on her behalf. Margaret was sitting in a cushioned-chair next to her, wearing sunglasses and staring straight ahead. Florence watched Margaret's chest barely rise and listened to her shallow inhalations and thought that they both might as well be dead themselves.

Once everyone had paid their due grimaces, the sombreness of the room lifted somewhat and people began to behave with tentative normality: voices raised slightly and a few laughs were let out. After moving around the room with the uncertainty of dust kicked up in a wind, people began to settle naturally into groups. The Dorperland farmers and their wives and children clustered together, Dorothy O'Neil and her parents among them; the men from the dead man's childhood sipped their whiskeys and spoke amongst themselves, while their wives gathered behind them and nibbled on strawberries; Miss Stuart was sipping her tea and being harangued by the God's Waters Sunday School teacher, Mrs Joseph and next to her the young grocery store cashier stood with her hands behind her back, listening to the conversation. The dark woman had gone. Florence watched Pastor McConnell and his wife move around the room, arriving at each group with broad smiles and hearty handshakes. She could feel them, like vultures, circling closer and closer to her.

*

Shirley felt she was doing all the grieving for her younger sister. Besides the outpouring of emotion from Florence during the service, she had found her sister to be remarkably calm. She considered the fact that perhaps her sister's calmness was just another form of her shock, but there was something — she couldn't think of a better word — *serene* about her sister, something tranquil. Dare she say it, she sometimes appeared to be relieved. But this observation

Shirley could not reconcile with the Florence she had known while John had still been alive. Florence's entire existence had seemed to hang in the balance of John's success or failure.

Shirley had not often been over to visit her sister and her husband in Dorperland — Shirley herself owned a successful hair and beauty salon in Upington that required her constant supervision — but she and Florence had kept up the weekly Sunday-night phone call policy that they had instituted when Shirley had first gone away to boarding school. During those phone-calls, Shirley would relay news about her husband, her two sons, her business. Florence would listen dutifully, but Shirley could feel that her sister was just waiting for her turn to speak and Shirley knew that all Florence would talk about was John. Shirley would try to incite more varied responses from her sister by asking questions about how the lambing season was going, the workers who had just had babies, whether there was any new gossip from the neighbours in Dorperland. But Florence was able to hold only one kind of conversation.

If Shirley didn't interrupt, Florence would have been able to go on for hours. She would list the meals she had cooked for John that day, how they had affected his mood and how good of a writing session he'd had as a result. She'd mention whether he had seemed particularly listless or wistful or excited and how important his work was. Shirley could become sick listening to her sister's droning on, but they'd made a pact and so every Sunday night she'd sign on for the hours-long tribute to her sister's husband. Often, Shirley would be able to detect the sadness or loneliness her sister was trying to keep hidden and attempt to pry some honesty out of her. But Florence would not relent and skilfully managed to evade her sister's concerns by changing the subject.

One evening, however, Florence had not been able to hide her feelings. While Shirley had been complaining about the recent drama at her salon involving two stylists who disliked each other, Florence had interjected abruptly. For the first time in a long time, without

provocation and with the seeming involuntary urge to do so, Florence had shared something private with her sister.

'That girl was here again.'

Shirley had been about to become annoyed over being interrupted, but caught herself when she'd realised what was happening. 'What girl?'

'The neighbour's daughter. They keep sending her over here to help me with the farm work as punishment. She's quite rebellious, you know. She runs around with boys. Her parents think a few hours of mopping floors and deworming the sheep will set her straight.'

Shirley had been confused, but there was no mistaking the anguish in Florence's voice.

'Alright, so you had the neighbour's daughter over to help with the chores. I don't understand. Floss, what's going on?'

'We've never spoken about it, never laid down any rules, but it was understood.' Florence's voice had begun to rise. 'He went *out*, they didn't come *here*. But he took her into his study. For English lessons, he said. In my house!'

'Oh my god, Floss.' Shirley had tried to keep her voice neutral, but it had been such a long time since her sister had shared anything with her that even this had brought up some kind of revolting excitement in her.

'They were there for hours.'

'Did you go in? Did you check?'

'Of course not. I know not to go into John's study when his door is closed.'

Shirley tried then to offer her sister some words of consolation, but as if she had suddenly come out of a daze, Florence changed the subject and wanted to know more about the feud going on at Shirley's salon.

Now, at John's funeral, Shirley held tightly onto Florence's arm, gripping for all the words she wanted to say but which Florence wouldn't want to hear.

*

Pastor McConnell held Kathy around her waist as they walked together towards Justin Lombard, Eon Lambrechts and some of the other young men who had been friendly with the deceased during his childhood. James shook hands with each of the men and kissed their wives on their cheeks. Kathy kissed each of the men hello as well and then went to chat to the men's wives.

'Wonderful service,' Justin Lombard said. 'Really brought home what it's all about.' The men agreed.

'Chaps, thank you.' Pastor McConnell grabbed a glass of iced tea. 'It can be hard to remember, particularly in the face of grief, but the Almighty has a plan for all of us. Now, sometimes that plan is hard to understand, hard to swallow, but true faith will always get you there.'

'Quite right, Pastor,' Jackson Tully said.

'I understand that you were good friends with John?'

Eon Lambrechts stepped in. 'I wouldn't say that, no. We grew up with him. Now I don't really know what kind of man he became, because he left Upington as soon as he possibly could and we didn't make contact once he returned, but I remember him as a boy. He seemed good-natured enough, a bit strange nonetheless. I remember his mother being quite devout herself. I hope that some of that stuck with him into his adulthood.'

'Yes, one can only hope.' Pastor McConnell smiled. 'Mr Tully, I hear you have some connections to an excellently stocked trout stream?'

'You've heard right, Pastor,' Jackson responded. 'Are you much into fly-fishing?'

'I think besides ministering, fly-fishing may be my next greatest calling.'

The men laughed and nodded as Jackson looked to each of them.

'Then you must join us. We're going down in two weeks' time. Maybe with you around, we'll have more luck.'

Pastor McConnell smiled, shook their hands again and excused himself to say a few words to the newly widowed Florence Fowler.

*

'Did any of you get a peek at that woman with the dark hair?' Kathy whispered to the women around her, her voice masked by their husbands' conversation about fishing. 'She's gone now, but she was standing at the back of the church during the service.'

'I saw her,' Mrs Tully, wife of Jackson Tully of Tully Lawnmowers, nodded her head. 'Quite striking. She didn't look like she was from around here.'

'Well, I asked Florence whether she knew the woman. She said she didn't but she didn't seem very comfortable with my question.'

'I heard from Georgia — she lives next door to the O'Neils — that John had had more than one extra-marital visitor,' Justin Lombard's wife said.

Eon Lambrecht's wife rolled her eyes. 'Of course he did. That's hardly news.'

Mrs Lombard looked affronted. Attempting to recover her dignity, she plucked another strawberry from the tower behind them. 'Well, don't make so light of it, darling. We are at his funeral, you know.'

Mrs Tully looked over to Florence. 'Do you think so?' she asked. 'Do you think Florence found out? Is that why he did it?'

Mrs Lombard shook her head. 'No, no. Florence may be plain, but she's not stupid. She knew, alright. No. I'll bet you the woman wanted something he couldn't give them. A baby. Money. Marriage. Could be anything. He killed himself to spare her the shame. Quite honourable, if you really think about it.'

The women nodded. Even Mrs Lambrechts didn't have anything to say to that. Mrs Lombard looked sadly over at Florence, whose eyes were darting around the room over the rim of her tea cup. 'I wouldn't have been able to bear the embarrassment if it were me.'

*

Florence prayed that Pastor McConnell wouldn't come and speak to her. She did not want any more of his wife's sympathies or his words of religious wisdom. John would never have wanted a funeral like this, but of course Florence had been forced into it by Margaret, who had used her God-given skills for evoking guilt and regret by playing up her illness. Florence watched Pastor McConnell leave the group of Upington men and walk towards her. There was no way out for her now. At least it was just him and she would not have to endure Kathy's awful side-on hugs. As Florence thought this, Kathy poked her head up like a meerkat over the group of women she had been enclosed by, looked for her husband and joined him in approaching Florence. Trapped between the approaching McConnells and the invalid Margaret on her right, Florence squeezed Shirley's hand back and said, 'Oh, Christ.'

'Florence, Florence, Florence,' Pastor McConnell said as he walked up to the sisters with his arms open wide. He stood like that for a moment, as if he expected Florence to walk into an embrace. When she didn't, he paused awkwardly for a moment and then thumped his hands onto her shoulders and said, 'The Church stands with you in this hard time.'

Despite her annoyance, Florence did manage to enjoy the look of jealousy that flashed over Kathy's face as her husband made contact with Florence. It had only been there for a second and Kathy had been quick to replace it with one of her simpering, wet-eyed smiles, but Florence had seen it.

'Thank you, but as you are aware, the whole tone of this funeral goes completely against what my husband would have wanted,' Florence said.

'Yes, you and your sister have been very clear on that point. But as we have discussed, it is all in his interest. If he is to enter an eternal life with Jesus...'

Florence knew from experience that James did not require a response from his captive audience in order to deliver one of his lectures, so as he began another sermon, she allowed herself to drift in and out of attention. As Florence was day-dreaming, watching the Pastor's mouth flap open and shut, she heard a chorus of voices whispering her name all over in Fellowship Hall. She pricked her ears and tried to hone in on the hushed discussions.

*

'It was Florence's gun,' Loodt de Bruin said in a low, hoarse voice that was as close to a whisper as he could muster. 'A shotgun. That's a two-person job.' Mrs de Bruin shushed him and Mrs O'Neil put her hands over Dot's ears and pulled her away.

Janie van Dyk crossed her arms. 'So what are you saying?'

Loodt continued. 'Listen. How many of you, God-forbid, could manage to shoot yourself in the head with a shotgun?' The other farmers bristled. 'Even David here, the tallest out of all of us, with the longest arms, I don't think he could manage to point a shotgun at his own face and pull the trigger.'

'Forget it, Loodt!' Michael van Dyk said. 'Are you serious?'

'Well, why not? It was her daddy's gun, wasn't it? She would have learned how to shoot it. I'm just saying that it doesn't seem right.'

Janie shook her head. 'Maybe it seems a bit funny, but somebody who is so bad that they want to kill themselves will find a way to do it. Besides, Florence worshipped him. There's no way. No way.'

'Then how did the house burn down?'

Janie exhaled in exasperation. 'What do you mean how? How should I know? Anyway, Florence was at your house when that happened, wasn't she, Roger?' Janie looked to Mr O'Neil,

who nodded. 'It was probably a candle or a cigarette that caught on something. You know how dry it is up here.'

Loodt brushed his moustache down. 'It just doesn't sit right.'

'Then let it sit wrong, but that's all I want to hear about it.'

The Dorperland farmers were quiet then, not usually ones to contend Janie van Dyk. After a few minutes tense silence, Mrs de Bruin gingerly brought up the tastiness of the baked goods available that day and the rest of the group leapt at the new line of conversation with unusual eagerness.

*

'Really, just an hour a week would do it. We could do it in the mornings, before they all settle down.'

Miss Stuart's patience was starting to wear out and she was now very annoyed. 'Mrs Josephs, that is when we do reading circles. The reading period is critical to the children.'

'And you couldn't spare just one hour of reading? I really think the parents would be thrilled to have Bible study integrated into the classroom.'

'Well, quite frankly, I don't care. I make sure the children get an academic education. If their parents want religious education then they can source it themselves, outside of the school.'

Mrs Josephs smiled as politely as she could and left. Still tense, Miss Stuart noticed the silent girl standing behind her with her arms behind her back.

'Come and stand next to me, girlie. I need a less aggravating conversation partner.'

The girl, who was more of a woman, Miss Stuart realised, stepped forwards and introduced herself as Natasha Deyzel. She worked at a small store in Upington that people called a grocer but was really a tuck shop. Every day Natasha provided the pedestrians of Upington who happened to pass her shop with litres of coca-cola, loose cigarettes, packets of slap-chips and toilet paper.

'So how did you come to know John, then? You look much too young to have been an ex-girlfriend,' Miss Stuart asked, watching Margaret, who had not moved since she had sat down in the Hall.

'Oh, no. The Fowlers lived down the road from the shop. I was a little girl when I started working there with my mother. John used to stop in on his way to the high school every morning to get a coke. He was friendly.'

'Mm. I had him in my class from grade 2. Extremely smart boy. But that mother...' Miss Stuart said absent-mindedly, staring at the statue of Margaret.

Natasha didn't reply.

'Did you ever meet her?' Miss Stuart could not help herself. She had never been able to stand either of John's parents, but she had been specifically intolerable of the mother. The father she could nearly excuse — his negligence was text-book, almost boring — but the mother, there was something deeply wrong with that woman. Something besides her phantom disease.

'Once or twice, but I don't like to— '

'She ruined a wonderful child.' As if in a trance, the words began to flow out of Miss Stuart's mouth in eery monotony as she continued to stare at Margaret with glazed, unseeing eyes. 'People think it was the father. He left them, you know. Probably better for it. But she stayed and maybe that was the issue. People like that — it does make one wonder if some people may have been better off as orphans.'

*

Margaret could hear the whispering. She didn't know exactly what they were saying, but could bet on the thousand variations of the same story. If anybody had bothered to ask her, she would have told them all that the boy was broken before her parenting could even begin.

She had wanted a girl. Eventually she came to accept the fact that she had had a son, but it had been difficult to come to terms with the kind of boy he was. John Senior had had it

even worse than she had. He had wanted a boy but, as he often said, a girl would have been better than the boy they got. She had tried not to blame her son for her husband leaving, but the boy had made it near impossible.

The whispering rumbled around Margaret like the start of a storm, threatening to climax at any moment. She felt trapped in her body, unable to move or else the pain might crescendo along with the voices. It was all rising around her, the voices, the pain, the day's last sun streaming in through the windows and blinding her even through her sunglasses. Suddenly, she began to shout to the room.

'He was just a small lad. But that's when we knew. He didn't want to throw stones at Mr Craven's car with the other boys, or ride his bike after the girls. He was like a bird. Small and weak. John Senior couldn't stand the sight of him. One day his daddy got home from work and found Junior writing in his journal. Or her may have been folding the linen, as he liked to do. It drove John Senior mad. He grabbed him. He screamed at the boy. *Why aren't you normal? Why don't you go and play?* He dragged him outside and locked the door behind him. The boys from down the street rode by, calling out to Junior to come and play, but he just sat out the front door crying like a dog to be let back in.'

*

Mrs Fowler's voice cut through the crowd and Fellowship Hall was stunned into silence. Those who had not been facing her now turned to look. Next to Margaret, Florence started to cry. Voices began murmuring. Kathy McConnell looked around desperately for her husband; the situation needed to be controlled, but James had gone outside to talk to Justin Lombard and hadn't returned yet. Janie van Dyk and Loodt de Bruin and the other farmers were all looking at Kathy, their expressions worried. Mrs Josephs mouthed 'Do something!' Kathy didn't know what to do; she was not sure what had just happened. Unsure of her plan, she started walking

towards Margaret. Just as she was approaching, James entered the hall with Justin. Kathy gestured frantically to him to come over to her.

'Margaret, are you all right?' Kathy said, bending down to look into Margaret's inscrutable face. 'Can I get you some water, some tea?' Kathy was aware of Florence above her, crying, but she did not feel equipped to handle her. She would much rather deal with the vacant mother.

'I could use a smoke,' Margaret said.

At this, James appeared by Kathy's side, smelling like a veld fire. 'Come along Mrs Fowler, let's you and I go for a walk.' James took Margaret's arm, eased her out of the chair and the nurse followed the staggering twosome outside.

Staring at the wall behind Margaret's empty chair, Kathy straightened up and turned stiffly towards Florence. 'Do you need anything, dear?' she asked the widow.

'Oh, bugger off, Kathy,' Shirley said and spun her sister around and marched her out through the other door.

Stunned, aware of the fixed stares from around the room, Kathy stood still a moment, said to herself, 'Yes, quite,' and then walked calmly into the ladies' bathroom to sit on a toilet until the reception was over and the congregation had left.

*

'Never mind her,' Shirley said to her sister. 'She's a silly cow.'

It was around two in the afternoon now. Florence and Shirley were outside, walking towards one of two large trees in the Churchyard which might umbrella them from the hot and heavy sun which was otherwise uninhibited by clear skies. Away in the near distance, under the other available tree, Florence spotted Margaret and the Pastor sharing a cigarette.

'Are you alright?' Shirley asked as they sat down on the cool ground.

'Yes,' Florence picked at a blade of grass.

Shirley could tell this was not true, but she didn't know how to press the subject. The two sisters sat in silence under the tree for a while, long enough that they were able to watch as Fellowship Hall emptied, the congregants getting into their cars one by one and driving away, knowing instinctively not to approach the people under the trees. Eventually, Pastor McConnell walked Margaret back to her car, which was driven off by the nurse. The last to leave, the Pastor and his wife waved goodbye to the sisters under the tree. Kathy raised her hand timidly. The sisters did not wave back, not out of spite, but because they were staring off somewhere far beyond the McConnells, far beyond the church, far beyond the horizon.

The day had begun to darken by the time either of them spoke.

'Yes, I'm alright,' Florence said, still staring at the spot in which the people of God's Waters Church had disappeared. 'But he never was.'

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